They Chose Instead Revolt:

Slave Narratives, Sexual Violence, and the Black Radical Tradition

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A dissertation

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Washington

2020

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

English

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Abstract

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This dissertation presents a revisionist account of black political radicalism in the United States. Scholars of black literature and history have consistently argued that enslaved people inaugurated a black radical tradition. But they have tended to neglect how enslaved people articulated a black radical politics through the writing of autobiographies, or slave narratives. The result has been the silencing of enslaved people in histories of the tradition they originated. Centering slave narratives, this dissertation finds that enslaved people articulated black radical politics through the telling of stories of sexual violence. It argues that slave narratives reveal hitherto overlooked sexual politics at the core of the antebellum tradition of black radicalism. The project's intervention is to bridge two fields: the historiography of black radicalism and the literary scholarship on slave narratives. While the latter has examined sexual violence in slave narratives at length, it has not considered the genre's implications for the study of black radicalism. Synthesizing these fields, the dissertation produces the insight that the sexual politics of slave narratives were central to the formation of the antebellum black radical tradition.

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Acknowledgments

Words never seem so limiting than when I want them to express the gratitude I feel for others. I trust that those I hold dear know how much they mean to me, despite my humble attempts to thank them here.

This project began well before I entered graduate school. My time at Binghamton University proved crucial to my development as a scholar. What Jennifer Stoever taught me about the stakes of knowledge production remains with me to this day. The courses I took with Joseph Keith showed me what kind of scholar I wanted to be. I am now fortunate to call both of these mentors friends. My brilliant fellow traveler through undergrad, Seyma Bayram, was the first to teach me that it is okay to embrace myself, fully, as I am. I will never forget this gift.

I cannot imagine a better intellectual home than the one I have found among friends, colleagues, and mentors at the University of Washington, Seattle. There is nowhere to be found a more supportive dissertation committee than mine. Were it not for the ongoing guidance of Alys Weinbaum, I would have long ago left graduate school. She saw potential in me well before I could see it in myself. Her uncompromising commitments to justice and good scholarship remain the standards to which I aspire. She has left detailed feedback on every draft of this project. I am a better writer and thinker for it. Her mentorship I treasure. Stephanie Smallwood has been a guiding light for me on more occasions than I can count. The many times I considered abandoning the study of English for History, she reminded me that I could do both and that there is value in inhabiting an interdisciplinary space. I thank her for the generosity of honest conversation. Few people have shaped my thinking like Chandan Reddy, whose keenness of mind is surpassed only by his kindness of heart. At every step of the way, with scintillating eloquence, he helped me untangle my ideas and deepen them. I have learned as much from his

actions as from his words that the best scholarship is an expression of love for others. Phillip Thurtle had faith in my research and teaching well before it was merited. The opportunities he provided me have not only made me a better scholar but helped me find a home on campus. Sareeta Amrute guided me to the people who became the first members of my writing group, and Gillian Harkins has time and again showed me how to do justice work inside violent institutions. I am grateful to both of them for the ways they have supported me.

I have had the good fortune of receiving funding from numerous sources to complete this dissertation. The 2018-19 Collaborative Learning and Interdisciplinary Pedagogy (CLIP) Fellowship in "Critical Justice Education" from the Department of Comparative History of Ideas at the University of Washington, and an accompanying research award from the Simpson Center for the Humanities, allowed me to complete the second chapter of this dissertation. A research award from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for participation in the University of Washington's 2017-18 Sawyer Seminar on Capitalism and Comparative Racialization, coupled with a year-long fellowship in the Washington Institute for the Study of Inequality and Race, helped me craft the framing of this project. The receipt of the Andrew Hilen American Studies Summer Dissertation Fellowship from the English Department in 2017 provided me with much needed financial support in the dissertation's early stages. Katherine Beckett and Steve Herbert offered me funding in the Law, Societies, and Justice Department as I was completing the dissertation. I so appreciate the warmth with which they welcomed me into the department.

There exists no greater force of influence on my thinking than that of my friends. Samantha Simon has been my longest friend in graduate school. Her clarity of insight has sustained me in dark times. Alan-Michael Weatherford has showed me how to blend laughter and activism. Jey Saung has helped me understand conversation as caregiving. For teaching me

the meaning of friendship and intellectual community, I thank these three, as well as Elizabeth Brown, Darren Byler, Edmond Chang, Gianna Craig, Leanne Day, Laura De Vos, Annie Dwyer, Alec Fisher, Sunao Fukanaga, John Gallagher, Lydia Heberling, Curtis Hisayasu, Alysse Hotz, Oloth Insyxiengmay, Heather Islander, Nanya Jhingran, Safiya Karmy-Jones, Roneva Keel, Elloise Kim, Philippe Kim, Najja Kossally, Renee Kubota, Sebastian Lopez-Vergara, Brian McDonald, Andrew Meinhold, Chelsea Moore, Jason Morse, Jonathan Nagata, Logan O'Laughlin, Liesl Sackschewsky, Leyla Savloff, Paige Seachrest, Sue Shon, A. Y. Yomi-Odedeyi, Jiwoon Yulee, and Kathryn Zyskowski. Special thanks are due to Cynthia Anderson, Nicolaas Barr, and Torie Reed, who welcomed me into the Comparative History of Ideas Department and kept me well fed. The members of my writing group deserve their own line of thanks: Darren Byler, Roneva Keel, Leyla Savloff, Samantha Simon, Alan-Michael Weatherford, Jiwoon Yulee, and Kathryn Zyskowski. These formidable interlocutors bear responsibility for the best parts of the dissertation. They have shared generously of their time, reading draft after draft of my underdeveloped ideas and tortuous prose. They have led me to arguments I could not have found on my own.

A few friends from my hometown have insisted upon steady connection even when I flung myself to another coast. How lucky I am to have found kindred souls in Jessica Przybysz Shafi and Benjamin Winn. They grounded me throughout graduate school. Thanks belong to Julia West and Nikita Robinson, as well, for showing me that I will always have a community to which I can return.

My family has only ever made me a better thinker. In many ways, this dissertation is for them. My siblings understand me and hold me accountable in ways that no one else can. I strive to be as stalwart as Luke, as magnanimous as Seth, and as people-loving as Hannah. I am proud

now to call Shannon Knapp and Samantha Tifft members of my family. A special place is reserved in my heart for Miriam—she is truly without equal. My mother taught me to love the power and beauty of words; I hope someday to master her vocabulary. My father taught me that much can be communicated wordlessly. He left too soon, but I am thankful for the ways he remains with me.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the profound impact my students have had on my scholarship. They have immeasurably sharpened my skills as a reader and writer. I continue to be thankful for the privilege of volunteer teaching with University Beyond Bars at the Washington State Reformatory. There is no question in my mind that I have learned far more from my students at the reformatory than I have taught them. I am especially grateful to Melanie Hernandez for introducing me to University Beyond Bars and to Joel Strom and Margaret Burke for the ways in which they continue to make the work of the organization possible.

The members of the Alliances Gender and Sexuality Group at the Washington State Reformatory have showed me what it means to live theory in practice. They remind me that scholarship is only as good as its contribution to struggles for justice.

My deepest gratitude is reserved for Michael Raka. He has listened to me grapple with the arguments of this dissertation continuously. With matchless perspicacity and unending patience, he has showed me how to better my ideas and make them clearer. I thank him for the gift of companionship.

I completed this dissertation in a moment of global crisis. As the world is rocked by the COVID-19 pandemic and protests in response to the murder of George Floyd and so many others, it is my hope that my work contributes in a small way to the making of another world, one defined by the vision of freedom dreamed up in the black radical tradition.

Introduction:
John Sella Martin and the Sexual Terror of Slavery

> There are few slave mothers who know enough about dates, or remember them sufficiently, to put any of their children in possession of the knowledge of the day, the month, or even the year of their birth. My mother was an exception to this, however, owing to the fact that a famous negro insurrectionist was hanged on the day of my birth, the 17th of September, 1832. The occurrence not only fixed the date in my mother's memory, but from her frequent mention of it, I think I can trace the purpose gradually formed, never to submit to a flogging; and the intention, early cherished, of escaping from slavery. Then, too, I must have had a superstitious glimpse of the doctrine of old Pythagoras, who held that when any one dies some one that moment was born, in whom the spirit of the departed found new abode. So I always felt myself to be in a better condition than it was said President James Buchanan was in; for one of his reviewers, in speaking of this doctrine and Buchanan's meanness, averred that when Buchanan was born nobody died. I had early dreams of taking up this negro's work where he had left off, and of becoming an emancipator myself; but Christian light and better sentiments prevailed, and now I am realising my desire in a better and holier way. Like too many slave girls, my mother had been made a victim of the selfish designs of her mistress in securing an eligible match in marriage for the heir of her property. Mr. Martin, her brother's only child, and her only heir, was destined by the old folks in both families to marry a young lady of wealth and position, who was some eight years his junior; and that this purpose might not be thwarted by her nephew forming attachments elsewhere while the girl was still a minor, Mrs. Henderson, by methods known only to the system of slavery, encouraged, and finally secured a relationship between Mr. Martin and my mother, of which my sister Caroline and myself were the fruits.
>
> —John Sella Martin, "My Slave Life" (1867)

John Sella Martin considered himself a radical by birth. When he recounted his nativity in an autobiographical narrative of his enslavement titled "My Slave Life" (1867), Martin framed the radical politics he espoused as the consequence of cosmic fate: he was born the same day that Nat Turner died. Turner, an enslaved man himself, had famously led an insurrection of enslaved people in Southampton, Virginia in August of 1831. The show-trial that followed quickly resulted in his execution on November 11 of the same year. But the spirit of insurgency that Turner had fomented outlived his succinct death. Turner's uprising breathed new life into the revolutionary energies of enslaved people throughout the United States. For his own part, Martin pondered the possibility that the spirit of Turner had been imparted to him in a direct way. The doubling of his birth with Turner's death led Martin to contemplate the plausibility of the transmigration of souls: could it be that the soul of the enslaved insurrectionist lived on in

Martin? On the question of Turner's reincarnation, Martin seems to have remained undecided. But of one thing he was certain: he would follow in Turner's footsteps. The radicalism of the enslaved revolutionary—whether in a literal or metaphorical sense—was his birthright.[1]

Martin's radicalism took the form of an unequivocal rejection of slavery. Martin learned to spurn the terms of his enslavement from a young age. His mother Winnifred, herself a radical by his account, instilled in him the significance of the conditions of his birth. If Turner served as his spiritual predecessor of sorts, it was his mother who ultimately radicalized Martin. She first noted his natal connection to Turner and reminded Martin of it often. Martin explains in the narrative that her "frequent mention" of the exceptional circumstances of his birth allow him to "trace" in himself "the purpose gradually formed, never to submit to a flogging; and the intention, early cherished, of escaping from slavery" (314). Through the influence of his mother, Martin came to favor revolt and fugitivity over deference to a master. His narrative bears out the truth of his embrace of a radical position. It relates numerous instances in which he defied the rule of slaveholders and tells the story of how he eventually escaped bondage by forging free papers and improvising passage on a Mississippi steamboat, and then a railway car, to Chicago.

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[1] Martin's narrative of enslavement appeared in two parts, split between subsequent editions of the Scottish periodical *Good Words* in May and June of 1867. Martin published the narrative while representing the American Missionary Association on a wide antislavery lecture-circuit throughout the United Kingdom and Europe. See Rev. Sella Martin, "My Slave Life," *Good Words*, May 1, 1867, 314-21 and *Good Words*, June 1, 1867, 393-99; hereafter cited parenthetically. In the opening of the narrative, Martin identifies the date of his birth and Turner's death as September 17, 1832. The historical accuracy of this assertion is contravened by the widely accepted documentary evidence that locates the date of Turner's death nearly a year earlier on November 11, 1831. Historian Herbert Aptheker, in his foundational study of enslaved resistance, observes that antebellum sources often incorrectly record the dates of enslaved people's uprisings, sometimes miscalculating by the span of a year or more. It is possible that the date Martin gives for Turner's death came from one of these inaccurate sources. For the purposes of the present analysis, the historical accuracy of Martin's claim matters less than the significance of the fact that the narrative connects Martin's birth to Turner's death. See Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* [1943], 50th anniversary ed. (New York: International, 2013), especially page 15, note 16. Although Martin was widely known during his time, little biographical writing on Martin exists to date. For a biography of Martin published while Martin was still alive, see Baptist Wriothesley Noel, *Freedom and Slavery in the United States of America* (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1863), 156-70. For a more recent and more extensive study of Martin, see R. J. M. Blackett, *Beating Against the Barriers: Biographical Essays in Nineteenth-Century Afro-American History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 185-285.

Martin admits that in his youth he fantasized about resurrecting Turner’s legacy of violent insurrection: “I had early dreams of taking up this negro’s work where he had left off, and of becoming an emancipator myself” (314). Over time, however, he came to favor the word over the sword. By the time he published his narrative, he had become a well-known antislavery preacher: “Christian light and better sentiments prevailed, and now I am realizing my desire in a better and holier way” (314). Though his methods had changed, his radical commitments remained the same: enslaved people must be free.

For as much as his birth augured a radical future for Martin, it also commemorated the fact of extreme sexual violence against his mother. His biological father was the nephew and sole heir of a white slaveholding woman of North Carolina. Winnifred, his mother, was her slave. Sometime before the birth of Martin a marriage had been arranged between his father and a wealthy young white woman eight years his father’s junior. Fearing the loss of a financially beneficial union through the young man’s pursuit of sexual attentions prior to his betrothed’s coming of age, the slaveholding matron forced Martin’s mother into a relation of concubinage with his father. The slaveholder designated a separate cabin for Winnifred, distinct from the living quarters of the other slaves, as was customary in such instances of sexual subjection. The arrangement occasioned the birth of Martin and his elder sister Caroline. When time came for her nephew to marry, the slaveholding woman found that he possessed little interest in the one to whom he had pledged matrimony. She responded by selling Winnifred. As Martin explains it, the split from his mother only further radicalized him: “It may be that without this experience I should never have been stimulated to escape from slavery, nor been permitted to contribute […] to the overthrow of that oppression” (316). The radicalism Martin avowed throughout his life developed in response to the fate not only of Nat Turner but of his mother.

The account Martin offers of his birth is notable for the manner in which it articulates his rejection of slavery. It is key that Martin notes both his connection to Turner as well as the sexual subjection of his mother in the opening paragraph of "My Slave Life." It was customary for formerly enslaved autobiographers to begin the stories of their lives with a description of their parentage to the extent that it was known to them. Martin's narrative is unexceptional with respect to the fact that it announces his white paternity. Many of the most well-known antebellum ex-slave autobiographers—including Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, Henry Bibb, and Ellen Craft—begin their narratives by pointing out that they were fathered by white men.[2] The opening pages of such narratives call attention, even if only implicitly, to the fact of sexual violence in the context of slavery. These ex-slave narrators took for granted that slavery was a form of racial as well as sexual domination. Martin was no different. The picture he paints of the institution defines it not solely by the racial violence visited upon African and African-descended people but by the sexual violence that circumstanced his own birth.

What sets Martin's narrative apart from the bulk of the rest is the emphasis it places on the author's unapologetic rejection of slavery at the outset. Whereas many narrators open by simply describing the conditions of their birth, Martin begins by pronouncing his radical political stance through self-identification with Turner. The attention he gives to his connection with Turner highlights his rejection of slavery. And then, as if to communicate by example what he means by slavery, Martin immediately relates the story of his mother's sexual subjection. The

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[2] See Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself* [1845], in *Slave Narratives*, ed. William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Library of America, 2001), 267-368; William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself* [1847], in *Slave Narratives*, ed. William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Library of America, 2001), 369-424; Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave, Written by Himself* [1849], in *Slave Narratives*, ed. William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Library of America, 2001), 425-566; and William Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* [1860], in *Slave Narratives*, ed. William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Library of America, 2001), 677-742.

effect of this narrative opening is to frame his radicalism as a rejection of the kind of racialized sexual abuse experienced by his mother. The reader is left with this: Martin articulates a radical politics through the unequivocal repudiation of slavery as a form of racial and sexual violence.

The story Martin tells of his birth illustrates some of the central arguments of this dissertation. The primary claim of the dissertation is that enslaved and formerly enslaved people in the antebellum and postbellum United States contributed to the articulation of a black radical tradition by expressing opposition to the racial and sexual violence of slavery through the telling of their life stories. It has been well demonstrated that enslaved people inaugurated the black radical tradition by rejecting the racial violence endemic to slavery. But little attention has been paid to the manner in which enslaved people understood slavery as a form of both racial as well as sexual violence. When enslaved people like Martin sought to overthrow slavery, they rejected not just racial but sexual domination. The black radical tradition thus developed with a distinct—if understudied—sexual politics at its core. This dissertation focuses on the often-overlooked sexual politics through which the black radical tradition took shape.

One of the dissertation's pivotal theses is that slave narratives—autobiographical accounts of bondage written or dictated by enslaved or formerly enslaved people—can be read for traces of black radicalism and that reading slave narratives in such a manner reveals the sexual politics that structured the antebellum black radical tradition. Of course, the narrators of slave autobiographies do not represent a monolith; they had different ideas about sexual violence and different relationships to it. The sexual politics they express in their narratives differ person to person. Not all ex-slave narrators talked about sexual violence, not all who talked about it were black radicals, and not all black radicals presented an account of sexual violence. Slave narratives demonstrate that the sexual politics of ex-slave narrators intersected variously with the

politics of black radicalism and other nineteenth-century formations, including feminism and abolitionism. But the study of slave narratives reveals one thing to be true: the sexual politics enslaved people expressed in slave narratives were central to the formation of the antebellum black radical tradition.

The Sexual Politics of the Black Radical Tradition

This dissertation defines black radicalism as a tradition of thought and practice inaugurated by enslaved peoples throughout the Americas, rooted in African thought systems and cultures, and characterized by a rejection of slavery in favor of alternative ways of knowing and being in the world. The definition rests on the premise that black radicalism took shape through the struggles by which enslaved people sought to liberate themselves from the conditions of their bondage. While black radicalism expressed itself in myriad ways, it frequently materialized in those forms of resistance espoused by Martin: fugitivity and revolt. The dissertation owes much of its account of black radicalism to the work of historian and political scientist Cedric J. Robinson, who in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983) first coined the term "black radical tradition" and theorized it. It adapts its title from a line in *Black Marxism* in which Robinson writes that enslaved people "chose instead armed revolt" against slavery rather than surrender to it.[3] Robinson argues that from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century a tradition of insurgency against European colonization and racial slavery emerged through enslaved people's practices of fugitivity and revolt. According to Robinson, these practices reveal a certain collective insistence on the preservation of alternatives to the colonial order of slavery, alternatives that doubly sprung from African cosmologies and

[3] Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* [1983] (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), quote 162.

that imagined social relations in ways that contravened the exploitative racial hierarchies central to European liberalism and capitalism. As Robinson sees it, the pervasiveness of fugitivity and revolt in the historical record gives the historian a window onto the fact of the black radical tradition's existence. For Robinson, in other words, enslaved people's struggles against slavery not only gave rise to the black radical tradition but make its historical elaboration possible.[4]

For as much he considers enslaved people to be central to the formation of the black radical tradition, Robinson grants minimal attention to the narratives they left behind. Robinson instead focused his interventions on two bodies of twentieth-century historiography: the historiography of slavery and the Marxist historiography of capitalism. As it concerned the former, Robinson's aim in formulating a theory of the black radical tradition was to demonstrate that enslaved people possessed historical agency by which they fought back against their oppressors and sometimes succeeded in achieving their own liberation. Although there exists ample evidence in the historical record of enslaved fugitivity and revolt, the dominant historiography of slavery had framed enslaved people as docile subjects who through centuries of psychological and physical domination had ultimately capitulated to the terms of their bondage. This historiography found itself hard pressed to explain the countless instances of fugitivity that populated the historical record, the numerous examples of maroon societies throughout the Americas and the Caribbean, and the unmistakable moments of revolutionary insurrection spearheaded by figures like Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, Toussaint Louverture, and others. The assertion of a black radical tradition produced a revision of the dominant historiography of slavery: it reframed enslaved people as historical agents who, far

[4] See Robinson, *Black Marxism*, especially 185-240.

from having succumbed to domination, had continually sought the realization of radical alternatives to slavery and colonization.

Perhaps the most enduring legacy of Robinson's work, however, is his intervention into the Marxist historiography of capitalism. Throughout *Black Marxism*, Robinson revisits and revises the foundational Marxist premise that slavery comprised a feature of capitalism's prehistory. Whereas Karl Marx had framed racial slavery as primitive accumulation and thus as an antecedent to the modern development of industrial capitalism, Robinson demonstrates that, contrary to Marx, slavery constituted a quintessential expression of capitalism in so far as capitalism turns on the differential valuation, dispossession, and exploitation of human life according to the logic of race. All capitalism, for Robinson, must be considered a form of what he famously calls "racial capitalism," the name he gives both to the theoretical analytic he uses to suss out capitalism's racial logic as well as the historical formations of capitalism he analyzes in the context of slavery and after. Framing slavery as racial capitalism, Robinson locates enslaved people at the center of the antagonisms constitutive of capitalism's history. For Robinson, the enslaved rose up against the order of racial capitalism in the selfsame moment that they contested their enslavement through various modalities of insurgency. The black radical tradition thus emerges in his analysis not simply as a rejection of slavery but as a historically determinative anti-capitalist struggle.

Martin's story affirms the anti-capitalist nature of slave insurgency at the same time that it provides insight into the ways that Robinson's account of the black radical tradition might be expanded. Turning to slave narratives like Martin's reveals what Robinson's *Black Marxism* does not—the sexual politics through which enslaved people articulated black radical responses to bondage. Having established his cosmic link to Turner, Martin introduces the plight of his

mother: "Like too many slave girls, my mother had been made a victim of the selfish designs of her mistress in securing an eligible match in marriage for the heir of her property" (314). The phrasing of this sentence involves a telling substitution: "heir of her property" stands in for "nephew." Martin could have ended the line by saying that his mistress sought an eligible match for her nephew, a choice that would have clarified the family relation of the unnamed heir to the avaricious mistress. The insertion of "heir of her property" does different work—it illustrates how the mistress sees her nephew. The line assumes the perspective of capitalist greed, revealing that the mistress's arrangement is driven by the desire to manipulate property relations and accumulate wealth. According to the rule of *partus sequitur ventrem*, which dictated that the child of an enslaved woman inherited the legal condition of her enslavement, neither Winnifred nor her children could claim rights to the property bequeathed to the nephew.[5] The birth of Martin and his sister did however increase the mistress's and her nephew's estate. Sexual violence against Martin's mother became the instrument by which the mistress could acquire more property and manipulate capitalist property relations in her favor through her nephew's marriage. It served as the means by which she could reproduce the existing order of capitalist property relations and thereby reproduce the existing order of racial slavery.

Sexual violence, in other words, reproduced relations of capital and of race. Feminist scholarship on slavery has documented at length the manner in which biological reproduction functioned as the mechanism by which the racialized order of property was constantly remade. Literary scholar Hazel Carby points out that white women in the antebellum period were "viewed as the means of the consolidation of property through the marriages of alliance between

[5] Scholars have written about this law extensively. For an excellent analysis of this law in the English sixteenth- and seventeenth-century colonial context, see Jennifer L. Morgan, "*Partus sequitur ventrem*: Law, Race, and Reproduction in Colonial Slavery," *Small Axe* 22, no. 1 (2018): 1-17.

plantation families, and they gave birth to the inheritors of that property."[6] Martin's story exemplifies this point. A union between the nephew and the white woman he was to marry would consolidate her property into his. The birth of children through that union would dictate to whom the property of the slaveholding mistress—and by extension the property of the nephew—would eventually descend. Yet the case was different for the enslaved black female. According to Carby, the enslaved woman existed "in an entirely different relation to the plantation patriarch. Her reproductive destiny was bound to capital accumulation; black women gave birth to property and, directly, to capital itself in the form of slaves" (25). Again, Martin's story proves illustrative. Winnifred, as an enslaved woman whose children inherited her legal status, could not produce heirs. The birth of her children reproduced her legal condition as property and thereby expanded the property claims of her owner. A legal and epistemic bind between race and reproduction thus secured and rationalized the reproduction of the capitalist property relations that constituted slavery.[7] The sexual subjection of Winnifred, in short, reproduced racial capitalism.

The story Martin tells of his mother has bearing on how the history of black radicalism should be understood. Robinson focuses in *Black Marxism* on enslaved people's rejection of the racial exploitation endemic to modern capitalism as the process through which the black radical tradition emerged. Martin's account of sexual violence allows readers to add fresh insight to Robinson's history of the black radical tradition: it had a sexual politics at its core. Martin's story indicates that sexual violence was central to the maintenance of slavery as a capitalist system. It

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[6] Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford, 1987), 24-25; hereafter cited parenthetically.

[7] The concept of an epistemic race/reproduction bind structuring transatlantic modernity I draw from Alys Eve Weinbaum's *Wayward Reproductions: Genealogies of Race and Nation in Transatlantic Modern Thought* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

bears emphasizing that Martin's radical rejection of enslavement therefore necessarily involved a rejection of sexual violence and its capitalist function. Rejecting slavery meant rejecting the capitalist order of property and the sexual violence that reproduced it. Martin's radicalism is consistent with Robinson's account of black radicalism in that it takes what can be understood as an anti-capitalist stance against slavery. What must be added, however, is that Martin's radicalism entailed a sexual politics. This observation is not to say that Martin must be considered a feminist, or that he contributed significantly to the betterment of enslaved women, or even that his take on the sexual violence of slavery occupied a foremost place in his writing and speaking on the institution. It is rather to make the point that slavery, as he presents it, was a capitalist structure of racial and sexual domination. To reject slavery was to reject the racial and sexual violence that organized capitalist property relations. The black radical politics Martin expresses in his narrative takes for granted an understanding of slavery as a capitalist institution maintained through racial as well as sexual violence.

Slave Narratives and the Historiography of Black Radicalism

This dissertation tells the story of the sexual politics central to the articulation of the antebellum black radical tradition. The sexual politics of enslaved and formerly enslaved black radicals often found expression in slave narratives. For as much as he emphasizes the role enslaved people played in the development of the black radical tradition, Robinson leaves their narratives to the side in *Black Marxism*. Subsequent scholars of black radicalism have by and large done the same. The tendency to prioritize other archives over slave narratives in the study of black radicalism has led to the inadvertent silencing of enslaved people in the historiography of the radical tradition they inaugurated. It has further meant the loss of potential insights into the

history of black radicalism that cannot be gleaned from other sources. Slave narratives complicate black radicalism's history in ways that have yet to be fully explored. This dissertation examines one way in which slave narratives enrich historical understanding of the formation of the black radical tradition in the United States from the 1830s to the 1860s, namely, through the accounts of sexual violence they contain. Examining how enslaved people wrote and spoke about sexual subjection in their autobiographies, the dissertation zeros in on the following question: how did enslaved people contribute to the making of the black radical tradition through the telling of stories of sexual violence in slave narratives? The project finds that, while the sexual politics of slave narrators vary, slave narratives nonetheless make it clear that black radicalism frequently took form through a politics of opposition to sexual violence. The dissertation thus figures the existing record of slave narratives as an indispensable resource for the production of knowledge about the history of the black radical tradition.

The project's principal intervention is to bridge two fields: the scholarly literature on slave narratives and the historiography of black radicalism. Synthesizing the contributions of these two fields, the dissertation makes arguments that inform not only the study of black radicalism but also the study of slave narratives. While scholars of the slave narrative have examined its sexual politics at length, they have not exhausted consideration of the genre's implications for the history of the black radical tradition. The prevailing tendency in this literature has been to conceptualize the slave narrative as an abolitionist genre, curated by white editors who were invested in amplifying the shock-value of slavery so as to advance a liberal political agenda and accomplish the legal abolition of slavery. The scholarship has consequently—and rightly—engaged slave narratives with a degree of critical skepticism, always holding in view the possibility that the language on the page might be less the words or

ideas of an ex-slave narrator than of a white antislavery propagandist. What has received less attention is the perhaps counterintuitive possibility that slave narratives might also express radical politics at the same time and in subtle ways. This dissertation takes the position that for as much as slave narratives outwardly expressed liberal abolitionist politics, they also contain scattered traces of black radicalism that can be located in anecdotes of sexual subjection.

In the Anglo-American context, slave narratives take a variety of forms. Written slave narratives tell the story of one enslaved person's life, typically focusing on that person's escape from slavery to freedom. Sometimes penned directly by the speaker and other times dictated to an editor, or amanuensis, these narratives usually take the first-person perspective of slaves themselves and are thus most often classed as a type of autobiography or memoir. They vary in length and medium of publication, ranging from several-hundred-word newspaper columns such as Martin's to several-hundred-page books. Collectively they span well over a century, the first released in the final decades of the 1700s and the latest finding publication in the 1920s and after.

Between 1936 and 1938, another category of slave narrative emerged. During this time, federal Works Progress Administration (WPA) employees conducted and recorded over two thousand face-to-face interviews with formerly enslaved people. The transcripts of these interviews—also called slave narratives—were subsequently deposited in the Library of Congress until, through the herculean efforts of historian George P. Rawick, they were collated into a 49-volume set and published in 1972. These oral narratives tend to be shorter than their antebellum counterparts. They record an informant's response to a series of questions and typically occupy no more than a few pages. Many of the questions, which were standardized and distributed to interviewers by WPA administrators, are ethnographic in nature. They ask the ex-

slave to speak generally on plantation culture rather than about one's individual experience.[8] These oral slave narratives, together with their written antecedents, constitute the bulk of the existing record on slavery from the perspective of slaves.

How these slave narratives should be interpreted has long been a matter of scholarly debate. Literary studies has focused almost exclusively on the written antebellum narratives. Throughout the 1980s and 90s, literary critics including Frances Foster Smith, Marion Wilson Starling, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and William Andrews defined the slave narrative as a literary genre. They identified its features of form and style and elaborated its foundational relation to the developing African American literary canon. Whereas the conventional disciplinary assumptions of literary studies excluded the written slave narrative from serious consideration as a subject of criticism, the hallmark—and intervention—of this scholarship has been to read the slave narrative as literature in its own right.[9] Unlike their literary colleagues, historians have analyzed

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[8] Sample questions included the following: "4. What did you eat and how was it cooked? Any possums? Rabbits? Fish? What food did you like best? Did the slaves have their own gardens?" and "7. How many acres in the plantation? How many slaves on it? How and at what time did the overseer wake up the slaves? Did they work hard and late at night? How and for what causes were the slaves punished? Tell what you saw. Tell some of the stories you heard." See "Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Administrative Files," Library of Congress, accessed October 19, 2019, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn001/.

[9] See Frances Smith Foster, *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979); Marion Wilson Starling, *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History* (Boston: G.K. Hall and Co., 1981); Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds., *The Slave's Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986). Other influential works on the slave narrative as literature include Robert B. Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979); James Olney, "'I Was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature," *Callaloo* 20 (1984): 46-73; John Sekora, "Black Message/White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative," *Callaloo* 32 (1987): 482-515; Valerie Smith, *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987); and Lindon Barrett, "African-American Slave Narratives: Literacy, the Body, Authority," *American Literary History* 7, no. 3 (1995): 415-42. Recent book-length studies of the slave narrative as a genre include Janet Neary, *Fugitive Testimony: On the Visual Logic of Slave Narratives* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017); Yogita Goyal, *Runaway Genres: The Global Afterlives of Slavery* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019); Laura T. Murphy, *The New Slave Narrative: The Battle over Representations of Contemporary Slavery* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019). Even more recently literary scholar John Ernest has collected and published an anthology of new essays by established and up-and-coming scholars on the slave narrative. See Ernest, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

both the written and WPA slave narrative extensively. Well past the midpoint of the twentieth century, dominant historiography regarded the slave narrative as factually unreliable.[10] Yet the growth of social history throughout the 1960s and 70s led to a wave of revisionist scholarship focused on telling the story of slavery from the vantage point of enslaved people themselves. The slave narrative became indispensable to the work of this scholarship, and historians began overturning prior claims about the unreliability of slave testimony.[11] The pioneering work of historians including John Blassingame, Nathan Irvin Huggins, Eugene Genovese, and Herbert Gutman made written and oral narratives by ex-slaves central to the historiography of slavery.[12] These scholars inaugurated the now standard historiographical practice of reading slave narratives as worthy records of enslaved experience and of the institution of slavery itself.

While leading historians throughout the 1970s did much to legitimize slave narratives as reliable historical records, they focused primarily on narratives left by formerly enslaved men and refused the credibility of records left by some enslaved women. In his field-making study of slave culture, *The Slave Community* (1972), John Blassingame rejects the facticity of what has emerged as the most important slave narrative written by a woman: Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). The sticking point, for Blassingame, was the way it deals with sexual violence. He argues:

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[10] The credibility of slave narratives—both written and oral—has long been debated. On this history, see John W. Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems," *Journal of Southern History* 41, no. 4 (1975): 473-92.

[11] See Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems."

[12] Important early histories of slavery based on slave narratives include John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* [1972], rev. and enlarged ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* [1972] (New York: Vintage, 1976); George P. Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Publishing Co., 1972); Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* [1976] (New York: Vintage, 1977); Leslie H. Owens, *This Species of Property: Slave Life and Culture in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Black Odyssey: The African-American Ordeal in Slavery* [1977] (New York: Vintage, 1990); Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* [1977] (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

> […] the work is not credible. In the first place, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), is too orderly; too many of the characters meet providentially after years of separation. Then, too, the story is too melodramatic: miscegenation and cruelty, outraged virtue, unrequited love, and planter licentiousness appear on practically every page. The virtuous Harriet sympathizes with her wretched mistress who has to look on all of the mulattoes fathered by her husband, she refuses to bow to the lascivious demands of her master, bears two children for another white man, and then runs away and hides in a garret in her grandmother's cabin for seven years until she is able to escape to New York.[13]

The kinds of sexual violence that Blassingame dismisses in Jacobs's narrative as melodrama have since been demonstrated by feminist historians of slavery to have been true for many enslaved women.[14] Through painstaking historical research, literary critic Jean Fagan Yellin has moreover corroborated the narrative, showing its account of Jacobs's life to be historically accurate.[15]

Since the entrance of Jacobs's narrative into the scholarly domain as a reliable record of slavery, literary critics and historians have studied its representations of sexual violence at length. The text garners nearly ubiquitous mention in scholarship on slavery, gender, and sexual

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[13] Blassingame, *Slave Community*, 373.

[14] See, for example, Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* [1985], rev. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1999). See also Nell Irvin Painter, *Southern History Across the Color Line* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the Hose of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Sasha Turner, *Contested Bodies: Pregnancy, Childbearing, and Slavery in Jamaica* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); Stephanie Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

[15] For the pioneering work of Jean Fagan Yellin on Jacobs, see Yellin, "Written by Herself: Harriet Jacobs's Slave Narrative," *American Literature* 53, no. 3 (1981): 479-86.

violence in the North American context. Deborah Gray White, in her pathbreaking study of enslaved women, *Ar'n't I a Woman?* (1985), cites Jacobs extensively to document the sexual violence of slavery and to overturn pervasive myths of the female slave as hypersexual Jezebel and asexual Mammy in the twentieth-century historiography of slavery. Literary scholar Hazel V. Carby famously illustrates in *Reconstructing Womanhood* (1987) that the discussion of sexual violence in Jacobs's *Incidents* articulates an emergent black feminist critique of antebellum white feminism. Reading Jacobs's sexual subjection as a form of violence foundational to the epistemic structure of modernity in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" (1987), literary scholar Hortense J. Spillers has laid the groundwork for continuing critical innovation in the fields of Black Studies and Gender and Sexuality Studies. Literary and cultural studies scholar Saidiya Hartman performs a thoroughgoing analysis of Jacobs's narrative in her watershed book, *Scenes of Subjection* (1997). Her reading of *Incidents* reveals how the text challenges the prevailing discourses of seduction that framed enslaved women as promiscuous and that negated the legal possibility of enslaved female rape. These scholars and the scholars they have inspired have produced a wealth of literature on the sexual violence of slavery.[16]

This dissertation extends this scholarship by considering how Jacobs's slave narrative and others might be read as records of black radicalism. The tendency in the literature on Jacobs has been to read her narrative as a foundational work of black feminism—literary scholar Angelyn Mitchell in fact representatively characterizes *Incidents* as an "Ur-text" of black womanhood.[17] And rightly so: the scholarship on Jacobs has demonstrated the foundational

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[16] See White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*; Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*; Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64-81; Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[17] See Angelyn Mitchell, *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 22-41.

black feminist contributions of the text. Yet even as the text looms large in black feminist scholarship on slavery, it has yet to be examined for the insights into the black radical tradition it offers. By analyzing *Incidents* doubly as a black feminist and a black radical text, the dissertation brings to light not only its radical politics of gender, sexuality, and sexual violence—politics that have been well documented—but also something that scholarship on the slave narrative has tended to pass over: its contributions to the anti-capitalist struggle outlined by Robinson. The dissertation shows that the text's critique of sexual violence and white feminist gender norms develops in articulation with an anti-capitalist politics Jacobs expresses throughout the narrative. It is the overlooked anti-capitalist politics of Jacobs's black feminism to which the dissertation draws attention by framing *Incidents* as a black radical text. One of the assertions of the dissertation is thus that Jacobs's anti-capitalist black feminism gives texture to the black radical tradition in ways that have been fully elaborated neither in scholarship on the slave narrative nor in the historiography of black radicalism. The framing of this assertion, of course, raises questions about the stakes of focusing on the feminist nature of Jacobs's contributions to black radicalism as opposed to the radical nature of Jacobs's contributions to black feminism. The project takes the former tack in order to produce a historical claim not about black feminism but about the variegated sexual politics of the black radical tradition.

