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## **"They was Things Past the Tellin': A Reconsideration of Sexuality and Memory in the Ex-Slave Narratives of the Federal Writers' Project"**

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“They was Things Past the Tellin’”:  
A Reconsideration of Sexuality and Memory in the  
Ex-Slave Narratives of the Federal Writers’ Project

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
In  
History

by

Lynn Cowles Wartberg

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Dedicated to the memory of my mother, Ruth Elaine Brown Cowles.

I did it, Mama.

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## **Abstract**

In 1936, Federal Writers' Project (FWP) employees began interviewing formerly enslaved men and women, allowing them to speak publicly of their experiences under slavery. Defying racism and the repressions of Jim Crow, ex-slaves discussed intimate details of their lives. Many researchers considered these interviews unreliable, but if viewed through the lens of gender and analyzed using recent scholarship on slavery and sexuality, FWP interviews offer new insights into the lives of enslaved men and women. Using a small number of ex-slave interviews, most of them drawn from Louisiana, this thesis demonstrates the value of these oral histories for understanding the sexual lives of enslaved men and women. These interviews expose what we would otherwise have little access to: the centrality of struggles over enslaved people's sexuality and reproduction to the experience of enslavement and the long-term effects of these struggles on the attitudes of slavery's survivors.

Slavery; Gender; Sexuality; Memory; Federal Writers' Project Ex-Slave Interviews; Louisiana

## Introduction

Henrietta Butler, born sometime before 1860, although the exact date is unknown, discussed her life as an enslaved woman with Flossie McElwee, an interviewer for the Louisiana Writers' Project (LWP) in Gretna, Louisiana, sometime in 1940.<sup>1</sup> "She [Butler's mistress] made me have a baby by one of dem mens on de plantation. De old devil! I gets mad every time I think about it . . . They made my ma have babies all de time. She was sellin' the boys and keepin' the gals."<sup>2</sup> Butler's mistress controlled not only her enslaved women's physical labor, but also their reproductive capabilities, which ensured the continued availability of new sources of slave labor for her plantation in La Fourche Parish, Louisiana. Unable to maintain ownership of her sexuality during the era of slavery, Butler voiced the rage that she felt over the long-term multiple rapes that she endured in order to provide her mistress with the demanded child. By doing so, Butler provided researchers with valuable source material, allowing historians an intimate glimpse of her life as an enslaved women, whose value to her mistress was entrenched in the number of children that she could provide to enhance her slaveholder's wealth.

Scholars of slavery have noted that enslaved women suffered a dual form of enslavement: physical labor and sexual exploitation.<sup>3</sup> During the nineteenth century, published slave narratives, with rare exception, avoided explicit language when exploring the lives of the narrators, and conformed to the social constraints of the era. However, the interviews collected by employees of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), in the form of the Federal Writers' Project (FWP), recorded a group of women and men determined to tell of the realities of sexual

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<sup>1</sup> Although the Louisiana Writers' Project had an African American Division, the Dillard Unit, McElwee was probably white. Attempts to locate her in census records have been inconclusive.

<sup>2</sup> Henrietta Butler, interview, in Federal Writers' Project (FWP), folder 19, Northwestern State University of Louisiana, Watson Memorial Library, Cammie G. Henry Research Center (CGHRC).

<sup>3</sup> See Deborah Gray White, *A'r'nt I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (NY: W. W. Norton, 1999, 1985; Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Gwen Campbell, Suzanne Meirs, and Joseph C. Miller, *Women and Slavery*, vol. 2 *The Modern Atlantic* (Athens, OG: Ohio University, 2008).



exploitation during slavery from their own perspective, as well as the experiences of their immediate family members. Unfortunately, these interviews have been long been disregarded by researchers as unreliable, influenced by the age of the informants, both at emancipation and at the time of their interview, as well as by the sway that racism had on the political climate of the early to mid-twentieth century South. However, if viewed through the lens of gender and analyzed using recent scholarship on slavery and sexuality, WPA interviews offer new insights into the lives of enslaved men and women. By closely analyzing a small number of WPA interviews, I will demonstrate the value of the collection of the FWP ex-slave interviews as sources of information on the memories of life on plantations for formerly enslaved men and women, and deserving of further exploration. These interviews expose what we would otherwise have little access to: the centrality of struggles over enslaved people's sexuality and reproduction to the experience of enslavement and the long-term effects of these struggles on the attitudes of slavery's survivors.

## The Federal Writers' Project and Scholarly Opinion

Under the supervision of the FWP, each state created a virtually autonomous program directed by a federally appointed administrator. Generating a body of work that encompassed more than 10,000 pages, the Federal Writers' Project provides researchers with information regarding the viewpoint of those who were enslaved in the American South.<sup>4</sup> According to Norman R. Yetman, the idea for the collection of ex-slave interviews as a project for the Works' Progress Administration arose out of efforts by John B. Cade, Charles S. Johnson, and Ophelia Settle Egypt to collect oral histories in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Cade, a historian at Southern University, and Egypt, acting as a member of the staff at Fisk University's Social Science Institute (founded by Johnson), independently interviewed former slaves. Cade's efforts to document the experiences of formerly enslaved people came as a response to a controversy surrounding the publication of Ulrich B. Phillips' *American Negro Slavery* (1918), who regarded the anecdotal evidence of both the formerly enslaved and former slaveholders as unreliable because "the lapse of decades has impaired inevitably the memories of men."<sup>5</sup> Cade began his collection of ex-slave interviews as an answer to Phillips' assertion that slaves were, "by racial quality submissive rather than defiant, light-hearted instead of gloomy, amiable and ingratiating instead of sullen, and whose very defects invited paternalism rather than repression," arguing that without the input from African Americans' themselves, a realistic picture of life under slavery could not be portrayed accurately.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For an in-depth history of the Federal Writers' Project collection of the ex-slave interviews, see Norman Yetman, "The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection," *American Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (Autumn, 1967): 534-553. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2711071> (accessed 3/18/2012).

<sup>5</sup> Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966, 1918), xxiii-xxiv.

<sup>6</sup> Yetman, "The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection," 540-541; Phillips, *American Negro Slavery*, 341-342; John B. Cade, "Out of the Mouths of Ex-Slaves," *Journal of Negro History* 20, no. 3 (Jul., 1935), 294.

