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Unrequited Toil

A History of United States Slavery

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Life in the Quotidian

Enslaved Americans were not merely American slaves. They were people. In everyday life, the enslaved were people with faith and friendships, loves and animosities, interests and fears, songs and sorrows. Concerns focused on the big picture issues of God, freedom, and evil in the world. But they also dwelled in the everyday. Most were gnawed by hunger, and many were chronically sick, their quotidian lives lurching from crisis to crisis as friends and loved ones got ill, were sold, suffered injury, or disappeared. Enslaved people were constrained by the interlocking strategies of enslavers to take without asking, hurt with impunity, and force labor without paying.

But slavery was a constellation of constraints rather than an identity or a totalizing experience. *Slave culture*, *slave religion*, and the *slave experience* refer to categories of analysis rather than walls of separation between the culture, religion, and experiences of enslaved and non-enslaved people. Each established human ties against a dehumanizing institution. Growing up enslaved in Maryland, a young Frederick Douglass met an older African American lay preacher, Charles Lawson. Douglass was just thirteen, living in Baltimore, and awakening to God. Lawson was a man of faith. “His life was a life of prayer,” Douglass warmly recalled decades later, “and his words . . . were about a better world.” Lawson formed a bond with the youth from the Eastern Shore. Douglass remembered “becoming deeply attached to the old man, I went often with him to prayer-meeting, and spent much of my leisure time with him on Sunday.” Lawson became a father figure to the fatherless Frederick. “The old man could read a little,” Douglass smiled, recalling their Bible lessons, “and I was a great help to him, in making out the hard words, for

I was a better reader than he. I could teach him ‘the letter,’ but he could teach me ‘the spirit,’ and high, refreshing times we had together, in singing, praying and glorifying God.” Their friendship deepened and “went on for a long time,” and though he lost Lawson when he was sent back to the Eastern Shore after the death of an owner, their mutual affection and fellowship built Douglass’s character and kindled in him an abiding Christian faith. Their friendship was forbidden by Douglass’s Baltimore master. But Lawson’s influence was beyond enslavers’ control. And Douglass’s faith grew into a calling when, soon after escaping from bondage in Maryland, he became a lay preacher in New Bedford, Massachusetts.¹

Yet Douglass’s friendship with Lawson illustrates the personal connections African American slavery interfered with. Contingency governed relationships because enslavers inserted obstacles that limited contact or disrupted a fellowship, family relationship, or friendship. Slavery dehumanized by tearing at the social fabric and violating the bodies of bondspersons. But enslaved people’s humanity did not disappear or erode under the constraints even as enslavers set the rules. For instance, men assigned to a gang or work group tended to form friendships in those male spaces. When they evaded patrols or drank alcohol, gambled, or fought, in violation of enslaver strictures, they also tended to deepen interpersonal bonds.² And enslaved people dwelled with their own concerns as they made life choices.

Life began in adversity and, for many, squalor. When born, an enslaved baby entered a world of constraints. Owners allowed little prenatal care, and babies were born to mothers who were poorly nourished and sleep deprived, and who were often forced to work right up to birth and then rejoin the workforce immediately afterward. That partly accounts for 10–15 percent of births of stillborn babies. Most African American babies were born in the cabins their mothers shared with family and fellow bondspersons. Those dwellings were often drafty in winter, sweltering in summer, lacking plumbing and anything but rough furniture and cooking implements. Mothers lacked diapers except for what they could improvise, and the dwellings enslaved people inhabited were unavoidably filthy.

¹ Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (Auburn, NY: Miller, Orton, and Mulligan, 1855), 167.

² Sergio A. Lussana, *My Brother Slaves: Friendship, Masculinity, and Resistance in the Antebellum South* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2016); Joshua D. Rothman, *Flush Times and Fever Dreams: A Story of the South and America in the Age of Jackson* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

Partly as a result, black infant mortality was 2.2 times higher than that of whites. Fifty-one percent of African American mortality was children younger than nine in 1850.³

High infant mortality and childhood death seemed to work against the value of property in people, but owners collectively implemented a grim calculus: it was less expensive to buy a bondsperson than to grow one. Careers of enslavers were generally shorter than the span of time it took to raise children to productive ages, and enslavers stinted young people of food, shelter, and necessities of life. And most enslaved people were young. In 1820, more than 43 percent were under age fourteen; throughout the antebellum period, average life expectancy was just over thirty years. Because of lack of food and poor nutrition, enslaved people were shorter in stature than free Americans. If possible, enslavers sent toddlers and young children to elderly or otherwise disabled caregivers. Frederick Douglass was raised until the age of six by his maternal grandmother since his mother's owner decided she was needed in the fields. African Americans strove for a two-parent-headed family, but such aspirations were constantly undermined by enslaver strategies. "Slavery does away with fathers, as it does away with families," Douglass argued. "Slavery has no use for either fathers or families, and its laws do not recognize their existence in the social arrangements of the plantation."⁴

Instead of attending school or receiving lessons, children were introduced to work. Jacob D. Green was put to work doing light housework as a child. He was Douglass's near contemporary, enslaved on Maryland's Eastern Shore. North Carolina native Moses Grandy was put to work in the fields tending animals. He recalled being "compelled to go into the fields and woods to work, with my naked feet cracked and bleeding from extreme cold: to warm them, I used to rouse an ox or hog, and stand on the place where it had lain."⁵ Enslaved girls and boys generally realized they were enslaved early in childhood, around six years old. In the nineteenth century, middle-class families designated childhood as an organic stage of development in which children were supposed to be kept from scenes of violence and nurtured. But enslaved children had no such childhood. It was a time filled with dread, Virginia native Madison Jefferson argued,

³ Wilma A. Dunaway, *The African American Family in Slavery and Emancipation* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 141-42.

⁴ Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 51.

⁵ Moses Grandy, *Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy, Late a Slave in the United States of America* (London: C. Gilpin, 1843), 11, online: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/grandy/grandy.html>, accessed: November 11, 2014.

"for we don't know how long master may keep us, nor into whose hands we may fall."⁶

In cabins and fields, children witnessed a full range of human ordeals. They saw parents and family members beaten and humiliated, and in domestic settings, they witnessed loved ones burning with fever, couples making love, and mothers in labor. If children were fortunate enough to be cared for by one or both parents, they also lived with others in dwellings centered on a hearth. Often they lived with extended family and others who were tossed in together under a roof. Not infrequently one parent lived across a property or county line, and children might spend most of their time with one and not the other except for Sundays and the customary break at Christmastime when bondspersons received some small respite from toils.

Most work was determined by the routine of the seasons. It varied by region, but in the cotton belt, winter was a time for clearing fields, fixing irrigation channels, mending fences, cutting wood, and tending winter vegetable and grain crops. In sugar regions, winter was the most arduous time of the year, when sugar cane was cut and crushed, and the mattresses (units of sugarcane production) seeded in preparation for the next growing season. In the Chesapeake, men might harvest oysters, and in cities and hiring-intensive areas, the first few weeks of the year were the time when yearly contracts turned over. Either the contract was renewed or the enslaved person was bound out to another employer. Winter was also part of the slave-selling season in Deep South markets like New Orleans and Natchez since it was both a low-disease time and also when planters took advances on cotton bales loaded onto ships and sent to market.

The coming of spring brought planting season for cotton, corn, and other crops. Fieldwork replaced ditching and repairing. Birthing animals needed tending, and in places with finicky crops like tobacco, the cycle of weeding and removing pests (before an era of chemical pesticides) required attention. On many agricultural sites of slave labor, the enslaved themselves oversaw and directed those activities, and enslavers relied on bondspersons' knowledge of crops, climate, soil, and other variables that ensured their bounty. By the same token, enslavers shifted much of the burden of care and maintenance onto workers themselves. They granted plots of land to raise vegetables and fowl like chickens and guinea hens.

⁶ John W. Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 218.

Men fished and hunted game, and as spring roads became passable, enslaved people visited and held clandestine parties called frolics.

Summer brought dangers from water- and mosquito-borne disease like cholera, dysentery, yellow fever, and malaria. Transmission was the result of unwashed hands or undercooked meat, which could spread pork tapeworm, causing cysticercosis. Diseases were picked up in the field and transmitted in cabins through fecal matter. Enslaved people associated hookworm with bad air. Infected workers grew anemic, lost weight, and succumbed to infections. The sufferers' symptoms began with a dermatitis, "ground itch" or "dew poison," which was the hookworm larvae penetrating the skin and entering the blood stream. Enslaved people used a wealth of medical knowledge, mostly folk and herbal remedies, but most nevertheless spent most of their lives ill.

The turn from summer to fall compounded the woes of workers since harvest time was when enslavers instituted the pushing system. Cotton was slow to ripen and needed to be picked two or three times from late summer to late fall. Enslaved wagoners or draymen took it to market. Tobacco needed special attention since it was a weed. It bolted or put forth flowering stalks that needed to be cut, and the leaves needed to be harvested at just the right moment, then cured for processing. Corn too needed to be picked, and often enslavers would organize corn-shucking gatherings. Some served whiskey and made it into a festivity or contest reaching late into the night. Hogs and other animals were slaughtered in the fall, and then came the tricky work of processing all the meat and by-products, smoked into ham or otherwise preserved in an era before reliable refrigeration. Harvest time was just about the only time of the year enslaved people ate well or received a break from the monotonous diet of corn or rice porridge and stewed vegetables or tubers. And the two weeks off surrounding Christmas and the New Year were times when loved ones could visit or expect to see family members separated during the working year. Many enslaved people celebrated with games and parties, but some took the opportunity to care for household chores neglected during the harvest rush. And interspersed with the routines of the seasons were the interpersonal concerns enslaved people had as they went about in their world.

Enslaved people sought relationships that lasted, or at least had the potential to last. Jacob D. Green seemed at times like a love-sick teenager. Green's bid to court a sweetheart featured a range of interpersonal conflicts and overwhelming emotions that involved enslavers solely when they got out of hand. He fell in love with Mary, who was a few years older.