Numerous slave narrators contributed to the articulation of black radicalism by rejecting slavery as a form of capitalist exploitation dependent on racial and sexual violence. But not all slave narrators made black feminist contributions to the black radical tradition as did Jacobs. Black feminism made Jacobs a black radical, but black radicalism did not inevitably make enslaved people black feminists. Martin, for instance, presents slavery as a form of sexual subjection but does not necessarily take what can be described as a feminist position on his

mother's exploitation. His rehearsal of the sexual violence against his mother might be read as a narrative mechanism by which he produces a masculine subjectivity for himself as speaker in oppositional relation to his mother who remains voiceless and abject.[18] Martin's self-association with Turner frames resistance to slavery as a masculine ideal to which he aspires just as the anecdote of sexual violence against Martin's mother feminizes subjection—particularly sexual subjection—as that which Martin must refuse in order to achieve masculine subjectivity and prove the merit of his identification with Turner. The sequencing of Martin's opening thus invites consideration of the possibility that Martin presents black radicalism as the purview of a masculinity that can only maintain itself through the binary production of gender that renders sexual domination as a distinctly feminized form of enslavement. Martin's rejection of sexual violence, in this reading, emerges less as a feminist statement against slavery than it does as an index of the masculinist anxiety of being feminized through subjection, especially subjection of a sexual nature. Read in this way, the sexual politics of Martin's narrative appear far afield of the black feminist sexual politics of Jacobs's. The point of analyzing Jacobs's narrative alongside Martin's and others' as contributions to the black radical tradition is not to collapse the sexual politics of these narratives but to demonstrate that enslaved people articulated the black radical tradition through sexual politics that ranged widely. The dissertation in this way presents black radicalism as a tradition defined by heterogeneity rather than uniformity.

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[18] The reference point for my analysis in this paragraph is the literature on the opening scene of the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, in which Douglass characterizes his introduction to the violence of slavery as the moment he overheard the sexualized beating of his Aunt Hester. Douglass's description of this scene has been written about at length and most notably by Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 3-4, who refuses to reproduce the scene of Hester's beating in her own work and who characterizes Douglass's description of the beating as a mechanism by which Douglass dramatizes his own subjectivity in relation to his aunt's. See also Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 1-24 and Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 1-26.

Sexual Terror

Feminist scholarship on black radicalism has in recent years begun to unpack the sexual politics of the black radical tradition. This scholarship has advanced the critique that Robinson fails to differentiate between gendered exploitation and insurgency in the context of slavery and that *Black Marxism* therefore presents the male slave's contributions to the black radical tradition as its universal form of expression. The presumptive masculinism of Robinson's analysis has led some scholars to recuperate black female activists such as Sojourner Truth, Charlotta A. Bass, and Claudia Jones as pillars of black radicalism.[19] Others have demonstrated the manner in which capitalism's exploitation of enslaved labor is simultaneously racialized and gendered. These scholars have highlighted the fact that slavery relied on enslaved women's reproductive labor, particularly in the wake of the closure of the transatlantic slave trade. As black labor became decreasingly available through import, the domestic reproduction of black labor became increasingly valuable. The pivotal lesson of this scholarship has been that slavery, as a form of racial capitalism, required the laboring bodies of enslaved women to reproduce the racialized labor force on which the entirety of the institution turned.[20] This scholarship has begun to address the sexual politics of enslaved black radicals to the extent that it has shown how enslaved

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[19] While these scholars do not necessarily frame their work as a direct response to Robinson, their studies of black radicalism nonetheless speak to his. See, for instance, Ula Y. Taylor's article on Sojourner Truth and Charlotta Bass, "'Read[ing] Men and Nations': Women in the Black Radical Tradition," *Souls* 1, no. 4 (1999): 72-80. For a recent study of Claudia Jones as a black radical, see Carole Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007). Political theorist H. L. T. Quan takes issue with the critique of Robinson for inherent masculinism, arguing by way of counterpoint that *Black Marxism* is feminist in its method. See Quan, "Geniuses of Resistance: Feminist Consciousness and the Black Radical Tradition," *Race and Class* 47, no. 2 (2005): 39-53.

[20] See Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage, 1997); Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women*; Alys Eve Weinbaum, "Gendering the General Strike: W. E. B. Du Bois's Black Reconstruction and Black Feminism's 'Propaganda of History'," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 3 (2013): 437-63; Saidiya Hartman, "The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors," *Souls* 18, no. 1 (2016): 166-73; Sasha Turner, *Contested Bodies*; Jennifer L. Morgan, "*Partus sequitur ventrem*," and Alys Eve Weinbaum, *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery: Biocapitalism and Black Feminism's Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

women fought back against the subjection of their reproductive labor. Literary critic Alys Eve Weinbaum, for instance, has recently demonstrated that enslaved women participated in a range of forms of anti-capitalist insurgency against their own reproductive exploitation and that the black radicalism of these women thus materializes as a sexual and reproductive politics.[21]

Yet this body of scholarship has tended to focus on sexual violence only in conjunction with or when expressed as reproductive labor exploitation. In so far as the focus of its intervention is the reproductive function of enslaved women's labor in the context of racial capitalism, it has left largely unexamined the many forms of sexual violence that cannot be rendered meaningful within a heterosexual teleology of biological reproduction. Quite often taking a cue from Hortense Spillers's analysis of Harriet Jacobs, which examines how the gender of the enslaved woman is put into flux through exposure to sexual violence by both her master as well as her mistress, an emerging body of scholarship on sexuality and slavery has demonstrated that many instances of enslaved sexual abuse took the form of same-sex sexual violence in which the possibility of biological reproduction was out of the question.[22] This dissertation maintains

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[21] See Alys Eve Weinbaum, "Gendering the General Strike" and *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery*.

[22] See Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe;" Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman, "'The Strangest Freaks of Despotism': Queer Sexuality in Antebellum African American Slave Narratives," *African American Review* 40, no. 2 (2006): 223-37; Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*; Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage," *GLQ* 14, no. 2-3 (2008); 191-215; Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 2010); Omise'eke Natasha Tinsely, *Thiefing Sugar: Eroticism Between Women in Caribbean Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Thomas A. Foster, "The Sexual Abuse of Black Men under Slavery," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20, no. 3 (2011): 445-64; Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman, *Against the Closet: Black Political Longing and the Erotics of Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); Treva B. Lindsey and Jessica Marie Johnson, "Searching for Climax: Black Erotic Lives in Slavery and Freedom," *Meridians* 12.2 (2014): 169-95; Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), especially 89-112; Vincent Woodard, *The Delectable Negro: Human Consumption and Homoeroticism Within U.S. Slave Culture*, ed. Justin A. Joyce and Dwight A. McBride (New York: New York University Press, 2014); 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: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 15-37; Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*; C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2017); Lamonte Aidoo, *Slavery Unseen: Sex, Power, and Violence in Brazilian History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); Daina Ramey Berry and Leslie M. Harris, eds., *Sexuality and Slavery: Reclaiming Intimate Histories in the Americas* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2018);

that sexual violence in the context of enslavement begs interrogation independently of reproductive labor exploitation for at least two reasons: first, slave narratives suggest that the sexual abuse of enslaved people served more than just a reproductive function, and, second, slave narratives demonstrate that not all forms of sexual violence were reproductive in nature. Martin intimates that his birth was only a secondary consequence of the primary function of his mother's sexual subjection, which was ostensibly to prevent the birth of legitimate heirs to the mistress's property before the nephew formally wed his rich fiancée. In *Incidents*, Jacobs, moreover, tells the story of a fugitive slave named Luke, whose master subjected him to what has been consistently interpreted as a form of homosexual sexual violence.[23] Such occasions of violence prompt consideration of the precise capitalist function of enslaved sexual abuse, particularly in same-sex and nonreproductive cases that cannot be interpreted as contributing directly to the reproduction of an enslaved labor force.

To make sense of the capitalist function of sexual violence in the context of slavery, this dissertation draws not only on the recent feminist literature on racial capitalism but also on the longstanding argument advanced by black feminist scholars that sexual violence constitutes a form of racialized and gendered terror. In "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves" (1971), one of the earliest examinations of the particularities of black female enslavement, Angela Davis argues that enslaved women were burdened with the task not only of laboring in the fields but also of maintaining the domestic conditions required to sustain the lives of enslaved laborers themselves. The gendering of exploitation made the enslaved

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Thomas A. Foster, *Rethinking Rufus: Sexual Violations of Enslaved Men* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2019); and Stephanie Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property*. See also the Queering Slavery Working Group, a website curated by historians Vanessa Holden and Jessica Marie Johnson and dedicated to the question of slavery's relationship to queerness, https://qswg.tumblr.com/.

[23] See Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman, "'The Strangest Freaks of Despotism'," Thomas A. Foster, "The Sexual Abuse of Black Men under Slavery;" Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman, *Against the Closet*; Vincent Woodard, *The Delectable Negro*; Downs, "Without a Trace;" Thomas A. Foster, *Rethinking Rufus*.

woman the key agent of the social reproduction of the enslaved community as a whole. As such, Davis points out, the enslaved woman found herself in a unique position: she was specially situated to both participate in and promote resistance to slavery. Her role opened up a range of modalities of insurrection—in addition to fugitivity and armed revolution—that enabled her to foster an insurgent consciousness among those who inhabited the slave quarters.[24]

Martin's story illustrates Davis's argument: the narrator makes it abundantly clear that it was his mother who planted in him the seed of a radical consciousness and his ultimate rejection of slavery. Davis emphasizes, however, that the unique position of the enslaved woman also made her vulnerable to slaveholding practices of counterinsurgency that often took the form of rape. The subjection of the enslaved woman to sexual violence, for Davis, represented an attack on both the individual woman and on the enslaved community at large. Slaveholders leveraged sexual violence against the enslaved woman as a mechanism of terror by which they could quell the insurgency she fomented. Davis stresses the fact that sexual violence functioned as a weapon of terror: "the American slaveholder's sexual domination never lost its openly terroristic character" (13).[25] In *Killing the Black Body* (1997), her widely influential study of black female reproductive subjugation, legal scholar Dorothy Roberts corroborates Davis's point:

> The fact that white men could profit from raping their female slaves does not mean that their motive was economic. The rape of slave women by their masters was primarily a weapon of terror that reinforced whites' domination over their human property.[26]

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[24] Davis points out there existed at the time of her writing a rich literature on enslaved forms of resistance but that most studies had ignored the unique forms of resistance in which enslaved women participated. See Angela Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," *Black Scholar* 3, no. 4 (1971): 2-15; hereafter cited parenthetically. Subsequent scholars have mapped enslaved female resistance at length. See especially Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?* and Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom*.

[25] Davis reiterates this point throughout her oeuvre. See, for instance, Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* [1981] (New York: Vintage, 1983), especially 172-201.

[26] Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 29-30.

For these scholars, the enslaved woman's subjection to sexual abuse held a distinctively counterinsurgent function.

Thinking about sexual violence as a form of terrorist counterinsurgency opens up a way of understanding the subjection of Martin's mother as more than just a kind of reproductive labor exploitation. Counterinsurgency is contingent upon the threat to an established order posed by insurgency, whether real or perceived. To identify something as counterinsurgency necessarily implies the existence of the insurgency to which it responds. If one takes the view that the sexual violence enacted against Martin's mother functioned as counterinsurgent terror, then one is forced to ask what the sexual terrorism against her was meant to squash. Perhaps Winnifred had in some way threatened fugitivity or revolt against her situation. If so, Martin does not tell the reader. But it is not necessary to identify some act of direct revolt against slavery on the part of Winnifred herself in order to understand her sexual subjection as counterinsurgency. What bears emphasizing is that sexual violence against enslaved women like Winnifred can be read as counterinsurgent terror visited upon the individual slave in response to the general threat of slave uprising that characterized the precarious relations between master and slave from the beginning of slavery to its end.

The context of Nat Turner's uprising is particularly instructive. The ultimate goal of insurgency, as exemplified by the attempted revolution in Southampton, was the total overthrow of the system of slavery. Insurgency against slavery meant insurgency against the relations of property that structured racial capitalism. Even if Martin's mother posed no immediate threat to the capitalist property relations of her mistress, the uprising of other slaves such as Turner certainly did. The attempts of the slaveholding mistress and nephew to secure their property through sexual violence against Martin's mother makes sense as a form of counterinsurgent

terrorism whether deployed in direct response to something Winnifred did or not. The pervasive fact of collective enslaved resistance continuously threatened the order of slavery regardless of the individual actions of Winnifred. Davis's point that sexual violence functioned as a weapon against the enslaved community as a whole is helpful in clarifying how sexual violence against Winnifred can be understood as an act of counterinsurgent terrorism: from a systemic vantage point it becomes possible to observe that the sexual subjugation of an individual like Winnifred operated as a form of counterinsurgency by which the general structure of slavery could be stabilized. Subjecting Winnifred to concubinage served to maintain the capitalist relations of property that constituted racial slavery. Sexual violence functioned as a form of counterinsurgency that sought the general preservation of the system of capitalist property relations through terror, a system always under threat by the insurgent actions of enslaved people as a whole.

Viewing sexual violence in this way allows one to account for nonreproductive forms of sexual abuse in the context of slavery. Historians Thavolia Glymph and Stephanie Jones-Rogers have demonstrated that white mistresses—just as frequently as masters—enacted sexual violence upon enslaved women.[27] More recently, historian Thomas A. Foster has shown that white masters visited sexual violence upon enslaved men just as much as they did upon enslaved women.[28] It is only by approaching the history of slavery through the ideological fiction of universal heterosexuality that it is possible to consider the sexual abuse endemic to the institution a form of violence that occurred only between members of the opposite sex. These historians have shown that enslaved people knew all too well the reality that any white person might subject them to sexual violence with de facto impunity. It would be remiss of his readers not to

[27] See Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, and Jones-Rogers, *The Were Her Property*.
[28] See Foster, *Rethinking Rufus*.

give thought to the possibility that Martin understood this reality himself. One might well read the opening of "My Slave Life" as a rejection of the sexual violence Martin understood he himself might face as a slave. Martin begins the narrative by figuring slavery as a form of sexual violence that he rejects perhaps not simply on behalf of his mother but out of the awareness that his status as property exposed him to sexual domination as well. His sexual subjection would function like his mother's as counterinsurgent terror against the all-pervasive threat posed by enslaved people to the existing structure of racial capitalist domination. The same could be said of Luke, the friend of Jacobs: sexual subjection by his master did not serve the function of biological reproduction, but it did serve, in Dorothy Robert's language, to "reinforce" the master's "domination over [his] human property." Regardless of its reproductive outcome, sexual abuse operated as a weapon of counterinsurgent terror that sought to foreclose the destabilization of property relations endemic to racial capitalism.

This dissertation therefore defines the sexual violence of slavery as a capitalist technology of counterinsurgent terror. It conceptualizes slavery as a structure of domination organized by capitalist property relations and maintained through the routinization of racial as well as sexual violence. It presupposes that slavery, as a form of racial capitalism, required the ongoing exercise of racial and sexual violence in order to continue to exist.[29] Drawing insight from the feminist scholarship on racial capitalism and Davis's and Roberts's studies of enslaved female rape, the dissertation takes for granted that reproductive labor exploitation was indispensable to the persistence of slavery and that reproductive and nonreproductive forms of

[29] My thinking on this point is inspired by studies that observe that, contrary to Marx's thinking, racial capitalism requires—in an ongoing capacity—the forms of racial violence Marx understood to be crucial only to the period of capital's primitive accumulation. See Jodi Melamed, "Racial Capitalism," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 76-85 and Nikhil Pal Singh, "On Race, Violence, and So-Called Primitive Accumulation," *Social Text* 34, no. 3 (2016): 27-50.

sexual violence functioned as mechanisms of counterinsurgent terrorism in the interests of securing and suppressing threats to existing property relations. Defining sexual violence as a capitalist technology of terror, the dissertation emphasizes both the centrality of sexual violence to the preservation of racial capitalism as well as the counterinsurgent function of sexual subjection in the context of slavery. At the same time, it highlights the observation by historians that the sexual violence of slavery did not occur exclusively within heterosexual paradigms but describes a range of reproductive and nonreproductive sexual encounters. This conceptualization of sexual violence thus pushes beyond frameworks that think sexual violence exclusively within heterosexual terms. Ultimately, the aim of defining sexual violence as terror, whether reproductive or not, is to communicate the link between individual instances of sexual violence—such as Winnifred's concubinage—and the general counterinsurgent character of sexual violence in racial capitalist social orders.[30]

As a technology of racial capitalist terror, sexual violence represented a form of counterinsurgency against black radicalism. Enslaved black radicals, as Robinson demonstrates, articulated a position against racial capitalism through participation in the insurgent behaviors of fugitivity and revolt. The narrative Martin gives of his birth makes it clear that his rejection of slavery entailed his rejection of the capitalist property relations that conditioned his mother's

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[30] The formulation of "racial capitalist terror" I present here draws on the theory of what historian Sarah Haley calls "gendered racial terror" in her study of the convict leasing and punishment of black women in the Jim Crow South. Haley frames gendered racial terror as a range of physical and psychological practices inflicted upon black women that functioned as technologies of domination through which existing orders of white supremacy, patriarchy, and racial capitalism could be maintained. See Haley, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016). My account of sexual violence as a technology of capitalist terror is also indebted to ongoing conversations with anthropologist and friend Darren Byler, whose work on "terror capitalism" as the mechanism through which the contemporary Chinese state accomplishes and rationalizes the violent dispossession of Uyghur migrants within its borders has pushed me to think critically about the relationship between capitalism and technologies of racial terror. See Darren T. Byler, "Spirit Breaking: Uyghur Dispossession, Culture Work and Terror Capitalism in a Chinese Global City" (PhD diss., University of Washington, 2018).

concubinage. It is evident in the slave narratives this dissertation examines that black radicalism repeatedly expressed itself as form of insurgency against the sexual violence required to safeguard existing relations of property. When slaveholders subjected enslaved people to all manner of sexual terror, they were seeking to quell the revolutionary currents of the black radical tradition. Sexual violence functioned as a means of suppressing black radicalism through racial capitalist terror. It was within this context that the sexual politics of the black radical tradition took shape.

Methods

The method of this dissertation is rooted in the insight, afforded by Robinson, that the black radical tradition expresses itself as insurgency—particularly as fugitivity and revolt. Many enslaved and formerly enslaved people who recorded their life stories were themselves rebels and fugitives. Martin took flight from slavery. The *Confessions* of his insurrectionary idol, Nat Turner, remains one of the most famous slave narratives to date.[31] Jacobs was both a rebel and a fugitive, for she refused to comply with her master's sexual demands and eventually fled to the North where she acquired her freedom. Analyzing Martin's and Jacobs's slave narratives, among others, the dissertation takes for granted that instances of fugitivity and revolt constitute expressions of black radical insurgency even if the narratives do not identify these instances as such. Working backwards, so to speak, from the event of the narrator's revolt or fugitivity, the dissertation pays careful attention to the ways in which the text articulates motive for such insurgency. This effort entails weeding through or even leaving to the side some of what the text presents as obvious political explanation for fugitivity and physical resistance against slavery.

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[31] Nat Turner, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* [1831], in *Slave Narratives*, ed. William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Library of America, 2000), 243-66.

Scholars of the slave narrative have shown that the genre tended to give voice to the liberal politics consistent with the dominant strain of the antislavery movement, especially prior to emancipation. Abolitionists recruited the stories of formerly enslaved people to advance the antislavery cause. The political visions of liberal abolitionist editors and publishers often put limits on what slave narrators could put directly into words. Seldom, therefore, do expressions of black radicalism flaunt themselves on the page.[32]

Yet the position of this dissertation is that traces of black radicalism can nonetheless be identified in slave narratives. These traces often appear in moments in which enslaved people make reference to, or narrate anecdotes of, the sexual violence of slavery. Martin's narrative serves as a case in point.[33] The description Martin provides of his mother's sexual subjection indicates that Martin's rejection of slavery entails a rejection of the capitalist property relations that are maintained through sexual violence against his mother. Put differently, the black radicalism of the text gets expressed as a politics of opposition to slavery and the sexual violence endemic to it. Such expressions of black radicalism possessed an antagonistic relation to the liberal politics characteristic of the slave narrative genre. The dissertation demonstrates through an analysis of Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853), for example, that liberal-minded abolitionists sought to resolve the problem of slavery's sexual violence by ending slavery, but without fundamentally altering the racialized structure of capitalist property relations that

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[32] John W. Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems." On the liberal politics of slave narratives, see Lisa Lowe, "Autobiography out of Empire," in *Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 43-71.

[33] It is worth remembering that Martin published his narrative in 1867 in the Scottish periodical *Good Words*, after the formal abolition of slavery in the United States. His narrative appears to have been subject to the oversight of no editor other than the one responsible for preparing the periodical for publication. For this reason, Martin did not face the same pressures to comply with the politics of antebellum abolitionism as had most other slave narrators writing in the United States prior to 1865. That said, his narrative nevertheless adheres to many of the genre's antislavery conventions and works similarly to antebellum slave narratives with respect to the way it gives expression to black radicalism in a discussion of sexual violence. It is, however, distinct in the way in which it unambiguously announces his rejection of slavery in the opening paragraph.

constituted enslavement. The vision of liberal abolitionism was not, like black radicalism, to overthrow capitalist property relations but to reform them. When Martin and others rejected the sexual violence through which racial capitalism reproduced and maintained itself, they took a position that set themselves apart from their liberal abolitionist peers.

Such traces of black radicalism produce moments of tension in slave narratives, for the implications of what the narrator says cannot be reconciled to the liberal abolitionist politics that structured the genre. It is these moments of tension that the dissertation tracks. This method distinguishes between reading slave narratives to produce historical insight into enslaved people and reading slave narratives to produce historical insight into the discursive and rhetorical ways in which an emergent radical political tradition manifests itself in texts. The dissertation focuses on the latter. This approach to slave narratives neither advances the claim that such moments of tension index the narrator's intent to express radical anti-capitalist sentiment nor does it deny the likelihood that enslaved people knew what they were doing when they subverted the conventions of the genre to express a political vision alternative to liberalism. Rather, the premise of the method is that slave narratives can be retrospectively read for subtle articulations of black radicalism, evident in the formal construction, contradictions, and tensions of the text itself, that enslaved people may have known themselves to be producing but may not have framed in these precise terms.

The dissertation historicizes the sexual politics of black radicalism by reading slave narratives in conjunction with nineteenth-century literary fiction, political writing, and legal theory. Examining these texts, the project reveals that the sexual violence of slavery constituted a focal point of political debate throughout the antebellum period. Again and again, abolitionists and proslavery advocates struggled over the future of slavery by struggling over the best means

by which to resolve the sexual violence associated with it. Even as they remained opposed on the question of slavery's future, the dissertation shows that they agreed that the sexual violence of slavery constituted a moral problem that needed to be addressed. Proslavery advocates tended to frame sexual violence in racial science terms as the consequence of the lax morals and innate lasciviousness of enslaved people themselves. They figured slaveholders and their families, sundered through illicit sexual affiliation, as victims of black sexual wantonness. Proslavery thinkers proposed solutions to the sexual violence of slavery that involved bolstering the paternalist structures of the institution. The answer for them was to preserve slavery and model it after the heterosexual patriarchal family, with the white male head of the plantation serving as a father figure responsible for disciplining and sustaining those who by virtue of their purportedly inferior being fell naturally under his care.

Abolitionists departed sharply from this view. On the whole, they understood the problem of sexual violence to stem from the legal possibility of owning property in people. They reasoned that, because the law gave slaveholders near total autonomy over their enslaved property, the law both sanctioned and fostered sexual immorality between master and slave. The racial science that shaped proslavery views of black sexuality also governed much liberal abolitionist thought, for many abolitionists, like their political opponents, held that enslaved people were prone to extreme sexual promiscuity. Yet the abolitionist solution was to end the institution that antislavery activists believed led to sexual degeneration of every plantation inhabitant. Abolishing slavery in law, for them, would resolve the problem of slavery's sexual violence.

The dissertation brings to the fore a group of people usually left out of the history of antebellum political struggle, who nevertheless contributed profoundly to it: enslaved and formerly enslaved people. Proslavery and abolitionist positions on the sexual violence of slavery

have been explored at length. Almost no attention has been devoted to the ways that enslaved and formerly enslaved people, though routinely barred from participation in the political sphere, robustly participated in antebellum debates about sexual violence and advanced their own solutions to it. Reading slave narratives alongside abolitionist and proslavery texts permits the observation that enslaved people engaged the political debates of their times by sharing their stories of enslavement. It further demonstrates that the sexual politics enslaved black radicals articulated through slave narratives fundamentally differed from that of liberal abolitionists and proslavery paternalists. The dissertation demonstrates that, in addition to the ideology of racial inferiority, liberal abolitionists and proslavery paternalists held two things in common: a commitment to racial capitalism and a commitment to liberal political philosophy. As they debated how to resolve the problem of sexual violence, liberal abolitionists and proslavery paternalists struggled over the meaning of liberal rights and to whom those rights should be guaranteed. They entered into contentious dialogue over how capitalist property relations should be organized and how property itself should be defined. But neither party called attention to the fact that it was the very possibility of capitalist property relations that gave rise to the problem of sexual violence in the first place. Neither group pointed out that the discourse of liberal rights would continue to rationalize the racial and sexual violence necessary for the preservation of capitalist property relations in the wake of slavery's abolition. What set the sexual politics of the narratives of enslaved black radicals apart from the politics of contemporaneous abolitionist and proslavery thinkers was the insistence that the racial and sexual violence of slavery could only be resolved through the total abandonment of the capitalist property relations and liberal political philosophies that defined western modernity.

Chapter Summaries

The argument of the dissertation breaks into three chapters. Chapter One, “Harriet Jacobs and Black Radicalism,” elaborates in depth the method the project employs to read slave narratives and deploys that method in a reading of Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). The chapter begins with a sustained analysis of the sixth chapter of Cedric Robinson’s *Black Marxism*, “The Historical Archaeology of the Black Radical Tradition.” In this section of his book, Robinson develops a method that frames enslaved insurgency as the primary expression of black radicalism in the historical record. This method—which he calls “historical archaeology”—allows him to metaphorically excavate the history of the black radical tradition in the dominant nineteenth- and twentieth-century historiography of slavery and capitalism. Chapter One unpacks this method and shows how it might be productively innovated to read a body of historical texts Robinson leaves unexplored: slave narratives. The chapter details the challenges and pitfalls of reading slave narratives for traces of black radicalism and comes to the conclusion that slave narratives nevertheless afford valuable insight into the history of the antebellum black radical tradition in so far as they reveal how enslaved people contributed to the articulation of that tradition by telling stories about the sexual violence of slavery. Using the method it develops through the reading of Robinson, the chapter considers how Jacobs formulates a black radical anti-capitalist stance on slavery precisely through a rejection of sexual domination by her master. Overall the chapter argues that, when read for traces of black radicalism, slave narratives demonstrate that sexual politics were central to the formation of the antebellum black radical tradition.

Chapter Two, “Solomon Northup and Liberal Abolitionism,” explores how the dominant liberal strains of the abolitionist movement conceptualized and sought to address the sexual

violence of slavery. The chapter emphasizes that not all slave narratives expressed black radical politics. The chapter reads Solomon Northup's autobiography, *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853), as an exemplary expression of liberal abolitionism—as opposed to black radicalism—in that it only presents solutions to enslaved sexual abuse that tally with those authorized by dominant works of abolitionist thought including Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). The analysis focuses on Northup's account of an enslaved woman named Patsey, who experiences routine sexual violence at the hands of her master. Whereas anecdotes of sexual subjection in narratives like Jacobs's undercut the liberal abolitionist proposition that the sexual violence of slavery could be resolved via the legal abolition of slavery, Northup's text consistently affirms this position. Through extensive archival research in the records of numerous historical newspapers from upstate New York, where Northup's autobiography was originally published, the chapter shows that the narrative enjoyed widespread celebratory review upon its initial printing. The chapter attributes this success to the narrative's implicit endorsement of the liberal politics of abolitionist critics and newspaper editors. In the end, it argues that the sexual subjection of Patsey produces a conflict in the narrative that the liberal politics of the slave narrative genre cannot resolve and that the text's representation of Patsey thus reveals the limited capacity of abolitionism to produce freedom from sexual violence for enslaved people through legal reform.

Chapter Three, "Celia and Proslavery Paternalism," analyzes the testimony presented by enslaved defendant Celia during the course of a criminal trial against her, *Missouri v. Celia* (1855). Celia had killed her master during his attempt to rape her. She was subsequently charged with murder, found guilty, and executed. The trial record includes Celia's account of the events that led to her master's death, an account solicited through coercion and recorded on her behalf by agents of the state. While the court regarded Celia's testimony as a formal legal confession,

this chapter analyzes it as a slave narrative. Whereas other texts produced under similar circumstances, such as Nat Turner's *Confessions*, have been widely embraced as slave narratives, Celia's account has been approached primarily as a legal record in the little scholarship that has given it attention. Reading the enslaved woman's testimony as a slave narrative, the chapter draws into view the manner in which Celia articulated a black radical politics through her account of refusal to submit sexually to her master. It contends that her narrative reveals how proslavery paternalists rationalized sexual abuse through recourse to arguments about liberal rights at the same time that they claimed to oppose sexual violence. Ultimately the chapter proposes that Celia participated in a form of revolt against slavery by resisting sexual assault and that this insurgency should be considered as central to the making of the black radical tradition as those uprisings led by famous male insurrectionists such as Turner.

The dissertation closes with a coda, "Fannie Berry and the Historiography of Revolt." It focuses the slave narrative of a formerly enslaved woman named Fannie Berry. Her narrative, collected by an employee of the WPA in Virginia in 1937, relates the story of an enslaved woman named Sukie, who shoved her master into pots of scalding lye when he attempted to sexually assault her. The coda frames Berry's story of Sukie as a history of black radical revolt. WPA narratives such as Berry's have since the 1970s become indispensable to the study of the history of slavery, but few scholars have taken them up for what they might say about their own historical moment. The tendency is to read WPA narratives as records that provide insight into the period of antebellum slavery that precedes their own production in time. The intervention of the coda is to suggest that the WPA slave narratives should also be read as texts that speak to struggles over the production of knowledge about slavery in the twentieth century. The coda analyzes Berry's narrative in relation to other works of twentieth century historiography,

including W. E. B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* (1935). It makes the case that, while not a work of formal scholarship, Berry's account of Sukie should nonetheless be read as a revisionist history of slavery and as a contribution to the historiography of the black radical tradition like Du Bois's for the ways it similarly refutes paternalist narratives of enslaved people and opens up radical ways of understanding slave revolt. It affirms through the example of Berry's narrative the argument of the dissertation—that enslaved people articulated a tradition of black radicalism in slave narratives through the rejection of the sexual violence endemic to slavery. In the final analysis, the coda advances a provocation: future research on black radicalism might turn to slave narratives from the WPA period as histories of the black radical tradition in their own right, histories that have yet to be fully explored for the accounts of black radical revolt they hold.

Conclusion

Overall, this dissertation argues that slave narratives can and should be read for traces of black radicalism and that doing so affords fresh insight into the history of the black radical tradition. It specifically contends that reading slave narratives in such a way reveals the centrality of sexual politics to nineteenth-century articulations of black radicalism. The research asserts that enslaved black radicals throughout the antebellum period framed slavery as a system of both racial and sexual domination and that the forms of fugitivity and revolt in which enslaved people engaged constituted forms of insurgency against the racial and sexual violence required for the preservation of capitalist relations of property. Narrating the story of black radicalism told by slave narratives, the dissertation ultimately invites consideration of the ways in which enslaved people laid the groundwork for a critique of the racial and sexual violence endemic to capitalist relations of property today.

Chapter One:
Harriet Jacobs and Black Radicalism

Scholars of black history tend to trace the origins of black radicalism to enslaved people's freedom struggles in the Americas. Historian and political scientist Cedric J. Robinson argues in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983) that African and African-descended people refused bondage from the earliest beginnings of slavery and thereby gave rise to what he calls the "black radical tradition." Robinson demonstrates that this refusal expressed itself in material and epistemological terms—enslaved people not only fled plantations and waged revolts but also rejected the colonial ways of knowing by which they were rendered property devoid of humanity, history, language, culture, and kinship. The new world order could not snuff out the African structures of philosophy and cognition—Robinson calls them "cosmologies" and "metaphysics"—that enslaved people carried with them across the Atlantic. Enslaved people continued to understand themselves as human beings who made history in their own terms. They accordingly took flight and formed independent communities. They organized kinship relations and participated in social life in ways that hearkened back to African customs. They fought slaveholders individually and banded together in rebellion. In these and many other ways they posed a profound challenge to slavery. In some cases, they overthrew it.[1] The black radical tradition is thus best understood as a longstanding practice of struggle grounded in a collective and revolutionary "consciousness," as Robinson puts it, shaped by African thought systems. According to Robinson, it emerged through the processes of capitalist slavery and colonial imperialism yet nevertheless remains irreducible to the objective conditions of European

[1] The Haitian Revolution is the perhaps the most obvious example of enslaved people's overthrow of slavery. See C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Overture and the San Domingo Revolution* [1938], second ed., rev. (New York: Vintage, 1989).

history. The black radical tradition, he emphasizes, is neither a variant of western radicalism nor simple dialectical opposition to western political modernity. Forged in what he calls the "social cauldron" of the violent colonial expropriation of land and labor in the Americas, it is rather a diasporic and distinctly African-rooted tradition of thought and practice characterized by the commitment to collective struggle for black liberation.[2]

While the term "black radical tradition" evokes no singular meaning or history, this chapter focuses on Robinson's formulation. As Robinson's work has become foundational to revisionist studies of race and capitalism over the past four decades, black radicalism has garnered increased attention in Black Studies in an array of disciplines including Political Science, History, Anthropology, Geography, and Literary Studies. For the most part, Robinson's name remains tethered to the study of black radicalism in these fields. To speak of the "black radical tradition" is almost invariably to cite Robinson, an honor he undoubtedly deserves for coining the phrase and contributing immensely to scholarship on black radicalism, even though—as he himself notes—he was not the first to theorize it or study its history.[3] Widespread engagement with Robinson has led to waves of new scholarship on black radicalism in recent years as well as the occasional, retroactive labelling of scholarship that predates *Black Marxism* as contributions to the analysis of racial capitalism that *Black Marxism* formulates.[4] The centrality of Robinson to current conversations in Black Studies accounts for this chapter's focus

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[2] Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* [1983] (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), see 72-74 and 167-71, quote 72; hereafter cited parenthetically.

[3] One of Robinson's central arguments is that early-twentieth-century black intellectuals including W. E. B. Du Bois, C. L. R. James, and Richard Wright theorized the black radical tradition and told its history even though they did not call it that directly. See Robinson, *Black Marxism*.

[4] Robin Kelley, for instance, argues that the work of thinkers like Walter Rodney, Manning Marable, June Jordan, Angela Davis, Nell Irvin Painter, Edward Said, and others have contributed to the scholarship on what Robinson calls "racial capitalism" even though some of their work predates the wide acceptance of Robinson's term. See Kelley, "The Strange Career of Hammer and Hoe," Preface to the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition of *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* [1990], twenty-fifth ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), xi-xxvi.

on his work. The intention of the chapter is to interrogate the ways in which a pivotal claim of *Black Marxism* has been continually reproduced and simultaneously neglected in the scholarship that has so widely taken it up: namely, the claim that enslaved people inaugurated the black radical tradition.

The aim of the present chapter is not to contest this claim. On the point that the black radical tradition has its roots in the beliefs and practices of enslaved people, I fully agree. My concern is rather to examine how Robinson and scholars after him enter enslaved people into their accounts of black radicalism. How does the prevailing body of scholarship on the black radical tradition represent enslaved people? In what capacities do the enslaved appear in existing narratives of black radicalism? It is the contention of this chapter that enslaved people occupy a site of tension in studies of the black radical tradition. In consensus with Robinson, it is almost universally agreed that the origins of black radicalism lie with the enslaved (so much so that, in the wake of Robinson, this claim often goes unstated). Yet, at the same time, enslaved people's contributions to the black radical tradition have remained narrowly examined. In general, individual studies are characterized by one of three patterns in the literature on black radicalism: 1) they mention neither slavery nor enslaved people directly; 2) they discuss the institution of slavery as context for the development of black radicalism but not the role of enslaved people in its formation; or 3), as is the case with Robinson, they focus on what historians have said about enslaved people, leaving to the side the documentary record containing what enslaved people said about themselves.[5] Part of what has fallen by the wayside in the literature on black

[5] The literature inspired by Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism* far exceeds the space available for enumeration here. Notable examples of scholarship on the black radical tradition include Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*; Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Carole Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Erica R. Edwards, *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Dan Berger, *Captive Nation: Black Prison*

radicalism is the rich (albeit limited and challenging) record of what historian John W. Blassingame has called “slave testimony”—the record of what enslaved people said about their own lives and world.[6] Though not all slave testimony articulates black radical thought, some does. The result of its neglect in the study of black radicalism has been a limited history of the black radical tradition and of enslaved people’s contributions to its making.