Interestingly, the federally directed LWP ex-slave interviews and other interviews conducted in Louisiana by Cade have received little attention from scholars exploring the memories of formerly enslaved persons.<sup>7</sup> The Federal Writers' Project charged Lyle Saxon, the head of the Louisiana Writers' Project (LWP), to write guidebooks for the state of Louisiana. Saxon and his writers compiled three books: *Louisiana: A Guide to the State*, the *New Orleans City Guide*, and *Gumbo Ya-Ya*. The first two consisted of straightforward guidebooks to the attractions of Louisiana and its premier city, New Orleans. The third book, *Gumbo Ya-Ya*, explored the folklore of Louisiana. It also depicted the antebellum era of Louisiana as perceived by white Louisianans.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, the Dillard Writers' Unit, a branch of the LWP and consisting of African American writers, began a manuscript, titled *The Negro in Louisiana*. Not only did the black authors write a history intent on erasing racial bias by demonstrating African American cultural and social influences on Louisiana, they interviewed a number of ex-slaves, in an effort to create a body of source material not influenced by the racial pressures of Jim Crow.<sup>9</sup>

Following the end of the Federal Writers' Project, Saxon designated Dillard University as the repository for the interviews collected by the Dillard Unit. The LWP interviews, however, were scattered among three other institutions, including the Cammie G. Henry Research Center (CGHRC) of Northwestern State University of Louisiana.<sup>10</sup> Many scholars mistakenly thought

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<sup>7</sup> For Cade's summary of his findings, see the journal article, "Out of the Mouths of Ex-Slaves," *Journal of Negro History* 20, no. 3 (Jul., 1935): 294-337. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2714721> (accessed 01/11/2012). However, according to Angela Proctor, curator at the John B. Cade Library, Southern University of Baton Rouge, the John B. Cade Collection of Ex-Slave Interviews, conducted during the late-1920s, is unavailable to researchers because the library is in the process of digitizing the collection, which has taken more than two years as of January 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Ronnie W. Clayton, "The Federal Writers' Project for Blacks in Louisiana," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 19, no. 3 (Summer, 1978): 329. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4231790> (accessed 01/11/2012).

<sup>9</sup> Joan Redding, "The Dillard Project: The Black Unit of the Louisiana Writers' Project," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 32, no. 1 (Winter, 1991): 53-54. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4232864> (accessed 01/11/2012)

<sup>10</sup> DaNean Olene Pound, "Slave to the Ex-Slave Narratives" (master's thesis, Northwestern State University of Louisiana, 2005), 6.

that Louisiana had not participated in the Federal Writers' Project ex-slave interviews, because of Saxon's failure to turn over the results of those interviews to the national unit tasked with compiling the documents for the National Archives.<sup>11</sup> As a result, only a few historians intent on studying antebellum Louisiana have analyzed the information provided by a number of men and women enslaved in the plantation system of Louisiana. Many, although not all, interviews used in this study are from the LWP. However, a more systematic study is needed, especially in light of the new availability of sources at Southern University, the John B. Cade Collection of Ex-Slave Interviews.

Scholars have questioned the reliability of the interviews as primary source materials, for a variety of reasons. John Blassingame examines the twentieth century ex-slave interviews, as well as other first-hand accounts of slavery, for his book *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (1977).<sup>12</sup> Blassingame clarifies the issues involved when using the twentieth century interviews as source material, and addresses concerns that one must consider when examining the documents, including the age of the informant, the gender and race of the interviewer, and the specific dynamic that existed in the Jim Crow South.<sup>13</sup> According to Blassingame, only three southern states, Virginia, Florida, and Louisiana, hired African Americans as interviewers for the project. The employment of blacks to question the informants regarding their experiences as human chattel, which allowed the former slaves to speak of their experiences without the threat of retaliation, partially negated the influence of Jim Crow and etiquette between the races, both of which strongly influenced the responses from the

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<sup>11</sup> Ronnie W. Clayton, *Mother Wit: The Ex-Slave Narratives of the Louisiana Writers' Project* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), 2-3.

<sup>12</sup> John Blassingame, *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977); Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems," *Journal of Southern History* 41, no. 4 (Nov., 1975): 473-492. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2205559> (accessed 03/13/2011).

<sup>13</sup> Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves," 481-486.

former slaves.<sup>14</sup> As Melvina Johnson Young states, “It was simply axiomatic of Black life, especially in the South, that you did not reveal your true self to white people because if they did not like what they saw, they had a very real power to harm you.”<sup>15</sup> Further complicating the collection of oral histories was the association of the white interviewers with the slaveholding class. According to Blassingame, “Frequently the white interviewers were closely identified with the *ancien régime*; on occasion they were the grandsons of the blacks’ former masters.” Use of degrading and stereotypical language, such as “darkeys, niggers, aunteys, mammies, and uncles,” further influenced the lack of candor on the part of the informants, although Blassingame does point out that gender of the interviewers contributed to the clarity of information, stating, “white women received more honest responses than white men.”<sup>16</sup> The racist attitudes of many interviewers, common in the white Southern culture, make the frank discussion of formerly enslaved women as they voiced their anger over their sexual exploitation even more remarkable.

Blassingame charges that the age of the informants altered the reliability of the interviews as well. His statistics are persuasive, “since only 16 percent of the informants had been fifteen years or older when the Civil War began, an overwhelming majority of them could only describe how slavery appeared to a black child.”<sup>17</sup> But Yetman breaks the age groups down further, stating that twenty-four percent of those interviewed were eleven through fifteen years of age, sixteen percent were sixteen through twenty, thirteen percent ranged from twenty one through thirty, and three percent were over thirty at the time of emancipation in 1865, which contradicted Blassingame’s analysis of the age range of the informants. When adding up the totals, fifty-six

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<sup>14</sup> Blassingame, “Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves,” 481.

<sup>15</sup> Melvina Johnson Young, “Exploring the WPA Narratives: Finding the Voices of Black Women and Men,” in *Theorizing Black Feminisms: The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women*, eds. Stanlie James and Abena P. A. Bush (London: Routledge, 1993), 55.

<sup>16</sup> Blassingame, “Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves,” 482-483, 487-488.

