

FREE IN THOUGHT, FETTERED IN ACTION:
ENSLAVED ADOLESCENT FEMALES IN THE SLAVE SOUTH

By

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To my parents, Brenda W. Moore and George Moore, my first teachers, and my wonderful family in North Carolina and Florida, my amazing village

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Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School
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Chair: William A Link
Cochair: J. Matthew Gallman
Major: History

According to the 1850 federal census, over three million enslaved African Americans populated the nation, half of whom were youths eighteen-years-old and under.¹ Though a large population, the development and experiences of slave youth have remained relatively unnoticed. If it is true that “the life of an individual in *any* society is a series of passages from one stage to another,” why have the life stages of slaves, particularly their adolescence, received minimal attention?²

Currently, scholars of slavery focus primarily on adult males. However, prior to adulthood, slaves frolicked through woods and played among rows of cotton as they carried water. But what happened to these children when plowing replaced play? This question remains unanswered because little scholarship has been devoted to the study of adolescent slavery, but if slavery is explored from the vantage point of teenage boys and girls--an age cohort who was on

¹ Federal Census Records of 1850. Reviewing the 1850 census record reveals that during the decade prior to the Civil War the slave population throughout the nation was over 3,000,000; analyzing the statistical data presented concerning age reveals that of the 3 million plus slaves, more than half were eighteen-years-old and younger.

² Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1985; revised and with a new introduction, 1999), 91. Note the italicized word emphasis is mine and not of White.

the cusp of adulthood and whose identities were shaped by slavery's experiences--the scholarship about slavery might be moved in a different direction.

Identifying this gap my research fills the historiographical void by exploring the lives of enslaved adolescent females. Focusing on antebellum Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia from 1800-1861, I reconstruct the rites of passage that enslaved females approaching adulthood experienced to argue that adolescent experience in work, dress, and sexual behavior decisively shaped slaves' development and helped to form a culture of resistance as they moved toward adulthood; knowledge that subsequently led slaves to an understanding of what it meant to be a slave for life.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

According to the federal census, in 1850 over three million enslaved African Americans populated the nation, half of whom were youths eighteen-years-old and under.¹ Though a large population, the development and experiences of slave youth have remained relatively unnoticed. If it is true that “the life of an individual in *any* society is a series of passages from one stage to another,” why have the life stages of slaves, particularly their adolescence, received minimal attention?²

Comprising half of the antebellum slave population, younger African Americans factored into patriarchal decisions concerning economic investments, family inheritances, politics, and social affiliations. They are thus crucial to our understanding of the peculiar institution and the larger South. It is these juvenile black bodies that this study seeks to assess. Doing so will impact the history of slavery by altering scholars’ perception of slaves, particularly concerning their identity formation. In addition, owing to the emphasis on adolescence, this dissertation also engages with childhood studies by adding a marginalized demographic to that field.

Currently, scholars of slaves and slavery focus primarily on adult males. Females, when discussed, are examined from the perspective of adults and the responsibilities associated with that phase of life. But if slavery is explored from the vantage point of teenage boys and girls--an age cohort who was on the cusp of adulthood and whose identities were shaped by slavery’s experiences--the scholarship about slavery might head in a different direction. First, by focusing

¹ Federal Census Records of 1850. Reviewing the 1850 census record reveals that during the decade prior to the Civil War the slave population throughout the nation was over 3,000,000; analyzing the statistical data presented concerning age reveals that of the 3 million plus slaves, more than half were eighteen-years-old and younger.

² Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1985; revised and with a new introduction, 1999), 91. Note the italicized word emphasis is mine and not of White.

on identity formation during adolescence we might gain insight into *why* adult slaves reacted as they did to the vicissitudes of life. Additionally, scholars would be able to answer long-held historical and historiographical questions concerning slave work ethic and practices, sexuality, and resistance plus other pertinent issues that continue to challenge the discipline today. Consequently, overcoming these challenges makes it possible for scholars to reconceptualize the story of slavery and its participants.

A brief historiographical sketch suggests the potential for this line of inquiry. Although since the 1950s enslaved men dominated the discourse about slavery,³ the growth of women and gender studies created new historical questions, questions that subsequently shifted our understanding of slavery.⁴ Deborah Gray White, Jacqueline Jones, and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, writing in the mid to late 1980s, have situated slave women within a larger scholarly debate.

³ Writing in the 1950s, Kenneth Stampp's *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956) and Stanley Elkins' *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959) initiated the first paradigm shift. Both scholars presented slavery as a brutal system, with the slave at the narrative's center. This interpretation directly refuted U.B. Phillips' racially biased description in *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment, and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1918). Influenced by the Civil Rights movement and the resurgence of Black Nationalism, scholars in the 1970s examined the institution from within slave communities. John Blassingame's *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (1972), Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972) and Herbert Gutman's *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (1975) explored the slave community. *The Slave Community*, describing chattel slaves' daily life, living conditions, families and slave personalities, is considered a classic. *Roll, Jordan, Roll*'s astute examination of paternalistic master-slave relationships continues to shape the literature and has gone relatively unchallenged for years. Gutman, uncovering the strength and stability of the black family in slavery and freedom, refutes ideas concerning the dysfunctional black household.

⁴ Prior to the 1970s women of all races and ethnicities were marginalized and passively treated in the historical literature. However, the advent of social history coupled with the influence of the Civil Rights and Women's Rights movements enabled women to receive greater historical attention. Initial studies during the 1970s dealt with women's societal contributions such as club movements, welfare reform and missionary operations. Successive waves incorporated larger themes, such as politics, gender ideologies and feminist theories. With each shift women were displayed as multi-dimensional personas that were active agents of change. Unfortunately, much of the revisionist work focused on white women. As historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham observed in the late 1980s, black female voices, despite gains in women's history, still remained unheard by historians. For further information on women's historiography and that of African American women reference Linda Gordon, "U.S. Women's History," in *The New American History*, revised and expanded edition, edited by Eric Foner, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997) and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "Beyond the Sound of Silence: Afro-American Women in History," *Gender & History* 1 (1989): 50-67.

Analyzing women's physiological differences and socially constructed gender roles, these historians agree that bondage cannot be understood by looking solely at the male experience. Deborah Gray White's *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (1985) was the first major work to place female slaves within a broader framework. Consulting Works Progress Administration (WPA) interviews, diaries, and travel journals, White argues that women not only experienced slavery differently than their male counterparts but that they also were active agents of change. "Black in a white society, slave in a free society, woman in a society ruled by men," she concludes "black women [were] at the intersection of racial and sexual ideologies and politics."⁵

In a subsequent edition of her work in 1999, White emphasizes the significance of gender as crucial to the slave experience. "In 1985, the empirical record made it relatively easy to discern the difference between male and female slavery and black and white women," she writes, but "conceptualizing the difference was considerably more difficult."⁶ Reviewing the scholarship concerning women and gender studies, she states, "today a stronger light shines on my subject."⁷ This "stronger light" locates black women and forces scholars to view slavery with racial *and* gendered colored lenses. Her meticulous research regarding female slave myths, work patterns, life cycles, family life, sexuality, and resistance complicates the subject and forces academics to rethink issues such as work experience, master-slave relationships, and slave resistance.

The same year that White's work appeared, historian Jacqueline Jones published *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, From Slavery To The Present*

⁵ White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 15, 12.

⁶ White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 5

⁷ White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 5.

(1985). Beginning with slavery and chronicling the black female worker until the 1980s, Jones argues that, throughout history, black women, unlike their white contemporaries, labored in private and public work roles. Despite grueling dual work responsibilities, black female laborers, Jones concludes, used resources within the black community and female networks; they subsequently reconciled the social tensions between the two positions, satisfying demands of the white and black communities. She suggests that white slaveholders, yearning to increase profit and needing field hands, forced slave women to work in public spheres such as fields, as well as completing cooking, cleaning, and childcare in the private realm.⁸ Slave women were thus expected to act in roles traditionally ascribed to both men and women. In essence, slave owners' capitalist goals for labor merged with Victorian gender and race ideologies to shape slave women's work experience.

What is most astounding about Jones' argument is her emphasis on female slave reproduction in conjunction with field and domestic work. These areas, she writes, make "the definition of slave women's work . . . problematical. If work is any activity that leads either directly or indirectly to the production of marketable goods, then slave women did nothing *but* work."⁹ If slave female personal care and reproduction "helped to maintain the owner's work force and to enhance its overall productivity" then Jones' work forces scholars to reexamine what constitutes "slave work."¹⁰

⁸ Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family, From Slavery to the Present* (New York: Vintage Works, 1985), 12.

⁹ Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 14.

¹⁰ Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 14. Jennifer Morgan's *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) explores the issues of African women, labor and the correlation of reproduction in her study concerning enslaved women during the colonial era. Her work is novel in that she emphasizes that female bodies prominently figured in planters' mentalities. She discusses slave women as immediate sources of labor for planters and their reproductive work value. Her presentation of slave women's reproductive capabilities indicates that women's physiological make-up enabled them to "work" in a capacity men were unable to perform.

While White and Jones focused solely on black women, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese contributes to the debate by engaging black and white women of the plantation household. *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (1988), discussing gender ideologies, roles and convictions, demonstrates the complexities of slavery and the master-slave relationship.¹¹ Fox-Genovese explores the volatile mistress-female slave relationship, as well as each group's interaction with men of their race.

In recent years, historians have continued to fashion a more sophisticated analysis concerning slave women. David Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine's edited collection *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (1996) addresses enslaved women's resistance and work. Although discussing aspects of colonial North American and Caribbean slavery, its broader goal is to provide tangible examples of analyses that examine "slavery and slave society through the prism of the lives of black women."¹² Other recent works include Sharla M. Fett's *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (2002) and Stephanie M. H. Camp's *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women & Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (2004).¹³

Examining slave-healing practices, Fett asserts that slave women played a crucial role within plantation medicine. Although her main objective is to add "African American doctoring. . . to the list of complex and compelling cultural work produced by African descendants under

¹¹ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within The Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

¹² David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, eds., *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), ix.

¹³ Sharla M. Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002) and Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women & Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

slavery,” she believes “bondswomen stood at the center of this struggle.”¹⁴ Camp examines the day-to-day resistance waged by enslaved women. Unlike past scholarship, she views resistance in relation to slave females’ use of public and private space such as woods, fields, and their bodies. She asserts that masters restricted slave social and physical mobility but slaves, by throwing off osnaburg, attending parties, even decorating their homes with abolitionist material, used private realms to resist and make political statements.

Through the myriad interpretations explored the broader scholarship has embraced concepts and methodologies that include gender analysis, public versus private space, and the use of a more inclusive definition of political participation that were unheard of when U.B. Phillips inaugurated slavery studies in 1918. As these works demonstrate, the use of exciting new questions, concepts and methodologies and the addition of more groups enable a more thorough interpretation of the institution to develop. Yet there is still much that needs to be accomplished. Before a truly accurate understanding of slavery can be reached, scholars must examine slaves in their totality. One cannot possibly understand Nat Turner, Frederick Douglass, or Harriet Jacobs without coming to terms with each individual’s childhood and adolescent experiences.¹⁵

Traditionally, children of all races, classes, and sexes have been marginalized. Viewed as powerless and insignificant to the historical landscape, the subject of the history of American youth was not fully engaged until the publication of Joseph Kett’s *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America, 1790 to the present* (1977). Exploring the history of American childhood, Kett

¹⁴ Fett, *Working Cures*, x, 5.

¹⁵ Historian Philip J. Greven argues the same point in the forward of James Marten’s edited collection *Children in Colonial America*. In conducting research concerning Protestant Child-rearing practices Greven’s understanding of adult practices were directly correlated with unraveling the childhood experiences of his subjects. For additional comments reference James Marten, ed., *Children in Colonial America* with a forward by Philip J. Greven (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

examines its fluid nature. Identifying attitudes concerning age, and their subsequent shifts, he argues that initially childhood was a nebulous concept that crystallized into unique life stages characterized by rites such as gaining employment, marriage and establishing households. Kett's work is groundbreaking in that he portrays American youth as central to understanding American history. Though blacks, females and lower-class masses do not factor into Kett's view of "American youth" his work laid the foundation for other age studies.¹⁶

In their exploration of colonial, antebellum and post-bellum children and youth, Stephen Mintz, Anya Jabour, James Marten, Wilma King, and Marie Schwartz are among Kett's successors.¹⁷ Demonstrating the significance of American childhood to the "broader political and social events in the life of the nation" Mintz's *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (2004) is a major contribution.¹⁸ Mintz, like Kett, presents a survey of American childhood that explores the shifting ideologies concerning age. Unlike Kett, his work engages various races, sexes, and social classes. *Huck's Raft* also seeks to dismantle romanticized notions of historic childhood, notions Mintz believes contributes to pessimistic views about the young. By chronicling the social and cultural construct of childhood, Mintz presents the history of childhood as well as combats twentieth-century ideas regarding present-day youth.

Jabour's *Scarlett's Sisters: Young Women in the Old South* (2007) and Marten's *The Children's Civil War* (1998) are more specialized studies concerning children and youth. Jabour

¹⁶ Joseph Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America, 1790 to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

¹⁷ Holly Brewer's *By Birth or Consent: Children, Law, and the Anglo-American Revolution in Authority* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005) also engages the subject of childhood during the colonial period. Brewer explores England and America's changing attitude concerning childhood and children. Using English and US law and religious practices as the vehicle, she argues that due to the political and religious debates concerning birth and consent, children were no longer deemed capable of making their own decisions; rather they needed the guidance of those who possessed the ability to reason, adults, until they reached the age of consent.

¹⁸ Stephen Mintz, *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), viii.

explores white elite females' coming of age in the antebellum South. Asserting that while gains are being made in studying Southern women (a term that now includes all classes and races) "historians have not yet produced the sort of in-depth analyses of young white women in the Old South that might challenge or complicate the popular image."¹⁹ As a result of this omission, students of the subject lack a full understanding of southern white womanhood. She therefore sets out in *Scarlett's Sisters* to unravel the young plantation mistress. Jabour argues that young white females' adolescence was a period in which teens reconciled personal desires for freedom with what constituted Southern womanhood. This internal struggle persisted through a number of rites (education, courtship, engagement), but ended with young white women embracing the ideologies of white Southern womanhood. Though this work, like Mintz's, informs our understanding of childhood and adolescence, it fails to engage any substantial comparison of teenage slave girls, young women who came of age alongside Jabour's females.

Marten examines northern and southern children and youth's response to the Civil War. He argues that children, similar to adults, were cognizant of the war's import to their lives and for many, the daily experiences of war, such as hunger, violence and absentee fathers, affected their outlook on life locally, nationally, and internationally.²⁰ Slave offspring are among the children he explores. Relying heavily on WPA interviews to capture the black voice, Marten discovers slave children experienced great physical want, lacking food and clothes, as well as endured emotional abuse from owners, particularly when their fathers absconded to join the Union army.²¹ Though he engages slave children, the brunt of the work focuses on whites.

¹⁹ Anya Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters: Young Women in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 2.

²⁰ James Marten, *The Children's Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 3.

²¹ Marten, *The Children's Civil War*, 2, 126-127.

Despite their minimal presence in preceding works, two scholars, historians Wilma King and Marie Schwartz, have devoted significant attention to slave children and youth in their full-length studies, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America* (1995) and *Born in Bondage: Growing Up Enslaved in the Antebellum South* (2000).²² Considered “pioneering” works, these books are the “most significant” analyses on enslaved youth in nineteenth-century America to date.²³ Seeking to “extricate enslaved children and youth from the amorphous mass of bond servants” King and Schwartz suggest their books will enhance our understanding of slave children, enslaved families and slave life in general.²⁴ Reframing questions about slavery, King revisits sources and finds children and youth playfully hiding among travel accounts, diary entries, memoirs, and interviews. Based on her findings, she concludes that slave children, thriving in a world of harsh treatments, conflicting authority figures and child labor, were “children without childhoods.”²⁵ Schwartz, writing five years later, analyzes specific stages of development to contest King’s “stolen childhood” interpretation. She argues that “slave children did experience childhood, if one defines the concept as a distinct stage of life separate from that of adulthood.”²⁶

²² Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995) and Marie Schwartz, *Born in Bondage: Growing Up Enslaved in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

²³ These ideas are expressed by Audra Abbe Diptee who studies enslaved youth in Jamaica. Referencing the scant historiography concerning enslaved youth in “Imperial Ideas, Colonial Realities: Enslaved Children in Jamaica, 1775-1834 in *Children in Colonial America* edited by James Marten with a forward by Philip J. Greven (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 48-60, Diptee writes “Slavery specialists have been giving increasing attention to the historical experiences of enslaved children in the Americas. Most significant would be the pioneering work of Wilma King and the later published work of Marie Jenkins Schwartz—both of which focus on enslaved children born in the United States during the nineteenth century,” 49.

²⁴ King, *Stolen Childhood*, xvii.

²⁵ King, *Stolen Childhood*, xxi.

²⁶ Schwartz, *Born in Bondage*, 14.

More recently scholarship about enslaved children has expanded as New World and Caribbean scholars have devoted their attention to children in western systems of slavery. In 2006 *Slavery and Abolition* dedicated a special edition to the topic. Seeking to challenge the notion of slave men as the quintessential black buck, contributors Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, Paul Lovejoy and others review the scant historiography on the subject, define what constituted a slave child and youth, and propose questions that will “provoke students and colleagues to rectify them in imaginative feats of research.”²⁷ Discussing diet, slave toys, clothes, nurses, home life and friendships, these analyses demonstrate that not all slaves were adults. Prior to experiencing fully their lot as beasts of burden, slaves frolicked through woods, played among rows of cotton as they carried water, and listened with wide-eyes as relatives relayed Br’er Rabbit tales and stories of ancient African conquests. But what happened to these children when play was replaced by plowing?

Unfortunately, this question remains unanswered because even less scholarship has been devoted to the study of adolescent slavery. As it stands, unlike white females, no full-length study exists to explain what life was like as slaves grew from childhood to adulthood. Identifying this gap my research seeks to fill the void through exploring the lives of enslaved adolescent females. Focusing on antebellum Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia from 1800-1861, slavery’s most stable period, I reconstruct the rites of passage that enslaved females approaching adulthood experienced to argue that adolescent experience in work, dress, and sexual behavior decisively shaped slaves’ development and helped to form a

²⁷ Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers and Joseph C. Miller, “Children in European Systems of Slavery: Introduction,” *Slavery and Abolition*, Special Edition, “Children in European Systems of Bondage” Vol. 27, No. 2 (August 2006): 165.

culture of resistance as they moved toward adulthood; knowledge that subsequently led slaves to an understanding of what it meant to be a slave for life.²⁸

I seek to push the debate in a different direction--from recognizing the rites as did White and Jones, to exploring the significance and effects of these changes on slave identity formation. Though historians have typically shied away from examining enslaved people from a psychological standpoint, identity formation is an integral part of understanding slavery and the slave experience. Historians such as Michael Gomez, Ira Berlin, and Nell Irvin Painter have attempted to unravel the way slaves developed their identities under such oppressive conditions in their respective studies.

Gomez's *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (1998) explores the origins of the African American identity. Examining the various African tribal groups that crossed the Atlantic in the slave trade he asserts that black slaves did not initially view themselves as a unified race. Rather, they identified themselves based on their tribal origins such as Ibo, Mandingo, and Yoruba. However, the oppressive conditions of the Middle passage and of New World Slavery forced Africans to abandon tribal and cultural differences and unite around the racial commonality that existed. This led to a fusion of African practices alongside newly adapted European customs, contributing to the beginnings of the African American identity.²⁹

²⁸ Throughout the work I employ the term “teenager,” “adolescent,” and “pubescent” when referencing those in the adolescent stage of development ranging in age from ten-years-old to as late as nineteen-years-old in some cases. The terms associated with the stage are contemporary words, but as youth literature denotes “adolescence” though a modern term was a recognized age of awkwardness and coming of age. It is important to note for quantitative purposes the work stops at eighteen-years-old.

²⁹ Michael Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

Berlin, in *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (1998), in examining the evolution of American slavery explores identity formation. He writes, “For most Africans. . . identity was a garment which might be worn or discarded, rather than a skin which never changed its spots.” This “garment” was formed as Africans borrowed from components of their African heritage, the white owning class and even the Native American population to forge ideas concerning self.³⁰ Though Gomez and Berlin are both accurate in that slaves borrowed ideas from different people and cultures neither discuss *when* this identity formation began.

Painter explores the psychological characteristics of enslaved men and women, particularly the impact of sexual abuse and violence used during slavery to control blacks. Using psychoanalysis to understand the mental and emotional ramifications of this abuse Painter also touches on identity formation, particularly its inception. In her groundbreaking article, “Soul Murder and Slavery” she writes slaves must be examined as people “with all the psychological characteristics of human beings, with *childhoods and adult identities formed during youthful interaction with others.*”³¹ It is this “youthful interaction” this work researches to discover the types of slave men and women that emerged from adolescence.

Exploring slaves’ life cycles reveals identity formation and its subsequent reshaping began during the teen years, when slaves’ identities were malleable and easily shaped by antebellum race and gender ideologies.³² The by-product produced adult slaves, individuals whose work

³⁰ Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), 105.

³¹ Nell Painter, “Soul Murder and Slavery” (Waco, Texas: Markham Press Fund, 1995), 10-11. Italics are mine and not of Painter.

³² Audra Abbe Diptee, writing of the use of enslaved youth in Jamaica during the colonial and early nineteenth-century, argues that white slave owners selected younger slaves because “the younger the child, the more malleable he or she would be, so that younger children would be better able to acclimatize to the social and cultural

output fueled the success of Southern economic systems. Hence, though a dissertation dedicated to the study of teens, this study, in grappling with identity formation, also sheds light on the experiences of adults. Furthermore, as the teenage female slave is explored within the context of antebellum society the dissertation provides a deeper understanding of antebellum attitudes concerning teenagers across socio-economic and political lines.

Certainly, I am not the first to consider slave life cycles. But this work does inaugurate investigating the *significance* of experiences linked to the teenage experience. White's Chapter Three, "The Life Cycle of the Female Slave," examines various stages of female slave development. Adolescent slave girls are included in her discussion as she engages female menses, introduction to work roles and courtship. Jones, like White, engages adolescence and ritualizes changes associated with dress and courtship. Yet, for both authors no real analysis exists beyond their identification of teenage rites. For example, White writes, "the early teenage years brought hard work and a painful awareness of what it meant to be a slave."³³ But she fails to express the origins of this "painful awareness." Did work or arranged sexual relationships create this awareness? Within the same passage she writes, "these years [early teenage years] were also marked by puberty."³⁴ This statement presents puberty as insignificant and somewhat of an afterthought but as her discussion on slaveholding interest in chattel reproduction suggests, puberty informed slavery.³⁵ Without the physiological changes puberty wrought, such as increased height, development of breasts and the start of menstrual cycles, girls would not have

assumptions of Jamaican slave society. This fact was not lost on contemporaries who noted that African children brought to the island would more easily adapt and eventually 'acquire the speech and manners' of their environment," in "Imperial Ideas, Colonial Realities,"⁵⁷.

³³ White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 95.

³⁴ White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 95.

³⁵ For White's discussion concerning master's interest in adolescent female reproduction refer to *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, pgs. 98-103.

matriculated through the rites that taught them what it was to be a slave, hence without slave maturation you have the demise of slavery. This correlation must not be dismissed.

Jones' discussion surrounding the connection of gender and the receipt of clothes is equally problematic because she attributes the receipt of pants for males as extremely important while she overlooks the role of dresses in the lives of females. Though dresses did not differ greatly from childhood shifts, they were still laden with important meanings associated with femininity such as sexual activity and motherhood. These two areas proved crucial to slavery's maintenance; without sexual activity, the labor force could not replenish itself. Without mothers adhering to their maternal responsibilities helpless slave babies could not survive, again causing the institution's collapse.³⁶

But just as White, Jones, and other slave studies have not explored sufficiently teenage slaves, youth literature needs to present a more nuanced interpretation of slave adolescents as well. Though distinctions are made between children and youth, the brunt of the material continues to focus on people classified as children, thus omitting teenagers.³⁷ But, because historians have not recognized their historic value does not mean enslaved adolescents were not important or do not require scholarly attention.

In an effort to shed light on the subject this work pulls from an array of analytical tools and sources. Traditionally, scholars have failed to engage age as a tool of analytical inquiry, instead

³⁶ Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 32.

³⁷ *Slavery and Abolition's* special edition "Children in European Systems of Bondage" devotes a substantial amount of attention to defining what constituted a slave child. Based on Gwyn Campbell's article "slaves aged up to 12 were generally considered to be 'children,' and those between 12 and 15-18 to be 'youths,' which accords with the range of most modern western definitions of children and adolescents." Though the distinction is made most of the articles consulted focused only on those that she defined as "children." Slave youth were given little to no attention. Hence "youth" literature either explores younger children, similar to King and Schwartz, or it engages adolescence from an elite, white vantage point, such as Kett and Jabour. Gwyn Campbell, "Children and Slavery in the New World: A Review," *Slavery and Abolition*, Special Edition, "Children in European Systems of Bondage" Vol. 27, No. 2 (August 2006): 262.

relying on gender, race, and class. However, there are a growing number of studies that employ age as a useful category of inquiry. Just as early gender studies, by exploring the subject through the vantage point of the female, caused the discipline to re-evaluate aspects of slave life, using age as a critical tool of inquiry to investigate areas such as resistance, sexual relationships, work habits and dress will enable me to investigate the teenage slave experience and examine the origins of reformations of slave identity; consequently, leading to the development of a more nuanced interpretation of the complex socio-economic and political structure of the antebellum South.³⁸ No longer will we simply read about slave work experiences and resistance acts performed by adults but hopefully this work will influence scholars to unravel motivations behind these actions as located in the identities formed during enslaved coming of age, leading to a more complete picture of slaves.

Though age is a leading analytical tool and differentiates this study from other works, gender remains significant. Adolescent male slaves could serve easily as my subject, but I consider females because of the need for more monographs concerning black women. The unique gender conventions assigned to slave females and the social space they were forced to carve out in a world that recognized only maleness and whiteness provided an additional incentive to use teenage girls. But though women are the focus, men are far from absent from the dialogue, as sophisticated gender studies concerning female slaves demonstrate, female gender roles are inextricably bound to male gender roles, therefore in relaying the female

³⁸ Peter Carmichael's *The Last Generation: Young Virginians in Peace, War, and Reunion* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005) is one of the latest studies that employs age as an analytical tool. Studying young men in Virginia during the late antebellum and Civil War periods, he explores how these men came of age while actively engaging in the socio-economic and political events of the time. Carmichael's work is useful because like my study it seeks to shed light on Southern identity formation. Also, though she has been examined in the historiography, Jabour's *Scarlett's Sisters* is another wonderful example of the benefits of the generational approach.

account I will grapple with complex gender issues that relay the teenage slave experience for both sexes, as well as how adult males, black and white alike, factored into this process.

Slave interviews, narratives, travel journals and plantation records are crucial to unearthing the significance of age to the enslaved female experience. WPA interviews provide a wealth of information. George P. Rawick's *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (1979) provides data concerning slave life such as food, living conditions, and work assignments. In addition, Charles Perdue's *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves* (1976) is quite useful. Unlike Rawick's work that uses interviews conducted by white and black interviewers, the majority of interviews featured in *Weevils* were conducted by African American interviewers, thus eliminating the criticism that racial differences between the interviewee and interviewer prevented ex-slaves from being forthright in their responses. Furthermore, *Weevils*' focus on Virginia further aids the study.

WPA interviews are often criticized because some scholars believe the interviewees' recollections are inaccurate due to their extreme age, and as mentioned, the racial differences between interviewers and interviewees.³⁹ For elderly people, human memory, while inconsistent concerning contemporary events, proves quite reliable in recalling past life events, further proving the reliability and validity of the source. Furthermore, the source is of great value due to the interviewees' age when they experienced slavery.⁴⁰ The majority of them were children and

³⁹ Among those who criticized the use of WPA interviews were John Blassingame and David Henige. For discussion on the criticisms consult Norman Yetman, "An Introduction to the WPA Narratives: The Limitations of the Slave Narrative Collection: Problems of Memory," [<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snintro14.html>], March 2010. David Henige, *Oral Historiography* (London, Longman, 1982). George Rawick also has comments in his general introduction to the supplemental series, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, Supplement, Series 1 (London, Greenwood Press, 1977).

⁴⁰ Though Henige was extremely critical of the narratives believing they failed to relay the slave experience accurately he believes they were useful in understanding slave children. He states "'weaknesses that characterizes the ex-slave narratives restricts their reliable data to such matters as childhood under slavery'" in Norman Yetman,

teenagers when enslaved, as such their recollections of their coming of age experience speak directly to the heart of this study on adolescents. All of these accounts, taken in unison, help recreate what life was like for slave girls as they went through puberty while being deemed property and how that fact shaped their consciousness.

Slave narratives also provide excellent first-person accounts. I consulted two that are invaluable: Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and Elizabeth Keckley's *Behind the Scenes: Thirty Years A Slave and Four Years in the White House* (1868). Jacobs, a North Carolina native and Keckley, a Virginian, are within my study's geographical parameters, and thus both provide insight on slavery in those states. But, most importantly, both works chronicle two slave women's lives from childhood to adulthood, with extensive attention devoted to their tumultuous teenage years. Both not only relay the physiological changes but they also poignantly describe the emotional angst endured, enabling historians to move from speculating what slaves felt or thought, to effectively relaying slaves' feelings in their words.

Unearthing the white role in enslaved females' coming of age proved easier given the wealth of white sources available such as travel journals and diaries of white antebellum citizens, plantation records and federal reports. *The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveller's Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States* by Frederick Law Olmsted and William Howard Russell's *My Diary North and South* were among the journals researched. Written by journalists who recorded their observations during their Southern travels both of these works demonstrate whites' perception of black youth, particularly their insignificance and asexual place during childhood.

"An Introduction to the WPA Narratives: Should the Slave Narrative Collection Be Used?," [\[http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snintro16.html\]](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snintro16.html), March 2010.

Plantation records including slave inventories, slave lists and federal reports, such as census records, were helpful in documenting slave age, occupation, value, and gauging the white attitude toward adolescent slaves, especially white male perceptions concerning slave female sexuality.⁴¹ This source material was also useful in understanding economic aspects concerning the correlation between puberty and the appreciation of slave values.

I have also consulted criminal court cases, and antebellum novels. Criminal court cases provided the brunt of the material for resistance. In these cases, primarily from Virginia and North Carolina, we encounter young girls being prosecuted for everything from arson to poisoning to infanticide. Through testimony and affidavits we gain insight into what motivated young slaves to resist. Antebellum and postbellum novels were helpful as well, as they, by shedding light on the pulse of popular culture, provide insight into citizens' thoughts concerning slavery. Novels that were useful include William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853), Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) and Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894). Brown aids discussion concerning sexuality, Wilson's novel informs the chapter concerning work, and Twain's book aids our understanding of teenage slaves and dress.

The source material identified is drawn primarily from Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia. Though in close geographic proximity these states were selected because, unlike southwestern states where slavery did not develop fully until the cotton boom pushed whites westward, slavery, particularly the enslaved teenage population can be traced back as

⁴¹ Having identified primary source material it is important to explain how these materials were used. Because these sources have never been consulted with the teenage slave in mind, I reread accounts seeking rites that appeared ubiquitous to the adolescent populace. Investigating plantation records and slave inventories, I charted the ages a child was deemed an adolescent and noted changes slave owners recorded such as increase in food allocation, incorporation into trash gangs, even the type of attire girls received. Charting this data uncovered common patterns concerning identified rites among the age group throughout the South. Also comparing changes masters dictated to the way slave teens internalized and accepted their changing status from childhood to adulthood led to evidence of slave resistance.

early as 1800 in the four states. Therefore, each of them lends themselves to reflect slavery's change over time. Additionally, they all were impacted by Eli Whitley's revolutionary cotton gin (1793) and incorporated cotton into their economy on some level by 1811. Due to their involvement with cotton, they tended to select a more balanced sexual ratio unlike the sugar plantations further south that relied more on men.⁴² Also, according to the 1820 federal census, these states maintained the largest slave populations in their regions, a feat they maintained for decades to come.⁴³

These factors enable me to gauge patterns, such as the age community's growth as well as their role within the Domestic slave trade, over time. Aside from uncovering patterns, these similarities, as well as differences, such as the various types of crops produced, the use of absentee masters, and slaveholding sizes, enable me to use the four states to examine the teenage slave community at a microscopic level, using findings to make implications concerning the larger South as it relates to teenage slave girls.

At this point a brief historical overview of slavery in each of these states is appropriate.⁴⁴

⁴² Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (London: Harvard University Press, 2003), 179-180.

⁴³ Reference Table 6-1 in Darlene Clark Hine, et. al., *The African-American Odyssey: Combined Volume* (New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc., 2006), 139.

⁴⁴ Numerous studies, such as Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll* and Peter Kolchin's, *American Slavery, 1619-1877 Anniversary edition* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), have broadened our understanding of American slavery from its origins to the complicated master-slave relationships. Through the work of these and other scholars, we understand the broad commonalities that existed throughout Southern slavery as well as the subtle differences within each state. Within Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia slavery served as a cornerstone of their economic growth and development as slaves performed tasks, from cultivating crops to working in industry. Slaves' presence also shaped politics, providing a source of debate, especially during the 1850s, as Northern and Southern whites contested slavery's future. Northern states, having all but eliminated slavery within their borders and having adopted an industrial economy, argued that the slave South prevented the nation from realizing real growth and progress. Northern antislavery advocates, infused by an ideology that embraced free labor and challenged slavery's morality, sought to undermine the slave South. Taking the offensive, Southerners portrayed themselves as defenders of the South and benevolent friends of slaves, and they worked politically to protect Southern interests. Whether it was South Carolina's fire-eaters, vehement pro-slavery activists, North Carolina yeoman farmers or Virginia's gentry, the South solidified around their right to maintain and protect slavery. Despite numerous national legislative concessions, such as the Missouri Compromise, the Fugitive Slave laws, and the

Virginia's agricultural and industrial economy employed slaves in urban areas, such as Alexandria and Richmond, as well as rural areas, such as the Blue Ridge Mountains. Used in the production of tobacco, cotton, lumber and wheat, Virginia slaves engaged in everything from grain farming and grazing in the mountains to planting tobacco on large plantations near major rivers and bays such as the James, Rappahannock, York, Potomac, and Chesapeake in eastern Virginia.

First arriving in Jamestown, Virginia in 1619, blacks initially maintained a status similar to white servants and "interact[ed] with [Englishmen] . . . on terms of relative equality for two generations."⁴⁵ At first, slavery was a temporary arrangement. But soon racial slavery became institutionalized, and, after 1661 Africans became bondsmen for life. With the passage of a new set of slave codes in 1705, the future of Africans in America was determined.⁴⁶ Despite the change in status, Africans reproduced at a high rate, and from 1790 to 1830 Virginia's slave population increased rapidly.⁴⁷ Natural reproduction among slaves became crucial to slavery's survival with the end of the Atlantic slave trade after 1808. Consequently, Virginia possessed one of the largest slave populations throughout the antebellum period and by the start of the Civil War Virginia's slave population consisted of nearly 500,000 enslaved men, women, and

Compromise of 1850, slavery so divided the nation that the South, including these four states, seceded, eventually sparking civil war. However, before torn by war, the Southeast possessed a well-developed system of slavery.

⁴⁵ T.H. Breen and Stephen Innes, *Myne Owne Ground: Race and Freedom on Virginia's Eastern Shore, 1640-1676* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 5.

⁴⁶ Breen, et. al., *Myne Owne Ground*, 5.

⁴⁷ For additional information concerning slavery in Virginia specifically the growth of its slave population consult James Curtis Ballagh, *A History of Slavery in Virginia* (Baltimore, John Hopkins Press, 1902).

children.⁴⁸ With this large slave population Virginia slaveholders sold slaves to southwestern markets especially as the demands of the cotton economy increased labor needs.

Populated by Virginians who migrated south in the early eighteenth-century, North Carolina boasted a slave population that increased by 32 percent from 1790 to 1800. The growth in North Carolina's slave population slowed thereafter, in stark contrast to the expansion of slavery in Virginia. North Carolina's population growth was further hampered by the effects of the cotton boom. Desiring to prosper in the cotton business, whites either migrated west, taking slaves with them, or they took advantage of the high prices slaves brought by selling them south. Hence, the migration of North Carolinians to places like Georgia and Alabama from 1830 to 1850 along with the state's involvement with the domestic slave trade further limited the spread of slavery in North Carolina.⁴⁹

Like Virginia, North Carolina slavery spread from the coastal region to the western portion of the state, though western slaveholders owned fewer slaves than their eastern counterparts.⁵⁰ Slavery in eastern North Carolina was concentrated in the northeastern portion of the state, including the Roanoke River Valley, as well as the Cape Fear and Albemarle regions. The Roanoke River Valley, bordering Virginia, contained larger plantations and wealthier planters than any other portion of the state.⁵¹ Unlike western North Carolina slaves, Roanoke slaves usually worked under the supervision of an overseer, rather than the slave owner, growing

⁴⁸ Federal Census Records of 1860.

⁴⁹ John Spencer Bassett, *Slavery in the State of North Carolina* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1899), [<http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/bassett99/menu.html>], 77, 78.

⁵⁰ On average typical western slaveholders owned between five and twenty slaves, and they generally worked alongside their owners cultivating cotton, tobacco and in some cases raising beef cattle. Bassett, *Slavery in the State of North Carolina*, 8.

⁵¹ Jane Turner Censer, *North Carolina Planters and Their Children: 1800-1861* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 1.

tobacco and cotton, draining swampland, building the infrastructure, and constructing plantation homes. Unlike Virginia, North Carolina was slower to adopt a manufacturing economy. But slaves there did work in various industries such as naval stores, manufacturing tar, turpentine and related products.⁵² Due south was the Cape Fear area, home of the port city Wilmington and populated primarily with white and black migrants from South Carolina. Slaves in the Cape Fear region produced corn, rice, and indigo. The methods and type of rice production did not rival the South Carolina crop, but rice nonetheless served as a staple in North Carolina's agricultural economy. With the production of tobacco to the north and rice to the south, North Carolina needed slave labor both for the fields and the domestic slave trade, a trade North Carolina was increasingly involved.

Slavery in South Carolina was originally concentrated on the coastal plain, with time slavery permeated every geographic region of the state, the low, middle and upcountry. Within South Carolina, especially the coastline, Africans and African Americans maintained huge populations, outnumbering whites in South Carolina as early as 1708.⁵³ Producing rice, cotton and corn, South Carolina slaves adhered generally to a task work system, a system where slaves were assigned a task in the morning, once the task was completed the worker was free to stop for the day. Under this system slaves were granted greater freedom in completing work assignments. The practice of absentee owners also provided slaves with greater autonomy. Due to the spread of diseases such as malaria, masters in the lowcountry were known for being absentee planters; in striking contrasts to Virginia and North Carolina. Aside from personal

⁵² Darlene Clark Hine, et. al., *The African-American Odyssey: Combined Volume* (New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc., 2006), 136-157.

⁵³ Jeffrey Young, *Domesticating Slavery: The Master Class in Georgia and South Carolina, 1670-1837* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 20.

freedoms given through the task system and the practice of absentee planters, South Carolina slaves found economic freedom through the garden system. Under this system slaves were given the opportunity to cultivate their own crops, taking surplus produce to local marketplaces where they brokered business deals with whites by selling goods and other services.⁵⁴ However, with time and subsequent slave rebellions, such as Stono's rebellion in 1739, South Carolinians adopted harsher rules over their black population.

Black codes not only made servitude permanent for blacks, but they also limited the rights of slaves concerning voting, testifying in court and carrying firearms. As South Carolina slavery developed slave laws became more stringent in subsequent years. However, by the mid eighteenth-century slavery, and the laws associated with the institution, was firmly in place.⁵⁵ South Carolina slavery continued to evolve due to the effects of the cotton boom, the need for more slave labor, and its involvement with the domestic slave trade.

Georgia was unique in that slavery was initially banned when it was founded as a thirteenth English colony in North America, but in the years that followed slave labor became firmly established. Georgia struggled during its initial years economically, partly because of an inadequate workforce. After much debate in the mid eighteenth-century, slave labor was allowed; once instituted, slavery swept Georgia from the coastal region to the upcountry of the west.⁵⁶ At the start of the nineteenth-century, Georgia possessed about 60,000 slaves. By 1860, the slave population had increased by nearly eight times, the majority of whom lived on the

⁵⁴ For information on South Carolina slavery consult Larry E. Hudson Jr., *To Have and to Hold: Slave Work and Family Life in Antebellum South Carolina* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997).

⁵⁵ For information on South Carolina slavery consult Peter Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1974).

⁵⁶ For information on Georgia slavery consult Ralph Flanders, *Plantation Slavery in Georgia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1933).

coastline. With a rapidly expanding slave population, white Georgians solidified control over their property. Using South Carolina's slavery legislation as a model, Georgia instituted its first slave code in 1755. Like other state slave codes the laws made slavery a permanent condition for blacks and provided a highly restrictive system. For example, according to the 1755 law all persons of color, including Indians, mulattos and mestizos, as well as their offspring, were "declared to be and remain hereafter absolute slaves and shall follow the condition of the mother." Other laws restricted slave mobility, regulated slave gatherings, and monitored slave drinking. However, unlike South Carolina, it appears that Georgia's codes were milder and issued some protections in favor of chattel. Those included requiring that slaves be given Sunday off unless extenuating circumstances necessitated they work. Additionally, slaves' work hours could not exceed sixteen hours and fines were given to slave owners who used excessive force on their property.⁵⁷

Enslaved Georgia blacks, like their upper South counterparts, produced rice, corn, timber, beeswax, skins, indigo and cotton. Additionally, slaves labored in naval stores and textile mills making a significant impact on the state's industrial development.⁵⁸ But as the demand for cotton increased leading to the spread of slavery, Georgia, like Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina, demanded slaves as never before. Unlike Virginia, North Carolina and South Carolina, which exported a significant number of slaves, Georgia *imported* more enslaved persons from the domestic slave trade, acquiring the precious commodities in markets found in Augusta, Savannah, Macon and Louisville. According to historian Daina Berry, in her study of Georgia slavery, due to the massive influx of slaves from South Carolina and Virginia, the state,

⁵⁷ Flanders, *Plantation Slavery in Georgia*, 23-26.

⁵⁸ Hine, *The African-American Odyssey*, 136-157.

under Governor William Rabun, required all owners of imported slaves to register their chattel through local county courts in 1817. Of those registered a disproportionate number were between the ages of ten and seventeen.⁵⁹

Free in Thought, Fettered in Action begins by seeking to understand how teenage slaves were situated within the antebellum social hierarchy in Chapter Two “*Like a Bridge*”: *The Teenage Slave and Slaveholding Society*. Chapter Three: *Mind How Much Cotton You Pick: Navigating the World of Work* analyzes how enslaved female teens transition from childhood to adulthood via work roles. This chapter demonstrates how teenage slave girls learned about their new work responsibilities and how they maneuvered through this oppressive work world. It is my contention that through work slaves interacted with adults. Whether black or white, slave or free, consciously or haphazardly, these people helped the teenage female understand and construct techniques to survive and resist the intricate institution of slavery. Furthermore, the actual tasks teenage females performed gave them firsthand experience of what it meant to be a slave for life. As adolescents, slaves were no longer confined to the yard to play; rather slave girls began to witness the grim realities of slave life.

Chapter Four: *Badge of Slavery: Pubescent Females and Clothing* explores how the acquisition of a dress for slave girls indicated their ensuing adulthood. By putting on a dress and shedding a shift, the adolescent slave female marked one of the passages into womanhood. Once clothed in the slave wardrobe, the teenager was draped with a badge of slavery and enveloped within the capitalistic and sexual edicts that defined her place within the institution. This new garment was important because it denoted or “advertised” the start of menstrual cycles, an

⁵⁹ Daina Berry, *Swing the Sickle for the Harvest is Ripe: Gender and Slavery in Antebellum Georgia* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2007), 90.

important physiological change that moved girls from asexual to sexual beings, it is this sexuality that is the subject of the succeeding chapter.

Chapter Five: “*Victims of the Grossest Passion: Enslaved Adolescent Female Sexuality*” relays the way slave girls acquired sexual knowledge from parents, whites and personal experience (voluntary and forced sexual encounters). Whether sexually active or abstinent, a slave female gained self-awareness via her body. She learned sex was an act, which caused her to differ from black male slaves. It feminized her within her masculine work world. At the same time, created a different set of sexual standards from that of the adolescent white female. Furthermore, she discovered forced relations reflected the strong physical hold slavery maintained, while courting and voluntary premarital sex represented her ability to maintain a semblance of humanity within the system.

Chapter Six: “*Before I Be a Slave*”: *Teenage Resistance* considers the type of resistance pubescent girls performed upon gaining the knowledge of what life under slavery encompassed for them. Infanticide is among the key areas of resistance explored. However, other forms of resistance examined include physical assaults, poisoning and arson. After exploring all of the rites that informed slave girls of their status, and the steps some implemented to refute that identity, Chapter Seven: *Coming of Age* explores the byproduct of this transformation into adulthood. What type of slave females emerged from this experience? Using narratives, such as Jacobs’ *Incidents and Keckley’s Behind the Scenes*, the final chapter displays the type of adult slaves these slave girls developed to argue that a double consciousness resulted with slaves operating seamlessly between their enslaved and human identity in white and African American subcultures.