This chapter presents a case for analyzing slave narratives—autobiographical accounts of bondage written or dictated by enslaved or formerly enslaved people—as records of black radical thought and expression. It frames slave narratives as a subset of slave testimony that make valuable contributions to the articulation of the black radical tradition outlined by Robinson. The chapter begins with an analysis of Robinson’s method in *Black Marxism*, particularly the sixth chapter in which Robinson narrates his account of black radicalism’s origins, curiously titled “The Historical Archaeology of the Black Radical Tradition.” I unpack the metaphor Robinson uses to characterize his method—historical archaeology—to elaborate how he figuratively excavates the existence of the black radical tradition in an unlikely archive: the dominant twentieth-century historiography of slavery, which reproduced ideologies of black racial inferiority and nonresistance to bondage. The following section proposes that Robinson’s method for reading historiography might be usefully applied to the reading of slave narratives. The value of taking up Robinson’s archaeological method in the context of slave narratives is, as I show,

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Organizing in the Civil Rights Era (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Lisa Lowe, *Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015); Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin, eds., *Futures of Black Radicalism* (New York: Verso, 2017); Alys Eve Weinbaum, *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery: Biocapitalism and Black Feminism’s Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019). One recent notable exception to this claim is David Kazanjian’s *The Brink of Freedom: Improvising Life in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016). But while Kazanjian examines the letters of black settler colonists in Liberia and Mayan rebels in the Yucatán, he does not examine the slave testimony of enslaved people in the United States as I do in this chapter.

[6] See John W. Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* [1977] (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005).

that it enables the reader to do at least two things. First, it allows the reader to excavate expressions of black radicalism in texts that appear to be defined by commitment to other politics. Although most slave narratives adhere to genre conventions characteristic of liberal thought, reading these texts in the spirit of Robinson's method renders available deeper currents of black radical politics in slave narratives. Second, reading slave narratives in such a way affords insights into the history of the black radical tradition that Robinson overlooked. Through an examination of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), a slave narrative by formerly enslaved woman Harriet Jacobs, I argue that antebellum articulations of black radicalism emerged through opposition not only to the racial violence of capitalism, as Robinson suggests, but also through opposition to the sexual violence endemic to the capitalist order of property. In making this claim, the chapter proposes that certain expressions of black radicalism in the antebellum period grew out of a distinctly black feminist politics. In the final analysis, the chapter proposes the need for further elaboration of the history of the black radical tradition through the reading of slave narratives—and slave testimony more broadly—for the ways that enslaved people spoke and wrote about their own struggles for liberation.

The Historical Archaeology of the Black Radical Tradition

In the sixth chapter of *Black Marxism*—titled "The Historical Archaeology of the Black Radical Tradition"—Robinson traces the roots of black radicalism to the insurgent actions of enslaved people. Covering four hundred years of chattel slavery, he focuses on the forms of fugitivity and revolt through which enslaved people refused their captivity. He frames those who took flight and those who formed independent communities as contributors to the black radical tradition: the *cimarrones* of colonial Mexico; the *quilombolas* of Brazil; the "Bush Negroes" of

the French Guianas and Dutch Suriname; the *cumbes* of Venezuela, the *palenqueros* of Colombia, the maroons of Jamaica, the Carolinas, Florida, and Virginia. Robinson names those who preferred direct confrontation with their enslavers as contributors to the black radical tradition as well: the *ladinos* who led uprisings in Puerto Rico, Colombia, and Panama; the insurrectionists who challenged slavery in Cuba and colonial New York; the rebels who actualized the Malê revolt in Brazil, the Baptist War in Jamaica, the Stono Uprising in South Carolina, the Turner Rebellion in Virginia, the Haitian Revolution, and other acts of slave-led resistance to subjugation.[7] In recent years, feminist scholars have elaborated the gendered dimensions of insurgency, demonstrating that enslaved women not only resisted bondage through fugitivity and participation in armed revolt but often through the refusal of intimate, sexual, and reproductive violence as well. They have expanded the domain of insurgency to include, among other acts, infanticide, truancy, flight, suicide, child-stealing, poisoning, insubordination, work slow-downs, communal knowledge-keeping, birth control, murder, arson, feigning illness, and the physical refusal of punishment and sexual assault.[8]

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[7] Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 121-166.
[8] See Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Woman and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Sasha Turner, *Contested Bodies: Pregnancy, Childrearing, and Slavery in Jamaica* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019); Alys Eve Weinbaum, “Gendering the General Strike: W. E. B. Du Bois’s Black Reconstruction and Black Feminism’s ‘Propaganda of History,’” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 3 (2013): 437-63; Alys Eve Weinbaum, *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery*. These scholars have built on the foundational feminist historiography of a previous generation of scholars, including Angela Davis, “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves,” *Black Scholar* 3, no. 4 (1971): 2-15, and *Women, Race, and Class* [1981] (New York: Vintage, 1983); Darlene Clarke Hine, “Female Slave Resistance: The Economics of Sex,” *Western Journal of Black Studies* 3, no. 2 (1979): 123-27; bell hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* [1981] (New York: Routledge, 2015); Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* [1985] (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1999); Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64-81; Nell Irvin Painter, *Soul Murder and Slavery* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 1995); Darlene Clarke Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West,” *Signs* 4, no. 4 (1989): 912-20;

The many and varied insurgencies described by Robinson and those after him highlight two notable attributes of the black radical tradition. First, the black radical tradition is heterogeneous in the sense that it materializes differently depending on context and historical actors. There exists no pure form of, no single script for, fugitivity and revolt. Black radicalism rejects capitalism and imperialism, but that rejection finds expression in a range of practices and improvisations. Margaret Garner's decision to end the life of her newborn, for example, is as much an instance of black radical revolt as is Nat Turner's rebellion.[9] And as I demonstrate in the case of Harriet Jacobs below, the trace of black radicalism can be found as much in the nine-by-seven-by-three-foot hideaway of one enslaved woman as in the maroon communities of the Great Dismal Swamp.

Second, the black radical tradition is diasporic, meaning that, as a category of historiographical analysis, it consolidates diverse groups of people according to a shared relation to historical processes of slavery and imperialism. Whereas the term "diaspora" is often used to refer to the sub-Saharan populations scattered via the slave trade, Black Studies scholars have cautioned against essentialist notions of the black diaspora that presume its members are bound by a single history, racial identity, homeland, or culture. These thinkers have insisted that the black diaspora be understood as a historical practice and as a scholarly abstraction, both of which are constituted through the articulation of difference among African and African-descended peoples.[10] Robinson concludes the sixth chapter of *Black Marxism* with the affirmation that the

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Saidiya Hartman, "Seduction and the Ruses of Power," *Callaloo* 19, no. 2 (1996): 537-60, and *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[9] For more on Margaret Garner, see Alys Weinbaum, "Gendering the General Strike" and *Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery*.

[10] See Brent Hayes Edwards, "The Uses of Diaspora," *Social Text* 19, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 45-73 and *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003). Edwards builds on the work of Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall, who insisted that diaspora was constituted through difference and hybridity. See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) and Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity:*

black radical tradition coheres a black diaspora: "The peoples of Africa and the African diaspora had endured an integrating experience that left them not only with a common task but a shared vision" (166). The emphasis on the "shared vision" of black folks throughout the world—what Robinson repeatedly calls the "consciousness" that forms the cornerstone of the black radical tradition—raises questions about the degree to which his formulation of black radicalism obscures the differences constitutive of the black diaspora and risks the presumption of unifying essentialisms.[11] Yet, for the present analysis, I am less interested in pursuing this critique of Robinson than in tracking the negative arguments he makes about what this "consciousness" is not and underscoring his positive characterization of the black radical tradition as heterogeneous and diasporic. I emphasize the latter in order to make that point that, when I speak about black radicalism as it appears in the record of slave testimony, I do not speak about the black radical tradition as a monolith. Rather, I discuss what might be understood as isolated moments and localized expressions of black radicalism in the United States during the antebellum period.

Robinson uses the language of consciousness throughout *Black Marxism* to describe the core feature of the black radical tradition. He proposes that the black diaspora is characterized by what he calls in turns a "revolutionary consciousness" (169) and a "collective consciousness" (171), which arise out of black people's ongoing historical struggles for liberation. For Robinson, this consciousness stems from the preservation of the African thought systems enslaved people

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Community, Culture, Difference, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 222-37. More recently, Shana L. Redmond, has characterized the black diaspora as "a political project of affiliation and camaraderie that unites its members through historical condition and deliberate choice" as opposed to the fictions of shared origin, language, and racial identity. See Redmond, "Diaspora," in *Keywords for African American Studies*, ed. Erica R. Edwards, Roderick A. Ferguson, and Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 63-68, quote 64. See also Redmond, *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

[11] Brent Hayes Edwards argues that Robinson's theory of the black radical tradition turns on "what seems to be an explicit *racial* essentialism" and suggests that Robinson perhaps deploys such positivist framing knowingly, in the spirit of what Gayatri Spivak has described as "strategic essentialism." See Edwards, "The 'Autonomy' of the Black Radical Tradition," *Social Text* 19, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 1-13; quote 6.

brought with them to the new world. Robinson notes in the opening of the sixth chapter that the "cargoes of laborers" that filled the holds of slave ships

> […] contained African cultures, critical mixes and admixtures of language and thought, of cosmology and metaphysics, of habits, beliefs, and morality. These were the actual terms of their humanity. These cargoes, then, did not consist of intellectual isolates or deculturated Blacks—men, women, and children separated from their previous universe. African labor brought the past with it, a past that had produced itself and settled on it the first elements of consciousness and comprehension. (121-22)

The African ways of knowing and being that enslaved people carried with them into bondage constitute, for Robinson, the germ of the consciousness that founds the black radical tradition. While it developed in the context of colonization and slavery, this consciousness must be understood as preservationist rather than reactionary. "After all," Robinson writes, "it had been as an emergent African people and not as slaves that Black men and women had opposed enslavement" (170-71). The succinct phrase "emergent African people" captures the diasporic condition of diverse groups of people in the historical process of becoming singularly "African" through forced migration to the new world. While Robinson leaves open the possibility that enslaved people possessed collective self-awareness of this process and acute self-perception of what linked them to one other in struggle, the consciousness in which Robinson is most interested is less a concern of phenomenology than of epistemology. For Robinson, it is the preservation of the African-rooted thought systems by which enslaved people conceived of themselves as people—as opposed to chattel—that constituted the basis of their refusals of slavery through fugitivity and revolt. What binds enslaved people together under the rubric of the black radical tradition in this reading is not uniform African-ness but opposition to enslavement

promoted by the self-understanding of enslaved people, in Robinson's words, as "people and not as slaves." Consciousness in this sense might better be defined as consciousnesses, a plurality of ways of knowing that collectively posed alternatives to the epistemologies of European capitalism that had tried to enter enslaved people into history as labor and property. What Robinson calls the revolutionary consciousness of enslaved people is thus not simply group opposition to the ravages of capitalism—although that is certainly part of it—but shared insistence upon counterhegemonic ways of imagining social relations, history, and ontological being.[12]

Robinson advances this notion of consciousness in the context of his revision of Marxist historiography. Robinson opens Chapter 6 by noting that Marxist historiography relegates slavery to the stage of capitalist development known as primitive accumulation. Of the many interventions Robinson makes into Marxist thought, perhaps the most enduring is his revisionist account of this foundational Marxist premise. Marx, Robinson explains, understood slavery to be endemic to primitive accumulation and primitive accumulation to be precursory to and distinct from capitalism. Robinson, by contrast, shows throughout *Black Marxism* that slavery and other forms of racialized exploitation are central to the organization of capital in the modern world. Slavery, according to Robinson, therefore constitutes what he terms "racial capitalism." Racial capitalism as Robinson describes it is synonymous with capitalism, for capitalism requires the production and differential valuation, dispossession, and exploitation of human groups on the

[12] As this discussion makes clear, a crucial distinction inheres in the terminological difference between "slaves" and "enslaved people." The former names a category of chattel property and labor produced by western capitalism; the latter names a group of people who by fugitivity and revolt exceeded capitalism's ability to dictate the categories through which they would enter history. The word "slaves" renders those in bondage in accordance with the epistemologies of western Europe; "enslaved people," by contrast, frames them as agents of black radicalism while bringing into view the historical processes (enslavement and colonization) that sought to reduce them to slaves. For this reason, I prefer the term "enslaved people" throughout the remainder of this chapter.

basis of race.[13] By the time he gets to the sixth chapter of his book Robinson has established this argument. Yet he revisits Marx on primitive accumulation in order to turn from the question of racial capitalism to the larger concern of *Black Marxism*: the black radical tradition. Robinson notes that Marx recognized the humanity of enslaved people in his account of primitive accumulation but missed the fact that enslaved people brought "African ontological and cosmological systems" (122) with them to the mines and the plantations of the Americas. "This," Robinson notes,

> was the embryo of the demon that would be visited on the whole enterprise of primitive accumulation. It would be through the historical and social consciousness of these Africans that the trade in slaves and the system of slave labor was infected with its contradiction. (122)

Marxist theories of capitalism double as theories of contradiction—indeed, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels contend in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) that capitalism is characterized by a fundamental contradiction between capital and labor. Through the process of their exploitation as labor, members of the proletariat become conscious of this contradiction as well as their common interest in revolutionizing the social and economic order through class struggle. The revolutionary consciousness of the proletariat is thus what foments the contradictions of capitalism (leading to its eventual overthrow) in the traditional Marxist account.[14]

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[13] I adapt this formulation from Jodi Melamed, "Racial Capitalism," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 76-85.

[14] See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* [1848], ed. David McLellan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). Subsequent thinkers have complicated this notion of the proletariat, arguing that the laboring masses cannot accomplish historical self-actualization as a class when left to their own devices and that, consequently, they require an intellectual vanguard to lead them to revolutionary consciousness through education. See Vladimir Il'ich Lenin, *What Is to Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement* [1902] (New York: International Publishers, 1969). Others have added that the proletariat is the only class capable of revolutionary consciousness as it is uniquely positioned within the class structure to be able to apprehend historical processes in their totality. See György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* [1923] (Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 1971).

Yet Robinson departs from this account at the beginning of the sixth chapter of his book. Framing slavery as an antecedent to capitalism makes it impossible to see the antagonisms enslaved people waged against the capitalist social order—it makes it impossible, in other words, to see the black radical tradition as an anti-capitalist struggle. Though Marx may have recognized the humanity of enslaved people, his periodization of history refused enslaved people the possibility of anti-capitalist historical agency: they could not be understood as a revolutionary force against capitalism because their exploitation was consigned to the period of capitalism's prehistory. Theorizing slavery as a form of racial capitalism in the first five chapters of *Black Marxism* sets Robinson up in the sixth to demonstrate how enslaved people struggled against it. And this he does in his extended discussion of fugitivity and revolt. A key takeaway from his discussion is thus that enslaved people's insurgency is distinctly anti-capitalist.

Yet Robinson does not frame enslaved people in strict Marxist terms as a proletariat. To do so would be to suggest that the revolutionary consciousness of enslaved people emerges through dialectical opposition to capitalist exploitation. Such framing, however, would erase the preservationist impulse of the black radical tradition. The collective striving of enslaved people toward African-rooted ways of being and knowing involved the refusal of the universalizing tendencies of capitalism and its knowledge systems but this striving was not reducible to such refusal. Though Marx's proletariat and Robinson's insurgents meet in the struggle against capitalism, the consciousness that leads them there differs. For Robinson, it is enslaved people's efforts to preserve thought systems grounded in African ways of knowing that agitate the contradictions of capitalism. In this regard, the Marxist notion of a proletariat as a reactionary class oppositionally related to capitalism cannot exhaust the story of enslaved people's fugitivity and revolt in the new world. The concept of the proletariat as theorized by Marx in a vacuum of

European liberal thought is too limited. So even as he revises Marxist historiography to make it clear how enslaved people contributed to struggle against capitalism like a proletariat, Robinson conspicuously avoids the term, for it cannot capture the African character and preservationist impulse of what he calls the revolutionary consciousness that drives the black radical tradition.

Just as Robinson situates his discussion of this consciousness in relation to the Marxist historiography of capitalism, he also positions it in relation to the then dominant historiography of slavery. By the mid-twentieth century, developments in the fields of sociology and psychology had trickled into the discipline of history. Drawing on the sociological thesis that internment in concentration camps altered the psyches of Holocaust survivors, historian Stanley Elkins proposes in his widely influential *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (1959) that enslavement similarly resulted in the alteration of slave psychology on a collective scale. He famously advances the "Sambo thesis," which posited that enslaved people over time internalized the stereotypes of racial inferiority, laziness, docility, and childish simplicity that the master class had used to rationalize their subjection. The internalization of these stereotypes, he argues, resulted in the eventual loss of enslaved people's capacity to resist bondage.[15] Far from an isolated study, Elkin's book represents a much larger strain of historiographical interest in defining the "slave personality type" that stemmed at least as far back as Ulrich Bonnell Phillip's *American Negro Slavery* (1918).[16] A prevailing consensus in

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[15] See Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* [1959], third ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), especially 81-139.

[16] Robinson puts it this way: "In the North American slave experience, particularly with respect to the nineteenth century, the attempts to portray the 'slave personality type,' to identify a 'plantation type'—a motion already firmly in place by the time the system produced its most celebrated post hoc apologist, Ulrich Bonnell Phillips—had as their results a veritable stock company of characters." See Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 123. See also Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* [1918] (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990).

this historiography was that enslaved people were characterized by some kind of group psychopathology, the nature of which it was the historian's job to define.

Robinson roundly rejects this premise. Immediately following his brief discussion of Marxist historiography in the opening of the sixth chapter, he turns to an extended analysis of the work of peer historians John Blassingame and Leslie Howard Owens. These scholars, Robinson points out, complicate the existing conversation about slave personality, refusing the unilateral reduction of enslaved people to the Sambo thesis by which Elkins reproduces racist, proslavery ideology as history. In doing so, Robinson notes, they overturn Elkins's conclusion that enslaved people psychologically succumbed to domination and surrendered the capacity to resist. The most salient feature of the work of historians like Blassingame and Owens, for Robinson, is that their refutation of collective black psychopathology opens the door for acknowledgment of the fact that enslaved people did, in a wide range of ways, refuse the terms of their enslavement. Enslaved people, Robinson insists, never fully became slaves: they maintained a revolutionary consciousness under the conditions of bondage that led them to participate in acts of fugitivity and revolt.[17]

Though Robinson prefers the account of slave personality offered by Blassingame and Owens, he ultimately departs from their interest in the history of slave psychology. Robinson's intervention in *Black Marxism* is to name and theorize a genealogy of thought and practice—the black radical tradition—conceptually unavailable to the historiographical methods represented by Marx and Elkins. Thus, while Robinson's elaboration of a black diasporic consciousness challenges the historiography of slavery that would render enslaved people childlike and complacent, the consciousness he describes cannot be apprehended fully within the terms of then

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[17] See Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 123-25.

pervasive debates about slave psychology. Put differently, Robinson theorizes the collective consciousness of the enslaved in order to formulate an account of the black radical tradition, but not to produce another counterpoint to Elkins. Perhaps nowhere is this investment so obvious as in his rationale for choosing the term "fugitive" over "runaway" to describe the enslaved who took flight from captivity. Reflecting on his preference for "fugitive" in a lecture he delivered at the University of California, Irvine in 2012, Robinson explains:

> At some point when I was writing *Black Marxism*, I came across the notion of the "runaway." Most historians talk about runaways, write about runaways. But I became convinced that that language contained and persisted in the notion that slave agency was childlike. Children run away, but what these people were doing was achieving fugitive status. So I began to use the term "fugitive" instead of the term "runaway." […] The first impulse of these Africans was to remove themselves from the slave system. Rather than going after slavery, they wanted to recreate their African homelands. Rather than confront the system as the system, they removed themselves from it.[18]

As his comments in this passage make clear, Robinson responds to but moves beyond the historiography of slave psychology (just as he transcends the Marxist historiography of capitalism) in *Black Marxism*. While his definition of enslaved fugitives and other insurgents refutes the racist stereotypes of contemporaneous historiography on the slave personality type, the point of arguing their revolutionary consciousness in Chapter 6 is to demonstrate the collective insistence of enslaved people upon African-rooted ways of being and knowing, an insistence that serves as the basis of the black radical tradition.

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[18] See Cedric J. Robinson and Elizabeth P. Robinson, Preface to *Futures of Black Radicalism*, ed. Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (New York: Verso, 2017), 1-8, quote 3.

The remainder of the sixth chapter of *Black Marxism* focuses on forms of fugitivity and revolt that illustrate for Robinson the revolutionary consciousness of enslaved people. He issues a brief reminder that European empires began to enslave Africans only once the exploitation of indigenous labor and white servitude became insufficient to sustain the colonial project—a point central to Robinson's insistence that what makes racial capitalism "racial" is its extraction of surplus value from bodies rendered not racially "black" per se but distinct from the normative (white male) human subject of European modernity.[19] What follows is a brief but sweeping history lesson on black insurgency. These pages showcase the staggering breadth of Robinson's mastery as a scholar. Robinson cites publications written in at least four languages (English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish) and models interdisciplinarity at its finest, synthesizing scholarship on enslaved fugitivity and revolt in the disciplines of History, Anthropology, and Sociology, among others. The footnotes for the chapter (and, for that matter, the entirety of *Black Marxism*) constitute a tour de force all their own, containing not only a wealth of bibliographic citation but fine-grained engagement with other thinkers and a veritable encyclopedia of

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[19] It is key for Robinson that the "racial" in racial capitalism refers to capitalism's differential valuation and exploitation of human groups in general rather than the exploitation of human groups specifically racialized black. Robinson emphasizes in the first part of *Black Marxism* that the development of industrial capitalism in England involved the subjection of the Irish to colonization and exploitation as a racialized class by the English. Robinson insists not only in *Black Marxism* but elsewhere that the racism necessary to rationalize racial capitalism thus begins intra-racially (in his analysis, between putatively white races) in Europe prior to Europe's racialization and exploitation of African and African-descended labor. See Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 1-68. Summing up this point years later, Robinson puts it thus: "Some of you are interested in why I pursued the Irish in *Black Marxism* as well as in the latest work, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning*. In part, I'm trying to give a great deal of our audience a purchase point. There's no possibility of really telling a Black story without telling other peoples' stories. I can tell it in the nationalist trope. And the nationalist trope, in effect, will be guilty of repeating the artificialities that I'm trying to oppose, those kinds of boundaries. The Irish and the Irish Americans are, to a certain degree, opportunistic subjects. Opportunistic in the sense that a lot of their history is coincident with Blackness [….] But also because I want you to understand that the Irish were negatively racialized, even before the Africans, in the European imagination. We were simply a lob to occupy a category already established. And given the irony that is history, it became the impression that the category had always been ours, always been ours, exclusively. That simply isn't how human affairs have been conducted." See Robinson, Preface to *Futures of Black Radicalism*, 7. For further discussion of the development of race in Europe, see Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film Before World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 1-81.

clarifying detail too extensive to be addressed in the main body of the text. The sixth chapter of *Black Marxism*, in other words, is a prodigious account of black radicalism's origins across time and space.

Yet what remains conspicuously absent from this chapter and its footnotes is any discussion of the widespread debates about primary source material that animated the historical study of slavery throughout the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. Put another way, *Black Marxism* cites Blassingame to stress the invalidity of the Sambo thesis but bypasses what is arguably his more profound contribution to the historiography of slavery: his use of slave narratives. In *The Slave Community* (1972, revised edition 1979), Blassingame focuses on testimony drawn from ex-slave autobiographies, written or dictated during the antebellum period, to substantiate his field-shifting account of enslaved life in the U.S. South. Blassingame dedicates an entire chapter to enslaved insurgency under the title "Runaways and Rebels," addressing the same set of concerns Robinson later takes up in the language of fugitivity and revolt. Blassingame opens this chapter with an unambiguous assertion: "There is overwhelming evidence, in the primary sources, of the Negro's resistance to his bondage and of his undying love for freedom."[20] This assertion can only be fully understood when read in the context of the larger struggle over evidence in the historiography of slavery at the time. Questions about what constitutes evidence, what kinds of sources should be preferred by the historian, and what records could be deemed reliable occupied the focal point of conversations in the field.[21] The dominant approach had been to narrate the

[20] Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* [1972], rev. and enlarged ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 192. Blassingame first published *The Slave Community* in 1972 and published a revised and expanded edition in 1979 in response to the wave of criticism the book generated. Throughout this chapter, I cite the later edition parenthetically unless otherwise noted.
[21] See John W. Blassingame, "Critical Essay on Sources," in *The Slave Community*, rev. and enlarged ed., 367-82. See also John W. Blassingame, Introduction to *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* [1977], ed. John W. Blassingame (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), xvii-lxv.

history of slavery using records produced by the slave-owning class. The use of these sources led to the reproduction of slave-owning ideology as fact (as is evident in the work of Ulrich Bonnell Phillips and Stanley Elkins).

But with transformations in the domain of social history throughout the 1960s and 70s came a push to tell the story of slavery "from the bottom up." Historians including Blassingame, Owens, and others (many of whom Robinson cites in his footnotes) began to seek new historical methods and sources, ones with which to narrate the story of slavery from the perspectives of enslaved people themselves. With this aim in mind, they turned to primary texts that had been largely disregarded by the discipline.[22] During this period, historian George P. Rawick compiled and published the Works Progress Administration (WPA) ex-slave interviews that had been collected between 1936 and 1938 but had remained neglected in the Library of Congress archives. What resulted was the multi-volume set of WPA narratives now considered standard source material for historians of U.S. slavery.[23] Literary scholars Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips simultaneously compiled and published a stand-alone volume of WPA Virginia narratives, widely accepted as more historically accurate than other WPA documents by virtue of the fact that many of the interviewers who collected ex-slaves' stories in

[22] Stephanie E. Smallwood details this shift in "The Politics of the Archive and History's Accountability to the Enslaved," *History of the Present* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 117-32. Smallwood points out that while historians like Carter G. Woodson and W. E. B. Du Bois had challenged dominant narratives of slavery by pushing the boundaries of received notions of historical evidence since the early twentieth century, it was during the 1960s and 1970s that a shift in the dominant historiography occurred as historians like John Blassingame, George P. Rawick, Lawrence Levine, David Brion Davis, Peter H. Wood, and others began to turn to neglected archival sources and to write history from the perspectives of the enslaved. Framing them as "American revisionists," Robinson cites many of these scholars in his discussion and refutation of the Sambo thesis. Yet he focuses on their collective rejection of the idea that enslaved people psychologically succumbed to their enslavement and leaves to the side the contributions these scholars made to struggles over evidence in the historiography of slavery. See Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 123-25 and 355, note 16.
[23] See George P. Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1972). For the WPA narratives, see Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, 19 vols. (Westport, CT: Greenwood), 1972.

Virginia were black as opposed to white.[24] One of the most profound contributions to the expansion of the evidentiary record during this time was John Blassingame's *Slave Testimony* (1977), which compiles—and legitimates as sound historical records—letters, speeches, autobiographies, and well over a century's worth of interviews either produced or dictated by enslaved or formerly enslaved people in the United States.[25] While *Slave Testimony* has yet to be fully mined for the abundance of documentary sources it contains, it marks a shift in the historiography of slavery toward an insistence upon the historical record produced by enslaved people themselves.

Yet Robinson refrains from utilizing the wealth of source material compiled and legitimated by the painstaking labors of a generation of scholars a short decade prior to him. The fact that he gives little direct attention to the "overwhelming evidence" in the primary sources, as Blassingame puts it, invites questions about his methodology and its stakes. Throughout the chapter, Robinson relies exclusively on work produced by other scholars—mainly historians and anthropologists—in the twentieth century to substantiate his claims about the history of black radical consciousness. When he does quote a primary source record, he draws the quote from its reproduction in secondary scholarship. Yet nowhere in the sixth chapter does Robinson explain why he focuses so narrowly on secondary, as opposed to primary, texts.

In an effort to elucidate Robinson's method, scholars have occasionally drawn analogies between Robinson's work and that of other thinkers. Literary critic Brent Hayes Edwards explains that Robinson's method bears much in common with historiographical approaches to the analysis of revolutionary consciousness in contemporaneous subaltern studies. Edwards

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[24] See Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips, eds., *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1976).
[25] See John W. Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony*.

likens Robinson's approach to that of historian Ranajit Guha, who in *The Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (first published in 1983, like *Black Marxism*), focuses on the development of what Guha calls the "rebel consciousness" of a peasantry striving against British colonial rule on the Indian subcontinent from the late eighteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth.[26] Guha's account of the "rebel consciousness" of the peasantry parallels Robinson's account of the revolutionary consciousness of the enslaved in the sense that it describes the "general form" of a struggle that materializes in and through individual acts of resistance to colonial processes—acts that, far from spontaneous or isolated, speak to the emergence of a coherent tradition of political radicalism among disparate insurgents. Guha argues via Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci that the consciousness of the Indian peasantry does not have to be characterized by self-appointed leadership, a well-defined aim, or explicit objectives for achieving that aim in order to be considered a form of consciousness. Though he qualifies it extensively, calling it "inchoate," "naïve," "feeble," "imperfect," and "almost embryonic," the rebel consciousness of the peasantry must be understood, he argues, as a combination of awareness and will: the awareness of peasants of their situation and their will to alter it.[27]

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[26] See Edwards, "The 'Autonomy' of Black Radicalism," 5, and Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* [1983] (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 11-12.

[27] Guha writes that compared to the anti-imperialist struggles that followed the period of peasant insurgency, "the peasant movements of the first three-quarters of British rule represented a somewhat inchoate and naïve state of consciousness. Yet we propose to focus on this consciousness as our central theme, because it is not possible to make sense of the experience of insurgency merely as a history of events without a subject. It is in order to rehabilitate that subject that we must take the peasant-rebel's awareness of his own world and his will to change it as our point of departure. For however feeble and tragically ineffective this awareness and will might have been, they were still nothing less than the elements of a consciousness which was learning to compile and classify the individual and disparate moments of experience and organize these into some sort of generalizations. These were, in other words, the very beginnings of a theoretical consciousness. Insurgency was indeed the site where the two mutually contradictory tendencies within this still imperfect, almost embryonic, theoretical consciousness—that is, a conservative tendency made up of the inherited and uncritically absorbed material of the ruling culture and a radical one oriented toward a practical transformation of the rebel's conditions of existence—met for a decisive trial of strength. The object of this work is to try and depict this struggle not as a series of specific encounters but in its general form. The elements of this form derive from the very long history of the peasant's subalternity and his

In theorizing the revolutionary consciousness of the enslaved, Robinson—like Guha—bumps up against a methodological challenge: how to substantiate the claim of insurgent consciousness with historical evidence. For his own part, Guha relies on records produced by the colonial elite. He reads colonial archives for the forms of insurgency that the elite sought to manage, narrate, and suppress. The dominant historical record, for Guha, gives the lie to the existence of insurgency by aiming (though never succeeding) to write the peasantry's challenges to colonial stability out of history. It functions as evidence of the tradition of peasant insurgency that the colonial elite could neither fully control nor subdue. While he recognizes the pitfalls of using elitist sources to tell the story of peasant struggle, Guha explains that there exists no better archive for such purpose. The record of peasant folklore—both oral and written—is too slim, according to Guha, in terms of quantity and is often characterized by elitist prejudice itself.[28] Comparing their approaches to the historical record, Edwards notes that Robinson and Guha both take for granted "that one can read what Guha calls the 'consciousness of insurgency' within a 'discourse of counter-insurgency'—that is, within the archives of colonialism and within the recesses of traditional bourgeois historiography."[29] For as much as he is correct that Guha and Robinson glimpse counterhegemonic consciousnesses within the dominant record of history, Edwards names and then leaves underexamined a critical distinction between their work: while Guha focuses on the "archives of colonialism," Robinson attends most closely to "traditional bourgeois historiography." Put differently, Guha roots his analysis in records produced by a colonial elite that antedate him in time while Robinson grounds his study in historiography

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striving to end it" (11). See Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, 1-17, "general form," "inchoate," "naïve," "feeble," "imperfect," and "almost embryonic" 11, "rebel consciousness" 12.

[28] See Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, 13-17.

[29] See Edwards, "The Autonomy of Black Radicalism," 6.

produced contemporaneously with his own writing. The archive of *Black Marxism*, in other words, is twentieth-century historiography itself.

The significance of this point can only fully be appreciated when contextualized by the sixth chapter's provocative title: "The Historical Archaeology of the Black Radical Tradition." While Robinson never explains what precisely he means by "archaeology," his reliance on peer historiography as an archive within which he can excavate evidence of the black radical tradition suggests that the archaeology he conducts is more metaphorical than literal. How historical archaeology should be defined is the subject of ongoing debate in the discipline of archaeology. But in general, the subfield of historical archaeology is defined either by subject matter or by method of analysis. When defined by subject matter, it is understood as the study of the lifeways of literate human groups that left written as well as artifactual records. According to this definition, for example, historical archaeology can include the examination of pre-common-era Mesopotamian and Mesoamerican civilizations that produced written records in logosyllabic script. Others who prefer to define historical archaeology by the subject of its analysis characterize it as the study of the lifeways of human groups caught up in the historical processes of European colonization from the fifteenth century forward. Within this framing, historical archaeology can include the study of peoples who left few written records themselves but were nevertheless written about in colonial archives, such as the peasantry of colonial India or enslaved people throughout the Atlantic world. This pull and tug over historical archaeology is further complicated by those who prefer to define it by method. This camp splits into two groups as well: those who approach historical archaeology as a historical mode of inquiry versus those who treat it as an anthropological one. For the former, the purpose of historical archaeology is to focus on the production of historical narratives; for the latter, the aim is to address issues of

primary concern to anthropologists, such as the emergence of gender roles, the development of racial ideology, and the growth of capitalism through the colonization of the Americas.

Despite their differences, however, historical anthropologists widely insist upon the significance of the written text to archaeological excavation. Historical archaeology in this sense might be understood to cohere around a unifying methodological presumption: namely, that the close scrutiny of an artifact must be accompanied by the close scrutiny of a written record. Often dubbed the "father of historical archaeology," Ivor Noël Hume has characterized it as a process of "[d]igging in the documents and in the earth" to arrive at the truths of a particular culture or historical period.[30] Archivist Patricia Galloway has elaborated the ways in which historical archaeologists balance attention to text and artifact, noting that they usually prefer one of four approaches to analyze text and artifact in tandem: 1) archaeologists use artifacts to confirm what appears in the documentary record; 2) they employ texts as commentary on archaeological finds; 3) they attribute equal significance to text and artifact to construct as comprehensive an account of a group's lifeways as possible; and 4) they attend carefully to the discrepancies between text and artifact to uncover aspects of life that have been written out of the historical record.[31]

Robinson's focus on enslaved fugitivity is consistent with trends among those who define historical archaeology by the subject of its analysis. Anthropologist Charles E. Orser, Jr. explains that beginning in the mid-1960s, in keeping with the rise of interest in the history of the oppressed in the social sciences as well as in response to historical preservationist movements in

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[30] See Ivor Noël Hume, *Historical Archaeology* [1969] (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 19.
[31] See Patricia Galloway, "Material Culture and Text: Exploring the Spaces within and Between," in *Historical Archaeology*, ed. Martin Hall and Stephen W. Silliman (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 42-64. For more on the field formation of historical archaeology, including the struggles over how historical archaeology gets defined, see James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: The Archaeology of Early American Life* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1977), Martin Hall and Stephen W. Silliman, eds., *Historical Archaeology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), Charles E. Orser, Jr., *Historical Archaeology* [1995], third ed. (New York: Routledge, 2017), and Stanley South, *Method and Theory in Historical Archaeology* (New York: Academic Press, 1977).

the United States, historical archaeology began focusing on the maroon communities of fugitive slaves scattered throughout the Americas. On the one hand, archaeological excavation could supplement the recognizably biased and therefore limited written record produced by the master class on slavery. The discovery of artifacts affords historical archaeologists a window onto features of enslaved daily life that had perhaps been misrepresented in or excluded from the documentary record. On the other hand, the focus on maroon societies, especially in places like Palmares, Brazil, Nanny Town, Jamaica, and Fort Mose, Florida, contributes to a historical revisionist project in the sense that such focus steers the historiography of slavery away from the prevailing discussion of enslaved people as slaves toward a discussion of African and African-descended people in the Americas as makers of their own communities and keepers of their own cultural traditions. Summarizing a large body of historical archaeological work, Orser observes that existing studies "not only follow current archaeological practice, they also demonstrate the tenacious character of cultural customs embedded within people's belief systems and ritual behaviors."[32] Particularly apparent in the historical archaeology of maroon societies, in other words, are the ways in which enslaved people resisted processes of colonization and held on to African systems of belief and practice.

In *Black Marxism*, Robinson identifies enslaved people's struggle to preserve such belief systems and gives a name to it—the black radical tradition. To the extent that he arrives at his formulation of black radicalism through a method that approximates historical archaeology in its focus on enslaved lifeways, his work fits squarely within the field.[33] Yet, in terms of method,

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[32] See C. E. Orser, Jr., "The Archaeology of the African Diaspora," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 27 (1998): 63-82, quote 68-69. See also Charles E. Orser, Jr., "Maroon Sites," in *Encyclopedia of Historical Archaeology*, ed. Charles E. Orser, Jr. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 331-32.

[33] Robinson's work in *Black Marxism* might be understood as an intervention into historical archaeology in another sense as well. In a tremendously rich provocation published in the form of an essay and followed by comments from twelve peer researchers, archaeologists Mark P. Leone, Parker B. Potter, Jr., and Paul A. Shackel argue for the adoption of "critical theory" in the archaeological study of post-Columbian societies, which for them amounts to a

Robinson departs from the conventions of historical archaeology in the sense that he does not conduct a physical site excavation and in the more important sense that the writing he examines in the sixth chapter of *Black Marxism* is contemporaneous with his own historical moment rather than with the one he studies. Put another way, one might characterize his method as a process of digging only in the documents (and not in the earth), which for him consist of histories of slavery published in the twentieth century.