"One glance of her large dark eyes broke my heart in pieces," he sighed. "In spite of either [slave patrollers] or dogs, who stood in my way, every night nearly I was in Mary's company." By the cabin fire they talked of past and future. "I learned from her that she had already had a child to her master in Mobile," Green recalled. The jealous mistress had her sold to Maryland "for revenge" to hide the husband's infidelity; "her baby she said her mistress sold out of her arms, only eleven months old" to a Kentucky owner. Mary had faced hardships, but Green was smitten. "I could not sleep at night for thinking of this almost angel in human shape." Six weeks he courted her, and besides her history he learned – to his "annoyance" – that "Mary was adored by every negro in the neighbourhood, and this excited my jealousy and made me miserable." Green's biggest rival was Dan, "a sweet and easy talker," Green recalled, "and a good bone and banjo player." "One night I went over to see Mary, and in looking through the window, saw Mary – my sweet and beloved Mary – sitting upon Dan's knee." Dan too was risking punishment to court Mary. Jacob Green was thunderstruck. "My teeth clenched and bit my tongue – my head grew dizzy, and began to swim round and round," and he considered killing his rival but shook it off, settling on another tactic to make Mary choose him. Green called one afternoon at Mary's – she was the domestic servant of a local physician – and asked whom she would be, his or Dan's? "Dan's, she replied, with an important toss of her head, which went through my very soul, like the shock from a galvanic battery." Green then pulled a trick he'd soon regret. He threatened to hang himself if Mary didn't change her mind. "To this she replied, hang on if you are fool enough," whereupon Green pulled out a length of rope, secured it to a ceiling beam in the kitchen, tied a noose, slipped it over his head, climbed on a three-legged stool, and fastened the rope around his neck. Mary was unimpressed. "I stood upon the stool for some considerable time," Green confessed, "groaning and struggling, and making every kind of noise that might make her believe that I was choking or strangling; but still Mary sat deliberately smoking her pipe with the utmost coolness, and seemed to take no notice of me or what I was doing." "I stood like a fool," Green admitted, waiting for his would-be lover's intercession. Mary got tired of the act and departed. Then the owner's dog burst in, "racing after the cat, right across the kitchen floor, and the dog coming in contact with the stool, knocked it right away from under my feet, and brought my neck suddenly to the full length of the rope, which barely allowed my toes to touch the floor." The trick went bad as the noose closed around his neck, leaving him choking and shaking. "I roared out, Mary! for God's sake cut

the rope! No, answered Mary, you went up there to hang yourself, so now hang on." Green pleaded, confessing that he didn't want to hang – just to get her to love him, not Dan. "I roared out like a jackass, and must too have fainted," Green recalled, and when he regained consciousness, he looked up at the doctor, along with his wife and Mary. They were resuscitating him. "Next day my neck was dreadfully swollen, and my throat was so sore that it was with difficulty that I could swallow meat for more than a week," Green sighed. His owner learned of the trick and punished him with "seventy-eight lashes, and this was the end of my crazy love and court-ship with Mary."⁷

Jacob Green's account of his failed courtship is all too human, and besides the romantic idea of love it incorporates, Green shows a full range of emotions from jealousy and anger to humiliation and hope. He valued honor and defended it, even in a place in which enslaved males were not supposed to possess it. And while Mary was enslaved and the subject of sexual abuse and the trauma of having her baby taken away and sold, she too appears as a woman of moral propriety deciding to whom she would commit in a monogamous courtship and, Green contends, marriage.

Yet Mary and Dan's courtship soon turned tragic. A little while after Green gave up pursuing her, the son of Mary's owner cornered her in a barn and forced himself on her. Green reported that "she strenuously refused" his sexual advances. The doctor's son did not take no for an answer, but when Dan discovered the man assaulting his beloved, he murdered the assailant with a pitchfork. Mary and Dan fled. That night, a local cart driver called at Mary's owner's house, claiming he had a female corpse. To identify it, Mary's owner summoned Green. "The [d]octor ordered me to mount the cart and look at the corpse; I did so, and looked full in that face by the light of the lantern, and saw and knew, notwithstanding the horrible change that had been effected by the work of death, upon those once beautiful features, it was Mary. Poor Mary, driven to distraction by what had happened, she had sought salvation in the depths of the Chesapeake Bay that night." Dan was caught two months later and, according to Green, burned alive for the murder, the bondspersons of the neighborhood forced to witness his immolation. And a few years later, Green was "married" to an enslaved woman named Jane, who was already pregnant with their owner's child, whom Green

⁷ Jacob D. Green, *Narrative of the Life of J. D. Green, a Runaway Slave, from Kentucky, Containing an Account of His Three Escapes, in 1839, 1846, and 1848* (Huddersfield, [England]: Henry Fielding, 1864), 16–18.

described as having near-white skin and blue eyes, "yet notwithstanding this we lived happily together, and I felt happy and comfortable, and . . . I should never have thought of running away if she had not been sold." But after the death of the owner's wife and his engagement to the sister of the man Dan killed in the barn, the fiancée "made a condition that all female slaves whom he had at any time been intimate with must be sold, and my wife being one was sold with the children as well as any other female slaves." Green returned from an errand to find his wife and children sold, never to return again.⁸ He was devastated and soon fled bondage himself, beginning a decade-long ordeal of clawing his way out of the South and, eventually, the United States. And by the 1860s, Green was lecturing in England.

Green's story of his doomed romance and dissolved marriage shows the full range of human intentions and emotion, tragically undermined by the levers of power enslavers manipulated. Green did not behave slavishly but humanly, in his midnight gallantry in Mary's cabin and afternoon foolery in the kitchen. Mary and Dan became tragic lovers in a plot worthy of the shrewdest dramatic poet. Their responses to enslavers' assaults on affections and bodies reveal a determination to assert a humanity enslavers could not dominate or possess. Their identities and intentions were their own, and each paid for asserting their authenticity and being true to their hearts.

The conflicts over friendship and family Douglass and Green's ordeals suggest were part of a larger struggle over identity. Beyond matters of individual identity, gender featured a contest between enslaved people's investment in manhood or womanhood over against enslavers' blunting of gender identities as part of a means of social control. The result was a gender fluidity that existed in the spaces between enslaved people's intentions and enslavers' constraints.

Enslavers' violence and degradation worked against any enslaved person's efforts to be entirely cisgendered, in the modern sense of identifying as wholly male or female. In the early nineteenth century, masculinity in the American South was characterized by citizenship rights like court testimony, militia eligibility, property ownership, earned income, and public contracts. Men became breadwinners and voters. Despite the honor shown by Jacob Green and his rival Dan, enslaved males had no civil or political rights and next to no social prestige, which white Southern men called their honor and defended, often, with public violence.

⁸ Green, *Narrative of the Life of J. D. Green*, 18–22.

By the same token, middling adult females inhabited social identities as ladies, mistresses of a domestic realm, and moral exemplars as well as moral overseers. They were restrained by their own moral probity and were enforcers of order. Mary strove for a version of that idealized womanhood, which masked the fact that many women did not relish the role of moral enforcer or model. The sexual and gender-contoured violence to which African-descended females were subject distanced them from such femininity, however idealized. Most Southern women, white and black, performed farm and domestic work, endured reproductive labors including childbirth, and exercised more symbolic than actual restraints on male behavior. Married women's legal and social identity was bound up with that of their husbands. A fiancée might insist on purging an enslaver's household of his extramarital sexual partners and unrecognized offspring. But she had little such authority after marriage. By the same token, enslavers and other whites refused to treat African-descended females as ladies, wives, or even as women. And whether male or female the hard edges of that gender-fluid socialization began very young.

Enslavers stamped gender ambiguity onto children. When a baby was born on a slave ship en route to New Orleans, officials termed it an "infant slave," refusing to identify a gender.⁹ Enslavers enforced ambiguous gender identities on young people like Leonard Black. After the Maryland native's parents were sold to New Orleans, he and his four brothers were hired out to work. While the master flogged and branded him with hot iron, the mistress, he recalled, "had a son about ten years old; she used to make him beat me and spit in my face. Here I was, a poor slave boy, without father or mother to take my part."¹⁰ The spitting was not just a mark of racial inferiority. The mistress was teaching her son gender difference as well. Not only was Black African-descended and unequal to whites, he was not on a trajectory to manhood, in contrast to the white boy. Enslavers referred to adult bondsmen as Boy, a term of emasculation as well as derision. Former bondsman William Craft explained that "every man slave is called boy till he is very old, then the more respectable

⁹ Inward Slave Manifests, New Orleans, March 19–23, 1822 (*Lapwing*) National Archive and Records Administration (NARA), Microfilm M1895 Roll 2, images, 637–47; 645 (quotation).

¹⁰ Leonard Black, *The Life and Sufferings of Leonard Black, a Fugitive from Slavery. Written by Himself* (New Bedford, MA: Benjamin Lindsey, 1847), 7, online: <http://doc.south.unc.edu/neh/black/black.html>, accessed: August 23, 2016.

slaveholders call him uncle. The women are all girls till they are aged, then they are called aunts."¹¹

Enslaved people made their own meanings of such customs, refusing to accept emasculating constructions. Frederick Douglass explained that on the Eastern Shore plantation of his youth, "'Uncle Tony' was the blacksmith; 'Uncle Harry' was the cartwright; 'Uncle Abel' was the shoemaker; and all these had hands to assist them in their several departments." The title was "a mark of respect, due from the younger to the older slaves," even as enslavers used the titles to demasculize senior African Americans.¹²

Slavery made gender while making race. And even in abolitionist circles, formerly enslaved males struggled to assert a robustly masculine identity. After Douglass escaped to Massachusetts and began speaking at abolitionist gatherings, he was confronted with the gendered assumptions of his audiences and even his sponsors, and not merely the racial ones. In a Boston speech in 1842, William Lloyd Garrison "announced him, in his peculiarly arousing manner, as 'a thing from the South!'" the *Liberator* reported. The neuter-gender pronoun was intentional, setting up a contrast between free manliness and enslaved demasculization. Douglass was uncomfortable with the characterization. "The idea seemed to fire the noble fugitive with the indignation of outraged nature," the report continued. "His eyes flashed as he spoke in tones of appalling earnestness and significance [*sic*]."¹³ In his 1855 autobiography, Douglass argued that the essence of enslavement was treating a bondsman "as a thing destitute of a moral or an intellectual nature," or, more succinctly, "[m]anhood lost in chattelhood."¹⁴

Douglass framed his freedom as an existential and a gendered struggle, the defining moment of which came not when he exited a train in a free state, but when he established his honor in a fight with Edward Covey, a marginal white farmer who rented the sixteen-year-old on Maryland's Eastern Shore. Douglass argued that "this battle with Mr. Covey . . . was the turning point in my 'life as a slave.' It rekindled in my breast the smouldering embers of liberty . . . and revived a sense of my own manhood. I was a changed being after that fight. I was nothing before; I WAS

¹¹ William Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (London: William Tweedie, 1860), 77.

¹² Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 69.

¹³ *The [Boston] Liberator*, February 18, 1842.

¹⁴ Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 152 (first quotation), 175 (second quotation).

A MAN NOW. It recalled to life my crushed self-respect and my self-confidence, and inspired me with a renewed determination to be A FREEMAN." This self-conception was also a cultural nod to the cluster of attributes of nineteenth-century American masculinity. "A man, without force," Douglass argued, "is without the essential dignity of humanity. Human nature is so constituted, that it cannot honor a helpless man, although it can pity him; and even this it cannot do long, if the signs of power do not arise."¹⁵ In a society in which honor, force, and masculinity were fused, Douglass argued that enslaved males were men struggling against their chains rather than piteous beggars for whites' intercession.

In between the lines of Douglass's and others' argument for the humanity and dignity of enslaved men was a recognition that some men were attracted to other men. In early nineteenth-century America, there was no category of someone being gay or lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. Sexuality was an act rather than an identity. Speaking of his "fellow-slaves," Douglass remembered that:

They were noble souls; they not only possessed loving hearts, but brave ones. We were linked and inter-linked with each other. I loved them with a love stronger than any thing I have experienced since. It is sometimes said that we slaves do not love and confide in each other. In answer to this assertion, I can say, I never loved any or confided in any people more than my fellow-slaves.¹⁶

Although that passage can be understood within a heteronormative frame of fraternal closeness, mutual support, and solidarity, it also points beyond that to the intimate same-sex bonds that existed on the landscape of the American South among women and men, which were little understood and often feared even as gay, lesbian, and transgender enslaved people cherished them.¹⁷ And in making the argument for men's intimacies Douglass was also arguing that enslaved people were fully formed human beings.

He was not merely arguing for his own membership in a masculine gender identity but telling how slavery prohibited millions of males like him from participating in it. And that celebration of masculinity was also one female bondspersons used to argue for their own emancipation.

¹⁵ Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 246–47.

¹⁶ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (Boston, MA: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845), 82–83.

¹⁷ Jim Downs, "With Only a Trace: Same-Sex Sexual Desire and Violence on Slave Plantations, 1607–1865," in *Connexions: Histories of Race and Sex in North America*, ed. Jennifer Brier, Jim Downs, and Jennifer L. Morgan (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 15–37.

Former bondswoman Sojourner Truth took a similar tack when arguing for women's rights. "I am a woman's rights," she argued to an Akron gathering in 1851. "I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that? I have heard much about the sexes being equal; I can carry as much as any man, and can eat as much too, if I can get it. I am as strong as any man that is now." Linking masculinity to civil rights and then applying for recognition as the equal of a man, Truth blended rather than differentiated gender characteristics. She tempered that appeal by emphasizing female differences in capacity. "As for intellect," Truth argued, "all I can say is, if a woman have a pint and a man have a quart – why can't she have her little pint full?" The nature of those capacities was not different, she contended, just the volume.¹⁸

Gender ambiguity sometimes paved the path out of slavery. Ellen and William Craft escaped from bondage in Georgia in 1848 by assuming opposite gender guises. William Craft dressed as a female servant, his dark skin accentuating the role. Ellen Craft was light-skinned and dressed and acted as a frail white enslaver traveling with his valet or personal servant. "I cut off my wife's hair square at the back of the head," William recalled of the plan, "and got her to dress in the disguise and stand out on the floor. I found that she made a most respectable looking gentleman." But the Crafts apologized for the gender ambiguity this caused. "My wife had no ambition whatever to assume this disguise, and would not have done so had it been possible to have obtained our liberty by more simple means; but we knew it was not customary in the South for ladies to travel with male servants; and therefore, notwithstanding my wife's fair complexion, it would have been a very difficult task for her to have come off as a free white lady, with me as her slave; in fact, her not being able to write would have made this quite impossible."¹⁹ The apology indicates a self-conscious attempt to disavow transgender leanings, even though Ellen Craft's success hinged on her inhabiting the role with such conviction that she dined with a ship captain and conversed with a slave trader, talking of "breaking" in bondspersons under one of the most notorious enslavers in South Carolina.²⁰ When telling their story, Ellen and William Craft used

¹⁸ Nell Irvin Painter, "Representing Truth: Sojourner Truth's Knowing and Becoming Known," *The Journal of American History* 81.2 (September 1994): 489 (quotations).

¹⁹ Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 35–36.

²⁰ Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 48.

he and she to refer to the genders they inhabited during the escape and without which the strategy would have collapsed.²¹

The Crafts' gender swapping was part of a series of shrewd tactics throwing off suspicion used among many enslaved people fleeing their chains. "Put your hands in your pockets, and walk ricketty, like de sailors," a sponsor advised Harriet Jacobs when she fled her enslaver's sexual abuse in Edenton, North Carolina. As she walked through the town, "I passed several people whom I knew," Jacobs recalled, "but they did not recognize me in my disguise."²² Disguised as a male sailor, the mother of two boarded a boat and braved the aptly named Snaky Swamp.

Gender fluidity worked too to make Harriet Tubman a "Moses" and a "hero" to those who escaped under her guidance before the Civil War.²³ Unable to recognize the strengths and perseverance of African American women, admirers turned Tubman into an honorary man. Masculinized, "General Tubman" became known as a fearsome warrior against slavery. Her military service was exemplary, requiring extraordinary valor on the part of someone who came up in Maryland and had never been south of the Chesapeake by the time she served in South Carolina from 1862 to 1865. It was not that those qualities were essentially masculine but that they were recognized as masculine at the time. The army did not enroll self-identified females. Yet Tubman was among a small group of combat women serving as soldiers and spies, many posing as males and others, like Albert D. J. Cashier, who was white and who made a permanent transition from female to male.²⁴ And while Tubman identified as a woman, there were certainly African-descended transgender people for whom slavery's gender ambiguity was part of a process of inhabiting a transgender identity, before sexuality was recognized as an identity and not merely a complex of behaviors.²⁵ Cisgender norms were part of an edifice of white male control, always more celebrated and idealized

²¹ Barbara McCaskill, *Love, Liberation, and Escaping Slavery: William and Ellen Craft in Cultural Memory* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2015).

²² Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, ed. Lydia Maria Child (Boston, MA: the author, 1861), 170.

²³ William Wells Brown, *The Rising Son, Or, The Antecedents and Advancement of the Colored Race* (Boston, MA: A. G. Brown and Company, 1882), 538.

²⁴ Milton C. Sernett, *Harriet Tubman: Myth, Memory, and History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 42, quotation; Richard H. Hall, *Women on the Civil War Battlefield* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2006), chaps. 3, 10.

²⁵ Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

than actually practiced. In the United States, enslaved people themselves lived in gender-fluid ways from a combination of violent cisgender norms enforced on them and based on the creativity born of those constraints.

In the enslavers' stronghold of gender and color lines, enslaved women were condemned three times over, as bondspersons, as females, and as African-descended people. Like enslaved males, they were subject to arbitrary force, unpaid labor, and legally sanctioned punishments. But they also faced gender-specific constraints and perils in a patriarchal society. Growing up, enslaved girls had to be wary of predators of all classes and colors. Wives had no legal rights to husbands' protections and no legal protections from male violence either, whether the aggressor was free or enslaved. It was no crime in Virginia, say, to rape or abuse a black female. In that environment, the line between girlhood and womanhood was hazy too.

Enslaved children had no childhood marked off as an organic phase of development. Parents often did not instruct enslaved children about sexuality and childbirth, and many enslaved girls found out in violent and degrading ways. To keep children from slavery's torments as long as possible, parents of enslaved children apparently did not instruct girls extensively in sexual matters, and young women experiencing menarche seem to have been told what it signaled only reluctantly. When children asked where babies came from, parents sent them looking in clover patches or hollow logs, or instructed them to await the arrival of the physician or midwife. A young woman like Jacobs had to grow up very quickly.²⁶

Yet Harriet Jacobs's attachment to her two children, Louisa Matilda and Joseph, led her to an extraordinary strategy. When she escaped from her legal owner, she hid in her grandmother's attic, just blocks from where her children were living in slavery, watching them through a hole in the wall. Jacobs relied on a social network centered on her grandmother Molly Horniblow, a free African-descended woman and small business proprietor, who hid her from 1835 to 1842.²⁷ Only when the father and

²⁶ Anthony S. Parent Jr. and Susan Brown Wallace, "Childhood and Sexual Identity under Slavery," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3.3 (January 1993): 363-401; John Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia: A Narrative of the Life, Sufferings, and Escape of John Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Now in England* (London: [W. M. Watts], 1855), 2.

²⁷ Jean Fagan Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs: A Life* (New York, NY: Basic Civitas, 2005), chaps. 3-4; *Edinburgh Gazetteer, The Edinburgh Gazetteer, or Compendious Geographical Dictionary*, 2nd edn. (Edinburgh: Longmans, Rees, Orme, Brown & Green, 1829), 167.

owner of Louisa and Joseph moved them from Chowan County to New York State did Jacobs make good her escape and reunite with them.

Strategies to keep families together were constrained by the fact that enslaved females had more limited work tasks than their male counterparts. That meant fewer opportunities to network. Trades were male gendered. If they showed aptitude, males were often apprenticed to learn barrel making or carpentry, or how to operate a boat or wagon. Gabriel learned blacksmithing in 1790s Richmond. Frederick Douglass learned the lucrative trade of caulking ships' hulls in 1830s Baltimore. Some enslaved males went to sea. And as Gabriel and Douglass discovered, urban networks could provide informal schooling. That did not forestall female learning, but it did hide it. Douglass discovered after his mother's death that "she could read, and that she was the only one of all the slaves and colored people in Tuckahoe who enjoyed that advantage." (A white kinswoman of Douglass's mother's owner countered that "many" in fact possessed literacy: "They were proud of the fact that they could read the [B]ible.")²⁸ Yet there were advantages that bondswomen could seize.

In the culture of surveillance and suspicion that prevailed after the Nat Turner Rebellion, enslaved women were able to cultivate and pass along literacy as Sunday school teachers, missionaries, and church extension workers. Like white women, African American women tended to prize church membership more than men, even though they were forbidden from being ministers, preachers, exhorters, or class leaders. But while enslavers kept strict watch on male pastors and preachers, churchwomen were able to offer religious instruction and lead informal worship, especially to the young. Despite males' having greater access to literacy, enslaved females helped steal an education from owners who forbade it. In a society in which relatively few whites could read and write, however, enslaved literacy remained low, perhaps no more than 5 or 10 percent of the population. Formal literacy statistics may hide folk and biblical literacy that was more aural and theologically sophisticated than grounded in the words of scripture. Sojourner Truth's biographer argued that Truth often asked children to read her passages out of the Bible since they would do so without the adults' habit of lapsing into commentary. When she

²⁸ Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 57–58 (first quotation); Harriet Anthony quoted in Calvin Schermerhorn, "Working through the Double-Bind: Frederick Douglass's Intellectual and Literary Legacy, 1841–1855," *U.S. Studies Online: The BAAS Postgraduate Journal* 13 (Autumn 2008): www.baas.ac.uk/issue-13-autumn-2008-article-5/ accessed: July 14, 2016 (second quotation).

challenged Seventh Day Adventists on one occasion, she met scriptural reasoning with scriptural reasoning arguing, "I am going to stay here and stand the fire, like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego! And Jesus will walk with me through the fire, and keep me from harm." Her opponents, "[white] ministers[,] were taken quite aback at so unexpected an opposer," concluding that "she had learned much that man had never taught her."²⁹ Informed by the Word of God, Truth's theology and mission – inseparable from abolition – was guided by the Holy Spirit, indicating a much more complex and rich interplay of literacy, religious education, and social activism than is indicated by formal literacy statistics. But females' experience of slavery was rarely a contest of letters.

Most were forced into agricultural or fieldwork. Cotton required dexterity and endurance rather than strength, and unlike sugar masters who preferred males, cotton enslavers put females to work in fields as soon as they could follow directions. A close second was domestic labor. Enslaved women toiling in the households of owners or hired out to staff middle-class white households were exposed to violence and abuse that complemented the punishing pushing system in the fields. Household service was a gender-fluid set of occupations. Children and adult males were trained in domestic arts, including those whose appearance flattered enslavers' sense of their own mastery, whiteness, and prestige.³⁰ Jacob Green, for instance, kept house as a boy.

But most domestic bondspersons were female, and they typically served two households. After performing the domestic drudgery of scrubbing floors, emptying chamber pots, cleaning dishes, cooking over open fires, serving food, washing, mending, ironing, sweeping, dusting, dressing, nursing, and diapering white babies, most had to remove one apron and put on another to cook, clean, wash, and nurse their own families, repeating the same female-gendered tasks around the hearth of their own family's cabin or urban tenement apartment. And that was just the everyday drudgery of domestic work. For enslaved females, labor carried a variety of meanings and manifestations.

Labor in childbirth complemented field and domestic toil for most enslaved women. US slavery was distinctive in the Americas and the

²⁹ Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern Slave, Emancipated from Bodily Servitude by the State of New York, in 1828*, ed. Olive Gilbert (Boston, MA: the author, 1850), 112, online: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/truth50/truth50.html>, accessed: August 25, 2016.

³⁰ Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), chap. 5.

Atlantic world because the enslaved population was self-reproducing. A healthy enslaved female was pregnant or nursing from her late teens to her early forties and sometimes beyond. And slavery robbed children of childhood while enslavers robbed mothers of important parts of motherhood. Laws of slave states held that the children born of enslaved women were also enslaved. Babies of enslaved men and free women were free, but slavery followed the mother's legal condition. Motherhood, the sacred bond between parent and child, was cut through by an owner's property relationship. A mother's precious baby was also the legal property of the mother's owner.³¹ As former bondswoman Fannie Berry put it many years later, "[u]s [c]olored women had to go through a plenty, I tell you."³²

And so the chattel principle fell doubly hard on mothers when enslavers ripped beloved babies from their mothers' arms through work regimes in which the mother was hired out, or through other geographic separations. Enslavers often gave babies or children as gifts, sold young people to pay debts, or removed nursing infants in order to put new mothers back to work in fields, kitchens, and parlors. Such babies were typically cared for by older kinswomen or female bondspersons past prime working age. Mothers of enslaved children could expect an inevitable separation at the point of sale or estate division after an owner's death. Birth labor began a tragic progression of joy and love followed by violence and traumatic loss, heartache, and both support and witness to other mothers and women enduring similar toils and trials.³³ Yet not all was anguish and loss.

Enslaved women were social joiners, healers, worship leaders, and even matriarchs. The flip side of domestic work was that enslaved women typically traveled through neighborhoods in domestic circuits. Through their unseen labor, enslaved females knit together families, neighborhoods, churches, and even communities as they cared for children, the sick, elderly, and disabled and made the business of living their business, protecting the most vulnerable along the way. Some grew small businesses selling handicrafts, eggs, poultry, and vegetables. So-called root doctors and midwives traveled local circuits practicing arts of healing, forging

³¹ Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Birth of a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

³² Interview of Mrs. Fannie Berry (1937), online: www.encyclopediavirginia.org/_Interview_of_Mrs_Fannie_Berry_1937, accessed: April 24, 2017.

³³ Emily West, *Enslaved Women in America: From Colonial Times to Emancipation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015).

therapeutic ties among people, giving perinatal care, and practicing social medicine. Slave quarters were the closest thing to community clinics for most of the enslaved population residing in what amounted to slave labor camps. Enslavers often called on male physicians to treat sick, injured, or pregnant African Americans, but racist medical science and physicians' limited (and often counterproductive) repertoire of therapies and procedures made midwives and folk healers preferable in many cases. Black female medical providers' operating principles tended to start with empathy and compassion as opposed to enslavers' callous suspicion, and that by itself influenced better outcomes than the professional physicians who roamed the early nineteenth-century South.³⁴

Enslaved women's medical repertoires were sometimes generations deep. Neighborhoods often had a female healer who made rounds dispensing herbal remedies. And African American women shared herbal remedies with one another, from mother to daughter, transmitting a pharmacopeia of folk medicines, many of which had originated back across the Atlantic Ocean. The same is true with the recipes and the foodways that enriched slave cabins' hearths and were incorporated into Southern regional cuisines. Men may have held the secrets to tasty barbecue. But enslaved female cooks prepared nearly everything else, including dishes of fowl and vegetables, grains, dairy, eggs, and even desserts.³⁵ Since domestic labor was at its core female, enslaved women shaped much of the material culture outside the kitchen as well.

Enslaved women sewed dresses and other garments, did one another's hair, crafted ornamental jewelry, and transmitted knowledge of cosmetics and sewing to females in their network. Rather than imitating mistresses' styles, African American women made homemade relaxers to straighten hair while others braided cornrows, plaited, or opted for "tidy Afros," hiding styles under wraps during hours in kitchens and fields.³⁶ As they made clothes for one another, did one another's hair, and passed along medical knowledge, enslaved females formed networks sometimes powerful enough to upend the strategies of enslavers.

³⁴ Herbert C. Covey, *African American Slave Medicine: Herbal and Non-Herbal Treatments* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007); Sharla M. Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

³⁵ Michael W. Twitty, *The Cooking Gene: A Journey through African-American Culinary History in the Old South* (New York, NY: Amistad, 2016).

³⁶ Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

In some contexts, enslaved women formed gossip networks in which anecdotes and stories, true or not, could end up in court testimony impeaching an enslaver, if repeated strategically enough in the neighborhood. The power of suggestion and rumor could and did influence local elites, making enslaved women a formidable moral authority even in places in which they lacked civil and political rights.³⁷ Such gossip networks dovetailed with escape networks, and the most famous conductor on the Underground Railroad, Harriet Tubman, was able to orchestrate an elaborate network of allies reaching down into her native Dorchester County, Maryland, up through Philadelphia and Auburn in upstate New York and eventually to Saint Catharine's, Canada. Harriet Jacobs, too, in her quest to keep close her children, Joseph and Louisa, was able to hide out in her grandmother's attic for the better part of seven years, all while sending letters to her owner in Edenton that were postmarked from New York, and watching her children as they grew up through a hole in the garret of her grandmother's house. Her grandmother Molly Horniblow, who was formerly enslaved, carried enough clout in the neighborhood to protect Jacobs and eventually head an escape network.³⁸

And so while enslaved males had comparatively much greater mobility and varieties of work, and therefore the ability to run off, make good their escapes, and mobilize as part of the black insurgency, enslaved females used the putative disadvantages of their gender as tools to network to serve and minister to one another, to organize defenses, and to knit neighborhoods, families, and communities together. Enslaved people were never merely slaves, and a constellation of contingencies ensured that there were no uniform cultural or religious experiences uniting bondspersons. Proximity and working environments fostered friendships and gendered understandings of work, knowledge, and sociality influenced gender identities. But violence and social instability worked against permanence in those relationships that were at the core of enslaved people's being. Each was the sum of the roles she lived in the human dramas of the everyday.

³⁷ Laura F. Edwards, "Status without Rights: African Americans and the Tangled History of Law and Governance in the Nineteenth-Century U.S. South," *American Historical Review* 112 (April 2007): 365–93.

³⁸ Calvin Schermerhorn, *Money over Mastery, Family over Freedom: Slavery in the Antebellum Upper South* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), chap. 3.