This dissertation does not pose or answer all the questions concerning enslaved adolescent females. But, just as older historical works laid the foundation for this study, this research will no doubt lead other scholars to engage the teenage slave. Hopefully, this modest study will be a step toward adding teenage slave girls in a narrative that for too long has forgotten them.

CHAPTER 2

LIKE A BRIDGE: THE TEENAGE SLAVE AND SLAVEHOLDING SOCIETY

For modern teens, adolescence consists of increased responsibilities such as part-time work, acquiring a driving license, dating and preparation for college or full-time employment after high school. In the antebellum South, how did whites and enslaved blacks grow up? How did antebellum parents react to the physiological and psychological changes? Were they cautious and fearful? Given slavery's significance to the South, what was enslaved teenagers' role in its socio-economic and political development? This chapter answers these questions by examining the general contours of antebellum adolescence.

Prior to the early nineteenth-century, ideas concerning age and development remained nebulous. Instead, physical size determined when a child reached adulthood and became capable of work.¹ Consider, for instance, the historical language used to describe slave youth on the threshold of adulthood. Young females were commonly called "big missy," while enslaved males were often described as "half grown." Both terms emphasize the youth's size but ignore the emotional and psychological maturation that is associated with growth. Given the agricultural economy that dominated this period, adults needed physical strength and endurance in field hands, but using a child's size as an age determinant could also be imprecise.

Take the case of Abigail Adams, the wife of former President John Adams, who assumed that Jefferson's famed concubine, Sally Hemings, was two years older than her actual age. Sent to negotiate a peace treaty with Great Britain, Jefferson and his eldest daughter Patsy lived in France, leaving his two youngest girls, Lucy and Polly, under the care of his sister-in-law, Elizabeth Eppes. After Lucy's death, Jefferson desperately wanted his other child in France.

¹ Kett, *Rites of Passage*, 17. Holly Brewer's *By Birth or Consent* examines childhood in colonial society. Researching colonial legislation, Brewer argues that ideologies concerning childhood experienced a fundamental shift as children initially were considered individuals with legal consent to persons who needed the protection of adults.

Sending for her in 1787, Polly made the Atlantic voyage with her waiting maid, Sally. When the pair arrived in England, they were under Mrs. Adams' charge. While there, Adams corresponded with Jefferson about his daughter's well-being and about Polly's immature waiting maid, Sally, a girl she described as "about 15 or 16."² Hemings' size, the basis of Adams' assessment, caused the former first lady to assume that Sally was an older slave, rather than a thirteen or fourteen-year-old child. Subsequently, because Adams assumed that Sally was older she became annoyed at what she perceived as Sally's immaturity and childlike behavior. No doubt other adults misjudged a child's age because of size.

As the market revolution transformed the American economy, children became less crucial to the household economy. At the same time, social standards changed, causing childhood and adolescence to be viewed as life phases which were distinct from adulthood and which required unique experiences and parental guidance. Consequently, Southerners abandoned size as the sole determinant of maturation, leading to the creation of a set of rites employed to determine adolescence.³ These new experiences became markers for this transition from childhood to adulthood.

For mid nineteenth-century whites, physical growth denoted the onset of puberty. White boys were considered mature when their height increased and they became capable of completing a man's full work load. Consequently, they became incorporated fully into the workforce around fifteen or sixteen years of age.⁴ For white girls, the development of breasts and the onset of menstrual cycles indicated their ensuing womanhood, which began typically

² Annette Gordon-Reed, *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 194.

³ Kett, *Rites of Passage*, 11-13, King, *Stolen Childhood*, xx.

⁴ Kett, *Rites of Passage*, 17.

around sixteen or seventeen years of age.⁵ These physical changes initiated the start of numerous experiences for both sexes, including a decrease in parental supervision and courtship.

With maturity white children participated in activities, such as church functions, dances and courting, free from parental supervision. White males enjoyed additional freedom to participate in voluntary military companies and local political events. In these settings, teens not only asserted their independence but they were also exposed to adult matters, such as joining a local church, making acquaintance with members of the opposite sex, and forming ideas about politics and slavery.⁶

Courtship, occurring simultaneously with physical growth, became an important part of adolescence. Designed to aid young people in locating a future spouse for the establishment of an independent household, courtship was among the rites that led whites toward adulthood. Young men, by obtaining permission from the head of the family, initiated courtship. However, according to historians Guion Johnson, Jane Censer, and Anya Jabour, white females were far from passive participants in the process.⁷ For example, a correspondent of the *Western Carolinian* was shocked to discover young women “parading the streets of Salisbury, staring at the men ‘with a fixed and intent gaze.’” Though he maintained his decorum, he could not help but relay this episode to his aunt Dorothy. Seemingly appalled, she recalled her youth and the way “gentlemen,” found young ladies at home “employed either in reading or sewing.”⁸

⁵ Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters*, 28-31.

⁶ Kett, *Rites of Passage*, 23, 43-44. It is important to note that one's class dictated the extent of these experiences but certain elements were common despite social status.

⁷ Guion Johnson, *Ante-bellum North Carolina: A Social History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1937), [<http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/johnson/chapter7.html>], accessed May 2010. For additional information on teenage courtship consult Censer's *North Carolina Planters and Their Children* and Jabour's *Scarlett's Sisters*.

⁸ Johnson, *Ante-bellum North Carolina*, 194.

Certainly, as suggested by Aunt Dorothy's comments, ideologies concerning youth and their experiences were in flux.

During courtship white couples engaged in a variety of activities, including carriage rides, walks, or attending church functions or races.⁹ Some enjoyed the courtship process and its culmination in marriage; others loathed it, realizing that it curtailed their freedom with friends and forced them to eventually assume adult responsibilities as provider or nurturer. Despite personal opinions, once courting, larger society recognized that teenagers were quickly becoming adults. Yet how did adults react to witnessing their children moving toward adulthood?

White parents viewed adolescence as a dangerous period requiring close supervision because of the "overpressure and . . . acceleration of experiences."¹⁰ This fear was fueled further by numerous physicians, psychiatrists, philosophers and educators who began to write extensively concerning puberty in the American adolescent as early as 1830.¹¹ Topics ranged from sexual maturation to rapid growth, to education and included advice for parents. For example, phrenologist Orson Fowler advocated parents delaying the time children began work as he believed premature labor greatly reduced the years individuals lived as adults.¹² Thus, by the time we reach the antebellum era adolescence is a topic of great concern for parents and academicians alike.

⁹ Johnson, *Ante-bellum North Carolina*, 195.

¹⁰ Kett, *Rites of Passage*, 135.

¹¹ Kett, *Rites of Passage*, 134.

¹² Kett, *Rites of Passage*, 135.

Although seen as a tumultuous transitional time for both sexes, most citizens viewed females as the most emotional and unstable during this period.¹³ Subsequently, adults were frequently more anxious about female puberty than male puberty.¹⁴ Because of their anxiety, grown-ups believed adolescents should be acclimated slowly to adult gender roles, roles that varied not only based on race but also class. Young elite men and women learned plantation management. For males, that consisted of learning slave management, proper agricultural techniques, and basic business skills. Elite white females, confined to the home, learned the techniques in executing domestic duties such as cooking, cleaning, and sewing. Lower-class whites internalized comparable gendered work roles. Males settled into farm work or a trade; females, like their wealthy counterparts, learned domestic duties, but without the benefit of servants to assist. Apprehensive about the type of adult that emerged from this turbulent period of change, parents thus viewed it their duty to prepare adolescents for adult responsibilities. For wealthy white teens these duties included interacting with and controlling slaves. What was adolescence like for those who became the property of these future masters and mistresses?

Unlike their white contemporaries, enslaved boys and girls unraveled the mysteries of puberty while also coming to terms with what it meant to be property. Like white teenagers, adolescence for enslaved males and females served as a transitional period leading them into adulthood. But adulthood for teenage slaves in the antebellum South was a vastly different period with significantly different outcomes. In some respects, the transitions were similar: both experienced similar activities, rites, and adult attitudes about puberty. But enslaved adolescence was deeply connected to the South's socio-economic and political survival.

¹³ Kett, *Rites of Passage*, 137-138.

¹⁴ Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters*, 28.

Like whites, physical change became a marker of slave maturation. Height for male slaves and the onset of menstrual cycles for females both served as indicators of adulthood. Most enslaved males reached their maximum height by age nineteen, and enslaved girls' menstrual cycles began between fourteen to fifteen-years-old, two years earlier than white girls.¹⁵ Prior to reaching their growth spurt or ovulating enslaved children were asexual beings, making minimal contributions to plantation production, work, if completed, consisted of carrying water, fanning flies or sweeping yards. As slaves grew, they were able to labor in fields, cultivating crops needed to sustain the expanding Southern economies.¹⁶ This shift in their productive capacities greatly increased their value.

Lists of Negroes, bill of sales, and correspondences regarding the slave trade provide insight into slave values and the increases that resulted as slaves matured. A detailed list of negroes from the Collins Family Papers clearly demonstrates the economic worth masters placed on growing slave bodies. Slaveholders Josiah Collins I, II and III, were among the largest slave-owners in eastern North Carolina. Consequently, they left detailed records concerning their slave property, among those items were slave lists from 1840, listing the ages and values of their property.

Slave toddlers, such as two-year-old Lucinda and Patience, were valued at \$75 dollars, while their playmates, three-year-old Alfred and Daniel, were appraised slightly higher at \$100 dollars. Children, such as seven-year-old Harry or nine-year-old Elizabeth, were judged more valuable due to age, with both being listed at \$175 dollars. However, by the time slave youth

¹⁵ Campbell, "Children and Slavery in the New World," 261. For additional information on teenage physical maturation consult Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters*, 30-31.

¹⁶ Schwartz in *Born in Bondage* argues that the "prices paid for slave children depended on their ability to perform agricultural or household chores, not their age (160)." While that is true, the ability to effectively complete those tasks usually occurred around a general age for most, so one cannot simply attribute a slave's worth to size and completely discount age, it was significant.

reached their early and late teens they had appreciated greatly in value. The twenty-one teenage boys between the ages of thirteen and eighteen years-old were valued between \$350 and \$700 dollars, the twenty-one females in that same age category were valued from \$300 to \$450 dollars.¹⁷ As reflected in the bill of sales for Mariah, a sixteen-year-old girl sold for \$400 dollars in Dekalb County, Georgia, and seventeen-year-old Ann and fourteen-year-old Rose of South Carolina the Collins' accurately valued their slaves as teenage slave girls generally brought around \$400 in the market.¹⁸

Antebellum price lists and correspondences sent from traders within the market also aid our understanding of teenage slave values. Based on an 1846 North Carolina Negro Price List, a list used by traders to determine the market value of slaves, “negro men between the ages of 18 and 25 yrs old are worth from \$600 to \$650 and girls from 14 to 20 years old are worth from 400 to \$450 if these negroes are sound and of fair quality.”¹⁹ Former slave William Johnson of Virginia affirmed that fact. Recalling slave auctions, he stated, “when they put the women up on the auction block, bidders would come up and feel the women’s legs—lift up their parments and examine their hips, feel their breast, and examine them to see if they could bear children. If the women were in good condition they would bring anywhere from \$150.00 to \$500.00 a piece.”²⁰

¹⁷ List of Negroes at Edenton, Collins Plantation Records, Slave Records, April 1, 1840, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh. List of Negroes, Collins Plantation Records, Slave Records, 1840, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh.

¹⁸ Bill of Sale, August 18, 1828, William C. Hardin Family Papers, ac 1967-0178M, Georgia Archives. Bills of sale, Vols. 6A and 6B: 1843-1849, Secretary of State, Recorded Instruments, 6A, 261, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia. Bills of sale, Vols. 6A and 6B: 1843-1849, Secretary of State, Recorded Instruments, 6B, 225, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia.

¹⁹ Negro Price List, Collins Plantation Records, Slave Records, Nov. 13, 1846, Appraiser: Malachi Haughton, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh.

²⁰ William I. Johnson, Jr., “William I. Johnson, Jr. Interview,” interview by Milton L. Randolph in *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, edited by Charles L. Perdue, Jr., et. al (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 166.

Younger slaves, naturally, were sold for less. According to the same appraiser, Malachi Haughton, boys twelve to fourteen-years-old were valued from \$425 to \$450 dollars and girls, the same age, from \$350 to \$400 dollars.²¹ However, the prices slaves brought at market were impacted directly by the cotton market and its demand for laborers. Consequently, during boom times slave prices increased, as such teenage boys and girls' value skyrocketed.

Correspondence in the William Finney papers reflect increases in teenage slave market value. Finney, a Pittsylvania County, Virginia, slaveholder, received numerous letters from Philip Thomas, whom he employed as a slave trader. Writing in February 1859 from Richmond, Virginia, one of the leading slave trading centers in the country, Thomas described the results of the sales of slaves including young females: "14 year old girls bring from \$1250 to 1275. No. 1 women \$1300 and . . . No. 1 men from \$1300 to \$1600."²² These prices were further confirmed by the Richmond, Virginia, slave auctioneering firm Dickinson Hill and Company. According to a market guide provided by the company in December 1859 slave men aged nineteen to twenty-five-years-old were valued from \$1400 to \$1500 dollars, males fifteen to eighteen-years-old wrought \$1350 to \$1450 dollars, and younger boys ten to fourteen-years-old sold for \$900 to \$1300 dollars. As females generally sold for less than males, that trend held true in the late antebellum period, but, as with men, female prices increased also; females sixteen to twenty-two years-old were sold for \$1200 to \$1350 dollars, younger girls ten to fifteen-years-old sold for \$900-\$1150. These prices remained high as reflected in notices sent by the same company in

²¹ Negro Price List, Collins Plantation Records, Slave Records, Nov. 13, 1846, Appraiser: Malachi Haughton, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh.

²² Phillip Thomas to William Finney, 1 February 1859, Kenneth Stampp, ed., *Records of the Ante-Bellum Southern Plantations from the Revolution through the Civil War* (Frederick, Md. : University Publications of America, 1985), Series F; Part 3, William A.J. Finney papers, 1849-1876.

June and July of 1860.²³ Certainly, the bill of sale for eighteen-year-old Eliza of Georgia, and fourteen-year-old Rebecca of South Carolina bear witness to the company's price list. Eliza, listed as having a "dark complexion," sold for "eleven hundred dollars" in September of 1859 and her contemporary, Rebecca sold for \$1,000 dollars in July of 1860.²⁴

As youth, slaves were well aware of their economic value. Born 1849 in King William County, Virginia ex-slave Robert Ellett was all too familiar with the monetary value assigned to his person. As an eight-year-old Ellett said his master was offered "eight hundred dollars in bank notes and silver" from a white man. Ellett surmised he was valued so high, despite his age, because he "was strong and was working in the fields a-worming tobacco then."²⁵ Slaves' productive capabilities and size influenced their economic value, but values were further affected by the acquisition of special skills or physical maladies. No doubt Robert Ellett's prowess as a field hand, led him to yield such a high value at eight-years-old, and the shoe making ability of a fifteen-year-old cobbler on the Collins plantation led to his high value of \$700 dollars, while his contemporaries, eighteen-year-old Daniel and Julius Caesar, were only valued at \$500 dollars

²³ Dickinson Hall and Company to William Finney, 24 December 1859, Kenneth Stampp, ed., *Records of the Ante-Bellum Southern Plantations from the Revolution through the Civil War* (Frederick, Md.: University Publications of America, 1985), Series F; Part 3, William A.J. Finney papers, 1849-1876. Dickinson Hall and Company to William Finney, 26 June 1860, Kenneth Stampp, ed., *Records of the Ante-Bellum Southern Plantations from the Revolution through the Civil War* (Frederick, Md.: University Publications of America, 1985), Series F; Part 3, William A.J. Finney papers, 1849-1876. Dickinson Hall and Company to William Finney, 14 July 1860, Kenneth Stampp, ed., *Records of the Ante-Bellum Southern Plantations from the Revolution through the Civil War* (Frederick, Md.: University Publications of America, 1985), Series F; Part 3, William A.J. Finney papers, 1849-1876.

²⁴ Bill of Sale, September 7, 1859, A.T. McIntyre Family Papers, ac 00-0290M, Georgia Archives. Bills of sale, Vols. 6E and 6F: 1857-1872, Secretary of State, Recorded Instruments, 256, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia.

²⁵ Robert Ellett, "Robert Ellett Interview," interview by Claude W. Anderson in *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, edited by Charles L. Perdue, Jr., et. al (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 85.

each. No doubt the fifteen-year-old's skill greatly increased his value but what led to the decline in price for his fellow male slaves?

Daniel was described as "very ordinary," and Julius Caesar was said to have "inflamed eyes." These descriptions, though simple, suggest a great deal about white perceptions of blacks. Those with physical maladies or who lacked extraordinary skills could not greatly increase slaveholders' profit, consequently they were deemed less than in terms of value and often pushed to the margins. The same was true of female slaves, like Rose and Venus.²⁶ Thirteen-year-old Rose and fourteen-year-old Venus were both blind. Subsequently, in the ledger they were described as "hopelessly Blind and useless." Because they were characterized as "useless" these young girls were of no interest to the slaveholder, an individual who needed each laborer to increase his net worth. Certainly, the number of slaves with physical maladies, like Julius Caesar, made up a small percentage of the enslaved population. The vast majority were healthy, capable of not only producing crops but also reproducing chattel.

Male slaves were needed for procreation, but female reproductive capabilities were most important to slavery's survival. Enslaved female reproduction has been well documented, but aside from Schwartz's comments about the correlation between puberty, enslaved female beauty and the capacity to work, historians have said little about the importance of the start of menses, the function required for reproduction to occur or its possible correlation to price increase.²⁷ In reviewing increases in female slave values, increases coincide with the time slave girls are experiencing their first menstrual cycle. Certainly their size and increased working abilities

²⁶ List of Negroes at Edenton, Collins Plantation Records, Slave Records, April 1, 1840, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh.

²⁷ Schwartz in *Born In Bondage* writes, "For girls, the physical attributes that determined a slave's market value included notions of beauty held by the owning class. Girls reached puberty at about the same time as their physical capacity for work increased sufficiently to make them efficient and effective laborers. Accordingly, they confronted double jeopardy: they were at risk not only for sale but also for sexual exploitation," 161.

influenced this phenomenon but one cannot help but speculate that slave girls' reproductive capabilities factored into this increase, especially by the nineteenth-century when slavery is a well-defined system.

Take, for example, the Reverend Ishrael Massie's description of slave sales. Born in South Emporia, Virginia, Massie was sold to Ira Wyche as a boy. As a slave he witnessed slaves being sold at local auctions. According to Massie young slaves sold for higher prices and "good breedin' 'oman brought big money." The significance of enslaved females' reproductive function to their economic value is further denoted in the language auctioneers used in the bidding process. Many auctioneers noted the fertility of slave females by yelling, "'Fine wench! Good breeder,' and de like."²⁸ If women's values were only linked to their ability to labor in slaveholding homes or fields why did their reproductive capabilities factor into the way they were advertised by whites or the money they yielded at auction? Enslaved female labor was indeed essential, but enslaved females' ability to plow or pick cotton was not the sole defining factor in considering their worth. Instead, they were also valued according to their ability to reproduce.²⁹ Small slaveholders confirm this fact as indicated by their interest in purchasing

²⁸ Reverend Ishrael Massie, "Reverend Ishrael Massie Interview," interview by Susie R.C. Byrd in *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, edited by Charles L. Perdue, Jr., et. al (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 205.

²⁹ White in *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, supports this point, she writes "Surprisingly, slaveholders were slow to appreciate the economic value of the slave woman's procreative ability, but by the middle of the eighteenth century most slave owners, especially those with twenty or more slaves, had come to realize the potential benefits" (67). She goes on to write "Once slaveholders realized that the reproductive function of the female slave could yield a profit, the manipulation of procreative sexual relations became an integral part of the sexual exploitation of female slaves. Few of the calculations made by masters and overseers failed to take a slave woman's childbearing capacity into account. This was particularly true after Congress outlawed the overseas slave trade in 1807" (68). Also reference White's *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, Chapter 2 "The Nature of Female Slavery," note 22. Additionally, White's discussion concerning the decreased value of nonchildbearing women gives further credence to the argument that reproduction factored into enslaved female value. Reference White's Chapter 3, "The Life Cycle of the Female Slave," particularly discussion surrounding pregnancy. I agree with White's contention, however, I argue that masters of young females in the nineteenth-century were aware of this from the moment slave females were born as denoted by phrases used particularly on bill of sales, securing the slave female as well as the "fruit of her womb." This interest in female wombs increased greatly when girls reached adolescence. This argument of slave value and reproduction

young childbearing women for their farms; this purchase provided both labor to meet immediate demands and the possibility of gaining additional slaves through natural reproduction.³⁰

The beginning of slave girls' menses was significant in that it marked the inauguration of sexual relations. This provided a stark contrast to white females, who were taught that premarital sexual relations were sinful and unladylike. Certainly, enslaved females learned the religious and social importance of maintaining one's virtue, but the nature of the institution made it nearly impossible for most enslaved adolescents to abstain from sex until marriage. As such, enslaved females often experienced their first sexual encounter, be it voluntary or involuntary, shortly after the start of their menstrual cycle.³¹

With the start of sexual activity came the possibility of pregnancy. Though some slaves gave birth by seventeen years of age, the average slave female experienced her first birth at nineteen to twenty-one-years-old.³² Pregnancy wrought new psychological and physiological changes. Among these was the harsh reality that, as White argues, slave females "were not free to consider their future without considering that their childbearing ability was of economic

is further complicated by Jones. If we take her argument in *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 14, that "any activity" women did that led to "the production of marketable goods" was considered work then reproduction is tied into her value, because in producing slave children they were producing a commodity that owners could sell for a profit.

³⁰ White's *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, Chapter 2 "The Nature of Female Slavery," note 22. Also reference Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (London: Harvard University Press, 2003), 169 and Schwartz in *Born in Bondage* writes, "slaveholders who purchased an adolescent girl could expect to benefit from the births of children throughout her fertile years. Consequently, the majority of girls sold were between the ages of thirteen and nineteen or twenty," 158.

³¹ Herbert Gutman in Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 33 says "that a 'sizable minority' of girls became sexually active soon after they began to menstruate, though other scholars have argued that the average age of slave woman at the time of the birth of her first child was twenty or twenty-one, four years after menarche and probably two years after the onset of fertility. The quality of that first sexual experience of course depended upon a number of personal factors, but all of these were overshadowed by the fact that slave women were always vulnerable to rape by white men."

³² Richard H. Steckel, "A Peculiar Population: The Nutrition, Health, and Mortality of American Slaves from Childhood to Maturity" in *The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (Sep., 1986), 725, 726.

consequence to their owners.”³³ Former slave Hilliard Yellerday recalled the significance placed on reproduction after the start of menses. “‘When a girl became a woman,’” Yellerday stated, “‘she was required to go to a man and become a mother. There was generally a form of marriage. . . . Master would sometimes go and get a large hale hearty Negro man from some other plantation to go to his Negro woman. He would ask the other master to let this man come over to his place to go to his slave girls. A slave girl was expected to have children as soon as she became a woman. Some of them had children at the age of twelve and thirteen years old. Negro men six feet tall went to some of these children.’”³⁴

Yellerday’s comments reaffirm several realities about antebellum society. First, they suggest the significance of menstrual cycles to the slave economy’s continued success. Menarche, at least on this slaveholding, led to a quasi-marriage relationship in which slave men would “go to” slave girls in order to reproduce. This process did not occur without master’s recognizing the inception of young girls’ menstrual cycles. Yellerday’s recollections also suggest that height was attributed as a male marker, while menstrual cycles determined female growth. He identifies the age of men not by a number but by their height. In this case, these men were six feet tall, and thus older slave males. But whereas height, an outwardly visible marker, determined men’s age, menstrual cycles became a determinant for slave girls. When he said that “girls become women,” Yellerday used coded language to imply the start of menstrual cycles. Given the taboo nature of the subject in antebellum culture, he masked this event with his use of

³³ White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*, 98.

³⁴ Hilliard Yellerday, "Hilliard Yellerday," interview by T. Pat Matthews, in WPA Slave Narrative Project, North Carolina Narratives, Volume 11, Part 2, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 434 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=112/mesn112.db&recNum=437&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Yellerday,+Hilliard\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=112/mesn112.db&recNum=437&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Yellerday,+Hilliard)))], accessed December 2008.

language. But the fact that Yellerday mentioned these terms, though coded, represents the importance of menstrual cycles in a female slave's life.

Aside from physical changes, additional experiences instructed enslaved teenagers about their transition from childhood to adulthood. These rites included changes in work, dress, sexual knowledge and the use of resistance, procedures that will be engaged in the forthcoming chapters. Teenage slaves also had adult attitudes to consider. Unlike white teens, who only worried about the impact of white adult attitudes on their lives, slave youth, writes Schwartz, "occupied an unusual position in that two sets of adults valued them, laying claim to their economic worth and attaching an emotional significance to their presence."³⁵ White and black adults looked on with vastly different attitudes and expectations for this group of young people.³⁶

Prior to puberty, slave children were supervised by adult slaves. Children on small farms stayed in close proximity to parents, but youth that resided on large plantations were generally supervised by a member of the slave community. Consequently, they had little to no interaction with white slaveholders and their subsequent authority. Slaves, therefore readily identified their parents as sources of power and authority. Yet puberty brought a cold reality: adult slaves were subject to white authority, just as slave teenagers and children. However, this truth did not deter parents from acting in positions of power or prevent slave children and teenagers from adhering to adult slave authority.

Slave parents, like white parents, regarded adolescence with a looming sense of trepidation, especially concerning enslaved adolescent females. They recognized that adolescence inevitably increased workloads for males and females but for girls it also resulted in

³⁵ Schwartz, *Born in Bondage*, 8.

³⁶ Schwartz, *Born in Bondage*, 9.

the threat of sexual abuse. Work placed teenage slave girls under the purview of whites, exposure that could lead to sexual harassment, rape, and pregnancy from masters, overseers, or white teenage boys. Recognizing these perils, slave parents often encouraged their children to proceed cautiously toward adulthood.³⁷ But whereas slave adults viewed adolescence with dread and anxiety, white slaveholders welcomed this period of transition as it shaped their socio-economic and political position within antebellum slave society.

The need for mature slave labor led white slaveholders to observe slave children's growth anxiously. Writing to traveler Frederick Olmsted, a slaveholder stated that "in the States of Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Missouri, as much attention is paid to the breeding and growth of negroes as to that of horses and mules."³⁸ Certainly, the yields were slow, because masters had to wait for slave infants to grow into capable producers, but the onset of puberty signaled that yet another slave was equipped to begin "learning" his or her role as chattel property. Mockingly, whites, who lamented watching their children grow, gladly welcomed puberty among slaves within their slaveholdings.

Aside from their economic contribution, teenage slaves' value also influenced whites' social position. Slaveholders' social standing and status depended on ownership of valuable slaves, for without them white males could not operate within prominent social circles or amass political power. Therefore, it benefited slaveholders even more when slave children matured, thereby increasing their value and wealth. But beyond the individual how did communities and states benefit? What impact did teenage slaves have specifically on Virginia, North Carolina,

South Carolina and Georgia?

³⁷ White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 95-97.; Schwartz, *Born in Bondage*, 156.

³⁸ Frederick Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveller's Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States*, edited by Arthur Schlesinger, Sr. with an introduction by Lawrence Powell (New York: Random House, Inc., 1984), 46, Footnote 2.

Enslaved teens became agents of change in Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia as these states experienced transformations in everything from crop cultivation to the domestic slave trade. At the start of the nineteenth-century, slavery underwent significant changes. On the one hand, Congress' 1808 ban of the Atlantic slave trade threatened to bring the institution to a halt while the cotton boom, aided greatly by Eli Whitney's gin, fueled it as never before. I argue that important to both these developments were teenage slaves. With the ban, teenage slaves filled the labor void the restriction left; additionally as cotton plantations grew, and began forging south and west, it was slave teenagers that slaveholders sold, purchased and or relocated to establish plantations in the southern interior.

Since the colonial era, whites used the Atlantic slave trade to acquire slave labor, but by the mid eighteenth-century whites were debating the merits of the African slave trade. Many observers, antislavery and proslavery alike, viewed the slave trade as "deplorable," and the Second Continental Congress enacted resolutions, as early as 1776, opposing slave importation. Influenced by the resolutions, coupled with a surplus of slaves in a declining tobacco market, some states, such as Virginia in 1778, initiated bans as well. Though useful in upper Southern states that maintained a surplus of slave labor, states further south, in desperate need of chattel labor, such as South Carolina and Georgia, lamented the restrictions.³⁹ Debates over the trade raged on until it was deemed illegal to import slaves to the U.S. as of 1808. With the ban enacted, masters considered the need for slave labor as never before. Who would replace slave adults when they were too old to work? What would occur to slavery since slaves were no longer imported from Africa? How would the South meet Northern and British demands for cotton without a steady supply of workers?

³⁹ Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 79.

According to Schwartz the need for labor, though important, was not urgent among slaveholders because they took comfort in the large rate of natural reproduction occurring in places like Virginia.⁴⁰ However, based on recent work by Ira Berlin we know that once the ban was enacted, slaveholders “hastened to assemble a labor force.”⁴¹ Whites continued to smuggle Africans through Florida and Texas, and resorted to kidnapping free blacks from the North and Upper South.⁴² These sources accounted for a small percentage of the total enslaved labor force, but “neither smuggling Africans nor kidnapping African Americans could satisfy the demand for laborers.”⁴³

As if locating slaves to work was not trying enough, slaveholders had to find slaves, physically capable and old enough, to begin working to immediately replace adult slaves the Atlantic trade generally provided. As proven by slaveholders’ preference for individuals fifteen to twenty-five-years-old, teenage slaves and young adults became a solution. In one instance, an owner’s preference to purchase teenagers was corroborated by Louis Fitzgerald. Recanting his family history to a WPA interviewer, Fitzgerald relayed the story of his grandmother, Jennie Rash and several of his aunts and uncles. Enslaved in Luenburg County, in central Virginia, Jennie was the property of Edmund Hite. Apparently not opposed to dissolving slave families, Hite, sold many of Jennie’s children. Though he sold young children (on one occasion selling Rash’s five month son, Frederick) teenagers were most susceptible as “there were 4 or 5 of her [Jennie] children when they reached teen age were sold down south and she never saw them

⁴⁰ Schwartz, *Born in Bondage*, 4.

⁴¹ Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 166.

⁴² Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 167.

⁴³ Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 167.

anymore.”⁴⁴ At a point of physical maturation, teens were capable of working. Additionally, teenagers were attractive laborers because they were capable of reproducing offspring thus ensuring slavery’s future survival and stability.⁴⁵

Aside from providing a labor source after the demise of the international slave trade, teenage slaves helped slaveholders to meet the demands of the cotton boom. With cotton production made easier by Whitney’s gin, which separated the seeds from the fiber of cotton, cotton’s high demand, coupled with manufacturers demanding the crop at record levels, created an insatiable need for labor and land. Concerning labor, developments caused regions with huge slave populations, like Virginia, to supply slaves to areas with slave shortages. Additionally, as slaveholders needed more land, slavery spread to the south and southwest in places like Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas.⁴⁶ As suggested by the domestic trade’s reliance on young slaves, whites depended on them to realize the profits of the cotton boom.

During the colonial period, prior to cotton’s ascent as a leading cash crop in the 1800s, cotton was grown in marginal amounts. Technological innovations, such as the introduction of steam power in British textile industry created a huge demand for the crop. Aided by the cotton gin, cotton planters were able to cultivate the crop easier, subsequently meeting the increasing need for cotton. By the nineteenth-century, particularly during the 1850s cotton production soared. In 1790 the US produced approximately 3,000 bales of cotton, during the 1820s it

⁴⁴ Louis Fitzgerald, “Louis Fitzgerald Interview,” interview by Susie R.C. Byrd in *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, edited by Charles L. Perdue, Jr., et. al (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 92.

⁴⁵ Speaking of the domestic trade in the southern interior in *Generations of Captivity*, Berlin writes, “The Second Middle Passage, like the first, had a logic of its own. As with the transatlantic slave trade, planters developed a clear understanding of which slaves they wanted. For the most part, these were young men and women whose strength could be harnessed to turn the wilderness into plantations and whose fecundity would assure the continued viability of the slave regime (169).

⁴⁶ For additional information on slavery’s westward expansion consult Berlin’s *Generations of Captivity*.

increased to 500,000 and by 1860 planters surpassed 4,000,000 bales of cotton annually.⁴⁷ As the leading export item, cotton was extremely important to the American economy.⁴⁸ Because cotton required a lengthy growing season, at least two hundred frost-free days, the Carolinas and Georgia initially played a significant role in supplying the crop during the antebellum era, but with production spreading south and westward, Florida, Texas, Alabama, and Mississippi became cotton producing states.

Due to larger slave populations in Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina, slave owners found it more profitable to take advantage of the high slave prices the boom period created and sell slaves to newly developing cotton plantations in the southern interior rather than retain them on their farms and plantations.⁴⁹ Slaves recall seeing their peers driven south. Former Virginia slave Lorenzo Ivy stated “Dey sol’ slaves heah an everywhere. I’ve seen droves of Negroes brought in heah on foot goin’ Souf to be sol’. Each one have an old tow sack on his back wif everythin’ he’s got in it. Over de hills dey come in lines reachin’ as far as you kin see. Dey walk in double lines chained tergether in twos. Dey walk’ em heah to de railroad an’ ship ‘em Souf lak cattle. Truly, son, de haf has never been tol’.”⁵⁰ Robert Williams, a former slave, recalled a similar scene of men, women, and children being taken South especially during cotton

⁴⁷ Hine, *The African-American Odyssey*, 142. Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 95.

⁴⁸ Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 95.

⁴⁹ Chapter Four, “Migration Generations” of Berlin’s *Generations of Captivity* has great information on the Southern Seaboard and slavery.

⁵⁰ Lorenzo Ivy, “Lorenzo Ivy Interview,” interview by Claude W. Anderson in *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, edited by Charles L. Perdue, Jr., et. al (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 153.

season. “De white folks would come up from de cotton country,” he said “and buy slaves and carry dem back in droves.”⁵¹

Among those sold South were former slaves Anne Maddox and Laura Clark. Sold at thirteen years of age to Bill Maddox of Alabama, Virginia native Anne Maddox described the process. ““When I come from Virginy us travelled in wagons, [we] slept in tents. Eve’y mornin’ us was made to clean ourselves an’ dress up; den us wuz put on de block an’ bid on.””⁵² Clark, a slave of Mr. Pleasant Powell in North Carolina, was sold with ten other children.⁵³ Once sold, teenagers were imported to various states.

Whites, seeking to take full advantage of the cotton market, transplanted plantations or created new slaveholdings in unsettled lands in the southern interior. The warmer climates, suitable for cotton cultivation, and seemingly endless land supply encouraged this migration. The only additional factor of production required was slave labor. Seeking laborers to populate newly formed southwestern plantations, whites transported slaves from the upper South to the lower and deep South in what became known as the domestic slave trade, the transporting of approximately 1,000,000 slaves within the borders of the United States.⁵⁴ As with the institution

⁵¹ Robert Williams, “Robert Williams Interview,” interview by William T. Lee in *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, edited by Charles L. Perdue, Jr., et. al (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 323.

⁵² Anne Maddox, “Anne Maddox,” interview by Preston Klein in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Alabama Narratives, Volume 1, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 272 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=010/mesn010.db&recNum=277&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Maddox,+Anne\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=010/mesn010.db&recNum=277&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Maddox,+Anne)))] accessed September 2008.

⁵³ Laura Clark, “Laura Clark,” interview by Ruby Pickens Tartt in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Alabama Narratives, Volume 1, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 72 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=010/mesn010.db&recNum=77&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Clark,+Laura\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=010/mesn010.db&recNum=77&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Clark,+Laura)))], accessed on September 2008.

⁵⁴ Berlin, in *Generations of Captivity*, refers to the Domestic Slave trade as the Second Middle Passage, because as he argues, the separation, isolation, cross country travel and pioneer life created similar physical and

of slavery the domestic slave trade initially was unstable and unorganized and took years to crystallize into a well organized system of commerce. However, by the early 1800s a system of domestic trade was firmly in place, with trading posts throughout Maryland, Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, and Louisiana.⁵⁵ Slaveholders in states that produced little to no cotton, and, as stated previously, possessed an abundance of slaves, like Virginia and the Carolinas, took advantage of the high prices slaves brought within the domestic market and sold them to places like Georgia, Tennessee, Alabama and Mississippi. In fact, according to Berlin, “for some seaboard slaveowners,” slave youth “were their most profitable ‘crop.’”⁵⁶

Masters who sold slaves in these markets or relocated were said to have “caught de ‘cotton fever,’” the deep desire “to git down south an’ raise cotton to sell.” That was the case for Lorenzo Ivy’s owner, William Tunstall. Characterized as mean, “Old Tunstall,” as Ivy referenced him, and others were said to have contracted this fever. According to Ivy, Tunstall separated “families right an lef.” In fact, Tunstall relocated two of Ivy’s “aunts an’ lef dere husbands up heah an’ he separated all tergether seven husbands an’ wives. One ‘oman had twelve chillum. Yessuh! Separated dem all an tuk ‘em south wif him to Georgy an’ Alabamy.”⁵⁷ However, Tunstall would not be the only Virginia slaveholder to relocate slaves to the South.

Virginia served as one of the largest slave exporters to the south and southwest. Alongside cities like Baltimore, Washington, Nashville, and St. Louis, Virginian cities, such as Richmond, Norfolk, and Alexandria became leading centers for purchasing and selling slaves, annually

emotional horrors of what first generation slaves experienced in the Atlantic trade. Consult text for additional information.

⁵⁵ Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 96; Walter Johnson, *Soul By Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), 5-7.

⁵⁶ Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 214.

⁵⁷ Lorenzo Ivy, “Lorenzo Ivy Interview,” 151-152.

sending thousands of slaves to the South. The slave trade, run by men such as Isaac Franklin and John Armfield of Alexandria, Virginia, sold slaves of all ages but young slaves dominated the market, with even numbers of males and females transported.⁵⁸ Although the ratios were balanced, “smallholders seemed particularly partial to young women, who came at a lower price and offered the possibility of enlarging the slave force through reproduction.”⁵⁹ Essentially, many slaves, upon entering puberty, were susceptible to being relocated.⁶⁰ Scholar Michael Tadman concludes that ““for slave children living in the upper South in 1820, the cumulative chance of being ‘sold South’ by 1860 might have been something like 30 percent.””⁶¹ Those caught in the trade were sent to places like Georgia.

Georgia was the largest importer of slaves in this study. Georgia slave importation records suggest that teenage slaves made up significant numbers of those in the slave markets. For example, of the 978 slaves imported to Richmond County, Georgia from 1820 to 1821, 212 of them were slaves between thirteen to eighteen-years-old and a little over 120 teens would be imported into Elbert County, Georgia between 1822-1847. In both cases, teenage slaves account for at least 21% of the slaves imported.⁶² Establishing new plantations or supplementing the labor force on pre-established slaveholdings these young males and females served as a solution

⁵⁸ Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 97. Berlin, in *Generations of Captivity*, notes that this balanced sexual ratio was found among cotton planters rather than sugar planters who tended to solely purchase young male slaves. For more information reference Berlin 169, 179, 180-1.

⁵⁹ Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 169.

⁶⁰ Schwartz, *Born in Bondage*, 90, 156.

⁶¹ Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 97.

⁶² Slave Importation Register, Richmond County, Georgia, 1820-21, Kenneth Stampp, ed., *Records of the Ante-Bellum Southern Plantations from the Revolution through the Civil War* (Frederick, Md.: University Publications of America, 1985), Series F; Part 2, Superior Court (Richmond County). Affidavits for bringing slaves into the state, Book A, 1822-1847, Superior Court, Elbert Co., Ga., MFL-135, 088201-135, Georgia Archives.

to the problem whites faced in meeting the demands of the cotton boom. As with the Atlantic slave trade ban, teenagers helped to rid the slave south of any severe labor shortages that might have resulted during this time of transition and helped to bring planters' dreams of establishing great estates to fruition.

Though dispersed throughout the South and valued by white society for their physical and reproductive function, these slave teenagers were human beings. If we move beyond bill of sale price listings, if we dig deeper than the simplistic descriptions jotted beside their names on slave inventories, we find young men and women on the verge of understanding what it is to be adults in the slave South. Though their experiences were similar, as this dissertation argues, if we heighten our perception to these youth, we find that they were human beings, living, thinking, breathing people with unique stories that enable historians to not simply reconstruct an extensive analysis of adolescent life, but, as this dissertation seeks to also do, ascribe an individual face and voice to the thousands of slave teenagers that resided and or passed through Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia. Found among the faces were Harriet Jacobs and Elizabeth Keckley.

Harriet Ann Jacobs was born circa 1813 in Edenton, North Carolina to enslaved parents, Elijah and Delilah. Elijah, a skilled carpenter, belonged to Dr. Andrew Knox, while Delilah was the property of Elizabeth Pritchard Horniblow. In addition to Harriet the couple had a son, John, two years Harriet's junior. Orphaned as a youth, Jacobs found comfort in her maternal grandmother Molly Horniblow,⁶³ a former slave who owned a home in Edenton, and her extended family of aunts, uncles and friends.

⁶³ In Jacobs' narrative Molly Horniblow is known as Aunt Martha.

Though Harriet was fortunate to have the support and comfort of family and friends, they could not insulate her from the reality slavery presented: she was property. Her first mistress was Margaret Horniblow, a woman Jacobs loved like a mother. Dying when Harriet was eleven, Jacobs was willed to Horniblow's three-year-old niece, Mary Matilda Norcom.⁶⁴ Due to Mary's extreme youth, her parents Dr. and Mrs. James Norcom,⁶⁵ who had previously purchased Harriet's brother John, served as her master and mistress until Mary came of age. While living with the Norcoms Harriet conceived two children, Joseph and Louisa Matilda,⁶⁶ with a young white lawyer, Samuel Tredwell Sawyer.⁶⁷ Jacobs remained enslaved until 1852, when, after years of hiding and running in her hometown of Edenton, and other places, including Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, New York and England, her employer, Cornelia Grinnell Willis purchased her, declaring her a free person of color.⁶⁸

Elizabeth Keckley was born near Dinwiddie Court House, Virginia to Agnes and George Pleasant Hobbs around 1824.⁶⁹ Agnes, the servant of Armistead Burwell and George, belonging to the Grum family, maintained a long distant marriage, with George permitted to visit his wife

⁶⁴ In Jacobs' narrative Mary Matilda Norcom is known as Miss Emily Flint and later Mrs. Dodge.

⁶⁵ In Jacobs' narrative Dr. and Mrs. Norcom are known as Dr. and Mrs. Flint.

⁶⁶ In Jacobs' narrative Joseph is known as Benny and her daughter, Louisa Matilda Jacobs, is known as Ellen.

⁶⁷ In Jacobs' narrative Mr. Samuel Tredwell Sawyer is known as Mr. Sands.

⁶⁸ Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*, edited and with an introduction by Jean Fagan Yellin (London, Harvard University Press, 2000).

⁶⁹ There is debate surrounding Keckley's birth. Some researchers, such as Adele Logan Alexander, Rayford W. Logan and Becky Rutberg date her birth in 1818, personal acquaintances Francis Grimke and Hallie Q. Brown argue her birth occurred somewhere between 1820-1825, with one person citing 1840. However scholar Frances Smith Foster exploring the subtitle and internal evidence in the account asserts "Keckley was born about 1824, or at least wanted us to believe that" (xix). Given the scant attention given to record keeping in the antebellum period for all people, especially slaves, it is not uncommon that so much controversy surrounds Keckley's birthdate (xviii-xix). Reference Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes: Thirty Years A Slave And Four Years In the White House* edited by Frances Smith Foster (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

and child twice yearly.⁷⁰ Eventually, these visits ceased as he was relocated with his owner to Tennessee. Correspondence with Agnes and “Little Lizzie,” as he called his daughter were their only means of connection. Eventually, even the letters stopped, destroying yet another slave family.

As property of Armistead Burwell, at fourteen-years-old Keckley was loaned to his son Robert, a poor Presbyterian minister, and his wife. Eventually, the younger Burwell relocated to Hillsborough, North Carolina. In Hillsborough, Keckley’s coming of age was characterized by physical and sexual abuse. The sexual abuse, at the hands of a family friend, Alexander Kirkland, led to the conception of a son, whom she named after her father.⁷¹ After some time Keckley, with her son George, returned to Virginia where she was sent to live with Burwell’s daughter Anne, and her husband, Hugh A. Garland. Struggling financially, Garland sought his fortune by moving west, relocating his household to St. Louis, Missouri. Keckley worked as a seamstress in St. Louis, providing for her elderly mother who was hired out, as well as the Garland family and their servants. During this tenure, she bargained a verbal contract to purchase her and George’s freedom for \$1200 dollars. Though in a position to abscond easily (she often traveled to free states with her dressmaking), Keckley insisted that she purchase her freedom. Toiling unsuccessfully for years, she and George, due to the financial assistance of her friends, were freed in 1855.