Robinson's focus on twentieth-century historiography as his primary archive disrupts several assumptions that structure historical archaeology's conceptualization of the past. Historical archaeologists tend to frame the historical record as the archive of colonialism, which they imagine as a set of documents produced by state officials, colonial elites, slave owners, and the like. This framing is especially apparent not only in the work of those who focus on ex-slave maroon societies but in the work of those who consider post-Columbian societies to be the exclusive domain of historical archaeology. For these scholars, the archive of colonialism exists in a past that is discontinuous with the present of the archaeologist. The artifacts of a given maroon community and the written record analyzed in tandem with those artifacts are imbued by the archaeologist with a certain measure of historical distance understood to separate the researcher and the researched. Methodologically, in other words, historical archaeology

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reconsideration of historical archaeology as the archaeology of capitalism. To the extent that Robinson's analysis throughout *Black Marxism* gets at the roots of racial formation in the Americas and the development of capitalism—in other words, his analysis leads him to the theoretical formulation of racial capitalism—Robinson's project might be considered an intervention into historical archaeology as the archaeology of capitalism. One might read *Black Marxism* as an archaeological work of interest to those of the more anthropological bent in the field of historical archaeology, for it directly addresses the questions of race and capitalist development that preoccupy the anthropologically minded historical archaeologists. But it must be remembered that Robinson's aim in the sixth chapter is to produce not an archaeology of capitalism but of the black radical tradition that for him cannot be reduced to the colonial capitalist context within which it emerged. For this reason, I hesitate to label Robinson's work an archaeology of capitalism, even though it certainly contributes to conversations in historical archaeology about capitalism's development. Ultimately, as Robinson himself indicates with the title of his sixth chapter, *Black Marxism* is an archaeology of black radicalism, not capitalism. See Mark P. Leone et al., "Toward a Critical Archaeology [and Comments and Reply]," *Current Anthropology* 28, no. 3 (June 1987): 283-302.

presumes that the archaeologist's objects of analysis—texts and artifacts—speak to a past that is always already over. Within this view, it is the archaeologist's job, through study, to reach across the gap between the "now" and the "then" to produce knowledge about people and cultures that are presumed to occupy a past historically distinct from the present.

Robinson's framing of the past contrasts sharply with this view. On the whole, Robinson tends to think history in terms of continuities rather than breaks. Robinson devotes the final third of *Black Marxism* to three studies of black radicalism in the twentieth century: W. E. B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* (1935), C. L. R. James's *Black Jacobins* (1938), and Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and *The Outsider* (1953), each of which demonstrate the author's contributions to the theoretical and historical elaboration of the black radical tradition. The chronological arc of *Black Marxism* thus moves the reader from the sixteenth century (the sixth chapter) to the twentieth (the book's last three chapters). While Robinson devotes far greater attention to twentieth-century black radicalism than its earlier manifestations, he emphasizes that black radicalism must be understood as a tradition stretching into the contemporary moment yet rooted in the era of slavery and colonization. He insists that readers "recognize the continuity that exists between the Black rebellions of the previous centuries and the first articulations of a world revolutionary Black theory in the present century" (176). The final chapter reiterates the book's arguments about continuity by combining its discussion of black radicalism from the sixteenth to the twentieth century into a single, seamless narrative that occupies the space of a few pages.

Robinson's framing of black radicalism as characterized by historical continuity provokes consideration of the fact that colonialism is also characterized by continuity. If one of Robinson's main points is that racial capitalism emerges through colonial processes and that

racial capitalism continues into the present, it is also true that, for Robinson, colonialism never ended. Colonialism in his analysis continues into the present. It neither exists chronologically distinct and distant from the moment the twentieth-century scholar inhabits, nor does it fit neatly into the periodization of past and present that historical archaeology prefers, but persists in the many forms of exploitation, dispossession, and knowledge production that racial capitalism requires across time.[34] One might therefore understand the archive of colonialism to include those discrete sets of documents produced in the past (what conventional historical archaeologists imagine as the colonial archive) as well as the dominant historiography of slavery produced in the twentieth century by scholars like Ulrich Bonnell Phillips and Stanley Elkins. Black radicalism must be metaphorically excavated in these works of historiography because these works continue to obscure the black radical tradition in much the same way that Guha claims the records of the colonial elite obscured the insurgency of peasants in colonial India.

It is this task—this historical archaeology of sorts, a metaphorical excavation of the black radical tradition in the dominant historiography of slavery—that Robinson accomplishes in the sixth chapter of *Black Marxism*. Robinson explains at the beginning of the chapter that the dominant historiography of slavery is characterized by "one overriding claim: that the enslaved in time came to accept the terms of slavery" (124). For Robinson, the idea that enslaved people ultimately succumbed to their enslavement structured the metanarrative of slavery in multiple academic domains: "The practice of submission, so went the conventional wisdom embodied in the American disciplines of history, sociology, and psychology, became for the slaves the habits

[34] Scholars who insist on historically strict definitions of the term "colonialism" might quibble with my usage of it here. My point is neither to claim that processes of colonization are identical across time nor to suggest that there are not important differences between colonial processes in the proverbial Age of Exploration, for instance, and in the mid-twentieth-century United States. I am not suggesting that one uncritically collapse the material and ideological features of colonial processes into sameness. My aim is simply to emphasize how Robinson's work differs from that of the historical archaeologists in so far as it conceptualizes history in terms of continuities rather than breaks.

of inferiority" (124). It is such historiography—what Brent Hayes Edwards calls "traditional bourgeois historiography"—that might be considered the colonial archive into which Robinson's historical archaeology intervenes. Due to, in Blassingame's words, the "overwhelming evidence" of slave insurgency in the primary record, historians like Elkins had to go to great lengths to explain slave revolt and fugitivity as something other than insurgency.[35] So, while dominant historiography rejected the idea that enslaved people resisted slavery, it nevertheless disclosed the historical fact of slave resistance in its efforts to suppress it. Robinson accomplishes a historical archaeology of black radicalism by naming instances of fugitivity and revolt as evidence of the black radical tradition. In doing so, he metaphorically excavates that which the dominant historiography of slavery could neither fully erase nor explain away.

On Method

Enslaved people played a central—indeed, an inaugural—role in the formation of the black radical tradition. The first black radicals, according to Robinson, were the enslaved. And as black radicals, they struggled for liberation from bondage in ways that decisively shaped the course of history. In making this argument, Robinson attributes historical agency to enslaved people as did Du Bois and James before him. Robinson, like Du Bois and James, casts enslaved people as agents of their own historical self-determination through resistance to forms of European colonization and enslavement. Contrary to the dominant historiography of the early

[35] This fact is especially apparent in the overworked language and feats of historical invention by which Elkins tries to explain away revolts led by figures like Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner while simultaneously advancing the thesis that enslaved people, on the whole, did not resist captivity. Elkins argues that anxious Southerners overrated the threat of slave revolts on the plantation and that slave revolts were not led by "plantation laborers" but rather by people like Prosser, Vesey, and Turner who, according to Elkins, existed "well outside the full coercions of the plantation authority-system." The facile distinction between "plantation laborers" and enslaved rebels enables Elkins to argue that slaves in general did not resist the terms of their enslavement. See Elkins, *Slavery*, 133-39.

twentieth century, Du Bois shows that enslaved people determined the outcome of the Civil War and won their own liberation by fleeing the plantation to join Union army ranks, effectively accomplishing a "general strike" against slavery that resulted in its abolition.[36] In his revisionist narrative of the Haitian Revolution, James similarly locates the force of historical transformation on San Domingo in the actions of the enslaved masses rather than exclusively in the achievements of individual "great men" like Toussaint L'Ouverture.[37] In the same vein as these black radical thinkers, Robinson contributes to a revisionist historiography of slavery by representing enslaved people as human beings who made history in their own terms. The dominant historiography of slavery had presumed enslaved people to be childlike, racially inferior to whites, and historically inconsequential. Robinson rejects these ideas, writing the enslaved into history as the means of their own liberation. But in doing so he reproduces the methodological feature of dominant historiography that historians like Blassingame and others had sought to correct: the neglect of slave testimony. Robinson ultimately centers enslaved people without centering what they said about themselves. Subsequent scholarship on black radicalism has similarly tended to leave primary records produced by enslaved people to the side. Such neglect has led to the tendency to silence the voices of the enslaved in histories of the black radical tradition while simultaneously giving them credit for inaugurating it. The result of this tendency has been limited historical accounts of the origins of black radicalism.

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[36] See W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* [1935] (New York: Free Press, 1992).
[37] C. L. R. James famously writes in the Preface to the first edition of *The Black Jacobins* that "Great men make history, but only such history as it is possible for them to make. Their freedom of achievement is limited by the necessities of their environment." He asserts from the outset that "Toussaint did not make the revolution. It was the revolution that made Toussaint." The argument throughout the book proceeds to demonstrate how the "economic forces of the age" gave rise not only to an individual revolutionary leader—Toussaint—but a revolutionary mass of enslaved people who overthrew the existing social and economic order. See James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* [1938], second ed., revised (New York: Vintage, 1968), quotes x.

To address the neglect of slave testimony in the literature on black radicalism the present chapter explores how one might read slave narratives—accounts of bondage written or dictated by enslaved or formerly enslaved people—as records of the black radical consciousness Robinson describes. An interrogation of the existing body of slave narrative archive is invited by Robinson himself. At the end of *Black Marxism*, Robinson suggests that black radicalism found expression in a range of nineteenth-century black-authored texts:

> […] Black radical commitment was echoed by the ideologists of the slave rebellions and the Black refugees from slavery. It was given expression among the militant Black "abolitionists," in the assemblies of the emigration movement, and among Blacks such as the Chatham conventioneers who, with John Brown, planned the overthrow of the slave system. The evidence of the tradition's persistence and ideological vitality among the Black slave masses was to be found not only in the rebellious and the underground but as well in the shouts, the spirituals, the sermons, and the very textual body of Black Christianity. (311)

Robinson's comments in this passage open the door to the study of a range of slave testimony as a record of the black radical tradition. But of particular interest to the present inquiry is Robinson's assertion that the "ideologists of the slave rebellions" and "refugees from slavery" gave expression to black radicalism. Many of the enslaved people who narrated stories of their lives were also ideologists of rebellion or refugees from slavery. Nat Turner was an ideologist of slave rebellion if there ever was one: he famously led an insurrection of enslaved people against the slaveholding community of Southampton, Virginia in 1831. His *Confessions of Nat Turner* (1831), dictated through the bars of a jail cell to a white attorney named Thomas R. Gray, exists in the present as a complicated record—but a record nonetheless—of his rationale for rising up

in revolt.[38] Harriet Jacobs, who occupies the focus of this chapter's final sections, famously secreted herself in the garret of her grandmother's cabin to escape the sexual pursuit of her master. There she hid as a refugee from slavery for seven years until fleeing north, where she remained a fugitive form some time before a friend bought her and set her free. Her fugitivity she recounts at length in her autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861).[39] These two texts—Turner's *Confessions* and Jacobs's *Incidents*—number among the most well-known slave narratives today. They also function as historical records of the practices of fugitivity and revolt in which their authors engaged. To the extent that black radicalism manifests in the fugitivity and revolt of enslaved people, we might say that these slave narratives can be read as records of black radicalism in the antebellum United States.

Reading slave narratives as records of black radicalism, however, runs counter to the prevailing tendency to read them as abolitionist texts. Literary critics and historians have long emphasized that slave narratives espouse abolitionist politics.[40] Slave narratives were usually published in order to advance the abolitionist cause. Though some abolitionists preferred more radical politics than others, they generally agreed upon legislative policy reform: the predominant goal of antebellum abolitionism was the abolition of slavery in law.[41] Antebellum slave narratives tended to be produced with this end in mind. White editors, who often solicited

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[38] See Nat Turner, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* [1831], in *Slave Narratives*, ed. William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Library of America, 2000), 243-66.

[39] See Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, ed. L. Maria Child [1861], enlarged ed., ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard University Press, 2009). Hereafter cited parenthetically.

[40] The literature on slave narratives is too extensive to list in full here. Foundational works include Frances Smith Foster, *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-Bellum Slave Narratives* [1979], second ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994); Marion Wilson Starling, *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History* (Boston: G. K. Hall and Co., 1981); Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds., *The Slave's Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); and William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

[41] On the many strains of abolitionism, see Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016). On the radical politics of abolitionists, see Holly Jackson, *American Radicals: How Nineteenth-Century Protest Shaped the Nation* (New York: Crown, 2019).

narratives from formerly enslaved people, assisted them in the production of the narratives, and wrote prefatory material for the texts, highlighted the dramatic and horrifying aspects of enslavement with the intent of swaying the political opinion of readers in favor of abolitionism. The dominant strain of abolitionism in the antebellum United States was markedly liberal in the sense that it framed slavery as a violation of the universal and inalienable rights of the individual (in this case, the slave) and in the sense that it favored the preservation of capitalism even as it sought the end of the legal possibility of owning property in slaves. Mainstream abolitionism, in other words, took for granted fundamental premises of the liberal philosophical tradition with respect to the rights of the individual and the capitalist order of property. These liberal politics shaped the form and content of slave narratives and rendered slave narratives a liberal genre.[42]

Reading slave narratives as records of black radicalism, then, presents something of a methodological challenge. It is precisely the European liberal philosophical tradition and the capitalist imperatives of the colonial world order that enslaved fugitives and rebels in Robinson's account reject. Put differently, liberal abolitionism and black radicalism exist in contradiction with each other. While not all the ideologies and political strategies of liberal abolitionism and black radicalism were mutually exclusive, the two approaches fundamentally differed on the question of freedom. Liberal abolitionism sought freedom for the slave through legal reform and the preservation of capitalism. Black radicalism sought freedom for the slave through the overthrow of the capitalist and liberal legal orders of colonial modernity. To argue that slave narratives constitute evidence of the black radical tradition seems on this account paradoxical:

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[42] This argument I develop in the second chapter of this dissertation on abolitionism. For an excellent analysis of the slave narrative as a liberal genre, see Lisa Lowe, "Autobiography out of Empire," in *Intimacies of Four Continents*, 43-71.

how can one read slave narratives as records of liberal abolitionism and black radicalism at the same time?

Robinson's approach to dominant historiography is useful here. Throughout *Black Marxism*, Robinson distinguishes between the facticity of insurgency in the context of slavery and the ways that such insurgency gets narrated in historiography. Whereas the fact of slave resistance forces many twentieth-century historians to address black insurgency in their accounts of slavery, the tendency is, as Robinson demonstrates, to fail or refuse to recognize the radical tradition expressed by that insurgency. Robinson's insight is that the very fact of enslaved resistance nonetheless stands as evidence of black radicalism, however obscured that resistance is in the historiography. One might usefully extend this insight to slave narratives on the grounds that slave narratives, whatever their abolitionist politics, make plain the fact of enslaved insurgency. In this sense, they can be read as evidence of the black radical tradition despite the liberal politics that often constrained their production and literary form. Using Robinson's approach to twentieth-century historiography as a methodological guidepost of sorts, this chapter analyzes slave narratives as records of black radicalism, their manifestly liberal politics notwithstanding.

The phrasing Robinson uses to characterize black radical expression invites readers to take this methodological approach one step further. There is a difference between contending that slave narratives supply evidence of the black radical tradition and saying that enslaved people expressed black radical politics in slave narratives. Robinson leaves open the possibility of the latter when he asserts in the final pages of his book that "Black radical commitment was echoed by the ideologists of the slave rebellions and the Black refugees from slavery" (311). The sentence attributes the action of "echo[ing]" to enslaved people despite its grammatically passive

construction. The thrust of the sentence is that ideologists of rebellion and refugees from slavery "echoed" black radical commitment actively. It is unclear, however, in what capacity they did so. The phrasing of the sentence does not clarify whether Robinson employs the verb "echo" figuratively so as to characterize the insurgent actions of enslaved people as metaphorical resonances of black radicalism or whether he intends the term in a more literal sense to suggest that enslaved people discursively expressed black radical commitments in language that may have made it onto the pages of slave narratives. If one presumes that black radicalism possesses a semantic or formal trace in slave narratives, as I do here, the question becomes what exact shape this trace takes. This chapter pursues this question in relation to one slave narrative as a case study—namely, Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*—rather than positing and attempting to outline a general form in which black radical expression can be identified across the disparate body of existing slave narratives.

The method I employ to read *Incidents* might best be described as a process of attending closely to moments of tension in the text in which the experience of the author ultimately challenges and opens up the possibility of alternatives to the liberal and pro-capitalist politics of the mainstream abolitionist movement. In reading *Incidents* for the trace of black radicalism, I am reading for the trace of what Marxist cultural theorist Raymond Williams has termed a "structure of feeling."[43] Unlike social formations whose forms and conventions of semantic articulation have been classified and are thus easily identifiable, structures of feeling are nascent (Williams calls them "emergent" or "pre-emergent") formations of social experience whose

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[43] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), hereafter cited parenthetically. In calling black radicalism a structure of feeling, I follow Ruth Wilson Gilmore, who defines the black radical tradition as "a constantly evolving accumulation of structures of feeling whose individual and collective narrative arcs persistently tend toward freedom." See Gilmore, "Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence," in *Futures of Black Radicalism*, ed. Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (New York: Verso, 2017), 225-40, quote 237.

characteristic features of expression are still developing and have yet to be isolated, formalized, and fixed. According to Williams, a structure of feeling materializes not therefore in immediately recognizable conventions but in a text's moments of tension:

> There is frequent tension between the received interpretation and practical experience. Where this tension can be made direct and explicit, we are still within a dimension of relatively fixed forms. But the tension is often an unease, a stress, a displacement, a latency [. …] There are experiences to which the fixed forms do not speak at all, which indeed they do not recognize. (130)

The dominant narrative forms of a particular historical period do not express the incipient formations of experience Williams calls structures of feeling. Throughout this dissertation I consider liberal abolitionism one such dominant, "fixed form" that offers an interpretation of slavery and conventions for representing it that fail to address or recognize the radicalism expressed by enslaved people's experiences of fugitivity and revolt. The disjuncture between the liberal form of the slave narrative and the black radicalism of a slave narrator's insurgency produces moments of tension in the text. These moments of tension occur in places in which the narrative conventions of liberal abolitionism cannot resolve challenges to the capitalist order of property posed by a slave narrator's fugitivity and revolt. In these moments the narrative seamlessness of the text breaks down. At the same time, the possibility of black radical alternatives to liberal abolitionism become available. This chapter focuses on elaborating the challenges—rather than the alternatives—Jacobs's insurgency poses to liberal abolitionism and the capitalist order of property in *Incidents*. In doing so the chapter takes Robinson's position that the study of opposition to racial capitalism and European liberalism is foundational to the study of the black radical tradition itself.

The black radicalism expressed in *Incidents* resides in its subtle implications and assumptions rather than in its reproduction of familiar narrative conventions. In most cases, the passages I analyze can be read doubly as expressions of black radicalism as well as liberal abolitionism. When assessed at face value, much of what Jacobs says can be construed to be consistent with the politics of the liberal abolitionist movement. But when one attends to the nuances of the text, a different reading becomes available. Williams points out that a structure of feeling appears in texts as "a specific structure of particular linkages, particular emphases and suppressions, and, in what are often its most recognizable forms, particular deep starting-points and conclusions" (134). What he means by "particular deep starting-points and conclusions" Williams clarifies through example:

> Early Victorian ideology, for example, specified the exposure caused by poverty or by debt or by illegitimacy as social failure or deviation; the contemporary structure of feeling, meanwhile, in the new semantic figures of Dickens, of Emily Brontë, and others, specified exposure and isolation as a *general* condition, and poverty, debt, or illegitimacy as its connecting instances. An alternative ideology, relating such exposure to the nature of the social order, was only later generally formed […] (134)

The structure of feeling Williams identifies in this example is evident in a shift in the way literary texts account for the material attributes (such as poverty, debt, and illegitimacy) of a particular social order.

The same is true for *Incidents*. Whereas liberal abolitionism tended to frame slavery as a legal institution that could be terminated through legal reform, the "particular deep starting-point" of *Incidents*, the embryonic premise on which Jacobs's narrative rests, is that slavery constitutes a form of capitalism that can only be terminated through the total abolition (rather

than the limited legal reform) of the capitalist order of property. This premise differs from that of liberal abolitionists who wanted to reform capitalist property relations (legally abolish slavery) but keep capitalism intact. The black radical structure of feeling in *Incidents* is thus grounded in an inchoate conception of capitalism—not law—as the root of the problem with slavery. Moments of tension in the text correspondingly cluster around Jacobs's frequent and searching discussions of capitalist property relations.

What is notable about these discussions is that, for Jacobs, capitalist property relations undergird not only her racial domination but her sexual domination as well. Jacobs states plainly that her status as property exposes her to violence at the hands of her master—violence that possesses both a racial and sexual dimension. Jacobs moreover explains that this violence drives her to revolt against her master by refusing his sexual demands and ultimately taking flight from slavery. It bears emphasizing that to the extent that one regards Jacobs's fugitivity and revolt as an expression of black radicalism, one must also permit that black radicalism in the antebellum period possessed a distinctively black feminist strain. Historians and literary scholars have demonstrated that one of the pillars of nineteenth-century feminism was opposition to the sexual violence justified by patriarchal property relations.[44] Jacobs's *Incidents* has also been widely regarded as a quintessential expression of black feminism for decades.[45] What has yet to be fully established, however, is that *Incidents*, as a black feminist text, also constitutes a profound contribution to the black radical tradition. When Jacobs's text is analyzed doubly as a foundational expression of black feminism as well as black radicalism, it becomes clear that the black radical tradition inaugurated by slaves articulated itself in the antebellum period through

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[44] Exemplary articulations of this argument include Angela Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* and Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

[45] Early examples of this argument include Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, and Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*.

opposition to both the racial and sexual—not just the racial—violence inherent in capitalist property relations.

This observation is significant given the fact that Robinson's account of the black radical tradition has come under critique in recent years for intrinsic masculinism. While Robinson does not disallow the possibility that women exercised black radical agency, he does not foreground women in his analysis. His discussion of black radicalism during the four-hundred-year period of chattel slavery refers to enslaved people as a monolith and his discussion of black radicalism in the twentieth century focuses on three black men (Du Bois, James, and Wright). Critiquing the work of Robinson without directly naming him, black studies scholar Ula B. Taylor has argued that histories of the black radical tradition too often ignore the contributions of black women, allowing for the reproduction of assumptions about gender that render politics the exclusive domain of men. To correct for the exclusion of women from these histories, she explores the activism of black women including Sojourner Truth and Charlotta A. Bass, radical political leaders in their own times.[46] Writing only half a decade later, political theorist H. L. T. Quan counters with the argument that critiques of Robinson for his non-attention to women fail to take into account the fact that his argument is methodologically feminist in its aspirations, for it closes by signaling its own limits and its need for further articulation with other political traditions such as feminism.[47] Literary critic Alys Eve Weinbaum has more recently identified Robinson's focus on men as space for feminist intervention, elaborating the ways in which enslaved women's insurgency against reproductive exploitation contributed to the antebellum tradition of black radicalism. Through an extended analysis of the enslaved fugitive Margaret Garner, who sought

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[46] See Ula Y. Taylor, "'Read[ing] Men and Nations': Women in the Black Radical Tradition," *Souls* 1, no. 4 (1999): 72-80.
[47] See H. L. T. Quan, "Geniuses of Resistance: Feminist Consciousness and the Black Radical Tradition," *Race and Class* 47, no. 2 (2005): 39-53.

to kill her own children rather than have them returned to slavery, Weinbaum demonstrates that feminist opposition to sexual and reproductive violence was central—not supplementary or tangential—to the development of the black radical tradition.[48]

While my argument hews closely to Weinbaum's in the sense that it considers the black feminist struggle against sexual violence to be constitutive of antebellum black radicalism (rather than secondary to it), it departs from Weinbaum in the sense that it takes up a historical record that Weinbaum, like Robinson, passes over: the historical record of slave testimony. My intervention into the feminist critique of Robinson is to note that slave narratives, as forms of slave testimony, afford insights into the black feminist sexual politics at the core of the black radical tradition that remain unavailable through the study of other texts. This black feminist sexual politics finds exemplary expression in Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

Buying Freedom

Incidents opens with a double failure. Much according to the conventions of the slave narrative, the first sentence establishes Jacobs's birth into slavery and offers Jacobs's own version of what literary scholar James Olney has called the "sketchy account of parentage" customarily presented in the genre's opening pages.[49] Whereas many slave narratives focus on the maternal lineage of the narrator (due often to uncertain paternity and the fact that the children of enslaved women inherited the legal standing of the mother), Jacobs emphasizes her paternal lineage, describing her father as a well-respected enslaved carpenter permitted to sell his labor in exchange for supporting himself and paying a two-hundred-dollar tax to his mistress annually.

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[48] See Alys Eve Weinbaum, "Gendering the General Strike," and *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery*.

[49] See James Olney, "'I Was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature," *Callaloo* 20 (1984): 46-73, quote 50.

Jacobs states that her father's "strongest wish was to purchase his children; but, though he several times offered his hard earnings for that purpose, he never succeeded" (5). The failure of Jacobs's father to buy his children parallels the failure of Jacobs's maternal grandmother to do the same. The entrepreneurial spirit of her father rivals that of her grandmother, who, as an enslaved housekeeper and accomplished baker, toiled after the completion of her household duties to produce baked goods for sale in the local market. Jacobs tells the reader that the "business proved profitable" and that her grandmother gradually "laid by a little, which was saved for a fund to purchase her children" (6). Yet her aspiration remains unfulfilled: the master of Jacobs's grandmother dies, and her offspring are split as property among his heirs. The stakes of these attempts at purchase are high, for buying a family member was one means by which that family member could be set free. Tucked into what might otherwise seem a fairly standard opening is thus a story of frustrated bids for freedom.

The framing of this opening is striking in that it places the onus of responsibility for the failed purchases on the prospective buyers rather than sellers of the enslaved children. Jacobs writes of the attempts of her father to purchase his children that "he never succeeded" (5). It goes without saying that a transaction of this type would have necessarily involved an agreement between the slaveholder who held property in the enslaved children and Jacobs's father. The exchange of commodities—in this case, the children—for money requires two parties, yet the implied second party in Jacobs's account falls largely out of the picture. The thrust of the opening would have been entirely different had Jacobs concluded that, despite her father's efforts, the mistress had never agreed to sell her property. One can easily imagine that this hypothetical alternative framing would have allowed Jacobs to leverage a critique against the slaveholding class for reluctance to relinquish the possibility of future profit harbored in the

bodies of enslaved children. Instead Jacobs frames the failure to secure a deal for his children as a marker of her father's success. The consequence of this framing, though it might at first seem harsh and even uncritical on Jacobs's part, is that it attributes agency to her father. Using the active voice to narrate her father's failed attempts to purchase his children makes the same revisionist historiographical move that Du Bois, James, and Robinson make decades later: it frames enslaved people as the agents of historical struggle for their own liberation. The "never" in "he never succeeded" suggests that her father tried more than once to buy his children's freedom, that getting his children free was for him an ongoing struggle over a period of time. Jacobs's phrasing leaves open to question why he did not succeed. It is unclear whether the absence of his success was due to the unbudging nature of a hardened mistress or some other reason. Yet the doubling of his story in that of Jacobs's grandmother suggests that the enslaved father was no exception. It raises the possibility that there was something about this particular approach to the struggle for freedom that did not work.

The following chapter opens the project of buying freedom to further suspicion. Upon the death of her mistress, Jacobs is bequeathed to the five-year-old daughter of one Doctor Flint, the slaveholder against whose tyranny Jacobs struggles until the achievement of her freedom in the final pages of the text. Along with her brother William, Jacobs is removed to the home of the doctor, whereupon their father dies, leaving the two children demoralized by his loss. William and Jacobs enter into debate about how best to continue the struggle for freedom their father had initiated on their behalf. Jacobs identifies her own position first:

> I argued that we were growing older and stronger, and that perhaps we might, before long, be allowed to hire our own time, and then we could earn money to buy our freedom.

> William declared this was much easier to say than to do; moreover, he did not intend to *buy* his freedom. We held daily controversies on this subject. (original emphasis 12)

In contrast to Jacobs, William rejects the approach to freedom taken by their father and grandmother. The basis of his rejection remains unexplained in the passage, but the emphasis Jacobs places on the word "*buy*" indicates that William felt an aversion to the practice of purchasing freedom—a practice that accedes to the capitalist rendering of the slave as a commodity who could be bought and sold.

An alternative to freedom through purchase soon presents itself in the narrative. As Jacobs illustrates it, the recurring conflict between herself and William fixates on the practice of buying freedom, with little discussion of other means of achieving liberation. Yet they quickly encounter a different approach in the example of their uncle Benjamin, close in age to Jacobs. William relays to Jacobs one afternoon that Benjamin had refused to be whipped by his master, had fought him, and had thrown him to the ground. The consequence of Benjamin's opposition to punishment was to be more punishment: a public whipping. Later that evening Benjamin communicates to Jacobs and William that he intends to skirt this punishment by taking flight to the North. He quickly makes his escape but is captured shortly thereafter, incarcerated for six months, and sold to a slave trader bound for New Orleans. Jacobs's grandmother pleads with the trader to allow her to purchase Benjamin but the trader triples Benjamin's price. The setback does little to curb her resolve—she asks a connection in New Orleans to purchase Benjamin for her, but this plan falls through because Benjamin declines to cooperate. He instead bides his time and makes a successful escape to New York (24-32). The approach to freedom that presents itself through Benjamin's story is the practice of resistance Robinson locates at the heart of the

black radical tradition: fugitivity and revolt. Benjamin revolts against the rule of his master and achieves liberation through fugitivity.

The juxtaposition of Benjamin's story with that of Jacobs's father and grandmother appears to suggest that buying freedom was a doomed endeavor. But the chapter on Benjamin's flight ends—foreshadowing the ending of *Incidents* itself—with a surprising success: the purchase of freedom for Benjamin's brother Phillip. With Benjamin's liberation secured, Jacobs's grandmother continues to store away funds until she has saved eight hundred dollars, with which she buys Phillip and sets him free (32). The purchase of Phillip anticipates the purchase of Jacobs at the end of the narrative. Having escaped to New York, Jacobs finds employment as a wet nurse for the newborn of an aristocratic woman named Mrs. Bruce. Although the Fugitive Slave Law (1850) mandated the cooperation of northerners in the capture and return of fugitives like Jacobs, Mrs. Bruce harbors the enslaved woman illegally and refuses to disclose her whereabouts to those who search for her. Jacobs successfully dodges several efforts by Dr. Flint to recapture her, but her situation remains precarious, as her fugitive freedom possesses no legal legitimacy. In the final pages of the book, Jacobs learns that Dr. Flint has died and that his impoverished son-in-law—who holds title to Jacobs through marriage to Flint's daughter—has arrived in New York to collect Jacobs. His pecuniary circumstances drive him to search for Jacobs relentlessly, and Mrs. Bruce takes it upon herself to resolve matters by offering him money in exchange for the right to property in Jacobs. He agrees and Mrs. Bruce purchases Jacobs and sets her free.

The narrative thus adheres to the tidy slavery-to-freedom arc characteristic of the slave narrative genre. The structural convention of the genre is to open with the birth of the narrator into enslavement and to end with the narrator's liberation from bondage. Literary scholar Lisa

Lowe has argued that the western genre of the autobiography is structured as a story of progress in which a narrator initially alienated from a liberal democratic society undergoes a series of transformations through which that narrator becomes reconciled to it by the end of the book. Lowe has demonstrated that, adapting this normative structure, the slave narrative traces what might be characterized not only as the protagonist's journey into freedom but the protagonist's reconciliation with the dominant social order.[50] To the extent that *Incidents* illustrates Jacobs's entrance into liberal personhood through legal manumission, it might be read as a liberal text. The abolitionist sentiment of Mrs. Bruce, who cannot bear to watch Jacobs hounded by a financially desperate master, functions as the instrument of Jacobs's freedom: the good graces of the liberal-minded woman prompt her to award Jacobs the legal freedom the enslaved woman could not achieve through fugitivity. The fact that Jacobs's freedom is bought provides neat resolution to the narrative's opening conflict. Though not through the efforts of her father or grandmother, their dream of buying Jacobs's freedom gets realized. The ending of the narrative on the successful purchase of Jacobs's formal legal emancipation seems to rectify the failures with which the narrative opens. The text might in this way be read to convey a standard liberal abolitionist message: the problem of slavery is decisively overcome through the achievement of liberal freedom and personhood for the slave.

Yet Jacobs openly disdains the purchase of her freedom. Despite her initial inclination to pursue liberation through purchase, Jacobs soon adopts a strong aversion to buying freedom, aligning herself with the position her brother William had taken from the outset. When Mrs. Bruce first proposes to pay for Jacobs and set her free, Jacobs responds by declining the offer. She states plainly that she "objected to having my freedom bought" (257) and provides the

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[50] See Lowe, "Autobiography out of Empire," in *Intimacies of Four Continents*, 43-71.

following rationale: "The more my mind had become enlightened," Jacobs writes, "the more difficult it was to consider myself an article of property" (256). Some time after Jacobs had been in the North, she receives a letter from Dr. Flint's daughter containing an ultimatum: return to the South or pay for your freedom. Jacobs does not reply to the letter but explains her reaction to it:

> It seemed not only hard, but unjust, to pay for myself. I could not possibly regard myself as a piece of property. […] My children certainly belonged to me; but though Dr. Flint had incurred no expense for their support, he had received a large sum of money for them. I knew the law would decide that I was his property, and would probably still give his daughter a claim to my children; but I regarded such laws as the regulations of robbers, who had no rights that I was bound to respect. (240)

The last line of this passage invokes the language that Chief Justice Roger B. Taney used to formulate the Supreme Court's decision in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857). Scott, an enslaved man, had filed a lawsuit against his master for maintaining a property claim to Scott after having brought him into free territory and having returned to a slave state. On appeal, the case made its way to the highest judiciary in the land, whereupon the bench ruled in favor of the defendant. In what has become one of the most infamous opinions of the court, Taney argued that black people were not meant to be included as citizens under the Constitution and that Scott, as a black man, could not therefore exercise the rights—including the First Amendment right to petition the federal government for a redress of grievances—guaranteed to citizens of the United States. In perhaps the most enduring line of this opinion, Taney argues that the black man "had no rights which the white man was bound to respect; and that the negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit."[51] Jacobs's borrowing of this language in *Incidents* produces a

[51] Dred Scott v. Sandford, 60 U.S. 393, 407 (1856).

subtle but trenchant inversion of the original sentence. Whereas Taney asserts the rightlessness of the slave, Jacobs insists on the rightlessness of the slaveholder.

The invocation of Taney puts a snag in the neat slavery-to-freedom arc ostensibly reproduced by the slave narrative. Jacobs spends no time discussing the case or its implications—in fact she does not even reference it directly. But wedging some of the period's most notorious legal language on the nonexistence of black rights into a paragraph on the question of buying freedom has the effect of calling into question the certainty that such a transaction would carry any legal weight. If black rights represent a legal impossibility, then the payment of money by Jacobs's father or grandmother—even by Jacobs herself—to Dr. Flint would fail to garner the protection of the law as a legally binding exchange. The payor would possess no legal guarantee that the slaveholder could not take the money and keep Jacobs. And, more significantly, even if the transaction succeeded, the freedom achieved through purchase would not be recognized by the Constitution of the United States. If there exists no such thing as black rights in the Constitution, then there exists no such thing as black freedom under the law. The line between slavery and freedom dissolves under Taney's proposition that "the negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit."[52] The abolitionist thesis that slavery could be overcome through the nominal accomplishment of liberal freedom appears in this light as the contradiction that it is. Liberal freedom could not reconcile the enslaved person to the existing social order so long as the existing social order was structured on the impossibility of black freedom. The invocation of Taney disrupts the easy arc of the slave narrative genre, reminding readers that the freedom Jacobs achieves in the end is little more than freedom in name.

[52] *Dred Scott*, 60 U.S. at 407.

It is significant that Jacobs not only invokes but inverts Taney's formulation. The argument that the black man "had no rights which the white man was bound to respect" articulates an exclusion of black political recognition from the liberal democratic social order of the United States. It takes for granted the legitimacy of constitutional law and the liberal political philosophies that ground it, differentiating between those who can claim protections under it (white men) and those who cannot (black people). By contrast, Jacobs's contention that slaveholders possess "no rights that I was bound to respect" articulates a rejection of the legitimacy of the liberal democratic social order altogether. The comment functions as much more than an inversion of white and black political roles. It would be one thing for Jacobs to say that, contrary to the prevailing opinion of the court, enslaved and formerly enslaved black people possess the truest entitlement to rights under the law and that slaveholders and white men should be excluded from political recognition within the republic. Such logic would merely flip the position of citizen and noncitizen within the racial hierarchy that structures the U.S. nation-state. The words of Jacobs instead suggest something more profound: her wholesale refusal of the ordering philosophical premises of liberal democracy founded on capitalist property relations.

Jacobs hints at this refusal in a passage that precedes her final sale to Mrs. Bruce. Having hid herself in her grandmother's garret for seven years to escape the sexual machinations of Dr. Flint, Jacobs prepares to flee north, and her grandmother offers to part with "all she had in the world" (193) to secure legal freedom for Jacobs. Whereas Jacobs had once taken faith in her grandmother's methods, she here narrates her firm rejection of transacting freedom through sale:

> […] in my own mind I resolved that not another cent of her hard earnings should be spent to pay rapacious slaveholders for what they call their property. And even if I had not been unwilling to buy what I already had a right to possess, common humanity would have

> prevented me from accepting the generous offer, at the expense of turning my aged relative out of her house and home, when she was trembling on the brink of the grave. (193)

The offer of her grandmother marks a moment of political reckoning for Jacobs. Faced with the decision to play into the market logic that defined liberation in monetary terms acceptable to the slaveholding class or to take her freedom into her own hands through fugitivity, Jacobs—unlike her grandmother—choses the latter. Jacobs's rejection of the thought systems by which enslaved people are rendered property is evident in the language Jacobs uses to narrate her decision: she will not pay slaveholders "for what they call their property" (193). Jacobs could have simply said that she refuses to pay slaveholders "for their property." The deliberate insertion of "what they call" produces a split between what is and what is understood to be. It draws attention to the fact that Jacobs's status as property is not an ontological but an epistemological one. The simplicity of the line belies the immensity of its implications—it is not merely her status as property that Jacobs rejects but the epistemologies that make it possible for her to be rendered as such. In the language Robinson uses, one might say that Jacobs articulates a refusal of the thought systems of European liberalism and racial capitalism.

Put in positive terms, her repudiation of her status as property ultimately makes legible what Robinson might call her black radical politics. What Jacobs rejects is the legitimacy of the liberal philosophical traditions that rationalize capitalist relations of property. Jacobs's refusal of her status as chattel becomes by the end of the narrative a persistent refrain, one that not only reveals the erroneous nature of the abolitionist presumption that she could be reconciled to the liberal democratic social order through the purchasing of nominal freedom but one that also articulates an emergent black radicalism. Her rebuff of her condition takes the form of fugitivity

and revolt: actions through which Robinson argues the black radical tradition can be traced. Jacobs revolts against the sexual demands of her master and takes flight to achieve independence from him. Jacobs, however, expresses a black radical politics through more than just her insurgent actions. If one takes for granted Robinson's formulation of black radicalism as a rejection of racial capitalism and the European liberalism that sanctioned it, one can see that Jacobs's vocal disdain for buying freedom articulates a black radical politics as well. To purchase the freedom of the self or another, the purchaser must agree to the terms that govern exchange in the capitalist marketplace. The purchaser must play by the rules of a capitalist system that transmuted enslaved people into fungible commodities and rendered them commensurable with things. The purchaser must participate in the process whereby enslaved people were assigned value, making their circulation in the market economy not only possible but easy.[53] The purchaser, moreover, must assent to the liberal structure of rights and freedoms that authorized capitalist property relations and justified the legal ownership of some by others as the natural way of the world. To buy freedom was to countenance the capitalist foundations of liberal democracy rather than to reject liberalism and capitalism entirely in favor of a radical vision of freedom. When Jacobs pushes back against freedom through purchase, in other words, she renounces capitalism and the liberal thought systems that present purchase as a pathway to emancipation. Hers is a black radical vision of liberation made possible not through capitalist exchange but through a total repudiation of the capitalist order of property.

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[53] Historian Stephanie E. Smallwood has written extensively on the process by which enslaved people were turned into commodities through trade and sale into the new world marketplace. See Smallwood, "Commodified Freedom: Interrogating the Limits of Anti-Slavery Ideology in the Early Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic* 24, no. 2 (2004): 289-98 and *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). On the question of assigning value to the enslaved, see Daina Ramey Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved, from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation* (Boston: Beacon, 2017).

The Sexual Politics of Black Radicalism

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl has been widely regarded as a black feminist text in its treatment of sexual violence. In a chapter titled "The Trials of Girlhood," one of the most frequently revisited passages in literary criticism on the text, Jacobs writes that as she entered adolescence her master began to "whisper foul words in my ear" (33) and to press her for sexual favors. Her master's sexual pursuit proving relentless, Jacobs takes up with another white man, Mr. Sands, garnering a modicum of protection from Flint by virtue of Sands's interposition. Yet Flint continues to hound Jacobs, threatening to jeopardize the lives of her children if she continues to resist his sexual demands. Knowing that the doctor will eschew responsibility for her children once he can no longer leverage their wellbeing against her, Jacobs takes flight first to her grandmother's attic and eventually to the North. By the standards of the time, Jacobs's account of enslavement takes an unprecedented and graphic look at slavery's sexual underbelly. Male-authored slave narratives had not portrayed the sexual economy of slavery in such focus and detail.[54]

Literary scholars have documented the text's sexual politics at length. According to Jean Fagan Yellin, who authenticated the text as a factual historical record (rather than fiction), *Incidents* politicizes the "forbidden topic" of sexual abuse to disrupt the putative universality of the male slave's experience and to foment abolitionism.[55] Hazel Carby treats *Incidents* as an

[54] I borrow the phrase "sexual economy" from Adrienne Davis, "'Don't Let Nobody Bother Yo' Principle': The Sexual Economy of Slavery," in *Sister Circle: Black Women and Work*, ed. Sharon Harley and the Black Women and Work Collective (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 103-27.

[55] Yellin was the first scholar to treat *Incidents* as historical record after it fell out of print post abolition. In 1981, she published findings of a cache of Jacobs's letters that legitimized the authenticity of the text. Prior to Yellin's discovery, the text had been largely dismissed as a piece of sentimental fiction. See "*Written by Herself*: Harriet Jacobs' Slave Narrative," *American Literature* 53, no. 3 (1981): 479-86. For Yellin's reading of *Incidents*, see Yellin, Introduction to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, by Harriet A. Jacobs, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin, enlarged ed. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard University Press, 2009), xxi, and Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs: A Life* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2004).

early black feminist text that reveals the epistemological erasure of sexual violence against the black woman through the presumptive whiteness of feminist politics and the presumptive masculinity of black politics. In what might be considered the overarching conclusion of a vast body of scholarship on the narrative, one critic insightfully characterizes *Incidents* as an "Ur-text" of black female sexuality under conditions of violence.[56]

Although *Incidents* has long been regarded as a black feminist text, it has rarely been read as an expression of the black radical tradition outlined by Robinson. What I want to emphasize here is the fact that the text's black feminist stance on sexual violence is precisely what constitutes the text's black radicalism. Put another way, it is exactly her revolt against racialized sexual violence that catalyzes and gives substance to the black radicalism Jacobs expresses through objection to freedom through purchase. Early in the "Trials of Girlhood" chapter, Jacobs explains that the sexual demands of her master are grounded in his property claim over her: "He told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things" (34). Read in conjunction with Jacobs's numerous subsequent references to property—her inability to consider herself as such, her outright rejection of the property rights of slaveholders in general—this sentence provides a crucial clue to the origins of Jacobs's anti-capitalist sentiment that materializes by the end of the book.

If, as I argue above, Jacobs articulates a black radical politics through her repudiation of the capitalist order of property, it must also be emphasized that she repudiates the capitalist order

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[56] The scholarship on *Incidents* is too large to cite in full here. Notable works include Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 40-61; Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe;" Valerie Smith, *Self-Discovery and Authority*, 28-43; Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 79-112; Jennifer Sharpe, *Ghosts of Slavery: A Literary Archaeology of Black Women's Lives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), xviii-xxii. Angelyn Mitchell calls *Incidents* an "Ur-text" of black female sexuality in *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 22-41.

of property because it entails not only racial but sexual violence. Her revolt against Flint represents insurgency not merely against the racial violence required to reduce her to the condition of chattel but against the sexual violence she faces as his property. Rehearsing his rhetoric—"He told me I was his property"—Jacobs makes it abundantly clear that Flint leverages his property right as a sexual right. Jacobs's resistance to Flint's sexual demands emerges as resistance to capitalism through her ultimate rejection of buying freedom to escape Flint's demands. Structurally, "Trials of Girlhood" appears immediately after the chapter in which Jacobs explains that she and her brother William disagree on the best means of achieving freedom. When Jacobs begins to narrate her sexual subjection to Flint, she has not yet revealed to the reader that she later comes to agree with William that freedom should be acquired through revolt and fugitivity rather than through purchase. The effect of this ordering is to establish a narrative chronology within which Jacobs, upon encountering Flint's sexual harassment, still favors buying her freedom over other methods. Within the narrative structure of the book, it is then in the wake of encounter with the lasciviousness of Flint that Jacobs changes her mind and finds William's methods—fugitivity and revolt—more favorable. The narrative in this way presents Flint's sexual pursuit of Jacobs as the impetus for Jacobs's shift on the issue of buying freedom. The structure of the book figures her insurgency against the sexual violence of her master as the constitutive element of what I have described as her anti-capitalist, black radical politics.

In her rehearsal of the rhetoric Flint uses to justify his right to sexual supremacy over her, Jacobs demonstrates that racial and sexual violence were endemic to capitalist property relations. And in her rejection of freedom through purchase, Jacobs rejects the racial and sexual subjection inherent in the capitalist order of property. *Incidents* thus provides an account of black radicalism

that exceeds the one formulated by Robinson. Whereas Robinson focuses on enslaved people's opposition to their racial subjection under capitalist slavery, *Incidents* articulates its black radical politics through Jacobs's revolt against capitalism as a structure of both racial and sexual domination. In the case of *Incidents*, black feminist politics are neither secondary nor supplementary to the articulation of black radicalism but constitutive of it. While not all expressions of the antebellum black radical tradition can be said to be black feminist, it is certainly the case that Jacobs's black radicalism grows out of what literary critics have for decades characterized as her black feminist sexual politics. Jacobs's black feminist rejection of both racial and sexual subjection materializes in a black radical refusal of the capitalist order of property and the liberal rights and freedoms that rationalize it.

Incidents leaves the reader with questions about what new histories of the black radical tradition might become available if slave narratives were read for the traces of black radical expression they contain. If, as the feminist critique of *Black Marxism* has established, Robinson's account of the black radical tradition renders history in masculinist terms, Jacobs's slave narrative reveals that some of the enslaved inaugurators of the black radical tradition articulated a revolutionary consciousness precisely through the refusal to accept both the racial and sexual violence necessitated by capitalist property relations. Through a reading of *Incidents*, one might begin to imagine a history of black radicalism that not only places women at the center of its formulation but more significantly highlights the interconnected forms of racial and sexual violence against which revolutionaries must struggle in order for black freedom to begin to be possible. Ultimately, it is by turning to the slave narrative and slave testimony in general, as a relatively neglected archive in the literature on the black radical tradition, that scholars may begin to uncover histories of black radicalism that have yet to be fully told.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that Cedric Robinson's account of the black radical tradition in *Black Marxism* can be elaborated through the analysis of historical records he neglects: slave narratives. I have demonstrated through a reading of one such text—Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*—that slave narratives provide a window onto the articulation of the antebellum black radical tradition through opposition to something that Robinson left unexamined, namely the sexual (in addition to the racial) violence endemic to capitalism. While it has only examined one slave narrative, this chapter proposes that revisiting slave narratives holds the potential to deepen scholarly understanding of enslaved people's contributions to the black radical tradition. Robinson frames enslaved people as the inaugurators of the black radical tradition but gives little sustained attention to the ways in which enslaved people themselves articulated this tradition through their own testimony. By taking up slave narratives and the larger archive of slave testimony consolidated through the efforts of a generation of historians in the latter half of the twentieth century, new histories of black radicalism might become possible. More significantly, by revisiting the ways in which enslaved people expressed insurgency against capitalist property relations in their own moment, one might begin to gain insight into the ways that black radical freedom struggles have laid the groundwork for the pursuit of alternatives to the capitalist order of property in our own time.

Chapter Two:
Solomon Northup and Liberal Abolitionism

Abolitionists in the antebellum United States differed over much but on one thing they usually agreed: slavery led to sexual violence. They argued that for this reason slavery needed to be abolished. They made this argument in broadsides and editorials, treatises and tracts, impromptu conversations and formal lectures. The argument appeared in personal diaries and published memoirs, literary fiction and theatrical plays. People of all gender and racial identities contributed to it and met on common ground—the sexual violence of slavery constituted a problem. The problem of sexual violence was for most abolitionists a systemic one, rooted in the legal possibility of human enslavement. The laws of slavery disallowed recognition of enslaved marriage and gave slave owners license to treat their slaves as they saw fit. No enslaved person could legally testify against a person racially white, so no enslaved victim of sexual abuse had recourse to the law for retribution or justice. The very existence of slavery, abolitionists argued, degraded the moral character of master and slave alike, leading to all manner of lewdness and indecency as well as rape, incest, adultery, concubinage, prostitution, profane displays of nudity, sexualized rituals of punishment, and more. The solution to the problem of sexual violence for most abolitionists was thus the legal abolition of slavery. If the legal permissibility of slavery led to sexual violence, the abolition of slavery by law could do away with it. The prevailing narrative in these circles was that freedom for enslaved people would overcome the sexual violence of slavery. To advocate for the end of slavery, abolitionists represented sexual violence frequently and in detail. As they did so, representational conventions emerged, the foremost of which was to frame the enslaved woman as little more than a helpless victim of horrific sexual abuse. In

figuring enslaved women as victims, abolitionists believed themselves to be fueling the antislavery cause. Far from prudish, antebellum abolitionists fixated on enslaved sex.

Yet, to date, little scholarly work has examined the abolitionist obsession with sexual violence. The sexual dimensions of enslaved subjection have been extensively documented by historians and literary scholars, especially those working in the tradition of black feminism. These scholars have demonstrated that sexual violence pervaded human bondage, that rape functioned as an instrument of terror and social control, and that sexual violation constituted a legal impossibility for those who possessed no lawfully-recognized will with which to refuse consent.[1] There also exists a rich body of scholarship on the history of abolitionism, particularly

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[1] For the argument that rape functions as an instrument of terror, see Angela Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," *Black Scholar* 3, no. 4 (1971): 2-15, and Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* [1981] (New York: Vintage, 1983). For the argument about the legal impossibility of rape in the context of slavery, see Saidiya Hartman, "Seduction and the Ruses of Power," *Callaloo* 19, no. 2 (1996): 537-60, and Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). Additional important studies of slavery and sexual violence include Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975); Darlene Clarke Hine, "Female Slave Resistance: The Economics of Sex," *Western Journal of Black Studies* 3, no. 2 (1979): 123-27; Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* [1985] (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1999); Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64-81; Nell Irvin Painter, *Soul Murder and Slavery* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 1995); Darlene Clarke Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," *Signs* 4, no. 4 (1989): 912-20; Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* [1997] (New York: Vintage, 1999); Edward E. Baptist, "'Cuffy,' 'Fancy Maids,' and 'One-Eyed Men': Rape, Commodification, and the Domestic Slave Trade in the United States," *American Historical Review* 106, no. 5 (2001): 1619-50; Adrienne Davis, "'Don't Let Nobody Bother Yo' Principle': The Sexual Economy of Slavery," in *Sister Circle: Black Women and Work*, ed. Sharon Harley and the Black Women and Work Collective (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 103-27; Nell Irvin Painter, *Southern History Across the Color Line* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Sharon Block, *Rape and Sexual Power in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Thomas A. Foster, "The Sexual Abuse of Black Men under Slavery," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20, no. 3 (2011): 445-64; Brenda E. Stevenson, "What's Love Got to Do with It?: Concubinage and Enslaved Women and Girls in the Antebellum South," *Journal of African American History* 98, no. 1 (2013): 99-125; bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Jennifer Brier, Jim Downs, and Jennifer L. Morgan, eds., *Connexions: Histories of Race and Sex in North America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016); Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Sowande' M. Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016); Daina Ramey Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved, from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation* (Boston: Beacon, 2017); Sasha Turner, *Contested Bodies: Pregnancy, Childrearing, and Slavery in Jamaica* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); Daina Ramey Berry and Leslie M. Harris, eds., *Sexuality and Slavery: Reclaiming Intimate Histories in the*

as it appeared in the United States and in relation to the development of the women's rights movement. This scholarship shows that abolitionism was a multifaceted social and political formation characterized by a range of competing ideologies and discourses led first and foremost by enslaved people themselves, not their white counterparts. It moreover teaches that it is impossible to think the history of the abolitionist struggle for black liberation outside of its connections to early feminism.[2] Yet, with a few notable exceptions, this rich genealogy of scholarship has yet to fully embrace the insights of work on the sexual violence of slavery.[3] It has tended to treat sexual violence, when it does so at all, as a concern of secondary rather than central importance to the movement for slavery's abolition. The result has been not only a limited historical account of the antebellum period, its politics, and the social protests that defined it, but also an incomplete understanding of the epistemology of abolitionism itself. In this chapter, I bring the study of sexual violence to the history of abolition to make two observations: first, that, contrary to the notion of prohibitively rigid nineteenth-century standards

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Americas (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2018); Lamonte Aidoo, *Slavery Unseen: Sex, Power, and Violence in Brazilian History* (Durham Duke University Press, 2018); Alys Eve Weinbaum, *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery: Biocapitalism and Black Feminism's Philosophy of History* (Durham Duke University Press, 2019).

[2] There are far too many works on abolitionism to include a comprehensive list here. Scholarship I have consulted in the writing of this chapter includes Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969); David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* [1975] (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Shirley J. Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828-1860* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992); Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne, eds., *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1994); Julie Roy Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Richard S. Newman, *The Transformations of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Robin Blackburn, *American Crucible: Slavery, Emancipation, and Human Rights* (New York: Verso, 2011); Andrew Delbanco, *The Abolitionist Imagination* (New York, Harvard University Press, 2012); Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); and Holly Jackson, *American Radicals: How Nineteenth-Century Protest Shaped the Nation* (New York: Crown, 2019). Though not a book-length study, Sarah Haley's keyword essay on abolition has contributed to the concept of abolitionism developed here. See Haley, "Abolition," in *Keywords for African American Cultural Studies*, ed. Erica R. Edwards, Roderick A. Ferguson, and Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 9-14.

[3] I am thinking here especially of Davis's *Women, Race, and Class* and Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection*.

of decorum, graphic representations of sex recur throughout the record of abolitionist discourse and, second, that concern over sexual violence structured the very logic of dominant abolitionist thought.[4] Abolitionists talked a lot about sex because most of them believed that the pervasiveness of sexual violence under slavery constituted one of the strongest arguments for emancipation. The prevailing logic of abolitionism was that by granting enslaved people freedom, the nation could eliminate the abominable sexual abuses so often visited upon them. Freedom, in the minds of most abolitionists, would overcome not only slavery but the sexual violence that arose from it.

Twelve Years a Slave, the 1853 narrative of the life of one Solomon Northup, disrupts this logic. While it adopts many of the representational conventions of mainstream abolitionism, especially in that it frames enslaved women as victims of sexual abuse, it also reveals the internal contradictions of the dominant abolitionist movement. In this chapter, I argue that *Twelve Years* makes visible the limits of what I call "liberal abolitionism," the hegemonic formation of antislavery thought throughout the antebellum period. It does so precisely through its representation of the sexualized whipping of an enslaved woman named Patsey, who had been subject to rape at the hands of her master, spite at the hands of her mistress, and punishment for resisting either. Representations of such sexualized rituals of torture were, by the common practice of the day, meant to make the most powerful case in favor of liberal abolitionism. They were meant to persuade audiences that freedom for the slave, understood as the legal abolition of the possibility of human bondage, was urgently necessary in order to overcome the sexual

[4] Though a sustained study of the discourse of sex in relation to slavery has yet to be produced, the arguments that Foucault makes about Victorian society apply in the antebellum U.S. context as well. Foucault argues that, contrary to the idea that Victorians seldom spoke of sex due to a dominant culture of decorum, Victorian society was obsessed with sex and spoke of it so frequently that it produced a "veritable discursive explosion" around it. See Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* [1976], trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), quote 17.

violence of slavery. Yet the whipping of Patsey in *Twelve Years* accomplishes something different: it demonstrates that the legal dissolution of slavery would not and could not do away with racialized sexual harm. Framed in the narrative as the right of some to exercise autonomy over others without legal retribution, liberal freedom would rather constitute the ongoing condition of possibility for and the expression of racial and sexual violence in the wake of emancipation. So long as liberal abolitionism advocated only for the stripping away of legal bondage and not the dismantling of liberal freedom itself, the sexual violence of slavery would continue under other names. In what follows, I advance this argument in three parts. The first section draws on archival research to make the case that *Twelve Years* adheres to many conventions of abolitionist discourse and should be read as an abolitionist text. The second provides evidence for the pervasiveness of attention to sexual violence in antislavery protest and documents the liberal abolitionist practice of framing enslaved women as sexual abuse victims. Finally, through a close reading of Northup's narrative, the third section elaborates the primary argument of the chapter: that *Twelve Years* powerfully reveals the limits of liberal abolitionism.

Twelve Years **as Abolitionist Text**

Sexual violence pervades *Twelve Years a Slave*. Early in the narrative Northup recounts his introduction to Eliza, who, arrayed in silk and gold, enters the slave pen where he is detained. In explanation of her luxurious apparel Northup reveals that Eliza had for nine years been the enslaved mistress of her master. This slaveholder had decked Eliza in finery, built her a house of her own, and fathered her daughter Emily. After nearly a decade, for reasons unnamed, his property was split among his family. Both mother and daughter were sold. Eliza is the first of several with similar stories to appear in the text. While enslaved on the Epps plantation, Northup

labors in the fields alongside a bankrupt slave owner named Armsby, who had "made a wife of his slave Charlotte," and an enslaved woman named Patsey, who stole frequent visits to Harriet Shaw, the "black wife" of the neighboring plantation owner.[5] Repeated reference to these informal (because not legally binding) marital unions communicates their prevalence throughout the slaveholding South. Yet the sexual arrangements of slavery did not always take the form of improvised matrimony. Emily, upon separation from her mother, was reserved for the fancy trade, a subset of the slave economy centered around the buying and selling of young, usually fair-skinned, mixed-race enslaved women for the purposes of sexual exploitation (58). Another bondwoman, Maria, awaited the same fate at the time she met Northup (41). By contrast, a dress of "coarse cotton" worn by the truant Celeste suggested to Northup that she held the standing of neither enslaved fancy nor mistress. But she did possess skin "far whiter than her owner," a feature perhaps noteworthy to Northup given the possibility that, like Emily, her owner may have also been her father (186). And whatever her parentage, Patsey faced routine sexual assault at the hands of her master. The stories of these women—especially Eliza, Emily, and Patsey—paint a vivid picture of the sexual violence of southern slave society.

The text represents Eliza in relation to her experience of sexual violence from the moment she appears. The framing of the enslaved woman suggests that the most salient feature of her character is her sexual history, and its subtle wording communicates that this history was violent. The lines that introduce her are laden with implications of force and coercion:

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[5] Throughout this chapter, I use the authoritative version of the text edited by historians Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon, who in 1968 fact-checked the narrative and rereleased it for publication after it had fallen out of print in 1856. See Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave* [1853], ed. Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), quotes 176 (on Charlotte) and 195 (on Harriet Shaw). References to the text hereafter appear parenthetically.

> She was the slave of Elisha Berry, a rich man, living in the neighborhood of Washington. She was born, I think she said, on his plantation. Years before, he had fallen into dissipated habits, and quarreled with his wife. […] Leaving his wife and daughter in the house they had always occupied, he erected a new one near by, on the estate. Into this house he brought Eliza; and, on condition of her living with him, she and her children were to be emancipated. (30-31)

Nowhere in this brief sketch does Eliza appear a willing participant. The phrasing of the sentence that identifies a change in her living situation—"Into this house he brought Eliza"—places her in the grammatical position of the object, one acted upon rather than acting. Were this deliberate syntax insufficient to communicate the fact of rape, Northup indicates that the move took the form of an ultimatum: she must agree to the slaveholder's sexual demands or else forfeit the possibility of freedom for herself and her children. The chronology established by the opening lines complicates the story of Eliza's sexual assault further. Had Eliza in fact been born on Berry's plantation well after Berry had "fallen into dissipated habits"—such as engaging in forced sexual liaisons with his slaves—it is quite possible that Eliza was of his own lineage. The text leaves open the possibility that her victimization was not just rape but a form of sexual abuse considered as much, if not more, taboo: incest.

If Eliza captures one part of sex under slavery, her daughter Emily captures another. Upon removal from the pen, Northup and Eliza are flushed into the New Orleans slave trade and purchased by a planter named William Ford. Impending separation from her daughter leads Eliza to beg Ford to buy Emily as well. When Ford inquires after her price, the trader withdraws Emily from sale in language that indicates her sexual commodification:

> He would not sell her then on any account whatsoever. There were heaps and piles of money to be made of her, he said, when she was a few years older. There were men enough in New-Orleans who would give five thousand dollars for such an extra, handsome, fancy piece as Emily would be, rather than not get her. (58)

This passage contains one of the most frequently cited antebellum references to the fancy trade, that part of the market in slaves that transacted explicitly in sex.[6] The dependence of slavery on the reproductive labor of enslaved women meant that many faced the possibility of sexual assault during their lifetimes. Rape functioned as an instrument by which slaveholders sought to obtain control of the womb and reproduce the labor force of the plantation.[7] Yet the fancy trade turned on the commercialization of sex as an end in itself. Rape in this setting served primarily as an instrument of pleasure, what Saidiya Hartman has called "the full enjoyment of the slave as a thing" by the master.[8] In the context of the market in "fancies," it was not the reproductive capacity of an enslaved woman so much as it was her value as an object of sexual desire that drove the accumulation of capital. Financial speculation structured the trade: dealers took risks on enslaved girls like Emily in hopes that they would soon command sexual rivalry among white men in the form of competitive monetary bids. In the complexions of slaves, in other words, brokers saw the possibility of future profit.[9] Narrating the story of Emily, the text makes it possible to see that this "would be" vision of traders entailed sexual violence not only in the future but also in the present. Sexual violence inhered not just in the anticipated act of intimate

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[6] See, for example, White, *Ar'n't I a Woman*, 38, and Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 113.

[7] The fact of slave breeding has been widely studied. A few notable works include Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role," Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*; Morgan, *Laboring Women*; Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Saidiya Hartman, "The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors," *Souls* 18, no. 1 (2016): 166-73; Turner, *Contested Bodies*; and Weinbaum, *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery*.

[8] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 86.

[9] For elaboration on this point, see Baptist, "'Cuffy,' 'Fancy Maids,' and 'One-Eyed Men'."

brutality but the immediate act of speculating on the potential of an enslaved person to yield profit as an object of sexual enjoyment.

The libidinal calculus of the fancy trade constitutes only a portion of the sexual violence represented in the narrative. *Twelve Years* develops its most sustained account of slavery's sexual economy through the story of Patsey. Northup meets Patsey on his sale to Edwin Epps, a Louisiana planter who embodies the dissipated and despotic face of the slaveholding South. Northup describes Epps as a conniving, drunken brute given to lascivious habits. Just as the owner of Eliza subjected her to an ongoing sexual relationship, so too does Epps subject Patsey. Northup so consistently reminds readers that the twenty-three-year-old occupies the focus of her master's desire that the text all but flattens her historical person into a symbol of sexual victimization. Northup remarks that:

> Patsey wept oftener, and suffered more, than any of her companions. She had been literally excoriated. Her back bore the scars of a thousand stripes; not because she was backward in her work, nor because she was of an unmindful and rebellious spirit, but because it had fallen to her lot to be the slave of a licentious master and a jealous mistress. She shrank before the lustful eye of the one, and was in danger even of her life at the hands of the other, and between the two, she was indeed accursed. […] The enslaved victim of lust and hate, Patsey had no comfort of her life. (143)

This description of Patsey contains an internal tension, for it at once presents her situation as exceptional and thoroughly ordinary. Northup distinguishes the enslaved woman with comparative adjectives: Patsey wept "oftener" and suffered "more." Such language constitutes the violence against her relationally, situating Patsey alongside her unfree peers in order to stress the degree to which the severity of her subjection exceeded theirs. Framing Patsey in relation to

other slaves emphasizes the extraordinary magnitude of ill treatment she faced. Yet Northup locates Patsey at the nexus of another set of relations, one so frequently denounced by antislavery advocates that it had become an abolitionist trope: the triangulation of the "licentious master," the "jealous mistress," and the "enslaved victim" of both.[10] What the text signals with these terms is less the historical specificity or extremity of Patsey's situation than how it fits a familiar paradigm. Within this different framework, in which she is understood in relation to members of the slaveholding class, Patsey appears as one of many enslaved women, caught between predatory desire and punitive spite, so countless in number that the very typicality of her situation was understood to constitute an argument for the end of slavery. The narrative's representation of Patsey turns her, along with Eliza and Emily, into another variation of a recurring stock character in the abolitionist imagination: the enslaved female victim of sexual violence.

The point of this observation—that *Twelve Years* represents enslaved women as sexual victims—is not in any way to deny the historical reality of their subjection but to raise questions about the function that such representations served in the context of the antislavery movement. Whatever the differences in their circumstances, the text makes it clear that Eliza, Emily, and Patsey held the experience of sexual trauma in common. Its portrayal of these three invites readers to consider the purpose of so insistently drawing notice to enslaved women's victimization in a narrative ostensibly dedicated to the recounting of Northup's own life in bondage. It is impossible to deduce authorial intent—why Northup or his editor (or both) chose to represent Eliza, Emily, and Patsey in this way and the extent to which they did so purposefully is not ultimately available to the reader today. I am therefore less interested in their motives as

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[10] Scholars have treated this configuration at length. See especially Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood* and Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe."

producers of the text than I am in the literary conventions of dominant abolitionism within which they had to write in order to make Northup's story legible to a liberal reading public. The norm of abolitionist literature at the time was to represent bondwomen as little more than targets of the sexual rapaciousness of slaveholders. Antislavery advocates rehearsed sensationalized accounts of rape, incest, prostitution, concubinage, and adultery to illustrate not just the extreme brutality of slavery but its sexual enormities. They believed that framing bondwomen like Eliza, Emily, and Patsey as helpless victims would incentivize readers to take political action. The more scandalous the image of slavery, the more persuasive the call to end it. Sexual violence against enslaved women was thus routinely tooled to abolitionist ends—it was represented in ways that would provoke moral outrage to garner support for the abolitionist cause. As much as they serve as records of individual women, then, the stories of Eliza, Emily, and Patsey also function as records of abolitionist conventions of representation.

Throughout this chapter, I discuss how *Twelve Years*, the text—as opposed to Northup, the author—adheres to abolitionist conventions precisely because the authorship of the text can be called into question. To date it remains unclear whether Northup put the narrative to paper himself. What is clear is that Northup produced the book through collaborative effort with David Wilson, an upstate-New-York attorney and politician. By the time of Northup's return to freedom, Wilson had gained smalltime recognition for his chops as an author and poet. His connections to those in Northup's immediate circle made him a likely collaborator on the narrative. The two began work in early 1853 and they worked fast. By mid-July the book had left the press.[11] But they never recorded the details of their working relationship. In the preface to the

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[11] See Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon, Introduction to *Twelve Years a Slave* [1853], edited by Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), ix-xxiv, cited material xiv; and David Fiske, Clifford W. Brown, and Rachel Seligman, *Solomon Northup: The Complete Story of* Twelve Years a Slave (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2013), 112-4.

book Wilson identifies himself as an "editor" who sought to "give a faithful history of Solomon Northup's life, as he received it from his lips" (xxxvii). The statement indicates that Northup told Wilson his story but leaves to speculation the dynamic that existed between them and the extent to which Wilson manipulated the language set down in ink. Wilson states he had anticipated a smaller book but found it necessary to "extend it to its present length" (xxxvii) in order to include all the details Northup communicated. This admission suggests that Wilson sought to present everything Northup told him in largely unaltered form. The image of Northup in the preface is that of an eager autobiographer with words ready for the page. But other sources from the period presume—likely based on the racialized assumption that Northup was incapable of producing so full and coherent a narrative himself—that Wilson had to ply him with questions in order to gather enough material for the book. An advertisement for it in the *New York Times* surmises that some "competent person" must have "been at pains to elicit from the rescued negro a full story of his life and sufferings"—a conjecture that figures Northup as unforthcoming and attributes to Wilson a large hand in shaping the narrative.[12] Northup's robust lecture tour in the wake of the book's publication contravenes the image of one slow to divulge information and at a loss for words. Yet who took what role in the production of the text and how much of the language belongs to Northup endures as a matter of dispute.

A few scholars have attempted to parse Northup's contributions from Wilson's by analyzing the literary voice of the narrative. Historians Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon, who fact-checked the text and returned it to publication in 1968, argue that the "prose style of the narrative clearly belongs to Wilson."[13] After *Twelve Years*, Wilson published several more books, all

[12] "Forthcoming Books," *New York Times*, April 22, 1853, 3.
[13] Eakin and Logsdon, Introduction, xiv.

sensational stories revolving around persons of regional interest like Northup.[14] The phrasing and composition of *The Life of Jane McCrea* (1853) and *Henrietta Robinson* (1855) bear so strong a resemblance to that of *Twelve Years*, Eakin and Logsdon conclude, that the latter must have been written predominantly in Wilson's voice.[15] The strongest piece of evidence for their case they do not include, namely, *Three Years Among the Camanches* (1859), a captivity narrative Wilson later produced in conjunction with a poor white man named Nelson Lee, who had purportedly been held hostage by an indigenous tribe in the Great Plains of Texas.[16] Upon his return, Wilson collaborated with Lee to publish his story. Of the three books, *Three Years* possesses the strongest likeness to *Twelve Years* not only on account of its titular structure, its related content (both are captivity narratives), and its first-person mode of narration (*Jane McCrea* and *Henrietta Robinson* use third-person), but the striking similarities between the editorial prefaces of each text. Each contains a defense of the narrative's veracity in language that overlaps: Wilson says of *Twelve Years* that its pages are "corroborated by abundant evidence" (xxxvii) and of the stories in *Three Years* that the "[e]vidences corroborating them are abundant" (iv). Wilson explains that he recorded Northup's story "as he received it from his lips" (xxxvii). He likewise says of Lee's story:

> The narrative has been recorded, as received from his lips, from day to day, not precisely in his own words, inasmuch as he is not an educated, though an intelligent man, but his history is told substantially as he relates it. (iv)

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[14] These include *The Life of Jane McCrea, with an Account of Burgoyne's Expedition in 1777* (New York: Baker, Godwin & Co., 1853); *Henrietta Robinson* (New York: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855); and *Three Years Among the Camanches, The Narrative of Nelson Lee, the Texan Ranger, Containing a Detailed Account of His Captivity Among the Indians, His Singular Escape Through the Instrumentality of His Watch, and Fully Illustrating Indian Life as It Is on the War Path and in the Camp* (Albany: Baker Taylor, 1859).

[15] See Eakin and Logsdon, Introduction, xiii-iv.

[16] *Three Years Among the Camanches* has tended to evade its link to Wilson. Likely due to his role as amanuensis for Lee, Wilson is not listed as the author of the publication. However, the obituary of his death refers to him as the writer of the text. See "Death of David Wilson," *Albany Evening Journal*, June 10, 1870, 2.

The continuities in phrasing between the prefaces might be read as evidence in support of the claim that *Twelve Years* takes the voice of Wilson. If Wilson recorded the story of Lee "not precisely in his own words," one might conjecture that he did the same when recording the story of Northup.[17]

But the fact that Wilson made a point of specifying his departure from the language of Lee suggests that *Twelve Years* might contain more of Northup's voice than Eakin and Logsdon allow. It is quite possible that Wilson did not mark the degree to which he altered Northup's words because he altered them very little. A recent study of Northup's life—described by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. as the "best current biography" of Northup—takes this position, preferring a reading of *Twelve Years* that attributes its language to the autobiographer rather than the amanuensis.[18] Whereas formerly enslaved narrators like Frederick Douglass tended to narrate slavery in generalities, *Twelve Years* describes bondage in detail: it names people and places, characterizes manufacturing and agricultural processes meticulously, elaborates the routines of daily plantation life in depth, and offers nuanced accounts of Northup's enslavers and fellow captives. None of this information, much of which has been verified, could have come from Wilson—it was Northup who possessed firsthand knowledge of these particularities.[19]

Contemporary reviews of the book noted its unique content and called attention to the composition of the narrative. The *Rochester Daily Democrat* observed that the narrative offers a

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[17] A local advertisement for a lecture by Northup supports this conjecture. Correcting a previous announcement for the lecture that had referred to Northup as the author of *Twelve Years*, the ad states: "This is the Solomon Northup who is the *hero*, but (we suppose) not literally the *author*, of the Narrative referred to. In this lecture, we understand, he tells his own story, in his own way; and as he is a plain, uneducated man, it will probably be all the more interesting." See the editorial page in the *Syracuse Evening Chronicle*, January 30, 1854, 2, original emphasis.
[18] For the biography, see Fiske et al., *Solomon Northup*. For the appraisal of the book by Gates, see the Afterword to *Twelve Years a Slave* [1853], ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Penguin, 2012), 231-42, quote 241.
[19] Ira Berlin makes this point in his Introduction to the 2012 Penguin Books edition of the text. See Berlin, "Solomon Northup: A Life and a Message," Introduction to *Twelve Years a Slave* [1853], ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Penguin, 2012), xxv-xxxv, cited material xxvi-vii. Fiske et al. make this point as well in *Solomon Northup*, 113.

"great deal of information" concerning slavery and that it does so in a "simple, manly and straight forward style."[20] Other papers concurred. The *Detroit Tribune* called the book a "simple unvarnished tale" and the *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser* called it a "plain and simple statement" of Northup's experience.[21] Descriptions of the text's literary style match descriptions of Northup's oratorical manner. The *Vermont Tribune* commented on Northup's "unaffected simplicity, directness, and gentlemanly bearing" on the abolitionist lecture circuit.[22] A letter to the editor of the *Liberator* emphasized the power of hearing Northup speak in his "clear, manly, straight-forward way," and an ad in the *Syracuse Evening Chronicle* invited readers to witness the "simple and unvarnished way" he recounted his twelve years of enslavement.[23] To the extent that contemporary audiences found the prose and rhetorical approach of the text to match that which Northup used when he spoke, it is likely that Northup dictated his story to Wilson and that Wilson made few changes to it. But parsing the voice of one from the other is ultimately an impossible task. What can be staked with certainty is that the text—whoever's words it may be—adheres to abolitionist conventions in its representation of sexual violence.[24]

Claiming that *Twelve Years* exemplifies abolitionist representational practice might seem ill-founded given that it does not espouse abolitionist politics. Many works by formerly enslaved people endorse the abolition of slavery openly, but nowhere does *Twelve Years* make its political commitments so plain. Northup bookends the memoir with a nearly identical refusal to expound on the ethics of human bondage. He tells readers at the start that he relates only facts, "leaving it

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[20] See "Solomon Northup's Narrative," *Rochester Daily Democrat*, August 16, 1853, 2.
[21] See *Detroit Tribune* and *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, quoted in "Twelve Years a Slave! 'Truth Stranger Than Fiction'," *Liberator*, August 26, 1853, 3, and *Frederick Douglass's Paper*, August 26, 1853, 4.
[22] See "A Speech by a 'Chattel'," quoted in *Frederick Douglass's Paper*, March 3, 1854, 2.
[23] See Henry C. Wright, "Solomon Northup," *Liberator*, March 23, 1855, 3, and the *Syracuse Evening Chronicle*, February 2, 1854, 2.
[24] Throughout the remainder of the chapter, when I speak of Northup doing or saying something in *Twelve Years*, I refer to Northup the narrator as he is represented within the pages of the text, not necessarily the historical person Northup himself.

for others to determine" the moral integrity of slavery (3). He defers judgment again at the end: "I have no comments to make on the subject of Slavery. Those who read this book may form their own opinions" (252). This refusal was of such note that one paper made it front-page news: the *Oneida Weekly Herald* reported that the narrative contains "no episodes or by-discussions of the merits of slavery. It leaves the reader, *in light of the facts narrated*, to make his own comments and deduce his own conclusions."[25] The performative neutrality of the text is striking given that Northup devoted so much time to the abolitionist lecture circuit. After hearing Northup's benefactor recount the trials of "Sol," none other than the famed ex-slave abolitionist Frederick Douglass proposed that Northup go on tour and share his story.[26]

Northup did just that. Announcements of appearances by Northup trace his movements throughout upstate New York and New England, from Albany and Buffalo to Montpelier and Boston.[27] One paper reports that, at an antislavery event in Syracuse, he shared the stage with congressman and former presidential candidate Gerrit Smith as well as Frederick Douglass himself.[28] Northup's politics appear devoted to the antislavery cause if for no other reason than that he spoke widely on the abolitionist circuit and associated himself publicly with prominent figures in the campaign to end slavery. Not everyone, however, attended these lectures or could be won to the cause by abolitionist pontification. The refusal to claim an abolitionist politics directly in the text, then, might indicate an attempt to make the book a compelling indictment of slavery rather than a condemnation of it outright. By disavowing ostensible bias, *Twelve Years* could pretend to let the magnitude of slavery's violence speak for itself. Taking up this strategy,

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[25] "Solomon Northup's Book," *Oneida Weekly Herald*, July 26, 1853, 1; original emphasis.
[26] Douglass published this proposal in a report on a lecture he attended at Port Byron, NY. See Douglass, "Port Byron," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, July 29, 1853, 2.
[27] See Fiske et al., *Solomon Northup*, 117-18, 155-58.
[28] See "Jerry Rescue Celebration," *Wesleyan*, October 6, 1853, 3.

the narrative perhaps sought to sneak an abolitionist message past the defenses of readers for whom vociferous exhortation was less an effective mode of persuasion than a dispassionate account of facts.

Yet another explanation is equally possible. The nonpartisan stance of the book in fact mirrors the moderate political stance of its editor. The amanuenses of other formerly enslaved autobiographers often possessed reputations as leading activists and publicized the books they edited from their own highly visible abolitionist platforms.[29] But David Wilson maintained no formal connections to the antislavery movement. At the time he met Northup, Wilson had recently turned to writing and politics after working for a decade as a lawyer in Whitehall, New York. His first book, *Life in Whitehall: A Tale of the Ship Fever Times*, had appeared serially in a local weekly before finding publication as a single volume in 1849.[30] In 1852 Wilson represented Washington County in the seventy-fifth session of the New York State Legislature. Two years later he was tendered a nomination to Congress but turned it down in favor of literary pursuits. During these years he published three more works, including *Twelve Years*.[31] From 1858-59 he served as the Clerk of the New York State Assembly, officiating the eight-first session of the Legislature. He took appointment as the Deputy Clerk of the New York State Court of Appeals

[29] William Lloyd Garrison did as much for Frederick Douglass as did Lydia Maria Child for Harriet Jacobs. See Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* [1845], in *Frederick Douglass: Autobiographies* (New York: Library of America, 1994), 1-102; and Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, ed. Lydia Maria Child [1861], enlarged ed., ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard University Press, 2009).
[30] The book deals with the typhus fever epidemic that broke out in New York in 1847 due to the influx of Irish immigration during the Great Famine years. See Wilson, *Life in Whitehall: A Tale of the Ship Fever Times* (Whitehall, NY: Southmayd & Buel, 1849).
[31] According to his obituary, he had started a fourth one, a history provisionally titled “Six Nations, but never completed it. See “Death of David Wilson,” *Albany Evening Journal*.

in 1861 and held that office for three years before retiring from government altogether and opening a brewery.[32]

Over the course of his career, Wilson held numerous party ties. At the time of his collaboration with Northup, he likely belonged to the Whig Party, which was split on the question of slavery and dissolved in the early 1850s over internal debates about the expansion of slavery to the territories.[33] Regarding the position of Wilson himself, one local newspaper speculated in 1853 that "he may be antislavery—somewhat conservative."[34] Another paper reported in 1859 that, during a local election, Wilson supported the ticket of the Republican Party, well known for its staunch antislavery politics.[35] Whatever the case, it appears that Wilson preferred to keep his thoughts about slavery to himself. Perhaps when collaborating on the narrative, Wilson asked Northup to abstain from endorsing one side of the slavery debate. The extent to which Northup's politics diverged from Wilson's remains uncertain. What can be said is that *Twelve Years* took an odd tact for a narrative of one formerly enslaved—it refused to make an explicit call for the end of slavery.

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[32] For biographical information on Wilson, see Eakin and Logsdon, Introduction, xiii-iv; Fiske et al., *Solomon Northup*, 112; "Death of David Wilson," *Albany Evening Journal*; Franklin B. Hough, *The New-York Civil List* (Albany: Weed, Parsons & Co., 1858), 244; Wm. D. Murphy, *Biographical Sketches of the State Officers and Members of the Legislature of the State of New York, in 1858* (Albany: J. Munsell, 1858), 246.

[33] It appears that Wilson, at the time he met Northup, was a Whig; see Eakin and Logsdon, Introduction, xiii. It also appears that he subsequently joined the American Party and then, when that party dissolved, the Republicans. In a letter published in an upstate-New-York paper, Wilson explains in 1859 that he can no longer count himself a member of the American Party; see "Letter from Hon. David Wilson," *Washington County Post*, November 4, 1859, 2. The Whig Party had emerged during the 1830s in opposition to then President Andrew Jackson of the Democratic Party. The question of slavery's expansion to the territories split the Whig Party in the 1850s. The 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act, which allowed the newly formed territories to legalize slavery by popular vote, cleaved the Whigs as Northern and Southern members took opposite sides in relation to the bill. As the party disbanded, some fled to Republican Party ranks while others joined the emerging American Party. For more on these political histories, see Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know-Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) and Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2005).

[34] See review by John Thomson, "Solomon Northup; or, Twelve Years a Slave," *Essex County Republican*, August 13, 1853, 2.

[35] See "Letter from Hon. David Wilson," *Washington County Post*.

It did not need to in order to turn a profit. By mid-century, demand for sensational stories of slavery had exploded. Only a year before the publication of Northup's book Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) had sold 300,000 copies in the United States and upwards of a million abroad. The bestseller epitomized a trend. It exemplified what audiences wanted to read and by extension what they would buy. This point was lost on neither Northup nor Wilson: *Twelve Years* could ride the coattails of *Uncle Tom's* success. The narrative went to press with an ostentatious dedication to Harriet Beecher Stowe. Eakin and Logsdon read the book's inscription as "an obvious attempt to capitalize on the phenomenal success of her novel"—an attempt that in a literal sense paid off. The first run of eight thousand copies sold out in a month and within three years that number had tripled.[36] Early reviews of Northup's narrative likened it to Stowe's novel. The *Albany Evening Journal* published an editorial on *Twelve Years* under the headline "Uncle Tom's Cabin—No. 2" and referred to Northup's memoir as "'Uncle Tom's Cabin' without its Romance."[37] William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator* and Frederick Douglass's *Paper* ran several reviews on the book, more than a few of which mentioned Stowe's work directly. "Next to Uncle Tom's Cabin," a critic for the *Detroit Tribune* raved, "the extraordinary Narrative of Solomon Northup is the most remarkable book that was ever issued from the American Press."[38] Even prior to the publication of the narrative, newspapers linked the writing of Northup and Stowe. An article in the *New York Times* noted a parallel: "The condition of this colored man during the nine years he was in the hands of EPPES, was of a character nearly approaching that described by Mrs. Stowe, as the condition of 'Uncle Tom' while in that

[36] See Eakin and Logsdon, Introduction, xiv.
[37] See "'Uncle Tom's Cabin.'—No. 2," *Albany Evening Journal*, July 18, 1853, 2.
[38] See *Detroit Tribune*, quoted in "Twelve Years a Slave! 'Truth Stranger Than Fiction'," *Liberator*, August 26, 1853, 3 and *Frederick Douglass's Paper*, August 26, 1853, 4.

region."[39] Perhaps the most telling indication of an association between the two texts took the form of a diminutive appellation: one reviewer repeatedly referred to Solomon Northup as "Uncle Sol."[40]

Linkages between *Twelve Years* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* followed Northup beyond the publication of his book. Less than a year after its release, the press picked up rumors that a dramatization of *Twelve Years* had entered rehearsals, that the National Theater in Syracuse would host the debut production on April 26, 1854, and that Northup would play himself in the lead role.[41] Wilson had left the picture and Northup worked in collaboration with a playwright named Mr. Kemble. As before, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* served as a model of success. Though not authorized by Stowe herself, dramatic renderings of her novel—colloquially known as "Tom shows"—had achieved immense popularity and drew enormous crowds nationwide.[42] Early announcements of Northup's play appeared alongside ads for performances based on Stowe's fiction.[43] And, once again, reviewers would not allow Northup's work to escape Stowe's shadow. It did not help that both plays ran at the National Theater concurrently. Many critics had preferred Northup's story to Stowe's when it had appeared in print, but the opposite was true when it appeared on stage. One paper noted that the dramatization of *Twelve Years* was too short compared to that of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Following the first night of Northup's show an

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[39] See "The Kidnapping Case: Narrative of the Seizure and Recovery of Solomon Northrup," *New York Times*, January 20, 1853, 1.
[40] See John Thompson, "Solomon Northup; or, Twelve Years a Slave," 2.
[41] See the editorial page in the *Syracuse Daily Standard*, April 20, 1854, 2, and April 24, 1854, 2, as well as the editorial page in the *Rome Daily Sentinel*, April 25, 1854, 2.
[42] For more on "Tom shows" and the production of these performances, see Eric Lott, "Uncle Tomitudes: Racial Melodrama and Modes of Production," in *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* [1993] (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 218-41. For a discussion of the adaptations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for the stage and eventually the screen, as well as the copyright infringement lawsuit Stowe brought against a German publisher who in 1853 translated and sold an unauthorized version of her book, see Stephen M. Best, "The Fugitive's Properties: Uncle Tom's Incalculable Dividend," in *The Fugitive's Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 101-200.
[43] See, for example, the editorial page in the *Syracuse Daily Standard*, April 20, 1854, 2.

afterpiece was added to it to satisfy theatergoers' expectations for a full evening of entertainment.[44] Other papers dismissed the play in thinly veiled racist critiques. A review for the *Syracuse Evening Chronicle* called Northup's venture into the theatrical arts presumptuous and predicted that the play would "result disastrously" due to Northup's lack of formal training in acting and stage direction.[45] Another proposed that Northup would "do better in the lumbering business, which is quite as honorable, if not more lucrative" than theater management.[46] Reviewers concurred that the play was a flop.

They disagreed, however, about whether Northup had produced it at the advice of abolitionists and whether abolitionists were obligated to support his endeavor. The squabble among them does little to clarify questions about Northup's political stance. In an attack on the *Syracuse Evening Chronicle*'s dismissal of the play, the *Syracuse Daily Republican* argued that the antislavery friends of Northup had led him to produce a drama that they were subsequently "too stingy to pay" to see.[47] The *Chronicle* retorted that "no abolitionists" had advised Northup to take to the stage, and the *Syracuse Daily Standard* added that Northup had in fact produced the piece "contrary to their advice," for which reason, it intimated, abolitionists possessed no obligation to open their pocketbooks to him.[48] The shared assumption across this string of barbed clap-backs was that Northup's motives for entering the entertainment business were not foremost political but pecuniary. For as much as they disagreed about who should pay to see the performance, these papers took for granted that Northup was less interested in advancing the

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[44] See the editorial page in the *Syracuse Daily Standard*, May 1, 1854, 2. An article titled "Solomon Northup's Play" in the *Syracuse Evening Chronicle*, April 28, 1854, 2 also brings up *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in a discussion of Northup's work.
[45] See the editorial page in the *Syracuse Evening Chronicle*, April 27, 1854, 2.
[46] See the editorial page in the *Syracuse Daily Standard*, May 3, 1854, 2.
[47] See the editorial page in the *Syracuse Daily Republican*, April 28, 1854, 2.
[48] See "Solomon Northup's Play," *Syracuse Evening Chronicle*, and "Give the Devil His Due," *Syracuse Daily Standard*, May 4, 1854, 2.

cause of abolition than in deepening the contents of his purse. The *Standard* put it this way: "Solomon is bound to make his fortune out of the new enterprise, if possible."[49] The play eventually reached as far east as Massachusetts and as far west as Cleveland, though it is unclear whether these performances were produced in collaboration with Northup. Whatever the case, records indicate that Northup's production did not fare well in the long term. Had Northup in fact been attempting to reproduce with the play his monetary luck with the book, the effort did not pay off.[50] The disavowal of Northup on the part of antislavery newspapers, moreover, offers few answers to questions about his political ties to abolitionism. While it is not possible to deduce from these papers Northup's politics, it does seem that local abolitionists held commitments to Northup so long as those commitments did not extend the length of their wallets.

As time elapsed, Northup seems to have lost even more allies. The flash of initial interest in *Twelve Years* boded well for Northup—it resulted in the apprehension of his kidnappers. The narrative made its way into the hands of one Thaddeus St. John who, upon reading it, identified Alexander Merrill and Joseph Russell as Northup's kidnappers and helped Northup bring them to court on the double charge of abducting and selling a free black man into slavery. But the trial brought about the end of Northup's career as a person of local celebrity. When it opened in October 1854, well over a year after the publication of *Twelve Years*, the case drew the attention of area newspapers, which followed Northup's story for yet another year as litigation dragged on

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[49] See the editorial page in the *Syracuse Daily Standard*, May 3, 1854, 2.

[50] The American Antiquarian Society holds two playbills constituting evidence that Northup's drama reached Massachusetts. See "Brinley Hall! The Great Scenic and Moral Representation of the Free Slave!," 1855, digital catalog record 205491, General Catalog of the American Antiquarian Society, accessed May 20, 2020, https://catalog.mwa.org/vwebv/holdingsInfo?bibId=205491, and "Go and See Solomon Northup's Great Moral and Scenic Representation of The Free Slave at the Town Hall…," between 1863 and 1876, digital catalog record 379036, General Catalog of the American Antiquarian Society, accessed May 20, 2020, https://catalog.mwa.org/vwebv/holdingsInfo?bibId=379036. For evidence that it reached Cleveland, see the editorial page in the *Syracuse Daily Standard*, December 11, 1854, 2. See also discussion of the production of the plays in Fiske et al., *Solomon Northup*, 118-22.

through a series of delays and appeals. In early 1855, the case went to the New York State Supreme Court over the issue of legal jurisdiction. The question was whether Merrill and Russell could be prosecuted in the State of New York for the crime of selling Northup in the District of Columbia. When the lower court refused to rule on this point of law, letting stand the indictment against Merrill and Russell, Democratic papers launched racist attacks against Northup and called for the acquittal of the kidnappers. Whig papers responded by coming to his defense. In June 1856, after still a year more, the court of appeals returned the case to the circuit court on a technicality. It could not rule on the matter of jurisdiction until the charge of kidnapping had been decided. By this time popular interest in the case had fizzled out. Newspapers moved on to other stories and none reported the outcome of the trial—that Merrill and Russell went unpunished. Northup sank from the public eye to such an extent that the details of his later life remain unknown. He died in obscurity and his book was forgotten.[51]

While the connection between *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Twelve Years a Slave* obtained Northup only a flash of fame, it secured Stowe ongoing legitimacy. Though it had garnered widespread acclaim upon its publication in 1852, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* faced immediate dismissal as propaganda on the grounds that its portrait of human bondage stood far afield from fact. To counter these claims, Stowe amassed a compendium of primary resources, ranging from runaway slave ads and personal correspondence to trial records and fugitive slave narratives, all from which she had drawn inspiration for her book. She dashed these clippings into a publication, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853), a single-volume annotated bibliography of sorts meant to substantiate the accuracy of her caricatures of slavery in the novel. Among these documents

[51] Eakin and Logsdon, Introduction, xvii-xxiii.

numbered the coverage of Northup's kidnapping as it had first appeared in the *New York Times*.[52] After quoting at length from the article on Northup, Stowe concludes:

> It is a singular coincidence that this man was carried to a plantation in the Red river country, that same region where the scene of Tom's captivity was laid; and his account of this plantation, his mode of life there, and some incidents which he describes, form a striking parallel to that history. (174)

The argument Stowe layers into this passage is that she had indeed gotten her facts straight in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Nothing else, she implies, could explain the "singular coincidence" that both she and Northup, who were complete strangers, had characterized the Southern landscape of slavery so consistently. The likeness for Stowe was ideal—Northup's story legitimized her own. *Twelve Years* bolstered Stowe's legitimacy when only months later, in his dedication to Stowe, Northup described his narrative as a text "AFFORDING ANOTHER" key to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (xxvii). The dedication at the beginning of Northup's book sanctioned Stowe's novel as a truthful account of slavery. The endorsement could not have come at a better time for Stowe.

That *Twelve Years* sutures itself to an unapologetically antislavery text in its dedication might be read as proof that Northup or Wilson (or both) possessed an abolitionist politics they refused to avow directly in the pages of the narrative. It might alternatively be read as evidence of enterprising strategy, an attempt on the part of Northup and Wilson to ride the wave of Stowe's success. Whatever the reason for the outward neutrality of the text—perhaps Wilson required it as a condition of his collaboration with Northup, perhaps Northup thought he could convert more people to the antislavery cause by refusing to take sides, perhaps neither—the fact

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[52] See Harriet Beecher Stowe, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin; Presenting the Original Facts and Documents Upon Which the Story Is Founded* (Boston: John P. Jewett & Co., 1853), 173-74; hereafter cited parenthetically. For the original newspaper article, see "The Kidnapping Case: Narrative of the Seizure and Recovery of Solomon Northrup," *New York Times*.

remains that *Twelve Years* aligns itself so directly with a leading abolitionist of the day (Stowe) and so consistently reproduces the abolitionist vision of enslaved women-as-victims that it functions not only as a record of Northup's life but as a record of the representational conventions of dominant abolitionism. Put simply, it does not matter that the text does not espouse an antislavery politics outright—it tells us something about the rhetorical practices and argumentative assumptions of the mainstream abolitionist movement all the same. The book functions as a window onto the prevailing ways that slavery was imagined and discussed in the antislavery movement. Of particular interest in this chapter is the recurring trope in abolitionist discourse that slavery led to abominable sexual intimacies and blatant sexual violence. To foreground the sexual assault of enslaved women and cast them as victims of the rapaciousness of slaveholders was a convention of abolitionist representation. Northup's narrative participates in this common abolitionist practice: for as much as *Twelve Years* communicates the histories of Eliza, Emily, and Patsey, it also complies with antislavery customs by emphasizing their sexual abuse. In this way, *Twelve Years* constitutes a paradigmatic example of abolitionist-style storytelling.

Enslaved Women as Victims: Abolitionist Representations of Sexual Violence

The image of the enslaved woman as a victim of sexual abuse is in no way exceptional to *Twelve Years*. Most abolitionists, when they talked about her at all, imagined the female-identified slave as the target of the lascivious drives of the white male slaveholder and represented her almost exclusively in relation to sexual violence. The dominant discourse of antislavery turned on a narrow conception of the enslaved woman (as a hypersexualized victim of male desire) and of sexual violence (as a range of intimacies forced by white men on black

women captives). Perhaps no writer provides a better example of this phenomenon that Stowe herself. Stowe populates *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with thinly veiled gestures to rape but places the burden of representing the sexual relations of slavery on the shoulders of two characters: Cassy and Emmeline. They function in the novel not to provide nuanced renderings of the interior lives of enslaved women but to emphasize the kinds of violence to which bondwomen were subject. Emmeline enters the novel at the moment of her sexual commodification. Stowe describers her as "a young girl of fifteen" who possesses a "fairer complexion" than her mother Susan.[53] The night before they appear on the auction block Susan admonishes Emmeline to brush her hair back so as to hide her curls and thereby invite purchase by a "respectable" family (473). Yet, the day of sale, the slave dealer orders Emmeline to return the curls to her head, observing that they will "make a hundred dollars difference" when she takes the stand (475). Split from her mother, she finds herself sold to the debased bachelor Simon Legree, who offers her earrings and indicates that upon taking her home she will "live like a lady" (490). The reference to the lightness of Emmeline's skin suggests not only that she entered the New Orleans trade as a fancy girl sold for the purpose of sexual exploitation but that her mother Susan may have given birth to Emmeline as a consequence of abuse by a white master as well. Indeed, Susan intuits the future that awaits her daughter and attempts to avert it. The trader's obsession with Emmeline's appearance bespeaks the logic of a market that transmutes sex into capital, and Legree's intimation that Emmeline will "live like a lady" threatens concubinage for the enslaved girl.

If Emmeline represents sexual victimization in the novel, so too does Cassy. The women operate as doubles, Emmeline embodying Cassy's past and Cassy Emmeline's future: Legree

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[53] Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin or, Life Among the Lowly* [1852], ed. Ann Douglass (New York: Penguin, 1986), 471; hereafter cited parenthetically.

purchases Emmeline to replace Cassy as his concubine. Confessing to Tom her own sexual subjection to Legree, Cassy reveals she knows as much:

> Did I *want* to live with him? Wasn't I a woman delicately bred; and he—God in heaven! What was he, and is he? And yet, I've lived with him, these five years, and cursed every moment of my life,—night and day! And now, he's got a new one,—a young thing, only fifteen, and she brought up piously. (original emphasis 512)

The typographical emphasis in the italicized "want" captures the fact of Cassy's abuse without naming it directly. The rhetorical interrogative implies its own answer—Cassy did not want to "live" with Legree; she was compelled to do so. As in the case of Emmeline, purchased to "live like a lady," the seemingly-innocuous "live" wraps the violence of rape in euphemism. The likeness of the two women deepens with the indication that Cassy too had been raised "delicately" and the suggestion that she had once been the "new one" for Legree herself. The temporal framing of her observations implies that the only thing distinguishing Cassy from Emmeline is time: both are enslaved female victims of sexual violence, one a victim of abuse in the past and the other a victim of abuse not yet arrived. The future the novel augurs, however, never materializes. Legree fails in his designs on Emmeline. Her arrival on the plantation prompts Cassy to take the girl under her wing in a gesture of maternal protection. Under the impending threat of Legree's intention to consummate relations with Emmeline, Cassy secrets the fifteen-year-old to the garret of the main house where both successfully evade discovery until they escape North to freedom.

In their zeal to draw connections between *Twelve Years* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, reviewers of Northup's narrative fixated on enslaved men and neglected to observe similarities between enslaved women in the books. Susan, of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, is separated from

Emmeline on the New Orleans auction block just as Eliza, of *Twelve Years*, is split from her daughter Emily in the same city. Both young women are sold for sex as fancy girls. Narrating her history to Tom, Cassy reveals that she had been the favorite of a prior master who had treated her like a wife, promised to free her children, lavished her with dresses, and set her up in a "beautiful house" (516). Eliza had been elevated to a like status, her children promised liberty while she was awarded gifts and special accommodations by a former owner. In both cases, slaveholding declarations of manumission went unfulfilled. On being sold, each found herself severed from her children: Eliza from Emily and Randall; Cassy from Elise and Henry. The overlap in these representations of enslaved women indexes the pervasiveness of sexual violence under slavery. Rape and concubinage were so prevalent that the captive "wife" and the child sex slave were quotidian occurrences. It is no surprise given these circumstances that the representations of Cassy and Emmeline, Eliza and Emily, align. Of all the portraits of slavery Stowe fought to substantiate in her *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, sexual violence was not on the list. It is notable that not once in the *Key* does Stowe offer proof of the kinds of subjection experienced by Cassy and Emmeline. The absence of such proof suggests none was necessary. Most people, it seems, would have taken for granted that the stories of Cassy and Emmeline constituted truthful renderings of enslaved female experience. One might assume the same to have been true for Eliza and Emily. Few would have found their victimization hard to believe.

But for all the similarities between *Twelve Years* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Northup's book differs from Stowe's in one notable regard. The latter leaves entirely untouched the drama of marital strife so central to the structure of enslaved women's domination in the former. There exists in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* no Patsey: neither Cassy nor Emmeline find themselves caught in the web of fraught relations between an adulterous husband and a vengeful wife. White women

of the South were keenly aware of the absence. Some had read Stowe's novel numerous times and referenced it in everyday discussions of plantation life. Mary Boykin Chesnut, for example, noted the exclusion in her diary. Her entry dated August 27, 1861 includes an exasperated jab at foreign journalist William Howard Russell for his naïve indignation that there existed enslaved women on Southern plantations whose status as "vestal virgins" could be called into question. In response to Russell, Chesnut recounts at length a conversation on sexual violence among female peers who knew all too well the realities of enslaved women's subjection. Invoking *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, one interlocutor remarks that "Mrs. Stowe did not hit the sorest spot. She makes Legree a bachelor."[54] Indeed, in her representations of Cassy and Emmeline, Stowe dodges the domestic tensions that lie at the core of Patsey's troubles in *Twelve Years*. The violence against Patsey inheres not simply in the sexual abuse of Epps but the retaliation she faces from his wife. For Cassy and Emmeline, there is no Mrs. Legree. And the owner of Emmeline prior—an "amiable and pious lady" (471)—treated her with kindness. The former owners of Cassy, while they sexually exploited her, held the conjugal standing of unmarried men. In general Stowe leaves wives out of the picture and thus sidesteps the triangulation of philandering master, jealous mistress, and enslaved victim of both.

Making Legree a bachelor made it possible for Stowe to avoid confronting the fact that white women contributed to the structure of sexual violence against women enslaved. Of course, the decision may have been strategic. While perhaps delegitimizing the text for certain readers, refusing to touch one of the most sensitive tensions of the Southern home may have curried

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[54] Because Chesnut leaves the speaking voices largely unidentified, it is unclear whether the dialogue is the reproduction of a real exchange or a fiction staged as a conversation that Chesnut uses to indicate that her ideas about sexual violence were shared by other women of her class. See the entry dated August 27, 1861 in "I Am Always on the Woman's Side," *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*, ed. C. Vann Woodward (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 166-71, quote 168.

Stowe favor with compatriots who did not prefer the secrets of their domestic lives to be turned into the stuff of sensational fiction. Some women of the South, including Chesnut herself, were perhaps drawn to the novel because Stowe left them largely out of it. But what Stowe may have gained in agreeability she lost in accuracy. However much *Uncle Tom's Cabin* invites readers to imagine otherwise, white women participated in the sexual violence of slavery. *Twelve Years* had no qualms about making this point. The enslavement of Patsey was conditioned by her suspension in the crosshairs of lust and spite. The text's introduction to Patsey implicates both Epps and his wife as agents of physical brutality and psychological terror against her:

> Patsey walked under a cloud. If she uttered a word in opposition to her master's will, the lash was resorted to at once, to bring her to subjection; if she was not watchful when about her cabin, or when walking in the yard, a billet of wood, or a broken bottle perhaps, hurled from her mistress' hand, would smite her unexpectedly in the face. (143)

The instruments of physical cruelty—in this case the "lash," the "billet of wood," and the "broken bottle"— contribute to Patsey's sexual domination. Epps whips Patsey in order to subject her to rape. His wife punishes Patsey for sexual relations with her husband. The figure of what free black abolitionist Sarah Mapps Douglass called the "cruel mistress" was no uncommon occurrence. In an 1832 article for the *Liberator*, she recounts in vivid detail the violence visited upon an unnamed enslaved woman by her master's wife for what appears to be sexual jealousy.[55] Hortense Spillers has more recently noted how the enslaved female's sexuality in such contexts

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[55] A formerly enslaved woman had related several hardships to Douglass, who recounted them in the article. Once the unnamed woman had been forced to work in a field while her baby was tied up near a fountain. Upon drawing water from the fountain, the enslaved woman sought to quench the thirst of her child but was stopped by her mistress, who beat her with a "large stick" and returned her to the fields. Another time, the same enslaved woman dropped a potato skin into the meal she was preparing. In a flash of anger, her mistress seized a knife and slashed her across the chest, leaving a scar. The article intimates that the enslaved woman's master, the mistress's husband, is the father of the child. The article was published pseudonymously under the name Zillah. See Sarah Mapps Douglass, "A Mother's Love," *Liberator*, July 28, 1832, 2.

is inevitably tethered to the wife's in so far as the wife, like her husband, simultaneously desires and seeks to dominate the body of the enslaved subject "in an apparently classic instance of sexual 'jealousy' and appropriation."[56] Other scholars have elaborated the ways in which the white woman perpetrated violence—often sexualized—against the women owned by their husbands or by themselves.[57]

Yet the wife of the lecherous master was most usually understood to be a victim rather than a perpetrator of the sexual violence of slavery. This idea held sway among abolitionists and constituted one of the many reasons they called for slavery's end. Angelina Grimké, an adamant women's rights and antislavery advocate from the planter class of South Carolina, fiercely rebuked slavery for its disintegration of normative family life. In an appeal to Northern women to join the abolitionist cause, she contends that a "dreadful state of morals" had arisen in the South in consequence of the sexual entanglements endemic to human bondage there. Chief among slavery's atrocities for her was the fact that the white matron of the Southern home often found herself in contest with "the colored daughter" of the family for her husband's affections.[58] Sarah M. Grimké, elder sibling of Angelina and enthusiastic member of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, castigated the sexual arrangements of slavery in verbiage that might characterize the Epps household in *Twelve Years* without alteration. Grimké writes that the wife of the slaveholder so frequently witnesses "crimes of seduction and illicit intercourse" between

[56] Spillers makes this observation in a discussion about the relationship between Harriet Jacobs of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and her master's wife, Mrs. Flint. See Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," quote 77.
[57] See Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*; Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), Stephanie Jones-Rogers, "Rethinking Sexual Violence and the Marketplace of Slavery: White Women, the Slave Market, and Enslaved People's Sexualized Bodies in the Nineteenth-Century South," in *Sexuality and Slavery: Reclaiming Intimate Histories in the Americas*, ed. Daina Ramey Berry and Leslie M. Harris, 109-23; and Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).
[58] See Angelina Grimké, *An Appeal to the Women of the Nominally Free States, Issued by an Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women* [1837], 2nd ed. (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838), 22. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

her husband and the female slave that the entire family splinters with "disgusting and heart-sickening jealousies and strifes."[59] To describe the situation at the South, both sisters invoked the story of enslaved concubinage that recurs across Abrahamic religious traditions. Fearing that his wife Sarah was barren and therefore unable to produce an heir, Abraham fathered a child by Sarah's enslaved handmaid Hagar, who was subsequently exiled to resolve the discord that had arisen between the two women. Drawing on this story, Sarah Grimké insists that the passions of the plantation home mirrored those that "disgraced and distracted the family of Abraham" (54). Angelina Grimké makes the same point in her own words: "There are, alas, too many families of which the contentions of Abraham's household is a fair example" (23). White women whose marriages were vitiated by the adulterous behaviors of slaveholders held a place of foremost concern among abolitionists like the Grimké sisters. The figure of one like Mrs. Epps drew as much, if not more, pity from them as the figure of Patsey.

Prevailing ideas about gender made the violence of the jealous wife difficult to see. The dominant ideology of femininity—what historian Barbara Welter has called the "cult of true womanhood"—defined the feminine according to a narrow set of terms. Women were judged to be women on the basis of their conformity to four virtues: "piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity."[60] By the norms of the day, the womanliness of a woman inhered in her religious devotion, sexual chastity, obedience to her husband, and governance of the home as mother and wife. To think of the white woman as a perpetrator of violent sexualized acts would have been to contradict the fiction of womanhood that predominated in the first half of the nineteenth century.

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[59] Sarah M. Grimké, "Letter VIII: On the Condition of Women in the United States" [1837], in *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes, and the Condition of Woman* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838), 46-55, quotes 53-54; hereafter cited parenthetically.
[60] See Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 151-74, quote 152.

While not all of the white women in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* appear as paragons of feminine virtue, it is key that Stowe opens none of them to accusations of sexual immorality. In fact, the white women of the novel are so thoroughly desexualized that they bring the sexual subjection of Cassy and Emmeline into stark relief. The sole flaw of Emily Shelby, devout bride of Tom's first master, is her perfect wifeliness—so staunch is her conviction in the kindness of her husband that she is blind to his intention to sell their slaves. Marie St. Clare, selfish wife of Tom's third master, is petulant and attention-seeking in large part because she has lost the ability to command her husband with her feminine charm. Her pious, unwed cousin-in-law, Miss Ophelia, holds religious standards "so high, so all-embracing, so minute" (248) that she herself cannot achieve them. And Eva, daughter of St. Clare, personifies the very apotheosis of Christian virtue as one of the most tiresomely saint-like figures in western literature. Each character in her own way—whether by religious faith, sexual purity, or domestic attachment—thus plays to the ideals white femininity. It was unthinkable that such women could or would perpetrate sexual violence against enslaved people.

It was more often the case that white women were framed as the equals of enslaved women in sexual subjection. The cult of true womanhood kept white women in a position of inferiority to white men and constituted the basis of a powerful analogy between marriage and enslavement. The connection held profound value for abolitionism. The ranks of the antislavery movement swelled in the 1830s and 40s as white women articulated their struggles against patriarchy to those of enslaved people against bondage. Advocates for the legal freedom of women borrowed the language of slavery to characterize the situation of the wife under coverture as well as her exclusion from participation in the political sphere. Reflecting on the limits of the

World's Antislavery Convention in London, 1840, Elizabeth Cady Stanton critiqued the abolitionist movement for its failure to recognize women's oppression as a form of slavery:

> To me there was no question so important as the emancipation of women from the dogmas of the past, political, religious, and social. It struck me as very remarkable that abolitionists, who felt so keenly the wrongs of the slave, should be so oblivious to the equal wrongs of their own mothers, wives, and sisters, when, according to the common law, both classes occupied a similar legal status.[61]

People like Elizabeth Cady Stanton argued that the work of antislavery necessarily entailed the campaign for women's rights in so far as the wife, too, was a slave. Within a half-decade after the end of the Civil War, in an article on "The Woman Question," Harriet Beecher Stowe also took up the slave-wife analogy to argue for women's legal emancipation. The "position of a married woman," she explained, "is, in many respects, precisely similar to that of the negro slave."[62] Writing these words in response to John Stuart Mill's 1869 essay on "The Subjection of Women," Stowe highlighted the fact that the precepts of coverture developed under English common law prevailed in the United States, stripping the married woman—like the slave—of legal and political rights, including autonomy over her own person.

Not everyone, however, believed the subjection of enslaved people and married women to be equal: some thought the wife had it worse. John Stuart Mill ventured that the slavery of the wife outweighed the slavery of the unfree black laborer to the extent that it entailed a sexual

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[61] Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "Our Wedding Journey," in *Elizabeth Cady Stanton as Revealed in Her Letters, Diary, and Reminiscences*, Vol. 1, ed. Theodore Stanton and Harriet Stanton Blatch (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1922), 67-89, quote 75.

[62] Stowe, "The Woman Question," *Hearth and Home*, August 7, 1869, 520-21, quote 520. It is worth noting that Harriet Beecher Stowe waffled on the question of women's suffrage over the course of her life, perhaps given that her family members held differing opinions on the matter. Catherine Ward Beecher tended to oppose suffrage, while Isabella Beecher Hooker favored women's rights and maintained friendships with Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. See Jeanne Boydston, Mary Kelley, and Ann Thorne Margolis, *The Limits of Sisterhood: The Beecher Sisters on Women's Rights and Woman's Sphere* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

violence from which the wife had no escape. Making this point in "The Subjection of Women," he invokes *Uncle Tom's Cabin*:

> 'Uncle Tom' under his first master has his own life in his 'cabin', almost as much as any man whose work takes him away from home, is able to have his own family. […] Not so with the wife: however brutal a tyrant she may be chained to—though she may know that he hates her, though it may be his daily pleasure to torture her, and though she may feel it impossible not to loathe him—he can claim from her and enforce the lowest degradation of a human being, that of being made the instrument of an animal function contrary to her own inclinations.[63]

The argument for women's emancipation becomes in the hands of Mill an argument against legalized rape: it is the sexual violence to which the wife is subject, her subjugation as "the instrument of an animal function," that constitutes for him the strongest case against her legal status under coverture. His commentary makes plain what might be called a relation of discursive appropriation between the women's rights and abolitionist movements. If early feminists borrowed the figure of the slave from abolitionist rhetoric, antislavery advocates—many of whom were also early feminists—learned from the women's rights movement the power of associating slavery with sexual violence. Their arguments and modes of appeal took shape in relation to each other. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the discourses of antislavery and women's rights held much in common: each opposed the subjection of a slave (whether white wife or black laborer) and did so on the grounds that such subjection entailed the wanton sexual abuse of those in bondage. Yet the discursive appropriation of the category of "slave" by the women's rights movement led to the uneven application of the term. The wife

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[63] See John Stuart Mill, "The Subjection of Women" [1869], in *On Liberty* with *The Subjection of Women* and *Chapters on Socialism*, ed. Stefan Collini (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 148.

came to be understood more accurately as a slave than the slave in law. Mill's commentary serves as a case in point. Such uses of "slave" glossed over the stark physical, psychological, and sexual brutalities of racial slavery while emphasizing the loss of rights that devolved upon the head of the woman under coverture. They drew upon what Angela Y. Davis calls the "shock value" of comparison and largely ignored the harsh realities of enslaved black life.[64]

In the process, enslaved women fell out of view. Mill's argument is again instructive. Mill makes the masculinized figure of Uncle Tom the universal stand-in for the slave, thereby obscuring the Cassys and Emmelines of the world whose gendered experiences of enslavement trouble the neat distinction he proposes between the racial exploitation of the slave-laborer and the sexual exploitation of the slave-wife. The ease with which Mill writes the enslaved black woman out of his analysis belies the manner in which the cult of true womanhood functioned not simply as an ideology of gender but also as an ideology of race. Hazel V. Carby has demonstrated that the notion of the white woman as sexually chaste emerged in dialectical opposition to the notion of the black female as sexually lascivious. The cult of true womanhood presumed a racialized order of gender difference in which only the white woman possessed sexual purity worthy of protection.[65] The female slave falls out of the call Mill makes for the rights of women perhaps because her chastity was unthinkable to him in the first place. Saidiya V. Hartman has shown how the sexual violation of the enslaved woman not only constituted a legal impossibility—for she could not refuse consent as a legal nonperson—but how, paradoxically, she also bore culpability for her own rape according to what Hartman calls the "discourse of seduction in slave law."[66] The law obviated the need to prosecute masters for

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[64] Davis, *Women, Race, and Class*, 33.
[65] See Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 20-39.
[66] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 81.

crimes of sex by attributing to enslaved women extreme sexual appetites and responsibility for the lewd attentions and behaviors of white men. As putative seductress, the enslaved woman was presumed to invite sexual encounter and thereby to subject her master to her sexual intentions. When Sarah Grimké wrote that the wife of the slaveholder had to witness gross "crimes of seduction" (53-54), one wonders whether she had the enslaved woman in mind as the criminal rather than the master. The very idea of "woman" in the antebellum period framed the white woman as pure and hypersexualized the black woman as promiscuous.

Stowe's novel contributes to the discourse of seduction to the extent that it makes Cassy a willing participant in her own sexual subjection. The typographical emphasis in Cassy's rhetorical question to Tom—"Did I *want* to live with him?" (512)—not only indicates the fact of her rape but implies the possibility of choice under conditions of enslavement. Cassy divulges that, while Legree repulsed her, she did "*want*" to live with a master prior. Upon the death of the slaveholder who had fathered her, Cassy found herself up for auction as a fancy girl, whereupon she captured the interest of a young bachelor who purchased her and took her as his concubine. Yet the narration of her sale presents it more like a courtship than a monetary transaction in which she ultimately had no say:

> I shall never forget that evening. I walked with him in the garden. I was lonesome and full of sorrow, and he was so kind and gentle to me; and he told me that he had seen me [...] and that he had loved me a great while, and that he would be my friend and protector;—in short, though he didn't tell me, he had paid two thousand dollars for me, and I was his property,—I became his willingly, for I loved him. Loved! (516)

With the exception of the aside offset by dashes, which tells a different version of the same story, the passage might be taken directly from a cheap romance of the day. Little in the monologue

differentiates ardor from enslavement. For as much as Stowe believed herself an abolitionist, the infatuation she attributes to Cassy reproduces the logic of paternalism as well as the logic of black female promiscuity. The idea that Cassy could and did desire to live with a slaveholder who doubled as her "protector" and lover suggests that the problem with slavery was not so much its existence but its sometimes unpreferable arrangements. It suggests that the violence of Cassy's sexual abjection could be eliminated not by abolishing slavery but by finding her a master to whom she would "*want*" to be sexually subject and who would, in turn, care for her. The narrative of reciprocal intimacy justifies slavery as individual choice and turns it from captivity into captivation. The purported love she felt for her slave owner allows that, in some way, Cassy brought a life of concubinage upon herself.

The discourse of enslaved female "*want*," in other words, masks the violence of rape in the cloak of solicited affection. The possibility of enslaved volition and pleasure in moments of sexual encounter between master and slave has been debated at length.[67] And Stowe was far from the last person to toy with the illusion that love or desire nullifies all but the legal condition of enslavement.[68] The point here, however, is that attributing sexual "*want*" to Cassy performs the work of imagining a simultaneous lack and desire on her part that effectively negates the possibility of her sexual victimization. The prospect of "*want*" in the context of human bondage

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[67] Hartman famously argues that rape is not legally possible in the context of enslavement because the enslaved person possesses no legally recognized will with which to consent or refuse consent in the moment of sexual encounter; see *Scenes of Subjection*, 79-112. Darieck Scott ventures the possibility of enslaved pleasure in moments of forced sexual encounter. See Scott, "Slavery, Rape, and the Black Male Abject" and "Notes on Black (Power) Bottoms," in *Extravagant Abjections: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 126-52 and 153-71.

[68] Kenneth M. Stampp, in his widely influential histories of slavery, not only suggests that enslaved women desired the sexual violence visited upon them but also cites Northup's text as evidence in favor of this argument. Stampp frames enslaved women as wanton and opportunistic: "Many whose sexual behavior was altogether promiscuous doubtless gave their favors without restraint to whites and Negroes alike. Others who were less promiscuous and would have rejected most whites, out of sheer opportunism willingly submitted to the master or overseer with the hope that special privileges—perhaps even freedom—would be their reward." See Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* [1956] (New York: Vintage, 1989).

presupposes the presence of a volitional subject who could act willfully upon an object of desire in the double attempt to satisfy a sexual craving and resolve a motivating lack of sexual fulfillment. It was precisely this reasoning that constituted the basis of the discourse of seduction. The enslaved woman could be held legally culpable for enticing her master into illicit liaisons so long as she was understood to possess a choice in the matter as well as the sexual feeling that would drive her to seduce him. Put differently, though Stowe may not present Cassy as an overt temptress, she nevertheless frames the enslaved woman exclusively in relation to her sexuality and commits to the ruse that Cassy could and did "*want*" her young master—that, in some capacity, Cassy invited subjection as his concubine. The answer Cassy offers to the question "Did I *want* to live with him?" in the case of Legree, while "no," becomes in the case of her earlier, handsomer master an emphatic "yes," for she admits her willful intent to submit to him: "I became his willingly" (516). The euphemism "Did I *want* to live with him?" becomes "Did I *want* him to rape me?"—a paradoxical question that reveals by its implied answer in the affirmative the structure of victim-blaming at the core of the discourse of seduction. The "*want*" makes Cassy responsible for the sexual violence committed against her.

It is perhaps for this reason, among others, that Harriet Jacobs refused to let Stowe narrate the story of her own enslavement. Formerly enslaved autobiographer of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Jacobs had been held as property in North Carolina by the child daughter of a lascivious master, who attempted to coerce her into sexual submission until she escaped North and acquired freedom in 1852, the same year that Stowe published *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In 1853, working as a wet-nurse for a white family in New York, Jacobs began penning her story. She kept her prior life secret and worked at night on the suspicion that the father of the family possessed proslavery sentiments. At the suggestion of abolitionist and women's rights

advocate Amy Post, Jacobs wrote to Stowe asking her to collaborate as amanuensis on the production of the narrative. Stowe's response betrayed Jacobs's trust. In a letter not to Jacobs but the woman for whom she worked, Stowe exposed Jacobs's history, refused the offer, and suggested that Jacobs instead allow Stowe to incorporate her experience of enslavement into the forthcoming *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Jacobs declined the counteroffer and Stowe never spoke to her again. Explaining to Amy Post why she turned down Stowe's proposal, Jacobs indicated not only that she wanted her story to stand on its own but that "it needed no romance."[69] Whether she had read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and what she may have thought about Stowe's representation of Cassy remain unknown. But it is clear that Jacobs felt in the hands of Stowe her account of the sexual violence of slavery would be romanticized. Perhaps Jacobs suspected that Stowe, as she had with Cassy, would make the enslaved woman responsible for the sexual abuse visited upon her under the guise of romance. Jacobs instead elected to represent herself neither as victim nor as seductress.[70]

Jacobs's narrative departs from the conventions of mainstream abolitionist representation in this regard. Whereas nearly all voices in the antislavery movement framed enslaved women as one or the other—victim or seductress—Jacobs refuses to reduce herself to a hypersexualized caricature of subjection or promiscuity. To be sure, *Incidents* conveys in no uncertain terms the manner in which the relentless Dr. Flint imagines Jacobs as little more than an object of sexual conquest. The narrative recounts in detail the evasions Jacobs improvises to safeguard herself from sexual violence. But as scholars including Frances Smith Foster have elaborated, Jacobs

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[69] See the letter from Harriet Jacobs to Amy Post, dated April 4, 1853 and quoted in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin, 321.
[70] For the details of the exchange between Stowe and Jacobs, see Jean Fagan Yellin, "Written by Herself: Harriet Jacobs's Slave Narrative," *American Literature* 53, no. 3 (1981): 479-86, and Jean Fagan Yellin, Introduction to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, xix-liii.

presents a nuanced account of her own person as a resourceful pursuer of freedom for herself and her children. The story she tells of herself contravenes one-dimensional abolitionist stereotypes of enslaved black women as figures of sexualized desire or trauma.[71] The same can be said of narratives written by other women enslaved. Elizabeth Keckley, personal modiste of Varina Davis and subsequently Mary Todd Lincoln, gestures to the sexual violence of slavery only twice in her autobiography, each time in ways that highlight her self-respect, resilience, and moral character. Foster notes that, while the enslaved woman identifies the sexual abuse she faced, Keckley spends far less time "chronicling her victimization" (69) than she does her accomplishments as lead dressmaker for the wives of both presidents during the Civil War.[72] To the extent that these authors refuse the abolitionist tendency to represent the enslaved woman solely in relation to sex, they offer less by way of insight into antislavery representational practice than do texts written by authors who tended to be white, male, or both.

Talking about sexual violence at all placed enslaved women in a double-bind. Like Keckley, abolitionist and orator Sojourner Truth said little about her experience of sexual subjection. But she did assert her woman-ness and independence from men, perhaps most famously in what has come to be called her "Ar'n't I a Woman?" speech (1851), in which she contested women's degraded social and political standing on the basis of gender and simultaneously challenged black women's exclusion from the category of "woman" on the basis of race.[73] Through her lectures, Truth eschewed the image of the enslaved woman as victim-

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[71] See Frances Foster, "'In Respect to Females…': Differences in the Portrayals of Women by Male and Female Narrators," *Black American Literature Review Forum* 15, no. 2 (1981): 66-70; hereafter cited parenthetically.

[72] See Keckley, *Behind the Scenes; or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* [1868]; ed. Frances Smith Foster (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

[73] Multiple accounts of Truth's famous speech exist. The most popular one, published by Frances Dana Gage in 1863 in the *New York Independent*, is questionable in terms of its historical accuracy. I here refer to the Marius Robinson version published in the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* in 1851, which historians Margaret Washington and Nell Irvin Painter agree is the more reliable of the two. For the Robinson version, see "Sojourner Truth," *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, June 21, 1851, 4. For the Gage version, see "'Sojourner Truth'," *New York Independent*, April 23, 1863, 1. For

seductress just like Jacobs and Keckley. She was perhaps reluctant to speak about the sexual abuse she faced, however, for a number of reasons. Obtaining the respect of a mid-nineteenth-century audience required that a woman present herself in accordance with the norms of femininity established by the cult of true womanhood. The dilemma was this: Truth could narrate her story of sexual subjection directly and lose respect as an "honest" woman, or she could adhere to the conventions of feminine decency and lose certain details of her story to the dictates of respectability. In her memoir, the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, she took the latter course. Via the pen of Olive Gilbert, who recorded it, Truth noted she faced a "long series of trials" as a young girl but chose "from motives of delicacy" to leave this experience under the cover of shadow.[74] Jacobs did the opposite. Unlike Truth, she talked about sexual violence in what for the time was explicit detail and, in doing so, placed her reputation as a lady in jeopardy. One wonders whether it is in part for reasons of "delicacy" that Stowe preferred conversation with Truth over Jacobs, whether Stowe associated with only those women whose manner of storytelling would not impinge on her own claim to lady-like decorum. In 1853, the same year that she declined collaboration with Harriet Jacobs, Stowe initiated a meeting with Sojourner Truth and gathered several members of the abolitionist community to hear the formerly enslaved woman speak. Of Truth's comportment before these listeners, in patronizing wonderment, Stowe remarked: "No princess could have received a drawing-room with more composed dignity than

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detailed historical accounts of the speech by Washington see Washington, *Sojourner Truth's America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009); 224-9, and Washington, "Sojourner Truth's 'Ar'n't I a Woman' Speech," in *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* [1850], by Sojourner Truth, ed. Margaret Washington (New York: Vintage, 1993), 117-118. For Painter's deeply nuanced account, see Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1996); 164-78.

[74] See Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* [1850], ed. Margaret Washington (New York: Vintage, 1993), 18.

Sojourner her audience."[75] To preserve dignity in a room of such people Truth had to talk about her past in discreet ways and omit parts of it altogether.

Stowe did as much when addressing sexual violence in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Cassy's rhetorical question to Tom—"Did I *want* to live with him?" (512)—exemplifies the strategy of indirectness Stowe employed throughout the novel as a whole. That Stowe coded rape and concubinage in the euphemistic language of "live with" indicates the degree to which the cult of true womanhood dictated what she as a female author could and could not say about sex directly if she wished to preserve an image of feminine propriety. Respectability connoted chastity and the absence of respectability often meant sexual untowardness in discourse or behavior. But Stowe did not need to mention sexual violence, concubinage, rape, incest, or the fancy trade directly. She simply had to craft carefully suggestive scenes and provocatively coded euphemisms. The culture of feminine decorum did not mean that women did not talk about sex. Abolitionists like Stowe obsessed over sex just the same—but did so in strategic ways. In recent years scholars have demonstrated that, throughout the nineteenth century, talk of immoral "connexions" and "loathsome" acts did the work of identifying sexual behaviors too illicit to be fully named. Words like "filthy" and "disgusting" gestured to acts of rape, incest, sodomy, and other forms of scorned sexual encounter.[76] White women abolitionists, Stowe exemplary of a

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[75] See Harriet Beecher Stowe, "Sojourner Truth: The Libyan Sibyl," *Atlantic Monthly* 11, no. 66 (1863): 473-81, quote 474.

[76] Jennifer Brier, Jim Downs, and Jennifer Morgan observe that small shifts in popular discourse, including the spelling of certain words, emerged to signify certain forms of sexual activity throughout the nineteenth century. "Beginning in the late eighteenth century," they argue, "the spelling of the word *connection* with an *x* instead of *ct* indicated that the subject at hand was illicit sex." Jim Downs moreover contravenes the commonly held assumption that there is little in the nineteenth-century historical record on same-sex sexual activity by examining how individuals throughout this period spoke of homosexual sex in terms like "loathsome" and "disgusting." See Jennifer Brier, Jim Downs, and Jennifer L. Morgan, Introduction to *Connexions: Histories of Race and Sex in North America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 1, and 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*, edited by Jennifer Brier, Jim Downs, and Jennifer L. Morgan (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 15-37.

larger trend among them, fixated on the many forms of sexual slavery yet consistently deemed the practices they denounced too illicit to be fully pronounced. As participants in a dominant culture of decorum and representatives of true womanhood, they found themselves in the gendered position of trying to build one of their strongest cases against slavery using evidence they could not mention outright. What emerged was a representational economy of hint and suggestion that sensationalized sexual violence in the paradoxical act of both foregrounding and censoring it.

Formerly enslaved women faced additional difficulties speaking about sexual violence not only because doing so placed their social reputation at risk but also because they found themselves challenging ideologies of gender within which sexual violence could only be understood narrowly in heterosexual terms. Same-sex rape and other forms of sexual assault were perceived to be so abominable that they almost never occupied the focus of sustained conversation. The act of discussing homosexual encounter openly, without immediate castigation and dismissal, exposed speakers of any gender to the moral judgment of others. Almost no one dared mention sexual violence between enslaved men and their masters or enslaved women and their mistresses—with the exception of women like Sojourner Truth and Harriet Jacobs. The stories of violent sexual encounter between members of the same sex has been almost all but otherwise written out of the archive of slavery. That it indeed did exist has been affirmed by historians of slavery and sexuality in recent decades through painstaking research. Much of their work has demonstrated how the frameworks of dominant historiography have for at least a century and a half presumed the universality of normative intimacy and gender relations such that the ideology of heterosexuality has been mistaken for history itself. These scholars reconstruct a history of violence largely excluded from the historical record and overwritten in

much contemporary scholarship by the assumption of sexual relationality exclusively and primarily between members of the opposite sex. In telling disruptive, obscured stories of same-sex sexual encounter, they build on a tradition of narration inaugurated by enslaved women—that of dispensing with the normative logics of gender in the effort to get at the truth about slavery.[77] In her narrative, Jacobs briefly divulges the case of a young man named Luke, whose master subjected him to the "strangest freaks of despotism" that Jacobs indicates were "of a nature too filthy to be repeated."[78] Truth, for her part, mentions she suffered at the hands of her mistress in a way "usually called so unnatural" that, had she revealed the full story, people would have impugned her faithfulness to fact.[79] The sexual violence of slavery did not, as these two suggested, fit neatly within heterosexual paradigms.

Enslaved women, in such ways, conveyed that about which little could be said in a culture of etiquette governed by the dictates of true womanhood. Women in general knew that prevailing norms of decorum functioned as mechanisms of censorship. The metaphor of the veil appears throughout nineteenth-century women's writing in moments that authors discourse on

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[77] See especially Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe;" Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman, "'The Strangest Freaks of Despotism': Queer Sexuality in Antebellum African American Slave Narratives," *African American Review* 40, no. 2 (2006): 223-37; Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage," *GLQ* 14, no. 2-3 (2008); 191-215; Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*; Scott, *Extravagant Abjections*; Omise'eke Natasha Tinsely, *Thiefing Sugar: Eroticism Between Women in Caribbean Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Foster, "The Sexual Abuse of Black Men under Slavery," Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman, *Against the Closet: Black Political Longing and the Erotics of Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); Treva B. Lindsey and Jessica Marie Johnson, "Searching for Climax: Black Erotic Lives in Slavery and Freedom," *Meridians* 12.2 (2014): 169-95; Vincent Woodard, *The Delectable Negro: Human Consumption and Homoeroticism Within U.S. Slave Culture*, ed. Justin A. Joyce and Dwight A. McBride (New York: New York University Press, 2014); Downs, "With Only a Trace;" Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*; C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2017); Aidoo, *Slavery Unseen*; and Stephanie Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property*. See also the website of Vanessa Holden and Jessica Marie Johnson dedicated to the question of slavery's relationship to queerness, *Queering Slavery Working Group*, https://qswg.tumblr.com/.

[78] See Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 247.

[79] Nell Irvin Painter puts the point this way: "Truth makes no mention of sexual abuse from John Dumont, although master-slave sex was a standard part of the abolitionist bill of indictment against the slave South. […] The sexual abuse came from her mistress Sally Dumont, and Truth could only tell about it obliquely, in scattered pages in her *Narrative*." See Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 16. For the quote, see Truth, *Narrative of the Life of Sojourner Truth*, 64.

subjects closed to them on the grounds of propriety. Abolitionist and early feminist Lydia Maria Child employed this metaphor frequently to identify her censorship and to circumvent it. "There is another view of this system," she writes of slavery in 1833, "which I cannot unveil so completely as it ought to be." Having offered this caveat, Child then communicates the violence of enslaved women's sexual exploitation, strategically performing politeness while making her point.[80] Other women used the same tactic. Angelina Grimké, having discussed the sexual degradation of the Southern home, reminds readers of her delicacy: "But we forbear to lift the veil of private life any higher; let these few hints suffice to give you some idea of what is daily passing *behind* that curtain" (original emphasis 23). In a manner more blatant than Child, Grimké makes clear her invitation to intuit what she will not say outright. Under the auspices of maintaining her own feminine dignity, she deals in "hints" and asks her audience to read between the lines. She, in a paradoxically effective move, speaks about the sexual violence of slavery while declining to speak about it. The strategy of saying something without saying it functioned as a means of preserving individual respect while outmaneuvering the gendered strictures of respectable discourse. And if white women dealt with the illicit in half phrases and hushed tones, the intimations of enslaved women like Truth and Jacobs pushed the envelope even further, disclosing the scope of sexual abuse under slavery and the limits of conceptualizing it in heterosexual terms.[81]

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[80] See Lydia Maria Child, *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans* (Boston: Allen and Ticknor, 1833), 19. In her editorial introduction to Jacobs's *Incidents*, Child dropped the ruse of a veil altogether. She writes in plain language the following: "I am well aware that many will accuse me of indecorum for presenting these pages to the public; for the experiences of this intelligent and much-injured woman belong to a class which some call delicate subjects, and others indelicate. This peculiar phase of Slavery has generally been kept veiled; but the public ought to be made acquainted with its monstrous features, and I willingly take the responsibility of presenting them with the veil withdrawn." See Child, Introduction to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, ed. Lydia Maria Child [1861], enlarged ed., ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard University Press, 2009), 4.

[81] Reading implication as evidence of "what happened" under slavery runs counter to the dominant historiographical impulse to deem only that which can be verified as hard fact in the traditional empirical sense reliable evidence. The

Women, however, did not always cloak sex in whisper. Sometimes they risked accusation of indecency and stated the facts of sexual violence outright. Angelina Grimké spoke of the "awful state of concubinage" (8) to which enslaved people were subject as did free black abolitionist Sarah Parker Remond. In a lecture delivered to a British audience at the Music Hall in Warrington, England, Remond remarked plainly on the sale of enslaved women into the fancy trade. In the words of a reporter:

> She then described a slave sale, and said that when they are exposed for sale their persons were not always covered. The more Anglo-Saxon blood that coursed in their veins the more gold they would fetch. These were sold to be the concubines of the white Americans, and not to be plantation slaves.[82]

The lecture performs the work of exposure at the same time it calls attention to it: Remond lays bare the truths of the slave market in the selfsame moment that she describes the ritual of divesting the enslaved of their clothes on the auction block. The boldness with which Remond approaches the subject of the fancy trade mirrors the candidness with which Louisa Picquet shared her story of subjection as a fancy girl. Their accounts match—Remond may well have been describing the firsthand experience of Picquet when she exposed the truth of slavery's sexual economy to her audience. Picquet shares in her narrative that, upon being brought to an

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privileging of records that can be authenticated, and the reading of these records on their own terms, typically leaves to the side as unprovable the stories of slavery recorded by women in bondage. In doing so, such a method discounts a wealth of truths about the institution of slavery and reproduces a vision of history limited by the parameters of heterosexist and masculinist ideology. Rather than deeming implication as unusable evidence, feminist historians and literary critics have demonstrated that implication allows us historical understanding of "what happened" in at least a double sense: it allows us to see the fact of gendered ideology at work upon the production of historical texts as well as to see aspects of enslavement that could not have otherwise entered the official historical record. Put more simply, implication, for these scholars, communicates that which it purports to leave unsaid and can be read as the trace of historical truth. See Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood* and Margaret Washington, "The Enduring Legacy of Sojourner Truth," Introduction to *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* [1850], ed. Margaret Washington (New York: Vintage, 1993), xxix-xxxiii.

[82] See "Miss Remond's Lecture," supplement to *The Warrington Guardian*, January 29, 1859, 1.

auction hall, she was "stripped and examined" for sale. Responding to pointed questions from her amanuensis about the nature of her purchaser, she reveals that she was bought by a middle-aged New Orleans man, parted from his wife, "not to be a plantation slave" in the words of Remond, but to serve as his concubine. The slaveholder expressed his intent to "end his days" with Picquet, promised her dresses, threatened her with violence should she refuse him, and fathered four children by her. Both Remond and Picquet, in these instances, preferred to speak candidly about slavery's sexual abuse.[83]

When women did choose to be frank about sexual violence, a pseudonym helped. It provided a means by which they could speak openly about indelicate matters while evading accusations of indecent character. Harriet Jacobs wrote *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* under a pen name. Behind the mask of Linda Brent, she depicts in unflinching clarity the "atmosphere of licentiousness" (65) that characterized the plantation South. Perhaps emboldened by the pseudonym, Jacobs deals with forms of sexual encounter avoided in other accounts of slavery. Testifying to the influence of debauchery on the slaveholder's children, Jacobs notes that the illicit liaisons of masters aroused the sexual curiosity not only of their sons but of their daughters. Young white women, Jacobs explains, were drawn into sexual relations with enslaved men: "They know that the women slaves are subject to their father's authority in all things; and in some cases they exercise the same authority over the men slaves" (66). Jacobs elaborates this claim by providing anecdotal evidence of an instance in which the daughter of a neighboring slaveholder consummated relations with an enslaved man and, anticipating her father's wrath,

[83] They both spoke directly, albeit to different audiences. The bulk of Picquet's narrative takes the form of an interview between Picquet and the Reverend Hiram Mattison. See Mattison, H., *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon: Or Inside Views of Southern Domestic Life* [1861], *Documenting the American South*, accessed June 24, 2019, https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/picquet/picquet.html, quote 16.

gave him free papers and sent him from the state.[84] The suggestion of enslaved male rape embedded in this story contravenes the dominant logic of female sexual passivity and disrupts the dominant ideology of chaste white womanhood and predatory black male sexuality. The myth of the black rapist guaranteed that relations between white women and black men almost invariably assumes the form of rape in national consciousness.[85] But the possibility that it was the young white woman who exercised sexual dominance over the black man—that it was she who raped him—would have been in Jacobs's time (and remains in our own) unthinkable and utterly incendiary. If within the cult of true womanhood the white woman personifies chastity, the young white woman represents the epitome of innocence and purity. In this context, the anecdote Jacobs shares is tantamount to the suggestion that little Eva of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—that famous embodiment of idealized Christian virtue—could have posed a sexual threat to Uncle Tom. The pseudonym under which Jacobs wrote helped protect her from inevitable backlash against such a proposition.

Jacobs's anecdote, however, does not only illustrate the value of a pen name. It exemplifies another strategy abolitionist women employed to address the difficult sexual matters of slavery: the act of speaking through the example of others. Sharing one's own story involved the danger of publicly damaging one's reputation. But formerly enslaved as well as free black women skirted this risk by divulging the stories of other women and men in bondage. They frequently packaged accounts of sexual violence in third person rather than first. One antebellum

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[84] Jacobs writes: "I have myself seen the master of such a household whose head was bowed down in shame; for it was known in the neighborhood that his daughter had selected one of the meanest slaves on his plantation to be the father of his first grandchild. She did not make her advances to her equals, nor even to her father's more intelligent servants. She selected the most brutalized, over whom her authority could be exercised with less fear of exposure. Her father, half frantic with rage, sought to revenge himself on the offending black man; but his daughter, foreseeing the storm that would arise, had given him free papers, and sent him out of the state." See Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 66.

[85] Scholars have addressed the myth of the black rapist at length. See especially Davis, *Women, Race, & Class*, 172-201; and Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 79-112.

reporter notes how Sarah Parker Remond bridged the topic of the fancy trade before a London audience:

> The lecturer read an affecting account of the sale by auction of a woman who was recommended on account of her being undistinguishable by complexion from the white race, for her unsullied virtue, her personal beauty, and her elevated piety, and who, for these reasons, brought a high price that she might become the mistress of some depraved monster.[86]

In this instance, Remond relied on the third-person to communicate the sexual violence of slavery. The strategy worked well. The reporter remarks that, having finished her lecture, Remond "sat down amidst great applause" (252). The drawback of speaking through the experience of others was a potential decrease in credibility. Perhaps none knew this fact so well as Harriet Jacobs. Prior to the publication of *Incidents*, she authored a short piece for the *New York Tribune* under the anonymous moniker "A Fugitive Slave." There she recounted the story of a purported "sister" who faced trials much like her own, caught between the jealousy of a mistress and the "brutal passion" of a master.[87] In a self-conscious aside at the beginning of the article, Jacobs comments on her decision to submit the article in her own hand rather than to hire someone to write the story on her behalf. She states: "The truth can never be told so well through the second and third person as from yourself" (6). On its surface, this line justifies Jacobs's refusal to hire an editor who would narrate the story of this "sister" from a distance twice-removed. Yet, in a self-referential way, it also gestures to the limits of speaking about the experiences of a "sister" rather than one's own. The third-person does not capture the "truth" of

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[86] See "Miss Sarah P. Remond in London," *Anti-Slavery Advocate*, July 1, 1859, 251-52, quote 251; hereafter cited parenthetically.
[87] See "Letter from a Fugitive Slave," *New York Tribune*, June 21, 1853, 6; hereafter cited parenthetically.

slavery, as Jacobs put it, in the way that first-person can. The double-binds of grammatical perspective notwithstanding, third-person held certain rhetorical power. Both Jacobs and Remond drew on the stories of their "sisters" in bondage to speak about slavery's sexual violence.

Abolitionist women employed another strategy to the same end: they cited the writings of others, including men. Sarah Parker Remond, on a different occasion, addressed the sexual realities of enslavement by strategically quoting. She began a lecture at the Red Lion Hotel in Warrington by calling direct attention to the "fearful amount of licentiousness which everywhere pervaded the Southern States."[88] But her tactic before this audience soon shifted:

> She preferred, however, giving them unquestionable facts instead of personal statements which she might offer, and to this end read several extracts from books, all proving that the system of slavery and the immorality it engenders are eating out the vitals of the country, and destroying domestic happiness, not only amongst the subject race, but amongst the families of slaveholders. (1)

Quotation allowed Remond to give sustained attention to the fancy trade, thereby "proving" the legitimacy of her opening claim. She did not, in other words, need to rely on personal stories to demonstrate the licentiousness of slavery—the quotes did the work for her. One of the accounts she read included a "graphic description," as the reporter put it, "of a young a beautiful girl at a slave sale" (1). The story appears to have left a profound impact on its audience, for the reporter recounted this anecdote in detail, down to the $2,000-dollar amount for which the enslaved girl was sold. What Remond did in speech other women did in writing. In her *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes*, Sarah A. Grimké quotes a different passage in which a "beautiful girl" was sold to

[88] See "The Lecture at the Lion Hotel," *Liberator*, March 11, 1859, 1; hereafter cited parenthetically.

an "ugly-looking bachelor" for the unusually high price of $7,000. As for Remond, the account of a young girl's sale at auction demonstrated for Grimké the "licentiousness of the South" (53). Deepening her point, Grimké quotes again, this time from the travel writings of British lawyer Simon Ansley Ferrall:

> Negresses when young and likely, are often employed by the planter, or his friends, to administer to their sensual desires. This frequently is a matter of speculation, for if the offspring, a mulatto, be a handsome female, 800 or 1000 dollars may be obtained for her in the New Orleans market. (52)[89]

That women abolitionists frequently cited the writings of others to discourse on the fancy trade suggests that quotation was a particularly effective means by which to bridge what may have been otherwise too unladylike a topic. Navigating the cult of true womanhood meant for women like Remond and Grimké finding ways around the strictures of decorum that limited what they could say about sex.

Matters of sex, of course, were neither of exclusive concern nor interest to women. Men contributed as much, if not more, to antebellum discourse on sexual violence. Men who chose to speak up about the sexual abuse of slaves risked losing less social respect than their female-identified counterparts. Righteous outrage about the ill treatment of women, in fact, epitomized masculine respectability. To the extent that womanliness was defined by demure submission to

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[89] Grimké slightly misquotes Ferrall in this passage, although the meaning in the original remains the same. The original reads thus: "Negresses, when young and likely, are often employed as wet nurses by white people, as also by either the planter or his friends, to administer to their sensual desires—this frequently as a matter of speculation, for if the offspring, a mulatto, be a handsome female, from 800 to 1000 dollars may be obtained for her in the Orleans market." Grimké, citing Ferrall, cut the reference to wet-nursing as well as the footnote that pertained to it. In doing so, she obscures a little discussed aspect of the sexual violence of slavery, namely the fact that enslaved women were sometimes forced to nurse non-human animals. Ferrall, writing in his own voice in the footnote, states: "I have been informed by a gentleman who has resided in the English West Indian Islands, that he has known instances there of highly educated white women, young and unmarried, making black mothers suckle puppy lap-dogs for them." See Ferrall, *A Ramble of Six Thousand Miles Through the United States of America* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1832), 194-95.

men, manliness was defined by possessive authority over women and their bodies.[90] Men therefore engaged in conversations about sexual violence openly and loudly. The coded language Stowe used to speak of rape—"Did I *want* to live with him?" (512)—differs starkly from that of her male peers such as William Lloyd Garrison, who had no scruples thundering against it in blatant terms. In an early issue of the *Liberator*, Garrison objurgates the lascivious men of the South in a self-righteous torrent of incendiary rhetoric and typographic hyperbole:

> There are in this country A MILLION female slaves who have no protection whatever for their chastity, and who may be ravished by their masters or drives with impunity!! Marriage among the slaves is no more recognized by law than among brutes!! There are born every year more than SIXTY THOUSAND infant slaves who are *illegitimate!* a large portion of whom have *white fathers*—some of these are the most distinguished men at the South—who sell them as they would pigs or sheep!! *Is not this perdition upon earth*—A BURNING HELL *in the very bosom of our country*—A VOLCANO OF LUST AND IMPURITY, *threatening to blast every plant of virtue, and to roll its lava tide over all that is beautiful to the eye, or precious in the sight of God?*[91]

If nothing else, the drama of the typography exemplifies the freedom Garrison had to impugn sexual violence on the basis of his social positionality. In contrast to women abolitionists like Stowe or Grimké, Child or Remond, Jacobs or Truth, Garrison possesses little filter, surpassing all in his abrasiveness, bluntness, and fervor. Yet, in his mouth, the vituperative attack on sexual violence amounted to honorable wrath rather than social offense and materialized his masculine

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[90] I use the language of "authority" here in a deliberate echo of Gail Bederman. She writes: "Manhood—or 'masculinity,' as it is commonly termed today—is a continual, dynamic process. Through that process, men claim certain kinds of authority, based upon their particular type of bodies." See Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), quote 7.

[91] See the editorial page in the *Liberator*, August 11, 1832, 3, original emphasis; hereafter cited parenthetically.

subjectivity within the discursive terrain of the antebellum United States. It moreover calls attention to the way in which men contributed to the hypersexualization of enslaved women by framing them as victims of sexual abuse. For all their differences of rhetorical approach, Garrison like Stowe figures the sexual violence of slavery within normative sexual and gender paradigms as a relation of forced intimacy between white male slaveholder and black female slave. And unlike Jacobs and Keckley, he construes enslaved women to be victims of violent sex, nothing more.

When white men weighed in on the subject of enslaved sexual abuse, they usually framed white slaveholding men as the guilty party. But sometimes they indicted white women as perpetrators as well. In *Slavery Illustrated in Its Effects upon Women and Domestic Society* (1837), abolitionist author and editor George Bourne wrote at length on the moral degradation of Southern slaveholding society. The third chapter of the text, on the "Condition of Female Slaves," dedicates an extraordinary twenty-five pages to the subject of sexual violence against enslaved women. While he spends the bulk of the chapter cataloguing various sexual horrors perpetrated by men, Bourne shares an anecdote before closing in which two churchgoing women establish a brothel to profit from the sexual exploitation of the women they owned. Bourne's description emphasizes the calculating manner in which these women played the system:

> Some years since, as it is understood, they commenced business by opening a boarding-house, with one or two female slaves. They speedily perceived that by conniving at the sexual intercourse between their boarders and the colored women, they should rapidly acquire wealth. Accordingly, inducements were held out to their female slaves to become

> mothers. The male children were exchanged for "*likely nigger wenches*," and thus the breeding stock was increased.[92]

The house of ill fame enabled the two women to line their pockets while simultaneously relying on rape to expand their business. The men had to pay for sex and sex increased the number of women the madams could exploit. The arrangement entailed reproduction in at least a double sense: biological reproduction meant the reproduction of the brothel. The children of sex slaves could be sold to purchase more women for sex or raised as sex slaves themselves. The business in this way sustained and enlarged itself through sexual exploitation. Rape held the key to capital accumulation. The example of this brothel, for Bourne, highlights the hypocrisy of Southern Christians, who without hesitation professed faith and promoted their own financial gain through depraved means. Bourne ends the anecdote on a withering criticism, noting that the two women chanted religious blessings while turning their house into a "prolific slave-factory" (66). Women-orchestrated corruption such as this constituted as reprehensible a facet of slavery for him as that committed by men.

Opposition to sexual violence often took the form of religious condemnation. Free black printer, bookstore-owner, and Underground Railroad operative David Ruggles found puritanical arguments against the sexual immorality of slavery to be more compelling than political ones. In a sustained examination of relationship between enslavement and adultery, *The Abrogation of the Seventh Commandment* (1835), Ruggles inveighs against the practices of fornication prevalent throughout the slaveholding South. Like his male-identified peers, he affords readers blunt accounts of slavery's sexual violence, opening the pamphlet by noting that "false delicacy" and "improper squeamishness" have occluded the subject and prevented most from addressing it

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[92] See George Bourne, *Slavery Illustrated in Its Effects upon Women and Domestic Society* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1837), original emphasis 65; hereafter cited parenthetically.

directly.[93] Taking an unapologetically explicit approach to the issue, Ruggles elaborates that the central problem of slavery—the foremost reason why it must be abolished—is the problem of sexual violence. The entire system of human bondage turns, for him, on the flagrant violation of the Seventh Commandment, which in Puritan religious traditions forbids the practice of adultery and sanctions intercourse within the confines of marriage alone. Citing the double fact that the law prohibited enslaved matrimony and that slaveholders faced no legal repercussions for sex with slaves, Ruggles insists on the impossibility of ending the sexual violence of slavery without ending slavery itself. He writes that

> […] in the case of the slave, the transgression of the seventh commandment is not only tolerated, it is ENFORCED, and CANNOT BE AVOIDED UNTIL SLAVERY IS ABOLISHED. That promiscuous licentiousness of intercourse is not a morbid excrescence which has unnaturally been grafted upon the tree of slavery, it is the very sap which gives life, vigour, and perpetuity to the whole system. (13)

Preferring typographical flair akin to Garrison's, Ruggles frames slavery as extreme sexual immorality proscribed by scriptural law. The practice of slavery thus amounts to religious interdict. Though perhaps less grandiloquent, white abolitionist and politician Charles Sumner used a similar tactic to argue against what he called the "Barbarism of Slavery" in an 1860 speech delivered on the Senate floor to then President James Buchanan. Sumner contested the position that slavery was divinely ordained by contending the reverse—that slavery in fact constituted the brazen violation of religious teaching. Using language identical to Ruggles, Sumner proceeded:

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[93] See David Ruggles, *The Abrogation of the Seventh Commandment, by the American Churches* (New York: David Ruggles, 1835), quotes 3; hereafter cited parenthetically.

> Slavery paints itself again in its complete *abrogation of marriage*, recognized as a sacrament by the church, and recognized as a contract wherever civilization prevails. Under the law of slavery, no such sacrament is respected, and no such contract exists. The ties that may be formed between slaves are all subject to the selfish interests or more selfish lust of the master, whose license knows no check.[94]

Both Ruggles and Sumner relied on the authority of moral doctrine to sway their audiences. By framing the sexual practices of enslavement as anathema to Christian values, especially the sanctity of marriage, they leveraged people's religious commitments to abolitionist ends.

Not all men spoke out against the violation of marriage in the expository mode. Rather than pontificating on sexual violence in the abstract, formerly enslaved men often simply recounted personal experiences. Only a few pages prior to describing the abuse his wife Nancy sustained for nursing a child of dubious parentage in front of her mistress, Henry "Box" Brown affirms that "slaveholders are licentious men, and the most respectable and kind masters keep some of these slaves as mistresses."[95] The sequence of remarks leads the reader to question whether his wife was herself a kept mistress who bore a child to her master and thereby incurred the hatred of his legal bride. Brown gestures to concubinage again in the case of his sister. Upon the death of his master, Brown and his siblings were divided among the slaveholder's sons. In a short but poignant line, Brown reveals that his sister faced a lot perhaps identical to that of his wife Nancy: "William Barret took my sister Martha for his 'keep Miss'" (61). If Brown preferred ambiguity, Henry Bibb spoke openly about disregard for slave marriage throughout the South.

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[94] Charles Sumner, *The Barbarism of Slavery: Speech of Hon. Charles Sumner on the Bill for the Admission of Kansas as a Free State, in the United States Senate, June 4, 1860* [1860], New ed. (New York: Young Men's Republican Union, 1863), original emphasis 14.

[95] Henry "Box" Brown, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself* [1849, 1851], ed. John Ernest (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 56; hereafter cited parenthetically.

Bibb and an enslaved woman named Malinda agreed to enter into wedlock on the twofold condition that they would, wait one year to determine whether their "minds should not change" and flee to Canada at the earliest opportunity. They did marry but the latter portion of their plans never materialized. Malinda was sold before they could escape.[96] For Bibb, marriage was not to be entered into lightly, for a matrimonial covenant among slaves could be torn asunder at the whim of the master. "Licentious white men," Bibb remarks, "can and do, enter at night or day the lodging places of slaves; break up the bonds of affection in families; destroy all their domestic and social union for life; and the laws of the country afford them no protection" (455). In the process of explaining his hesitation to wed, Bibb reveals the manner in which the nonexistence of enslaved conjugal rights and legal absence of protection against slaveholding rape ran contrary to the dominant religious order of the antebellum United States. Neither Brown nor Bibb needed a sermon to prove that slavery desecrated the institution of marriage and profaned the Seventh Commandment. They simply told their stories.

Formerly enslaved men sometimes shared accounts of sexual violence that did not affect themselves or their wives directly. The autobiography of William and Ellen Craft—who did flee, as Henry Bibb and Malinda had planned—proceeds in the masculinist voice of William Craft and foregrounds the prevalence of sexual abuse under slavery from the outset. The opening lines of the narrative insinuate that Ellen is the child of rape. William explains: "My wife's first master was her father, and her mother his slave."[97] The pages that follow trace the recurrence of sexual violence throughout Ellen's extended family. After relating a complicated story about an

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[96] Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself* [1849], in *Slave Narratives*, ed. William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Library of America, 2001), 425-566, quote 455; hereafter cited parenthetically.
[97] William and Ellen Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, The Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* [1860], in *Slave Narratives*, ed. William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Library of America, 2001), 677-742, quote 681; hereafter cited parenthetically.

unnamed woman who had been forced into concubinage with her master and whose daughters had been sold for sex, the text makes a profound reveal: the woman and her children are Ellen's aunt and cousins. Yet it was not always extended family whose violation formerly enslaved men recorded—it was also fellow bondwomen whose lives intersected theirs. Such is the case not only with Solomon Northup but John D. Green, whose autobiography includes one of the most graphic renderings of rape that appears in the archives of slave testimony. Green tells the story of one woman named Mary with unswerving frankness:

> While in the barn, Mary was surprised by William Tillotson, her master's son, who ordered her to take her bed among the hay and submit to his lustful passion. This she strenuously refused to do, telling him of the punishment she had already suffered from her former mistress for a similar act of conduct, and reminding him at the same time of his wife, whose vengeance she would have to dread; but William was not to be put off, nor his base passion go unsatisfied, by any excuse that Mary could make, so he at once resorted to force.[98]

The story makes visible the layering of numerous violences against Mary. Not only does the slaveholder's son compel her into extreme sexual and corporeal subjection—he contributes to the compounding of abuse to which she has already been subject. The deaf ear Tillotson turns to her remonstrations villainizes his act as utterly heinous while nevertheless reproducing the reductive and hypersexualized image of the enslaved woman as the target of a special kind of sexual despotism.

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[98] Jacob D. Green, *Narrative of the Life of J. D. Green, A Runaway Slave, From Kentucky* [1864], in *Slave Narratives*, ed. William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Library of America, 2001), 949-97, quote 968.

Other times formerly enslaved men preferred to communicate the licentiousness of slavery through fiction. Perhaps most famously William Wells Brown chose this means to address at the time widespread rumors that Thomas Jefferson had fathered several children by his slave Sally Hemings. Often considered the first African American novel, *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter* (1853) offers a sustained critique of the forced intimacies between slaveholders and enslaved women. The novel opens in the din of an auction house in which Currur, the fictionalized concubine of Thomas Jefferson and mother of two of his children, Althesa and Clotel, are being sold. Split from her family, Clotel faces the stand alone as the auctioneer belts out invitations to place cash bids on the opportunity to use her for sex: "'Miss Clotel had been reserved for last, because she was the most valuable. How much gentlemen? Real Albino, fit for a fancy girl for any one.'"[99] In a recasting of the sexual relationship between Currer and Jefferson (and ultimately Jefferson and Hemings), a white man by the name of Horatio Green quickly snatches Clotel up for the grand sum of $1,500, takes her as his informal wife, and fathers her first child Mary. His political career, however, soon leads him to seek the legal marriage of a white woman, who despises Clotel and punishes Mary out of spite against the enslaved woman. Green sells Clotel to appease his new wife, splitting mother from daughter as had the trader at the sale of Currer and Clotel. Upon returning to free her child, Clotel finds herself cornered by slave catchers and evades apprehension in an act of suicide by flinging herself into the depths of the Potomac. The drama, for Brown, illustrates not only the extreme sexual immorality of slavery but the inherent contradictions of a nation that, after the real Thomas Jefferson, expounds freedom for all yet allows such practices to persist. Fiction, over

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[99] William Wells Brown, *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter, A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States* [1853], ed. Robert S. Levine (Boston: Bedford/St.Martin's, 2000), 87; hereafter cited parenthetically.

autobiography, functioned as an instrument through which Brown could contest what others spoke out against in the form of personal testimony.

Outcry against enslaved sexual abuse took many forms, but a speech delivered by Frederick Douglass in Rochester, New York, in December of 1850 perhaps best exemplifies the rhetoric of abolitionist protest against sexual violence. Douglass had by this time become a famed orator and a leading face of the antislavery movement. On the eighth of the month, he gave the second of a series of lectures on slavery at the city's Corinthian Hall. Before his audience, he uttered these words:

> I hold myself ready to prove that more than a million of women, in the Southern States of this Union, are, by the laws of the land, and through no fault of their own, consigned to a life of revolting prostitution; that, by those laws, in many of the States, if a woman, in defense of her own innocence, shall lift her hand against the brutal aggressor, she may be lawfully put to death. I hold myself ready to prove, by the laws of slave states, that three million of the people of those States are utterly incapacitated to form marriage contracts. I am also prepared to prove that slave breeding is relied upon by Virginia as one of her chief sources of wealth. It has long been known that the best blood of old Virginia may now be found in the slave markets of New Orleans. It is also known that slave women, who are nearly white, are sold in those markets, at prices which proclaim, trumpet-tongued, the accursed purposes to which they are to be devoted. Youth and eloquence, beauty and innocence, are exposed for sale upon the auction block; while villainous monsters stand around, with pockets lined with gold, gazing with lustful eyes upon their prospective victims. But I will not go behind the scene further. I leave you to picture to yourselves what must be the state of society where marriage is not allowed by law, and

> where *woman* is reduced to mere *chattel*. To the thoughtful I need say no more. You have already conceived a state of things equaling, in horror and abomination, your worst conceptions of Sodom itself.[100]

What makes the language of Douglass so profound—besides its effortless eloquence—is the fact that it captures in under three hundred words the central conventions of abolitionist rhetoric at the middle of the nineteenth century. Throughout the antebellum period, antislavery discourse fixated on sex: it obsessed over enslaved concubinage, emphasized the vitiation of marriage, rehearsed time and again the legal defenselessness of bondwomen against rape, painted the New Orleans fancy market in eager detail, railed against slave breeding for profit, and insisted upon the general degeneracy of a society in which such practices proceeded unchecked. In a few short sentences, Douglass touches on each of these commonplaces of abolitionist rhetoric concerning sexual violence. He moreover performs decorum, as many women abolitionists did out of necessity, by arresting his account of sexual violence midway and inviting listeners to fill in the gaps using their imaginations. Self-reflexive sensitivity not unlike Douglass's characterizes much abolitionist rhetoric on sex from the 1830s to the 1860s. In this way, Douglass again typifies convention. But of the strategies he employs in this speech, one captures the tenor of abolitionist discourse more powerfully than the rest: that of framing enslaved women as victims—and little more than victims—of the many forms of sexual violence under slavery. Enslaved women occupy the center of abolitionist protest against slaveholding sexual behavior. And it is predominantly their production as victims that enters them into the historical record. Abolitionist writing and oration constitutes one of the largest bodies of literature of the first half

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[100] See Douglass, "Lecture No. 2," in *Lectures on American Slavery* (Buffalo: Geo. Reese & Co., 1851), original emphasis 21-22.

of the nineteenth century. This same body of literature frames enslaved women as victims of violent sex.

Freedom as the Limit of Liberal Abolitionism

Abolitionist representations of sexual violence had a purpose: to advance the antislavery cause. The ultimate aim of discoursing on the subject of sex, of framing enslaved women as victims, of condemning the licentiousness of slaveholders, was to bring slavery to an end. Frances Smith Foster notes that narratives by former slaves were meant to “enlighten audiences” and “excite them to work” for the abolition of slavery (66). The slave narrative constitutes only part of a vast abolitionist literature collectively bent on advancing the cause of those held in bondage. The frequency with which the figure of the abused bondwoman appears in this literature suggests that representations of the enslaved woman as victim were understood to be particularly suited to this end. Abolitionist speeches, pamphlets, narratives, and broadsides consistently turned the gendered traumas of enslavement into sensationalized reasons for moral outrage. The names of particular women, the complexities of their characters, and the nuances of their interior lives mattered less than the fact that their stories held shock value for most readers. No one—proslavery advocates and abolitionists alike—openly and unconditionally argued in favor of sexual violence against enslaved women. Even those proslavery thinkers who contended that enslaved abuse enabled young white men to gain sexual experience and vent their lusts without sullying the integrity of white femininity framed it as the best of a set of bad options.[101] Tugs at the moral conscience of a predominantly Christian audience, both North and South,

[101] I discuss proslavery thinking on sexual violence in the following chapter.

carried immense force. The image of the helpless victim of slave-owning lust was perhaps the single most persuasive tool in the abolition arsenal. And abolitionists were not afraid to use it.

But what interests me in this chapter is less the fact that abolitionists represented enslaved women as victims than the logic that subtended such representation. The idea within the mainstream abolitionist movement was that the end of slavery would bring about the end of the sexual violence associated with it. The figure of the abused enslaved woman—as it was produced in most abolitionist discourse—invited audiences to presume a certain chain of cause and effect: slavery led to abominable forms of sexual relation; emancipation would put a stop to them. Many antebellum thinkers took for granted that the abolition of slavery would resolve enslaved rape, concubinage, and sale for sex. This thinking placed the sexual violence of slavery conceptually at odds with the freedom bondpeople were to obtain in the event of emancipation. It made freedom and enslaved sexual abuse mutually exclusive and placed the latter in a relation of temporal anteriority to the former. So long as the one could not exist simultaneously with the other, freedom and sexual violence occupied successive positions on the abolitionist timeline. The end of slavery would give way not just legally but temporally to the freedom of enslaved people from sexual violence. The logic of the dominant abolitionist movement in this way structured itself according to what Lisa Lowe has called a narrative of "freedom overcoming slavery." Lowe explains in the *Intimacies of Four Continents* (2015) that modern western thought is organized by the foundational premise of liberal political philosophy that slavery constitutes the distant past out of and against which liberal democracy, freedom, and rights emerge. The liberal tradition resolves contradictions between the coexistence of slavery and freedom in the antebellum context by framing the former as a relic of an old world that is in the process of being overcome by the modern one. This narrative of "freedom overcoming slavery,"

for Lowe, accomplishes the disavowal of ongoing settler colonialization, forced migration, indigenous dispossession, and enslavement in the name of progressive historical struggles for national consciousness and the development of liberal political societies.[102] What I wish to add to Lowe's account is the observation that the narrative of "freedom overcoming slavery" also structured the bulk of abolitionist appeal for enslaved liberation from sexual violence. "Freedom overcoming slavery" became what might be described in the context of abolitionism as a narrative of "freedom overcoming the sexual violence of slavery."

The mainstream antislavery movement, in other words, took its discursive logic from the narrative of becoming that organizes the dominant thought system of liberal modernity. It bears the hallmarks of liberal political philosophy in so far as it renders the sexual violence of slavery within a linear temporality in which enslaved sexual abuse is eventually overcome by the force of historical progress toward freedom. For this reason, I call the epistemology of the dominant abolitionist movement "liberal abolitionism," understanding it to be a formation of thought and discourse that took shape through social-material processes that reproduced liberal ideology in and through the call by abolitionists for enslaved freedom from sexual violence. What made it liberal was not consensus around the freedom to be obtained by the enslaved—for the meaning of freedom differed abolitionist to abolitionist—but rather the widespread presumption that abstract liberal freedom could and would supersede slavery and sexual violence in the forward march of history. Perhaps the most famous person to put this idea to words in the U.S. context is Thomas Jefferson, who, in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), argues that the "total emancipation" of the slave would come about by "nature and natural means" and advocates himself for gradual manumission as well as the colonization of Africa by the formerly

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[102] See Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham Duke University Press, 2015), especially 1-71.

enslaved.[103] Half a century later the idea that "total emancipation" constituted the natural trend of history had become hegemonic within abolitionist circles. Liberal abolitionism gained supremacy as the dominant of many competing abolitionisms. By framing liberal abolitionism as dominant, I do not mean to suggest that every abolitionist who protested sexual violence was liberal, nor do I wish to imply that the antislavery movement was a monolith. Quite the contrary—thinkers such as Harriet Jacobs protested the sexual violence of slavery but remained wary of the idea that legal abolition would solve the problem of sexual violence against formerly enslaved people. Jacobs's position represents what might be considered a black radical and counterhegemonic one in relation to the dominant.[104] Neat lines, of course, cannot always be drawn between abolitionist formations. Often ideological boundaries were blurry—liberal abolitionism sometimes overlapped with proslavery paternalism and at other times with black radicalism. But one thing remained unique to liberal abolitionist thought: the supposition that freedom would, in the long view of history, overcome the sexual violence of slavery.

Liberal abolitionism framed sexual violence as a systemic problem rather than one rooted in the actions of individuals. The dominant discourse of antislavery emerged in the context of struggle not only among abolitionists and but between abolitionists and proslavery apologists, who talked about sex just as much but tended to treat rape and other forms of sexual assault as harms resulting from the bad morals of a few slaveholders, not slavery itself.[105] Staking out an

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[103] See Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* [1785], ed. William Peden (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), especially 130-49 and 162-63; quotes 163. Hereafter cited parenthetically.
[104] I discuss Jacobs's contributions to black radicalism in the previous chapter.
[105] A prime example of this thinking appears in the arguments presented by the defense in *Missouri v. Celia* (1855). Celia had killed her master in an attempt to avoid rape by him. Her three attorneys unsuccessfully argued that she had killed her master in an act of self-defense against an act of individualized sexual aggression. For the purposes of the current discussion, it is significant that they framed Celia's refusal of rape as a refusal of Newsom's specific advances, not a refusal of the sexual arrangements sanctioned generally by the legal institution of human enslavement. Celia's defense attorneys, in other words, both defended the institution of slavery while also defending Celia's actions against someone they framed as an aberrant slave owner. For them, it was not slavery that was the problem; it was the individual aggressor who, in their view, deviated from ideal slaveholding morality. This case

opposing position, liberal abolitionists insisted that the legal possibility of enslavement was itself the problem and that individual instances of slaveholding abuse were consequent upon the systemic right to own property in human flesh. If sexual violence stemmed from the system of slavery, then system of slavery, they argued, needed to be abolished. Jefferson took a systemic view of slavery as early as the revolutionary period. One of the most frequently quoted passages in *Notes* reads:

> There must doubtless be an unhappy influence on the manners of our people produced by the existence of slavery among us. The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other. (162)

The idea in these few short lines—that slavery deteriorates the moral condition of both slaveholder and slave—reappears in nineteenth-century abolitionist literature so frequently that instances of its repetition are too numerous to count. The argument, after Jefferson, maintained that the legal permissibility of slavery was responsible for the "boisterous passions" of the slaveholder. The root of sexual violence lay in the legal system not the individual—it could be traced to the law's protection of human bondage. The law therefore was the system that occupied the focus of much liberal abolitionist critique. George Bourne contended that the "law-makers of southern States" kept enslaved women in "helpless debasement" (46). Lydia Maria Child lamented that the "negro woman is unprotected by either law or public opinion" (19). Sarah Grimké expressed horror that the "laws of some of the slave States" (52) made it legal to kill a bondwoman who resisted rape. "Under the law of Slavery," Charles Sumner noted of enslaved marriage, "no such sacrament is respected" (14). Liberal abolitionists fixated on the law as the

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occupies the bulk of my discussion of proslavery thought on sexual violence in the following chapter. See the State of Missouri v. Celia, a Slave, File 4496 (13th Cir. 1855), Callaway County Courthouse, Fulton, Missouri.

source of sexual violence under slavery and correspondingly pushed for the legal abolition of slavery as the means by which enslaved protection from sexual violence could be won.

Perhaps no one expressed the liberal abolitionist position so profoundly as did Harriet Beecher Stowe. In its end, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* crescendoes into an exhortation against the legality of slavery spanning the length of the final chapter:

> Let it be remembered that in all southern states it is a principle of jurisprudence that no person of colored lineage can testify in a suit against a white, and it will be easy to see that such a case may occur, wherever there is a man whose passions outweigh his interests, and a slave who has manhood or principle enough to resist his will. There is, actually, nothing to protect the slave's life, but the *character* of the master. […] This injustice is an *inherent* one in the slave system,—it cannot exist without it. (original emphasis 619)

The "passions" to which Stowe directly refers are those of the brute-like master Simon Legree, who smites Tom in a rage-fueled fit of despotism in the singularly most famous scene of Stowe's massively famous novel. The murder of Tom became a rallying cry against slavery as an example of the extreme moral degradation the institution of bondage bred in the slaveholder and the extreme violence to which enslaved people were subject. What is often left out of discussions of this scene, however, is the fact that Legree murders Tom precisely because Tom frustrates his "passions" in a sexual capacity—Tom makes it impossible for him to sexually exploit Cassy and Emmeline. Shortly after Legree brings Emmeline home, Cassy hides her away that they might flee the plantation together. It is because Legree cannot identify the whereabouts of Cassy, his enslaved concubine, and Emmeline, his enslaved fancy, that he approaches Tom. And it is because Tom refuses to divulge their location, which the enslaved man admits he knows, that

Legree explodes into a violent fury. The "passions" Stowe mentions in the final chapter thus not only include the tyrannical forms of punishment exemplified in Legree's murder of Tom but also the illicit forms of sexual assault exemplified in Legree's relationship to Cassy and Emmeline. For Stowe, as for the tradition of liberal abolitionism of which she was a figurehead, enslaved people possessed no legal protection from such "passions" of the master—sexual and otherwise—of which Legree was a paradigmatic example. The final chapter makes clear that the violence of slavery constituted not an individual problem but a systemic one rooted in the structure of U.S. "jurisprudence." The injustice of a figure like Legree could only be arrested, according to Stowe, through the legal abolition of human bondage.

What makes Stowe a paragon of liberal abolitionism, however, is not only the fact that she took a systemic view of bondage and understood the law to be the primary terrain of struggle over slavery but the fact that her account of the "passions" of the master draws directly on the tradition of liberal thought tracing back to Jefferson. Surmising in *Notes* that slavery gives rise to the "most boisterous passions," Jefferson argues that the moral degradation of the slaveholder passes itself down generationally. "The parent storms," he writes, and

> the child looks on, catches the lineaments of wrath, puts on the same airs in the circle of smaller slaves, gives a loose to his worst of passions, and thus nursed, educated, and daily exercised in tyranny, cannot but be stamped by it with odious peculiarities. (162)

Just as Jefferson, in expository form, argues that slavery breeds corruption across generations, so too does Stowe in the idiom of fiction. Midway through *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe introduces readers to Henrique, the twelve-year-old son of Alfred St. Clare, the twin brother of Augustine, Tom's third owner. Less a developed character than a foil for his saintly cousin Eva, Henrique proves a tyrannous and despotic young master. Upon finding his riding horse brought to him

dirtied, he flashes with anger, striking the enslaved boy responsible and whipping him until too breathless to again lift the instrument of punishment. The scene sparks a conversation between Alfred and Augustine who, looking on, take up the question of slavery's morality in Jeffersonian terms. Augustine sarcastically frames the whipping as evidence of Henrique's instruction in the "republican catechism" that "All men are born free and equal" (390). Alfred responds sincerely, dismissing the axiom as "one of Tom Jefferson's pieces of French sentiment and humbug" (390). The pages that follow recast the moralizing observations of *Notes* in the form of debate between the brothers. Despite his unapologetic commitments to slaveholding, Alfred eventually concedes that "our system is a difficult one to train children under. It gives too free scope to the passions" (393). The rehearsal of this argument frames Henrique as a figure of the moral corruption associated with slavery—the corruption against which Jefferson had warned.

Though Henrique appears for only one chapter, his character is key, for it prefigures a later one: Simon Legree. Stowe notoriously renders the fictional slave owner Legree so cruel that his name has become synonymous with torture in the study of U.S. literature. Legree, like Henrique, is prone to violent outbursts. He beats his slaves in fits of temper. It is Legree who holds responsibility for the death of Tom, Legree who kills him in a frenzy of indignation. Henrique anticipates Legree as a figure of the degraded despot in child's clothes. Yet Legree's violence exceeds Henrique's in one important degree: it also entails sexual abuse. The sexualized rituals of terror that Stowe could not explore through the figure of the tyrannous child Henrique she addresses in the character of the sadistic adult Legree. What makes Legree so wicked within the moral economy of the text is not simply that he exercises extreme brutality but the fact that his brutality possesses sexual dimensions. Legree's very introduction in the text occurs through his purchase of Tom and the fair-complexioned Emmeline, fifteen years of age, whom he intends

to subject to a life of concubinage and rape. Though Emmeline, with the aid of Cassy, evades his designs, the lewdness of his intentions constitutes one of Stowe's most salient indictments of the wickedness of slavery. And just as Stowe represents Henrique in ways that hearken back to Jefferson, so too does she paint Legree, down to the language she uses to describe him. Stowe reproduces the conspicuous instance of "boisterous passions" in *Notes* by using the word "boisterous" only once in her entire novel and in reference to Legree. "Boisterous, unruly, and tyrannical"—these are the three terms she employs to characterize the adult slaveholder (528). "Boisterous" condenses the Jeffersonian assessment of slavery to one word and brands the owner of the appellation the personification of moral corruption made possible by the laws of slavery. It consolidates the systemic critique of liberal abolitionism into the form of a single, unprincipled slave master.

Twelve Years a Slave uses the term "boisterous" as well—to describe Edwin Epps, the last and longest owner of Solomon Northup. The text introduces Epps as a brutish and brutal man who steeps himself in alcohol and derives perverse pleasure from beating his slaves. In a description of his habits, Northup says of Epps that he frequented shooting matches in the neighboring town and would come home "boisterous and half-crazy" from drink (136). "Often he would break the dishes," Northup explains, "chairs, and whatever furniture he could lay his hands on. When satisfied with his amusement in the house, he would seize the whip and walk forth into the yard" (136). On these occasions Northup learned to take care, for Epps would gallivant about the plantation seeking the "first black face" (136) he could strike for entertainment. Coupled with the fact that he keeps an enslaved mistress, Epps mirrors Legree to the extent that both exercise what Jefferson called the "most boisterous passions" of slavery and the "most unremitting despotism" of the slaveholding class. Whether by design or coincidence,

Epps and Legree function as parallel figures, each of a character so despicable and dissipated by the moral standards of nineteenth-century society that they make the urgency of abolition appear self-evident. *Twelve Years* reproduces the defining tropes of liberal abolitionist discourse in so far as it not only frames enslaved women like Emily, Eliza, and Patsey as victims of slaveholding licentiousness but also figures egregiously "boisterous" slaveholders like Epps as evidence of the corruption fomented by slavery. *Twelve Years* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in other words, rely on the same liberal abolitionist conventions. The degraded slaveholding individual, distinguished by the exercise of sexual and sadistic "passions," comes to represent the evils of the entire system.

If *Twelve Years* renders the wickedness of slavery in the character of Epps, it embodies liberal abolitionism in the form of another character: Samuel Bass. In June 1852, the itinerant carpenter Bass was contracted to help build a house for Edwin Epps. Because he similarly possessed experience in carpentry, Northup was also charged with assisting the completion of the house. Northup soon discovered Bass to be sympathetic to his situation. Having listened to Northup's narrative of kidnapping and enslavement, Bass agreed to mail the letter that eventually led to Northup's rescue and return to freedom. The text represents Bass as the very embodiment of liberal abolitionist ideals. Northup describes Bass as "liberal to a fault" (204) just before staging a conversation between Bass and Epps in which Bass makes a case for abolition and Epps an apology for slavery. It is difficult not to read the scene metonymically as a caricatured representation of opposing sides—abolitionist and proslavery—in the national debate over the institution. Throughout the conversation, Bass assumes the ideological position of liberal abolitionism. In an invocation of the words of Jefferson meant to trap Epps by his own answer, Bass asks, "Are not all men created free and equal as the Declaration of Independence holds they are?" (206). Epps retorts in the affirmative only to dispute the category of human, from which he

insists enslaved people must be excluded: "'Yes,' responded Epps, 'But all men, niggers, and monkeys *ain't*'" (206). The two struggle over the boundaries of the human until Epps mockingly speculates, in reference to Northern abolitionists, that Bass would be "one of them cursed fanatics" (207) had he resided in New England. Bass allows the hypothetical and reproduces the paradigmatic arguments of liberal abolitionism in reply:

> I would be just what I am here. I would say that Slavery was an iniquity, and ought to be abolished. I would say there was no reason nor justice in the law, or the constitution that allows one man to hold another man in bondage. (207)

In this scene, *Twelve Years* does with Bass what it does with Epps in that Bass comes to personify something bigger than himself—namely, the logic of liberal abolitionism. Bass focuses on the law doubly as an instrument of moral degradation and social transformation. He understands the law to be responsible for the "iniquity" of slavery just as he understands the legal abolition of slavery to be the means by which such "iniquity" can be ended. If within the representational order of the narrative Epps gives form to the proslavery position, Bass gives form to its antithesis.

Yet, while Epps and Bass are staged as opposites, their source is the same: both draw on arguments ventured by Thomas Jefferson. Bass takes up the strain of Jeffersonian thought that supposed slavery existed in contradiction with liberal modernity and would eventually be overcome by freedom. He warns that there "will be a reckoning yet" (207), that a day will come when the enslaved will be liberated whether of their own accord or by providential design. In this way, Bass likens to the Jefferson invoked by liberal abolitionists such as Stowe while Epps mirrors another Jefferson, the racial scientist. In arguing parallels between enslaved people and "monkeys," Epps does not simply circumvent the need to include enslaved people in the claims

of universal human freedom propounded by the Declaration of Independence but also invokes a longstanding tradition of virulently racist natural history to which Jefferson significantly contributed. Perhaps more often quoted than his query on "boisterous passions" is the one on the ideal set of "Laws" needed to administer the Virginian commonwealth, a section of the *Notes* in which Jefferson concludes the likelihood of species difference between the black and white races. Epps's choice of "monkey" is not without precedent, for Jefferson famously analogizes enslaved people and orangutans in this chapter.[106] Jefferson speculates:

> I advance it therefore as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind. It is not against experience to suppose, that different species of the same genus, or varieties of the same species, may possess different qualifications. […] This unfortunate difference of colour, and perhaps of faculty, is a powerful obstacle to the emancipation of these people. (143)

As this passage demonstrates, Jefferson contributed to the idea that species difference justified black enslavement and invalidated calls for abolition just as much as he propounded in other passages the idea that freedom would eventually overcome slavery and that emancipation constitutes the future of liberal modernity. In conversation with Bass, Epps picks up the former logic and wields it precisely in the way Jefferson described: as a "powerful obstacle" to

[106] Elaborating racial distinctions between black and white, Jefferson writes: "The first difference which strikes us is that of colour. Whether the black of the negro resides in the reticular membrane between the skin and scarf-skin, or in the scarf-skin itself; whether it proceeds from the colour of the bile, or from that of some other secretion, the difference is fixed in nature, and is as real as if its seat and cause were better known to us. And is this difference of no importance? Is it not the foundation of a greater or less share of beauty in the two races? Are not the fine mixtures of red and white, the expressions of every passion by greater or less suffusions of colour in the one, preferable to that eternal monotony, which reigns in the countenances, that immoveable veil of black which covers all the emotions of the other race? Add to these, flowing hair, a more elegant symmetry of form, their own judgement in favour of the whites, declared by their own preference of them, as uniformly as is the preference of the Oran-ootan for the black women over those of his own species." See Jefferson, *Notes*, 138.

arguments for liberation. The debate between Epps and Bass manifests the internal contradictions of Jeffersonian thought and calls into question the viability of liberal abolitionism by revealing that it shares the same genealogy as proslavery racial science.

The debate between Epps and Bass opens up a glimpse onto the limits of liberal abolitionism. The struggle between the two men remains unresolved in the narrative. Neither liberal abolitionism nor proslavery science conclusively invalidates the claims of the other. In response to Epps's assertion that slaves are essentially "monkeys" and therefore unprotected by the universal guarantees of liberal democracy, Bass wavers, asserting enslaved humanity and then arguing himself into acceptance of black inferiority:

> These niggers are human beings. […] They are held in bondage, generation after generation, deprived of mental improvement, and who can expect them to possess much knowledge? If they are not brought down to a level with the brute creation, you slaveholders will never be blamed for it. If they are baboons, or stand no higher in the scale of intelligence than such animals, you and men like you will never have to answer for it. (206-7)

The unfortunate incongruity of this response is that in the selfsame moment Bass presumes himself to make a decisive case for abolition, he recapitulates the very arguments he attempts to overturn—put simply, he argues himself into a corner. Bass advances the claim that slaveholders will bear no culpability for the violence of slavery so long as slavery does not exist. It does not matter to him whether enslaved inferiority is natural or imposed—and there's the catch. In the exact moment he advances this premise he concedes black inferiority, placing himself in agreement with Epps and the racialized claims of nineteenth-century natural history. In a few short lines Bass asserts that enslaved people both possess the status of "human beings" (206) and

exist in a relation of inferiority to the domain of the human. At the end of the exchange, the thinking of Epps remains unchanged—staunchly proslavery. It is Bass who, though he believes himself to be unwaveringly committed to abolition, falters in his position. He transforms in the scene into Jefferson the racial scientist. What *Twelve Years* reveals through the character of Bass is that liberal abolitionism can exist simultaneously with a belief in black inferiority.

The possibility of black inferiority places black freedom on shaky ground. Epps knew all too well that there exists no protection for black citizenship, black rights, black liberty, or black life itself so long as black people can be excluded from the circle of man to whom such privileges are extended within western liberal democracy. And the law of the antebellum United States agreed with Epps, not Bass—it held that blackness signified racial inferiority and justified black exclusion from access to liberal democratic rights. No one made this point so plain as Roger B. Taney, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, who, in delivering the opinion of the court in the case of *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857), discoursed page after page on whether the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States were meant to include people of African descent, free or enslaved, as rights-bearing citizens. At length, he decides:

> We think they are not, and that they are not included, and were not intended to be included, under the word "citizens" in the Constitution, and can therefore claim none of the rights and privileges which that instrument provides for and secures to the citizens of the United States. On the contrary, they were at that time considered as a subordinate and inferior class of beings, who had been subjugated by the dominant race, and whether emancipated or not, yet remained subject to their authority, and had no rights or

> privileges but such as those who held the power and the Government might choose to grant them.[107]

Over the course of the opinion, Taney asserts again and again that the founding documents of the United States disallow the possibility of black citizenship, and the rights that come with that citizenship, on the grounds of black inferiority. He also insists that, while opinions about black inferiority may have changed between the revolutionary period and the mid-nineteenth century, the Supreme Court was in no position to contravene the original intent of the law. What Taney's commentary indicates in relation to the debate between Epps and Bass is that Epps ultimately had the law on his side. The highest legal authority in the United States agreed that black people constituted an inferior class of beings and that they could for this reason be denied the rights and privileges extended to legal citizens. The possibility of black freedom, as a legal right, was thus to a large degree illusory, conditional, and tenuous. Access to legal freedom depended on who could be counted as a person within the legal and ideological frameworks of the antebellum republic. To the extent that black folks were understood to constitute a separate, inferior species, they could and would be excluded from access to legal freedom.[108]

Twelve Years makes this point profoundly in the kidnapping of Solomon Northup. Perhaps the most unusual feature of the narrative is the fact that it begins in freedom. Northup is "born a freeman" (3), he tells us, and makes no mistake in repeating that he held the status, from birth, of a "free citizen of New-York" (39). Nearly every other extant autobiography by a person formerly enslaved opens with the birth of the narrator into slavery. The pattern occurs with such

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[107] Dred Scott v. Sandford, 60 U.S. 393, 404-5 (1856).

[108] Valerie Smith makes this point profoundly in her review of the recent film directed by Steve McQueen, *12 Years a Slave*, based on Northup's narrative. Assessing the success of the film, Smith writes: "I suspect that Northup's *12 Years a Slave* has achieved success with a global viewing audience precisely because it is a story about the tenuous nature of black freedom." See Smith, "Black Life in the Balance: *12 Years a Slave*," *American Literary History* 26, no. 2 (2014): 362-66, quote 364.

frequency that the progress of the protagonist from slavery to freedom is widely considered the normative arc of the slave narrative genre. The uncommon attribute of Northup's narrative is that it proceeds through less a linear arc than a narrative loop. Mirroring the life of Northup, *Twelve Years* opens with freedom, follows him into the depths of slavery, and traces his path back out. The fact that Northup's story of enslavement begins in freedom speaks to the fragile nature of that freedom. It speaks to the fact that Northup, to borrow the famous words of Taney, held "no rights which the white man was bound to respect"—that he possessed freedom and citizenship only in name.[109]

That no white man was "bound to respect" the provisional rights to which Northup laid claim appears forcefully in the scene in which Northup finds himself imprisoned by the slave trader named James H. Burch, who attempts to break him of his insistence upon his free status. Repeated claims to freedom on the part of Northup pit Burch's word against his own, and Burch wins. "I asserted," