

“MY MOTHER WAS MUCH OF A WOMAN”: BLACK WOMEN, WORK, AND THE FAMILY UNDER SLAVERY

JACQUELINE JONES

“Ah was born back due in slavery,” says Nanny to her granddaughter in Zora Neale Hurston’s novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, “so it wasn’t for me to fulfill my dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do.” Nanny had never confused the degrading regimen of slavery with her own desires as they related to work, love, and motherhood: “Ah didn’t want to be used for a work-ox and a brood-sow and Ah didn’t want mah daughter used dat way neither. It sho wasn’t mah will for things to happen lak they did.” Throughout her life, she had sustained a silent faith in herself and her sisters that was permitted no expression within the spiritual void of bondage: “Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin’ on high, but they wasn’t no pulpit for me,” she grieved.¹

Nanny’s lament offers a challenge to the historian who seeks to understand American slave women — their unfulfilled dreams as well as their day-in, day-out experiences. Despite recent scholarly interest in the relationship between women’s work and family life on the one hand and Afro-American culture on the other, a systematic analysis of the roles of slave women is lacking. In her pioneering article entitled “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves” (published over a decade ago), Angela Davis made a crucial distinction between the work that women were forced to perform for a master and the domestic labor that they provided for their own families. But her emphasis on the political implications of nurturing under slavery has not received the in-depth consideration it deserves.²

For example, a few scholars have explored the roles of the bondswoman as devoted wife and mother, physically powerful

fieldworker, and rebellious servant. Herbert G. Gutman has illuminated the strength of kin ties within the slave community, and Eugene D. Genovese has furthered our understanding of black-white, male-female relations on the antebellum plantation. However, most historians continue to rely on the gender-neutral term "slave" — which invariably connotes "male" — and race supersedes sex as the focal point of their discussions. Consequently, questions related to the sexual division of labor under slavery and the way in which task assignments in the fields, the "Big House," and the slave quarters shaped the experiences of black women have largely gone unanswered — and unasked.³

Moreover, historians primarily concerned with the status of American women have examined the effects of patriarchy on various classes and ethnic groups over time; in the process they have highlighted variations on the theme of women's distinctive work patterns as determined by changing economic conditions, combined with traditional cultural assumptions about women's domestic responsibilities. Yet within the context of current feminist scholarship, slave women as a group remain for the most part neglected, perhaps because they existed outside the mainstream of the industrial revolution and (together with their menfolk) had few opportunities to put into practice their own ideas about appropriate work for women and men. According to this view, slave women were something of a historical aberration, a "special case" that has little relevance to current theoretical and methodological perspectives on women's work.⁴

The purpose of this article is to suggest that the burdens shouldered by slave women actually represented in extreme form the dual nature of all women's labor within a patriarchal, capitalist society: the production of goods and services and the reproduction and care of members of a future work force. The antebellum plantation brought into focus the interaction between notions of women *qua* "equal" workers and women *qua* unequal reproducers; hence a slaveowner just as "naturally" put his bondwomen to work chopping cotton as washing, ironing, or cooking. Furthermore, in seeking to maximize the productivity of his entire labor force while reserving certain domestic tasks for women exclusively, the master demonstrated how patriarchal and capitalist assumptions concerning women's work could reinforce one another. The "peculiar institution" thus involved forms of oppression against women that were unique manifestations of a more universal condition. The following discussion focuses on

female slaves in the American rural South between 1830 and 1860 — cotton boom years that laid bare the economic and social underpinnings of slavery and indeed all of American society.⁵

Under slavery, blacks' attempts to maintain the integrity of family life amounted to a political act of protest, and herein lies a central irony in the history of slave women. In defiance of their owners' tendencies to ignore gender differences in making work assignments in the fields, the slaves whenever possible adhered to a strict division of labor within their own households and communities. This impulse was exhibited most dramatically in patterns of black family and economic life after emancipation. Consequently, the family, often considered by feminists to be a source (or at least a vehicle) of women's subservience, played a key role in the freed people's struggle to resist racial and gender oppression, for black women's full attention to the duties of motherhood deprived whites of their power over these women as field laborers and domestic servants.⁶

Interviewed by a Federal Writers Project (FWP) worker in 1937, Hannah Davidson spoke reluctantly of her experiences as a slave in Kentucky: "The things that my sister May and I suffered were so terrible It is best not to have such things in our memory." During the course of the interview, she stressed that unremitting toil had been the hallmark of her life under bondage. "Work, work, work," she said; it had consumed all her days (from dawn until midnight) and all her years (she was only eight when she began minding her master's children and helping the older women with their spinning). "I been so exhausted working, I was like an inchworm crawling along a roof. I worked till I thought another lick would kill me." On Sundays, "the only time they had to themselves," women washed clothes, and some of the men tended their small tobacco patches. As a child she loved to play in the haystack, but that was possible only on "Sunday evening, after work."⁷

American slavery was an economic and political system by which a group of whites extracted as much labor as possible from blacks through the use or threat of force. A slaveowner thus replaced any traditional division of labor that might have existed among blacks before enslavement with a work structure of his own choosing. All slaves were barred by law from owning pro-

perty or acquiring literacy skills, and although the system played favorites with a few, black females and males were equal in the sense that neither sex wielded economic power over the other. Hence property relations — “the basic determinant of the sexual division of labor and of the sexual order” within most societies⁸ — did not affect male-female interaction among the slaves themselves. To a considerable extent, the types of jobs slaves did, and the amount and regularity of labor they were forced to devote to such jobs, were all dictated by the master.

For these reasons the definition of slave women’s work is 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 Even their efforts to care for themselves and their families helped to maintain the owner’s work force, and to enhance its overall productivity. Tasks performed within the family context — childcare, cooking, and washing clothes, for example — were distinct from labor carried out under the lash in the field or under the mistress’s watchful eye in the Big House. Still, these forms of nurture contributed to the health and welfare of the slave population, thereby increasing the actual value of the master’s property (that is, slaves as both strong workers and “marketable commodities”). White men warned prospective mothers that they wanted neither “runts” nor girls born on their plantations, and slave women understood that their owner’s economic self-interest affected even the most intimate family ties. Of the pregnant bondwomen on her husband’s expansive Butlers Island (Georgia) rice plantation, Fanny Kemble observed, “they have all of them a most distinct and perfect knowledge of their value to their owners as property,” and she recoiled at their obsequious profession obviously intended to delight her: “Missus, tho’ we no able to work, we make little niggers for Massa.” One North Carolina slave woman, the mother of fifteen children, used to carry her youngest with her to the field each day, and “when it get hungry she just slip it around in front and feed it and go right on picking or hoeing. . . .,” symbolizing in one deft motion the equal significance of the productive and reproductive functions to her owner.¹⁰

It is possible to divide the daily work routine of slave women into three discrete types of activity. These involved the production of goods and services for different groups and individuals, and included women’s labor that directly benefited first, their families, second, other members of the slave community, and

third, their owners. Although the master served as the ultimate regulator of all three types of work, he did not subject certain duties related to personal sustenance (that is, those carried out in the slave quarters) to the same scrutiny that characterized fieldwork or domestic service.

The rhythm of the planting-weeding-harvesting cycle shaped the lives of almost all American slaves, 95 percent of whom lived in rural areas. This cycle dictated a common work routine for slaves throughout the South, though the staple crop varied from tobacco in the Upper South to rice on the Georgia and South Carolina Sea Islands, sugar in Louisiana, and the "king" of all agricultural products, cotton, in the broad swath of "Black Belt" that dominated the whole region. Of almost four million slaves, about one-half labored on farms with holdings of twenty slaves or more; one-quarter endured bondage with at least fifty other people on the same plantation. In its most basic form, a life of slavery meant working the soil with other blacks at a pace calculated to reap the largest harvest for a white master.¹¹

In his efforts to wrench as much field labor as possible from female slaves without injuring their capacity to bear children, the master made "a noble admission of female equality," observed one abolitionist sympathizer with bitter irony. Slaveholders had little use for sentimental platitudes about the delicacy of the female constitution when it came to grading their "hands" according to physical strength and endurance. Judged on the basis of a standard set by a healthy adult man, most women probably ranked as three-quarter hands; yet there were enough women like Susan Mabry of Virginia, who could pick four or five hundred pounds of cotton a day (one hundred and fifty to two hundred pounds was considered respectable for an average worker), to remove from a master's mind all doubts about the ability of a strong, healthy, woman fieldworker. As a result, he conveniently discarded his time-honored Anglo-Saxon notions about the types of work best suited for women, thereby producing many "dreary scenes" like the one described by northern journalist Frederick Law Olmsted: during winter preparation of rice fields on a Sea Island plantation, a group of black women, "armed with axes, shovels and hoes . . . all slopping about in the black, unctuous mire at the bottom of the ditches." Although pregnant and nursing women suffered from temporary lapses in productivity, most slaveholders apparently agreed with the (in Olmsted's words) "well-known, intelligent, and benevolent" Mississippi

planter who declared that "labor is conducive to health; a healthy woman will rear most children." In essence, the quest for an "efficient" agricultural work force led slaveowners to downplay gender differences in assigning adults to field labor.¹²

Dressed in coarse osnaburg gowns; their skirts "reefed up with a cord drawn tightly around the body, a little above the hips" (the traditional "second belt"); long sleeves pushed above the elbows and kerchiefs on their heads, female field hands were a common sight throughout the antebellum South. Together with their fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons, black women were roused at four A.M. and spent up to fourteen hours a day toiling out of doors, often under a blazing sun. In the cotton belt they plowed fields; dropped seed; and hoed, picked, ginned, and sorted cotton. On farms in Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, and Tennessee, women hoed tobacco; laid worm fences; and threshed, raked, and bound wheat. For those on the Sea Islands and in coastal areas, rice culture included raking and burning the stubble from the previous year's crop; ditching; sowing seed; plowing, listing, and hoeing fields; and harvesting, stacking, and threshing the rice. In the bayou region of Louisiana, women planted sugarcane cuttings, plowed, and helped to harvest and gin the cane. During the winter, they performed a myriad of tasks necessary on nineteenth-century farms of all kinds: repairing roads, pitching hay, burning brush, and setting up post and rail fences. Like Sara Colquitt of Alabama, most adult females "worked in de fields every day from 'fore daylight to almost plumb dark." During the busy harvest season, everyone was forced to labor up to sixteen hours at a time — after sunset by the light of candles or burning pine knots. Miscellaneous chores occupied women and men around outbuildings regularly and indoors on rainy days. Slaves of both sexes watered the horses, fed the chickens, and slopped the hogs. Together they ginned cotton, ground hominy, shelled corn and peas, and milled flour.¹³

Work assignments for women and men differed according to the size of a plantation and its degree of specialization. For example, on one Virginia wheat farm, the men scythed and cradled the grain, women raked and bound it into sheaves which children then gathered and stacked. Thomas Couper, a wealthy Sea Island planter, divided his slaves according to sex and employed men exclusively in ditching and women in moting and sorting cotton. Within the two gender groups, he further classified hands according to individual strength so that during the sugarcane harvest

three “gangs” of women stripped blades (medium-level task), cut them (hardest), and bound and carried them (easiest). However, because cotton served as the basis of the southern agricultural system, distinct patterns of female work usually transcended local and regional differences in labor-force management. Stated simply, most women spent a good deal of their lives plowing, hoeing, and picking cotton. In the fields, the notion of a distinctive “women’s work” vanished as slaveholders realized that “women can do plowing very well and full well with the hoes and equal to men at picking.”¹⁴

To harness a double team of mules or oxen and steer a heavy wooden plow was no mean feat for any person, and yet a “substantial minority” of slave women mastered these rigorous activities. White women and men from the North and South marvelled at the skill and strength of female plow hands. Emily Burke of eastern Georgia saw women and men “promiscuously run their ploughs side by side, and day after day. . . and as far as I was able to learn, the part the women sustained in this masculine employment, was quite as efficient as that of the more athletic sex.” In his travels through Mississippi, Olmsted watched as women “twitched their plows around on the headland, jerking their reins, and yelling to their mules, with apparent ease, energy, and rapidity.” He saw no indication that “their sex unfitted them for the occupation.”¹⁵

On another estate in the Mississippi Valley, Olmsted observed forty of the “largest and strongest” women he had ever seen; they “carried themselves loftily, each having a hoe over the shoulder, and walking with a free, powerful swing, like *chasseurs* on the march.” In preparing fields for planting, and in keeping grass from strangling the crop, women as well as men blistered their hands with the clumsy hoe characteristic of southern agriculture. “Hammered out of pig iron, broad like a shovel,” these “slave-time hoes” withstood most forms of abuse (destruction of farm implements constituted an integral part of resistance to forced labor). Recalled one former slave of the tool that also served as pick, spade, and gravedigger: “Dey make ‘em heavy so dey fall hard, but de bigges’ trouble was liftin’ dem up.” Hoeing was backbreaking labor, but the versatility of the tool and its importance to cotton cultivation meant that the majority of female hands used it a good part of the year.¹⁶

The cotton-picking season usually began in late July or early August and continued without interruption until the end of

December. Thus for up to five months annually, every available man, woman, and child was engaged in a type of work that was strenuous and “tedious from its sameness.” Each picker carried a bag fastened by a strap around her neck and deposited the cotton in it as she made her way down the row, at the end of which she emptied the bag’s contents into a basket. Picking cotton required endurance and agility as much as physical strength, and women frequently won regional and interfarm competitions conducted during the year. Pregnant and nursing women usually ranked as half-hands and were required to pick an amount less than the “average” one hundred and fifty or so pounds per day.¹⁷

Slaveholders often reserved the tasks that demanded sheer muscle power for men exclusively. These included clearing the land of trees, rolling logs, and chopping and hauling wood. However, plantation exigencies sometimes mandated women’s labor in this area, too; in general, the smaller the farm, the more arduous and varied was women’s fieldwork. Lizzie Atkins, who lived on a twenty-five-acre Texas plantation with only three other slaves, remembered working “until slam dark every day”; she helped to clear land, cut wood, and tend the livestock in addition to her other duties of hoeing corn, spinning thread, sewing clothes, cooking, washing dishes, and grinding corn. One Texas farmer, who had his female slaves haul logs and plow with oxen, even made them wear breeches, thus minimizing outward differences between the sexes. Still, FWP interviews with former slaves indicate that blacks considered certain jobs uncharacteristic of bondwomen. Recalled Louise Terrell of her days on a farm near Jackson, Mississippi: “The women had to split rails all day long, just like the men.” Nancy Boudry of Georgia said she used to “split wood jus’ like a man.” Elderly women reminisced about their mothers and grandmothers with a mixture of pride and wonder. Mary Frances Webb declared of her slave grandmother, “in the winter she sawed and cut cord wood just like a man. She said it didn’t hurt her as she was strong as an ox.” Janie Scott’s description of her mother implied the extent of the older woman’s emotional as well as physical strength: she was “strong and could roll and cut logs like a man, and was much of a woman.”¹⁸

Very few women served as skilled artisans or mechanics; on large estates, men invariably filled the positions of carpenter, cooper, wheelwright, tanner, blacksmith, and shoemaker. At first it seems ironic that masters would utilize women fully as field

laborers, but reserve most of the skilled occupations that required manual dexterity for men. Here the high cost of specialized and extensive training proved crucial in determining the division of labor; although women were capable of learning these skills, their work lives were frequently interrupted by childbearing and nursing; a female blacksmith might not be able to provide the regular service required on a plantation. Too, masters frequently "hired out" mechanics and artisans to work for other employers during the winter, and women's domestic responsibilities were deemed too important to permit protracted absences from the quarters. However, many young girls learned to spin thread and weave cloth because these tasks could occupy them during confinement.¹⁹

The drive for cotton profits induced slaveowners to squeeze every bit of strength from black women as a group. According to the estimates of Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, in the 1850s at least 90 percent of all female slaves over sixteen years of age labored more than 261 days per year, eleven to thirteen hours each day. Few overseers or masters had any patience with women whose movements in the field were persistently "clumsy, awkward, gross, [and] elephantine" for whatever reasons — malnutrition, exhaustion, recalcitrance. As Hannah Davidson said: "If you had something to do, you did it or got whipped." The enforced pace of work more nearly resembled that of a factory than a farm; Kemble referred to female field hands as "human hoeing machines." The bitter memories of former slaves merely suggest the extent to which the physical strength of women was exploited. Eliza Scantling of South Carolina, only sixteen years old at the end of the Civil War, plowed with a mule during the coldest months of the year: "Sometimes me hands get so cold I jes' cry." Matilda Perry of Virginia "Use to wuk fum sun to sun in dat ole terbaccy field. Wuk till my back felt lak it ready to pop in two."²⁰

At times a woman would rebel in a manner commensurate with the work demands imposed upon her. "She'd git stubborn like a mule and quit." Or she took her hoe and knocked the overseer "plum down" and "chopped him right across his head." When masters and drivers "got rough on her, she got rough on them, and ran away in the woods." She cursed the man who insisted he "owned" her so that he beat her "till she fell" and left her broken body to serve as a warning to the others: "Dat's what you git efen you sass me." Indeed, in the severity of punishment meted

out to slaves, little distinction was made between the sexes: "Beat women! Why sure he [master] beat women. Beat women jes' lak men." A systematic survey of the FWP slave narrative collection reveals that women were more likely than men to engage in "verbal confrontations and striking the master but not running away," probably because of their family and childcare responsibilities.²¹

Family members who perceived their mothers or sisters as particularly weak and vulnerable in the fields conspired to lessen their work load. Frank Bell and his four brothers, slaves on a Virginia wheat farm, followed his parents down the long rows of grain during the harvest season. "In dat way one could help de other when dey got behind. All of us would pitch in and help Momma who warn't very strong." The overseer discouraged families from working together because he believed "dey ain't gonna work as fast as when dey all mixed up," but the black driver, Bell's uncle, "always looked out for his kinfolk, especially my mother." James Taliaferro told of his father, who counted the corn rows marked out for Aunt Rebecca ("a short-talking woman that ole Marsa didn't like") and told her that her assignment was almost double that given to the other women. Rebecca indignantly confronted the master, who relented by reducing her task, but not before he threatened to sell James's father for his meddling. On another plantation, the hands surreptitiously added handfuls of cotton to the basket of a young woman who "was small and just couldn't get her proper amount."²²

No slave women exercised authority over slave men as part of their work routine, but it is uncertain whether this practice reflected the sensibilities of the slaveowners or of the slaves themselves. Women were assigned to teach children simple tasks in the house and field and to supervise other women in various facets of household industry. A master might "let [a woman] off fo' de buryings 'cause she know how to manage de other niggahs and keep dem quiet at de funerls," but he would not install her as a driver over people in the field. Many strong-willed women demonstrated that they commanded respect among males as well as females, but more often than not masters perceived this as a negative quality to be suppressed. One Louisiana slaveholder complained bitterly about a particularly "rascally set of old negroes" — "the better you treat them the worst they are." He had no difficulty pinpointing the cause of the trouble, for "Big Lucy, the leader, corrupts every young negro in her power." On other plantations, women were held responsible for instigating all

sorts of undesirable behavior among their husbands and brothers and sisters. On Charles Colcock Jones's Georgia plantation, the slave Cash gave up going to prayer meeting and started swearing as soon as he married Phoebe, well-known for her truculence. Apparently few masters attempted to co-opt high-spirited women by offering them positions of formal power over black men.²³

In terms of labor-force management, southern slaveowners walked a fine line between making use of the physical strength of women as productive workers and protecting their investment in women as childbearers. These two objectives — one focused on immediate profit returns and the other on long-term economic considerations — at times clashed, because women who spent long hours picking cotton, toiling in the fields with heavy iron hoes, and walking several miles a day sustained damage to their reproductive systems immediately before and after giving birth. For financial reasons, slaveholders might have “regarded pregnancy as almost holy,” in the words of one medical historian. But they frequently suspected their bondwomen (like “the most insufferable liar” Nora) of shamming illness — “play [ing] the lady at your expense,” as one Virginia planter put it. These fears help to account for the reckless brutality with which owners forced women to work in the fields during and after pregnancy.²⁴

Work in the soil thus represented the chief lot of all slaves, female and male. In the Big House, a division of labor based on both gender and age became more apparent, reflecting slaveowners' assumptions about the nature of domestic service. Although women predominated as household workers, few devoted their energies full time to this kind of labor; the size of the plantation determined the degree to which the tasks of cleaning, laundering, caring for the master's children, cooking, and ironing were specialized. According to Eugene Genovese, as few as 5 percent of all antebellum adult slaves served in the elite corps of house servants trained for specific duties. Of course, during the harvest season all slaves, including those in the house, went to the fields to make obeisance to King Cotton. Thus the lines between domestic service and fieldwork blurred during the day and during the lives of slave women. Many continued to live in the slave quarters, but rose early in the morning to perform various chores for the mistress — “up wid de fust light to draw water and help as a house girl” — before heading for the field. James Claiborne's mother “wuked in de fiel' some, an' aroun' de house sometimes .

...’ Young girls tended babies and waited on tables until they were sent outside — ‘mos’ soon’s’ they could work — and returned to the house years later, too frail to hoe weeds, but still able to cook and sew. The circle of women’s domestic work went unbroken from day to day and from generation to generation.²⁵

Just as southern white men scorned manual labor as the proper sphere of slaves, so their wives strove (often unsuccessfully) to lead a life of leisure within their own homes. Those duties necessary to maintain the health, comfort, and daily welfare of white slaveholders were considered less women’s work than black women’s and black children’s work. Slave mistresses supervised the whole operation, but the sheer magnitude of labor involved in keeping all slaves and whites fed and clothed (with different standards set according to race, of course) meant that black women had to supply the elbow grease. For most slaves, housework involved hard, steady, often strenuous labor as they juggled the demands made by the mistress and other members of the master’s family. Mingo White of Alabama never forgot that his slave mother had shouldered a work load “too heavy for any one person.” She served as personal maid to the master’s daughter, cooked for all the hands on the plantation, carded cotton, spun a daily quota of thread, wove and dyed cloth. Every Wednesday she carried the white family’s laundry three-quarters of a mile to a creek, where she beat each garment with a wooden paddle. Ironing consumed the rest of her day. Like the lowliest field hand, she felt the lash if any tasks went undone.²⁶

Although mistresses found that their husbands commandeered most bondwomen for fieldwork during the better part of the day, they discovered in black children an acceptable alternative source of labor. Girls were favored for domestic service, but a child’s sex played only a secondary role in determining household assignments. On smaller holdings especially, the demands of housework, like cotton cultivation, admitted of no finely honed division of labor. Indeed, until puberty, girls and boys shared a great deal in terms of dress and work. All children wore a “split-tail shirt,” a knee-length smock slit up the sides: “Boys and gals all dress jes’ alike . . . They call it a shirt iffen a boy wear it and call it a dress iffen the gal wear it.” At the age of six or so, many received assignments around the barnyard or in the Big House from one or more members of the master’s family. Mr. and Mrs. Alex Smith, who grew up together, remembered performing different tasks. As a girl she helped to spin thread and pick seeds from cotton and

cockle burrs from wool. He chopped wood, carried water, hoed weeds, tended the cows, and picked bugs from tobacco plants. However, slave narratives contain descriptions of both girls and boys elsewhere doing each of these things.²⁷

Between the ages of six and twelve, black girls and boys followed the mistress's directions in filling woodboxes with kindling, lighting fires in chilly bedrooms in the morning and evening, making beds, washing and ironing clothes, parching coffee, polishing shoes, and stoking fires while the white family slept at night. They fetched water and milk from the springhouse and meat from the smokehouse. Three times a day they set the table, helped to prepare and serve meals, "minded flies" with peacock feather brushes, passed the salt and pepper on command and washed the dishes. They swept, polished, and dusted, served drinks and fanned overheated visitors. Mistresses entrusted to the care of those who were little more than babies themselves the bathing, diapering, dressing, grooming, and entertaining of white infants. In the barnyard black children gathered eggs, plucked chickens, drove cows to and from the stable and "tended the gaps" (opened and closed gates). (In the fields they acted as human scarecrows, toted water to the hands, and hauled shocks of corn together.) It was no wonder that Mary Ella Grandberry, a slave child grown old, "disremember[ed] ever playin' lack chilluns do today."²⁸

In only a few tasks did a sexual division of labor exist among children. Masters always chose boys to accompany them on hunting trips and to serve as their personal valets. Little girls learned how to sew, to milk cows and churn butter, and to attend to the personal needs of their mistresses. As tiny ladies-in-waiting, they did the bidding of fastidious white women and of girls not much older than they. Cicely Cawthon, age six when the Civil War began, called herself the mistress's "little keeper"; "I stayed around, and waited on her, handed her water, fanned her, kept the flies off her, pulled up her pillow, and done anything she'd tell me to do." Martha Showvely recounted a nightly ritual with her Virginia mistress. After she finished her regular work around the house, the young girl would go to the woman's bedroom, bow to her, wait for acknowledgment, and then scurry around as ordered, lowering the shades, filling the water pitcher, arranging towels on the washstand, or "anything else" that struck the woman's fancy. Mary Woodward, only eleven in 1865, was taught to comb her mistress's hair, lace her corset, and arrange

her hoop skirts. At the end of the toilet Mary was supposed to say, "You is served, mistress!" Recalled the former slave, "Her lak them little words at de last."²⁹

Sexual exploitation of female servants of all ages (described in graphic detail by Harriet Jacobs in Lydia Maria Child's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*) predictably antagonized white women. Jealousy over their husbands' real or suspected infidelities resulted in a propensity for spontaneous violence among many. Husbands who flaunted their adventures in the slave quarters increased the chance that their wives would attack a specific woman or her offspring. Sarah Wilson remembered being "picked on" by the mistress, who chafed under her husband's taunts; he would say, "'Let her alone, she got big, big blood in her, 'and then laugh.'"³⁰

A divorce petition filed with the Virginia legislature in 1848 included a witness's testimony that the master in question one morning told his slave favorite to sit down at the breakfast table "to which Mrs. N [his wife] objected, saying. . . that she (Mrs. N.) would have her severely punished." Her husband replied "that in that event he would visit her (Mrs. N.) with a like punishment. Mrs. N. then burst into tears and asked if it was not too much for her to stand." This husband went to extreme lengths to remind his spouse of slave-mistress Mary Chesnut's observation that "there is no slave, after all, like a wife." In the black woman the mistress saw not only the source of her own degradation, she saw herself — a woman without rights, subject to the impulses of an arrogant husband-master.³¹

To punish black women for minor offenses, mistresses were likely to attack with any weapon available — a fork, butcher knife, knitting needle, pan of boiling water. Some of the most barbaric forms of punishment resulting in the mutilation and permanent scarring of female servants were devised by white mistresses in the heat of passion. As a group they received well-deserved notoriety for the "veritable terror" they unleashed upon black women in the Big House.³²

Interviews with former slaves suggest that the advantages of domestic service (over fieldwork) for women have been exaggerated in accounts written by whites. Carrying wood and water, preparing three full meals a day over a smoky fireplace or pressing damp clothes with a hot iron rivaled cotton picking as back-breaking labor. Always "on call," women servants often had to

snatch a bite to eat whenever they could, remain standing in the presence of whites, and sleep on the floor at the foot of their mistress's bed (increasing the chances that they would sooner or later be bribed, seduced, or forced into sexual relations with the master). To peel potatoes with a sharp knife, build a fire, or carry a heavy load of laundry down a steep flight of stairs required skills and dexterity not always possessed by little girls and boys, and injuries were common. Chastisement for minor infractions came with swift severity; cooks who burned the bread and children who stole cookies or fell asleep while singing to the baby suffered every conceivable form of physical abuse, from jabs with pins to beatings that left them disfigured for life. The master's house offered no shelter from the most brutal manifestations of slavery.³³

For any one or all of these reasons, black women might prefer fieldwork to housework. During his visit to a rice plantation in 1853, Olmsted noted that hands "accustomed to the comparatively unconstrained life of the negro-settlement detest the close control and careful movements required of the house servants." Marriage could be both a means and an incentive to escape a willful mistress. Jessie Sparrow's mother wed at age thirteen in order "to go outer de big house. Dat how come she to marry so soon. . . ." Claude Wilson recalled many years later that "his mother was very rebellious toward her duties and constantly harassed the 'Missus' about letting her work in the fields with her husband until finally she was permitted to make the change from the house to the fields to be near her man." Other women, denied an alternative, explored the range of their own emotional resources in attempting to resist petty tyranny; their "sassiness" rubbed raw the nerves of mistresses already harried and high-strung. A few servants simply withdrew into a shell of "melancholy and timidity."³⁴

The dual status of a bondswoman — a slave and a female — afforded her master a certain degree of flexibility in formulating her work assignments. When he needed a field hand, her status as an able-bodied slave took precedence over gender considerations, and she was forced to toil alongside her menfolk. At the same time, the master's belief that most forms of domestic service required the attentions of a female reinforced among slave women the traditional role of woman as household worker.

The authority of the master in enforcing a sexual division of labor was absolute, but at times individual women could influence his decisions to some extent. In certain cases, a woman's

preferences for either fieldwork or domestic service worked to her advantage. For example, the rebelliousness of Claude Wilson's mother prompted her removal from the Big House to the field, a change she desired. Similarly, masters might promise a woman an opportunity to do a kind of work she preferred as a reward for her cooperation and diligence. On the other hand, a slave's misbehavior might cause her to lose a position she had come to value; more than one prized cook or maid was exiled to the fields for "sassing" the mistress or stealing. A system of rewards and punishments thus depended on the preferences of individual slaves, and a servant determined to make life miserable for the family in the Big House might get her way in any case.³⁵

In the field and Big House, black women worked under the close supervision of whites (the master, overseer, or mistress) at a forced pace. The slaves derived few, if any, tangible benefits from their labor to increase staple-crop profits and to render the white family comfortable (at least in physical terms). However, their efforts to provide for their own health and welfare often took place apart from whites, with a rhythm more in tune with community and family life. For slave women, these responsibilities, although physically arduous, offered a degree of personal fulfillment. As Martha Colquitt remarked of her slave grandmother and mother who stayed up late to knit and sew clothes "for us chillun": "Dey done it 'cause dey wanted to. Dey wuz workin' for deyselves den." Slave women deprived of the ability to cook for their own kinfolk or discipline their own children felt a keen sense of loss; family responsibilities revealed the limited extent to which black women (and men) could control their own lives. Furthermore, a strict sexual division of labor in the quarters openly challenged the master's opportunistic approach to slave women's work.³⁶

A number of activities were carried out either communally or centrally for the whole plantation by older women. On smaller farms, for example, a cook and her assistants might prepare one or all of the meals for the other slaves each day except Sunday. Similarly, an elderly woman, with the help of children too young to work in the fields, often was assigned charge of a nursery in the quarters, where mothers left their babies during the day. To keep any number of little ones happy and out of trouble for up to twelve to fourteen hours at a time taxed the patience of the most kindly souls. Slave children grew up with a mixture of affection and fear for the "grandmothers" who had dished out the licks along with the cornbread and clabber. Other grannies usurped the

position of the white physician (he rarely appeared in any case); they “brewed medicines for every ailment,” gave cloves and whiskey to ease the pain of childbirth, and prescribed potions for the lovesick. Even a child forced to partake of “Stinkin’ Jacob tea” or a concoction of “turpentine an’ castor oil an’ Jerusalem oak” (for worms) would assert years later that “Gran’mammy was a great doctor,” surely a testimony to her respected position within the slave community, if not to the delectability of her remedies.³⁷

On many plantations, it was the custom to release adult women from fieldwork early on Saturday so that they could do their week’s washing. Whether laundering was done in old wooden tubs, iron pots, or a nearby creek with batten sticks, wooden paddles, or washboards, it was a time-consuming and difficult chore. Yet this ancient form of women’s work provided opportunities for socializing “whilst de ’omans leaned over de tubs washin’ and a-singin’ dem old songs.” Mary Frances Webb remembered wash day — “a regular picnic” — with some fondness; it was a time for women “to spend the day together,” out of the sight and earshot of whites.³⁸

Much of the work black women did for the slave community resembled the colonial system of household industry. Well into the nineteenth century throughout the South, slave women continued to spin thread, weave and dye cloth, sew clothes, make soap and candles, prepare and preserve foods, churn butter, and grow food for the family table. Slave women mastered all these tasks with the aid of primitive equipment and skills passed on from grandmothers. Many years later, blacks of both sexes exclaimed over their slave mothers’ ability to prepare clothing dye from various combinations of tree bark and leaves, soil and berries; make soap out of ashes and animal skins; and fashion bottle lamps from string and tallow. Because of their lack of time and materials, black women only rarely found in these activities an outlet for creative expression, but they did take pride in their resourcefulness and produced articles of value to the community as a whole.³⁹

Black women’s work in home textile production illustrates the ironies of community labor under slavery, for the threads of cotton and wool bound them together in both bondage and sisterhood. Masters (or mistresses) imposed rigid spinning and weaving quotas on women who worked in the fields all day. For example, many were forced to spin one “cut” (about three hundred yards)

of thread nightly, or four to five cuts during rainy days or in the winter. Women of all ages worked together and children of both sexes helped to tease and card wool, pick up the loom shuttles, and knit. In the flickering candlelight, the whirr of the spinning wheel and the clackety-clack of the loom played a seductive lullabye, drawing those who were already "mighty tired" away from their assigned tasks.⁴⁰

As the "head spinner" on a Virginia plantation, Bob Ellis's mother was often sent home from fieldwork early to prepare materials for the night's work; "She had to portion out de cotton dey was gonna spin an' see dat each got a fair share." Later that evening, after supper, as she moved around the dusty loom room to check on the progress of the other women, she would sing:

Keep yo' eye on de sun,
See how she run
Don't let her catch you with you work undone,
I'm a trouble, I'm a trouble,
Trouble don' las' always.

With her song of urgency and promise she coaxed her sisters to finish their work so they could return home by sundown: "Dat made de women all speed up so dey could finish fo' dark catch 'em, 'cause it mighty hard handlin' dat cotton thread by fire-light."⁴¹

In the quarters, group work melded into family responsibilities, for the communal spirit was but a manifestation of primary kin relationships. Here it is possible only to outline the social dynamics of the slave household. The significance of the family in relation to the sexual division of labor under slavery cannot be overestimated; out of the mother-father, wife-husband nexus sprang the slaves' beliefs about what women and men should be and do. Ultimately, the practical application of those beliefs (in the words of Genovese) "provided a weapon for joint resistance to dehumanization."⁴²

The two-parent, nuclear family was the typical form of slave cohabitation regardless of the location, size, or economy of a plantation; the nature of its ownership; or the age of its slave community. Because of the omnipresent threat of forced separation by sale, gift, or bequest, this family was not "stable." Yet, in the absence of such separations, unions between husbands and wives and parents and children often endured for many years. Marital customs, particularly exogamy, and the practice of nam-

ing children after the mother's or father's relatives (the most common pattern was to name a boy after a male relative) revealed the strong sense of kinship among slaves. Households tended to be large; Herbert G. Gutman found families with eight living children to be quite common. Out of economic considerations, a master would encourage his work force to reproduce itself, but the slaves welcomed each new birth primarily as "a social and familial fact." A web of human emotions spun by close family ties — affection, dignity, love — brought slaves together in a world apart from whites.⁴³

In their own cabins, the blacks maintained a traditional division of labor between the sexes. Like women in almost all cultures, slave women had both a biological and a social "destiny." As part of their childbearing role, they assumed primary responsibility for childcare (when a husband and wife lived on separate plantations, the children remained with their mother and belonged to her master). Women also performed operations related to daily household maintenance — cooking, cleaning, tending fires, sewing and patching clothes.⁴⁴

Fathers shared the obligations of family life with their wives. In denying slaves the right to own property, make a living for themselves, participate in public life, or protect their children, the institution of bondage deprived black men of access to the patriarchy in the larger economic and political sense. But at home women and men worked together to support the father's role as provider and protector. In the evenings and on Sundays, men collected firewood; made shoes; wove baskets; constructed beds, tables, and chairs; and carved butter paddles, ax handles, and animal traps. Other family members appreciated a father's skills; recalled Molly Ammonds, "My pappy make all de funiture dat went in our house an' it were might' good funiture too," and Pauline Johnson echoed, "De furn'chure was ho-mek, but my daddy mek it good an' stout." Husbands provided necessary supplements to the family diet by hunting and trapping quails, possums, turkeys, rabbits, squirrels, and raccoons, and by fishing. They often assumed responsibility for cultivating the tiny household garden plots allotted to families by the master. Some craftsmen, like Bill Austin's father, received goods or small sums of money in return for their work on nearby estates; Jack Austin, "regarded as a fairly good carpenter, mason, and bricklayer," was paid in "hams, bits of cornmeal, cloth for dresses for his wife and children, and other small gifts; these he either used for his small

family or bartered with other slaves.”⁴⁵

These familial duties also applied to men who lived apart from their wives and children even though they were usually allowed to visit only on Saturday night and Sunday. Lucinda Miller’s family “never had any sugar, and only got coffee when her father would bring it to her mother” during his visits. The father of Hannah Chapman was sold to a nearby planter when she was very small. Because “he missed us and us longed for him,” she said many years later, he tried to visit his family under the cover of darkness whenever possible. She noted, “Us would gather ’round him an’ crawl up in his lap, tickled slap to death, but he give us dese pleasures at painful risk.” If the master should happen to discover him, “Us could track him de nex’ day by de blood stains,” she remembered.⁴⁶

Hannah McFarland of South Carolina well remembered the time when the local slave patrol attempted to whip her mother, “but my papa sho’ stopped dat,” she said proudly. Whether or not he was made to suffer for his courage is unknown; however, the primary literature of slavery is replete with accounts of slave husbands who intervened, at the risk of their own lives, to save wives and children from violence at the hands of white men. More often, however, fathers had to show their compassion in less dramatic (though no less revealing) ways. On a Florida plantation, the Minus children often rose in the morning to find still warm in the fireplace the potatoes “which their father had thoughtfully roasted and which [they] readily consumed.” Margrett Nickerson recalled how her father would tenderly bind up the wounds inflicted on her by a maniacal overseer; in later years, her crippled legs preserved the memory of a father’s sorrow intermingled with her own suffering.⁴⁷

The more freedom the slaves had in determining their own activities the more clearly emerged a distinct division of labor between the sexes. During community festivities like log rollings, rail splittings, wood choppings, and corn shuckings, men performed the prescribed labor while women cooked the meals. At times, male participants willingly “worked all night,” for, in the words of one former slave, “we had the ‘Heavenly Banners’ (women and whiskey) by us.” A limited amount of primary evidence indicates that men actively scorned women’s work, especially cooking, housecleaning, sewing, washing clothes, and intimate forms of childcare (like bathing children and picking lice out of their hair). Some slaveholders devised forms of public

humiliation that capitalized on men's attempts to avoid these tasks. One Louisiana cotton planter punished slave men by forcing them to wash clothes (he also made chronic offenders wear women's dresses). In *This Species of Property*, Leslie Howard Owens remarks of men so treated, "So great was their shame before their fellows that many ran off and suffered the lash on their backs rather than submit to the discipline. Men clearly viewed certain chores as women's tasks, and female slaves largely respected the distinction."⁴⁸

The values and customs of the slave community played a predominant role in structuring work patterns among women and men within the quarters in general and the family in particular. Yet slaveholders affected the division of labor in the quarters in several ways; for example, they took women and girls out of the fields early on Saturdays to wash the clothes, and they enforced certain task assignments related to the production of household goods. An understanding of the social significance of the sexual division of labor requires at least brief mention of West African cultural preferences and the ways in which the American system of slavery disrupted or sustained traditional (African) patterns of women's work. Here it is important to keep in mind two points. First, cotton did not emerge as the South's primary staple crop until the late eighteenth century (the first slaves on the North American continent toiled in tobacco, rice, indigo, and corn fields); and second, regardless of the system of task assignments imposed upon antebellum blacks, the grueling pace of forced labor represented a cruel break from the past for people who had followed age-old customs related to subsistence agriculture.⁴⁹

Though dimmed by time and necessity, the outlines of African work patterns endured among the slaves. As members of traditional agricultural societies, African women played a major role in producing the family's food as well as in providing basic household services. The sexual division of labor was more often determined by a woman's childcare and domestic responsibilities than by any presumed physical weakness. She might engage in heavy, monotonous fieldwork (in some tribes) as long as she could make provisions for nursing her baby; that often meant keeping an infant with her in the field. She cultivated a kitchen garden that yielded a variety of vegetables consumed by the family or sold at market, and she usually milked the cows and churned butter.⁵⁰

West Africans in general brought with them competencies and

knowledge that slaveowners readily exploited. Certain tribes were familiar with rice, cotton, and indigo cultivation. Many black women had had experience spinning thread, weaving cloth, and sewing clothes. Moreover, slaves often used techniques and tools handed down from their ancestors — in the method of planting, hoeing, and pounding rice, for example. Whites frequently commented on the ability of slave women to balance heavy and unwieldy loads on their heads, an African trait.⁵¹

The primary difficulty in generalizing about African women's part in agriculture stems from the fact that members of West African tribes captured for the North American slave trade came from different hoe-culture economies. Within the geographically limited Niger Delta region, for example, women and men of the Ibo tribe worked together in planting, weeding, and harvesting, but female members of another prominent group, the Yoruba, helped only with harvest. In general, throughout most of sub-Saharan Africa (and particularly on the west coast) women had primary responsibility for tilling (though not clearing) the soil and cultivating the crops; perhaps this tradition, combined with work patterns established by white masters in this country, reinforced the blacks' beliefs that cutting trees and rolling logs was "men's work." In any case it is clear that African women often did fieldwork. But because the sexual division of labor varied according to tribe, it is impossible to state with any precision the effect of the African heritage on the slaves' perceptions of women's agricultural work.⁵²

The West African tradition of respect for one's elders found new meaning among American slaves; for most women, old age brought increased influence within the slave community even as their economic value to the master declined. Owners, fearful lest women escape from "earning their salt" once they became too infirm to go to the field, set them to work at other tasks — knitting, cooking, spinning, weaving, dairying, washing, ironing, caring for the children. (Elderly men worked as gardeners, wagoners, carters, and stocktenders.) But the imperatives of the southern economic system sometimes compelled slaveowners to extract from feeble women what field labor they could. In other cases they reduced the material provisions of the elderly — housing and allowances of food and clothing — in proportion to their decreased productivity.⁵³

The overwhelming youth of the general slave population between 1830 and 1860 (more than one-half of all slaves were

under twenty years of age) meant that most plantations had only a few old persons — the 10 percent over fifty years of age considered elderly. These slaves served as a repository of history and folklore for the others. Harriet Ware, a northern teacher assigned to the South Carolina Sea Islands, reported in 1862, “‘Learning’ with these people I find means a knowledge of medicine, and a person is valued accordingly.” Many older women practiced “‘medicine” in the broadest sense in their combined role of midwife, root doctor, healer, and conjurer. They guarded ancient secrets about herbs and other forms of plant life. In their interpretation of dreams and strange occurrences, they brought the real world closer to the supernatural realm and offered spiritual guidance to the ill, the troubled, and the lovelorn.⁵⁴

For slaves in the late antebellum period, these revered (and sometimes feared) women served as a tangible link with the African past. Interviewed by an FWP worker in 1937, a Mississippi-born former slave, James Brittan, recalled his own “‘grandma Aunt Mary” who had lived for 110 years. A “‘Molly Gasca [Madagascar?] negro,” she was plagued by a jealous mistress because of her striking physical appearance; “‘Her hair it was fine as silk and hung down below her waist.” Ned Chaney’s African-born Granny Silla (she was the oldest person anyone knew, he thought) commanded respect among the other slaves by virtue of her advanced age and her remarkable healing powers: “‘Ever’body set a heap of sto’ by her. I reckon, because she done ’cumullated so much knowledge an’ because her head were so white.” When Granny Silla died, her “‘little bags” of mysterious substances were buried with her because no one else knew how to use them. Yet Chaney’s description of his own mother, a midwife and herb doctor, indicates that she too eventually assumed a position of at least informal authority within the community.⁵⁵

As a little girl in Georgia, Mary Colbert adored her grandmother, a strong field hand, “‘smart as a whip.” “‘I used to tell my mother that I wished I was named Hannah for her, and so Mother called me Mary Hannah,” she recalled. Amanda Harris, interviewed in Virginia when she was ninety years old, looked back to the decade before the war when her grandmother was still alive: “‘Used to see her puffin’ on dat ole pipe o’ her’n, an’ one day I ast her what fun she got outen it. ‘Tain’t no fun, chile,’ she tole me. ‘But it’s a pow’ful lot o’ easment. Smoke away trouble, darter. Blow ole trouble an’ worry ’way in smoke.” Amanda started smoking a pipe shortly before her grandmother died, and in 1937 she

declared, "Now dat I'm ole as she was I know what she mean." In the quiet dignity of their own lives, these grandmothers preserved the past for future generations of Afro-American women.⁵⁶

Within well-defined limits, the slaves created — or preserved — an explicit sexual division of labor based on their own preferences. Wives and husbands and mothers and fathers had reciprocal obligations toward one another. Together they worked to preserve the integrity of the family. Having laid to rest once and for all the myth of the slave matriarchy, some historians suggest that relations between the sexes approximated "a healthy sexual equality."⁵⁷ Without private property, slave men lacked the means to achieve economic superiority over their wives, one of the major sources of inequality in the ("free") sexual order. But if female and male slaves shared duties related to household maintenance and community survival, they were nonetheless reduced to a state of powerlessness that rendered virtually meaningless the concept of equality as it applies to marital relations.

Developments during the turbulent postwar years, when the chains of bondage were loosened but not destroyed, made clear the significance of black women's work in supporting the southern staple-crop economy. They also revealed the connection between patterns of women's work and black family life — a connection that had, at least to some degree, remained latent under slavery. Black women did their part in helping to provide for their families after the war. Female household heads had a particularly difficult time, for under the "free labor" system, a mother working alone rarely earned enough to support small children who were themselves too little to make any money. Relatives in a better financial situation often "adopted" these children, or took the whole family under their care.⁵⁸

After the war, black women continued to serve as domestic servants, but large numbers stopped going to the fields altogether, or agreed to work only in harvest time. Indeed, from all over the South came reports that "the negro women are now almost wholly withdrawn from field labor." Ransom and Sutch, in their study of the economic consequences of emancipation, estimate that between one-third and one-half of all the women who worked in the fields under slavery provided proportionately less agricultural labor in the 1870s. This decline in overall female productivity was the result of two factors: many wives stayed home, and the ones who did continue to labor in the fields (like black men) put in shorter hours and fewer days each year than they had as slaves.

Crop output in many locales dropped accordingly, and white landowners lamented their loss, “for women were as efficient as men in working and picking cotton.”⁵⁹

In their speculation about the sources of this “evil of female loaferism,” whites offered a number of theories, from the pernicious influence of northern schoolteachers to the inherent laziness of the black race. Actually, black women and men responded to freedom in a manner consistent with preferences that had been thwarted during slavery. Husbands sought to protect their wives from the sexual abuse and physical punishment that continued to prevail under the wage system of agricultural labor. Wives wanted to remain at home with their children, as befitted free and freed women; many continued to contribute to the family welfare by taking in washing or raising chickens.⁶⁰

By 1867, freed people who wanted to assert control over their own productive energies had reached what some historians term a “compromise” with white landowners anxious to duplicate antebellum crop levels. This “compromise” came in the form of the sharecropping system, a family organization of labor that represented both a radical departure from collective or “gang” work characteristic of slavery and a rejection of the wage economy so integral to the (North’s) fledgling industrial revolution. Freed families moved out of the old slave quarters into cabins scattered around a white man’s plantation; they received “furnishings” (tools and seed) and agreed to pay the landlord a share of the crop — usually one-half of all the cotton they produced — in return for the use of the land and modest dwelling. Under this arrangement, black husbands assumed primary responsibility for crop management, and their wives devoted as much attention as possible to their roles as mothers and homemakers. During the particularly busy planting or harvesting seasons, a woman would join her husband and children at work in the field. In this way she could keep an eye on her offspring and still put to use her considerable strength and skills unmolested by white men.⁶¹

The Reconstruction South was not the best of all worlds in which to foster a new order between the races — or the sexes. Faced with persistent economic exploitation and political subservience within white-dominated society, black men sought to assert their authority as protectors of their communities and families. Outwardly, they placed a premium on closing ranks at home. This impulse was institutionalized in the freed people’s

churches (“Wives submit yourselves to your husbands” was the text of more than one postbellum sermon) and political organizations. One searches in vain for evidence of female participants in the many black conventions and meetings during this period, although this was perhaps in part attributable to the fact that women did not have the right to vote. Black women remained militantly outspoken in defense of their families and property rights, but they lacked a formal power base within their own communities. And in an atmosphere fraught with sexual violence, where freedwomen remained at the mercy of white men and where “the mere suggestion” that a black man was attracted to a white woman was “enough to hang him,” a black husband’s resentment might continue to manifest itself in his relations with those closest to him. A Sea Island slave folktale offered the lesson that “God had nebber made a woman for the head of a man.” In the struggle against white racism this often meant that black women were denied the equality with their men to which their labor — not to mention justice — entitled them.⁶²

The sexual division of labor under slavery actually assumed two forms — one system of work forced upon slaves by masters who valued women only as work-oxen and brood-sows, and the other initiated by the slaves themselves in the quarters. Only the profit motive accorded a measure of consistency to the slaveholder’s decisions concerning female work assignments; he sought to exploit his “hands” efficiently, and either invoked or repudiated traditional notions of women’s work to suit his own purposes. In this respect, his decision-making process represented in microcosm the shifting priorities of the larger society, wherein different groups of women were alternately defined primarily as producers or as reproducers according to the fluctuating labor demands of the capitalist economy.⁶³

Within their own communities, the slaves attempted to make work choices based on their African heritage as it applied to the American experience. Their well-defined sexual division of labor contrasted with the calculated self-interest of slaveowners. Slave women were allowed to fulfill their duties as wives and mothers only insofar as these responsibilities did not conflict with their masters’ demands for field or domestic labor. As sharecroppers,

freed people sought to institutionalize their resistance to the whites' conviction that black women should be servants or cotton pickers first, and family members only incidentally. In working together as a unit, black parents and children made an explicit political statement to the effect that their own priorities were inimical to those of white landowners.

To a considerable extent, the freed family's own patriarchal tendencies — fathers took care of "public" negotiations with the white landlord while mothers assumed primary responsibility for childcare — resulted from the black man's desire to protect his household in the midst of a violently racist society. The postbellum black nuclear family never duplicated exactly the functions of the white middle-class model, which (beginning in the late eighteenth century) drew an increasingly rigid distinction between masculine and feminine spheres of activity characteristic of commercial-industrial capitalism. Clearly, the peculiar southern way of life suggests that an analysis of black women's oppression should focus not so much on the family as on the dynamics of racial prejudice. However, black women and men in the long run paid a high price for their allegiance to a patriarchal family structure, and it is important not to romanticize this arrangement as it affected the status and opportunities of women, even within the confines of black community life. Women continued to wield informal influence in their roles as herb doctors and "grannies," but men held all positions of formal political and religious authority. Ultimately, black people's "preferences" in the postwar period took shape within two overlapping caste systems — one based on race, the other on gender. Former slaves were "free" only in the sense that they created their own forms of masculine authority as a counter to poverty and racism.

The story of slave women's work encapsulates an important part of American history. For here in naked form, stripped free of the pieties often used in describing white women and free workers at the time, were the forces that shaped patriarchal capitalism — exploitation of the most vulnerable members of society, and a contempt for women that knew no ethical or physical bounds. And yet, slave women demonstrated "true womanhood" in its truest sense. Like Janie Scott's mother who was "much of a woman," they revealed a physical and emotional strength that transcended gender and preached a great sermon about the human spirit.

NOTES

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¹Zora N. Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1938), pp. 31-32. Novelist, folklorist, and anthropologist, Hurston (born 1901, died 1960) had collected a massive amount of primary data on the culture and folklore of Afro-Americans before she began work on *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In 1938 she served as supervisor of the Negro Unit of the Florida Federal Writers Project which compiled interviews with former slaves. Her various writings are finally receiving long-overdue literary attention and critical acclaim. See Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977); and a recent anthology: Zora N. Hurston, *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing. . . And Then Again When I Am Looking Mean And Impressive*, ed. Alice Walker (Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1980).

²Angela Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," *The Black Scholar* 3 (December 1971): 3-15. For other works that focus on slave women, see Mary Ellen Obitko, "'Custodians of a House of Resistance': Black Women Respond to Slavery," in *Women and Men: The Consequences of Power*, ed. Dana V. Hiller and Robin Ann Sheets (Cincinnati: Office of Women's Studies, University of Cincinnati, 1977), pp. 256-59; Deborah G. White, "Ain't I A Woman? Female Slaves in the Antebellum South" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois-Chicago Circle, 1979). White's work examines several important themes related to slave women's work and family life, but her study lacks a coherent theoretical framework. She asserts that slave women gained considerable "self-confidence" because they achieved "equality" with men of their race, and even suggests that emancipation resulted in a "loss" of women's "equality"; freedom amounted to "a decline in the status of black women" (p. 51). When used in this context, the concepts of equality and status lose all meaning and relevance to the complex issues involved; White's argument obscures the subtleties of black female-male relations under bondage and after emancipation.

The volume edited by Gerda Lerner, *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Random House, 1972), includes material on the history of slave women.

³Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976); Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Random House, 1974); Leslie Howard Owens, *This Species of Property: Slave Life and Culture in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); John D. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); Paul A. David et al., *Reckoning With Slavery: A Critical Study in the Quantitative History of American Negro Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Paul D. Escott, *Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978).

In some specialized studies, women are largely excluded from the general analysis and discussed only in brief sections under the heading "Women and Children." See, for example, Robert S. Starobin, *Industrial Slavery in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); and Todd L. Savitt, *Medicine and Slavery: The Diseases and*

Health Care of Blacks in Antebellum Virginia (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978).

⁴For examples of studies of specific groups of women and the relationship between their work and family life, see Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: 'Woman's Sphere' in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979); Milton Cantor and Bruce Laurie, eds., *Class, Sex, and the Woman Worker* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1977); Virginia Yans McLaughlin, "Patterns of Work and Family Organization: Buffalo's Italians," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2 (Autumn 1971): 297-314; Leslie Woodcock Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women: Industrial Work and Family Life in the United States, 1900-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

General overviews and theoretical formulations that fail to take into account the experiences of slave women include Patricia Branca, "A New Perspective on Women's Work: A Comparative Typology," *Journal of Social History* 9 (Winter 1975): 129-53; W. Elliot Brownlee, "Household Values, Women's Work, and Economic Growth, 1800-1930," *Journal of Economic History* 39 (March 1979): 199-209; Maurine Weiner Greenwald, "Historians and the Working-Class Woman in America," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 14/15 (Spring 1979): 23-32; Alice Kessler-Harris, "Women, Work, and the Social Order," in *Liberating Women's History: Theoretical and Critical Essays*, ed. Berenice A. Carroll (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), pp. 330-43.

⁵On women's "productive-reproductive" functions and the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism, see Joan Kelly, "The Doubled Vision of Feminist Theory: A Postscript to the 'Women and Power' Conference," *Feminist Studies* 5 (Spring 1979): 216-27; Heidi Hartmann, "Capitalism, Patriarchy, and Job Segregation by Sex," and Zillah Eisenstein, "Developing a Theory of Capitalist Patriarchy and Socialist Feminism," and "Some Notes on the Relations of Capitalist Patriarchy," in *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*, ed. Zillah R. Eisenstein (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979); Annette Kuhn and AnnMarie Wolpe, "Feminism and Materialism" and Veronica Beechey, "Women and Production: A Critical Analysis of Some Sociological Theories of Women's Work," both in *Feminism and Materialism: Women and Modes of Production*, ed. Annette Kuhn and AnnMarie Wolpe (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

Several scholars argue that the last three decades of the antebellum period constituted a distinct phase in the history of slavery. Improved textile machinery and a rise in world demand for cotton led to a tremendous growth in the American slave economy, especially in the Lower South. A marked increase in slave mortality rates and family breakups (a consequence of forced migration from Upper to Lower South), and a slight decline in female fertility rates indicate the heightened demands made upon slave labor during the years 1830-60. See David, et al., *Reckoning With Slavery*, pp. 99, 356-57; Jack Erickson Eblen, "New Estimates of the Vital Rates of the United States Black Population During the Nineteenth Century," *Demography* 11 (May 1974): 307-13.

⁶For example, see Kelly, "Doubled Vision," pp. 217-18, and Eisenstein, "Relations of Capitalist Patriarchy," pp. 48-52, on the regressive implications of family life for women. But Davis notes that the slave woman's "survival-oriented activities were themselves a form of resistance" ("Reflections on the Black Woman's Role," p.7).

⁷Interviews with former slaves have been published in various forms, including George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, 41 vols., Series 1 and 2, supp. Series 1 and 2 (Westport Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1972, 1978, 1979); Social Science Institute, Fisk University, *Unwritten History of Slavery:*

Autobiographical Accounts of Negro Ex-Slaves (Washington, D.C.: Microcards Editions, 1968); Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Borden, and Robert K. Phillips, *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976); John B. Cade, "Out of the Mouths of Ex-Slaves," *Journal of Negro History* 20 (July 1935): 294-337.

The narratives as a historical source are evaluated in Escott, *Slavery Remembered*, pp. 3-18 ("the slave narratives offer the best evidence we will ever have on the feelings and attitudes of America's slaves . . ."); Martia Graham Goodson, "An Introductory Essay and Subject Index to Selected Interviews from the Slave Narrative Collection" (Ph.D. dissertation, Union Graduate School, 1977); and C. Vann Woodward, "History from Slave Sources," *American Historical Review* 79 (April 1974): 470-81.

The Davidson quotation is from Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, Ohio Narrs., Series 1, vol. 16, pp. 26-29. Hereafter, all references to this collection will include the name of the state, series number, volume, and page numbers. The other major source of slave interview material taken from the FWP collection for this paper — Perdue, et al. — will be referred to as *Weevils in the Wheat*.

⁸Joan Kelly-Gadol, "The Social Relations of the Sexes: Methodological Implications of Women's History," *Signs* 1 (Summer 1976): 809-10, 819.

⁹For discussions of women's work and the inadequacy of male-biased economic and social-scientific theory to define and analyze it, see Joan Acker, "Issues in the Sociological Study of Women's Work," in *Working Women: Theories and Facts in Perspective*, ed., Ann H. Stromberg and Shirley Harkess (Palo Alto, Calif.: Mayfield Publishing Co. 1978), pp. 134-61; and Judith K. Brown, "A Note on the Division of Labor by Sex," *American Anthropologist* 72 (October 1970): 1073-78.

¹⁰Miss. Narrs., supp. Series 1, pt. 2, vol. 7, p. 350; Okla. Narrs., supp. Series 1, vol. 12, p. 110; Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role," p. 8; Frances Anne Kemble, *Journal of A Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838-1839* (London: Longman, Green, 1863), pp. 60, 92.

¹¹Owens, *This Species of Property*, pp. 8-20.

¹²Kemble, *Journal of a Residence*, p. 28; Lewis Cecil Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States*, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution, 1933), pp. 533-548; *Weevils in the Wheat*, p. 199; Fla. Narrs., Series 1, vol. 17, p. 305; Charles S. Sydnor, *Slavery in Mississippi* (Gloucester, Mass.: P. Smith, 1965), p. 20; Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States* (New York: Dix and Edwards, 1856), p. 470; Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Back Country* (New York: Mason Brothers, 1860), p.59.

¹³Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*, p. 387; Ala. Narrs., Series 1, vol. 6, p. 87. Work descriptions were gleaned from the FWP slave narrative collection (*American Slave* and *Weevils in the Wheat*) and Gray, *History of Agriculture*. Goodson ("Introductory Essay") has indexed a sample of the interviews with women by subject (for example, "candlemaking," "carding wool," "field work," "splitting rails.')

For pictures of early twentieth-century black women of St. Helena's Islands, South Carolina, wearing the second belt, see photographs in Edith M. Dabbs, *Face of an Island: Leigh Richmond Miner's Photographs of St. Helena's Island* (New York: Grossman, 1971). The caption of one photo entitled "Woman with Hoe" reads: "Adelaide Washington sets off for her day's work in the field. The second belt or cord tied around the hips lifted all her garments a little and protected the long skirts from both early morning dew and contact with the dirt . . . [according to] an African superstition . . . the second cord also gave the wearer extra strength" (no pp.). Olmsted, *Slave States*, p. 387, includes a sketch of this form of dress.

¹⁴*Weevils in the Wheat*, p. 26; Gary, *History of Agriculture*, p. 251; planter quoted in Owens, *This Species of Property*, p. 39.

¹⁵Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, p. 495; Burke quoted in Gray, *History of Agriculture*, p. 549; Olmsted, *A Journey in the Back Country*, p. 81. For former slaves' descriptions of women who plowed, see Okla. Narrs., Series 1, vol. 7, p. 314; Fla. Narrs., Series 1, vol. 17, p. 33.

¹⁶Olmsted quoted in Sydnor, *Slavery in Mississippi*, p. 68; *Weevils in the Wheat*, p. 77. Of the women who worked in the South Carolina Sea Islands cotton fields, Harriet Ware (a northern teacher) wrote, "they walk off with their heavy hoes on their shoulders, as free, strong, and graceful as possible." Elizabeth Ware Pearson, ed., *Letters from Port Royal Written at the Time of the Civil War* (Boston: W.B. Clarke, 1906), p. 52.

¹⁷Stuart Bruchey, ed., *Cotton and the Growth of the American Economy: 1790-1860* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967), p. 174. See the documents under the heading "Making Cotton" and "The Routine of the Cotton Year," pp. 171-80. For examples of outstanding female pickers see Ala. Narrs., Series 1, vol. 6, p. 275 ("Oncet I won a contest wid a man an' made 480 pounds."); *Weevils in the Wheat*, p. 199.

¹⁸Texas Narrs., supp. Series 2, pt. 1, vol. 2, pp. 93-94; Miss. Narrs., supp. Series 1, pt. 1, vol. 6, pp. 235-36, and pt. 2, vol. 7, p. 404; Tex. Narrs., Series 1, pt. 3, vol. 5, p. 231; Ind. Narrs., Series 1, vol. 6, p. 25; Ga. Narrs., Series 1, pt. 1, vol. 12, p. 113; Okla. Narrs., Series 1, vol. 7, p. 314; Ala. Narrs., Series 1, vol. 6, p. 338.

¹⁹For a general discussion of slave artisans in the South see Gray, *History of Agriculture*, pp. 548, 565-67; Sydnor, *Slavery in Mississippi*, p. 9. Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, in *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), discuss "Occupational Distribution of Southern Blacks: 1860, 1870, 1890" in app. B, pp. 220-31. The works of Starobin (*Industrial Slavery*), and James H. Brewer, *The Confederate Negro: Virginia's Craftsmen and Military Laborers, 1861-1865* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1969), focus almost exclusively on male slaves. See also Herbert Gutman and Richard Sutch, "Victorians All? The Sexual Mores and Conduct of Slaves and their Masters," in David, et al., *Reckoning With Slavery*, p. 160; Gutman, *Black Family*, pp. 599-600. The "hiring out" of men and children frequently disrupted family life.

²⁰Ransom and Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom*, p. 233; Olmsted, *Slave States*, p. 388; Ohio Narrs., Series 1, vol. 16, p. 28; Kemble, *Journal*, p. 121; S.C. Narrs., Series 1, pt. 4, vol. 3, p. 78; *Weevils in the Wheat*, pp. 223-24. Genovese describes the plantation system as a "halfway house between peasant and factory cultures" (*Roll, Jordan, Roll*, p. 286). For further discussion of the grueling pace of fieldwork see Herbert G. Gutman and Richard Sutch, "Sambo Makes Good, or Were Slaves Imbued with the Protestant Work Ethic?" in David, et al., *Reckoning With Slavery*, pp. 55-93.

²¹Ala. Narrs., Series 1, vol. 6, p. 46; Fla. Narrs., Series 1, vol. 17, p. 185; *Weevils in the Wheat*, pp. 259, 216; Va. Narrs., Series 1, vol. 16, p. 51; Escott, *Slavery Remembered*, pp. 86-93. Escott includes an extensive discussion of resistance as revealed in the FWP slave narrative collection and provides data on the age, sex, and marital status of resisters and the purposes and forms of resistance. Gutman argues that the "typical runaway" was a male, aged sixteen to thirty-five years (*Black Family*, pp. 264-65). See also Obitko, "Custodians of a House of Resistance,"; Owens, *This Species of Property*, pp. 38, 88, 95.

²²*Weevils in the Wheat*, pp. 26, 282, 157. According to Gutman, plantation work patterns "apparently failed to take into account enlarged slave kin groups, and further study may show that a central tension between slaves and their owners had its origins

in the separation of work and kinship obligations" (*Black Family*, p. 209.).

²³Fla. Narrs., Series 1, vol. 17, p. 191; Bennet H. Barrow quoted in Gutman, *Black Family*, p. 263; Robert S. Starobin, ed., *Blacks in Bondage: Letters of American Slaves* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1974), p. 54.

In his recent study, *The Slave Drivers: Black Agricultural Labor Supervisors in the Antebellum South* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979), William L. Van DeBurg examines the anomalous position of black (male) drivers in relation to the rest of the slave community.

²⁴Savitt, *Medicine and Slavery*, pp. 115-20; planter quoted in Owens, *This Species of Property*, pp. 38-40; planter quoted in Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*, p. 190; Kemble, *Journal of a Residence*, p. 121. Cf. White, "Ain't I A Woman?" pp. 77-86, 101, 155-60.

²⁵Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, pp. 328, 340; Ala. Narrs., Series 1, vol. 6, p. 273; Miss. Narrs., supp. Series 1, pt. 2, vol. 7, p. 400; Tex. Narrs., Series 1, pt. 3, vol. 5, p. 45. Recent historians have emphasized that the distinction between housework and fieldwork was not always meaningful in terms of shaping a slave's personality and self-perception or defining her or his status. See Owens, *This Species of Property*, p. 113; Escott, *Slavery Remembered*, pp. 59-60.

²⁶Ala. Narrs., Series 1, vol. 6, pp. 416-17. In her study of slave mistresses, Anne Firor Scott gives an accurate description of their numerous supervisory duties, but she ignores that most of the actual manual labor was performed by slave women. See *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 31.

²⁷Tex. Narrs., Series 1, pt. 4, vol. 5, p. 11; Ind. Narrs., Series 1, vol. 6, p. 83. See also Miss. Narrs., supp. Series 1, pt. 1, vol. 6, pp. 54-55, 216, 257, 365, 380-81.

²⁸The FWP slave narrative collection provides these examples of children's work, and many more. Ala. Narrs., Series 1, vol. 6, p. 157; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, pp. 502-19; Owens, *This Species of Property*, p. 202.

In early adolescence (ages ten to fourteen), a child would normally join the regular work force as a half-hand. At that time (or perhaps before), she or he received adult clothing. This *rite de passage* apparently made more of an impression on boys than girls, probably because pants offered more of a contrast to the infant's smock than did a dress. Willis Cofer attested to the significance of the change: "Boys jes' wore shirts what looked lak dresses 'til dey wuz 12 years old and big enough to wuk in de field . . . and all de boys wuz mighty proud when dey got big enough to wear pants and go to wuk in de fields wid grown folkses. When a boy got to be man enough to wear pants, he drawed rations and quit eatin' out of de trough [in the nursery]." Ga. Narrs., Series 1, pt. 1, vol. 12, p. 203. For other examples of the significance of change from adults' to children's clothing, see Tex. Narrs., Series 1, pt. 3, vol. 5, pp. 211, 275; p. 4, pp. 109-110; Ga. Narrs., Series 1, pt. 1, vol. 12, p. 277; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, p. 505.

²⁹Ga. Narrs., supp. Series 1, pt. 1, vol. 3, p. 185; *Weevils in the Wheat*, pp. 264-65; S.C. Narrs., Series 1, pt. 4, vol. 3, p. 257.

³⁰Okla. Narrs., Series 1, vol. 7, p. 347; White "Ain't I A Woman?" pp. 210-15; L. Maria Child, ed., *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written By Herself* (Boston: L. Maria Child, 1861).

³¹James Hugo Johnston, *Race Relations in Virginia and Miscegenation in the South, 1776-1860* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1970), p. 247; Mary Boykin Chesnut, *A Diary From Dixie*, ed. Ben Ames Williams (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 49.

³²Fla. Narrs., Series 1, vol. 17, p. 35. For specific incidents illustrating these points, see *Weevils in the Wheat*, pp. 63, 199; Okla. Narrs., Series 1, vol. 7, pp. 135, 165-66; Tenn. Narrs., Series 1, vol. 16, p. 14. Slave punishment in general is discussed in Escott, *Slavery Remembered*, pp. 42-46; Owens, *This Species of Property*, p. 88; Savitt, *Slavery and Medicine*, pp. 65-69; Gutman and Sutch, "Sambo Makes Good," pp. 55-93; Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), pp. 60-61. These examples indicate that Anne Firor Scott is a bit sanguine in suggesting that although southern women were sensitive to the "depravity" of their husbands, "It may be significant that they did not blame black women, who might have provided convenient scapegoats. The blame was squarely placed on men." See Anne Firor Scott, "Women's Perspectives on the Patriarchy in the 1850s," *Journal of American History* 61 (June 1974): 52-64.

³³Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, pp. 333-38. See, for example, the document entitled "A Seamstress is Punished" in Lerner, ed., *Black Women in White America*, pp. 18-19.

³⁴Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*, p. 421; S.C. Narrs., Series 1, pt. 4, vol. 3, p. 126; Fla. Narrs., Series 1, vol. 14, p. 356; Escott, *Slavery Remembered*, p. 64; Kemble, *Journal of a Residence*, p. 98; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, pp. 346-47.

³⁵Fla. Narrs., Series 1, vol. 17, p. 356; Gutman and Sutch, "Sambo Makes Good," p. 74; Kemble, *Journal of a Residence*, p. 153; Gray, *History of Agriculture*, p. 553; Owens, *This Species of Property*, p. 113.

³⁶Ga. Narrs., Series 1, pt. 1, vol. 12, p. 243; Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role," pp. 4-7. For general discussions of women's work as it related to slave communal life see also Owens, *This Species of Property*, pp. 23, 225; and White, "Ain't I A Woman?" Polly Cancer recalled that, when she was growing up on a Mississippi plantation, the master "wudn't let de mammies whip dey own chillun [or 'do dey own cookin'] . . . , ef he cum 'cross a 'ooman whuppin' her chile he'd say, 'Git 'way 'ooman; dats my bizness" Miss. Narrs., supp. Series 1, pt. 2, vol. 7, pp. 340-41.

³⁷Gray, *History of Agriculture*, p. 563; Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*, pp. 424-25, 697-98; Owens, *This Species of Property*, p. 47; Fla. Narrs., Series 1, vol. 17, p. 175; Ala. Narrs., Series 1, vol. 6, p. 216; Miss. Narrs., supp. Series 1, pt. 1, vol. 6, pp. 10, 23, 25, 123; Ga. Narrs., supp. Series 1, pt. 1, vol. 3, p. 27. Savitt (*Slavery and Medicine*) includes a section on "Black Medicine" (pp. 171-84) and confirms Rebecca Hook's recollection that "on the plantation, the doctor was not nearly as popular as the 'granny' or midwife." Fla. Narrs., Series 1, vol. 17, p. 175.

³⁸Ga. Narrs., Series 1, pt. 1, vol. 12, p. 70; Okla. Narrs., Series 1, vol. 7, pp. 314-15; White, "Ain't I A Woman?" pp. 22-23; Tex. Narrs., Series 2, pt. 1, vol. 2, p. 98.

³⁹The FWP slave narrative collection contains many descriptions of slaves engaged in household industry. Alice Morse Earle details comparable techniques used by white women in colonial New England in *Home Life in Colonial Days* (New York: MacMillan Co., 1935).

⁴⁰See, for example, S.C. Narrs., Series 1, pt. 3, vol. 3, pp. 15, 218, 236; Tex. Narrs., Series 1, pt. 3, vol. 5, pp. 20, 89, 108, 114, 171, 188, 220; Miss. Narrs., supp. Series 1, pt. 1, vol. 6, p. 36.

⁴¹*Weevils in the Wheat*, pp. 88-89. George White of Lynchburg reported that his mother sang a similar version of this song to women while they were spinning (p. 309).

⁴²Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, p. 319.

⁴³Gutman, *Black Family*, p. 75. Escott points out that masters and slaves lived in "different worlds" (*Slavery Remembered*, p. 20). This paragraph briefly summarizes Gutman's pioneering work.

⁴⁴Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role," p. 7.

⁴⁵Ala. Narrs., Series 1, vol. 6, p. 9; Tex. Narrs., supp. Series 2, pt. 5, vol. 6, pp. 2036-37; Fla. Narrs., Series 1, vol. 17, pp. 22-23; White, "Ain't I A Woman?," pp. 30-31, 65.

⁴⁶Gutman, *Black Family*, pp. 142, 67-68, 267-78; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, pp. 318, 482-94; S.C. Narrs., Series 1, pt. 3, vol. 3, p. 192; Miss. Nars., supp. Series 1, pt. 2, vol. 7, pp. 380-81.

⁴⁷Okla. Narrs., Series 1, vol. 7, p. 210; Escott, *Slavery Remembered*, pp. 49-57, 87; Owens, *This Species of Property*, p. 201.

⁴⁸Gutman and Sutch, "Sambo Makes Good," p. 63; Owens, *This Species of Property*, p. 195; Miss. Narrs., supp. Series 1, pt. 1, vol. 6, pp. 59-60. For mention of corn shuckings in particular, see Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, p. 318; Miss. Narrs., Series 1, vol. 7, p. 6; Okla. Narrs., Series 1, vol. 7, p. 230. In the context of traditional female-male roles, what Genovese calls the "curious sexual division of labor" that marked these festivities was not "curious" at all (p. 318).

⁴⁹Unfortunately, much of the data about pre colonial African work patterns must be extrapolated from recent findings of anthropologists. The author benefited from conversations with Dr. M. Jean Hay of the Boston University African Studies Center concerning women's work in precolonial Africa and methodological problems in studying this subject.

⁵⁰For a theoretical formulation of the sexual division of labor in preindustrial societies, see Brown, "A Note on the Division of Labor By Sex."

⁵¹Peter Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina From 1670 Through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), pp. 59-62; P.C. Lloyd, "Osi fakunde of Ijebu," in *Africa Remembered: Narratives by West Africans from the Era of the Slave Trade*, ed. Philip D. Curtin (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), p. 263; Marguerite Dupire, "The Position of Women in a Pastoral Society," in *Women of Tropical Africa*, ed. Denise Paulme (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), pp. 76-80; Olaudah Equiano, "The Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African Written By Himself," in *Great Slave Narratives*, ed. Arna Bontemps (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), pp. 7-10; Kemble, *Journal of a Residence*, p. 42; Pearson, ed., *Letters from Port Royal*, pp. 58, 106.

⁵²Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1941), pp. 33-85; Wood, *Black Majority*, pp. 179, 250; Hermann Baumann, "The Division of Work According to Sex in African Hoe Culture," *Africa* 1 (July 1928): 289-319.

On the role of women in hoe agriculture, see also Leith Mullings, "Women and Economic Change in Africa," in *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change*, ed. Nancy J. Hafkin and Edna G. Bay (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976), pp. 239-64; Sylvia Leith-Ross, *African Women: A Study of the Ibo of Nigeria* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965), pp. 84-91; Ester Boserup, *Woman's Role in Economic Development* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1970), pp. 156-36; Jack Goody and Joan Buckley, "Inheritance and Women's Labour in Africa," *Africa* 63 (April 1973): 108-21. No tribes in precolonial Africa used the plow.

⁵³Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*, p. 433; Gray, *History of Agriculture*, p. 548; Kemble, *Journal of a Residence*, pp. 164, 247; Douglass, *Narrative*, pp. 76-78. According to Genovese, the ability of these elderly slaves "to live decently and with self-respect depended primarily on the support of their younger fellow slaves" (*Roll, Jordan, Roll*, p. 523); White "Ain't I A Woman?" p. 49; Miss. Narrs., supp. Series 1, pt. 1, vol. 6, p. 242.

⁵⁴Eblen, "New Estimates," p. 306; Pearson, ed. *Letters from Port Royal*, p. 25;

Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, pp. 522-23; Eliza F. Andrews, *The War-Time Journal of a Georgia Girl, 1864-1865* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1908), p. 101; Escott, *Slavery Remembered*, pp., 108-09; Owens, *This Species of Property*, p. 140; Gutman, *Black Family*, p. 218. For specific examples, see Ala. Narrs., supp. Series 1, pt. 1, vol. 6, p. 217; pt. 2, vol. 7, pp. 369-73. See also White, "Ain't I A Woman?" pp. 107-112.

⁵⁵Miss. Narrs., Supp. Series 1, pt. 1, Vol. 6, p. 217; pt. 2, Vol. 7, pp. 369-73. See also White, "Ain't I A Woman?" pp. 107-112.

⁵⁶Ga. Narrs., Series 1, pt. 1, vol. 12, p. 214; *Weevils in the Wheat*, p. 128

⁵⁷Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, p. 500. See also White, "Ain't I A Woman?" pp. 3-20, 51-54; and Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role," p. 7.

⁵⁸This section summarizes material in an essay by the author entitled "Freed Women?: Black Women, Work, and the Family During the Civil War and Reconstruction," Wellesley Center for Research on Women Working Paper No. 61 (Wellesley, Mass., 1980). "'My Mother'" and "Freed Women" constitute the first two chapters of a book on Afro-American women, work, and the family, 1830-1980 (forthcoming).

⁵⁹Robert Somers, *The Southern States Since the War, 1870-1* (London: MacMillan & Co., 1871), p. 59; Ransom and Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom*, p. 233; Francis W. Loring and C.F. Atkinson, *Cotton Culture and the South Considered with Reference to Emigration* (Boston: A. Williams, 1869), pp. 4-23. Other primary works that include relevant information are Frances Butler Leigh, *Ten Years on a Georgia Plantation Since the War* (London: R. Bentley, 1883); Charles Nordhoff, *The Cotton States in the Spring and Summer of 1875* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1876); George Campbell, *White and Black: The Outcome of a Visit to the United States* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1879).

⁶⁰Freedmen's Bureau official quoted in Gutman, *Black Family*, p. 167.

⁶¹The transition from wage labor to the sharecropping system is examined in Ralph Shlomowitz, "The Origins of Southern Sharecropping," *Agricultural History* 53 (July 1979): 557-75, and his "The Transition From Slave to Freedman Labor Arrangements in Southern Agriculture, 1865-1870," *Journal of Economic History* 39 (March 1979): 333-36; Jay R. Mandle, *The Roots of Black Poverty: The Southern Plantation Economy After the Civil War* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1978); Joseph D. Reid, Jr., "White Land, Black Labor, and Agricultural Stagnation: The Causes and Effects of Sharecropping in the Postbellum South," *Explorations in Economic History* 16 (January 1979): 31-55; Ransom and Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom*.

Jonathan Wiener suggests that blacks' rejection of gang labor and preference for family share units "represented a move away from classic capitalist organizations." See "Class Structure and Economic Development in the American South, 1865-1955," *American Historical Review* 84 (October 1979): 984.

⁶²Elizabeth Hyde Botume, *First Days Amongst the Contrabands* (Boston: Lee & Shepard, 1893), p. 166; Campbell, *White and Black*, pp. 172, 344, 364; tale entitled "De Tiger an' de Nyung Lady" quoted in Owens, *This Species of Property*, p. 144. See Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), pp. 502-56, for a detailed discussion of various freedmen's conventions held throughout the South.

⁶³For an analysis of the ways in which the household responsibilities of women are defined and redefined to alter the supply of available wage-earners, see Louise A. Tilly and Joan Scott, *Women, Work, and Family* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1978).