No longer a slave, Elizabeth married a black man, James Keckley. However, after eight years marital problems led her to end the union. With her mother, having been forced to move yet again with the Garland family and George, now a young man attending Wilberforce

70 Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (2001), xix.

71 Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (2001), xxi.

University, a Negro college in Ohio, Keckley moved North. There she continued to lead an extraordinary life becoming a member of the free black elite. Among those she worked for and befriended, was Mary Todd Lincoln, wife of President Abraham Lincoln during Lincoln's tenure in the White House.

Jacobs and Keckley's experiences are recorded in narratives they produced. Jacobs' *Incidents*, published in 1861, was written to condemn chattel slavery, particularly its treatment of slave women, and to further the abolition movement. Published in 1868, after slavery is banned, Keckley's *Behind the Scenes* deals with her slave experience yet the overarching goal of her work is not to push an anti-slavery agenda, though she certainly condemns the institution, rather she seems to be presenting her life history during freedom, specifically her career as a seamstress, the elite clientele she maintained and the black elite social circles she participated.

Both works chronicle the lives of two enslaved women from the southeastern United States. Recounting incidents that shaped their lives from childhood to adulthood, each of these narratives devotes a chapter to their transition to womanhood, years both women identified as beginning around fourteen to fifteen years of age. Because both narratives focus on the teenage years, the life cycles that is this dissertation's focus, they prove beneficial to relaying the thoughts, attitudes and emotions of teenage girls. Moreover, as their lives spanned the antebellum period both women experienced major events and changes slavery underwent. For example, Jacobs recalled Turner's insurrection and Keckley knew first-hand the effects of the cotton boom on relocation to the southwest. Thus, these two women became representative of the hundreds of thousands of black teenage girls who came of age with similar lots in life. Having found them valuable to unraveling the teenage experience I then explored those chapters

that dealt exclusively with their adolescence, locating rites that characterized the black teenage experience, rites that subsequently shaped their identity formation.

Both Keckley and Jacobs depicted how the experience of enslaved girls growing into womanhood was filled with sorrow, peril, and great trial. Both women dealt with the dimensions of adolescence that this study emphasizes--work, dress, and sexuality. Keckley discussed work and sexuality, while Jacobs explores all three topics in her narrative. In addition, both narratives are useful because these women resisted their lot starting during adolescence, a period of personal development which both women identify as the point in their young lives when they began to understand fully what life as slaves held for them. Whether it was through cunning as employed by Jacobs, or the sheer physical strength of Keckley, both women reveal how slave girls not only learned of their slave identity but also developed new ways to resist.

While the dissertation emphasizes the horrors of slavery, these young women, though property, remained consumed by the typical things and activities all teens love during adolescence. Mingled between the abuses and suffering, two young girls liked boys, enjoyed clothes, and loved knowing about their friends. Keckley, in her letters to her mother, asked if she had “seen any of [her] old acquaintances” and was smitten by a clothing article she received from a relative, being so “particular with it that [she had] only worn it once” at the time that the letter was penned.⁷² Jacobs, despite slavery, stated that “youth will be youth” subsequently she enjoyed a romance with a local young colored carpenter. Though the forces of slavery eventually severed the love relationship that did not prevent her from loving the young man with

72 Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes: Thirty Years A Slave And Four Years In the White House* (New York: G.W. Carleton & Company, 1868; reprint, New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1968), 40-41 (most page citations are to the reprint edition).

the “ardor of a young girl’s first love.”⁷³ All of this, the joy, the pain, led to the end result of this slave identity formation; two strong women, who manipulated the slave identity proscribed by whites to create a dual consciousness, one that encompassed their slave and human identities.

Although there were ubiquitous experiences of slavery individual differences remain. Of biracial parentage, Jacobs was “a light mulatto” who as an adult grew to be 5 feet 4 inches. Her physical appearance was also enhanced by her hair, which was as “a thick covering of black hair that curls naturally, but which can be easily combed straight.” We also know that Jacobs, through the benevolence of her first mistress, Margaret Horniblow, was literate and could “easily and fluently” speak English.⁷⁴ Until six years of age, Jacobs basked in her parents love in coastal North Carolina, and, after their deaths, she lived with whites, though she was comforted by her maternal grandmother, aunts, uncles and host of extended family. She confided in her brother, John, attending holiday events, even experienced her first love, and after becoming a mother of two, lavished them with maternal care.

Described by her father as a “large fine girl,” Keckley was regarded as “fair-looking for one of [her] race.”⁷⁵ Her beauty earned the attention of men, black and white, alike. Though separated from her parents through the sale of her father and her eventual relocation to North Carolina, Keckley maintained her relationship with her old slave community through letters. Penning accounts of her day-to-day activities, she remained emotionally connected to her black and white family alike. As a mother, she enjoyed spending time with her son, and she worked effortlessly to secure her mother’s needs when finally relocated with her in the Deep South. Two

73 Jacobs, *Incidents*, 37.

74 Jacobs, *Incidents*, 237.

75 Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1968 reprint), 22, 38-39.

remarkable women, with two remarkable lives, whose individual accounts provide a macroscopic view of the teenage experience.

Although black and white youth shared many experiences, this dissertation argues that the socio-economic and political survival of the South rested on black youth's maturation. Serving as slaveholders' solution to the labor shortages the Atlantic slave trade ban of 1808 and the antebellum cotton boom, this chapter maintains that enslaved teenagers, at the threshold of adulthood, occupied a central role in southern society. Having identified the teenage experience for black and white alike, let us now turn our attention to the rites teenage slave girls experienced during adolescence. As labor was intricately connected to the slave experience it is only fitting that we begin exploring teenage girls and their acclimation to the world of work.

CHAPTER 3

MIND HOW MUCH COTTON YOU PICK: NAVIGATING THE WORLD OF WORK

Using Works Progress Administration (WPA) interviews, slave narratives, and memoirs, this chapter argues that changes in work during enslaved female adolescence aided the construction of slave identity and informed an understanding of what constituted black womanhood in a slave society. For adolescent slave females, labor marked the conclusion of childhood and the beginning of full-time participation in the work world. The tasks of the work-a-day world and its often brutal environment provided first-hand experience of what it meant to be an adult slave. Through work, teenage female slaves interacted with adults of both races, who helped them to comprehend and construct techniques of survival. Additionally, entering into the labor force introduced young girls to the unique sexual position they occupied as female slaves.

Rising before dawn to begin their duties, adult slave women were expected to cultivate crops, care for white children, cook for slaveholders, and clean white households. Slave children, meanwhile, ran among clotheslines, played with white children, or engaged in light tasks around the plantation. For teenage girls, their awkward bodies did not permit them the freedom to run carelessly around the plantation, and their underdeveloped physiques also prevented them from engaging in the backbreaking labor of most adult slaves. Unsited for child and adult responsibilities, what tasks did teenage slave girls complete? Once assigned to the fields or big house, how did teenage slave girls reconcile their work requirements with antebellum gender mores?

Slave labor has always been an important topic in considerations of slavery. From Phillips' early contention that slaves did not work hard, to Stamp's refutation of that argument and assertion that slavery was a system designed to control and exploit labor, historians have analyzed work within a framework of larger themes. For both Phillips and Stamp,

consideration of slaves meant a consideration of adult slave men; slave women and children remained either marginalized or ignored. For example, Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, examines labor within the theme of paternalism. His work seeks to understand slave ideology as it relates to time, work rhythms, and work attitudes. Genovese's discussion of labor is useful in understanding the creation of slave work ethic, but historians should also incorporate gender and age as tools of analytical inquiry. Genovese, as evident in his discussion about children, recognizes that labor was critical. When sent to the fields for the first time, slaves often experienced what Genovese calls "shocking awareness" of their status. Yet what specific events evoked this awareness, and how did it aid in the formation of slaves' identity? ¹

Recent scholars pay greater attention to enslaved women and work. New research by scholars such as Hilary Beckles, Jacqueline Jones, Jennifer Morgan, and Daina Berry reveals the gendered nature of slave work as well as the paramount role women played in fields and households. Based on the varied interpretations, we now know that slave women's productive and reproductive functions caused every aspect of their lives to be linked with labor—labor that benefited white slaveholders.² But if work was such an integral part of the slave *woman's* life why is it that we know nothing of how slave *girls* were initiated into slave labor?

¹ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 505.

² Jones' *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, presents an excellent labor history concerning the female slave. According to Jones, slavery was a labor system in which black women were exploited because of white masters' desire for capital gain. Needing field hands and yearning to increase profit, white slaveholders forced slave women to work in public spheres, such as fields, as well as completing cooking, cleaning, and childcare in the private realm. She argues that "slave women did nothing *but* work," 14. She arrives at this conclusion by studying not only the manual labor women performed in white and slave homes but also their reproductive functions.

Hilary Beckles presents interesting findings concerning large female labor populations in *Natural Rebels: A Social History of Enslaved Black Women in Barbados* (1989). He believes black enslaved females' contributions to the socio-economic structure of the plantation system were disregarded. The minuscule attention paid to slave women related to "family structures, demographic patterns, and the sexual exploits of white males," 3. This characterization was problematic because it did not engage the multiple dynamics of the female slave. Studying Barbados, Beckles discovered black slave women were not only mothers, wives, and lovers but also domestics, drivers, and independent entrepreneurs. Using empirical data to support his hypothesis, he presents an enslaved

King and Schwartz examine slave childhood and labor. Both scholars present interesting data concerning slave children being introduced to work, but neither explores how work influenced the construction of slave identities. King, in her study of slave children, demonstrates the significance of work. Her chapter, “‘Us Ain’t Never Idle’: The World of Work,” examines labor’s role. Although King correctly concludes that “one of the greatest disruptions in [slaves’] lives was the quantum leap from childhood into the world of work,” she does not fully analyze the significance of work.³ In her study of enslaved children, Marie Schwartz also explores the significance of work. According to Schwartz, slave children began to work between five to ten years of age. For Schwartz, the completion of minor tasks, such as gathering eggs and carrying water, constituted the beginning of slave labor. Unlike Schwartz, I assert that work began the moment children assumed adult work roles in the slaveholding home or field.⁴ In addition, like King, Schwartz does not engage labor’s role in teenage identity construction.

Work, this chapter argues, went beyond simply introducing children to chores; this “quantum leap” led to the construction of their slave identity and, for slave girls, informed their

female labor history in which he argues “black females constituted the main labour source of capital accumulation” for masters and slave households within the plantation economy, 2.

Writing almost ten years after Jones, Jennifer Morgan presents a similar argument concerning colonial enslaved women. Her *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (2004) emphasizes the womb’s significance in slave women’s colonial world experience. She asserts that reproduction was an equally significant aspect of enslaved women’s labor. It is important to note that the economic role of reproduction has previously been explored, but Morgan’s equating reproduction with harvesting makes this concept novel. Morgan asserts “reproducing the labor force occurred alongside that of cultivating crops,” 145. Hence “black women’s bodies became the vessels in which slaveowners manifested their hopes for the future; they were, in effect, conduits of stability and wealth to the white community,” 83.

The most recent work on enslaved female labor is Daina Berry’s “*Swing That Sickle for the Harvest is Ripe*”: *Gender and Slavery in Antebellum Georgia* (2007). Exploring slave labor in Georgia, Berry’s work “seeks to break down binary opposites such as house labor equals skilled work and field labor equals unskilled work to explore more subtle dynamics that involve skill, talent, seniority, experience, personal relationships, and circumstance,” 2. By examining labor in a more nuanced manner Berry forces us to re-examine slave labor, and its impact on the social aspects of slave life.

³ King, *Stolen Childhood*, 21.

⁴ Schwartz, *Born in Bondage*, 109.

understanding of black womanhood. Yet how did pubescent slave females learn work roles? Once socialized to these positions, how did they cope? Although we know that slavery was different for men and women, how did young girls understand how their gender transformed their work experience? Answering these questions helps to clarify the process that shaped the lives of adult slaves. The manner in which enslaved teenage girls conducted their lives as adult slaves was predicated by their experiences, such as work, during adolescence, the period when slave and free society shaped the impending adult years of slave girls. Therefore to understand better why some slave women were obedient field hands while others deceived masters by feigning illness, one must first understand what work entailed for these young girls and how labor shaped their identities. In order to get at the heart of these questions, it is necessary to examine first the typical day-to-day experiences of slaves as children.

Unable to participate in labor, slave children were often ignored by owners and left to the care of the slave community. According to Frederick Law Olmsted, he learned from a Virginia planter that “until the negro is big enough for his labor to be plainly profitable to his master, he has no training to application or method, but only to idleness and carelessness. Before the children arrive at a working age, they hardly come under the notice of their owner. An inventory of them is taken on the plantation at Christmas; and a planter told me that sometimes they escaped the attention of the overseer and were not returned at all, till twelve or thirteen years old.”⁵

Left to their own devices, children were typically confined to an age-segregated, androgynous environment under the supervision of older slave youth, slave nurses, or elderly slaves. Former North Carolina slave Sally was left to the care of old Aunt Katy, an elderly slave

⁵ Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 102-103.

who cared for “all the children on the plantation.”⁶ Left to the supervision of others most of the day, some slaves such as Sally “passed through babyhood and [grew] into a stout little girl, running about the cabin and over the grounds, as unconscious of her relations to life as the dog with which she played, or the bird that sang in the old sycamore above the door.”⁷ For many slave children, genuine interaction with adults only occurred after they were sent to the fields to work with adult slaves.

While under the care of adult slaves, boys and girls played ring games, jumped rope, and played with marbles or dolls.⁸ Though some slaves did not enjoy recreation, other slaves recalled their childhoods as filled with happiness.⁹ Ex-slave Harriet Jacobs once declared that, “I was born a slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away.”¹⁰ Former North Carolina slave Lunsford Lane, like Jacobs, “passed his childhood as pleasantly as most children.” Having served as a slave for thirty-two years in Raleigh, North Carolina, Lane spent three of those years as a messenger and waiter for Governors Edward Bishop Dudley and John Motley Morehead. As a boy, he gladly “play[ed] with the other boys and girls, white and

⁶ Isaac Williams, *Aunt Sally: or, The Cross the Way of Freedom. A Narrative of the Slave-life and Purchase of the Mother of Rev. Isaac Williams, of Detroit, Michigan* (Cincinnati: American Reform Tract and Book Society, 1858), [<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/sally/sally.html>], accessed May 2009, 26.

⁷ Williams, *Aunt Sally*, 26.

⁸ White’s *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*, 92; King, *Stolen Childhood*, 45. For material on slave play reference David K. Wiggins, “The Play of Slave Children in the Plantation Communities of the Old South, 1820-1860,” *Journal of Sport History* 7 (Summer 1980): 21-39.

⁹ For accounts of slaves who did not recall a carefree childhood reference Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery, An Autobiography* (New York: Bantam, 1967); Betty Foreman Chessier, “Betty Foreman Chessier,” in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Oklahoma Narratives, Volume 13, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 30-31 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=130/mesn130.db&recNum=33&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Chessier,+Betty+Foreman\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=130/mesn130.db&recNum=33&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Chessier,+Betty+Foreman)))], accessed October 2007.; Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave. Written by Himself*, edited with an introduction by David W. Blight (Boston: Bedford, 1993).

¹⁰ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 5.

colored, in the ample yard and grounds of the mansion, and occasionally performing such little tasks as one of so tender years could accomplish.”¹¹ “‘Dem was de happy days,’” ex-slave George Fleming remembered similarly.¹² Born in 1854 in Laurens County, South Carolina, Fleming belonged to a master whom he characterized as “‘de best white man what ever breathed de good air.’” According to George’s account, his “happy days” were filled with playing with marbles and wrestling.¹³

How could slave children possibly be happy and carefree? For many of them, their nostalgia reflected the passage of time, and the fact that their interviews took place seventy or eighty years after the end of slavery. Their recollections of happiness, in addition, might be attributed to slave parents and other extended family members, who attempted to protect them by constructing an environment at least somewhat insulated from slavery’s cruelties. Slaves’ youthfulness might have also prevented them from realizing fully the horrors of slavery, as was the case for Fleming. Their perceptions of happiness might also reflect a relative freedom from adult responsibilities. Perhaps the games and toys they played with elicited the happiness remembered by these former slaves. Whatever the reasons, as Jacobs recalled, one could be sure that the “days- [were] too happy to last.”¹⁴

Whites often noted the carefree nature of slave children. Fanny Kemble, famed English actress and wife of slaveholder Pierce Butler, observed on Georgia plantations that the “stout,

¹¹ William Hawkins, *Lunsford Lane; or Another Helper from North Carolina* (Boston: Crosby & Nichols, 1863), [<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/hawkins/hawkins.html>], accessed May 2009, 18.

¹² George Fleming, “George Fleming Interview,” interview by Elmer Turnage in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, ed. George P. Rawick (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1977) Supplement, Series 1, vol. 11, 127.

¹³ George Fleming, “George Fleming Interview,” 126.

¹⁴ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 7.

hale, hearty girls and boys, of from eight to twelve and older, are allowed to lounge about, filthy and idle, with no pretense of an occupation but what they call ‘tend baby.’”¹⁵ Olmsted frequently described slave children relaxing throughout the Southern countryside. Arriving in Petersburg, Virginia, in December 1852, he observed that “a few negro children, staring as fixedly and posed as lifelessly as if they were really figures ‘carved in ebony,’ stood, lay, and lounged on the sunny side of the ranks of locomotive-firewood.”¹⁶ While touring plantations in Georgia, Olmsted described children “singing and dancing about a fire that they had made on the ground.” Engrossed in their play, he wrote, that “they were not at all disturbed or interrupted . . . by the presence of their owner and myself.”¹⁷

Aside from playing, slave children completed light work tasks, such as fanning flies, toting water, and sweeping the yard. Recalling her days growing up on Hamp McWhorter’s Oglethorpe County, Georgia plantation Mahala Jewel remembered: “‘Whilst us was little, slave chillum didn’t have much wuk to do. De littlest ones just picked up trash when de yards was bein’ cleant up and done easy jobs lak dat.’”¹⁸ Fellow Georgia slave Amanda McDaniel provides a description of her childhood labor. Born in 1850 in Watsonville, Georgia to Matilda Hale and Gilbert Whitlew, Amanda belonged to her mother’s owner, Mr. Hale, until emancipation. Hale only owned eight slaves, all of whom were women, thus McDaniel’s work load was more significant than many child slaves but still not as strenuous as adult slaves who labored in

¹⁵ Fanny Kemble, *Fanny Kemble’s Journals* edited by Catherine Clinton (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), 139.

¹⁶ Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 48.

¹⁷ Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 186.

¹⁸ Mahala Jewel, “Mahala Jewel,” interview by Grace McCune in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 2, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 317 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=042/mesn042.db&recNum=319&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Jewel,+Mahala\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=042/mesn042.db&recNum=319&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Jewel,+Mahala)))] accessed October 2007.

slaveholdings. Her daily childhood tasks included transporting breakfast to field hands, driving cows, and nursing her owners' children, a routine she maintained for a few years before being sent to the fields.¹⁹

Ex-slave Cora Shepherd's experience paralleled that of Jewel and McDaniel. The property of Jesse Walden, she "'jus' played about in de fields till . . . big enough to go in de house and fan flies when dey was eatin'." "'Us little chaps didn't do no work,'" she continued. "'Dey give us things to 'muse us, like. Us git bark for de mammy-she was de nuss what 'tend de little chaps and made 'em call her 'Mammy'- us played in de orchards, picked up rotten fruit, cleaned up like dat.'"²⁰ As a Virginia slave, the first duty of Elizabeth Keckley was to care for her owner Colonel Burwell's infant daughter. She later recalled that work as "pleasant."²¹

These women did not consider these tasks demanding. In fact, Shepherd was emphatic that "us little chaps didn't do no work."²² Like children today, recreation for slave children consisted of imitating adult roles and assisting in adult tasks. So it would not be unusual for unknowing slave children to tote water joyfully or to gather bark for cooking. Olmsted noted that, as children, slaves were carefree with minimal responsibilities. Through work they discovered childhood experiences were fleeing quickly and their adult reality consisted of unending toil. As children like Cora grew up, tasks intensified and work no longer "mused"

¹⁹ Amanda McDaniel, "Amanda McDaniel," interview by E. Driskell in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 3, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 71-72 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=043/mesn043.db&recNum=73&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(McDaniel,+Amanda\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=043/mesn043.db&recNum=73&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(McDaniel,+Amanda)))], accessed October 2007.

²⁰ Cora Shepherd, "Cora Shepherd Interview," interview by Velma Bell in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, Supplement Series 1, ed. George P. Rawick (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1977), vol. 4, part 2, 551-552.

²¹ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1968 reprint), 20.

²² Cora Shepherd, "Cora Shepherd Interview," 552.

them. As work levels increased, slaves recognized that slavery, and its proscribed identity, became their reality.

Although as children slaves remained oblivious to work, their situation changed as they grew toward adolescence. Reverend William Hawkins, who recounted Lunsford Lane's experiences, describes the impact of work on Lane's life. As Lane "increased in age, and the life of toil began," Hawkins wrote, "the keen *wedge* of slavery entered, to separate by a continually-increasing distance the tender endearments of childhood. He was a slave."²³

Hawkins' loaded comment reflects an important reality: labor was crucial to the construction of slave identity. As Lane's life illustrates, work served as a pivotal turning point in a slave's life. By actually engaging in the endless tasks on the plantation teenage slaves discovered a cruel reality about slavery: enslaved people were regarded as property rather than people. No doubt the cruelties Lane endured while laboring during adolescence influenced his decision as an adult to flee North Carolina with his wife and seven children.²⁴ As demonstrated by Lane and others, work punctuated that reality. But why was the implementation of work such a dramatic event in the lives of these young men and women?

Work was such a life-altering experience because it represented the antithesis of the experiences of slave childhood. As children they lounged; as adults they labored. As children they played; as adults they plowed.²⁵ If left to their own devices how did these children react when as adults they were forced to follow a strict work schedule under supervision? When did

²³ Hawkins, *Lunsford Lane*, 18.

²⁴ Hawkins, *Lunsford Lane*, vi.

²⁵ Genovese explores this briefly in his work. He writes, "For most, their [slaves] early and formative years had offered a semblance of childhood, at least relative to the children of other laboring classes.... Within limits they had been able to feel and enjoy life," *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 505.

they begin work? How did they adjust? How did their work experience compare with their white contemporaries?

The ages that slave youth began work varied according to slave owners and the size of slaveholdings. Most white sources suggest that slaves were generally first required to assume adult work-loads between ten and twelve years of age. One Virginia planter did not even take notice of children on his plantation until they reached the working age of twelve or thirteen.²⁶ In the Georgia rice district slave children “at twelve years of age. . . [were] first put to regular field-work; until then no labour [was] required of them, except, perhaps, occasionally they [were] charged with some light kind of duty.”²⁷ Young white mistress Letitia Burwell, noted in her memoir that training for their domestic slaves began at ten or twelve years of age.²⁸

Most former slaves confirm Burwell’s observations.²⁹ Robert Fogel, in conducting a quantitative analysis of over 2,000 ex-slave narratives, reconstructed the ages of slaves’ entry into the labor force. He concluded that “by age 7, over 40 percent of the boys and half of the girls” were being acclimated slowly to work with “the process. . . virtually completed by age 12.”³⁰ Relaying the horrors which she endured during enslavement in Virginia, runaway slave Dinah “at the age of ten was brought up to the big house to run errands and be useful in many ways.”³¹ Georgia slave Camilla Jackson and South Carolina slave Mary Raines both recall

²⁶ Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 102-103.

²⁷ Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 186.

²⁸ Letitia Burwell, *A Girl’s Life in Virginia Before the War* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1895), [<http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/burwell>], accessed April 2008, 4.

²⁹ George Fleming, “George Fleming Interview,” 133.

³⁰ Robert William Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989), 54-55.

³¹ John Hawkins Simpson, *Horrors of the Slave Trade and of the Slave-Rearing Plantations; The True Story of Dinah, an Escaped Virginian Slave, Now in London, on Whose Body Are Eleven Scars Left By Tortures Which*

beginning work at twelve years of age. Born the tenth of eighteen children to Charlotte and Joe Hoyle in Decatur, Georgia, Camilla and her family belonged to Dr. Peter Hoyle. Residing on a plantation of approximately seventy-five slaves who produced sugar cane and cotton, Camilla's first work experience was in the house where she operated the fly-brush, a device that consisted of a piece of cloth, wooden hinges and a cord whose constant fanning motion kept the room free of flies.³² Living further North, Mary characterized herself as a "strong girl." Because of her physical prowess Raines could meet the demands of the adult work requirements. According to her interview, she was forced to "'hoe [an] acre of cotton, 'long wid de grown ones, and pick . . . 150 pounds of cotton.'"³³

The introduction to work also brought the possibility of masters hiring slaves out to local residents, generally for one-year terms. George Abbott's slave, Fannie Berry of Appomattox County, Virginia, recalled that she was "a girl 'bout ten or twelve years old an' den, at dat time, dey started hiring me out."³⁴ North Carolina slave Friday Jones was also "taken away from them

Were Inflicted By Her Master, Her Own Father: Together with Extracts from the Laws of Virginia, Showing That Against These Barbarities the Law Gives Not the Smallest Protection to the Slave, But the Reverse (London: A.W. Bennett, 1863), [<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/simpson/simpson.html>], accessed April 2008, 8.

³² Camilla Jackson, "Camilla Jackson," Interview by Minnie B. Ross in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 2, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 295 [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=042/mesn042.db&recNum=297&itemLink=D?mesnbib:2:/temp/~ammem_8pZb::], accessed October 2007 .

³³ Mary Raines, "Mary Raines," interview by W.W. Dixon in WPA Slave Narrative Project, South Carolina Narratives, Volume 14, Part 4, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 2 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=144/mesn144.db&recNum=4&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Raines,+Mary\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=144/mesn144.db&recNum=4&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Raines,+Mary)))], accessed October 2007. Ex-slave George Fleming in his interview also confirms slaves began work around ten or older, George Fleming, "George Fleming Interview."

³⁴ Fannie Berry, "Fannie Berry Interview," interview by Susie R.C. Byrd in *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, edited by Charles L. Perdue, Jr., et. al (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 30.

[his parents] when [he] was small and hired out.”³⁵ Born in 1810 to Cherry and Barney, Jones was the property of Olser Hye of Wake County, North Carolina. Around 1820, Friday was hired out to Mr. Sim Alfred, a local man who lived two miles from Jones’ birthplace.³⁶ Just as slaves of the antebellum era were hired out, Moses Grandy, born in the late eighteenth-century, was hired out when he began work as well. Grandy recalled “When I became old enough to be taken away from my mother and put to field-work, I was hired out for the year, by auction, at the Court House, every January.”³⁷ For Fanny, Friday and Moses, age not only brought work increases but separation from family and friends.

Why was twelve-years-old the age masters began incorporating slave youth in to the work force? Slave growth data reveals that around the age of twelve slave youth began increasing in height, and their growth continued until their late teens (see Table 3.1). As size became an extremely important factor in determining a person’s progression toward adulthood, slave youth were sent to the fields or big house once slaveholders began noticing a marked increase in their size. As demonstrated by slaves commenting on the restrictions masters placed on slave children and work, masters recognized that growth was needed in order to have an effective work force.

³⁵ Friday Jones, *Days of Bondage. Autobiography of Friday Jones. Being a Brief Narrative of His Trials and Tribulations in Slavery* (Washington, D.C.: Commercial Pub. Co., 1883), [<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/fjones/jones.html>], accessed December 2009, 1.

³⁶ Jones, *Days of Bondage*, 1.

³⁷ Moses Grandy, *Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy: Late a slave in the United States of America* (London: C. Gilpin, 1843), [<http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/grandy/grandy.html>], accessed December 2008, 9.

In order to create a successful labor force whites implemented a number of strategies. Genovese suggests that “masters and overseers tried to bring them [young slaves] on slowly and safely.”³⁸ Interviewees confirm this as they describe their owners’ rules concerning the appropriate age to initiate slave children to the workforce. Aunt Sally’s master did not believe that young children should work. In fact, he “required but little work of the child. It [was] policy to leave the slaves to grow and strengthen, unfatigued by labor, until they [were] old enough to be constantly occupied, as a colt is loft unshackled, with free range of the pastures, until the ‘breaking’ time comes.”³⁹ According to Nellie Loyd of Union County, South Carolina, her master, Mr. George Buchanan, ““never allowed any negro under 12 years of age to work in the fields.””⁴⁰ Sallie Paul’s “white folks” in North Carolina also set rules concerning the appropriate age for slaves to begin work. Owned by the Williamson family, Paul recalled her owners as good to their slaves. Regarding slave children and work she said “[her owners] didn’t work de chillum when dey was little bit of things en stunt dem up. Chillum grow to be bout 12 or 13 years old fore dey work dem in dat day en time.””⁴¹ Chana Littlejohn’s owners did not let slave children participate in adult work until thirteen years of age. Born near Warrenton, North Carolina to Marcillus and Susan Littlejohn, Chana belonged to Peter and Laura Mitchell. According to Littlejohn, Mr. Mitchell was a “‘long, tall man’” who owned about one hundred

³⁸ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 294.

³⁹ Williams, *Aunt Sally*, 27.

⁴⁰ Nellie Loyd, “Nellie Loyd,” interview by G.L. Summer in WPA Slave Narrative Project, South Carolina Narratives, Volume 14, Part 3, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 126 [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=143/mesn143.db&recNum=128&itemLink=D?mesnbib:2:/temp/~ammem_asQB::] accessed October 2007.

⁴¹ Sallie Paul, “Sallie Paul,” interview by Annie Ruth Davis in WPA Slave Narrative Project, South Carolina Narratives, Volume 14, Part 3, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 232 [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=143/mesn143.db&recNum=235&itemLink=D?mesnbib:2:/temp/~ammem_2yRU::], accessed October 2007.

slaves. On the Mitchell plantation, Littlejohn said, ““Marster would not let us work until we were thirteen years old. Den he put us to plowin’ in soft lan’, an’ de men in rough lan’.””⁴²

Perhaps aware of the abundant slaveholder literature about proper plantation management, these masters recognized that as children slaves were physically incapable of working. But with each passing year the threat of “stunt[ing] dem up” decreased, and their potential for yielding profits in the field and big house increased. It was at this juncture that these young girls became formally introduced to slave work. Work was the “breaking time.” It was a dramatic experience that molded enslaved youth concerning their identity as chattel. Just as work forced Lunsford Lane to realize that “he was a slave,” it also forced countless enslaved teens throughout the antebellum South to come to that realization.

Although slave children often played carelessly about the farm or plantation, scattered about the yard with them were their future masters and mistresses. Ex-slaves, such as Jennie Kendricks, recalled the interracial play of slavery days. White travelers were also struck by the prevalence of black and white children playing together.⁴³ Yet as children grew older, the slave system required that both white and black children recognize their proper places in the social hierarchy.

The ages that slaves began work were similar to those of whites. White boys’ first work experience consisted of learning farming, carpentry and other male-appropriate tasks. White

⁴² Chana Littlejohn, “Chana Littlejohn,” interview by T. Pat Matthews in WPA Slave Narrative Project, North Carolina Narratives, Volume 11, Part 2, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 55-57 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=112/mesn112.db&recNum=58&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Littlejohn,+Chana\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=112/mesn112.db&recNum=58&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Littlejohn,+Chana)))] accessed October 2007.

⁴³ Jennie Kendricks, “Jennie Kendricks,” interview by E. Driskell in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 3, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 2 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=043/mesn043.db&recNum=3&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Kendricks,+Jennie\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=043/mesn043.db&recNum=3&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Kendricks,+Jennie)))], accessed October 2007. Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 31.

girls' first work experiences, like their slave contemporaries, included learning household responsibilities. Beginning around ten-years-old, white girls were introduced to household tasks that included cleaning dishes, setting the dinner table, tending young siblings and possibly supervising slaves. Sewing, embroidery, and knitting were important skills learned; as adults, white girls would be expected to make the necessary items for the households such as clothes and linens. Girls as young as eleven were taught this skill and expected to practice relentlessly. Virginian Gay Robertson Blackford remembered that by twelve she and her sister made all their own clothes, a task she recalled with great pride.⁴⁴

Not all young white girls embraced their new domestic duties so gladly. Laura Wirt, daughter of Virginia lawyer and United States Attorney General William Wirt, lamented household tasks. "I kept house today and am to do so for this week, besides mending and making my clothes!-darning stockings, and all the other disagreeable occupations that you can imagine," she wrote to her cousin.⁴⁵ Sarah Wadley described the difficulties of housewifery: "I have been very busy indoors for the last few days making me a dress; it is my first attempt at dress making and it is quite hard work for me."⁴⁶

Like enslaved youth, white girls' maturation marked the beginnings of increased demands by parents and subsequently a more structured work environment. For planters' teenage daughters, work occurred alongside the acquisition of a formal education, this contrasted greatly with poor white girls who did not enjoy this luxury.⁴⁷ Poor whites were generally hired out for

⁴⁴ Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters*, 23.

⁴⁵ Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters*, 84.

⁴⁶ Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters*, 96.

⁴⁷ Censer, *North Carolina Planters and their Children*, 42.

temporary periods or apprenticed until maturity.⁴⁸ Regardless of social standing, all girls worked and were initially inadequate but as demonstrated, due to race, work for white teenage girls was a vastly different experience from that of enslaved teenage females. Despite how “hard” it was for Wadley to sew her first dress, she and other white girls were not property. Though white children could serve as apprentices, the prospect of separation through hiring did not threaten their young lives. Essentially, as white girls assumed the responsibilities and mannerisms of a Southern woman, black girls, observing their “friends” transformation, realized that their slave responsibilities placed them far beyond the ideologies concerning a proper woman.

Many slave females began their work responsibilities in the slaveholding home. Such was the case for ex-slaves Catherine Williams and Queen Elizabeth Bunt. Originally born in Virginia to Adeline Williams, Williams’ owner, Dabney Cosby, a prominent antebellum architect and contractor, relocated his household from Halifax County, Virginia to Raleigh, North Carolina when Catherine was only four-years-old.⁴⁹ According to Catherine ““the first work [she] done was nursing the children in the home, next [she] waited on the table, then general housework.””⁵⁰ A Baker County, Georgia slave, Queen Elizabeth Bunt recalled her first job was to “play and entertain” her master’s children, “as [she] grew older [she] was taught to sweep yards and [work] as a house girl.” Orange County, North Carolina slave Sarah Debro also recalled first serving as

⁴⁸ Johnson, *Ante-bellum North Carolina*, 255.

⁴⁹ Catherine Williams, “Catherine Williams,” interview by T. Pat Matthews in WPA Slave Narrative Project, North Carolina Narratives, Volume 11, Part 2, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 381 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=112/mesn112.db&recNum=384&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Williams,+Catharine\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=112/mesn112.db&recNum=384&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Williams,+Catharine)))], accessed October 2007.

⁵⁰ Williams, “WPA Slave Narrative Project,” 382.

a house servant. Owned by the Cains, Debro was selected by her mistress, Miss Polly, and trained as a house maid.⁵¹

Acting as body servants, attending the needs of white children, and cleaning were among the female house slaves' endless tasks. Made a house girl by Virginia slaveholder Ben Tinsley around the age of nine, Martha Showvely described her typical work day. It included making beds, collecting water, arranging towels "on de washstand an' [doing] anything else mistress wants." Even after all of those chores were completed more work followed because, as Martha states, we "wasn't 'lowed to sit down. We had to be doing something all day."⁵² Completing these tasks under the scrutiny of whites twenty-four hours a day created significant stress for Martha and other pubescent slave females, especially since completing their monotonous chores prevented them from spending time with their family, other slave adolescents and the larger slave community, groups they were constantly around as children.

Though most youth began work in the plantation home, only a few remained domestic slaves as adult women. The majority of adolescent slave females were sent to the fields. Enslaved on a small plantation, Amanda McDaniel began as a nurse, but, once old enough, she became a field hand and planted peas, corn and picked cotton at harvest.⁵³ Caroline Hunter of Virginia, and Nellie Loyd, like McDaniel, moved from domestic duties to digging detail in the

⁵¹ Queen Elizabeth Bunts, "Queen Elizabeth Bunts Interview," in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, ed. George P. Rawick (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1977), Supplement, Series 1, vol. 3, part 1, 120. Sarah Debro, "Sarah Debro," interview by Travis Jordan" in WPA Slave Narrative Project, North Carolina Narratives, Volume 11, Part 1, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 248 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=111/mesn111.db&recNum=250&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Debro,+Sarah\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=111/mesn111.db&recNum=250&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Debro,+Sarah)))], accessed October 2007.

⁵² Martha Showvely, "Martha Showvely Interview," interview by William T. Lee in *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, edited by Charles L. Perdue, Jr., et. al (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 264-265.

⁵³ Amanda McDaniel, "WPA Slave Narrative Project," 71-72.

fields.⁵⁴ Trained by adult field hands, teenage slave girls were introduced to the working world by assignment to the task system or a trash gang by the slaveholder or overseer.

In the rice-growing areas of South Carolina and Georgia enslaved females often labored under the task system, a system which divided fields into half-or quarter-acre plots and drivers measured and staked off each slaves' assigned tasks. The task system provided slaves a certain degree of freedom in setting their work pace, for masters and overseers this system gave them the ability to assess quickly slave performance.⁵⁵ Though convenient for supervisors reviewing work and seasoned field hands who completed tasks quickly, young slave females' performance, because of inexperience, required a great deal of time and did not always meet expectations. They subsequently received verbal or physical reprimands.

If not working under the task system slave females were introduced to trash gangs. These gangs predominated on the cotton, tobacco and sugar fields in Virginia, North Carolina, and Georgia. Gangs worked for a specific period of the day under a white overseer and were divided into a plow and a hoe gang.⁵⁶ Consisting of a "unit of 'irregulars' [that] formed from the ranks of children, the elderly, and female slaves in advanced stages of pregnancy," gangs were comprised of male and female slaves.⁵⁷ Trash gangs were often noticed by travelers, such as Olmsted, who described women working in the fields with "large gangs [of] men" or a group of

⁵⁴ Caroline Hunter, "Caroline Hunter Interview," interview by Thelma Dunston in *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, edited by Charles L. Perdue, Jr., et. al (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1976),149 and Nellie Loyd, "WPA Slave Narrative Project" 126.

⁵⁵ For additional information on the task system consult Philip D. Morgan's *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

⁵⁶ William L. Van Deburg, *The Slave Drivers: Black Agricultural Labor Supervisors in the Antebellum South* (London: Greenwood Press, 1979). 5.

⁵⁷ Van Deburg, *The Slave Drivers*, 6.

twenty to thirty “women and girls.”⁵⁸ In the fields slave girls’ duties included “raking stubble, pulling weeds, or doing light hoeing.”⁵⁹ Once training in the trash gang was completed and teenage girls were able to cultivate cash crops, they were sent to the physically taxing task as fractional hands. Many began as quarter hands, required to produce one-fourth of the output of an experienced adult slave.⁶⁰ With age and growth the girls were eventually dubbed “full hands” and expected to meet the higher adult work quotas.⁶¹

Specific responsibilities within each work system depended upon the crop produced. Tobacco, for example required intense cultivation. Great care had to be given to ensure leaves were properly de-wormed and not damaged. After harvesting, the curing, grading, and shipping process began, tasks equally as laborious.⁶² Cotton harvesting involved removing the precious crop from the pod. Though sounding relatively simple, picking cotton throughout the four states created substantial physical pain as field laborers hands were often cut by the thorns and backs were worn after hours of constant bending. Rice and sugar cane production in South Carolina and Georgia, like other crops was quite daunting. Rice production took twelve to fourteen months to complete a planting and harvesting cycle. To produce rice weeds had to be removed, ditches cleared and canals built.⁶³ Sugar cane required constant weeding and once harvested,

⁵⁸ Olmsted. *The Cotton Kingdom*, 168,189.

⁵⁹ White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*, 94.

⁶⁰ Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution*, 57.

⁶¹ King, *Stolen Childhood*, 22.; Willie Lee Rose, *Slavery and Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982),47.

⁶² King, *Stolen Childhood*, 31.

⁶³ Morgan, *Slave Counterpart*, 149-153.

processing occurred twenty four hours daily until complete. No doubt working under these conditions was perplexing for teenagers.⁶⁴

Working within these environments that mixed, in terms of age and gender, adults and teens, these slave girls engaged in “teaching and learning’ experience[s].”⁶⁵ Aside from learning techniques associated with harvesting a specific crop, young slaves became acquainted with labor rhythms, slave work ethics, and modes of resistance. It was not uncommon for adult slaves to instruct eager youth to “mind” or be conscious of the amount of crop picked as larger quantities could adversely impact them later. Hence, fields served as classrooms where adult slaves offered “advice for maneuvering through the minefields of slavery.”⁶⁶ These processes gradually raised adolescent females’ consciousness of their slave status.

Slave children approaching the ages of ten through twelve took their first steps toward completely assuming adult responsibilities. No longer ignored by masters, teenage slave girls were developing into valuable commodities generating profits for owners. Yet how were they prepared to assume such roles? If Olmsted was correct in his assessment that slave children had no “training to application or method” in slave work, how did they learn what was expected of them? Moreover, how did they adjust to the new work loads and pace?

Some slave youth, such as Keckley, “had been raised in a hardy school [and thus] . . . taught . . . to prepare . . . to render assistance to others.”⁶⁷ Rev. Thomas H. Jones’ parents prepared he and his siblings about their impending doom by “talk[ing] about [their] coming

⁶⁴ For additional comments on the various crops produced as it relates to slave children reference King, *Stolen Childhood*, 31-34.

⁶⁵ King, *Stolen Childhood*, 68.; White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*, 94-95.

⁶⁶ King, *Stolen Childhood*, 68.

⁶⁷ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1968 reprint),19.

misery.”⁶⁸ Like Keckley, Aunt Sally was taught the importance of work at a young age by her mother. According to her narrative, her mother was “a good mother . . . [who] trained her children to habits of industry and activity.” If work was not completed to her mother’s standards Sally was whipped.⁶⁹ Others, by unsuspectingly fanning flies and cleaning the yard, were conditioned slowly to their servile roles. Despite their preliminary training one can be sure that acclimating to their roles as working chattel was a time of uncertainty, fear, and stress for these young women.

Many slave women recalled their first work experience and their initial inefficiency at their jobs.⁷⁰ Like most slaves, Keckley was introduced to some form of labor prior to ten years of age but at the age of fourteen, while loaned out to her master’s eldest son, a Presbyterian minister, she noted that she “did the work of three servants.” But despite her best efforts she was “scolded and regarded with distrust.”⁷¹ Virginia runaway slave Dinah, when summoned to the big house, expressed her displeasure in her new work role because “she was often beaten, and that severely, for very small faults.”⁷²

Like her slave sisters elsewhere in the upper South, Lily Perry of North Carolina, encountered harsh punishment at her inability to meet her owners’ satisfaction. Born near Louisburg, a small town outside of Raleigh, Perry belonged to Mr. Jerry Perry. Recalling her work experience she says “‘de fust things dat I can remember wus bein’ a house gal, pickin’ up

⁶⁸ *The Experience of Rev. Thomas H. Jones, Who Was a Slave for Forty-Three Years. Written by a Friend, as Related to Him by Brother Jones: Thomas H. Jones*, (New Bedford: E. Anthony & Sons, Printers, 1885), [<http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/jones85/jones85.html>], accessed December 2008, 5-6.

⁶⁹ Williams, *Aunt Sally*, 27.

⁷⁰ For an excellent account of a male slave’s first work experience reference Louis Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave: From Bondage to Freedom* (Milwaukee: South Side Printing Company, 1897).

⁷¹ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1968 reprint), 31-32.

⁷² Simpson, *Horrors of Slavery*, 8.

chips, mindin' de table an' feedin' de hogs. De slop buckets wus heavy an' I had a heap of wuck dat wus hard ter do. I done de very best dat I could but often I got whupped jist de same.” On countless occasions Perry attempted to resist the beatings but her abusers chained her hands to ensure she received her beating properly. She bore marks on her wrists some years later.⁷³ Mollie Mitchell, a field hand since seven-years-old, described her inability to “keep in the row” of her assigned area. Consequently, she was reprimanded by her master. ““Seems like I got whipped all day long,”” she recalled.⁷⁴

For Mollie to recall this whipping years later denotes just how significant corporal punishment was in shaping the identity of slave teenagers on the crux of becoming adult slaves. By consistently whipping young slaves like Mollie, masters reinforced to young women their inhumanity as enslaved people. Each lash by the cat-o-nine tails solidified their looming reality that life for them entailed endless toil but most importantly it reinforced the notion that they were property not people. This ideology would be needed to ensure that a docile workforce existed so that the South's socio-economic and political life continued unabated.

Olmsted noted that whipping served as a necessary component of the instruction and introduction of slave youth to work. The whipping of slaves that were perceived as “wild, lazy children” he wrote, occurred when they were “broke in to work.”⁷⁵ The experience of former

⁷³ Lily Perry, “Lily Perry,” interview by Mary A. Hicks in WPA Slave Narrative Project, North Carolina Narratives, Volume 11, Part 2, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 163 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=112/mesn112.db&recNum=166&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Perry,+Lily\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=112/mesn112.db&recNum=166&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Perry,+Lily)))], accessed October 2007.

⁷⁴ Mollie Mitchell, “Mollie Mitchell,” interview by Alberta Minor in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 3, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 133 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=043/mesn043.db&recNum=135&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Mitchell,+Mollie\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=043/mesn043.db&recNum=135&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Mitchell,+Mollie)))], accessed October 2007.

⁷⁵ Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 102-103.

slave Reverend Thomas H. Jones of North Carolina concurs with Olmsted's observation. According to Jones' narrative not long after he started work on the plantation he experienced corporal punishment for the first time. He wrote, "That year I received my first whipping. I had failed one day to finish my allotted task. . . The next morning my master made me strip off my shirt, and then whipped me with a cowhide till the blood ran trickling down upon the floor. My master was very profane, and with dreadful oaths he assured me that there was only one way for me to avoid a repetition of this terrible discipline, and that was to do my tasks every day, sick or well."⁷⁶

This "breaking in" process, or as Genovese describes it, "the battle to make them into workers," always involved white brutality. Whipping resulted in physical and psychological pain for slaves like Dinah and Mollie, pain most children were not previously exposed.⁷⁷ Work, as defined by adult standards, in itself was new for these young women, as noted by their inability to "keep" within the rows or maintain the work pace, but the verbal and physical lashes became a new experience. Certainly, slave children recalled punishment with a switch or a swat of the hand, but never had they endured the cowhide as used on adult slaves until employed in their first adult slave jobs.

Olmsted's observation, coupled with slaves' own testimony, was compelling. Both accounts demonstrate the intersection of age, work, and punishment. Scholars have shown how slave whippings served as a means of punishment for numerous indiscretions, including adult slave work infractions. But based on the discussion of whippings by slaves during their first

⁷⁶ *The Experience of Rev. Thomas H. Jones*, 11.

⁷⁷ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 294.

work experience as teenagers scholars are forced to reevaluate whipping not just as a means of correction for adult slaves but as a tool for constructing slave identity.

If we take Olmsted's words at face value, slave youth were whipped regularly and as part of their introduction to work. No doubt teenage slave girls recognized and therefore understood that their acclimation to the work regime not only brought increased work-loads but also the brutality of slaveholder power. Yet slave teenagers did not simply accept the lash, or their new work assignments. The suggestion of Olmsted's phrase "broke in to work" implies that a struggle over authority occurred between master and teenage servant. As examined in the chapter's opening, most slave children, though property, did not participate in strenuous tasks as children. Once removed from their childhood environments, however, they began to see for the first time that their lives were far from normal. Unwilling to accept the changes, such as work schedules and white supervision, many teenage slaves were considered unreliable and not to be "depended upon a minute, out of sight." These "incogitant habits" were, according to Olmsted, "formed in youth."⁷⁸ But masters believed that the lash, if applied consistently, would transform these youth from indolent teenagers to industrious slaves.

Aside from the implications concerning the intersection of slave correction, resistance, and age, these views become crucial to understanding slave attitudes about work and slave identity formation. Adult slave laborers, in most cases, did not passively accept their lot as chattel labor during adolescence. Slave girls and boys did not simply go from play to work seamlessly. Exiled from their childhood playgrounds, they entered slaveholding homes and fields. There, many began to confront the grim truth about slavery. In the midst of their new work

⁷⁸ Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 103.

assignments, their “sorrows and sufferings commenced.”⁷⁹ But this sorrow and suffering moved beyond tired muscles and bruised backs from the overseers whip; it was psychological, as well. Slaves were beaten and brutalized into their roles as workers; these human beings had to be taught to be slaves and forced to accept an identity as property.

The transition to adult work also forced enslaved young people to interact with adults for the first time. Slavery restricted the amount of attention slaves and slaveholders provided the young. As suggested by Aunt Sally’s childhood relationship with her parents, the work demands of adults prevented them from interacting with their parents a great deal, but those old enough to work labored beside adults. Therefore, leaving their age-segregated childhood havens and starting work placed teenage slaves in view of persons who had very little contact with them as children.

For slave girls, contact with adults made them aware of their maturation and their sexuality within the plantation household. Though this interaction with the slave regime occurred in a number of settings and will be analyzed subsequently in this dissertation, this chapter considers enslaved sexuality in the work environment. As boys and girls played together, performed the same tasks (such as toting water and babysitting) and dressed alike, few things within their childhood environment prompted them to recognize sexual differences. But after work in the big house or fields, females discovered that gender greatly informed their experience as enslaved persons. Unlike teenage boys, female slaves confronted work experiences that directly challenged their sexuality. For domestics, work in the big house made them susceptible to

⁷⁹ Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb: An American Slave* (New York, H. Bibb, 1849), [<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/bibb/bibb.html>], accessed October 2007, 14.

sexual harassment and rape,⁸⁰ while field hands also faced sexual victimization, their work, in the field, a place ascribed as a male domain, placed them outside of antebellum notions concerning femininity.

Numerous narratives and slave accounts survive about enslaved girls' experience with sexual threat in the slaveholding home. Though each relays the realities of sexual harassment and abuse, none do so more poignantly than Jacobs' narrative *Incidents*. Jacobs' sexual lessons began around fifteen years of age with the inception of physical development. At this point her owner, Dr. Flint,⁸¹ began to harass her. Though young, she "could not remain ignorant of their import." Disgusted and filled with hate for Flint, Jacobs recognized that the nature of slavery not only "compelled [her] to live under the same roof with him . . . [but also] be subject to his will in all things."⁸² Jacobs' plight was not uncommon to slave females. Female slaves, she wrote, were "reared in an atmosphere of licentiousness and fear. The lash and the foul talk of her master and his sons are her teachers. When she is fourteen or fifteen, her owner, or his sons, or the overseer, or perhaps all of them, begin to bribe her."⁸³ Though Jacobs avoided engaging in sexual relations with Flint, others were not as fortunate. For many slave girls, abuse moved beyond illicit conversations to sadistic acts of rape.

Sexual abuse devastated female slaves psychologically, emotionally, and physically. Fully recognizing their lot, for girls, hearts that were once light "became heavy with sad

⁸⁰ Historian Catherine Clinton has explored the sexual abuse of enslaved women in the work place. According to Clinton, sexual abuse often began in the big house when adolescent girls were introduced to adult slave work responsibilities. Various sources document how girls were purchased for the purpose of assisting mistresses in the hearth and masters in the bedroom.

⁸¹ Dr. Flint's character is based on Dr. James Norcom

⁸² Jacobs, *Incidents*, 27.

⁸³ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 51.

forebodings.”⁸⁴ Far removed from carefree days of play, teenage house servants now dwelt in the big house, the nucleus of the plantation household. Interaction with whites introduced pubescent female slaves to lives as slaves within a free world. By serving white families adolescent females not only continued a definite transition to an adult world and adult responsibilities they also came to a greater awareness of why their bodies caused their work experience to be different from that of their male contemporaries. Disenchanted and sexually violated, house servants would find that fellow female workers in the field encountered a perplexing antebellum world as well.

Pubescent female slaves assigned to the fields learned different lessons. By working with pregnant women, nursing mothers, and elderly females, adolescent slave girls learned about the mysterious world of sex, labor, and childbirth that had not been a part of their age segregated environment. Consequently, these teenage females were sensitized to the roles of mother, wife, and slave. This intimate contact laid a foundation a young female slave needed in order to survive bondage. Yet fieldwork did more than introduce teens to adults, their work roles exposed them to the fact that as black women they were removed from the Victorian prescribed private realm to the male sphere of the fields.

In antebellum society men and women operated within specific roles. Men served as patriarchs, providing spiritual leadership, material comfort, and protection for their families. Wives, confined to the home, served as nurturers, domestics, and sexual partners. These roles provided standards by which society judged manhood and womanhood. As property, slaves could only mimic dominant antebellum gender mores. Slave men could never become household providers, just as slave women could never serve as keeper of the home. This denial

⁸⁴ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 28.

of one's masculinity and femininity created contradictory roles for adult slaves, but it must have been even more bewildering for young women who were on the verge of understanding their slave identity.

Ex-slaves recalled entering the fields as teens, where they were forced to complete tasks that were considered masculine and feminine forms of work. According to Virginia slave Nancy Williams "when I got growd up an' start dis cou'tin' dey took me ouder de house an' put me in de fiel to wuck, jes' lak de men, plowin' an doin'. Lawd, you outer seed me an' dat ole ox."⁸⁵ Georgia slave Sally Brown's account demonstrates how slave girls recognized that they were forced to work in both male and female domains. "I worked hard always. Honey, you can't 'magine what a hard time I had. I split rails lak a man. . . [and] I help't spin the cotton into thread fur our clothes."⁸⁶

Those whites unfamiliar with Southern culture also noted the way black women worked outside of their culturally defined place in the home. During his southern travels, Olmsted noted Virginia slave women working in the field, described as "disgustingly dirty," worked "with no apparent distinction in their labour."⁸⁷ Carolina slaves also "engaged at exactly the same labour as the men."⁸⁸ Ex-slaves Green Wilbanks and George Fleming, like their white contemporaries, witnessed the defeminizing effect that field labor had on women. Wilbanks, born in Jackson County, Georgia, close to Commerce, to Mary and Isom Wilbanks, grew up watching his mother

⁸⁵ Nancy Williams, "Nancy Williams Interview," interview by Emmy Wilson and Claude W. Anderson in *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, edited by Charles L. Perdue, Jr., et. al (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 316.

⁸⁶ Sally Brown, "Sally Brown Interview," interview by G. Torsell in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, Supplement, Series 1*, ed. George P. Rawick (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1977), vol. 3, part 1, 97.

⁸⁷ Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 32.

⁸⁸ Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 161.

and grandmother toil in the fields. Describing his paternal grandmother, Rose, he states she ““was some worker, a regular man-woman; she could do any kind of work a man could do. She was a hot horse in her time and it took an extra good man to keep up with her when it came to work.””⁸⁹ On the large South Carolina plantation where Fleming lived, women worked in the fields just as the men, some of them plowing ““jes’ like de men and boys”” and even wearing ““pantelets or breeches.”” According to Fleming the similarities between the two genders working in the field were so great a person ““couldn’t tell ‘em apart in de field.””⁹⁰

These former slaves associated their work duties as being forced to “wuck, jes’ lak de men” and, in some cases, to dress like men. Slave women accepted antebellum mores concerning proper gender roles and space even if their status as slaves prevented them from adhering to them. Though defeminized by being placed in a male domain plowing and splitting rails like men, slave women, Fox-Genovese insists, “never accepted their performance of men’s work as a denial of their identity as women among their own people.”⁹¹

Though many may argue that house servants faced challenges reconciling their work and gender, I contend that house servants, existing within the domestic sphere, operated within Victorian ideas governing women as domestics.⁹² Slave girls pushed to the fields to work recognized that unlike boys, they operated in a realm assigned to men. Confronting the difficulty of their enslavement, these young women also coped with attitudes which deemed them

⁸⁹ Green Wilbanks, “Green Wilbanks,” interview by Mrs. Sadie B. Hornsby in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 4, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 137, 139 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=044/mesn044.db&recNum=140&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Wilbanks,+Green\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=044/mesn044.db&recNum=140&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Wilbanks,+Green)))], accessed October 2007.

⁹⁰ George Fleming, “George Fleming Interview,” 130.

⁹¹ Fox-Genovese, *Within The Plantation Household*, 172.

⁹² Fox-Genovese, *Within The Plantation Household*, 193.

unwomanly. But just as slaves reshaped Anglo-Saxon culture to meet their needs, slave women redefined what constituted womanhood for female slaves by fusing male and female gender roles creating what I term “feminized masculinity.”

Feminized masculinity is defined by a gender space in which women perform male roles while maintaining their femininity as demonstrated by their attire, attitude, and actions. Working in fields like men while clad in dresses with babies strapped to their backs, enslaved women gave a feminine quality to the masculine work they performed. Undermining Victorian gender roles because of their physical prowess as field hands, enslaved women challenged assumptions that women were biologically inferior. Functioning in the male sphere of work while simultaneously acting as caregivers, enslaved women feminized masculine work assignments they were expected to complete. Construction of this gender space enabled them to meet the demands of slaveholders while remaining true to their identities as women, which included serving as keeper of the hearth.

By operating between the field and the slave cabin these women responded to ex-slave Sojourner Truth’s famed question, “ar’n’t I a woman?,” by affirming, that they were indeed women. They simply maintained gendered space which meshed the assigned roles of both sexes together.⁹³ This sense of being, to use Wilbanks’ language, a “man-woman” was passed down to teenage girls as they labored beside older female field hands. Once exposed to these teachings of self-worth and black female sexuality, adolescent females became more equipped to survive the peculiar institution.

⁹³ It was believed that in 1851 former abolitionist and women’s activist, Sojourner Truth, speaking before the Akron Ohio Women’s Rights Convention, made a moving speech in which she dealt with the unique racism and sexism black women faced. Entitled “Ar’n’t I a Woman?,” the speech wonderfully articulated this notion of the black woman displaced from the white female world. Though discredited as Truth’s words, many agree the speech captures not only the heart of who Truth was but also the racial and sexual dilemma antebellum black women faced.

In 1859, African American author Harriet E. Wilson wrote a fictionalized account of the life of a biracial girl, Frado, entitled *Our Nig, or Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in a Two-Story White House, North*.⁹⁴ Depicting the trials of an orphaned youth, Wilson described northern racism, something the author believed paralleled racism in the South. Though not legally a slave, Frado, was treated in the same manner as the countless enslaved teenage girls throughout Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia. “Called early in the morning by her new mistress,” Frado was forced to tend to the livestock, attend the family during meals and complete basic household chores. Though “a new discipline [for] the child” she was expected to follow this regimented schedule day after day, each day receiving “a little more work, [that was] spic[ed] . . . [with] ‘words that burn,’ and frequent blows on [the] head.”⁹⁵

Wilson’s critique of Northern racism bespeaks the atrocities perpetuated against Amanda McDaniel, Fannie Berry, Nellie Loyd, Harriet Jacobs, Elizabeth Keckley, and other black enslaved women. No longer assigned “‘piddlin’ jobs,” slave children became intimately acquainted to their new slave status via work.⁹⁶ As teenagers, young slave women found dolls and marbles replaced with feather dusters and rakes. Previously joyful children were supplanted by somber young women who, like Bibb, “commenced seeing and feeling [like] . . . a wretched

⁹⁴ Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig, or Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in a Two-Story White House, North*, with an introduction and notes by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Boston: G. C. Rand & Avery, 1859; 2d edition New York: Random House, 1983), was the first novel published by a black woman in the United States. Though this work sought to serve as a critique of Northern and Southern racism it was virtually ignored during her lifetime and when initially discovered by scholars it was said to be the work of a white author.

⁹⁵ Wilson, *Our Nig*, 29-30.

⁹⁶ Carrie Hudson, “Carrie Hudson,” interview by Sadie B. Hornsby in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 2, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 212 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=042/mesn042.db&recNum=214&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Hudson,+Carrie\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=042/mesn042.db&recNum=214&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Hudson,+Carrie)))], accessed October 2007. According to Hudson, “piddlin’ jobs” were tasks such as “fotch[ing] in chips and wood.”

slave, compelled to work under the lash.”⁹⁷ This new life, as dictated by changing work patterns, was significant because it led to the formation of the slave identity. As girls, life for slaves resembled that of their white contemporaries, but, with time, masters used work to reshape slave girls’ outlook on life from that of their being humans to that of working beasts of burden.

Work thus marked a significant change in the lives of slave girls. Placed before the watchful eyes of slave parents, the hateful eyes of slave mistresses and the lustful eyes of slave masters, pubescent slave girls began to acquire knowledge through labor that informed them of their chattel status. Sent to the fields or plantation home around ten or twelve-years-old, teenage girls were introduced to household or harvesting duties they were not previously exposed. These new tasks provided first-hand knowledge concerning their identity as unfree laborers. As many slave children, because of the freedom of play, protection of parents or indifference of masters, did not fully comprehend their slave status, this new found knowledge via work no doubt created a great deal of anxiety, anxiety about being able to complete the job and or endure punishments given by whites. Yet for young slave women work did more than denote their chattel status, it revealed the unique gendered place slave women maintained in antebellum society. Within the big house they were forced to succumb to the sexual advances of their masters. In the fields they were not only denied the luxury of being exempted from hard labor like white women but the nature of the work ascribed them duties associated with the male gender.

Essentially, by encountering slave labor for the first time young black women now realized the true nature of the “household” in which they resided. Considered unfree because of their race and unwomanly because of their perceived licentiousness and arduous labor, teenage slave females began the painful transition from slave childhood to slave adulthood. These new work

⁹⁷ Bibb, *The Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*, 14.

experiences and the new realities they presented were no doubt painful. Nonetheless this was only the beginning of woes and sorrow. As each day passed girls, summoned to the field or big house, were stripped of their humanity and ushered further down the road of suffering, emptiness, and defeat.

Table 3-1. Estimated Heights of Male and Female Slaves

Age	Male Slave Height	Female Slave Height
9.5	47.47 inches	47.12 inches
10.5	49.45 inches	49.06 inches
11.5	51.42 inches	51.13 inches
12.5	53.44 inches	53.39 inches
13.5	55.59 inches	55.84 inches
14.5	57.85 inches	58.18 inches
15.5	60.15 inches	60.04 inches
16.5	62.29 inches	61.24 inches
17.5	64.04 inches	61.91 inches
18.5	65.30 inches	62.24 inches

Source: Richard H. Steckel, "A Peculiar Population: The Nutrition, Health, and Mortality of American Slaves from Childhood to Maturity" in *The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (Sept., 1986), 724-725.

CHAPTER 4
BADGE OF SLAVERY: PUBESCENT FEMALES AND CLOTHING

In 1894, famed American author Mark Twain published *Puddn'head Wilson*. Set in Missouri, the tale describes a case of mistaken identity when a mixed-race enslaved woman, Roxy, fearful of the challenges her child would face as a slave, switches her light-skinned son with the master's infant boy. The story, with strong racial themes, employs fiction to relay antebellum life, among the realities Twain explored was clothing's significance to slave identity formation. For all intents and purposes, Roxy was "as white as anybody," Twain wrote, "but the one sixteenth of her which was black outvoted the other fifteen parts and made her a negro." Roxy was a slave, and "saleable as such," and her son, "thirty-one parts white . . . was a slave. . . . He had blue eyes and flaxen curls like his white comrade; but even the father of the white child was able to tell the children apart. . . *by their clothes* [emphasis mine]: for the white babe wore ruffled soft muslin and a coral necklace, while the other wore merely a coarse tow-linen shirt which barely reached to its knees, and no jewellery."¹ As indicated by the description of Roxy and her child, Twain suggested that skin color was not the only way to identify a person's race. In this instance, because the master could not differentiate between the children without their clothes, Roxy believed that she could successfully switch the children.² But attire, as the excerpt so movingly reveals, helped to solidify racial identities in the slave South.

Clothing has always been an important marker in representing individuals' class and socioeconomic status.³ Beyond providing protection against the elements, apparel indicates

¹ Mark Twain, *Puddn' Head Wilson and Other Tales*, edited with an introduction and notes by R.D. Gooder (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 13.

² Twain, *Puddn' Head Wilson*, 18-19.

³ Lydia Jean Wares, "Dress of the African American Woman in Slavery and Freedom: 1500 to 1935" (PhD diss., Purdue University, 1981), 23.

distinctions of wealth or poverty. For those in the slave South, as Twain's words suggest, clothing differentiated between the races, as enslaved blacks wore osnaburg, or nigga-cloth, a rough, durable fabric, and whites, depending on social class, wore cotton, wool, or silk.⁴ In cases such as Roxy and her child, where a slave's skin color was similar to whites, clothing became the only way that whites had to determine slaves' status. Certainly, the racial implications surrounding clothing are important, but equally significant is the correlation between attire and identity formation. As demonstrated in *Puddin' Head Wilson*, when slaves donned certain garments it defined--and, in the case of Roxy's son, completely altered, their identity.

Exploring changes in slave attire, this chapter argues that the acquisition of dresses, shoes and headdresses during adolescence helped girls to understand their un-free status and the expectations of white slave owners. Moreover, teenage slave girls acquiring adult clothing indicated to slave society their maturity and individuality, such as the beginning of menstrual cycles, ability to attract the opposite sex, and, in some cases, to resist white authority. The process by which slaves' identity was shaped became crucial to the development of the adult female slave—and consequently to the institution of slavery. Without young blacks learning that they were slaves and how to live within slavery, the system itself might have collapsed.

For enslaved teenage girls, acquiring a dress and other adult apparel signaled the end of childhood freedoms, and denoted increased workloads and the potential for sexual abuse. These same garments also created opportunities that allowed slaves to express individuality by

⁴ Helen Foster in *New Raiments of Self: African American Clothing in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford, 1997) states "although particular items and styles of dress change over time and from place to place, the meanings that people give to clothes are universal: clothes mark one's age, sex, and status; and clothes are encoded with meanings for particular times, places, and events." 4.

modifying their attire.⁵ In addition, by wearing adult apparel slave youth participated in adult activities such as Saturday night parties and courting; these settings presented slaves opportunities to relax and enjoy others within their circle of family and friends.

Clothing went beyond informing enslaved teenage females of impending adulthood; adult apparel also signified to the slave community that younger slaves had reached maturation. Wearing a dress, head wrap, and donning slave shoes--or “brogans”--advertised to antebellum society that enslaved females’ were no longer children. Whites, observing enslaved girls wearing adult clothing, recognized that their young slave property had appreciated in value. To slave parents, adult apparel indicated that girls were no longer able to lead lives of leisure but would be exposed to intense labor and sexual exploitation.

This analysis benefits from scholars such as Jack Schwartz, Patricia Hunt, and Rebecca Earle, who examine the input of race, class, and clothing on individuals and groups.⁶ Their work, focusing on black clothing in America and colonial and antebellum slavery in Latin America, helps to frame this chapter’s argument concerning the role of clothing in identity formation. For example, Schwartz, referring to black males, asserts that “when the Negro community, or any other minority community, is denied access to many status symbols, it is forced to use compensatory devices to raise self-esteem, aid status symbolization, and cushion

⁵ Patricia K Hunt’s article “The Struggle to Achieve Individual Expression through Clothing and Adornment: African American Women Under and After Slavery” in *Discovering The Women In Slavery: Emancipating Perspectives on the American Past*, ed. Patricia Morton (Athens: University of Georgia, 1996) explores slave and postbellum attire to argue research “reveals that African American women did find a way to express themselves as individuals through their dresses, skirts, bodices, headwear, hairstyles, jewelry, and other accessories,” 227.

⁶ Scholarship concerning slave clothing remains scant. Existing research on the subject reveals that “dress is a communication medium” that “assists in the performance of identity” as revealed in the work of Jack Schwartz, “Men’s Clothing and the Negro” in *Phylon*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (3rd Quarter, 1963): 224 and Rebecca Earle, “Two pairs of Pink Satin Shoes!’: Race, Clothing and Identity in the Americas (17th-19th Centuries) in *History Workshop Journal*, No. 52 (Autumn, 2001): 175.

the traumatic effects of a subordinate position.”⁷ Patricia Hunt reaches similar conclusions concerning clothing’s role in countering oppression. Studying black women of Georgia during and after slavery, she suggests that “African American women were able to endure and persevere through the oppression they experienced under and after slavery . . . by how they used clothing and adornment to express their creativity, femininity and individuality.”⁸ Slave girls, like adult slaves, were an oppressed group who, with age, were forced out of lives that were relatively normal. They subsequently led lives of constant toil.

Shane White, Graham White, Lydia Wares, Wilma King, Jacqueline Jones, and Helen Foster also consider clothing within the context of slavery. White and White contend that clothing “was a vital and integral part of a culture that, fashioned out of adversity, made the lives of African Americans during the time of their enslavement bearable.”⁹ Explaining how and why clothing became an important component of slave life in the colonial and antebellum period, as the authors also examine white attitudes about slaves’ use of attire.¹⁰ White and White successfully demonstrate the role clothes played within the slave community and the plantation household. From the arrival of the first Africans and the coalescence of slavery, as this work suggests, clothes have always been instruments of both oppression and opportunity.

Whereas White and White explore clothing for African Americans at large, Lydia Wares’s dissertation examines the significance of dress for black females from slavery through the mid-

⁷ Schwartz, “Men’s Clothing and the Negro,” 225.

⁸ Hunt, “The Struggle to Achieve Individual Expression through Clothing and Adornment,” 237.

⁹ Shane White and Graham White, “Slave Clothing and African American Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” *Past and Present* no. 148 (August, 1995): 185.

¹⁰ White and White, “Slave Clothing and African American Culture,” 150. According to the authors, whites in attempting to control every facet of black life tried unsuccessfully to regulate their attire. Some colonies such as South Carolina, enacted legislation surrounding what constituted appropriate clothes for slaves. Aside from being moved to pass codes regulating black clothing, sources reveal that whites commented about black dress at length, expressing both disdain and ambivalence concerning the clothes donned by slaves.

1930s. Wares's work, among the first to deal with clothing as it relates to black women, is useful in understanding the correlation between female slaves and clothing. But, as she acknowledges, the subject requires further study. This chapter, by examining apparel's role in relation to adolescence and identity formation, seeks a more nuanced interpretation than that of White, White and Wares; several works have thus proven useful.¹¹

Reviewing the historiography of slave clothing in her article, Hunt discovers historians have paid little attention to the subject. Scholars who have explored the topic, such as Robert Fogel, Stanley Engerman, John Blassingame, only explore the "generalities of slave clothing, discussed slave men's dress rather than women's, or remarked on the white authored stereotypes."¹² However since the 1970s and 1980s scholars like Hunt have sought to revise the scholarship and its interpretation concerning slave clothing.

In her important study, *Stolen Childhood*, King analyzes garments children wore, as well as the authority of slave parents and slaveholders in dressing children. Like White and White she describes how slaves' attire attracted attention from casual observers and travelers as well as

¹¹ Using travel journals, runaway notices, slave narratives, and WPA interviews, White and White in "Slave Clothing and African American Culture" examine how colonial and antebellum slaves in the North and South used attire as a form of cultural expression, a coping mechanism and a form of resistance within the peculiar institution (185). Eighteenth-century slaves, whose clothes were primarily imported, used odd clothing combinations, generally items acquired from elite whites, to test the boundaries of the system. Wearing silk gowns with brogans, or felt hats with tattered trousers, slaves reflected their refusal to wear the required slave attire, thus subverting white authority. Moreover, donning the elite apparel evoked suspicion among whites that the wearer might be involved in illicit activity (158). These fears were plausible in that some slaves acquired these materials through theft, victimizing whites and other slaves. Though theft was a reality it is important to note that, as denoted by sources, most elite style clothes were acquired through white complicity. As time progressed and colonists boycotted European goods during the pre-Revolutionary and Revolutionary periods, slaves were forced to manufacture their clothing. It was this change over time that White and White argue characterized the nineteenth-century. They assert that, after American independence, slaves, "heavily involved in the manufacture of slave garments, [subsequently became] able to introduce a distinctly African-American aesthetic into textile and clothing design" (150). They support their contention by examining slaves incorporating bright dyes into clothing production, and employing intricate patchwork to repair or lengthen clothes. These changes sought to serve as a means to retain African identity and shape the appearance of the slave community.

¹² Hunt, "The Struggle to Achieve Individual Expression Through Clothing and Adornment," 228.

the slaves' awareness of the significance of clothes.¹³ King, Jones and Foster also examine the relationship between adolescence and clothing.¹⁴

Jones briefly considers the subject of clothes in *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*. Using age as an analytical tool, she discusses changes associated with dress by denoting that slaves in early adolescence generally received adult clothing at or shortly before assuming adult work roles.¹⁵ Foster combines aspect of race, class, gender and age in her examination of slave clothing from 1830-1860, using narratives and WPA interviews she argues that "clothing played a central part in the enslaved people's consciousness of self: to them clothing was tactile, visual and metaphoric."¹⁶ Foster reveals how slaves of all ages used clothing as sites to assert themselves as "personal self and communal self."¹⁷

While effectively identifying clothes as a rite of passage, Jones's analysis remains limited. She thus attributes the acquisition of pants for slave males as significant to puberty, but dismisses the importance of dresses' because "pants offered more of a contrast to the infant's smock than did a dress."¹⁸ While King and Jones should be credited for expanding our understanding of clothing in the lives of slaves, I find their emphasis on males and the acquisition of pants problematic. Although slave dresses resembled childhood shifts, they were still laden with important meanings associated with femininity such as sexual activity and motherhood.

¹³ King, *Stolen Childhood*, 16.

¹⁴ King, *Stolen Childhood*, 26.

¹⁵ Reference Jones' *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*.

¹⁶ Foster, *New Raiments of Self*, 2.

¹⁷ Foster, *New Raiments of Self*, 4.

¹⁸ Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 32.

Foster's work, like King and Jones, is also male-centered. She focuses on boys because as she states she "found only one explicit mention in the *Narratives* that clothing marked this rite of passage for adolescent females."¹⁹ But as with King and Jones female attire should not be disqualified from the analysis of slave clothing. Simply because slaves did not explicitly discuss receiving a dress at the inception of puberty does not mean this was not a significant event. Topics such as menstrual cycles were often considered taboo and were thus omitted in narratives or interviews. Although female physiological changes remained unmentionable, slaves and whites spoke frequently about their clothing in narratives, interviews, and travel accounts. If clothing was a topic of importance to contemporaries, why does it remain insignificant to scholars?

As children, slaves went nude or were poorly clad in makeshift dresses. Chiefly, the scarcity of clothing reflected slaveholders' preference to clothe adults slaves. Some former slaves, such as famed abolitionist Frederick Douglass, claimed that nudity among enslaved children was common throughout the year.²⁰ If slave children were fortunate enough to receive clothing they were of extremely poor quality and in some cases "just 'nough to hide [their] secret parts."²¹ Nudity was most common during the summer months, when excessive temperatures permitted slave children to run naked and masters the ability to cut costs by clothing them.

¹⁹ Foster, *New Raiments of Self*, 158.

²⁰ Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 44.

²¹ Sena Moore, "Sena Moore," interview by W.W. Dixon in WPA Slave Narrative Project, South Carolina Narratives, Volume 14, Part 3, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 210 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=143/mesn143.db&recNum=213&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Moore,+Sena\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=143/mesn143.db&recNum=213&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Moore,+Sena)))], accessed June 2009.

Worn by both sexes, the garment was known as a shirt, shift, or slip.²² “A cross between a dress and a slightly lengthened shirt, made of homespun or crocus material,” a slip consisted of a large opening for the head and two small openings for the arms.²³ Slave interviewees described the unique attire issued to them as children. According to Virginia ex-slave James L. Smith, ““Our dress was made of tow cloth; for the children, nothing was furnished them but a shirt.”²⁴ Jasper Battle described the slips that slave boys and girls wore on the plantation where he grew up. Born on Henry Jones’ plantation in Georgia, Jasper was “mighty little and young” during slavery. Despite his youth he recalled that ““all de nigger babies wore dresses made jus’ alak for boys and gals.”²⁵ Georgia slaves Jane Southerland and Tom Sheets’ son told how both girls and boys wore shifts. According to Will Sheets, ““gals and boys was dressed in de same way when dey was little chaps.”²⁶

²² White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*, 94.; Jeffrey Crow, Paul Escott, Flora Hatley, *A History of African-Americans in North Carolina* (Raleigh: N.C. Dept. of Cultural Resources, 1994), 57.; Henry D. Jenkins, “Henry D. Jenkins,” interview by W.W. Dixon in WPA Slave Narrative Project, South Carolina Narratives, Volume 14, Part 3, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 24 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=143/mesn143.db&recNum=26&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Jenkins,+Henry+D+\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=143/mesn143.db&recNum=26&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Jenkins,+Henry+D+)))], accessed June 2009.

²³ This description is found in the interview of ex-slave Mose Davis, “Mose Davis,” interview by E. Driskell in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 1, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 267 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=041/mesn041.db&recNum=269&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Davis,+Mose\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=041/mesn041.db&recNum=269&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Davis,+Mose)))], accessed June 2009.

²⁴ Foster, *New Raiments of Self*, 150.

²⁵ Jasper Battle, “Jasper Battle,” interview by Grace McCune in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 1, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 62, 65 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=041/mesn041.db&recNum=65&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Battle,+Jasper\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=041/mesn041.db&recNum=65&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Battle,+Jasper)))], accessed June 2009.

²⁶ Will Sheets, “Will Sheets,” interview by Sadie B. Hornsby in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 3, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 237, 239 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=043/mesn043.db&recNum=239&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Sheets,+Will\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=043/mesn043.db&recNum=239&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Sheets,+Will)))], accessed June 2009. It is important to note that though slaves spoke primarily of their shifts, many note that during the winter they either wore wool versions of their slips or in some cases received dresses or pants. However this change was contingent upon the slaveholders’ resources.

Some slaves, such as Caleb Craig, in describing their childhood clothes, associated the garment with membership in an exclusive club, while others, such as Tom Hawkins, linked it with recreation. Born in Blackstock, South Carolina, and given as a gift to his master's daughter, slave Caleb Craig recalled belonging to "de shirt-tail brigade," the group of youth who wore the night-gown like garment, on their large plantation of three hundred slaves.²⁷ Former slave Tom Hawkins also recalled slave garments on the four or five hundred acre Poore plantation in South Carolina. He commented on "how dem shirt tails used to pop in de wind when us runned fast."²⁸ If wearing a shift or shirt made one a member of the "shirt-tail brigade," a group free from adult responsibilities, or if the sounds the garments made enhanced young chattel's playtime how did teenage slaves feel when they were displaced from the brigade and the shirt popping ended because of the acquisition of pants and dresses?

White travelers visiting the nineteenth-century South described the attire of slave children in diaries, journals and travel accounts. Their writings support slave testimony that dress for slave children had little to do with gender. William Howard Russell, writing for the *London Times*, described the attire of children in his *My Diary North and South*. "Children of both sexes, [were] scantily clad," according to Russell.²⁹ Traveling from Baltimore to the deep South, Russell visited the Trescot plantation on the South Carolina sea islands. One morning, while

²⁷ Caleb Craig, "Caleb Craig," interview by W. W. Dixon in WPA Slave Narrative Project, South Carolina Narratives, Volume 14, Part 1, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 229-230 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=141/mesn141.db&recNum=231&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Craig,+Caleb\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=141/mesn141.db&recNum=231&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Craig,+Caleb)))], accessed June 2009.

²⁸ Tom Hawkins, "Tom Hawkins," interview by Sadie B. Hornsby in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 2, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 127, 129, 130 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=042/mesn042.db&recNum=129&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Hawkins,+Tom\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=042/mesn042.db&recNum=129&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Hawkins,+Tom)))], accessed June 2009.

²⁹ William Howard Russell, *My Diary North and South*, edited by Eugene H. Berwanger (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 99.

preparing for the day, he described the child assisting him as a “curly-headed creature, dressed in a sort of sack, without any particular waist.” Initially, he assumed it was a boy, “till *it* told me it was a girl [emphasis mine].”³⁰

Testimony by former slaves and white travelers provide vivid descriptions of childhood attire, revealing much about slave society. First, the use of a coarse slip suggests that slaveholders were concerned about the expenditures used for children. Except for the price they might bring at auction, slave youngsters were of very little monetary value to planters. Not until a child was able to perform forms of adult labor would he or she become valuable on the plantation. Moreover, death was an ever-looming reality for antebellum citizens of all races, but children, particularly slave children, were most vulnerable (see Table 4.1).³¹

According to scholars, slave babies were twice as likely to die as white infants, and higher mortality persisted beyond infancy, partly owing to unsanitary living conditions.³² Various illnesses, such as lockjaw, mumps, chicken pox, scarlet fever and cholera, which reached epidemic levels in the 1830s and 1840s, along with suffocation, ended the lives of numerous slave children.³³ Therefore, why purchase cloth and shoes for juvenile property that could possibly suffer the numerous maladies that plagued nineteenth-century children? But economic motivations were not the only factor. By failing to clothe properly enslaved children, whites

³⁰ Russell, *My Diary North and South*, 104.

³¹ Richard Steckel examines plantation records to analyze slave mortality. He presents quantitative data that helps us to better understand the subject. For additional information consult “Slave Mortality: Analysis of Evidence from Plantation Records,” *Social Science History*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 4 (1979): 86-114.

³² Schwartz, *Born in Bondage*, 76; For analysis on antebellum medicine and slavery consult Todd Savitt’s *Medicine and Slavery: The Diseases and Health Care of Blacks in Antebellum Virginia* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1978).

³³ Steckel “Slave Mortality,” 95.

revealed a complete disregard for black children's humanity; this would be key in justifying the use of blacks as slave labor.

According to former slave Lou Smith, whites believed that spending money on slave children's attire was unnecessary. Lou described an incident in which her mistress, Miss Jo, expressed her thoughts about financial costs associated with clothing enslaved children. "Miss Jo wasn't no good Mistress," she recalled. "She said us kids didn't need to wear any clothes and one day she told us we could jest tak'em off as it cost too much to clothe us."³⁴ From a moral perspective, Miss Jo's order that slave children remove their clothes reflected an insensitivity to the slaves' needs, a point Lou was quick to point out in her interview. But, as a businesswoman, Miss Jo's decision represented a desire to reduce costs. Slave children's attire went beyond dealing with plantation economics and white attitudes toward black humanity. It also struck to the heart of how slaves and masters defined slavery.

Slave children's dress marked a lack of sexual maturity, as well as a disregard of their gender, by white adults. That white traveler Russell assumed the slave child was a boy until "it" told him otherwise implied a lack of physical maturation made it difficult and unimportant for whites to differentiate between the sexes, especially when the children were unable to produce the human merchandise needed to sustain slavery. These attitudes were common to white males of the antebellum era. The inability to procreate cast slave children to the margins, so until "it" began a menstrual cycle, acquired breasts, and moved to work in the slaveholding home or field, slave girls were regulated to the background of the plantation system. Like the work tasks

³⁴ Lou Smith, "Lou Smith," interview in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Oklahoma Narratives, Volume 13, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 301 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=130/mesn130.db&recNum=307&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Smith,+Lou\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=130/mesn130.db&recNum=307&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Smith,+Lou)))], accessed June 2009.

associated with the childhood environment, slave children's garments did not promote a gendered awareness among enslaved boys and girls. Russell's comments suggest that shifts did not prompt whites to pay special attention to slave children's gender. But once enslaved girls received dresses, these garments prompted chattel girls to consider seriously what life held for them as slave women. Moreover, adult apparel gained antebellum society's attention.

Enslaved boys and girls were given adult clothes when they began puberty or full-time work, which generally occurred between ten to fourteen-years-old.³⁵ This occurrence was not unique to the antebellum South as "in many societies, puberty marks a change in dress." For example, some African cultures celebrate maturity by the "assumption of adult dress" with coming-of-age ceremonies including "the change, symbolically, from nudity to dress."³⁶ Though slaves did not participate in formal coming-of-age ceremonies, their recollections reveal that specific experiences were associated with the acquisition of adult clothing.

According to Edgecombe County, North Carolina, slave Lancy Harris, "so many chillen didn't wear clothes" on the plantation where she grew up. "But the missus owned the loom and de servants weave. When de chillen are big enough to work dey gib 'em some cloth from the loom."³⁷ On his Georgia plantation, Willis Cofer described how "Boys jes' wore shirts what looked lak dresses 'til dey wuz 12 years old and big enough to wuk in de field."³⁸ Ex-slaves

³⁵ According to Foster, in *New Raiments of Self* "In the antebellum South, the specific age at which the enslaved male was thought to change from boy to man varied from age 10 to 15 and even as late as 21 years; nevertheless, the addition of pants to his wardrobe very often clearly coded this rite of passage," 154.

³⁶ Foster, *New Raiments of Self*, 154.

³⁷ Lancy Harris, "Lancy Harris Interview," interview by Rev. Brown in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, ed. George P. Rawick (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1979), Supplemental Series 2, vol. 1, 256.

³⁸ Willis Cofer, "Willis Cofer," interview by Grace McCune in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 1, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 202, 203 [<http://memory.loc.gov/cgi->

Alice Hutcheson and G.W. Hawkins confirmed boys receiving pants around twelve or fourteen as well.³⁹ Girls began wearing dresses around the same time. As previously explored, while many scholars tend to associate the receipt of adult clothes as more significant in the lives of males than females, research shows that girls' receipt of adult attire was equally significant. Data suggests that wearing dresses meant that girls, like boys, reached maturity. One sign of maturity was the start of girls' menstrual cycles. Though the onset of female menarche varied, among girls, once it occurred it was considered a pivotal moment in slave girls' lives as it marked their ability to reproduce.⁴⁰

Such was the case for North Carolina slave Mattie Curtis. Born in Orange County, North Carolina, Mattie was sold along with her parents and two siblings to Reverend Whitfield of Granville County. Poorly fed and clothed, the beginning of her menstrual cycle led to changes in attire. "I went as naked as Yo' han' till I was fourteen years old," she recalled. "I was naked like dat when my nature come to me." With the beginning of menstruation, her "mammy tol

[bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=041/mesn041.db&recNum=210&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Cofer,+Willis\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=041/mesn041.db&recNum=210&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Cofer,+Willis)))], accessed June 2009.

³⁹ Alice Hutcheson, "Alice Hutcheson," interview by Grace McCune in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 2, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 285 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=042/mesn042.db&recNum=287&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Hutcheson,+Alice\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=042/mesn042.db&recNum=287&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Hutcheson,+Alice)))], accessed June 2009.; G.W. Hawkins, "G.W. Hawkins Interview," interview by Samuel S. Taylor in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Arkansas Narratives, Volume 2, Part 3, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 216 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=023/mesn023.db&recNum=216&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Hawkins,+G++W+\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=023/mesn023.db&recNum=216&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Hawkins,+G++W+)))], accessed June 2009.

⁴⁰ For additional information concerning enslaved female menarche consult James Trussell and Richard Steckel, "The Age of Slaves at Menarche and Their First Birth," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* Vol. 8, no. 3 (Winter 1978): 477-505.

[the master] dat [she] had ter have clothes.”⁴¹ Though there are few accounts of females discussing the start of their menstrual cycle no doubt countless slaves had similar experiences.

Enslaved females received two clothing allotments per year. Dresses were either produced at home, or slaveholders’ purchased manufactured items. Surry County, Virginia slave Lucy Skipwith served as seamstress and weaver. According to Skipwith “she provided all the clothing for seventy slaves of her master as well as her family’s garments.”⁴² For owners who purchased slave clothing, they used manufacturers such as the Gallego Manufacturing Company or the Richmond Cotton Manufacturing Company, factories that produced Negro clothing.⁴³ Though manufacturers were available the majority of slaves attest to the fact that many of their clothes were homemade.⁴⁴ Amanda Jackson’s clothes were made by her master’s wife and other slaves on the Georgia farm where she was enslaved. Born to Joe and Rachael, South Carolina slave George McAlilley’s clothes were made ““right dere on de plantation”” as well.⁴⁵

Females received a wool dress in the fall and a cotton dress in the spring. Born between West Point and Columbus, Georgia, Emma Jones recalled the clothes rations provided by her

⁴¹ Mattie Curtis, “Mattie Curtis,” interview by Mary A. Hicks in WPA Slave Narrative Project, North Carolina Narratives, Volume 11, Part 1, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 217, 218 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=111/mesn111.db&recNum=220&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Curtis,+Mattie\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=111/mesn111.db&recNum=220&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Curtis,+Mattie)))], accessed June 2009.

⁴² Wares, “Dress of the African American Woman in Slavery and Freedom,” 118.

⁴³ Wares, “Dress of the African American Woman in Slavery and Freedom,” 177.

⁴⁴ Foster, *New Raiments of Self*, 75, 79.

⁴⁵ Amanda Jackson, “Amanda Jackson,” in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 2, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 290 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=042/mesn042.db&recNum=292&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Jackson,+Amanda\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=042/mesn042.db&recNum=292&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Jackson,+Amanda)))], accessed June 2009.

George McAlilley, “George McAlilley,” interview by W. W. Dixon in WPA Slave Narrative Project, South Carolina Narratives, Volume 14, Part 3, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 143-144 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=143/mesn143.db&recNum=145&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(McAlilley,+George\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=143/mesn143.db&recNum=145&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(McAlilley,+George)))], accessed June 2009.

owners, Wiley and Melba Jones. ““After us got to be big gals, us wo’ cotton dresses an’ drawses in hot weather,”” she recalled, ““an’ when it git col’ we had to wear long drawses an’ homespun wool dresses.””⁴⁶ Former Raleigh, North Carolina slave Betty Chessier remembered her clothing allowance. Working as a house servant, Chessier “never [had] over two dresses. One . . . calico and one gingham.”⁴⁷ The quality and style of the dress slave girls received depended on the position held. House servants’ dresses seemed to be more well kept and lavish while field hands attire was plain and of poorer quality.⁴⁸

Slaves often described the dresses they wore in detail. In Georgia, where Frances Willingham was enslaved she recalled how in the summer slaves wore homespun, ““made wid full skirts sewed on to tight fittin’ waisties what was fastened down de bak wid buttons made out of cows and rams horns.””⁴⁹ Born in Monroe, Georgia, Julia Cole recalled wearing slave attire. According to Cole dresses made of ““common cloth”” were ““well sewed and made wid belts to ‘em.””⁵⁰ Former slave Maggie Black stated ““dey wear long ole frock den en uh girl comin’ on dere when dey ge’ to be any kind uv uh girl, dey put dat frock down . . . Dey use’er wear dem

⁴⁶ Emma Jones, “Emma Jones,” interview by Mrs. Preston Klein in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Alabama Narratives, Volume 1, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 236 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=010/mesn010.db&recNum=241&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Jones,+Emma\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=010/mesn010.db&recNum=241&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Jones,+Emma)))], accessed June 2009.

⁴⁷ Betty Foreman Chessier, “WPA Slave Narrative Project,” 30.

⁴⁸ Foster, *New Raiments of Self*, 138.

⁴⁹ Frances Willingham, “Frances Willingham,” interview by Sadie B. Hornsby in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 4, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 154-155 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=044/mesn044.db&recNum=157&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Willingham,+Frances\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=044/mesn044.db&recNum=157&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Willingham,+Frances)))], accessed June 2009.

⁵⁰ Julia Cole, “Julia Cole,” interview by Corry Fowler in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 1, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 232, 234 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=041/mesn041.db&recNum=240&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Cole,+Julia\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=041/mesn041.db&recNum=240&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Cole,+Julia)))], accessed June 2009.

big ole hoop skirt dat sit out broad lak from de ankle en den dey wear little panty dat show down twixt dey skirt en dey ankle. Jes tie em ‘round dey knees wid some sorta string en le’ em show dat way ‘bout dey ankle.’”⁵¹ Did Willingham, Chessier and their slave peers embrace the dresses or reject the garb? Was the garment, and its modest appearance redefined within the slave quarters? Or, as some may argue, were the dresses accepted and relegated in the slave girls’ mind as a component of the grim life slavery forced them to lead? How did it compare to the white female adolescent experience?

For young girls putting on a slave woman’s dress held many conflicting meanings. On one hand, adult attire indicated that they were adults, and like most youth, past and present, slaves, such as Willis Cofer’s older slave acquaintances who “‘wuz mighty proud when dey got big enough to wear pants and go to wuk in de fields wid grown folkses,’” longed to enter adulthood.⁵² Additionally, the adult garment presented opportunities to alter dresses, thus showing individuality within the slave community. But as many of them realized quickly, wearing a dress also meant that they were bound in a system that denied both their freedom and humanity. Clothed in the slave wardrobe, the teenager was draped with a symbol of slavery and enveloped within the institution.

Oral testimony by former slaves reveals that they either loved or loathed the dress. Harriet Jacobs remembered receiving her linsey-woolsey dress ration every winter. She viewed the dress with the same contempt she associated with her licentious master and his irate wife. For Jacobs, the dress served as “one of the badges of slavery,” a stigma this cunning, fugitive house

⁵¹ Maggie Black, “Maggie Black,” interview by Annie Ruth Davis in WPA Slave Narrative Project, South Carolina Narratives, Volume 14, Part 1, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 57, 58 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=141/mesn141.db&recNum=59&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Black,+Maggie\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=141/mesn141.db&recNum=59&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Black,+Maggie)))], accessed June 2009.

⁵² Willis Cofer, “WPA Slave Narrative Project,” 203.

servant refused to accept.⁵³ As suggested by the runaway notice for Jacobs, she wore a “variety of very fine clothes.”⁵⁴ Her ability to sew and her grandmother’s financial support permitted her to enjoy the pleasure of wearing finer apparel than most female slaves. By rejecting the clothes provided by her master, Jacobs refused to accept her plight as a slave. However, adolescent female slaves, having little means and less privilege, also liberated themselves of the signature slave garment.

Although all slave females did not have access to as fine a wardrobe as Jacobs, their attempt to express their individuality through clothing served as a primary component in detaching themselves from slavery. During adolescence female slaves often wore distinctive dresses, such as coloring material and enlarging skirts, as displayed by adult slave women. By altering attire slave girls’ actions reflect what psychologist Marilyn Horn has termed the Extension of Self. According to Horn’s theory “the type of clothing worn by an individual acts as a reinforcement of an attitude or particular emotion of self, such as highlighting one’s physical attributes. Clothing then can elicit an emotional response that an individual can find pleasing or likeable; ‘the extension of self is determined primarily within the individual.’”⁵⁵ By teenage girls altering their standard issue attire reveals that they felt they were indeed humans not chattel, and thus capable of reflecting their unique individuality despite whites’ attempt to conform them to ideologies of inferiority. With each modified dress, girls used clothing to reinforce their attitude of self-worth to themselves, as well as the slave and slaveholding communities.

⁵³ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 11.

⁵⁴ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 237.

⁵⁵ Wares, “Dress of the African American Woman in Slavery and Freedom,” 17.

Slave females dressed up their calico dresses by brightly dyeing them using woods such as walnut, elm, cherry as well as other agents.⁵⁶ Former slave Nancy Williams of Norfolk, Virginia remembered that she wore dresses of all colors. When asked how she got an array of colored dresses, she responded “Jes’ change dey colors. Took my white dress out to de polk berry bush an’ jes’ a-dyed it red.”⁵⁷ Ex-slave Gus Feaster noted the changes made to dresses. “‘Sunday clothes,’” he told an interviewer, “‘was died red for de gals.’”⁵⁸

Pubescent females also placed grapevines in their skirts to give them an ample, regal look.⁵⁹ Maggie Black, in recalling the attire of the time, went in the woods “‘en ge’ wild grape vine en bend em round en put em under us skirt en make it stand out big lak. Hadder hab uh big ole ring fa de bottom uv de skirt en den one uh little bit smaller eve’y time dey ge’ closer to de waist. Ne’er hab none tall in de waist cause dat wuz s’ppose to be little bitty t’ing.’”⁶⁰ Gus Feaster also noted that girls used grapevines to make hoops. In fact, they paid ten cents for a set of the prized vines.⁶¹ The redesigned dresses were reserved as an outlet from the uniformity masters attempted to exert over slaves. Special occasions such as New Year’s Day, Christmas,

⁵⁶ White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*, 95; For a list of cloth dyes used by slaves as reported in the WPA narratives reference Appendix III of Foster’s *New Raiments of Self*.

⁵⁷ Nancy Williams, “Nancy Williams Interview,” interview by Emmy Wilson and Claude W. Anderson in *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, edited by Charles L. Perdue, Jr., et. al (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 316.

⁵⁸ Gus Feaster, “Gus Feaster,” interview by Caldwell Sims in WPA Slave Narrative Project, South Carolina Narratives, Volume 14, Part 2, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 47 [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=142/mesn142.db&recNum=50&itemLink=D?mesnbib:3:/temp/~ammem_UkvU:], accessed June 2009.

⁵⁹ King, *Stolen Childhood*, 61.

⁶⁰ Maggie Black, “WPA Slave Narrative Project,” 58.

⁶¹ Gus Feaster, “WPA Slave Narrative Project,” 47.

corn-shucking parties, and church meetings presented an opportunity for these young women to adorn themselves in their best attire.

Adding a unique style to the issued attire detached slave girls, if only temporarily, from the harsh realities of slavery erupting in their lives, proving scholars' assertion that clothes served as a coping mechanism against the oppressive environment of slavery.⁶² But, as this chapter argues, clothing went beyond serving as a coping mechanism: it also served as one of the tools used to inform young girls of the oppressive slave identity they would soon inherit. Once they understood they were chattel by the clothes that graced their bodies they became more aware of slavery's racial and sexual oppression. Then and only then could they devise means to resist this oppression. Each time girls adorned themselves in their party dresses or Sunday attire they were escaping, if only temporarily, their reality of life as property. Most importantly, altering the dress represented slave females' attempt to distinguish themselves from their slave counterparts and in some ways compare with their white female contemporaries.

Just as slave girls became acclimated to their new clothing, adolescent white girls also experienced changes in their attire. White girls also realized that acquiring a long skirt and dress signified a coming-of-age, a process which served as an "outward, visible sign of having achieved the status of a young lady."⁶³ Poorer whites wore the same clothes as teenage slave girls while whites on the upper echelons of society dressed in the fashionable Victorian styles of the day.⁶⁴ As children, upper and middle-class white girls wore loose fitting chemises or short

⁶² For further study, reference White and White, "Slave Clothing and African American Culture," and Hunt's "The Struggle to Achieve Individual Expression through Clothing and Adornment."

⁶³ Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters*, 33.

⁶⁴ Foster, *New Raiments of Self*, 135.

skirts but their growth and maturation required that they wear adult clothing—long skirts, corsets and hoopskirts.⁶⁵

White antebellum females of all ages recognized the importance of wearing long skirts. For parents it denoted age, class and racial status; for white girls, as with their slave counterparts, it also indicated maturity and the privileges associated with it, such as courting and attending parties. Many white girls were anxious to acquire dresses as early as their parents permitted. North Carolinian Julia Turner, a student in Harnett County's Floral College, pleaded with her mother to make her dresses long since "'nearly all the girls have on long dresses.'"⁶⁶ Unlike Turner, who was influenced by peer pressure, Lizzie Kimberly's maturation necessitated new clothes. Kimberly, daughter of University of North Carolina professor John Kimberly, wore a chemise during childhood, but, by age fifteen she wore dresses more appropriate for a young woman. Writing her father from her school in Raleigh, North Carolina, Lizzie complained that "'all [her] dresses was [sic] too small,'" requiring her to "let out tucks and hems." Eventually, she gained the "form-fitting corset of womanhood."⁶⁷ Wearing adult apparel, though more cumbersome than the chemise, indicated that Lizzie and her peers were becoming women. Thus for whites, as with slaves, clothing served as markers of class, race, gender and most importantly age.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters*, 18.

⁶⁶ Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters*, 33.

⁶⁷ Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters*, 18.

⁶⁸ Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters*, 33. *Scarlett's Sisters* presents excellent insight into the attitude of antebellum whites, clothing and coming-of-age. According to Jabour "fashion was more than a marker of class and racial status; it was also an indicator of age and gender. In the Old South, clothing and hairstyles functioned both as outward signs of one's status as a young lady and as effective means of enforcing ladylike behavior," 33. Thus, clothing factored greatly in the social landscape of the antebellum South.

Slaves often recalled white females' attire, describing the beautiful lace, large hoops, and ornate designs. Georgia slave Addie Vinson stated: "White ladies wore hoopskirts wid deir dresses, and dey looked lak fairy queens" in Oconee, Georgia, where she was enslaved. Robert Shepherd, who lived in Oglethorpe County, recalled the higher quality dresses worn by white women. The "white ladies had nice silk dresses to wear to church."⁶⁹ For slaves, white females' attire represented one of the many inequalities of the slaveholding South. To many slaves, freedom became synonymous with fine livery, while being unfree was equated with poor clothing. These inequalities and social constraints forever prevented young black girls from achieving the look of their young white mistresses.

Like dresses, shoes, or a lack thereof, also denoted one's age and status.⁷⁰ Most enslaved children typically did not wear shoes. According to ex-slave William McWhorter of Greene County, Georgia, although shoes were made by the plantation cobbler, only the "grown folks on [their] plantation" received them, "chillun went barfoots."⁷¹ South Carolina native George Fleming recalled only "grown niggers" having shoes."⁷² Ex-slaves Benny Dillard and Jennie

⁶⁹ Addie Vinson, "Addie Vinson," interview by Mrs. Sadie B. Hornsby in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 4, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 99, 102 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=044/mesn044.db&recNum=102&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Vinson,+Addie\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=044/mesn044.db&recNum=102&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Vinson,+Addie)))], accessed June 2009. Robert Shepherd, "Robert Shepherd," interview by Grace McCune, in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 3, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 247, 253 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=043/mesn043.db&recNum=249&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Shepherd,+Robert\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=043/mesn043.db&recNum=249&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Shepherd,+Robert)))], accessed June 2009.

⁷⁰ Foster, *New Raiments of Self*, 225.

⁷¹ William McWhorter, "William McWhorter," interview by Sadie B. Hornsby in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 3, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 92, 95 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=043/mesn043.db&recNum=94&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(McWhorter,+William\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=043/mesn043.db&recNum=94&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(McWhorter,+William)))], accessed June 2009.

⁷² George Fleming, "George Fleming Interview," 134.

Kendricks also attested that most young slaves remained shoeless.⁷³ Whites also noted this phenomenon. A traveler William Howard Russell, described a group of South Carolina children summoned to sing for him as “shoeless urchins.”⁷⁴ For slave children to wear shoes at all or to have the option to wear them throughout the year suggested that they were moving from childhood to adulthood.

Slave shoes were either purchased from shoe manufacturers for a little more than a dollar a pair or made by slaves, generally males, on the plantation.⁷⁵ Recalling his parents’ accounts of

⁷³ Benny Dillard, “Benny Dillard,” interview by Grace McCune in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 1, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 291 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=041/mesn041.db&recNum=300&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Dillard,+Benny\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=041/mesn041.db&recNum=300&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Dillard,+Benny)))], accessed June 2009.

If slave children were provided shoes they were either poorly made or hand me downs worn only during the winter months. Such was the case for Jennie Kendricks and Mose Davis. Kendricks, describing the shoes of adults and children stated, “The grown people wore heavy shoes called ‘Brogans’ while those worn by the children were not so heavy and were called ‘Pekers’ because of their narrow appearance,” in Jennie Kendricks, “Jennie Kendricks,” interview by Edwin Driskell in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 3, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 3 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=043/mesn043.db&recNum=5&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Kendricks,+Jennie\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=043/mesn043.db&recNum=5&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Kendricks,+Jennie)))], accessed June 2009.

Born on a larger plantation approximately 12 miles from Perry, Georgia, Davis affirmed to his interviewer that “no shoes were given them until winter and then they got the cast-offs of the grown ups,” Mose Davis, “WPA Slave Narrative Project,” 265, 267.

Former slaves Nancy Smith and Ed McCree recalled the “brass-toed shoes” issued in winter as well in Nancy Smith, “Nancy Smith,” interview by Grace McCune in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 3, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 298 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=043/mesn043.db&recNum=300&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Smith,+Nancy\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=043/mesn043.db&recNum=300&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Smith,+Nancy)))], accessed June 2009.; Ed McCree, “Ed McCree,” interview by Sadie Hornsby in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 3, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 60 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=043/mesn043.db&recNum=62&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(McCree,+Ed\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=043/mesn043.db&recNum=62&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(McCree,+Ed)))], accessed June 2009.

⁷⁴ Russell, *My Diary North and South*, 96.

⁷⁵ Nicey Kinney, “Nacey Kinney,” interview by Grace McCune in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 3, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 27 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=043/mesn043.db&recNum=29&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Kinney,+Nacey\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=043/mesn043.db&recNum=29&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Kinney,+Nacey)))], accessed June 2009.; Mary Colbert, “Mary Colbert,” interview by Sadie Hornsby in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 1, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 218 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=041/mesn041.db&recNum=226&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Colbert,+Mary\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=041/mesn041.db&recNum=226&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Colbert,+Mary)))], accessed June 2009.

slavery, Bill Heard said that ““Most evby plantation had its own shoemaker man dat tanned all de leather and made up all de shoes.””⁷⁶ Slaves served as shoemakers in Georgia on the plantation where Georgia Baker lived. ““It tuk three shoemakers for our plantation,”” according to Baker. ““Dey was Uncle Isom, Uncle Jim, and Uncle Stafford. Dey made up hole-stock shoes for de ‘omans and gals and brass-toed brogans for de mens and boys.””⁷⁷ According to Fanny Cannady, on one plantation ““a dozen niggahs . . . didn’ do nothin’ else but make wooden shoes. . .for de slaves.””⁷⁸ The homemade shoes were often made of leather and underwent various production methods. Describing this process, Georgia native William Curtis recorded that cobblers would “kill a beef and skin it and spread the skin out and let it dry a while.” They then soaked the “hide in lime water to get the hair” and oiled it to make it malleable. After scraping and smoking it with oak wood, it would be rubbed, blacked, oiled and made into shoes; a process

[HOR+@od1\(Colbert,+Mary\)\)](#)], accessed June 2009.; Easter Huff, “Easter Huff,” interview by Sadie Hornsby in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 2, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 247 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=042/mesn042.db&recNum=249&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Huff,+Easter\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=042/mesn042.db&recNum=249&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Huff,+Easter)))], accessed June 2009.; Dosia Harris, “Dosia Harris,” interview by Sadie Hornsby in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 2, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 107 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=042/mesn042.db&recNum=109&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Harris,+Dosia\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=042/mesn042.db&recNum=109&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Harris,+Dosia)))], accessed June 2009. Foster, *New Raiments of Self*, 227; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 1972), 552.

⁷⁶ Bill Heard, “Bill Heard,” interview by Grace McCune in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 2, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 141, [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=042/mesn042.db&recNum=143&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Heard,+Bill\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=042/mesn042.db&recNum=143&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Heard,+Bill)))], accessed June 2009.

⁷⁷ Georgia Baker, “Georgia Baker,” interview by Mrs. Sadie Hornsby in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 1, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 42, [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=041/mesn041.db&recNum=45&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Baker,+Georgia\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=041/mesn041.db&recNum=45&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Baker,+Georgia)))], accessed June 2009.

⁷⁸ Fanny Cannady, “Fanny Cannady,” interview by Travis Jordan in WPA Slave Narrative Project, North Carolina Narratives, Volume 11, Part 1, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 160, [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=111/mesn111.db&recNum=163&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Cannady,+Fanny\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=111/mesn111.db&recNum=163&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Cannady,+Fanny)))], accessed June 2009.

that took close to a year.⁷⁹ With such involved techniques it is not surprising that masters opted to only supply working adult slave shoes. But not all slave shoes were homemade; in rare instances, shoes were purchased.

Given as a wedding gift to Jackie Dorn and his bride, Julia Bunch received shoes both at the market and from a local shoemaker. “Us bought some shoes from de market,” she recalled, “but dere was a travelin’ shoemaker dat wukked by days for all de folks.”⁸⁰ Referred to as brogans, slave shoes were made out of “rough red leather what never had been dyed or colored up none,” and “finished off wid brass knobs on de toes,” which according to ex-slave Dosia Harris were used “to keep ‘em [shoes] from wearing out too quick.”⁸¹ Enslaved youth began wearing shoes as early as ten-years-old and as late as their first marriage. According to slave Tom Hawkins “us didn’t git no shoes for our foots, winter or summer, ‘til us was ten years old.”⁸² An unknown slave described slaves receiving shoes five years later. According to the interview, “chillun didn’t know what shoes was ‘til they was ‘bout fifteen years old. . . .The first

⁷⁹ William Curtis, “William Curtis,” in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Oklahoma Narratives, Volume 13, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 49-50 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=130/mesn130.db&recNum=52&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Curtis,+William\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=130/mesn130.db&recNum=52&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Curtis,+William)))], accessed June 2009.

⁸⁰ Julia Bunch, “Julia Bunch,” interview by Leila Harris in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 1, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 156, 157 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=041/mesn041.db&recNum=160&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Bunch,+Julia\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=041/mesn041.db&recNum=160&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Bunch,+Julia)))], accessed June 2009.

⁸¹ Easter Huff, “WPA Slave Narrative Project,” 247.; Lina Hunter, “Lina Hunter,” interview by Grace McCune in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 2, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 257 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=042/mesn042.db&recNum=259&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Hunter,+Lina\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=042/mesn042.db&recNum=259&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Hunter,+Lina)))], accessed June 2009. Dosia Harris, “WPA Slave Narrative Project,” 107.

⁸² Tom Hawkins, “WPA Slave Narrative Project,” 129.

pair of shoes I ever wore, I was sixteen years old.”⁸³ Another slave stated they went “barefooted all winter until we was grown and married.”⁸⁴ This was also the case for Lila Nichols of Cary, North Carolina, she did not receive shoes until twenty-one years of age.⁸⁵

The beginning of slaves’ work figured significantly in masters’ decision to provide shoes. Slave owners recognized that shoes “were an important investment towards physically protecting the enslaved people and their valuable labor” against frostbite, puncture wounds, scraps, burns and hookworms.⁸⁶ Lee McGillery remembered how his master provided shoes “‘cause master say he no want cripple negro.”⁸⁷ Hence most owners felt it imperative to provide shoes for youth being acclimated to their labor. This fact was not lost on slaves who commented on the correlation between work and the receipt of shoes. Smith Simmons remembered that children went barefoot throughout the year. Their unprotected feet “‘would crack open from the cold if they went outside in bad weather.” He also recalled that the “‘grown folks had good shoes cause they had to go out side to work.”⁸⁸ In North Carolina, according to Annie Stephenson,

⁸³ Unknown, “Compilation Interview- Richmond County: Folk remedies and superstition,” interview by Louise Oliphant in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 4, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 307 [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=044/mesn044.db&recNum=310&itemLink=D?mesnbib:10:./temp/~ammem_8Rkh::], accessed June 2009.

⁸⁴ Isiah Jefferies, “Isiah Jefferies,” interview by Caldwell Sims in WPA Slave Narrative Project, South Carolina Narratives, Volume 14, Part 3, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 18 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=143/mesn143.db&recNum=20&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Jefferies,+Isiah\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=143/mesn143.db&recNum=20&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Jefferies,+Isiah)))], accessed June 2009.

⁸⁵ Wares, “Dress of the African American Woman in Slavery and Freedom,” 156.

⁸⁶ Foster, *New Raiments of Self*, 226; Savitt’s *Medicine and Slavery*, 85.

⁸⁷ Foster, *New Raiments of Self*, 226.

⁸⁸ Foster, *New Raiments of Self*, 152.

“chilluns was not give shoes at our place till dey was big enough to work.”⁸⁹ Ex-slave G.T. Griffin described how “children wore no shoes until they were large enough to work.”⁹⁰ A house servant, Phyllis Fox, though receiving “plenty to eat an plenty clothes to wear,” was provided used shoes as the master felt field hands required new shoes.⁹¹

Slaves, adults and young alike, complained about shoes’ poor construction and the resulting discomfort.⁹² Former Georgia slave Carrie Davis described the shoes as “hard as rocks.”⁹³ Former Virginia slave Julia Williams attributed her clumsiness to the “big heavy shoes” that made her feet sore.⁹⁴ Many preferred to go barefoot, some even pulling them off and “throwed ’em in the fire.”⁹⁵ Despite their discomfort, many slaves triumphantly recalled the joy and sense of power they felt in wearing shoes as youth. Lina Hunter said “us was sho mighty dressed up Niggers when us got on dem shoes wid deir shiny knobs.”⁹⁶ Nicey Kinney

⁸⁹ Annie Stephenson, “Annie Stephenson,” interview by T. Pat Matthews in WPA Slave Narrative Project, North Carolina Narratives, Volume 11, Part 2, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 313 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=112/mesn112.db&recNum=316&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Stephenson,+Annie\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=112/mesn112.db&recNum=316&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Stephenson,+Annie)))], accessed June 2009.

⁹⁰ Wares, “Dress of the African American Woman in Slavery and Freedom,” 156.

⁹¹ Foster, *New Raiments of Self*, 225.

⁹² White and White, “Slave Clothing and African American Culture,” 172.

⁹³ Carrie Davis, “Carrie Davis,” interview by Preston Klein in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Alabama Narratives, Volume 1, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 106 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=010/mesn010.db&recNum=111&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Davis,+Carrie\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=010/mesn010.db&recNum=111&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Davis,+Carrie)))], accessed June 2009.

⁹⁴ Julia Williams, “Julia Williams,” interview by Forest H. Lees in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Ohio Narratives, Volume 12, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 103 [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=120/mesn120.db&recNum=106&itemLink=D?mesnbib:2:/temp/~ammem_7GVg::], accessed June 2009.

⁹⁵ Unknown, “WPA Slave Narrative Project,” 307.

⁹⁶ Lina Hunter, “WPA Slave Narrative Project,” 257.

recognized that while the shoes were “‘jus’ brogans wid brass toes’” and inferior to that of shoes worn by whites she still felt “‘powerful dressed up when us got ‘em on, ‘specially when dey was new and de brass was bright and shiny.’”⁹⁷

Why did slave youth feel “powerfully” dressed? Their power was derived from their acquisition of articles that propelled them toward adulthood. In interviews, slaves were quick to describe the shiny brass toe and the newness of the shoe. New shoes provided a stark contrast to the dirty, worn attire that graced their bodies. Moreover, as they generally received them during key periods of life, such as maturation, like Tom Hawkins, or at marriage, teenage slave girls no doubt felt empowered because they were maturing. Just as dresses and shoes denoted increased maturity, the use of head wraps suggested a similar coming-of-age.

Although historians have said little about headdress and its correlation with age, the subject warrants analysis. Head wraps, known as a turban, head rag, head tie, or head handkerchief, consisted, according to Foster, of a “piece of cloth fabric wound around the head, usually completely covering the hair and head in place either by tucking the ends of the fabric into the wrap or by tying the ends into knots close to the skull.”⁹⁸ Though worn in African societies as a source of pride, this headdress, because of legislative action, became a badge of “servitude and poverty” for black women.⁹⁹ During his southern travels, Olmstead observed that head rags were typically worn by slave women. In the fields of South Carolina he encountered black women “with ‘handkerchiefs . . . tied around their heads.’” He found slave women

⁹⁷ Nicey Kinney, “WPA Slave Narrative Project,” 27.

⁹⁸ Foster, *New Raiments of Self*, 272.

⁹⁹ Foster, *New Raiments of Self*, 273.

similarly dressed in Virginia and Mississippi.¹⁰⁰ Genovese, in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, recognizes the significance of headdress. His research reveals that “the Mammies of the South Carolina low country marked their status by wearing white turbans, and the house slaves more generally by wearing brightly colored, tastefully wound headkerchiefs. But throughout the South even the field women would wear them when they could. In some areas, headkerchiefs became a sign of a married woman.”¹⁰¹ But headdresses went beyond merely denoting racial and social status; they also reflected age. It is their association with age that is of greatest interest to this study.¹⁰²

Though some slave girls might have worn bonnets, generally most headwear was reserved for older slave women. According to Sara Clayton, a white Georgian, headwear served as a marker of age. Among house servants, only the “older experienced slaves” were those “who wore turbans.”¹⁰³ For girls to don head wraps in the kitchen or fields became a sign of increased age. Along with the acquisition of dresses and shoes, wearing a turban made these enslaved teenage girls prey to the maladies of slavery: sexual abuse, forced labor, and sale.

James Redpath, an abolitionist who visited the South during the late 1850s, attended a slave auction in Richmond, Virginia, and he observed a twelve-year-old girl who came forth wearing “‘a small-checked tartan frock, a white apron and a light-colored handkerchief.’”¹⁰⁴ Children generally were not often sold at slave markets because of the care which they required, but once old enough—as was this girl in the Richmond slave market who donned a headwrap--

¹⁰⁰ Olmstead, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 162.

¹⁰¹ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 559.

¹⁰² Foster, *New Raiments of Self*, 312.

¹⁰³ Sarah Clayton, *Requiem for a Lost City: A Memoir of Civil War Atlantic and the Old South*, edited by Robert Davis, Jr. (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1999), 85.

¹⁰⁴ Foster, *New Raiments of Self*, 273.

they became marketable commodities. Undoubtedly, this change was troubling for this unnamed victim and other pubescent girls. But how did adults cope with these changes in enslaved girls' attire? What were white and black attitudes toward girls receiving adult clothes?

For white slaveholders, providing young enslaved females dresses and shoes demonstrated that slaves had reached physical maturation. Supplying clothing for adult slaves proved more costly. During the late antebellum era, according to Genovese, slaveholders spent “seven and ten dollars per year to clothe an adult slave; some spent fifteen dollars or even more.”¹⁰⁵ The expense was well worth it; teenage female slaves produced profit. For members of the slave community, dresses and shoes also signified enslaved females' coming-of-age, as well as their enhanced labor and reproductive functions. But unlike white slaveholders, for adult slaves this transition created fears that their young daughters were now susceptible to slavery's physical and sexual hardships.

White attitudes toward teenage slaves' attire suggests that masters recognized female slaves' ability to produce and reproduce. Supplying dresses symbolized economic profit for masters; pubescent slave females could contribute to the plantation economy. When masters purchased store-bought shoes on business trips—as did Nicey Kinney's master for her and her contemporaries—slaveholders signified that they valued adolescent slaves. Similarly, when Dosia's master instructed the plantation shoemaker to make a pair of brogans, a signal was communicated which indicated her importance. By wearing adult clothing teenage slaves were now capable of work and reproduction—two essential measures of value in the slave economy. In addition, they became usable objects for sexual gratification. For both teenage slave girls and

¹⁰⁵ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 550-551.

white slaveholders, dresses, shoes, and head wraps became items that were deeply interwoven with labor and sexual implications.

Although whites waited anxiously for girls to outgrow shifts, wear shoes, and tie on head scarves, slave parents, known for working to diligently prolong slave childhood, and the innocence associated with it, recognized that the simple garment ensured that their children continued to be protected from a full awareness of all that slavery involved.¹⁰⁶ Parents exerted little influence over what their children wore, but they worked diligently to keep their children in youthful attire. Many of them loved the melodious sound of shirt-tails popping in the wind, but physical maturation was inevitable and slave girls were soon forced to turn in their slippers, and assume the responsibilities that accompanied adulthood. Parents mournfully watched because “their ability to shield the children eroded more rapidly as they showed signs of physical maturity” as reflected in their attire.¹⁰⁷

Parents associated adult clothing--and adulthood--as the beginning of problems for their children. When Mattie Curtis’ mother informed their owner of her daughter’s “nature” arriving, she lamented the change. Mattie was not only capable of reproducing slave children, she was now susceptible to exploitation by white and black men. According to Jacobs, “mothers of slaves lived in ‘daily expectation of trouble’” because of their girls’ maturation.¹⁰⁸ Some parents, such as Lucy McCullough’s mother, tried their best to ensure that when teenage girls received dresses that they did not attract unnecessary male attention. Observing Lucy crossing a field she was unhappy that Lucy’s “dress [was] rising too far.” Once Lucy was in her presence

¹⁰⁶ For further information concerning slave parents’ devotion and protection of their children consult King’s *Stolen Childhood*, Schwartz’s *Born in Bondage* and White’s *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*.

¹⁰⁷ King, *Stolen Childhood*, 60.

¹⁰⁸ King, *Stolen Childhood*, 60.

“she promptly tore the hem out in the sight of everyone.”¹⁰⁹ Lucy’s mother recognized that wearing the dress alone made her child prey to unwanted advances, but for Lucy’s hem to reveal her developing physique increased the risks. Seeking to protect her daughter, she acted immediately disregarding the embarrassment she might cause. Having witnessed the abuse of countless women, she valued Lucy’s physical well-being over temporary embarrassment. For slave adults, walking past teens they noticed that not only had dresses supplanted shifts but shoes now replaced bare feet once covered in sod. They knew that this subtle change meant that females once deemed girls were dressed fully in their work uniform, but they were also ready to work in any capacity that the master deemed necessary.

With their coming-of-age, slave girls came to realize their adult slave identities. Provided dresses, shoes, and turbans with the start of menses or their first work assignment, enslaved girls recognized that they were no longer relegated to the margins of slave society. Rather, they were becoming adult slave women, key factors of production. For slaveholders, this transition, as girls draped in dresses with feet adorned with brass-toed brogans, indicated growth in the value of their slave property. Slaveholders’ excitement offered a stark contrast to adults within the slave community, who knew all too well that acquiring adult attire, also meant gaining the woes and sorrows, such as severe work conditions, sadistic punishments and sexual abuse, brought by slave adulthood. Enslaved adolescent females soon realized that, though they felt empowered by slave shoes and dresses, this did not compare with the way adult attire bound them within slavery. Unlike childhood, when they ran barefoot and in shifts around the slaveholding, dresses, shoes, and head rags enslaved adolescent females wore placed them in fields and kitchens toiling long hours, made them susceptible to sexual abuse and sought to destroy their sense of self-

¹⁰⁹ White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*, 96.

worth. Once clothed in the slave wardrobe their lives were forever altered as they were enveloped within the social hierarchy that defined their place within the institution.

Table 4-1. Mortality Rates Per Thousand By Age For Slaves And the Antebellum Population

Age	Slaves	United States
0	350	179
1-4	201	93
5-9	54	28
10-14	37	19
15-19	35	28
20-24	40	39

Source: Richard Steckel, "A Peculiar Population: The Nutrition, Health, and Mortality of American Slaves from Childhood to Maturity," *The Journal of Economic History* Vol. 46, No. 3 (Sep., 1986): 733.

CHAPTER 5 VICTIMS OF THE GROSSEST PASSION: ENSLAVED ADOLESCENT FEMALE SEXUALITY

Among the numerous components that define puberty, understanding and coping with one's sexuality remains paramount. Experiencing intense physiological, emotional, and psychological changes, teens come to understand the anatomy and function of their sexuality as well as the beliefs, taboos and cultural norms associated with it.¹ If the transformations of puberty and the acquisition of sexual knowledge are challenging transitions for youth today, young enslaved females in the antebellum South experienced a far more traumatic initiation into the world of sexuality.

Unlike successive generations of teenagers, enslaved youth were forced to understand their sexuality while they balanced conflicting expectations--all the while functioning as property. North Carolina native and renowned fugitive slave Harriet Jacobs offers an excellent example of the conflicting sexual experiences enslaved adolescents endured. Jacobs' introduction to sexuality began as a fourteen-year-old, when she experienced her first love and sexual abuse by her master. In her narrative, *Incidents*, she described her love for a local free man of color. However, after her master, Dr. Norcom, objected to the relationship, she was forced to end it and

¹ Sexuality, as defined by sexuality studies, moves beyond heterosexual, adult forms of sex engaged for reproductive purposes within the confines of marriage. Rather, it involves power struggles as well as non-normative sexual acts and identities. Reviewing the various definitions this chapter adheres to Nelly Stromquist's definition in "Global Perspectives on Sexuality and Equity in Education." She writes: Sexuality can be said to comprise the following elements: (a) sexual characteristics (the physiology and anatomy of sexual organs); (b) sexual beliefs (beliefs concerning women's sexual submissiveness, men's sexual drives, impurity of women during menstruation, weakness of women after childbirth, etc.); (c) cultural norms (emphasis on women's virginity, sexual double standard, physical separation through purdah, female circumcision, etc.); (d) sexual taboos (knowledge about hetero- and homo-sexual practices, masturbation, abortion); and (e) physical and psychological violence (rape, wife beatings, sexual harassment) (Stromquist 25). In exploring enslaved adolescent female sexuality these young girls were forced to confront many of the components of sexuality as defined by Stromquist during their teenage years. Nelly Stromquist, "Global Perspectives on Sexuality and Equity in Education," *Peabody Journal of Education* Vol. 64, No. 4, Sex Equity and Sexuality in Education (Summer 1987): 25-43.

submit to slavery's powerful authority.² Aside from the teenage years initiating Harriet's love interest, her coming-of-age also marked the beginning of sexual abuse. Throughout her narrative, Jacobs described Norcom's unwanted sexual advances. Resisting his power at age fifteen, she began a relationship with a local white man who later fathered her two children.³

This cursory view of Jacobs' life reveals a young woman on the cusp of learning about love and sex. Yet because of her social standing as a slave, the personal autonomy and rules that applied to white society concerning relationships and sex no longer applied to Harriet and other teenage slave girls. Forced to adhere to a different set of mores, Jacobs learned through her sexual encounters what life entailed for a person in bondage: a lack of control over the most important and intimate of decisions.

Countless historians have addressed the significance of enslaved females' bodies to their slavery experience. From White's *Ar'n't I a Woman* to Barbara Bush and Jennifer Morgan's emphasis on enslaved females' reproductive function, scholars conclude that females' sexual function distinguished their slave experience from that of slave men. While these arguments are accepted widely, one wonders why scholars have said so little about the process these adult women experienced as adolescents. Exactly how did enslaved females come to the realization, as Jacobs did, that "slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women?"⁴ The answer is found by exploring slaves' introduction to sexuality during adolescence.

Recognizing the difficulty Jacobs and others experienced during puberty, this chapter explores how teenage slave girls came to understand their sexuality and how this knowledge

² Jacobs, *Incidents*, 18, 37-42.

³ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 54.

⁴ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 77.

shaped their identity. It argues that through personal experiences such as courting, consensual sex and sexual abuse as well as the expectations of antebellum adults, girls learned that they were property, a legal and cultural classification that was subject to different sexual standards. Through these experiences enslaved girls discovered life's joys and sorrows under slavery. Daydreaming of love and courting, or by playing kissing games, slave girls experienced emotions and actions similar to their white contemporaries. But arranged relationships, sexual harassment, and rape reminded them quickly of a different reality: that their emotions and bodies were not their own. Like Harriet, many, perhaps most, enslaved girls were forced to fashion an identity that reconciled their humanity with their chattel status.

In order to comprehend enslaved sexuality it is necessary to explore the white teenage sexual experience, as slaves would have observed white practices and been influenced by white notions of love, courtship, and sex. For antebellum whites, courtship was considered an important rite of passage that led teens toward marital unions and offspring. For wealthy whites, courting marked the beginning of potential family alliances that could lead to lucrative family dynasties. An example can be seen in the exchange between two white Southerners, Richard Hines and John Buxton Williams. Describing the positive qualities of a young man courting Williams' niece, Hines noted the young man's wealth. "His family you know," he wrote, "are of the first respectability and he will have at the death of his father an estate of some thirty or forty thousand dollars probably more." "My opinion," he concluded, was that it was "a first rate match for her if she is pleased with him &c."⁵ Hines' comments suggest that, for whites, future benefits from courting always remained in their sights. But although money and status were important determinants for Hines and other affluent whites, Southerners, as denoted by the

⁵ Censer, *North Carolina Planters and Their Children*, 65-66.

words, “if she is pleased with him,” also believed that love and compatibility should be determinants as well.

By the late eighteenth-century, the notion that love and affection should serve as the basis of marriage took hold among the upper and middle classes of Western Europe and the United States. By the nineteenth-century, elite white Southerners had embraced companionate marriage, which called for a partnership in which spouses, according to scholar Jane Turner Censer, were “linked by mutual attraction and should provide affectionate support for each other while rearing a family.”⁶ This notion of companionship, with its emphasis of emotional satisfaction over status and wealth, created greater equality between husbands and wives, a marital shift that some spiritual leaders and prominent citizens opposed. Despite opposition, the notion of emotionalism and marriage continued to gain popularity, and, by the nineteenth-century, many adhered to it. This ideology guided elite white teenagers as they began courtship.

White females began courting during their late teens.⁷ For wealthy white females, courting was marked by a formal introduction to society, known as a debut, generally occurring when young women returned home from school. Debuts were grand affairs consisting of a fancy ball with the guest of honor dressed in the finest of livery.⁸ Lizzie Davis of North Carolina described the event in an essay entitled “Bubbles.” According to Lizzie, “A young girl is standing before her mirror dressed for a ball. . . . Her dress of virgin white exposes the plump neck, & rounded arm, Pearls are clasped around her wrist and throat. and twined among her

⁶ Censer, *North Carolina Planters and Their Children*, 72; For a good analysis of the beginning of companionate marriages consult Lawrence Stone’s *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800*, abridged edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1979). In his chapter entitled “The Companionate Marriage” he discusses the inception of the notion of companionate marriage, the changes it wrought (changes to living patterns, the introduction of pet names, etc.) and the response of men and women to the changes in the institution.

⁷ Jabour, *Scarlett’s Sisters*, 117.

⁸ Jabour, *Scarlett’s Sisters*, 118.

sunny ringlets. Yes, she is very lovely[.] A few moments more, & she is the center of a gay circle. Her merry laugh acts like a charm upon those around her. . . . She floats gracefully through the dance, a soft flush mantling her fair cheek. She seems to have all that [is] requisite to render life happy.” This description resembled closely the real life experiences of Alabama native Virginia Tunstall Clay and Georgian Gertrude Clanton.⁹ Less fortunate girls, particularly in rural areas, received a new dress denoting purity and a visit to a larger city. Once properly presented girls of all classes were available to court potential suitors.

Courtship for young whites often began with a chance meeting at a local event such as a church social, wedding, dance or graduation ceremony. Thereafter girls began allowing young men to call or visit. Prior to the visit, males received permission from the head of their household. For example when “an Edenton physician fell in love with fourteen-year-old Maria, her father being dead, he obtained her mother’s consent before he ‘paid his addresses’ formally to the young girl.”¹⁰ Upon being informed of their visit, girls prepared diligently to meet their guest. Virginian Eliza Barksdale noted that in preparing to meet her date she dressed “‘with all possible care.’”¹¹ Once ready, girls anticipated eagerly their date’s arrival.

Girls received male guests at home, but they were also permitted to venture off on strolls or horseback rides. Home visits occurred generally in the presence of the female’s parents or a chaperone, as was the case for Caroline Brooks. Brooks, a school teacher, lived alone when she began receiving visits from her future spouse, James Lilly. As such when he visited he was

⁹ Jabour, *Scarlett’s Sisters*, 119-120.

¹⁰ Johnson, *Ante-bellum North Carolina*, 191.

¹¹ Jabour, *Scarlett’s Sisters*, 139.

accompanied by a female chaperone.¹² But it was “within the bounds of propriety for a young man to take his sweetheart for a ride or to accompany her on a walk. They might be seen together at church or at the races, although it was customary for a young lady to accompany the family to a ball rather than to be escorted by her lover. Among the yeomanry, however, and even among the middle class, the young men usually would ‘gallant the girls to the frolic.’”¹³ Dates outside the home generally occurred in groups or with an appropriate chaperone.¹⁴ For example, Laura Wirt’s parents refused to allow her to go horseback riding unattended.¹⁵

Historians have concluded that though parents influenced the courting process and regulated it, they did not completely control who their teenage girls courted.¹⁶ Belle Price’s father, for example admonished her to be wary of the company with which she associated herself, and tried to dissuade unprofitable unions.¹⁷ But ultimately the decision to court, and eventually marry, belonged primarily to the two individuals involved in the relationship. Despite a lack of strict parental regulation white girls remained mindful of cultural norms concerning proper lady-like behavior, which included a mild manner, a love of family and sexual purity. They readily exhibited these traits, something their enslaved teenage counterparts noticed. But unlike white females, courting and coming to understand their sexuality was a vastly different experience for enslaved girls.

¹² Jabour, *Scarlett’s Sisters*, 142.

¹³ Johnson, *Ante-bellum North Carolina*, 195.

¹⁴ Jabour, *Scarlett’s Sisters*, 140.

¹⁵ Jabour, *Scarlett’s Sisters*, 140.

¹⁶ Censer, *North Carolina Planters and Their Children*, 68.

¹⁷ Jabour, *Scarlett’s Sisters*, 139.

For teenage slave girls, interest in their physical appearance, along with activities such as parties and courting, indicated their emerging sexuality.¹⁸ As discussed in previous chapters, before entering the work force slave boys and girls often played together. With the onset of puberty enslaved girls no longer viewed boys as playmates, but as objects of affection.¹⁹ In order to gain the attention of potential beaux, slave girls wore make-up and colorful, ornate dresses when participating in dances and other courtship activities.

Girls concocted make-up from berries, and they adorned their hair with kerchiefs and ribbons and designed jewelry made of nuts. They also perfumed themselves with honeysuckles, roses, and orchards.²⁰ Recalling the beauty rituals of courting girls, former slave Gus Feaster recalled: “‘Den de gals charmed us wid honeysuckle and rose petals hid in dere bosoms. Now de gals goes to de ten cent sto’ and buys cheap perfume. In dem days dey dried cheneyberries (chinaberries) and painted dem and wo’ dem on a string around dere necks to charm us.’”²¹

By grooming themselves, slave girls defined their differences from males, the need for individuality, and the desire to attract mates. Furthermore, engaging in this elaborate affair of wearing chinaberries as beads, selecting colorful dresses and applying make-up possibly served as both an extension of West African beautification rituals as well as an attempt by slave girls to imitate white girls’ debut preparation. Undoubtedly, girls were exposed to enslaved women who continued the tradition of the tribes of Northern Nigeria and Sierra Leone who beautified themselves with beads and gold earrings, observing their mothers and other adult slave women,

¹⁸ Anthony Parent and Susan Brown Wallace, “Childhood and Sexual Identity under Slavery,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 3, No. 3, Special Issue: African American Culture and Sexuality (Jan., 1993): 399.

¹⁹ White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman*, 95.

²⁰ King, *Stolen Childhood*, 61.

²¹ Gus Feaster, “WPA Slave Narrative Project,” 52.

teenage girls could easily imitate their practices.²² As white girls, like Virginia and Gertrude, prepared for their big soiree, it was their teenage servants attending to their needs. Standing in the shadows as the guest of honor marveled at her transformation from girl to budding young lady, teenage slave girls no doubt fantasized that they too would don a gorgeous ball gown, beautiful jewelry and serve as the center of attention among the plantation household. Unable to accomplish this lofty goal, teenage slave girls still attempted this feat as proven by the rose petals hidden in their breasts and the perfume crafted out of honeysuckle. Completing these rituals of beauty also demonstrated that slave females rejected their slave status and defined their own sense of femininity and self worth. Once presentable, enslaved females engaged in a courtship process with their young mates.

Some slaves believed that courtship was reserved for whites. “‘Dat courtin’ stuff is what white folks does,’” said ex-slave Jane Johnson, and “no nigger knows what dat fancy thing is. Us just natchally lives together; men and women mates lak de animals out dere. Colored people don’t pay no ‘tention to what white folks call love, they just ‘sires de women they wants, dat’s all.’”²³ Johnson’s comments suggest that she viewed herself and other slaves as lacking the capacity to love. Though Jane seemingly internalized the white belief that slaves were inhumane and incapable of expressing human emotions such as love, not all slaves agreed.

Johnson’s fellow South Carolinian, Frank Adamson, when asked if he courted during slavery, responded with righteous indignation. “‘Now what make you ask dat? Did me ever do any courtin’? You knows I did. Every he thing from a he king down to a bunty rooster gits ‘cited

²² Josephine Beoku-Betts, “Western Perceptions of African Women in the 19th & Early 20th Centuries” in *Readings in Gender in Africa* ed. Andrea Cornwall (United Kingdom: The International African Institute School of Oriental & African Studies, 2005), 21.

²³ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 468.

‘bout she things. . . . It’s de nature of a he, to take after de she. They do say dat a he angel ain’t got dis to worry ‘bout.’”²⁴ For Adamson, courting was a natural act. His comment reveals contempt that the interviewer would even broach the subject, knowing that all males, with the exception of celestial beings, were naturally drawn to “she” things. For Adamson, the indignities of slavery could not change the natural inclination to love and engage in relationships with the opposite sex. Reviewing narratives and interviews that discuss courting, suggest that most former slaves adhered to Adamson’s view rather than Johnson’s idea that courting was a “fancy thing” for whites only.

Unlike whites, who began courting in their mid to late teens, for slave girls courtship began as early as fourteen-years-old, the age when wealthy white girls were pursuing a formal education. As mentioned, Jacobs’ first love experience occurred at fourteen, when she was courted by a local free man of color. Fourteen was the age Lovie Williams began dating as well.²⁵ Greene County, Georgia, slave Emeline Stepney was about fifteen when her first suitor and future husband began visiting.²⁶ Emeline’s fellow slave, Caroline Malloy, was also fifteen when “the young negro boys started coming to see her.”²⁷ Born in Lincoln County, Georgia, to Emeline and Jordan Sybert, Arrie Binns was slightly older when her interest in boys developed. I was “‘15 or 16 years old when the war broke (1865),” she went on to say, I was “‘big enough

²⁴ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 468.

²⁵ Jasper Battle, “WPA Slave Narrative Project,” 69; Jacobs, *Incidents*, 19.

²⁶ Emeline Stepney, “Emeline Stepney,” interview by Joseph Jaffee in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 3, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 341 [<http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=043/mesn043.db&recNum=343&itemLink=S%3Fammem%2Fmesnbib%3A@field%28AUTHOR%2B@od1%28Stepney%2C%2BEmeline%29%29>], accessed May 2008.

²⁷ Caroline Malloy, “Caroline Malloy,” interview by Elizabeth Watson in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, Supplement, Series 1, ed. George P. Rawick (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1977), vol. 4, part 2, 413.

to be lookin' at boys an' dey lookin' at me.'"²⁸ Binns' comments are significant because it reflects two events that brought life altering changes to Arrie and other slaves' lives. War brought freedom, and courting could lead to life-altering events like pregnancy and marriage. However, not all slaves began courting during their early and mid-teens as Lovie, Emeline, Caroline and Arrie.

According to ex-slave Rhodus Walton, courtship during slavery began much later than was customary during post-emancipation.²⁹ Raised on a large plantation in Clinton, Georgia, George Womble agreed with Rhodus Walton's assessment, noting that male slaves were twenty-one-years-old and girls were eighteen-years-old before they were allowed to court.³⁰ In fact, though Lovie was fourteen when she began seeing a male slave, "her Mammy runned [him] off and said she warn't gwine to let Lovie git married up wid nobody 'til she got big enough."³¹ Slaves like Lovie who were considered too young to court created ways to see each other. One male slave recalled: "I wasn't big enough to court; I had to slip. I knowed the road she'd come, and I could slip off and meet her sometimes, but we had to dodge the old folks 'cause they would whip

²⁸ Arrie Binns, "Arrie Binns Interview," interview by Minnie Stonestreet WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 1, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 74 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=041/mesn041.db&recNum=77&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Binns,+Arrie\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=041/mesn041.db&recNum=77&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Binns,+Arrie)))], accessed May 2008.

²⁹ Rhodus Walton, "Rhodus Walton," interview by Adella S. Dixon in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 4, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 124 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=044/mesn044.db&recNum=127&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Walton,+Rhodus\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=044/mesn044.db&recNum=127&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Walton,+Rhodus)))], accessed May 2008.

³⁰ George Womble, "George Womble," interview by E. Driskell in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 4, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 189 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=044/mesn044.db&recNum=182&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Womble,+George\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=044/mesn044.db&recNum=182&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Womble,+George)))], accessed May 2008.

³¹ Jasper Battle, "WPA Slave Narrative Project," 69.

me sho'."'³² Whether granted permission from parents or courting secretly, teenage slave girls enjoyed engaging in courtship with male slaves.

According to scholars such as historian Wilma King, young slaves' courting manners were "ritualistic and stylized."³³ If females' actions were successful, they could tell if a young man was in love by the way he positioned his hat. Rhodus Walton said, "young negro men always 'cocked' their hats on one side of their heads when they became interested in the other sex."³⁴ Slave girls often watched anxiously to see if their mannerisms successfully excited any love interest.

Teenage enslaved girls did everything from monitor their speech to limit food intake in front of a suitor. "Young gals couldn't eat much in public," Gus Feaster stated, "kaise it ain't stylish fer young courting gals to let on like dey has any appetite to speak of. I sees dat am a custom dat still goes amongst de wimmen folks, not to eat, so heavy. Cullud gals tried to do jes' like de young whites missus would do."³⁵ Feaster's comments suggest that blacks were keenly aware of white ideas concerning courting and they worked diligently to mimic them. Slave girls watched as white females reduced their meal portions and responded in kind. Though slavery bound them physically, it did not deter their desire to lead lives similar to the free whites they served.

Slavery's strain on slave courtship is further revealed through the limited time teens had for courting. As work was first and foremost for slaves, "Niggers," according to one slave, "didn't have time to do much courting in them days." Subsequently, courting was limited to

³² Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 470.

³³ King, *Stolen Childhood*, 61.

³⁴ Rhodus Walton, "WPA Slave Narrative Project," 124.

³⁵ Gus Feaster, "WPA Slave Narrative Project," 61.

Sunday evenings and holidays like Christmas or July Fourth.³⁶ Special events such as dances and corn-shuckings were also excellent opportunities for courtship. According to South Carolina slave George Fleming “‘de older boys and gals had big frolics, ‘specially in de fall of de year.’”³⁷ At these gatherings teenage slaves danced, ate, and were merry with other young slaves from their slaveholding and neighboring farms or plantations. However, there were instances when slaves received callers on a more consistent basis. Take the account of ex-slave Sara Crocker, according to Sara, in central Georgia, her master, Jim Everett Fulton, allowed them to court “at night, during the week, and on Sundays.”³⁸

Courtship, like other facets of antebellum life, was governed by a set of culturally defined norms that were based upon white ideas of respectability. Though the nature of slavery modified them, many norms were still employed among slaves concerning courting and sex. Time, gift-giving, as well as place were severely regulated by white and black adults. Born in Richmond, Virginia, as a teenager, Phil Towns was sold down South and sent to Taylor County, Georgia. Courting was among his numerous recollections of slavery. According to Towns, there were “certain hours for visiting and even though the girl might accompany her sweetheart away from home she had to be back at that hour. They had no clocks but a ‘time mark’ was set by the sun.”³⁹ Boys fortunate enough to have access to a clock, says ex-slave Camilla Jackson, were extremely time conscious while courting as they would be “seen looking at the clock.”⁴⁰

³⁶ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 469. For accounts of slave girls courting on Sunday reference Camilla Jackson, “WPA Slave Narrative Project,” 296.

³⁷ George Fleming, “George Fleming Interview,” 127.

³⁸ Sara Crocker, “Sara Crocker Interview,” interview by E. Watson in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, Supplement, Series 1, ed. George P. Rawick (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1977), vol. 3, part 1, 223, 225.

³⁹ Phil Towns, “Phil Towns Interview,” interview by Adella S. Dixon in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 4, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 37-8, [<http://memory.loc.gov/cgi->

Gift-giving by enslaved parents, or rather its prohibition, also served as an important part of courting. Slaves remembered that giving “gifts to one’s sweetheart were not permitted.”⁴¹ “There were no presents in those days,” Sara Crocker told an interviewer, “but the girls were always glad to have company.”⁴² Perhaps gifts were disapproved or confiscated because parents believed males, black and white alike, might want sexual favors in exchange for the token.

The restriction on gift-giving contrasted with the practices of white teenage girls, who were permitted to receive presents from suitors. According to historian Guion Johnson, gift-giving, a custom long practiced before the 1800s, was used by males to secure a female’s favor. J. Johnston Pettigrew, a Southerner who later became a Confederate war hero, presented jewelry to a young woman. Attaching a note with the token, he wrote: “Although I have not the presumption to claim any but an undistinguished place among the number of your admirers—will you allow my respect for your father to obtain for me the privilege of . . . adding this little ornament as a token of the good wishes for your perfect felicity.” His gift was well received. The young woman told Johnston to visit her before departing the city so that she might express “in person the feeling which is so much better seen in action than in words.”⁴³

Despite the rule against giving gifts, some couples tried secretly to exchange tokens of affection. Phil Towns similarly remembered that “a young man was not allowed to give his girl any form of gift, and the efforts of some girls to secretly receive gifts which they claimed to have

[bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=044/mesn044.db&recNum=40&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Towns,+Phil\)\)](http://bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=044/mesn044.db&recNum=40&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Towns,+Phil)))], accessed May 2008.

⁴⁰ Camilla Jackson, “WPA Slave Narrative Project,” 296.

⁴¹ Rhodus Walton, “WPA Slave Narrative Project,” 124.

⁴² Sara Crocker, “Sara Crocker Interview,” 225.

⁴³ Johnson, *Ante-bellum North Carolina*, 196.

‘found,’ were in vain, for these were taken from them.”⁴⁴ The fact that enslaved mates attempted to provide tokens, though far less valuable than gifts white males purchased, suggests that blacks despite race and social status mimicked white practices. But unlike white girls who could openly accept and treasure the items slave girls were strictly forbidden from doing so.

Aside from time and gift giving restrictions slave courtship, like that of whites, had to occur in the presence of an adult. According to Camilla Jackson, courting occurred in the parents’ presence. Such was the case for North Carolina slave Lucy Ann Dunn. Upon seeing Jim Dunn, Lucy liked him immediately, subsequently he began visiting. Recalling their first visit she said “‘We walked dat mile home in front of my Mammy, and I was so happy dat I ain’t thought it half a mile home. We et corn bread and turnips for dinner and it was night before he went home. Mammy wouldn’t let me walk with him to de gate, I knowed, so I just set dere on de porch and says goodnight. He come every Sunday for a year and finally he proposed. I had told Mammy dat I thought dat I ought to be allowed to walk to the gate with Jim and she said all right, iffen she was settin’ dere on de porch lookin’.’”⁴⁵ Aside from slave parents’ supervising courting, whites, like Caroline Malloy’s mistress, governed courtship time also. Upon receiving permission from her mistress, Caroline received “‘company’” every Sunday night. According to Malloy, her “‘mistress kept a watchful eye over her and she was not allowed to go outside the boundaries of the plantation.’”⁴⁶

These adults, though well aware of slavery’s horrors still worked to create a sense of normality in these young girls’ lives. The dictates of the time called for supervision among counting teens, and adult slaves tried their level best to adhere to this regulation. If girls

⁴⁴ Phil Towns, “WPA Slave Narrative Project,” 38-9.

⁴⁵ Camilla Jackson, “WPA Slave Narrative Project,” 296.; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 469.

⁴⁶ Caroline Malloy, “Caroline Malloy Interview,” 413.

succeeded in escaping the watchful eyes of adults, some courting couples such as Virginia slave Nancy Williams, would “slip ‘way an’ go to de wood to a ole cabin to dance. It ‘bout five miles out. Whoops! Dem dances was somepin.”⁴⁷ Here these couples engaged in kissing and other minor sexual activity.

Despite parental efforts, girls often “slip[ped] into sexual adventures despite their mothers’ efforts.”⁴⁸ This was similar to lower class whites who, according to church and other records, routinely engaged in premarital sex. Sexual activity initially began with kissing games, a part of the courtship process that often catapulted slave females into sexual activity. These games included “Walking the Lonesome Road,” “In the Well,” “Fruit in the Basket,” and others. In these games, the person was subjected to some type of hardship (such as becoming stuck in a well) in which a kiss could only be used for his or her rescue.⁴⁹ In “Please or Displease,” a slave girl posed a question to a male suitor: “What it take to please you?” The young man replied “A kiss from dat purty gal over dar’.”⁵⁰ Situations such as these caused slave females to further explore sex and become acclimated to adult sexual activities.

Unraveling courting rituals is significant in that they suggest the rites slaves engaged in as youth that led to the construction of slave marriages and families. Moreover, they reflect slaves’ sense of humanity despite the oppressions of slavery. They were typical teens who were developing their identity as young women without regard to their slave label. Perhaps as teens they did not recognize fully what being a slave encompassed as they were just becoming acclimated to working among adults and wearing adult clothing, changes that many welcomed

⁴⁷ Nancy Williams, “Nancy Williams Interview,” 316.

⁴⁸ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 465.

⁴⁹ King, *Stolen Childhood*, 61.

⁵⁰ George Fleming, “George Fleming Interview,” 127.

because of the perceived freedom they brought. But adult slaves were fully aware of what adulthood entailed. Consequently, slave parents, fueled by fear, sought to delay courtship as they did entrance into the work world and changes in dress. Whites, on the other hand, fueled by capitalist ambition, welcomed the period.

While teenage slave girls expressed a desire to court, they were confronted with the expectations from adult slaves and white slaveholders. Unlike their excited teenage daughters, for slave mothers this period marked the beginnings of anxiety. This “uneasiness during [their] daughter[s] adolescence,” writes White, “grew out of [their] desire to protect [their] daughter[s] from the responsibilities of adulthood.” Slave parents, especially mothers, sought to “usher females out of the asexual world of childhood, through puberty, and into the sexual world of marriage and motherhood.”⁵¹

From the moment slave girls were born, parents often grieved, knowing the greater difficulties daughters would face—as compared to sons—especially concerning sex. Harriet Jacobs recounted her great sadness when she learned that her second child was female: “When they told me my new-born babe was a girl, my heart was heavier than it had ever been before. Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, *they* have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own.”⁵² Kate Drumgoold’s mother felt similarly. According to Drumgoold, her mother had a deep affection for Drumgoold’s brother. In fact, she recalled, “my mother thought so much of him

⁵¹ White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman*, 96, 98.

⁵² Jacobs, *Incidents*, 77.

that she often would say if we were all boys she would not have to worry, for boys could do so much better than girls.”⁵³

Drumgoold’s mother and Jacobs recognized fully the horrors life held for female slaves. Jacobs, forced to end her relationship with her carpenter suitor and flee from Norcom’s sexual advances, realized that slavery would inflict the same pain upon her baby girl. This reality, though a great burden, did not stop parents, like Jacobs, from loving their daughters, or deter them from attempting to protect them from sexual predators once they reached adolescence.

Writing about slave families, historian Steven E. Brown argues that slave parents enacted “rigorous courtship strictures. . . . limitations. . . included waiting until the slaves attained a certain age before they were allowed to court, and being chaperoned by the female’s parents.”⁵⁴

The case of Lovie Williams’ mother provides concrete evidence of Brown’s argument. She chased Lovie’s beau away, citing her daughter’s youthfulness as the reason she objected.⁵⁵

Harriet Jacobs’ grandmother, Aunt Martha,⁵⁶ presents another excellent example of slave parents’ desire to delay the sexual experience of slave adolescents. As Harriet’s parents died when she was young, she was reared by her grandmother. Among the numerous life lessons Martha instilled were ideas about sex, a subject she was “very strict on.” Martha and Lovie’s mother admonished the girls to remain chaste, follow “pure principles,” and reject the sexual advances of men.⁵⁷

⁵³ Kate Drumgoold, *A Slave Girl’s Story in Women’s Slave Narratives: Annie L. Burton and Others* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2006), 117.

⁵⁴ Steven E. Brown, “Sexuality and the Slave Community,” *Phylon* 42 (1981): 3.

⁵⁵ Jasper Battle, “WPA Slave Narrative Project,” 69.

⁵⁶ Aunt Martha is based on Molly Horniblow, Jacobs’ grandmother

⁵⁷ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 27-29.

However, despite Martha's and other parents' best efforts to delay slave females' acquisition of sexual knowledge, their lives became "marked by puberty and a budding interest in boys."⁵⁸ To prevent unprofitable unions, some slave parents acted in ways similar to William Wells Brown's mulatto protagonist, Curren, in his novel, *Clotel*. Curren worked hard as a laundress so that "she and her daughters lived in comparative luxury."⁵⁹ To ensure her daughters attracted the attention of the best men she sent them to balls and parties. Lacking Curren's skin color and privilege, other parents employed more meager strategies to police their daughters' sexuality. Tactics included monitoring visits and providing input concerning future mates. Slave parents' actions indicate that they refuted white notions that they were uncaring irresponsible parents. In fact, slaves tried their best to salvage the best possible life for their children despite the atrocities slavery presented. Moreover, when it came to courting and sex, slaves, like white parents, wanted to protect their daughters' virtue. But the very nature of slavery, coupled with young women's "own ideas about sex and courtship," made this a difficult task.⁶⁰

Whites, on the other hand, desired that slaves court, hoping that it would lead to sexual relations and the reproduction of more human property. This idea contrasted with masters' ideas concerning their daughters, who married and gave birth later than slaves. Many slaveholders were quite interested in slave courtship, especially as it related to sexual activities. As previously noted, Olmsted, in his travel journal, recounted how slaveholders discussed the

⁵⁸ White, *Ar'n't I a Woman*, 95.

⁵⁹ William Wells Brown, *Clotel or President's Daughter*, with an introduction and notes by William Edward Farrison (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1969), 64.

⁶⁰ White, *Ar'n't I a Woman*, 98. Many scholars have noted the more relaxed sexual standards that existed in the slave community, ideas that link back to West African societies. Though slave girls were not condemned harshly for engaging in premarital sex, parents sought to delay the initial act and still encouraged restraint. For more on this subject see Anthony Parent, Herbert Gutman, Eugene Genovese, and Rebecca Fraser's works.

significance of slave breeding.⁶¹ Slaves also commented on white interest in slave procreation. According to former South Carolina slave Benjamin Russell, his master and mistress expressed a keen interest in slave courtship. He recalled ““They would be driving along and pass a girl walking with a boy. When she came to the house she would be sent for and questioned . . . ‘who was that young man? How come you with him? Don’t you ever let me see you with that ape again. If you cannot pick a mate better than that I’ll do the picking for you.’” According to Russell the owners were concerned because ““the girl must breed good strong serviceable children.””⁶² Hence, breeding was important and at the forefront of the master’s mind. These realities shaped slave girls’ experiences and caused their identity formation to be unlike boys because their identities were linked both to their ability to work *and* to produce healthy slave offspring.⁶³

⁶¹ Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 46, Footnote 2. For additional research on breeding reference Daina Berry’s “*Swing the Sickle for the Harvest is Ripe*”: *Gender and Slavery in Antebellum Georgia* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

⁶² Rebecca Fraser, *Courtship and Love among the Enslaved in North Carolina* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 37.

⁶³ Slave breeding has been a source of contention among scholars. Some, such as Richard Sutch and Herbert Gutman argue that slave breeding, which Sutch defines as ““any practice of the slave master intended to cause the fertility of the slave population to be higher than it would have been in the absence of such interference. So defined, ‘breeding’ includes the use of ‘reward’ for childbearing, the encouragement of early marriage and short lactation periods, and the provision of both pre- and postnatal medical care, as well as practices more reprehensible to modern sensibilities,” was widely practiced by slaveholders desiring to reap profit from the high prices slaves yielded in market. Sutch quote found in Robert W. Fogel and Stanley Engerman’s “The Slave Breeding Thesis,” in *Without Consent or Contract: Conditions of Slave Life and The Transition to Freedom, Technical Papers, Volume 2* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), 455. Economic historians Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman in “The Slave Breeding Thesis,” through conducting studies of demographics, as well as the correlation between slave population and slave prices find that slave breeding hypothesis is without great merit. While it does appear the data does not support arguments that masters yielded substantial control over slave reproduction, yet how does Fogel and Engerman account for the narratives and interviews that support the prevalence of this issue? For additional information reference Robert Sutch, “The Breeding of Slaves for Slave and the Westward Expansion of Slavery, 1850-1860” in Stanley L. Engerman and Eugene Genovese, eds. *Race and Slavery in the Western Hemisphere* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1975).; Robert Sutch, “The Treatment Received by American Slaves: A Critical Review of the Evidence Presented in *Time on the Cross*,” *Explorations in Economic History* 12 (1975): 335-438.; Herbert Gutman’s, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 75-80; Robert W. Fogel and Stanley Engerman’s “The Slave Breeding Thesis,” in *Without Consent or Contract: Conditions of Slave Life and The Transition to Freedom, Technical Papers, Volume 2* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), 455-472.; James Trussell and Richard H. Steckel, “The Age of Slaves at Menarche and Their First

Noting masters' interest in their sexuality, slaves often commented on whites' role in slave courtship. Many whites determined the pool of suitors' from which slaves selected. "They didn't mind the slaves matin," according to ex-slave Julia Brown, but they wanted "their niggers to marry only amongst them on their place. They didn't 'low 'em to mate with other slaves from other places."⁶⁴ Other masters, though not as proactive in the process, simply wanted notification of a potential love connection. This was the case for Georgia slave Della Briscoe. According to Briscoe, on the large Ross plantation in Putnam County an "old man' who was past the age for work and only had to watch what went on at the quarters, was usually the first to notice a budding friendship, which he reported to the master."⁶⁵

Though love and courting might have started as a matter of the heart, slave girls soon realized that, for whites, slave sexuality was intricately linked to the economy. Without sexual relations among slaves the labor force would not increase. Masters therefore took interest in "budding friendship[s]." Because legislation required that slave children follow the status of their mothers, belonging to the female slaves' slaveholder, whites only wanted mating to occur "amongst them on their place." These factors placed teenage girls at the mercy of the slave system. Their youthful ignorance soon eroded as they realized that their bodies and subsequent actions with their bodies determined the amount of wealth planters amassed. Many of them also

Birth" in *Without Consent or Contract: Conditions of Slave Life and The Transition to Freedom, Technical Papers, Volume 2* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), 435-454.

⁶⁴ Julia Brown, "Julia Brown," interview by Geneva Tonsill in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 1, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 142 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=041/mesn041.db&recNum=145&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Brown,+Julia++Aunt+Sally+\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=041/mesn041.db&recNum=145&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Brown,+Julia++Aunt+Sally+)))], accessed May 2008.

⁶⁵ Della Briscoe, "Della Briscoe," interview by Adella S. Dixon in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 1, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 127-8 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=041/mesn041.db&recNum=129&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Briscoe,+Della\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=041/mesn041.db&recNum=129&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Briscoe,+Della)))], accessed May 2008.

came to understand why their parents ran suitors away or chaperoned dates: because courting was more than a personal love interest it helped in the perpetuation of bondage. Hence teenage slave females while coming to terms with their sexuality began realizing that sexuality was not private but rather a public event as it was linked to the antebellum socio-economic and political system.⁶⁶

As they entered the realm of sexuality, slave girls received two conflicting messages. One was to abstain from sexual activity and wait until they grew older to court; another encouraged courtship and permissive sex. But whether monitored by watchful aunts, grandmothers, and parents, who urged them to proceed cautiously, or encouraged by anxious patriarchs to court, they acquired sexual knowledge during their teenage years. After they inaugurated their sexual experience, they were subjected to a set of standards vastly different from that of white women. Free to select a lover without fear of social ostracism, black women enjoyed a sexual liberty about which white women, perched within the parlor of the big house, only dreamed.⁶⁷ Yet, for all of their sexual freedom, slave female sexuality made them susceptible to unwanted male sexual advances.

In 1881, black Episcopalian minister Alexander Crummell discussed black females' sexual vulnerability in a pamphlet entitled *The Black Woman of the South: Her Neglects and Her Needs*.

⁶⁶ White and Herbert Gutman are among the historians who examine the reproductive value of enslaved women to slave owners. Both assert that masters were cognizant of slave women's import to sustaining the labor force and consequently white profit. Gutman, in *The Black Family*, goes on to argue that this knowledge "could hardly have been unknown to the slaves that the essential value of adult women rested on their capacity to reproduce the labor force" (75). For additional information reference Gutman's Chapter Two, "Because She Was My Cousin,"; White's, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, Chapter Two, "The Nature of Female Slavery," and Chapter Three, "The Life Cycle of the Female Slave."

⁶⁷ Despite slave mothers' attempts to shelter girls from sex, the slave community presented a sexual code that allowed for premarital sex without fear of ostracism or shame. Herbert Gutman explores the slave community's sexual ethos in *The Black Family*. According to Gutman, prenuptial intercourse and prenuptial pregnancy were accepted norms as long as a settled union occurred at some point after offspring arrived. For additional information on this topic also reference White's chapter entitled "The Life Cycle of the Female Slave."

Crummell, a prominent black nationalist who advocated the abolishment of slavery and spearheaded the black exodus to Africa, abhorred the treatment blacks received, often calling attention to African Americans' plight. About black girls, he wrote: "In her girlhood all the delicate tenderness of her sex has been rudely outraged No chance was given her for delicate reserve or tender modesty. From her childhood she was the doomed victim of the grossest passion. All the virtues of her sex were utterly ignored. If the instinct of chastity asserted itself, then she had to fight like a tiger for the ownership . . . of her own person When she reached maturity, all the tender instincts of her womanhood were ruthlessly violated."⁶⁸ The abuse Crummell so poignantly penned described the female slave experience. Sometimes paired with male slaves twice their age, or victims of rape by white males, pubescent slave girls came to understand just why slavery was "far more terrible for women."⁶⁹

Although enslaved girls, like modern teens, often dreamed of love and romance, their notions contrasted with antebellum sexual norms and mores that existed for white women. Antebellum whites viewed black women as lascivious beings who neither wanted nor deserved the respect shown white females. Believed to be driven by sexuality and thought to bear children easily, white slaveholders often abused slave women for sexual pleasure and capital gain. According to historian Catherine Clinton, whites began sexual advances when slaves were young, with house servants subjected to the worst abuse. A house servant for Dr. and Mrs. Flint,⁷⁰ Harriet Jacobs' sexual lessons began with the inception of physical development, the time she began attending the Flint family. It was this experience that caused her to conclude the

⁶⁸ Quoted in Dorothy Roberts' *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), 29.

⁶⁹ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 77.

⁷⁰ Dr. and Mrs. Flint's characters are based on Dr. James and Mrs. Mary Matilda Horniblow Norcom

following: “Every where the years bring to all enough of sin and sorrow; but in slavery the very dawn of life is darkened by these shadows. Even the little child, who is accustomed to wait on her mistress and her children, will learn, before she is twelve years old, why it is that her mistress hates such and such a one among the slaves. Perhaps the child’s own mother is among those hated ones. She listens to violent outbreaks of jealous passion, and cannot help understanding what is the cause. She will become prematurely knowing in evil things. Soon she will learn to tremble when she hears her master’s footfall. She will be compelled to realize that she is no longer a child. If God has bestowed beauty upon her, it will prove her greatest curse. That which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens the degradation of the female slave.”⁷¹ As Jacobs words demonstrates, introduction to the sexual abuses of slavery devastated female slaves psychologically, emotionally, and physically. At this juncture, these girls, no longer innocent children, were viewed as sexually lewd animals at the disposal of men.

For Jacobs and her contemporaries, the abuse was initially verbal. She wrote about these experiences at length. According to her narrative, Dr. Flint began filling her mind with illicit ideas and harassing her verbally; a plight not uncommon to slave girls.⁷² Recalling one beautiful spring morning when Dr. Flint exposed her to sexual comments, she wrote: He “had just left me, with stinging scorching words; words that scathed ear and brain like fire.”⁷³ Among the things that tormented Jacobs was his declaration that she was must fully submit herself to him. Flint’s announcement created a sense of helplessness for young Jacobs. She wrote “Sometimes he would complain of the heat of the tea room, and order his supper to be placed on a small table in the piazza. He would seat himself there with a well-satisfied smile, and tell me to stand by and

⁷¹ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 28.

⁷² Jacobs, *Incidents*, 27.

⁷³ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 18.

brush away the flies. He would eat very slowly, pausing between the mouthfuls. These intervals were employed in describing the happiness I was so foolishly throwing away, and in threatening me with the penalty that finally awaited my stubborn disobedience.”⁷⁴ Flint’s actions were designed to sway Harriet to give herself sexually to him. After unsuccessfully luring her to his side by offering her a happy life he employed verbal taunting; this taunting so frightened the child that it negatively impacted her disposition.

Unfortunately, Jacobs’ daughter experienced a similar fate. Reared by her great-grandmother, Aunt Martha, Ellen,⁷⁵ and her brother eventually moved in with their father and owner, Mr. Sands.⁷⁶ To escape Dr. Flint’s grasp she was sent to live in Brooklyn with Sands’ relatives. After years of separation Harriet was reunited with her daughter. It was then, through observing Ellen’s melancholy disposition, that Jacobs suspected her daughter was being sexually abused.⁷⁷ Jacobs’ fears were well-founded: she discovered some years later that Mrs. Hobbs’⁷⁸ “southern brother” had been sexually tormenting Ellen. “Finally, I ascertained that she felt troubled about the dissipation that was continually going on in the house. . . . She was always desirous not to add to my troubles more than she could help, and I did not discover till years afterwards that Mr. Thorne’s⁷⁹ intemperance was not the only annoyance she suffered from him. Though he professed too much gratitude to my grandmother to injure any of her descendants, he

⁷⁴ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 31-32.

⁷⁵ Ellen’s character is based on Louisa Matilda Jacobs, Harriet’s daughter.

⁷⁶ Mr. Sands’ character is based on Mr. Samuel Tredwell Sawyer.

⁷⁷ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 138, 166.

⁷⁸ Mrs. Hobbs’ character is based on Mary Bonner Blount Tredwell.

⁷⁹ Mr. Thorne’s character is based on Joseph Blount.

had poured vile language into the ears of her innocent great-grandchild.”⁸⁰ This scenario was not uncommon, as mothers and daughters throughout the antebellum South were linked not only by kinship but also through the experience of sexual abuse.

Having interacted with white women, slave girls became familiar with societal expectations about female sexuality: sex was reserved for marriage as a means to satisfy male sexual desires and to reproduce. As their white female playmates adhered to these principles, enslaved girls like Harriet believed that the same rules applied. But why did Harriet, a slave girl, become so angry and uneasy by his words? His words were indeed “stinging scorching” words because they told Harriet of what was expected of her as a slave, a life far from the sexual chastity of white girls.

As Jacobs suggested, abuse such as this made life almost unbearable. She wrote “My soul revolted against the mean tyranny. But where could I turn for protection? No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death; all these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men.”⁸¹ Unfortunately, her victimization was ubiquitous for others. Elizabeth Keckley’s narrative also suggested verbal abuse. Prior to the conception of her child she was “persecuted. . . for four years” by a white man with “base designs” for her.⁸²

Aside from verbal abuse many slave girls endured punishment meant to demean them sexually. An example of white males degrading black teenage girls can be seen in Keckley’s narrative. Having relocated to Hillsborough, North Carolina with the Burwell family, Elizabeth met Mr. Bingham, a local schoolmaster, who was a member of the church her hired-out master

⁸⁰ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 178-179.

⁸¹ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 27.

⁸² Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1968 reprint), 39.

Mr. Burwell had come to serve. To Keckley's dismay, Bingham, a man she described as "hard" and "cruel" was a frequent guest. While one day working, Mr. Bingham called her and informed her of her impending flogging. Unsure of her offence she asked "'Whip me, Mr. Bingham! what for?'" Refusing to supply a reason he replied "'No matter,' . . . I am going to whip you, so take down your dress this instant.'" This proved unthinkable for Keckley, a young developing teenager, as she wrote, "recollect, I was eighteen years of age, was a woman fully developed, and yet this man coolly bade me to take down my dress."⁸³

Though Keckley fought to stave off Mr. Bingham she was most appalled that he would make such a request. Like most teens, Keckley displayed a sense of modesty about her fully developed body. Moreover, as a woman in antebellum society, she was expected to conduct herself with the proper decorum which included, among other things, covering herself. But because she was a "slave woman" those norms could be abated easily, as indicated in the way she was "coolly bade" to remove her dress. What is interesting is that though slavery stripped her of the expected modesty of Victorian society, Keckley asserted her own sense of self-worth. "No, Mr. Bingham, I shall not take down my dress before you," she declared, promising to fight to maintain her stance. The fact that he flippantly dismissed Keckley's questioning the reason behind the flogging and requested she unclothe herself suggests a sexual lewdness as an underlying motivation. While verbal abuse and sexually lewd practices were feared girls realized that they could experience far worse fates such as forced breeding and rape.

While white interest was reflected in more humane ways such as verbal prodding and giving incentives, including shorter work hours and the receipt of more rations, to women who

⁸³ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1968 reprint), 33.

became pregnant, some owners simply forced slave girls to sire children with male slaves.⁸⁴

According to Prophet John Henry Kemp, on the Mississippi plantation where he was reared slave breeding was required by their master, in fact, those who did not abide by that rule were deemed unruly slaves. Kemp, was the slave of John Gay, a man he described as “one of the meanest plantation owners” in that part of the region. For slaves, proper behavior included not only accepting minimal food rations but also “mating only at his command and for purposes purely of breeding more and stronger slaves on his plantation for sale.”⁸⁵

That was certainly the reality for Willie McCullough’s mother. According to McCullough, when his mother ““became a woman at the age of sixteen years her marster went to a slave owner near by and got a six-foot nigger man, almost an entire stranger to her, and told her she must marry him. Her marster read a paper to them, told them they were man and wife and told this negro he could take her to a certain cabin and go to bed. This was done without getting her consent or even asking her about it. Grandmother said that several different men were put to her just about the same as if she had been a cow or sow. The slave owners treated them as if they had been common animals in this respect.””⁸⁶

In this account this young girl was assigned a male slave so that they could produce slave offspring. The pairing of young females occurred when they “became a woman,” as masters

⁸⁴ White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman*, 99.

⁸⁵ “Prophet” John Henry Kemp, ““Prophet” John Henry Kemp,” interview by L. Rebecca Baker in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Florida Narratives, Volume 3, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 184-185, [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=030/mesn030.db&recNum=186&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Kemp,+John+Henry++Prophet+\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=030/mesn030.db&recNum=186&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Kemp,+John+Henry++Prophet+)))], April 2010.

⁸⁶ Willie McCullough, “Willie McCullough,” interview by T. Pat Matthews in WPA Slave Narrative Project, North Carolina Narratives, Volume 11, Part 2, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 78 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=112/mesn112.db&recNum=81&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(McCullough,+Willie\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=112/mesn112.db&recNum=81&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(McCullough,+Willie)))], accessed May 2008.

took an interest in the physical maturation of enslaved females. Unsure of the physical changes occurring to her body, this enslaved girl confronted her first sexual encounter with a man “almost an entire stranger to her.” Perhaps she passed the gentleman as she frolicked the plantation as a girl in her shift, so he was not a complete stranger, but nevertheless she did not know him well. The emotional indifference was further revealed in her lack of input into the arrangement. As a growing adult, she, like all humans, believed the ability to make independent decisions accompanied adulthood. She soon realized, however, that her decision making ability was revoked the moment she was born chattel. Like countless slave girls, she discovered that when it came to sexuality she would be treated like nothing more than a “common animal.”

Engaging in such an intimate act at such a young age with a stranger was likely a shattering, traumatic experience for these young women. Just beginning to court and understand sex, the introduction to breeding created more complex ideas and emotions for these young women to unravel. Unfortunately, the landscape became more perilous when white male sexual predators entered.

Though purchased as domestic or field hands, enslaved women provided planters more than labor. These women afforded white men an opportunity “to exercise sexual license.”⁸⁷ This sexual license often resulted in rape of slave women, one of the most significant horrors that enslaved females endured. Rape and repeated sexual violence characterized slave women’s daily

⁸⁷ Though not engaged here or a great deal in other literature, its important to note that enslaved females were subject to sexual abuse by slave men as well. For additional information on the topic consult White’s *Ar’n’t I a Woman*, 152-153. John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 2d edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 94.

lives, leading to what Painter described as “soul murder.”⁸⁸ This state, which psychologists define as “depression, lowered self-esteem and anger” impacted greatly the enslaved psyche.⁸⁹

Many slaves recalled the sexual liberty white males had with slave women with some slaves stating that some slaveholders slept exclusively with slave women. Recalling his master in North Carolina, former slave Jacob Manson stated ““Marster had no chilluns by white women. He had his sweethearts ‘mong his slave women.”” This was apparently the norm in this region as Manson goes on to state ““At dat time it wus a hard job to find a marster dat didn’t have women ‘mong his slaves. Dat wus a ginerel thing ‘mong de slave owners.””⁹⁰ Manson’s fellow North Carolina slave John Bectom affirmed that slave masters had ““certain slave women reserved for their own use.””⁹¹ Former Georgia slave and famed runaway, William Craft, in his narrative *Running A Thousand Miles for Freedom: The Escape of Ellen and William Craft from Slavery*, recalls the privileges white slave owners took with enslaved females. He writes, “Any man with money (let him be ever such a rough brute), can buy a beautiful and virtuous girl, and force her to live with him in a criminal connexion.” A practice that was, according to Craft, “common. . . for gentlemen.”⁹²

⁸⁸ White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman*, 9-10.; Painter, “Soul Murder and Slavery.”

⁸⁹ Painter, “Soul Murder and Slavery,” 7.

⁹⁰ Jacob Manson, “Jacob Manson,” interview by T. Pat Matthews in WPA Slave Narrative Project, North Carolina Narratives, Volume 11, Part 2, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 97 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=112/mesn112.db&recNum=100&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Manson,+Jacob\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=112/mesn112.db&recNum=100&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Manson,+Jacob)))], accessed May 2008.

⁹¹ John C. Bectom, “John C. Bectom,” interview by T. Pat Matthews in WPA Slave Narrative Project, North Carolina Narratives, Volume 11, Part 1, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 98 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Bectom,+John+C+\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Bectom,+John+C+)))], accessed May 2008.

⁹² William Craft and Ellen Craft, *Running A Thousand Miles for Freedom: The Escape of Ellen and William Craft from Slavery* with an introduction by Barbara McCaskill (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 12.

As property, girls were expected to “be subject to [their masters’] will in all things.”⁹³ Pubescent slave girls soon realized what “all things” encompassed. Recalling her sister’s experience, former slave Mollie Kinsey stated that as a girl her sister was forced to ““go out and lay on a table and two or three white men would have in’ercourse with her befo’ they’d let her git up.””⁹⁴ Young female slave acquaintances of Cureton Milling also endured rape at the hands of slaveholders. Recalling his master’s sneaky, sadistic practices Mr. Milling stated, ““He take ‘vantage of de young gal slaves. ‘You go yonder and shell corn in de crib,’ he say to one of them. He’s de marster so she have to go. Then he send de others to work some other place, then he go to de crib. He did dis to my very aunt and she had a mulatto boy.””⁹⁵

Though her writing is evasive about the act, Keckley’s account reveals rape was a part of her slave experience as well. She writes, “The savage efforts to subdue my pride were not the only things that brought me suffering and deep mortification during my residence at Hillsboro.’ I was regarded as fair-looking for one of my race, and for four years a white man-I spare the world his name--had base designs upon me. I do not care to dwell upon this subject, for it is one that is fraught with pain. Suffice it to say, that he persecuted me for four years, and I-I-became a mother. The child of which he was the father was the only child that I ever brought into the world. If my poor boy ever suffered any humiliating pangs on account of birth, he could not

⁹³ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 27.

⁹⁴ Mollie Kinsey, “Mollie Kinsey Interview,” interview by Geneva Tonsill in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, Supplement, Series 1, ed. George P. Rawick (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1977), vol. 4, part 2, 373.

⁹⁵ Cureton Milling, “Cureton Milling,” interview by W. W. Dixon in WPA Slave Narrative Project, South Carolina Narratives, Volume 14, Part 3, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 194 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=143/mesn143.db&recNum=197&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Milling,+Cureton\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=143/mesn143.db&recNum=197&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Milling,+Cureton)))], accessed May 2008.

blame his mother, for God knows that she did not wish to give him life; he must blame the edicts of that society which deemed it no crime to undermine the virtue of girls in my then position.”⁹⁶

Rape was the act that cemented black teenage girls’ identity. It taught them that they were slaves, property not people, who were excluded from the social norms and mores that applied to whites. Moreover, each rape taught that as slave women, their bodies were used not only for labor purposes, but for white men’s sexual recreation. Thus, rape was one of the events within enslaved females coming-of-age that informed their identity. Though slave girls were forced to engage in sex not all passively accepted men’s advances, as demonstrated by Virginia slave Fannie Berry’s colorful interview. “I wuz one slave dat de poor white man had his match. See Miss Sue? Dese here ol’ white men said, ‘what I can’t do by fair means I’ll do by foul.’ One tried to throw me, but he couldn’t. We tusseled an’ knocked over chairs an’ when I got a grip I scratched his face all to pieces; an dar wuz no more bothering Fannie from him; but oh, honey, some slaves would be beat up so, when dey resisted, an’ sometimes if you’ll ‘belled de overseer would kill yo’. Us Colored women had to go through a plenty, I tell you.”⁹⁷ Indeed, colored women did go through a plenty.

Though Judy and Fanny resorted to brawn, Jacobs relied on her brains to oppose her master. She resisted by choosing a white lover. “Among others, it chanced that a white unmarried gentleman had obtained some knowledge of the circumstances in which I was placed. He knew my grandmother, and often spoke to me in the street. He became interested for me, and asked questions about my master, which I answered in part. He expressed a great deal of

⁹⁶ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1968 reprint), 38-39.

⁹⁷ Fannie Berry, “Fannie Berry,” interview by Susie Byrd in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Virginia Narratives, Volume 17, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 2 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=170/mesn170.db&recNum=4&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Berry,+Fannie\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=170/mesn170.db&recNum=4&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Berry,+Fannie)))], accessed May 2008.

sympathy, and a wish to aid me. He constantly sought opportunities to see me, and wrote to me frequently. I was a poor slave girl, only fifteen years old. . . . By degrees, a more tender feeling crept into my heart. . . . Of course I saw whither all this was tending. I knew the impassable gulf between us; but to be an object of interest to a man who is not married, and who is not her master, is agreeable to the pride and feelings of a slave, if her miserable situation has left her any pride or sentiment.”⁹⁸

This is significant because it demonstrates that though enslaved females were often introduced to sex through coerced sexual relations with whites, scholars should not assume all slave females were unwilling partners in sexual unions or that sexual abuse prevented them from using their sexuality in ways to benefit them. Moreover, to ascribe sex to enslaved females only through forced sexual relations detracts from the slaves’ humanness. As proven by the “tender feeling [that] crept” into fifteen-year-old Harriet’s heart for her white lover, the desire for love or to have a sexual need and ability to meet that need is a human characteristic that bondage, despite its horrors, did not eradicate.

Through each of the previous accounts we witness enslaved girls utter disdain of rape and their resistance to those acts, in an attempt to reclaim control of their sexuality. But for some, rape, or the prospect thereof, was so devastating that in some cases girls, possibly feeling hopeless and unable to cope with the physical and psychological impact of rape, felt it more feasible to end their lives; such was the case of Antoinette, as retold by William Craft. Characterized as “the flower of [her] family,” Antoinette was loved by all “for her Christ-like piety, dignity of manner, as well as her great talents and extreme beauty.”⁹⁹ The daughter of a

⁹⁸ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 54-55.

⁹⁹ Craft and Craft, *Running A Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 14.

white male of means and an enslaved mother, who lived as husband and wife, Antoinette and her siblings grew up in relative ease, receiving a good education. The untimely demise of her father, ended all of this for the family as he left no will. Consequently, the widow and children were awarded to a white man claiming to be the decedent's relative, with his new found slave property he sold the widow and most of her children. As if coping with the separation from her family was not trying enough, Antoinette had to contend with the sexual lewdness of the "uneducated and drunken slave-dealer" that purchased her.¹⁰⁰

The unnamed villain paid the sum of two-thousand dollars because he "always wanted her for . . .[his] own use." Pleased with his prize he ordered the girl be sent to his house and locked in an upper apartment where he would soon visit. Entering the room to a frantic slave girl, the drunken trader and the slave struggled. Breaking loose from his grasp Antoinette "pitched herself head foremost through the window, and fell upon the pavement below," killing herself.

¹⁰¹ Certainly Antoinette's case is an extreme example of slave females' resistance to rape as suicide among slaves was not typically the norm. But Antoinette's actions, her frantic mindset, the struggle and her utter loathing of her white attacker, were similar for numerous slave females across the slave South, teenage and adult alike. Daily slave girls lived in fear, knowing that at any moment they might have to involuntarily relinquish their bodies to men who disgraced them sexually. With each indecorous comment or unwanted touch, a part of these young girls' souls, to use Painter's argument, were indeed murdered.

"The influences of slavery," Harriet Jacobs wrote, "had had the same effect on me that they had on other young girls; they had made me prematurely knowing, concerning the evil ways

¹⁰⁰ Craft and Craft, *Running A Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 13-14.

¹⁰¹ Craft and Craft, *Running A Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 15.

of the world.”¹⁰² Anguish, sorrow, solitude, and unimaginable suffering reverberated from these words, and reveal an adolescent girl with heavy responsibilities bending her young shoulders. No longer shielded from the innocent days of childhood, Jacobs, like countless teenage slave girls throughout the antebellum South, was forced to confront the reality of her sexuality within the context of her bondage.

Though capable of loving others and establishing relationships, slave girls during their teens discovered that masters had power to end these relationships, select mates, and regulate courting. Unlike their white female contemporaries for whom love and courtship was a voluntary act, for teenage slave girls these experiences were always regulated by masters and their desire for profit. This knowledge was solidified further when enslaved girls learned that masters could also determine *how* slave girls used their body as demonstrated by the use of forced breeding and rape.

Initiated into the world of adult sexuality, slave females gained self-awareness via their bodies. They learned their sexuality distinguished them from black male slaves, established a different set of sexual standards from that of the adolescent white females, and revealed the extent of their powerlessness over their hearts and bodies. Most importantly, their sexuality informed them that they were not only becoming adults but *slave* adults, individuals excluded from the human courtesies afforded whites.

¹⁰² Jacobs, *Incidents*, 54.

CHAPTER 6
BEFORE I BE A SLAVE: TEENAGE RESISTANCE

One evening after putting her white charge to sleep, eighteen-year-old Elizabeth Keckley was summoned to the office of Mr. Bingham, a member of her owner's church. Entering the study, she realized that he intended to whip her. To this Keckley retorted: "You shall not whip me unless you prove the stronger."¹ A tussle ensued. Keckley "resisted with all [her] strength," but she was no match for her abuser, and Bingham successfully bound her hands and began administering the cowhide. Though physically overcome, Keckley's resistance did not end, and while flogged she refused to scream. "I was too proud to let my tormentor know what I was suffering," she wrote, "I closed my lips firmly, that not even a groan might escape from them, and I stood like a statue while the keen lash cut deep into my flesh."² This scene repeated itself over the next weeks as Mr. Bingham continued assaulting Elizabeth, and she continued resisting. And though she often went home sore and bleeding, she did so "with pride as strong and defiant as ever."³

Countless enslaved men and women suffered beatings by whites, and, like Keckley, they resisted. What remains unique about this instance is the enslaved girl's young age. Exploring acts of enslaved female resistance reveals a pattern: many of the offenders were teenage girls. Why did young slaves—individuals who remained relatively unfamiliar with the perils of slavery--resist? Why did Elizabeth and other teens simply not acquiesce? As a teenager, did she understand fully the ramifications of her actions, or did her youthfulness impede her? What do Keckley's actions reveal about teenage girls' ideology concerning slavery and the power

¹ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1968 reprint), 33.

² Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1968 reprint), 34.

³ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1968 reprint), 36-37.

relations between masters and slaves? If they resisted, what forms of resistance remained at their disposal? This chapter explores these questions, along with the correlation between resistance and coming of age. Studying the physical and psychological development of slaves reveals that enslaved individuals became conscious of their slave identity and exactly what it entailed during their teenage years, when they experienced changes in their work habits, attire, and sexual knowledge. After exposure to adult slave life, some teenage slaves, disillusioned and dissatisfied, rejected this identity and resisted their masters. Teenage resistance methods included running away, poisoning, assault, arson and infanticide.

This study defines resistance as any violent or non-violent action slaves used in direct opposition to the social, economic and political practices of the slaveholder regime to alter, or, in some particularly violent cases, completely upset, the delicate power balance whites maintained over blacks. Employing this definition enables us to consider all forms of resistance teens committed, from the most mundane to the most violent, in order to reject their slave identity and maintain a semblance of the normality they experienced as children.

Numerous scholars have contributed to our understanding of slave resistance, exploring everything from covert attacks such as poisoning, or breaking tools, to more overtly violent confrontations such as murder and arson. Blassingame's *The Slave Community* was among the first to explore fully the resistant slave community. Contrasting slaves' harsh existence with their masters' lives, Blassingame argues that slaves clearly understood what freedom was, and they used resistance to obtain it. This "yearning for freedom," he writes, "came with the first realization of the finality, of the fact, of slavery."⁴ Relying on the slave narratives of Louis Hughes, Lunsford Lane, and others, he discusses slaves' realization of their identity and their

⁴ John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), revised edition, 192.

desire for freedom. But Blassingame says little about the age that this realization occurred. For many, like Lane, and the girls of this study, this keen understanding of their slave identity occurred during slaves' teenage years. If Blassingame argues that the desire for liberty and the subsequent resistance began when slaves understood that they were property, then he must explain the development stage when the realization occurred. Doing so will prevent the scholarship from presenting the resistant slave community as merely a population of resistant adult male slaves.

Writing after Blassingame, Genovese, demonstrating how resistance could upset easily the delicate balance of power between masters and slaves, introduces the idea of paternalism, a system of control under which whites provided slaves with protection and provision in exchange for labor and obedience. Genovese argues that, despite the master-slave relationship, "life in the fields as well as in the Big House was often lived on the edge of violence."⁵ Genovese's depiction of slavery's power balance helps to frame the theme that slave girls' resistance sent a clear message to whites that power, as they knew it, could be usurped if and when slaves chose to do so. While that concept is helpful, Genovese's work says little about the participants of the violence in the fields and Big House. Who were the residents of the "edge of violence" that Genovese describes? Based on this chapter's findings young females often lived on the "edge of violence" along with the adult male slaves Genovese described. This chapter seeks to locate them within the narrative and explain why life on the slaveholding became violent.

Recently, other scholars of slavery have offered very different interpretations. Writing some twenty years later, Walter Johnson, using antebellum slave markets, challenges Genovese's concept of paternalism as it relates to resistance. Discussing slave's agency in resisting sales and

⁵ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 617.

in their attempts to maintain their families in *Soul By Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market*, Johnson asserts that paternalism was more fantasy than reality. Masters lacked control over the enslaved, according to Johnson, and their control was undermined by the violent resistance of slaves. Such resistance “belies the influential claim that slaveholders were able to exact a sort of unwitting consent from their slaves.”⁶ *Soul By Soul* is important to this study because it demonstrates the fragile control that existed in the antebellum slave South. This chapter simply pushes the interpretation forward by proving that not only was it fragile, but that it was made so by young slave girls, individuals newly acclimated to the rigors of slave life.

Anthony Kaye, in *Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South*, reassesses the use of Blassingame’s concept of community. Kaye also questions the meaning of paternalism by exploring the neighborhood’s role in upsetting the master-slave relationship. Kaye argues that using the term “community” suggests that slaves were a unified group of people, but the reality was that slaves, though living together and experiencing similar hardships, were far from a cohesive unit. They resided not in communities but in neighborhoods, collections of slaveholdings that were places of contentment and discord. Using neighborhoods in relation to resistance Kaye presents resistance as a collective act that involved rumor, socializing and other forms of assistance from other slaves rather than the random, individual acts generally explored by scholars.⁷ Kaye offers a novel take on slavery, but, like his predecessors, he fails to analyze the significance of age to resistance thus omitting a key demographic of the neighborhood: teenage slave girls.

⁶ Johnson, *Soul By Soul*, 206.

⁷ Anthony Kaye, *Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

During the mid 1980s scholars began examining resistance in light of female slaves' unique plight under slavery. In her definitive study, *Ar'n't I a Woman*, White shows how enslaved women, like men, resisted bondage. She asserts that enslaved women, unlike slave men, struck out against the power the system granted for whiteness, maleness, and white womanhood.⁸ Interestingly, although White identified slave life cycles and examined the stages of development, she says little about resistance in light of the adolescent girls she identifies. Based on her work, resistance does not include any discussion of the significance of age. Despite this oversight, White's work laid the foundation for future studies concerning women and resistance, such as Stephanie Camp's *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*.

Camp suggests that traditionally resistance is explored from a male-vantage point, consequently displacing women and erroneously presenting the illusion that women did not resist. Camp argues instead for the use of the public-private binary as a way to understand female resistance.⁹ Employing this method, she maintains that female slaves resisted by reclaiming space, such as their bodies, homes and sites for slave gatherings. Though masters worked to restrict slave social and physical mobility, she asserts slave females, by throwing off osnaburg, attending parties, even decorating their homes with abolitionist material, used private realms to resist and make political statements. Camp successfully accomplishes her goal of

⁸ In addition to White's discussion on female resistance scholar Barbara Bush in her work, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650-1838* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) presents interesting insight into the subject. She asserts women acted just as courageously if not more so than men in slave resistance.

⁹ Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women & Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004). For discussion on the use of space, refer to Mary P. Ryan's *Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City during the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) and Kaye's *Joining Places*. Ryan's work explores the use of public and private space and explores the public-private binary. Anthony, exploring slave neighborhoods attempts to understand how slaves shaped and utilized space within antebellum neighborhoods. Both works are useful in understanding antebellum concepts of space.

emphasizing the distinctiveness of enslaved females' resistance. But there is much to be done especially concerning enslaved teenagers. Just as resistance studies need to modify methodology to capture female resistance, they also need to be altered to recognize teenagers.

During the mid-1990s, historian Wilma King began unraveling the relation of age and resistance. Her chapter entitled, "Free at Last': The Quest for Freedom," examines adolescent resistance. "Once they reached a level of understanding," she writes, "youngsters showed their dissatisfaction with slavery. They were the most vulnerable members of the slave community, yet their reactions to bondage resembled those of experienced adults when they failed to obey orders or ran away."¹⁰ King's work remains among the few scholarly studies that deal specifically with resistance and youth. However, she does not engage fully with this critical subject matter. She explains why they became so dissatisfied: the realization that they were considered slaves for life. But what specific items prompted them to resist? How does puberty play a role in this phenomenon? These are questions the chapter seeks to explore.

Teenage slaves resisted components of their coming-of-age experiences that initiated their adult slave status. Thus far, in exploring the various rites, we have learned that like typical teens, slave girls embraced those experiences that separated them from slave children, denoting their ensuing adult status such as interacting with adults, the ability to wear more mature attire and the opportunity to court and attend parties. However, once they realized that based on their social status, adulthood involved toiling from sun-up to sun down in osnaburg, or cloth designated for the un-free, and that courting was allowed not simply for personal pleasure but in order to procreate the labor force, these teens became disillusioned, distrustful and dissatisfied. Although adult slaves assigned them chores and administered discipline it was not until they

¹⁰ King, *Stolen Childhood*, 115-116.

actually assumed grown-up work roles, attire, and sexual practices that enslaved females experienced the brunt of slavery's cruelties. At this point, many resisted. Those who did so fought white attempts to force them to adopt the slave identity and the lifestyle associated with it, revealing a determination to contest the system that sought to dehumanize them.

In his mid-teens, famed ex-slave and civil rights activist Frederick Douglass recalled an incident when he lashed out at his oppressor—and assumed an identity independent from that assigned by the slaveholder regime. Regarded as an inefficient servant for his master, Mr. Thomas, Douglass was sent to Mr. Covey, a man with a “very high reputation for breaking young slaves.”¹¹ Entering his new household on January 1, 1833, Douglass quickly experienced harsh working conditions and brutal whippings, conditions that persisted during the first six months of his year on the Covey farm. Broken and utterly dejected, Douglass, on the verge of being punished again, “resolved to fight.” He “seized Covey hard by the throat.” This struggle ensued for some two hours until Covey let Douglass go.¹² Though Covey never admitted defeat, Douglass stated that for the remainder of his time with Covey “he never laid the weight of his finger upon [him] in anger.”¹³ Aside from ending the physical abuse, this incident altered Douglass’ perception of himself; it forever instilled within him a sense of manhood and empowered this teen to reject the slave label.

Douglass’ experience was not unusual. As explored in Frederick Olmsted’s observation of the use of violence and the inauguration of work in Chapter Three, increased workloads and whippings were both regularly employed to acclimate teenage slaves to their new adult labor

¹¹ Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 71.

¹² Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 78, 79.

¹³ Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 79.

responsibilities. Such was the case of North Carolina slave Louis Hughes. In his autobiography, *Thirty Years a Slave*, Hughes described the trauma suffered during his early work experiences. Initially, chores, such as dusting were “awkward.” As he was “young and consequently not strong” landscaping duties and running errands made him tired. He also dreaded certain work, such as warping the cloth. His distain developed because he “always got [his] ears boxed if [he] did not or could not do the work to suit [his mistress] . . . [he] would get very tired at this work and, like any child, wanted to be at play.”¹⁴ Just as Hughes’ “boxed ears” opened the door to the beastlike rage of the mistress, other slaves entering the adult world gained firsthand knowledge of the reality of slave adulthood as well, a reality which included severe beatings.

Olmsted’s observation, coupled with Hughes’ experience and Douglass’ testimony, was gripping. These accounts demonstrate the intersection of age and abuse for slaves during their teenage years, as most slaves had not experienced harsh physical abuse until they could contribute labor to the slaveholding. Yet Olmsted and Douglass’ accounts also speak to the notion of teenage resistance. Olmsted’s phrase “broke in to work,” coupled with Covey’s reputation and his altercation with Douglass, suggest that a struggle over authority ensued regularly between master and teenage servant throughout the antebellum South.

Slaveholders strove to replace young slaves’ ideas of leisure with an ideology of work. Often this task proved difficult. Many slaves were not accustomed to the structure which the work regime presented, or the constant interaction with whites and their rigid demands. Consequently, slaveholders required the assistance of slave breakers such as Covey. Because slavery’s success rested on blacks acquiescing to white hegemony, teenage insubordination resulted in great fear among whites. Without future slave generations obeying the social order,

¹⁴ Louis Hughes, Louis Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave: From Bondage to Freedom*, (Milwaukee: South Side Printing Company, 1897), [<http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/hughes/hughes.html>], accessed May 2008, 17-18.

the institution would collapse. It thus became necessary for someone in the community to specialize in teaching teens to surrender their wills to white control. Covey was one such man. He had a “very high reputation” for having successfully broken other defiant teenage slaves. But not all young slaves surrendered easily. Female teenagers were among those that lashed out against the institution, rebelling against changes concerning their lives including those associated with labor.

In discussing teenage slaves’ introduction to work, research demonstrates that labor introduced them to older slaves, who not only taught them how to complete their domestic or field duties but also ways to resist subtly. Working alongside adults, young girls witnessed adult slaves slowing down work, breaking tools, practicing truancy, destroying linen, burning food, or purposefully performing tasks poorly. These covert tactics were undoubtedly used by adolescent girls unhappy with their new work conditions. However, not all secretly expressed their frustrations, some, such as Lily Perry, employed violence.

Perry, a North Carolina slave, encountered harsh punishment concerning work, but, like Douglass, she too resisted. Perry’s work regiment was explored in Chapter Three, but a closer look at her narrative reveals that Lily did not accept her arduous tasks or ill treatment passively. Forced to complete heavy tasks, Perry worked diligently to conclude her duties in a timely and efficient manner but was beaten nonetheless. But when assaulted she fought back. ““When dey’d start ter whup me”” she says, ““I’d bite lak a runmad dog.””¹⁵ To curtail the biting, her abusers tightly bound her hands as proven by the scars she bore some years later. Though beaten severely, Perry continued to resist. On another occasion she fought again. ““One day I ain’t feelin’ so good,”” she recalled, and ““de slops am so heavy dat I stops an’ pours out some of it.

¹⁵ Lily Perry, “WPA Slave Narrative Project,” 163-164.

De oberseer, Zack Terrell, sees me an' when I gits back ter de house he grabs me ter whup me. De minute he grabs me I seize on ter his thumb an' I bites hit ter de bone.'" Perry's actions angered greatly the overseer, causing him to violently throw her, leaving her incapacitated for a week.¹⁶

Despite the outcome, it had to be unsettling for overseer Terrell to have this preteen oppose his authority. As an overseer he belonged to the lower class and needed employment for survival. Therefore, he must have known his job stood in jeopardy if he proved incapable of controlling the youngest and weakest of his subordinates. But something far more important than his job stability was at play in this assault: his social status and authority as a white man. Slavery hinged on whites being able to control black men and women. What message did it send when a white male was consistently attacked by a young black female who had only recently come to understand her role as working property? Perry and other young slave girls' resistance to the horrid work conditions and treatment they received placed the entire institution at risk.

Changes in attire marked a significant rite of passage which girls experienced in their teens. The clothes worn denoted their new status as unfree labor; knowing this, some resisted wearing their new garments. As previously explored, Harriet Jacobs resisted her lot as a slave during her formative years by outright refusing the attire issued by her owner Dr. Flint.¹⁷ Other slaves, not privy to relatives financially able to purchase an alternative wardrobe, accepted the attire but they modified it by brightly dyeing them, as did former slave Nancy Williams, or simply altering the buttons or bodice.¹⁸ Certainly in modifying the dresses some slaves did so simply to

¹⁶ Lily Perry, "WPA Slave Narrative Project," 163-164.

¹⁷ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 11.

¹⁸ White, *Ar'n't I a Woman*, 95; Nancy Williams, "Nancy Williams Interview," 316; Gus Feaster, "WPA Slave Narrative Project," 47.

appeal to their personal taste, but the act in and of itself suggests that slaves did not simply accept the master's orders if so moved they could and did disobey, simply because they chose to do so. Through refusing the clothes slaveholders provided, Jacobs and other slave girls reflected their refusal to accept their plight as slaves. By doing so, they reclaimed their bodies, something Camp identifies as spaces masters and slaves battled over constantly. Having triumphed via the clothes that graced their developing physiques, these girls chose identities that recognized their humanity. As Jacobs and other teenage girls experienced additional life transformations, such as the introduction to sex, they had more reasons to resist.

Jacobs, in her autobiography, described herself as a disgruntled teenage girl who was forced to abandon her boyfriend and endure the sexual advances of her master. But Jacobs, perhaps due to her youthful pride, did not capitulate to Flint's authority: instead, she resisted and chose her own lover. She demonstrated to Flint that his authority was only complete if she allowed it to be so. The fact that she had two children by a man Flint disapproved of suggests that slavery's power over Harriet and others was only effective if slaves participated.

An unidentified slave female also resisted due to the sexual aggression of white males. She stated: "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." Feeling she had endured an injustice she fought back because she felt "he had no right to beat me for not goin' with him."¹⁹ This female's actions reveals that at this juncture she still felt she possessed complete control of her body, and was subsequently able to reject male advances, even if they came from a male, who by law, owned her person and had the right to do with it as he pleased.

¹⁹ Unknown, "WPA Slave Narrative Project, 293.

Unlike Harriet and her unidentified protagonist who fought from the onset, some teenage girls, such as Missouri slave Celia, initially endured the abuse but eventually resisted. Purchased by Mr. Newsom to serve as a house servant, Celia was raped on her return trip with her new master in an act that “at once established and defined the nature of the relationship between the master and his newly acquired slave.”²⁰ According to Melton A. McLaurin, unfortunately “life for Celia would entail continual sexual exploitation by her master,” and, during the next five years, she gave birth to two of his children.²¹ While serving as Newsom’s concubine, she also had a relationship with a local slave, George. Unable to cope with Celia’s relationship with her owner, George delivered an ultimatum: Celia must chose him or Newsom. Desiring to please George, she attempted to end the sexual relationship with Newsom. Doing so forever altered her life. On June 23, 1855, Robert Newsom, despite being warned by the teenager that their sexual relations must end, went to Celia’s cabin. Ignoring her protests, Newsom advanced, and Celia, in response, grabbed a large stick and struck Newsom across the head. Afraid that he would retaliate she hit him a second time, and the blow was fatal.²²

Celia’s actions reveal a young slave girl who sought to be treated as a human, with an ability to make her own decisions. She then lashed out at the system. But why did it take her five years to resist when her contemporaries acted immediately? Perhaps she failed to resist initially because she was purchased at a young age, taken from the only environment she knew into a setting where she was surrounded by unfamiliar people. As a result, Celia possibly felt she had no way out and simply acquiesced, but, with time, as she began establishing her own romantic and familial relationships, she recognized her own will and desires. Celia thus came to

²⁰ Melton Alonza McLaurin, *Celia, a Slave* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 24.

²¹ McLaurin, *Celia*, 25, 28.

²² McLaurin, *Celia*, 34, 35.

the same conclusion that so many other girls reached: slavery fettered them in action but they remained free in thought. If and when they choose to, they asserted themselves by any means necessary. As she was still relatively young, an older teenager at most, the resolve to resist remained.

Celia's first form of resistance is seen in the relationship she established with George. Having purchased her and built a cabin especially for Celia, Newsom undoubtedly expected her to be sexually exclusive. But her relationship with a local slave proves that Celia tried to retain control. Newsom might have controlled her body, but he could not control her emotions. Through a subtle form of resistance, Celia asserted herself by asking that Newsom end their physical relationship. When he refused, Celia had no choice but to kill him. Though we will never understand her precise feelings, Celia's actions suggest that she no longer accepted Newsom's slaveholder authority.

Forced to confront experiences that contrasted greatly with childhood, Celia, Harriet, and other teenage girls became acclimated to slavery. Fighting abusive work practices, wearing clothes that represented their chattel status, or enduring whites' sexual advances, these enslaved girls faced bewildering changes. Unwilling to abandon the sense of humanity childhood instilled in them, girls struggled against the vicissitudes of life. They did so using an array of methods, including flight, fight, poisoning, arson, and infanticide.

To avoid slavery's perils, teenage girls often challenged the institution. In previous chapters, we have explored how coming-of-age experiences helped to inform them of their slave status, experiences that served as the motivation behind resistance. How did they acquire the knowledge to imitate adult resistance? What forms of resistance did they employ? Perhaps young girls overheard white and black adults discussing the latest master-slave fights,

poisonings, or rebellions. Maybe they assisted fugitives by supplying food or shelter.²³ In whatever way they learned resistance--including flight, poisoning, assault, arson and infanticide--teenage slave girls did not hesitate to fight back.

Teenage slaves ran away as a statement against the slaveholder regime. Yet running away was more commonly associated with adult male slaves. According to scholars, slave women and children absconded less frequently for a number of reasons. For women, family ties, dependent children and a lack of knowledge concerning the surrounding area were factors that bound them to slaveholding farms and plantations. When Jacobs considered leaving, her grandmother urged her to reconsider. Jacobs needed to “stand by [her] children, and suffer with them till death,” because as Aunt Martha put it, “nobody respects a mother who forsakes her children.”²⁴ Countless slave women agreed, remaining enslaved with their children. For slaves fifteen and younger, a lack of familiarity with the world beyond the slaveholding, fear and attachment to parents deterred them from running.²⁵

Historian Freddie Parker, in *Running for Freedom: Slave Runaways in North Carolina, 1775-1840*, presents quantitative data concerning runaway slaves in North Carolina from 1775-1840. Of the runaways he studies, Parker finds that girls between the ages of ten to nineteen

²³ These are plausible methods for the acquisition of knowledge among teenage slave girls as narratives discuss rebellious slaves. For example, in Jacobs’ narrative she recalls the news of Nat Turner’s insurrection arriving to Edenton and the great uproar it caused. No doubt, if Jacobs was aware of it, other teenage girls also learned of slave resistance in that manner. Jacobs, *Incidents*, 63.

²⁴ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 91.

²⁵ For information on runaway slaves consult John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger’s *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) and Freddie Parker’s *Running for Freedom: Slave Runaways in North Carolina, 1775-1840* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993). For more specialized studies concerning women and children consult components of White’s *Ar’n’t I a Woman* for enslaved women and Wilma King’s *Stolen Childhood* for her discussion on children and resistance.

years of age ran away as well.²⁶ These findings suggest that slave girls were more likely to choose flight around the time they were realizing their identity. Many had entered the work force and were engaged in sexual relationships either voluntarily or involuntarily by that time. Therefore, it is no coincidence that they chose flight. Unwilling to have their bodies abused by overwork in fields and kitchens, unwilling to endure rape and breeding by men who viewed them as merely objects of sexual pleasure and needed equipment in the reproduction of the labor force, slave girls absconded. Leaving the slave regime before it could further dehumanize and destroy them; their actions demonstrated to whites that they would not accept it.

Though running away in comparatively smaller numbers, adolescent girls imitated their teenage slave brothers, young men in their teens and twenties who comprised the majority of runaways.²⁷ According to a recent study by John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, young men ran in larger numbers because they were unmarried, childless and “more willing to defy overseers and owners if they felt aggrieved.”²⁸ These reasons also apply to teenage girls, many of whom lacked family responsibilities and were better prepared to abscond. Running to nearby woods, swamps, slave neighborhoods, or opting to head North, teenage girls had no compunction about flight.

Eighteen-year-old Maria ran but was returned home after six months. The slave of Daniel Raymond Fox, a Louisiana physician who attended slaves on local plantations, and his wife, Tryphena, a local teacher, Maria when initially acquired by the small slaveholders performed

²⁶ Parker, *Running for Freedom*. Of the teenage girls that ran, the largest number were between the ages of sixteen to eighteen-years-old. Parker also provides more specific data concerning the frequency distribution of runaways by age and sex in Table 5 of his text (77).

²⁷ Franklin, *Runaway Slaves*, 210.; The authors also assert teenage girls ran but they argue that it was limited due to children or other family ties, 212.

²⁸ Franklin, *Runaway Slaves*, 210-211.

well under Mrs. Fox's supervision. Consequently, Fox wrote her mother: "Maria does pretty well in the kitchen with my showing [her] & I do the housework. I think Maria is going to make me a most excellent servant." Though "young & heedless," Fox felt Maria's weaknesses would be corrected with "a little training & teaching."²⁹ However, Fox's prediction was premature because in March 1861 Maria "took a notion to *run away*."³⁰

Fox had invested a significant amount of time in training the teenager to perform the sweeping, dusting, sewing, and cooking to her satisfaction. However, these tasks were completed if Maria surrendered to her mistress's demands. "She [Maria] was one whom I could depend upon if I were sick or away from home" Fox wrote, "& could feel that she would keep house & attend to everything just as I would myself; that is if she chose to do it & not run out nights & sleep all day as she was very fond of doing."³¹ The day Maria fled she had been punished by Mrs. Fox for not attending her chores. Fox, who chose to discipline Maria because her husband whipped "her so severely," writes that when whipped that morning "she did tolerably well until night," when she again was derelict in her duties.³² Upon receiving another whipping, she once more promised to do better. However, the next morning when summoned Maria had fled, escaping from an unlocked office window, with the assistance of some men whose foot prints were discovered in the soft mud.³³ Maria was eventually located after she

²⁹ Wilma King, ed., *A Northern Woman in the Plantation South: Letters of Tryphena Blanche Holder Fox, 1856-1876* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 100.

³⁰ Wilma King, ed., *A Northern Woman in the Plantation South*, 114.

³¹ Wilma King, ed., *A Northern Woman in the Plantation South*, 115.

³² Wilma King, ed., *A Northern Woman in the Plantation South*, 115.

³³ Wilma King, ed., *A Northern Woman in the Plantation South*, 115-116.

fled, having been aided by local slaves.³⁴ Though she was returned, by running away her actions indicate she refused to capitulate easily to the institution.

Clary, though slightly older, also sought to free herself by running away. According to the September 27, 1837 runaway advertisement in the *North Carolina Journal*, Clary a nineteen-year-old girl about five feet, with a dark complexion and “very large mouth” ran from her Cumberland County master.³⁵ According to South Carolina criminal court cases eighteen years prior to Clary running, Betsy absconded. According to court records, Betsy, a sixteen or seventeen-year-old slave “of black complexion” was captured after attempting to run from her owner Mr. Jeremiah Patterson. Though no verdict or sentence was pronounced, Betsy’s discontent with the institution became apparent as she attempted to escape life on the Patterson slaveholding.³⁶

Far younger girls than Maria, Clary, or Betsy fled as well. Given to Sophia Freeman of Maryland, Rose was a twelve-year-old slave known for her defiant behavior. “Rose was ‘so bad and her habits so vicious and incorrigible’ that none of her employers ‘would retain her in service.’” Moreover, she was “in the habit of running away frequently and was ‘prone to falsehood & theft.’” Despite their best efforts to reform Rose, her owners were without success.³⁷ Virginia slave Louise Jones recalls her flight as a child. Hired out to a local white woman that Louise described as “de meanes’ white ‘oman in de world.” Due to harsh treatment

³⁴ Wilma King, ed., *A Northern Woman in the Plantation South*, 133.

³⁵ *North Carolina Journal* (Fayetteville), 27 September 1837 in Parker, *Running for Freedom* following pg. 95, entitled Selected Newspaper Advertisements for Runaway Slaves.

³⁶ Trial Record of Betsey (Betty), Pendleton/Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, 27 August 1819, South Carolina Criminal Court Cases, Case 2, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia.

³⁷ Franklin, *Runaway Slaves*, 247.

Jones says “I took an’ run ‘way from her. You know I jes’ had to run ‘cross de field to jinin’ plantation, but ‘twas three or four miles fo’ I got to de house. I will always recollect’ dat day going through de woods. I had to pass a spring. I got tired from runnin’. After I got out o’ ev’ybody’s sight, I start walkin’ an’ playin’ ‘long, as chillun will do.”³⁸ Louise Jones’ actions are telling—displeased with her work conditions she chose to leave proving that to this young slave, white authority could be ignored. But not all teenage girls fled, some stayed and simply rebelled by poisoning whites.

Poisoning has long been a form of resistance shrouded in ambiguity. A covert form of resistance it was practiced generally by slave women working as cooks, house servants, and nurses. Given such intimate access to whites, it became easy for slaves to murder entire families by sabotaging food and drink. While scholars are unsure of the number of poisonings committed--or the extent to which accounts of it reflected white paranoia--poisoning remained a reality of slavery that instilled a great deal of fear among whites. Poisoning was generally associated with adult slave women, but just as scholars overlook age’s role in other forms of resistance, they neglect the fact that teenage girls engaged in such a violent, yet clandestine crime as well.

On January 2, 1852, Susan, a fourteen or fifteen-year-old Virginia slave girl, allegedly attempted to “feloniously mingle a certain poison called Poke root and several other things with certain food of boiled cabbage [and] Bacon in order that the same might be taken by Judith W. Brightwell and other persons.”³⁹ Susan, the property of James Fitzgerald, was hired out to the

³⁸ Louise Jones, “Louise Jones Interview,” interview by Susie R. C. Byrd in *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, edited by Charles L. Perdue, Jr., et. al (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 186.

³⁹ Trial Record of Susan, Prince Edward County Court, 15 March 1852, A.D. Dickinson to Joseph Johnson, March 25, 1852, Executive Papers, Library of Virginia, Richmond.

Brightwell family since 1850. On the night in question, Susan allegedly placed the root in the food, but the family discovered a foreign object and refused to eat. Though “no one was made sick at all,” the Brightwell family, certain that their young servant was poisoning them, brought the matter before the Prince Edward County court. Assigned a court-appointed attorney, Asa D. Dickinson, Susan’s trial proceeded with Brightwell family members as well as medical experts testifying. Throughout the testimonies, it was established that Susan wanted to leave the Brightwells, but beyond that the family knew “of no malice or illwill of the prisoner” towards them. The court predictably found Susan guilty, sentencing her to “sale and transportation beyond the limits of the United States.”⁴⁰ Susan consistently denied the Brightwell’s allegations. When questioned, she responded that the mixture was a medicinal poultice she was using on her sore foot. The mixture, she said, accidentally fell into the food from a dish rag that it rested on.⁴¹

Despite Susan’s proclamations of innocence, the date of the incident, January 2, cannot be ignored as this was the day after most slaves were hired out or returned to their owners for the upcoming year. Slaves anticipated the New Year as their fates would be settled on that day. For some, periods of separation were ended and families reunited as hired hands returned to the slaveholdings. For others, the New Year brought heartache, as the day marked the inception of their separation. This was a time of particular trepidation for teenage slaves. The onset of adolescence marked the beginning of their susceptibility to hiring out or permanent sale. As a young teenager, Susan had been snatched from her home and placed in unfamiliar terrain. As January approached, she dreamed of returning to family and friends on the slaveholding. For two consecutive years her hopes were dashed despite her expressing her desire to leave. It is

⁴⁰ Trial Record of Susan.

⁴¹ Trial Record of Susan. Susan later changed her statement saying the mixture was in her hand and fell into the dish.

perhaps no coincidence that a day after this disappointment a mysterious substance appeared in the family's food. It is possible that Susan did not intend to commit murder, but her actions sent a message.

Susan would not be the only teenage girl accused of such a crime, some thirty years prior a North Carolina teen stood trial for murder by poisoning her owner. On a rainy April evening in 1821 at Samuel Skinner's home, in Washington County, a slaveholding county on the North Carolina coast, Lavinia, a slave cook, and her teenage helper, Poll, allegedly conspired to murder their owner. Serving a pot of soup laced with white arsenic that Lavinia prepared, Poll and her accomplice awaited the poison's lethal effects on Skinner and his family.⁴² The household was comprised of Skinner's wife, Nancy, two females whose age ranged from under ten to twenty-six years of age and two males under ten years of age as well as slaves.⁴³ Lavinia prepared the evening meal for the family while Poll, fully aware of the soup's lethal contents, served the meal. After dinner Poll returned to the kitchen with the meal's leftovers. Lavinia, curious about the dinner, anxiously asked, "which eat out of the Bole?" Seeing a visitor, Moses, lying on the bench, Poll called to him to see if he was asleep. Receiving no reply, she proceeded to relay the meal's events. Satisfied with the report, Lavinia prepared her accomplice for the second phase of their plot. Poll was instructed to carry the poison to the Skinner's home and administer it during the night if Skinner called for water. The next morning she was to return the poison to the kitchen for Lavinia to use the following day.

⁴² Samuel Skinner began his downward spiral on the twenty-third day of April in Washington County, North Carolina. Formed in 1799 from Tyrrell County and named in honor of the United States' first president, George Washington, Washington County is located in coastal North Carolina. Nestled between Tyrrell, Hyde, Beaufort, Martin and Bertie Counties, the county lies on the Albemarle Sound. Dorothy Williams Potter, *1820 Federal Census of North Carolina*, Washington, County, Volume LIV, ix-30.

⁴³ Potter, *1820 Federal Census*, 6.

Very early the next morning, Poll returned to the kitchen, hid the arsenic in the designated hiding place and reported the previous night's events to Lavinia. Although Poll was unable to give her deadly venom to Skinner, as he got his own water that night she learned that Skinner, after pouring a glass of water, "puked like a dog." In this fashion, the white arsenic was beginning to torture slowly Samuel Skinner and eighteen days later, on May 10, 1821, he died.⁴⁴ Suspected and formally charged with murder by poisoning, Poll and Lavinia stood trial.

Indicted for Samuel Skinner's murder, these women fought to save themselves from the gallows. Upon their arrest and examination before the committing magistrate, Lavinia accused a local white man, John Skinner, of giving "Poll something like lime" to place in Samuel Skinner's food."⁴⁵ Pleading not guilty, Poll and Lavinia were tried separately from John Skinner. Their legal battle, which initially began in Washington County, North Carolina, was reviewed in the Chowan County Superior Court, the North Carolina Supreme Court and Bertie County Judicial System. After two years of judicial proceedings, Poll was acquitted and Lavinia sentenced to death.

Poll, as a house and body servant, enjoyed an advantageous position. Like her accomplice, Lavinia, Poll's gender confined her to a sphere deemed appropriate for women, but her adolescence, gave her a greater edge. Her youthfulness, a period associated with innocence, possibly deterred whites from suspecting her as a brutal criminal. As such no one believed a conspiracy was occurring as Poll moved throughout the house and out back to the kitchen. If suspected, the Skinners' would not have eagerly eaten their meal on that deadly April evening;

⁴⁴ Trial Records of Poll and Lavinia, Slave Records: Criminal Actions Concerning Slaves, 1821, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh.

⁴⁵ Trial Record of Poll and Lavinia.

thus Poll's defined gender role coupled with her adolescence made her a perfect murderer. But was she merely an aid to Lavinia, or did she play an equal role in the plot?

Undoubtedly, the legal system held that Lavinia was more liable; as she was sentenced to pay for the crime with her life. Whites perhaps believed she led this gullible teenager to commit such a crime. But as has been suggested by twelve-year-old Rose, the habitual runaway, slaves, despite youthfulness resisted the system not because of the influence of older adult slaves but due to the harsh experiences they endured during their young lives. How much more for females in their early and late teens who committed violent forms of resistance?

Slave resistance sent a powerful message to slaveholders. It represented discontent and a determination to resist. How much more powerful was this message when this resistance turned from breaking tools, or simply running away to violently attacking white Southerners? Slaves realized that fighting whites in most cases carried harsh consequences, yet some chose to fight anyway. Source material reveals a number of men and women lashed out. But analyzing records, such as court records and narratives, with age as an analytical tool, reveals that young slaves physically assaulted their oppressors as well. While older, larger slaves were in a better position to attack whites directly, younger slaves employed techniques, such as abusing bedridden masters and mistresses, that made up for their size disadvantage.

Slaves as young as nine-years-old engaged in violent resistance. Nine-year-old Judy of Albemarle County, Virginia attacked her ill mistress Margaret Terrill. According to the court records a few days prior to the attack Judy was beaten for stealing, and she sought retribution. Ambushing her mistress with tongs while she slept, Judy, to Terrill's surprise and pain, expressed her desire to kill her mistress. Setting out to accomplish this feat, the young girl beat Terrill with a shovel and gouged at her eyes, leaving her mistress with a facial scar and broken

fingers.⁴⁶ Certainly Judy's youth, coupled with her seemingly deep-seeded hatred, made this case quite shocking. Perhaps the beating Judy received at the hands of her owners was one in a long series of constant abuse. Unwilling to take it anymore this slave child lashed out attacking her perpetrator as well as the system Terrill sought to maintain.

Other young enslaved females resisted violently. Sixteen-year-old Emma Gray of Morehouse Parish, Louisiana, after repeated beatings, retaliated. Punished due to problems with her plowing, the overseer, referred to as Old Bumpus, hit Emma ““with a bull whip—drawing blood.”” In her interview she says, ““I grabbed it; he changed ends and hit me on the head. I then snatched the whip and struck him on the head. This drew blood, making both of us bleed. After fifteen minutes of hard tussling, he let me go and never attempted to whip me again.””⁴⁷ Tired of the abuse, Gray made a conscious choice to retaliate, and the result was that Old Bumpus stopped the whippings. But others fought and though the abuse persisted, their actions empowered them while also revealing their hatred for slavery.

Like Judy and Emma, Elizabeth Keckley fought back. But based on her writing we are better able to understand the enslaved adolescent psyche as they contemplated using violence against their oppressors. We have been introduced to Mr. Bingham and the abuse he administered to Elizabeth earlier in the dissertation, returning to that incident reveals Elizabeth's reaction to this abuse, she wrote: “I drew myself up proudly, firmly, and said: . . . ‘Nobody has a right to whip me but my own master, and nobody shall do so if I can prevent it.’”⁴⁸ Although Bingham overcame her physically, she resisted vigorously. Like Frederick Douglass, Keckley

⁴⁶ William A. Link, *Roots of Secession: Slavery and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 49-50.

⁴⁷ John B. Cade, “Out of the Mouths of Ex-Slaves,” *Journal of Negro History* Vol. 20, No. 3 (Jul., 1935): 315.

⁴⁸ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1968 reprint), 33.

was empowered by the experience of resistance. Keckley suffered greatly at Bingham's hands, a man she later learned had "pledged himself to Mrs. Burwell to subdue what he called [her] 'stubborn pride.'" Yet she also discovered that after each incident she acquired a "pride as strong and defiant as ever."⁴⁹ However, in analyzing Keckley's statement "nobody has a right to whip me but my own master, and nobody shall do so if I can prevent it," interesting attitudes emerge concerning her view of the balance of power in antebellum society.

Keckley recognized the wide-ranging powers the slaveholder regime vested in her owner, but it is unclear by her latter statement if she completely accepted that authority. When she stated "nobody" would whip her, did that include her legal owner or simply whites who did not own her? The fact that she complained to her owner, Minister Robert Burwell, the son of her legal owner, Colonel Burwell, suggests that she recognized Burwell's power superseded anything Mr. Bingham might say. But her continued resistance of Bingham when she was sent back to assist him reveals that Minister Burwell's commands meant nothing to her either. Essentially, Keckley's actions revealed that white authority was effective only if slaves chose to accept it. In the end, Elizabeth realized, she could disregard it if and when she chose to do so. Resisting slaveholding power was possibly linked to Keckley's youthfulness. It might also be connected to what Schweninger and Franklin describe as an important characteristic of young male runaways--their greater willingness to test the limits of white authority. Lucy was among those who chose to test white authority.

According to Virginia criminal court records, Lucy, a thirteen-year-old enslaved girl, "on the twenty fourth day of June 1852 in said City, feloniously, and maliciously in the night time of

⁴⁹ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1968 reprint), 36-37.

that day, burn[ed] the dwelling house of James H. Peay.”⁵⁰ Arson was a crime that not only endangered the lives of whites but could also destroy their property. Again generally associated with men, teenage girls used it as a means to lash out against white authority as well. On the night of the fire, Lucy was up well past her usual bedtime of nine o’clock but her actions were not held with the least bit of suspicion. Securing a candlestick from Mr. Peay, she went into the small lock up room in which she was responsible. Shortly after, residents of the home smelled smoke and discovered fire in the room. What drove this thirteen-year-old girl to commit such a crime? Based on court documents we know that Lucy was a hired servant in the household and had been with the Peay family for at least a year. As a hired servant she was separated from her family, an occurrence most slave youth feared. Lucy was not exempt.⁵¹

As if the isolation from family was not enough, Lucy was also assigned additional work duties and at some point given a whipping for “improper and unruly conduct.”⁵² Perhaps all these changes encouraged Lucy to burn the Peay home. Certainly Mr. Peay believed so as he noted the whipping, which took place some months before, in the deposition. Though we are unaware of the trial’s outcome, Lucy’s actions reveal that teenage slave girls, as they became more familiar with the horrors of slavery, the isolation, increased workloads, and whipping, fought back using any means necessary. Though Lucy’s crime endangered the lives of whites, what does it say when slaves murdered their own children?

Infanticide, like poisoning is surrounded by a great deal of uncertainty as slave mothers tried their best to hide the crime. A form of slave resistance exclusive to enslaved women,

⁵⁰ Trial Record of Lucy, Richmond Hustings Court, June 13, 1852, Library of Virginia, Richmond.

⁵¹ Trial Record of Lucy.

⁵² Trial Record of Lucy.

infanticide complicated whites' understanding of the slave psyche and their subsequent actions. With assaults and other forms of murder whites' easily interpreted resistance as simply personal conflict that accompanied relationships, yet how did one comprehend a mother, allowing a child to mature, enduring the agony of labor and then slaying the issue of her body?

In order to sooth the burning question, some whites simply attributed infanticide to the slave female's barbaric nature. But it was more than simply apathetic mothers murdering helpless children. Infanticide indicated slave female's hatred of the system, the abuses they suffered from it, such as rape, and their inability to relinquish another baby to the depraved slave world. Furthermore, infanticide demonstrated slave female's attempt to overthrow the system of slavery. For without slaves the institution lacked its needed labor force. This causes one to argue that while slave children suffered the aggression, it was not directed at the child but rather the system of slavery. All of these reasons cause many historians to agree that infanticide was the most alarming form of slave violence as killing their babies slave women sent an "unnerving message."⁵³ But how much more unnerving when teenage girls, not adult women, killed their children?

According to the Richmond Hustings court records, Lucy, a fourteen-year-old enslaved girl of Virginia gave birth to a boy in August 1852. At some point after giving birth she murdered the infant by taking a brick and severely fracturing his skull. It appears that Lucy secretly delivered the child as those in the house characterized her behavior as "confused and stupid" and heard what appeared to be the faint cry of a child. It would not be until Lucy underwent extensive questioning coupled with a search of the premises which uncovered the afterbirth and

⁵³ Link, *Roots of Secession*, 58.

the deceased male infant, who was discovered in a “hogshead, wrapped up in an old apron,” that it was proven that Lucy had indeed given birth and committed murder.⁵⁴

Based on the existing depositions we know that Lucy’s actions shocked those around, as she was described as a young woman of “excellent character.” Though she originally denied her guilt she eventually confessed to the birth and subsequent murder. But her actions, when asked the motive behind the murder, are striking. When posed the question as to why she committed the heinous crime “Lucy raised the cover partly over her face, and smiling replied that she killed it from shame.”⁵⁵

While others speculated Lucy was overly medicated as she had taken “a table spoon full of spirits with a tea spoon ful of camphor with 10 drops of laudanum in each, three times” within a three hour period.⁵⁶ We cannot ignore Lucy’s own statement, that “shame” motivated her actions. No doubt, the fact that she was a slave played in her young mind. No longer allowed to ramble carefree about the plantation she was coming to understand her fate as property. To further complicate the situation, the child was now *having* a child who she knew faced a similar fate. That coupled with the fact that Lucy was pregnant and unmarried all led her to feel shame; a deep sense of shame that potentially pushed her to murder her child.

It is interesting to note that Lucy was originally found guilty and sentenced to death. But the court, upon reviewing the depositions, reconsidered. Instead recommending “to the Executive to commute the punishment of the said slave Lucy, to sale and transportation, because

⁵⁴ Trial Record of Lucy, Richmond Hustings Court, August 24, 1852, Library of Virginia. Richmond.

⁵⁵ Trial Record of Lucy, Richmond Hustings Court, August 24, 1852, Library of Virginia. Richmond.

⁵⁶ Trial Record of Lucy, Richmond Hustings Court, August 24, 1852, Library of Virginia. Richmond.

of her youth, and the excellent character which she has borne up to the time of this crime.”⁵⁷

Ironically, the system recognized her youth and humanity to save her life from the gallows but it failed to acknowledge and attack the institution of oppression that led to Lucy’s initial demise and that of her unnamed son.

Though Lucy’s child was dead and she was relocated she delivered a message to her black and white contemporaries. To blacks, male and female alike, she demonstrated her ability to resist and not passively accept bondage. For Lucy to have been fourteen-years-old as oppose to twenty-five or thirty-years-old indicates that perhaps her newness as a slave granted her a deeper resolve to *not* allow another generation to endure her lot, as a slave, despite her brief experience. To whites, young Lucy demonstrated the fragile state of white power and their ability, despite their youthfulness, to annihilate that power at any time and by any means necessary. To all antebellum inhabitants her case reveals the great lengths enslaved females took to attack the peculiar institution.

Resistance of any kind baffled many whites. What did it say when the young, those not well acquainted with the toil of slave labor, burned homes, killed masters and murdered their babies? It sent a clear message that black teenagers would not capitulate easily to white desires to dehumanize them. Despite being labeled property, teenage slave girls fought to reject this definition. With each foul word, kick, whipping or sexual advance by whites, slave girls, unable to suppress the pain, used their only recourse, aggression thereby upsetting the delicate balance of power that existed. Moreover, for these to be young girls they sent an alarming message to society. Their actions stated that they would not simply acquiesce to white power. As whites

⁵⁷ Trial Record of Lucy, Richmond Hustings Court, August 24, 1852, Library of Virginia. Richmond.

depended on slaves to accept their lot this had to create a sense of fear and cause them to question if the next generation of slaves would accept their status. If not, the institution of slavery stood in jeopardy of dissolution.

CHAPTER 7 COMING OF AGE

For nineteenth-century white southerners, one of the most important events in a girl's life was her debut into society. Commonly referred to as "coming out," this moment involved new activities and a new identity.¹ For elite white girls, the culmination of this was a debutante ball, where young women, having successfully completed puberty, were formally introduced to society, revealing their new, mature identity. Antebellum whites attached great importance to the transition from white childhood to white womanhood. However, slave youth also debuted, though in a vastly different way, and, like white girls, they made a public presentation of their new identity.

This dissertation has argued that teenage slaves experienced a coming-of-age process that led them to understand their role in antebellum society. Changes in work, dress, and sex guided slave girls in the formation of a slave identity in which they realized their position as property, rather than human beings. But based on accounts of teenage resistance explored in Chapter Seven not all teenage slave girls accepted this assigned identity. If enslaved teenage females did not acquiesce in their status, what identity emerged in adulthood? Because the institution of slavery persisted into the nineteenth-century, enslaved men, women and children undoubtedly adapted to their status. But to what extent did they do so? Did teenage slave girls emerge as brainwashed slave women? Were they renegades who lashed out? Or did they reconcile their identities as black, slave, and female, creating a median between the extremes? This concluding chapter addresses these questions by exploring the identity that emerged from enslaved teenage girls' coming-of-age.

¹ Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters*, 117.

Although white slaveholders employed various practices to force African American youth to accept their slave identity, considerable evidence suggests otherwise. Based on Jacobs and Keckley's coming-of-age narratives, along with other slave sources, this chapter argues that, during puberty, teenage slaves acquired a double consciousness which included their enslaved and human selves. The duality of the slaves' experience can be readily observed through their actions in the African American culture. Depending on the circumstances, slaves operated either in the role of property or person; those slaves who demanded that antebellum society recognize their person contested whites, consequently emerging with a greater sense of self. Though forced to operate between two conflicting ideologies among whites, within their community slave adults reconciled the double consciousness by nurturing relationships and participating in celebrations in the African American subculture, a distinct culture formed as slaves created practices to circumvent limitations slaveholders placed on them.

Slaves, especially women, left few written records, and even fewer that chronicle their lives from childhood to adulthood, making it difficult for historians to study slaves from childhood to adulthood. That is why the lives of Harriet Jacobs and Elizabeth Keckley became so important: both narratives richly describe slaves' lives from infancy to adulthood. As this dissertation has relied heavily on both women in understanding the rites slave teens engaged it is appropriate that they should be examined to understand the identity slaves emerged with after adolescence.

Entering adolescence, youth experience physiological and psychological changes and are expected to adopt certain social skills in order to assume adult responsibilities. After years of development, the person emerges as an adult. This dissertation has argued that, under slavery, race not only altered the adolescent experience but also the identity that resulted from this

process. So far, we have examined some of the practices young white females, particularly wealthy whites, underwent in order to prepare for their adult lives. As noted, by completing their formal training and returning home to assume domestic duties, white teenage females became formally introduced to society, signaling their transition to southern womanhood and their readiness for marriage. Because marriage served as the ultimate goal of their social debuts, this rite did not occur typically until the late teens. Hence girls, such as Mississippian Mary Bertron, were forbidden from making a debut at thirteen whereas older teens, like seventeen-year-old Laura Wirt of Virginia, came out immediately after completing school.²

Many girls anticipated the event not because of the potential for marriage, but because of the exciting social life that accompanied the event in lively galas, travel, and the beginning of courtship. Excited by the parties and potential callers, many young girls, such as fourteen-year-old Mississippi school girl Lemuella Brickell, looked forward to this event. “I only can anticipate that eventful epoque in my life, the ‘coming out,’ . . . I shall laugh and dance and flirt, haha, am I not going to have a nice time,” she declared. “I will have beaux, plenty of them (that is if I can get some) and go to parties and lead a very pleasant life.”³ Not all young girls were as eager as Lemuella. “Instead of rejoicing as some girls do at the idea of being released from the restraint and imployment [sic] of school and becomming [sic] as the fashionable deem it ‘a turned out young lady,’” wrote Virginian Mary Miller, “I feel exceedingly sad to think that my school days, my hours of pleasure, are gone never to return.”⁴ Despite varying emotions, white teenage girls recognized that by coming out they were assuming a new identity--that of a

² Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters*, 117.

³ Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters*, 116.

⁴ Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters*, 116-117.

southern woman. With this new identity came the responsibility of wife, mother and slaveholding mistress.

Although black women became wives and mothers like their white female contemporaries, slavery altered their roles. For example, marriage for slaves was not legally sanctioned. Slavery also impeded their ability to select mates. The institution of slavery also limited their parental role as work, was first and foremost. The potential sale of children was an additional reality slave mothers faced daily.⁵ Given these disparities, what identity emerged for black teenage girls who assisted their young mistresses with their corsets and hair as they prepared for the luxurious balls held in their honor? Exactly what awaited enslaved teenage girls in womanhood?

On the cusp of assuming adult roles, enslaved teenage girls participated in a coming-out party not in fancy halls or on manor estates. Instead, they “came out” dressed in their slave attire in fields, or in white homes. In these lackluster surroundings, their new identities became apparent to whites and blacks alike. To whites, another slave reached maturity and thus capable of extending planters’ wealth through increased workloads and reproducing additional slaves. For enslaved teenage girls and those within the slave community, this coming out was far more complicated. It entailed a new identity as it did for white girls, but it was one that reconciled the need to appease whites by acting as docile, unthinking workers while simultaneously refusing to surrender their sense of humanity.

W.E.B Du Bois, in *The Souls of Black Folks*, examined black identity after the Civil War and concluded that newly freed blacks possessed a double identity, one that embodied their black and American consciousness, identities that were at war with the other for acceptance. He wrote:

⁵ For a text concerning slavery and the black family consult Gutman’s *The Black Family*.

“One ever feels his twoness,--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.”⁶ Studying slavery, I argue that a double consciousness existed during the antebellum era among blacks as they saw themselves as slaves and humans, one title unjustly bestowed on them, the other inherently awarded by birth. Examining the actions of adult slave women suggests that enslaved teenagers acquired a double consciousness that included their enslaved and human selves. Like blacks in Du Bois’ classic work, these two souls were kept together by the “dogged strength” of these young women.

Harriet Jacobs and Elizabeth Keckley were examples of young enslaved women who possessed this dual identity.⁷ Performing their assigned work duties and accepting the hardships of slavery, slave women yielded to the demands of their slave conscious, but by resisting, tending to their families, and gaining their freedom they affirmed their humanity.

Working as a house servant for Dr. and Mrs. Flint, Jacobs described her duties, which included sewing, running errands, and basic domestic chores. “I did my work faithfully,” she wrote, “though not, of course, with a willing mind.”⁸ Jacobs, like countless enslaved people, recognized her lot as chattel labor. As such she accepted it by “faithfully” completing her tasks.

⁶ W.E.B Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folks*, with an introduction by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Bantam Books, 1989), 3.

⁷ Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and The Politics of Empowerment* explores the construction of black women’s identity using theory and the lived experiences of African American females. Among the ideas she explores is the self-definition of black women in Chapter Five entitled “The Power of Self-Definition.” Black feminist poet Audre Lorde’s ideas are among the items examined in this chapter. According to Lorde, “In order to survive, those of us for whom oppression is as American as apple pie have always had to be watchers.” “This ‘watching’ generates a dual consciousness in African-American women,” one that mimics the oppressors’ actions while at the same time creating a self-defined image that is not readily visible to the dominant group (91). I find that this process of a dual consciousness and the practices associated therein began with these teenage slave girls as they began to understand their slave identity and sought ways to avoid its demoralizing effects. For additional information on Collins and Lorde’s ideas consult Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and The Politics of Empowerment*, Perspectives on Gender, Volume 2 (New York: Routledge, 1991).

⁸ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 95.

But though it appeared to whites that she accepted her status by completing her work, she did so without a “willing mind.” Whites seemingly controlled her body, but they could never control her mentally.

Further examination of Jacobs’ comment suggests that this unwilling mindset was prevalent throughout the slave community. In a somewhat flippant manner she wrote, “I did my work faithfully, though not, *of course*, with a willing mind.” Her word choice suggests that it was an understood fact, at least among slaves, and perhaps those who sympathized with them, that slaves, while property, never fully accepted the role. If they were working it was only to appear docile and obedient, their counterparts knew their true intentions as indicated by Jacobs’ word choice.

Owned by Colonel Burwell and later loaned to his eldest son, Keckley worked as a house servant during her thirty years as a slave. With age she assumed additional duties in the home. “I grew strong and healthy,” she wrote, “and, notwithstanding I knit socks and attended to various kinds of work.”⁹ When she moved in with Robert, Keckley continued to accept her status as a slave. She kept working diligently, completing the “work of three servants.”¹⁰ Despite her hard work, she was often mistreated, causing her time with the young poor couple to pass slowly. However, her unhappiness did not stop her from adhering to her role as slave: “I continued to serve them,” she wrote.¹¹ Keckley, like Jacobs, recognized her slave identity thus continued to serve, yet this did not indicate that she accepted mentally her enslaved status, as proven by her resistance and desire to secure her freedom.

⁹ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1968 reprint), 21.

¹⁰ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1968 reprint), 32.

¹¹ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1968 reprint), 32.

Just as slaves' adherence to labor requirements denoted their outward acceptance of their slave identity additional challenges, such as denial of basic human rights, physical abuse, and family separation indicated that though labeled slaves, the title did not make them immune to the pain humans face in adversity. Former slave Virginia Hayes Shepherd's discussion of her mother's work experience is an example of slaves assuming their human identity when basic human decencies were denied. In her interview Shepherd stated, "As slaves, Negroes did some real work," Shepherd stated, "but even the Negro had his limit. My mother use to tell me about such an instance. One day she had worked and worked and worked until she just couldn't go any faster. The overseer told her to work faster or he'd beat her. She said she simply stopped and told them, 'Go a-head, kill me if you want. I'm working as fast as I can and I just can't do more.' They saw she was at the place where she didn't care whether she died or not; so they left her alone."¹²

In attempting to meet the unrealistic work expectations of the overseer, Shepherd's mother operated as a slave. But as the overseer's demands increased, it became increasingly difficult for her to meet them. Shepherd's mother abandoned the slave role and assented to her limited human capabilities as revealed in her statement, "I'm working as fast as I can and I just can't do more." At this emotional place her overseer recognized that she was unaffected by physical consequences thus they left her alone. Although we do not know the final outcome of the day's event we can surmise that she was left alone for the balance of that day, but not all slaves were given that luxury. At times slaves were forced to operate between their dual selves almost simultaneously.

¹² Virginia Hayes Shepherd, "Virginia Hayes Shepherd Interview," interview by Emmy Wilson and Claude W. Anderson in *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, edited by Charles L. Perdue, Jr., et. Al (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 258-259.

For example, Keckley recounted the day her father was sold and forced to part from her family. Elizabeth's mother, Agnes, was naturally disheartened and cried profusely. Observing the scene, Agnes' mistress retorted coldly, "'Stop your nonsense; there is no necessity for you putting on airs. Your husband is not the only slave that has been sold from his family, and you are not the only one that has had to part. There are plenty more men about here, and if you want a husband so badly, stop your crying and go and find another.'"13

Mrs. Burwell's callous words reflected the huge gulf that existed between white and black antebellum women. A married woman, Burwell had little sympathy for Agnes, who, as a woman also, had a husband whom she loved dearly. According to Burwell, Agnes was a slave who, due to the sexual lewdness and savage nature of blacks, could easily part with one husband and simply "go and find another." But Agnes' actions in response to her mistress's cruel remarks demonstrate how slaves operated between two identities sometimes quite seamlessly.

Rather than responding to her mistress's cruelty, Agnes simply left in silence masking the scorn she felt for Mrs. Burwell in her heart.¹⁴ Moments before the cruel reprimand, Agnes revealed her humanity as she cried out in anguish for her beloved husband. But when instructed by her mistress to stop mourning the loss of a man that, according to white society, could be replaced easily, Agnes assumed the role of slave yet again by stopping the crying. As with slaves performing their work duties, one cannot take Agnes' silence as acceptance; as indicated by the "loathing scorn," reflecting not only on her face but also in her heart; she simply mentally decided to operate as a slave at that moment. As a young girl Elizabeth witnessed this scene, no doubt learning how to operate effortlessly between her slave and human identities.

¹³ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1968 reprint), 24-25.

¹⁴ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1968 reprint), 25.

As girls, countless slave women learned that slavery forced them to act as servants in one realm and people in another. As adults, many slave women performed their role as slaves despite the hardships they faced, often doing so with a happy disposition. But as Keckley wrote: “Alas! the sunny face of the slave is not always an indication of sunshine of the heart.”¹⁵ Working as slaves did not mean women abandoned their humanity. As suggested through their resistance to the injustices suffered, care rendered to their children, and their eventual release from the institution through flight and purchase slave women operated as human beings, despite white efforts to eradicate any sense of black humanity or self-worth.

Chapter Six argues that, for teenage slaves, resistance became a response to the changes they were undergoing as whites were acclimating them to their lives of labor and toil. For many of these young men and women, resistance suggested their unhappiness and their unwillingness to submit. Jacobs, Keckley, and countless slave women resisted slaveholder authority, demonstrating that, while slaves, they maintained their humanity. Each time these young women and other slaves resisted they demonstrated that they were not *slaves*, but rather human beings who happened to be unjustly *enslaved*. We have explored how Jacobs defied her master, who wanted a sexual relationship with her; instead choosing a white lover, Mr. Sands. Speaking of the feelings that arose in her initial courtship, she wrote, “He expressed a great deal of sympathy, and a wish to aid me. He constantly sought opportunities to see me, and wrote to me frequently. . . . So much attention from a superior person was, of course, flattering; for human nature is the same in all. I also felt grateful for his sympathy, and encouraged by his kind words. It seemed

¹⁵ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1968 reprint), 29.

to me a great thing to have such a friend. By degrees, a more tender feeling crept into my heart.”¹⁶

Jacobs’ words are quite telling concerning slave females identifying themselves as humans. Again she employs the term “of course” noting that though slaves, it was only natural that she would enjoy the attention. Her humanity is further reflected in the emotional attachment that grew between the pair in this forbidden relationship. Slavery dictated that Sands, because of his race and gender, enjoyed social superiority. In fact, legally it was a relationship between a person, Sands, and property, Jacobs, but the bonds of slavery could not eradicate Harriet’s human capacity to feel various emotions. During each visit with Sands Jacobs operated within her humanity as revealed by her gratefulness for his sympathy, kindness and the tender feeling that arose in her heart. Thus, as she so eloquently stated, her rebellious love relationship with Sands demonstrates that despite her slave title that “human nature [was indeed] the same in all.”¹⁷ This sense of humanity arose in other slave women, including Keckley.

By resisting those who attempted to whip her, Elizabeth asserted her humanity. Refusing to be beaten, Keckley relayed the scuffles that ensued when she was punished. Though she recalled the “terrible, excruciating agony of those moments,” this was a recurring incident as she continued to fight.¹⁸ Yet, if the pain was indeed that unbearable, what prompted this young woman and others like her to resist? The answer lies in a statement she made after reporting the violence she suffered from her owner, Reverend Robert Burwell. “My spirit rebelled against the unjustness that had been inflicted upon me,” she wrote, “and though I tried to smother my anger

¹⁶ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 54.

¹⁷ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 54.

¹⁸ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1968 reprint), 34.

and to forgive those who had been so cruel to me, it was impossible.”¹⁹ Keckley could not suppress her inner humanity. Despite attempts by the institution of slavery to break her spirit, Elizabeth remained strong and unbreakable like so many others. Each time, Keckley fought back, Jacobs courted her white lover, or slaves, like Shepherd’s mother, reached their limit, they reaffirmed their humanity. Yet, resistance was not the only way they displayed it, through caring for their children slave females further shaped their identity as human beings.

Both Jacobs and Keckley gave birth to slave children. By age nineteen, Jacobs was the mother of a son and daughter. Keckley had a son. Though lamenting the status of their children, both young women loved them dearly. Writing of her son George, Keckley said: “He came into the world through no will of mine, and yet, God only knows how I loved him.”²⁰ She did not desire to be a mother, writing that “I could not bear the thought of bringing children into slavery—of adding one single recruit to the millions bound to hopeless servitude.”²¹ But once George arrived Elizabeth loved and cared for him with great vigor. Jacobs’ love was apparent throughout her narrative as well. She found joy in everything from her children’s smiles to watching them sleep.²² This love was further displayed in the excellent care both women rendered their children. But these young mothers’ fidelity went beyond meeting their children’s day-to-day needs as both women worked tirelessly to secure their family’s freedom as well.

Jacobs viewed slavery as a curse to all involved, white and black alike.²³ She sought to free herself of this blight through flight and purchase of her children. It took seven years of

¹⁹ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1968 reprint), 35.

²⁰ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1968 reprint), 47.

²¹ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1968 reprint), 46.

²² Jacobs, *Incidents*, 62.

²³ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 52.

confinement in a garret in her grandmother's home, coupled with numerous plots, to trick her owner until she was able to flee North. Although overwhelmed by the demands of seeking her children's freedom from Dr. Flint and eventually their father, Mr. Sands, who later retained ownership, her love for her children strengthened her resolve. Hiding in her grandmother's home for quite some time Jacobs grew "weary of [her] long imprisonment." Yearning to die, "the hope of serving [her] children. . . [made her] willing to bear on."²⁴ Though Jacobs escaped prior to securing both of her children's freedom she never stopped seeking ways to secure liberty for her offspring. This woman's tireless efforts again reiterate that slaves recognized that slavery was not their "natural" state, freedom was their inalienable right. Freedom that was given to them by nature of being human; hence each time they resisted and attempted to care for and free their children they revealed their humanity.

Keckley's love prompted her to ask: "Why should my son be held in slavery?" Unwilling to accept this fate for her son, she set out to buy herself and George.²⁵ Having relocated to the Deep South with her owners, Keckley was soon employed as a seamstress and dressmaker to make money for the struggling slaveholding family. After securing a verbal promise that she could purchase her family's freedom for twelve hundred dollars she set out to secure the money.²⁶ Although unable to do so, friends in St. Louis raised the money freeing Keckley and George.²⁷ Through these women's great desire to gain freedom, we find that they ascribed to their sense of humanity rather than their slave status. Slavery dictated that African Americans

²⁴ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 127.

²⁵ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1968 reprint), 47.

²⁶ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1968 reprint), 49.

²⁷ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1968 reprint), 54-60.

were naturally created to work as chattel. If that were the case why would slaves desire freedom or fight to have their humanity recognized by the white power structure?

Depending on the circumstances, slaves operated either in the role of property or person; those who wanted antebellum society to recognize their humanity contested whites. This struggle, often occurring during slaves' formative years, shaped their self-awareness. The examples of Jacobs and Keckley, as well as of Frederick Douglass, suggest that at the end of adolescence, slaves, despite the horrors perpetuated against them, often managed to emerge from adolescence with a greater sense of self.

Jacobs' father taught her at a young age that she was of value. Describing him as a skilled carpenter who had the "feelings of a freeman," she explained how her masters despised him because "they thought he had spoiled his children, by teaching them to feel that they were human beings."²⁸ But Elijah taught his children much more than simply how to embrace their humanity. According to Jacobs' brother, John, in his autobiography, *A True Tale of Slavery*, he remembered how Elijah also taught them to hate slavery.²⁹ Such ideas instilled into children were dangerous for whites, who believed, wrote Harriet, that it "was [a] blasphemous doctrine for a slave to teach [such ideas]; presumptuous in him, and dangerous to the masters."³⁰ Slavery dictated that slaves view themselves as beasts of burden, to think otherwise made them more difficult to control. Jacobs' realization that slavery was a cruel and unjust institution helped her preserve the values instilled by her father. This sense of love and affirmation inculcated by

²⁸ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 9, 10.

²⁹ John Jacobs, *A True Tale of Slavery*, in Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*, edited and with an introduction by Jean Fagan Yellin (London, Harvard University Press, 2000), 208.

³⁰ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 10.

Jacobs' father forever guided her life, as revealed in the way she conducted herself as an enslaved woman and, eventually, a free woman of color.

For Douglass and Keckley, their self-awareness arose after they violently resisted the slave system. Douglass, as discussed in the resistance chapter, recalled the turning point in his life as his decision to resist physically the overseer, Mr. Covey. When first arriving at the Covey farm, Douglass recalled that he was "somewhat unmanageable," though "a few months of [Covey's rough] discipline tamed [him]." "Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me," he writes, "I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute!"³¹ Douglass' words powerfully describe how the abuses of slavery stole his sense of humanity and self-worth. As a young slave he viewed himself as a human, a person unjustly enslaved, but the constant oppression eradicated that feeling, replacing the vibrant teen with a broken brute. Unfortunately, Douglass' experience reverberated throughout the South as numerous teenagers fell under the yoke of slavery. However, just as violence was used to break Douglass it would be violence that restored his broken spirit.

Douglass acknowledges that the events at Covey's farm formed "an epoch in [his] humble history." "You have seen how a man was made a slave," he wrote, and "you shall see how a slave was made a man."³² In vivid detail, he described his battle with Covey and how he regained not only his masculinity but his humanity as well. Certainly, as discussed in the resistance chapter, the physical attack by Douglass against Covey loomed large. But the impact

³¹ Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 74.

³² Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 75.

that this event had in Douglass's identity formation is equally significant, for in battling Covey, Douglass was not simply lashing out at his white attacker or the institution of slavery, he was also reclaiming his sense of worth and manhood. "This battle with Mr. Covey," Douglas wrote, "was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free. The gratification afforded by the triumph was a full compensation for whatever else might follow, even death itself. . . . I felt as I never felt before. It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact."³³ Douglass, a young man once broken, emerges with a new vision of who he was. Though he remained a slave four years after that life changing event, his identity was no longer that of a broken, downhearted hopeless slave. However, this feeling was not exclusive to teenage boys, as proven by Keckley, enslaved teenage girls experienced such life altering incidents as well.

During her years in North Carolina, Keckley, like Douglass, was sent by her owners to a local white person, Mr. Bingham, for the purpose of breaking her into a more docile slave.³⁴ Time and time again Keckley recalled the beatings and how she resisted each attack. But beyond the resistance, Keckley's account reveals the impact this had in her identity formation. After one particularly violent beating Keckley writes "again I went home sore and bleeding, but with pride

³³ Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 79.

³⁴ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1968 reprint), 36.

as strong and defiant as ever.”³⁵ Each fight seemed only to embolden Keckley while weakening her abuser. Of Bingham she writes: “again [he] tried to conquer me, but in vain.” This would be the last attack for as she “stood bleeding before him, nearly exhausted with his efforts, he [Bingham] burst into tears, and declared that it would be a sin to beat [her] any more.”³⁶ With Bingham capitulating, her master, Rev. Burwell undertook the seemingly difficult task to “subdue [Keckley’s] proud, rebellious spirit,” and like Bingham he too failed. “With an air of penitence,” Keckley wrote, Rev. Burwell vowed “that he should never strike me another blow; and faithfully he kept his word.”³⁷

What Keckley lacked in physical ability she possessed in heart and determination, and she emerged a stronger woman who conquered those that sought to conquer her. Though cruelly attacked, this young woman’s sense of self worth not only remained intact but, by her own admission, was as “strong and defiant as ever.” Slavery sought to break slaves, especially in their youth, but as suggested by these young teens, the lessons instilled by parents, as well as personal battles with the institution did not destroy them, if anything it gave them a greater resolve to maintain their sense of personal worth.

Though forced to operate between two conflicting ideologies among whites, slave adults attempted to reconcile their double consciousness. This attempt occurred as slaves used the boundaries slavery forced on them to reshape human practices and events. In doing so, enslaved people fashioned a modicum of normal life. This process led to the formation of the African American subculture, a distinct culture which created practices designed to circumvent slavery’s

³⁵ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1968 reprint), 36-37.

³⁶ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1968 reprint), 37.

³⁷ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1968 reprint), 38.

limitations. Reviewing the adult lives of these young slaves reveals by fostering relationships and engaging in various celebrations a viable slave community was maintained throughout successive generations.³⁸

Since the publication of Blassingame's *The Slave Community*, historians have sought to understand the world beyond the plantation big house. Initially scholars understood the slave experience only from an all-male perspective. Now historians are increasingly interested in enslaved females' role. Erroneously scholars have asserted that due to the nature of slavery enslaved women were self-assertive, independent women. If enslaved women, as White asserts, "seemed exceptionally strong it was partly because they often functioned in groups and derived strength from numbers."³⁹ Scholar Patricia Hill Collins characterizes these sites for gaining strength as "safe spaces," such as black families and community institutions. Within these realms Collins asserts black women could "develop a Black women's culture of resistance."⁴⁰ Agreeing with White and Collins, I find that enslaved women's strength came through family, friends, and spouses, as well as in activities, such as holidays, that became key to maintaining a rich African American subculture, a subculture that insulated slaves against the harsh institution.

Intellectuals have explored the significance of the black subculture to slave survival. Lawrence W. Levine in *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* in exploring black folk ways discovers that "black men and women [in antebellum and post-bellum society] were able to find the means to sustain a far greater degree of self-pride and group cohesion than the system they lived under ever intended for them to be able

³⁸ For more information on the formation of the African American culture consult Gomez's *Exchanging Our Country Marks*.

³⁹ White, *Ar'n't I a Woman*, 119.

⁴⁰ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 95.

to do.” Levine goes on to identify these means of sustenance as the culture formed out of slavery and reconstruction. He writes “upon the hard rock of racial, social and economic exploitation and injustice black Americans forged and nurtured a culture: they formed and maintained kinship networks, made love, raised and socialized children, built a religion, and created a rich expressive culture in which they articulated their feelings and hopes and dreams.”⁴¹ Key to that subculture was the family unit.

Jennifer Fleischner, in *Mastering Slavery: Memory, Family and Identity in Women’s Slave Narratives*, states that “the concept of ‘family,’ however configured, was a crucial counterforce to the soul-murdering abuse and deprivation under slavery.”⁴² Having been the basis of African socio-economic and political structure, slaves imitated African familial practices within their quarters.⁴³ As shown by the countless accounts concerning family, slaves worked diligently to maintain a family structure, and they served as a source of strength and assistance.

Throughout Jacobs’ account, we find countless examples of the continued strength of familial relationships. Orphaned at an early age, Harriet enjoyed little interaction with her parents, but her love for them was obvious, as she often recalled them throughout her narrative. Entering the church to have her children christened, Harriet was overcome by “recollections of [her] mother.” “In many an hour of tribulation I had seemed to hear her voice,” she wrote,

⁴¹ Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), xi.

⁴² Jennifer Fleischner, *Mastering Slavery: Memory, Family and Identity in Women’s Slave Narratives* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 29. To explore additional discussion on the family’s significance especially as it relates to the psyche consult Painter’s *Soul Murder and Slavery*, in it she engages ideas as set forth by Blassingame and White.

⁴³ Howard Dodson, *Jubilee: The Emergence of African-American Culture*, (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, 2002), 114. At the time that Gutman wrote *The Black Family*, it was a common belief by scholars like E. Franklin Frazier, that no connections existed between African and slave family practices however Gutman believed enough evidence existed to suggest otherwise (211). Based on the work of Gutman’s successors we find that continuities between slaves and their African ancestors, while not necessarily exact replicates of African traditions, existed, consult White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman*, 211, note 65.

“sometimes chiding me, sometimes whispering loving words into my wounded heart.”⁴⁴ These memories fueled Harriet as she fought to free herself. On the day her freedom was purchased, she “remembered how [her] poor father had tried to buy [her]. . .and how he had been disappointed.” She hoped that on that day “his spirit was rejoicing” over her freedom.⁴⁵ Though Jacobs’ parents were deceased they were sources of guidance and strength.

Though orphaned, Jacobs was surrounded by a host of other relatives who offered love and support. Her brother, William,⁴⁶ whom she described as “affectionate,” was a source of comfort for her, especially during her teens when she was tormented by Flint. “When he put his arms round my neck, and looked into my eyes, as if to read there the troubles I dared not tell,” she wrote, “I felt that I still had something to love.”⁴⁷ Beyond emotional support, William also assisted in the care of her children and tended to Harriet while ill in her grandmother’s garret.⁴⁸ Family support gave Jacobs the needed strength to survive the institution.

Though not living with her grandmother, Jacobs often visited with her as a teenager, despite threats of punishment. This relationship provided Harriet love, correction, and a place to retreat from Flint’s assault. Jacobs acknowledged that she was forever “indebted to *her* [grandmother] for all [her] comforts, spiritual or temporal.”⁴⁹ This relationship persisted until Jacobs fled slavery.

⁴⁴ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 78, 90.

⁴⁵ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 200.

⁴⁶ William’s character is based on Harriet’s brother, John S. Jacobs.

⁴⁷ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 18, 42.

⁴⁸ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 101, 122.

⁴⁹ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 10, 11.

Strong kinship ties are further reflected in relationships Jacobs maintained with her uncles and aunts. Her love for her Uncle Benjamin,⁵⁰ her mother's brother who fled slavery, manifested itself in naming her son after him.⁵¹ She was also especially fond of Aunt Nancy,⁵² her mother's twin sister who lived with Harriet at the Flints as a house servant. Acting as a surrogate mother to Jacobs, Harriet recalled the strong bond with her aunt. Among her fondest memories was the comfort she found in Nancy's bed at night, as well as the encouragement Nancy offered when Harriet fled and remained in her grandmother's garret. "When my friends tried to discourage me from running away," Jacobs wrote, "she always encouraged me. When they thought I had better return and ask my master's pardon, because there was no possibility of escape, she sent me word never to yield." Nancy also secretly stole away to bring news and a word of cheer to Jacobs hiding place.⁵³ Subsequently, when Nancy died, Harriet was overcome completely with grief. Yet her love for Nancy, as well as the support she and other relatives gave, strengthened Jacobs' resolve to not only love others but to also fight the oppression she faced.

Keckley's narrative also suggests the importance of slave families to the survival of enslaved people. However, unlike Jacobs, who enjoyed the physical presence of loved ones, Elizabeth had to preserve relationships across great distances. Devastated by the sale of her father, Keckley's family maintained contact through letters exchanged with him.⁵⁴ Letter writing was unheard of among most enslaved families as many slaves were illiterate, thus for the Keckleys to retain contact through letters was quite unusual but a valuable tool nonetheless.

⁵⁰ Uncle Benjamin's character is based on Joseph, Harriet's uncle.

⁵¹ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 78.

⁵² Aunt Nancy's character based on Betty, Harriet's aunt.

⁵³ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 144.

⁵⁴ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1968 reprint), 25-28.

Recalling those letters she wrote: “they kept up a regular correspondence for years” with her father. In his letters he included messages to his daughter for her to “be a good girl, and to learn her book.”⁵⁵ As she grew older, Keckley learned the value of letter-writing; when she was sold, she wrote letters back home. Separated from her mother in Virginia, she continued that relationship by correspondence. Through these letters she not only informed her mother of her well-being but she also relayed facts concerning local slaves and whites as well as sought information concerning former relations.⁵⁶ By so doing slaves were able to maintain relationships, relationships that were important in sustaining the African American subculture and their personal survival.

In addition to familial relations, slaves established friendships in slave neighborhoods, moving beyond the boundaries of the slave quarters, as Kaye suggests, to include neighboring plantations and farms. By these friendships, slaves assisted each other in surviving slavery through shelter and food. In Jacobs’ case, through the slave neighborhood she describes, she taught a fellow slave to read, and she received support when she fled her master. Jacobs fondly recalled a fifty-three-year-old black man, Uncle Fred. Having a “most earnest desire to learn to read,” Uncle Fred sought Jacobs’ assistance. Securing a “quiet nook, where no intruder was likely to penetrate,” she instructed her friend over the next six months.⁵⁷ Jacobs recognized the danger of teaching another slave to read, yet her desire to help Uncle Fred outweighed the risks. But her subversion of the slave system, and the risky behavior, suggested the strength of slave friendships.

⁵⁵ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1968 reprint), 25.

⁵⁶ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1968 reprint), 39-42.

⁵⁷ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 72-73.

Jacobs eventually fled the South, but not without much assistance from her slave neighborhood. Her grandmother, uncle, and other local slaves risked their lives to harbor her from Flint. Her friend Peter made final arrangements for her escape. Peter, a man Jacobs described as “kind-hearted [and] noble,” not only aided Harriet but also another fellow enslaved woman in her escape.⁵⁸ In recalling her departure and last thoughts of Peter, Jacobs writes, “I clasped the hand . . . of Peter, the brave, generous friend who had volunteered to run such terrible risks to secure my safety. To this day I remember how his bright face beamed with joy, when he told me he had discovered a safe method for me to escape. Yet that intelligent, enterprising, noble-hearted man was a chattel! . . . We parted in silence. Our hearts were all too full for words!”⁵⁹ Like Jacobs in assisting Uncle Fred, the consequences for Peter’s actions would have been severe. Yet he, like countless slaves, valued the human relationship established and went to great lengths to assist their fellow slaves.

African American culture persisted further by marriage, which is the bedrock of any society. Unable to marry legally, most enslaved people regarded still the institution as important.⁶⁰ For some, writes Daina Berry, “it was the focus of their existence as well as a significant unifying moment when the entire community came together.”⁶¹ Writing of slave weddings, scholars “Graham and Shane White argue that . . . [it] ‘may well have been the point

⁵⁸ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 150-156.

⁵⁹ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 156.

⁶⁰ Perhaps the significance of marriage was linked to the fact that, according to White, “marriage sanctioned motherhood,” 106. As discussed, slave sexual mores allowed for premarital sex and prenuptial birth with the understanding that enslaved couples would marry at some point after the birth, thus sanctioning parenthood. These ideas, though uncommon among Southern whites were a part of many cultures including the West African tradition. For additional information consult White’s discussion on slave marriage in *Ar’n’t I a Woman*.

⁶¹ Berry, *Swing that Sickle for the Harvest is Ripe*, 57.

when slave behavior on antebellum plantations most nearly corresponds to that of whites.’’⁶²

Jacobs did not marry, despite her earnest desire to wed her first love, a local free man of color.

On the other hand, her contemporary, Elizabeth, despite initial reservations, married.

Meeting Mr. Keckley in Virginia, Elizabeth was later reunited with him once she relocated to St. Louis, where he courted her. Unable to bear the thought of giving birth to slave children, “for a long time [she] refused to consider his proposal.”⁶³ After learning that she could purchase her freedom, however, she accepted his proposal. Though the marriage did not meet her expectations, the fact that she engaged in marriage suggested her faith in the institution. Furthermore, by engaging in marriage, Keckley, like countless other slave men and women, participated, deliberately or inadvertently, in a strong subculture within antebellum southern society. However, this subculture did not simply include the development and retention of human relationships: it included a variety of activities that were a part of the lives of enslaved people.

Despite the hardships they endured, slaves engaged in frequent celebrations. Dances, working socials, such as cornshucking parties, and Christmas were among the different events slaves observed. During these celebrations slaves enjoyed less strenuous work, or not having to work at all, as well as family and friends. Cornshucking, an example of one such working social, slaves engaged, was a festivity held during the winter after the harvest of all crops. It brought slaves from various plantations together. The goal at these functions was to shell as much corn as quickly as possible. Though work, the mood was often energetic and joyous as slaves

⁶² Fraser, *Courtship and Love Among the Enslaved in North Carolina*, 88.

⁶³ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1968 reprint), 46.

worked, ate, and sang songs such as “Come to Shuck That Corn To-night.”⁶⁴ Martha Colquitt of Georgia recalled observing cornshuckings as a child. She says they “‘sho’ wuz a sight.”

Because of her youth, she was only allowed to attend briefly but during that time she observed “‘corn...piled up high. . . and de folkses. . . danc[ing] ‘round and holler[ing] and whoop[ing].’”⁶⁵

Describing a cornshucking Kizzie Colquitt of Georgia stated “‘Dere wuz de corn shukin’ wid one house for de corn and another house for de shucks. Atter all de shuckin’ wuz done, dere wuz eatin’ and dancin’. And it wuz eatin’ too! Dey kilt hogs, barbecued ‘em, and roasted some wid apples in dey mouf’s to give ‘em a good flavor, and course a little corn likker went wid it.’”⁶⁶

But by far Christmas was the most anticipated holiday. Northerner Henry Cathell who traveled throughout the South recalled Christmas among blacks as a “‘genuine Darkey Amusements in Excels of originality.’”⁶⁷ Solomon Northup viewed it as “‘the carnival season with the children of bondage.’”⁶⁸ John Pierpont, a northerner who tutored on a South Carolina plantation recalled the attitude of Christmas among slaves. He wrote:

⁶⁴ King, *Stolen Childhood*, 57-58. The lyrics to “Come to Shuck That Corn To-night” include the following verses “All dem puty gals will be dar, Shuck dat corn before you eat; Dey will fix it fer us rare, Shuck dat corn before you eat. I hope dey’ll have some whisky dar, Shuck dat corn before you eat. I think I’ll fill my pockets full, Shuck dat corn before you eat.”

⁶⁵ Martha Colquitt, “Martha Colquitt,” interview by Sarah Hall in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 1, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 244 [<http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=041/mesn041.db&recNum=252&itemLink=S%3Fammem%2Fmesnbib%3A@field%28AUTHOR%2B@od1%28Colquitt%2C%2BMartha%29%29>], accessed November 2009.

⁶⁶ Kizzie Colquitt, “Kizzie Colquitt,” interview by Grace McCune WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 1, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 123 [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=041/mesn041.db&recNum=126&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field\(AUTHOR+@od1\(Colquitt,+Kizzie\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=041/mesn041.db&recNum=126&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Colquitt,+Kizzie)))], accessed November 2009.

⁶⁷ King, *Stolen Childhood*, 59.

⁶⁸ King, *Stolen Childhood*, 59.

On these days the chains of slavery with which the blacks are loaded and in which they toil unceasingly for their masters, are loosed. A smile is seen on every countenance, and the miseries of the year seem amply recompensed by this season of hilarity and festivity. No restraint is imposed upon their inclinations, no lash calls their attention from the enjoyment of all those delights which the most unconstrained freedom prefers [sic]. Children visit their parents; husbands, their wives; brothers & sisters each other, who live at a distance.⁶⁹

Christmas was such a celebrated event among enslaved people because it marked the end of the work year, brought decreased restrictions, and gave slaves a chance to reunite with family members, if only temporarily. Horace Muse of Richmond County, Virginia was hired out as a young man but he was always allowed to return home at Christmas for three or four days.⁷⁰

Consisting of feasting on sumptuous delicacies and visits from family and friends, Christmas served as a time of great pleasure among slaves. According to Virginian Fannie Berry “slaves lived jus’ fo’ Christmas to come round. Start gittin’ ready de fus’ snow fall. Commence to savin’ nuts and apples, fixin’ up party clothes, snitchin’ lace an’ beads fum de big house. General celebratin’ time, you see, ‘cause husbands is comin’ home an’ families is gittin’ ‘nited again. Husbands hurry on home to see dey new babies. Ev’ybody happy.”⁷¹

Parents also worked diligently to make the holiday special for children and youth. Certainly, Christmas in the slave quarters was not as elaborate as it was for whites, but slaves still tried to “gladden the hearts of their little ones” during this holiday.⁷² The holidays also

⁶⁹ John Pierpont quoted in Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 578.

⁷⁰ Horace Muse, “Horace Muse Interview,” interview by Claude W. Anderson and Marietta Silver in *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, edited by Charles L. Perdue, Jr., et. al (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 215.

⁷¹ Fannie Berry, “Fannie Berry Interview,” 49.

⁷² Jacobs, *Incidents*, 118.

remained important for Keckley as a child: on Easter and Christmas, her father was able to visit her and her mother.⁷³ Jacobs reflects the role of holidays in her narrative.

Though still in hiding she ensured that her children had a nice holiday. Securing materials from her grandmother the fugitive “busied [herself] making some new garments and little playthings” for her children. Because of her efforts “their Christmas stockings [were] filled.” Peeping through a hole in the garret she witnesses them happily playing in their new attire.⁷⁴ This made Christmas for Harriet’s children, as well as countless other slaves, a happy time. Though they never experienced Christmas as white families that did not discourage slaves from celebrating the holidays amongst themselves and in so doing they created new traditions as well as a sense of humanity and normalcy, if only for one day within their community. It would be this community, one fueled by family, friendship and rituals that strengthened slaves and gave them the resolve to not succumb fully to the horrible institution.

“I was born a slave--was the child of slave parents,” Elizabeth Keckley wrote of her childhood, “therefore I came upon the earth free in God-like thought, but fettered in action.”⁷⁵ Like many other enslaved women, Keckley recognized early on that she was “fettered in action.” Yet that reality did not alter the fact that she was free in thought. She subsequently described the “wrong . . . inflicted upon [her]” that since a “cruel custom deprived me of my liberty, and since I was robbed of my dearest right, I would not have been human had I not rebelled against the robbery.”⁷⁶ Though they endured emotional, physical and psychological scarring when introduced to their enslaved work roles, dress, and sexual expectations, teenage slave girls

⁷³ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1968 reprint), 22.

⁷⁴ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 118.

⁷⁵ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1968 reprint), 17.

⁷⁶ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1968 reprint), xii.

emerged from the process recognizing that, though they were slaves, their humanity had survived. Essentially, developing into young women who felt a deep sense of worth despite white attempts to break their spirits at young impressionable ages. All of these ideologies fueled their desire to continue maintaining familial relationships, establishing new relationships through marriage and friendships as well as practicing celebrations that both reiterated their sense of humanity as well as contributed to the continuance of an African American subculture. An identity and subculture that persisted once slavery ended, inspiring them through the Civil War and helping them adapt to their lives as free women during Reconstruction.

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