<sup>17</sup> Blassingame, “Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves,” 486.

percent of the narrators were eleven years old or older at emancipation.<sup>18</sup> In addition to the differences in the statistical analysis of the demographics, Blassingame's argument does not take into account that many, if not most, enslaved children began to work at a young age, as young as ten in some cases. Trained to assist adults in their daily tasks, as enslaved children grew older, they began to replace adults who no longer could fulfill their tasks.<sup>19</sup> Although today twelve to fifteen year-olds are considered children, one must take into consideration the era in which a child was raised when analyzing source material. Given the life that enslaved children endured, scholars have argued that that they were exposed more quickly than free children to the realities of life on a plantation as forced labor.<sup>20</sup>

Donna J. Spindel, author of "Assessing Memory: Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives Reconsidered," argues that the use of the ex-slave interviews as primary sources by historians should be considered questionable because of the unreliability of memory. Citing a number of psychological studies, she charges that scholarly works that utilize the twentieth-century interviews as sources cannot be considered as legitimate historical analysis. However, even Spindel admits that research into memory, both short- and long-term, is far from conclusive, and acknowledged two different studies that argue that older people remember events from their past quite well.<sup>21</sup> She does not examine memory retention of traumatic events, into which category rape and forced reproduction would fall. Nevertheless, Spindel's argument raises questions that scholars must acknowledge, demonstrating the need for more interdisciplinary research into the use of personal memories as sources.

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<sup>18</sup> Yetman, "The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection," 534-535.

<sup>19</sup> Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 74.

<sup>20</sup> King, *Stolen Childhood*, xxi-xxii.

<sup>21</sup> Donna J. Spindel, "Assessing Memory: Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives Reconsidered," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 27, no. 2 (Autumn, 1996), 249-251, 258. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/205156> (accessed 03/27/2012).

Although Yetman argues that the ex-slave interviews were recorded verbatim, Blassingame and others found evidence of extensive editing in a few interviews, including “deliberate distortions and interpolation of the views of WPA staffers.”<sup>22</sup> Even the language of the interviews shows evidence of interference by editors and typists. Although directed by the national office to record the dialect of informants faithfully, Henry Algsburg, the director of the FWP, sent out a memorandum to various states involved in the collection of the narratives, including Louisiana, of list of words that were not to be used when typing the transcripts of the interviews. He attempted to standardize the spelling of dialectical words and phrases. For example, he included the following: “ah” for “I”; “sto” for “store”; “ret” or “right” for “right”; and “whi” for “white.”<sup>23</sup> Although a relatively innocuous action, the existence of directions regarding word usage does raise the issue of other concerns of extensive editing. Handwritten notes from interviews, as well as multiple transcripts of the same interviews, provide further evidence of changes made by editors and transcribers.<sup>24</sup>

Paul Escott, in the introduction of his book, *Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth Century Slave Narratives*, discusses the complex issues of Jim Crow and racism limiting the frankness of the formerly enslaved people telling of their lives to the FWP interviewers. Escott stated:

The most formidable problem encountered in using the narratives is the problem of candor . . . southern blacks lived in the grip of a system of segregation that was nearly as oppressive as slavery . . . All the rules of racial etiquette had to be observed and the informant had to give priority to appeasing his interviewer rather than telling the truth about the past.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Blassingame, “Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves,” 484; Sharon Ann Musher, “Contesting ‘The Way the Almighty Wants It’: Crafting Memories of Ex-Slaves in the Slave Narrative Collection,” *American Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (Mar. 2001), 2. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30041871> (accessed 3/27/2012).

<sup>23</sup> “Front Matter of the WPA Project,” Appendixes, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, Vol. 1, ed. George P. Rawick (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing, 1972), 177-178.

<sup>24</sup> Musher, “Contesting ‘The Way the Almighty Wants It,’” 1-2.

<sup>25</sup> Paul D. Escott, *Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth Century Slave Narratives* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 7.

Combining the need for discretion in light of Jim Crow with the association of many of the interviewers with slaveholders in the minds of informants creates a situation in which the researcher must carefully read and analyze the interviews with the political and sociological influences at the forefront of one's mind, questioning what may have been left out by the informant, as well as what may have been added or removed by the FWP staff.

Although using FWP narratives can be problematic, as various scholars have demonstrated since the 1970s, with careful analysis, including the understanding of the influences of Jim Crow and memory loss, one can gain insight into life in the antebellum South. By examining interviews conducted during the twentieth century, one can begin to understand the lives that many African Americans were forced to live. When the memory involves rape and sexual exploitation, and the informant is speaking about personal experiences, or the experiences of immediate family members, it is possible to lend considerable credence to those testimonies especially given many informants unwillingness to divulge the truth about life under slavery to white interviewers.



## Scholarship on Gender, Slavery, and Sexuality

The historiographical examination of enslaved women as a separate group, worthy of scholarship, began in 1985, with the publication of Deborah Gray White's groundbreaking study, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*. Prior to this, female slave historiography fell within the purview of slave scholarship or feminist and women's studies. But White argues that African American women experienced slavery differently than African American men, and that African American women experienced paternalism differently than white women, "American white women were expected to be passive because they were female. But black women had to be submissive because they were black and slaves."<sup>26</sup> Without an analysis of the complex factors influencing the lives of enslaved women, White argues scholars cannot achieve a complete understanding of American racial slavery.

The examination of sexuality under chattel slavery must take into account a number of influences. According to White, white society characterized enslaved women in antebellum America as stereotypes. One category labeled African American women as Jezebels, women driven by their uncontrollable sexual desires. The idea of black women as hypersexual traced to the first Europeans who traveled to the continent of Africa. Whether it was because of a misunderstanding of African cultural traditions, such as polygamy, or the manner of dress, or lack of, because of the tropical climate, or an effort to prove the savagery of Africans, men who went to Africa to purchase slaves described women in hyper-sexualized terms in their travel

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<sup>26</sup> White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 17.

journals.<sup>27</sup> According to White, this fallacious view of black women influenced societal attitudes, including prominent men such as Thomas Jefferson, well into the nineteenth century.<sup>28</sup>

Enslaved women's reproductive activities became conversational topics, because the continuation of the slavery depended upon a high rate of natural increase once Congress outlawed the Atlantic slave trade in 1807. White states, "Since causal correlations have always been drawn between sensuality and fecundity, the increase of the slave population seemed to be evidence of the slave woman's lust." The need for high rates of reproduction led agricultural journals to publish articles "detailing optimal conditions under which bonded women were known to reproduce, and the merits of a particular 'breeder' were often the topic of parlor or dinner table conversations."<sup>29</sup> The association of reproduction with sexuality encouraged the idea of hypersexualized black women, willing to copulate with any available man.

White also examines the other common stereotype, Mammy. Mammy was viewed as an asexual woman, with a strong moral character, suitable for caring for the children of the slaveholder's family. According to White, the Mammy stereotype developed because of questions raised by abolitionists regarding the immoral enslaved woman and her fitness in raising white children.<sup>30</sup> Southerners argued that slavery actually improved the character of enslaved women, and used the idealized view of Mammy as proof. White explains the characterization of Mammy:

Mammy was, thus, the perfect image for antebellum Southerners. As the personification of the ideal slave, and the ideal woman, Mammy was an ideal symbol of the patriarchal tradition. She was not just a product of the "cultural uplift" theory, she was *also* a product of the forces that in the South raised

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<sup>27</sup> Jennifer L. Morgan, "'Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder': Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology," *William and Mary Quarterly* Third Series, 54, no. 1 (Jan., 1997), 170. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2953316> (accessed 10/01/2012).

<sup>28</sup> White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 28-30.

<sup>29</sup> White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 31.

<sup>30</sup> White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 45.

motherhood to sainthood. As part of the benign slave tradition, and as part of the cult of domesticity, Mammy was the centerpiece in the antebellum Southerner's perception of the perfectly organized society.<sup>31</sup>

Building on White's scholarship, Micki McElya argues that slaveholders answered accusations of sexual exploitation, rape and illicit sexual relationships between masters and enslaved women by creating the asexual, nurturing figure of Mammy.<sup>32</sup> But neither stereotype acknowledged black women's ownership of their own sexuality.

White briefly discusses the complicated issue of forced reproduction in her chapter on Jezebel and Mammy, as well as the chapter "The Nature of Female Slavery"; however, her endnotes on the topic are more extensive. Citing plantation journals, traveler diaries, periodicals such as *DeBow's Review*, and the FWP ex-slave interviews, she argues that plantation owners were well aware of the dual nature of female slavery, and the heightened value of enslaved women who gave birth to children that became the property of their owners. White also acknowledges the controversy that the theory of a systematic "breeding" program has engendered among scholars, including Eugene Genovese, Robert Fogel, Stanley Engerman, and Richard Sutch. The debate between the scholars mentioned is based upon primarily economic and demographic arguments. According to White, part of the controversy revolves around the domestic slave trade and the theory that states such as Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware "bred" slaves for sale to states such as Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas, as their plantation economy expanded.<sup>33</sup> She does not draw a stated conclusion, but acknowledges the need for further study, stating that an in-depth discussion would not be to the point of her chapter.<sup>34</sup> White's monograph

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<sup>31</sup> White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 58.

<sup>32</sup> Micki McElya, *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 8.

<sup>33</sup> White, *Ar'n't I a Slave*, 203.

<sup>34</sup> White, *Ar'n't I a Slave*, 31, 68, 201-203.

opened the field by introducing the idea that women experienced slavery in a different way, allowing more specialized studies of women and slavery.

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's treatise, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*, reduces the discussion of sexual assault committed upon slave women to a few sentences, initially in relation to the deferent attitudes expected by slave men from slave women.<sup>35</sup> In another section, Fox-Genovese seems almost to excuse white men for their sexual assaults, "The white men were not saints, and slave women who worked in the fields were clothed scantily, with skirts hitched above the knees."<sup>36</sup> Her statement places the blame for rape upon the women themselves, because of their manner of dressing. But Fox-Genovese fails to acknowledge that slave women wore what their masters supplied them with, and that rape is not the fault of the victim. Although not an apologist for slavery, Fox-Genovese only lightly touches upon the contradictions inherent in a slave-master system based upon race, and seems to entirely discount some of the difficulties faced by black women in the antebellum South.

Edward E. Baptist builds on Walter Johnson's discussion of the sale of "fancy girls," or enslaved women destined to become the concubines of slaveholders, at the New Orleans slave market, in which Johnson argues that the auction created an "open competition . . . between white men played out on the body of an enslaved woman."<sup>37</sup> Baptist argues that the slave market created a commodity with "an implication of the sadistic or sexual (or both) power and pleasure."<sup>38</sup> According to Baptist, by the nineteenth century, the conviction that women of African descent were hypersexual increased their desirability for white men, leading to the

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<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 49.

<sup>36</sup> Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 189.

<sup>37</sup> Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 113-115.

<sup>38</sup> Edward E. Baptist, "'Cuffy,' 'Fancy Maids,' and 'One-Eyed Men': Rape, Commodification, and the Domestic Slave Trade," *American Historical Review* 106, no. 5 (Dec., 2001), 1636. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2692741> (accessed 09/29/2012),

commodification of black women's sexuality in the form of the "fancy" trade in women of mixed race.<sup>39</sup> He further points out that the children of mixed race women were classified as slave labor, establishing the commodification of the reproductive capabilities of enslaved women, which reinforced the continued existence of enslaved men, women, and children.<sup>40</sup>

Marie Jenkins Schwartz's examination of childhood under the institution of slavery, *Born in Bondage: Growing up Enslaved in the Antebellum South*, observes the attempts of both enslaved parents and slaveholders to raise the children of slaves in such a manner as to benefit both the slaveholder and the enslaved community. Schwartz argues that frequently marriages between young enslaved men and women existed as a means to thwart the advances of other men, both enslaved and slaveholders. While marriage did not always deter men intent on sexually assaulting black women, it may well have provided some measure of protection.<sup>41</sup> Choosing to marry a man selected by a woman, rather than one chosen for her by her owner, formed a basis for control over her own sexuality, even though marriages between enslaved men and women were never considered legal, and owners easily dissolved such relationships by simply selling off either or both members of the partnership.

Stephanie M. H. Camp's study, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*, examines acts of resistance committed by enslaved women on a daily basis. Camp uses varied and extensive primary source materials, including papers and journals of planters, published nineteenth century slave narratives, and the collected FWP ex-slave interviews edited by George P. Rawick, *The American Slave: A Composite*

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<sup>39</sup> Baptist, "'Cuffy, 'Fancy Maids,' and 'One-Eyed Men,'" 1642-1643.

<sup>40</sup> Baptist, "'Cuffy, 'Fancy Maids,' and 'One-Eyed Men,'" 1647.

<sup>41</sup> Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Born in Bondage: Growing Up Enslaved in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 174-175.

*Autobiography*.<sup>42</sup> Despite her extensive research into her topic of the resistance of enslaved women, however, she does not mention the use of birth control methods as another form of resistance. Although few sources exist documenting enslaved women's use of plants, including cotton root, as birth control and abortifacients, with careful reading of the ex-slave interviews, such information can be extracted from the testimonies of formerly enslaved women, and should be considered a key element of black women's efforts to establish ownership of their bodies under chattel slavery in the antebellum South.

Marie Jenkins Schwartz published a second book, which examined the act of giving birth and the use of modern medicine under the institution of slavery, *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South*. Schwartz discusses the role that enslaved men played in the commodification of enslaved women's sexuality and procreative capabilities. She cites ex-slave interviews that explained the roles of "stockmen," or men assigned the role of "stud" on a plantation, and the tasks of the "travelin' nigger," an enslaved man hired from one slaveholder by another to impregnate enslaved women.<sup>43</sup> Although Schwartz argues against an organized program designed for forced reproduction, the existence of women whose assigned labors consisted of pregnancy and childbirth, and men known as "stockmen" and "travelin' niggers," lends credence to a contradicting argument, such as the one made by Daina Ramey Berry.

Berry's first monograph, *Swing the Sickle, for the Harvest is Ripe: Gender and Slavery in Antebellum Georgia*, explores the gendered division of labor, or lack thereof, in Georgia. Berry examines the idea of sexual exploitation and forced reproduction in the chapter titled "'O, I Never Has Forgot Dat Last Dinner wit My Folks': Enslaved Family and Community Realities." In the scholarly discussion of forced reproduction, one question that consistently arises is a clear

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<sup>42</sup> Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), end notes.

<sup>43</sup> Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave*, 23-25.

definition of breeding. Berry chooses to characterize the sensitive topic broadly, “any method employed to produce offspring for the slaveholding class (including evidence of the use of force to accomplish it).”<sup>44</sup> Berry classifies “forced breeding,” as “an indirect form of rape where the powerless enslaved males and females became the victims of reproductive abuse to which they did not *willingly* give their consent.”<sup>45</sup> Through violence, coercion, or a system of rewards and punishments, the interference of slaveholders in the reproductive lives of their human chattel constituted forced procreation. She points out that not only enslaved women were objects of slaveholders determination to increase their holdings through reproduction; slaveholders forced enslaved men to participate, making them victims of sexual exploitation as well, citing two examples contained in the Georgia WPA Ex-Slave Narratives, including one man who spoke of the approximately fifty children sired by his father.<sup>46</sup>

Thomas A. Foster examines the sexual exploitation of enslaved men in his article, “The Sexual Abuse of Black Men under American Slavery.” Foster argues that “black manhood under slavery was . . . violated in other ways that are less easily spoken of . . . namely, the sexual exploitation of enslaved men.”<sup>47</sup> Previous scholarship, with occasional exception, focuses upon both voluntary and coerced carnal relationships between African American men and white women, but Foster looks at all aspects of sexual abuse of enslaved men, including forced reproduction.<sup>48</sup> Foster points out that white men and women viewed African American men through the same stereotypical lens that identified African American women as hypersexual,

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<sup>44</sup> Daina Ramey Berry, *Swing the Sickle, for the Harvest is Ripe: Gender and Slavery in Antebellum Georgia* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 79.

<sup>45</sup> Berry, *Swing the Sickle*, 79.

<sup>46</sup> Berry, *Swing the Sickle*, 80, 82.

<sup>47</sup> Thomas A. Foster, “The Sexual Abuse of Black Men under American Slavery,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20, no. 3 (September, 2011), 446.

<sup>48</sup> See Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997); Foster, “The Sexual Abuse of Black Men,” 447.

willing participants in schemes to procreate with as many sexual partners as were needed to produce children to increase the wealth of slaveholders.<sup>49</sup>

By applying scholarship on slavery, sexuality, gender, and memory to the FWP ex-slave interviews, scholars seeking an historical understanding of the experiences and memories of formerly enslaved men and women expose the personal lives of those held in bondage and provide a more accurate interpretation of the institution of antebellum slavery, as experienced by those subjected to it. The following case study analyzes Louisiana ex-slave interviews found in the CGHRC Federal Writers' Project Collection, the Marcus Christian Collection at the Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, and extracted from the FWP ex-slave interviews conducted in Texas, included in the series *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, edited by George Rawick.

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<sup>49</sup> Foster, "The Sexual Abuse of Black Men," 450-451.



## **In Their Own Words**

Black women of Louisiana spoke of their lives under slavery to the interviewers of the LWP and other states conducting interviews for the FWP and voiced the anger that they felt toward their masters and mistresses for exploiting their vulnerability under the chattel slave system. Butler's rage toward Emily Haidee, her mistress, for forcing her to produce a child, fathered by a man Butler did not choose, clearly comes through her words, spoken more than half a century after emancipation. Her sexual vulnerability, coupled with her mistress's commodification of Butler and her mother's reproductive capabilities, as well as the future commodification of the girls that Haidee chose not to sell, led Butler to explicate her frustration decades later. According to Darlene Clark Hine, African American women maintained a silence, or a "culture of dissemblance," when it came to sensitive issues such as rape and sexual commodification, because they faced "pervasive stereotypes and negative estimations" of their sexuality. Hine further argues that not only did African American women maintain their silence when it came to personal topics; they "created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves."<sup>50</sup> But Butler and other women interviewed by the LWP chose to override any reluctance to discuss the sensitive issue of their sexual exploitation, disregarding the threat of retaliation for exposing their tormentors, and expressing outrage at their treatment under slavery.

As with other cultures, enslaved women prepared their children for life, but with the understanding of the constraints with which African Americans lived. Mary Ann Johns, who dwelled in Opelousas Parish on a cotton plantation, spoke of her mother's difficulties as an enslaved woman. Although Johns stated that she was only ten "when peace declared," she clearly

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<sup>50</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," *Signs* 14, no. 4, Common Grounds and Crossroads: Race, Ethnicity, and Class in Women's Lives (Summer, 1989), 912. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174692> (accessed 03/27/2012).

remembered many details of slavery, as well as the experiences that her mother related to her, including how her mother tried to explain what was expected from her oldest daughter and other women:

You know my ma allus told me if we had not of been set free when us was, in about two years, they would of made me have a baby. They had a big ole husky man on de place dey waield [sic] send all de gals to. If dey didn' want to go, dey give dem a lashin' an' made dem go; if dey did not git pregnant de first time dey was forced to go back. You see dat nigger didn' do a thing but get babies-you see dey allus sold dem.<sup>51</sup>

By telling her daughter of the slave system's expectations of young black women, Johns' mother not only described her life as an enslaved woman in antebellum Louisiana, she hinted at the realities of African American womanhood.

Many informants were too young prior to emancipation to be subjected to the terrors of sexual exploitation, but they clearly understood what life as an enslaved woman meant. Francis Doby, approximately one hundred years old at the time of her interview in New Orleans, remembered life on a Louisiana plantation, and the atrocities that her mother and other women on the plantation were subjected to under slavery. Her mother, Tinette, gave birth to twenty or twenty-five children, according to Doby. She stated that women served two purposes on the plantation; they either worked in the field, or they were kept "for da breedin.'" Although Doby's mother worked in the household on light duty, her primary job, possibly her most valuable task as an enslaved woman, was to produce children for the plantation owner.<sup>52</sup> Doby described the method used to whip a pregnant woman, similar to descriptions found in multiple other interviews conducted throughout the South. The overseer had a hole dug in the ground, and then the pregnant woman laid down on the ground with her protruding stomach in the hole. She was

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<sup>51</sup> Mary Ann Johns, interview, in FWP, folder 19, Northwestern State University of Louisiana, Watson Memorial Library, CGHRC.

<sup>52</sup> Francis Doby, interview, FWP, folder 19, Northwestern State University of Louisiana, Watson Memorial Library, CGHRC, 1.

then beaten with the whip, but her child was supposedly protected from injury within the cavity.<sup>53</sup>

Enslaved women understood the significance of their children to their masters, and made it clear during their interviews that slaveholders considered the children of their slaves as valuable property. Rebecca Fletcher, interviewed in New Orleans at the age of ninety-age, spoke of her perception of the worth of enslaved children, including the unborn:

Some of those overseers were mean men. They wanted slaves to have babies bekase they wuz valuable, so when a slave wuz erbout to produce a baby, an he wanten her whupped, he had a hold dug in the groun' an' made her lay acrost it an' her han's and foots were tied, so she had to submit quiet like to the beatin' with a strop.<sup>54</sup>

Formerly enslaved women such as Fletcher, by choosing to voice her perception of the market value of enslaved children, further reinforced the scholarly argument that those enslaved did not feel content in their condition, and instead, treasured their children as the promise of hope and a future free of exploitation.

The end of the Atlantic slave trade, along with the rise of King Cotton, led to a greater need for creole, or American-born, slaves. This situation raises the possibility of a systematic program to increase reproduction for enslaved women. Although little documentary evidence from slaveholders exists describing such a system, anecdotal evidence from those women and men who lived through enslavement weighs in favor of forced reproduction. The definition of forced breeding, or forced reproduction, is problematic. Some scholars, such as Daina Ramey Berry, argue in favor of a broad definition, one which considers that as long as coerced sex occurred for the purpose of producing a child intended on enhancing the economic position of

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<sup>53</sup> Doby, interview, 6.

<sup>54</sup> Rebecca Fletcher, interview, FWP, folder 19, Northwestern State University of Louisiana, Watson Memorial Library, CGHRC, 3.

the slaveholder, forced breeding has taken place.<sup>55</sup> Unfortunately, the term “breeding” infers a comparison between enslaved peoples and animals such as horses and cattle, with the implicit dehumanization and removal of agency from African Americans.

African American women were not the only victims of long-term rape for the purpose of procreation. As Berry argues in her discussion of forced reproduction, “Enslaved men without leadership positions were also powerless victims of breeding who suffered in ways similar to their female counterparts.”<sup>56</sup> Marie Jenkins Schwartz argues that an organized system of forced reproduction rarely, if ever, occurred in *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Old South*. However, Schwartz mentions a term used by an informant of a “stockman”:

[Stockmen] was weighed and tested. A men [sic] would rent the stockman and put him in a room with some young women he wanted to raise children from. Next morning when they come to let him out the man ask him what he done . . . If he said nothin’ they wouldn’t have to pay for him.<sup>57</sup>

Sam Jones Washington, of Texas, spoke of his own father as a “travelin’ nigger.” Washington stated that none of the enslaved women on the ranch where he was born were married, including his mother; instead, his master hired from other slaveholders African American men to impregnate his female slaves.<sup>58</sup> Manda Cooper discussed her mother’s life as an enslaved woman and mother, “None of us had the same father. They would pick out the biggest nigger and tell her they wanted a kid by him. She had to stay with him until she did get one.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Berry, *Swing the Sickle*, 79.

<sup>56</sup> Berry, *Swing the Sickle*, 80.

<sup>57</sup> Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave*, 23; Irene Robertson, interview, in *The American Negro: A Composite Autobiography*, Vol. 10, Arkansas Narratives, Part 6, ed. George P. Rawick (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing, 1941, 1972, 1973), 223.

<sup>58</sup> Sam Jones Washington, interview, in *The American Negro: A Composite Autobiography*, Supplement, Series 2, Vol. 10, Texas Narratives, Part 9, ed. George P. Rawick (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing, 1941, 1972, 1973), 3985.

<sup>59</sup> Manda Cooper, interview, in “Slave to the Ex-Slave Narratives,” Master’s Thesis, ed. DaNeen Olene Pound (Northwestern State University of Louisiana, 2005), 94.

Enslaved men also spoke of sexual exploitation in the ex-slave interviews conducted in the twentieth century, exposing themselves to retaliation by those determined to maintain the status quo of white superiority. A formerly enslaved man named Charles told of his own experience in attempting to select a wife during slavery, “Massa Nicholls tole me he gwine pick me a good woman. I tole him I mought he’p him wid it, but he jus’ laugh an’ say, ‘Charles, nobody yo’ age got any sense, white or collard.’” Charles’s slaveholder found a wife suitable for him, and encouraged them to produce children.<sup>60</sup> Elige Davis of Virginia admitted to fathering children with at least fifteen different enslaved women. Despite being married to a woman of his own choosing, Davis’s master forced him to procreate with other women selected for him, fathering more than a hundred children by his own calculations.<sup>61</sup> According to Thomas A. Foster, “Forced reproduction had the dehumanizing effect of labeling certain enslaved men as ‘stock men’ or ‘bulls.’” Many slaveholders demonstrated little consideration for the desires of their human property, instead choosing to focus on their own economic needs. Fewer men chose to speak of their sexual exploitation under slavery to their interviewers, probably because of cultural constraints; those who did affirmed their humanity by telling of their own exploitation, and demonstrated that ownership of one’s sexuality was not restricted to women.

Other enslaved men discussed the lack of choice in sexual partners granted to them by slaveholders, although they frequently couched it in terms of marriage. Marriages of enslaved men and women were not legally recognized by Southern states during slavery, leaving enslaved men and women at the mercy of their owners when he or she found a partner that he or she wanted to marry. Willie Williams, from Vermillion Parish, Louisiana, discussed marriage for

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<sup>60</sup> Orland Kay Armstrong, *Old Massa’s People: The Old Slaves Tell their Story* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1931), 164.

<sup>61</sup> Elige Davison, interview, in *The American Negro: A Composite Autobiography*, Vol. 4, Texas Narratives, Parts 1 & 2, ed. George P. Rawick (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing, 1941, 1972, 1973), 299.

enslaved men and women on the plantation. He pointed out that marriages did not take place without the consent of the master, and occasionally the slaveholder refused to grant approval for any marriage at all for a specific man or woman, with its cultural implications of monogamy, motivated by the desire to increase his human property holdings:

Yous see, de Marster am anxious of' to raise good big niggers, de kin' dat am able to do lots ob wo'k, an' sell of' a heap ob money if hims wants to sell. Hims have 'bout ten wenches dat hims not 'lows to get mai'ied. Deys am big, st'ong womens dat de doctah zamin of' de health. Den de Marster selects de big nigger an' de doctah zamines him, too. Dat nigger do no wo'k but watch dem womens, an' he am de husban' fo' dem all.<sup>62</sup>

Williams's discussion of physicians employed to examine both enslaved men and enslaved women who were prospective parents emphasized the importance that slaveholders placed on the children produced by marriages, pseudo- or real. According to Marie Jenkins Schwartz, "During the antebellum period, slaveholders began choosing yet another approach to resolving the 'problem' of infertility among slaves. To rewards and punishment, they added medicine."<sup>63</sup> By hiring doctors to tend to their pregnant enslaved women, slave masters increased the chances of bondswomen delivering a healthy child. Slaveholders were willing to go to some lengths to ensure an ever-increasing supply of both labor and capital.

Enslaved women took control of their sexuality by various means, including contraceptive resistance. Mary Gaffney, born in Mississippi in 1846, and interviewed in 1938, spoke of her forced marriage to a man that she did not choose, and her defiance of her master's wishes:

When I marries it was just home wedding, fact is I just hated the man I married but it was what Maser said do. . . He put another negro man with my mother, then he put one with me. I would not let that negro touch me and he told Maser and Maser gave me a real good whipping, so that night I let that negro have his way. Maser was going to raise him a lot more slaves, but still I cheated Maser, I never

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<sup>62</sup> Williams, interview, in *The American Slave* Vol. X, Texas Narratives, Part 9, ed. Rawick, 4158.

<sup>63</sup> Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave*, 68.

did have any slaves to grow and Maser he wondered what was the matter. I tell you son, I kept cotton roots and chewed them all the time but I was careful not to let Maser know or catch me, so I never did have any children while I was a slave. . . Yes, after freedom we had five children, four of them still living.<sup>64</sup>

According to Liese M. Perrin, enslaved women such as Gaffney who utilized cotton root as birth control not only performed an act of resistance, their actions can be considered “as a form of strike,” since enslaved women performed dual work duties, both physical labor and reproductive roles.<sup>65</sup> Perrin’s use of the term “strike” may be too strong; more appropriately, the use of an emmenagogue could be considered “sabotage.” Stephanie Camp points out that exploring the private and intimate aspects of life for enslaved women changes our perspective on resistance, and alters our idea of resistance as “public phenomenon.”<sup>66</sup> Little is more intimate than a woman’s conscious decision to utilize birth control as a means of claiming ownership to her reproductive capabilities. By discussing their resistance to sexual exploitation, formerly enslaved women gave voice to the idea women could and did take control over their bodies, even during a period in which they were considered little more than property.

Although women such as Gaffney and Butler told of their sexual exploitation at the hands of their slaveholders, other women were not so forthcoming. Mary Reynolds spoke of life on the plantation in Black River, Louisiana. The abuse Reynolds experienced, including the scars that she bore as a result of beatings she received, and the abuse that others suffered at the hands of her master and the overseer, “they was things past the tellin’.”<sup>67</sup> Beginning her narrative with her own mother’s experience, Reynolds tells how her father, a free man of color, fell in love with her mother, and offered to purchase her from her master; however, the master refused to sell any but

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<sup>64</sup> Mary Gaffney, interview, in *The American Slave*, Vol. 5, Texas Narratives, Part 4, ed. Rawick, 1453.

<sup>65</sup> Liese M. Perrin, “Resisting Reproduction: Reconsidering Slave Contraception in the Old South,” *Journal of American Studies* 35, no. 2, Part 2: Warring in America: Encounters of Gender and Race (Aug., 2001), 256. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27556967> (accessed 05/16/2011).

<sup>66</sup> Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 3.

<sup>67</sup> Mary Reynolds, interview, in *The American Slave*, Vol. 8, Texas Narratives, Part 7, ed. George P. Rawick (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing, 1941, 1972, 1973), 3287.

the most aged and those who could no longer work in the fields or give birth. Reynolds's father married her mother, and voluntarily went to work in the fields of the Kilpatrick family, in order to stay close to his wife, even though he was not the property of the Kilpatrick family, providing Reynolds' mother with a man of her choosing, rather than one chosen for her by her master.<sup>68</sup>

Continuing to discuss life on the Kilpatrick plantation, she spoke of relatively pleasant events until much later in the interview. On page nine of the transcription, she finally explained that her master had a reputation for sexually exploiting his female slaves, including a mixed-race "mistress" with training in fine needlework, supposedly purchased for her skills as a seamstress. According to Reynolds, the seamstress gave birth to a number of children who bore a resemblance to Kilpatrick, which created conflict between the slaveholder and his wife.<sup>69</sup> But Kilpatrick also exploited his enslaved women purchased to work in the fields, and Reynolds reluctantly related the story of a woman known as Aunt Cheney, who gave birth to a child, then attempted to escape. Reynolds speculated that the woman ran away because Kilpatrick fathered the child. When she did not return to nurse her child, the overseer and other men took dogs into the woods to search for the woman, and when found, "The mens holler, Who-o-o-e-e-e-e sick er, and agged them on to her. The dogs tore her naked and et the breasts plumb off'n her body."<sup>70</sup> The woman's attempt to escape her condition, and possibly her sexual exploitation, and the resulting physical assault, demonstrates her determination to maintain control over her body and her sexuality, even at the expense of her personal well-being.

Although not until the latter portion of the interview, Reynolds finally told of her own abuse, overcoming the desire to maintain her own silence. Instead, Reynolds challenged the possible threat of reprisal for speaking out against the man who abused her. Kilpatrick contracted

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<sup>68</sup> Reynolds, interview, 3284.

<sup>69</sup> Reynolds, interview, 3293-94.

<sup>70</sup> Reynolds, interview, 3294.



out his slaves as hands to others in need of labor, and Reynolds and an enslaved boy were sent to “ornery white trash named Kidd” to work. The boy escaped, and Kidd became convinced that Reynolds knew where he was. According to Reynolds, Kidd stripped her, hung her tied wrists from a tree limb, wrapped her legs around the tree, and tied her feet together, then beat her until she fainted. Although Reynolds did not know how much time had passed before she regained consciousness, eventually Kilpatrick’s daughter, Sara, brought the woman to her mother. Reynolds related her master’s examination of her injuries, “Marster looked me over good and said I would get well but that I was ruined for breedin’ children.”<sup>71</sup> The beating that Reynolds received was horrific, yet her injuries may have released her from the expectation that she would produce children to add to Kilpatrick’s wealth.

Sexual exploitation of enslaved women did not only consist of forced reproduction and lack of choice in the selection of sexual partners; white men forced and coerced black women into having sexual intercourse with them. But many black women resisted sexual assault by their masters, often at the expense of their bodies. Louise Sidney Martin, of New Orleans, described in great detail to her interviewer, Octave Lilly, Jr., the consequences of a woman resisting the advances of her master:

Ah member Aunt Josephine w’en dey whip her, every lick dey hit her, dat paddled cooked liked blood; de po’ ‘oman could’nt git up w’en dey finished whippin her, you member she was de ‘oman who dey whipped w’en her husband left to go wid de Yankees. De Marster tried to git her to have him and she would’nt so he beat her, de Marster on one side and the overseer on de other side. . . Ah tell you it’s terrible, and w’en somebody told you to go to a house at night to meet em and you had to go if you wanted to or not, nothin’s dirtier than dat. Dat’s de way dem dirty marsters done, w’en de wanted a nigger ‘oman dey made her have him or whipped her to death.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Reynolds, interview, 3296.

<sup>72</sup> Louise Martin, interview by Lilly, Octave, Jr., 2/4/1938, Marcus Christian Collection, MSS 011, Historical Source Materials, Slave Narrative, Box 4/16, Louisiana Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

The shame expressed by Martin contradicted the conventional belief that enslaved women had few morals, and desired and enjoyed sexual contact with their masters.<sup>73</sup> Although Martin does not delineate her motives for relating the story of her aunt's assault, her aunt was clearly raped, and by telling the story of her aunt's abuse, Martin expressed the despair that she felt at the memory of her female relative's rape and punishment for resistance.

Some overseers took advantage of their positions of authority and sexually assaulted enslaved women. Whether for sexual gratification or financial gain, or both, is open to speculation, but according to Fred Brown, a former enslaved man from Baton Rouge Parish, his master, John Brown, divided supervisory duties between an overseer, in charge of work details, and an "overlooker" who managed the enslaved women on the plantation. The overlooker restricted the sexual activities of the women in his charge:

Sometimes de overlooker don' let dem git married. I 'splains it dis way. He am used fer to father de chillum. He picks de portly, and de healthy women dat am to rear de portly chillum. De overlooker, he am portly man. Dem dat him picks he overlooks, and not 'low dem to marry or to go round with other nigger men. If dey do, it whippin' sho.' De massa raises some fine, portly chillen, and dey sel' some, after dey's half-grown, for \$500 and sometimes more.<sup>74</sup>

Although not explicitly stated, one can deduce that the "overlooker" was an African American man, adding a new dimension to the sexual exploitation of enslaved women. Brown's description of the arrangement in place on John Brown's plantation raises the question of how voluntary was the overlooker's participation in this practice of forced reproduction, especially given that he selected the desired women and did not allow them to choose anyone else. By describing this

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<sup>73</sup> White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 38.

<sup>74</sup> Fred Brown, interview, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938* Texas Narratives, Vol. XVI, Part 1, 156-157. <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=161/mesn161.db&recNum=161&itemLink=S?ammem/mesnbib:@field%28AUTHOR+@od1%28Brown,+Fred%29%29>. (accessed 4/21/2012).

system to the FWP interviewer, Brown gave voice to the numerous women who could not or did not choose to speak out about their exploitation at the hands of an African American man.

## **Conclusion**

Enslaved women experienced American racial slavery as both laborers and the source of new laborers. Women such as Henrietta Butler, Manda Cooper, and Mary Reynolds told their stories long after the end of slavery. Although no longer considered property, the political climate of Louisiana and other states of the South continued to support white supremacy, leaving African American women vulnerable to threats, and forced to comply with racial etiquette of the 1930s. Yet in interviews with the FWP, men and women who experienced the terror of rape, the frustration of being unable to choose a sexual partner, and the fear of reprisal, told of their daily lives under slavery and expressed the anger that they maintained for more than a half a century following emancipation. Scholarship on the history of women and gender under antebellum slavery demands that we move beyond debates over memory and authenticity, and ask new questions of the FWP narratives. Without attention to these stories of sexual exploitation, voiced even in the repressive climate of the Jim Crow South, the complete story of slavery in the antebellum United States cannot be told.

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### **Vita**

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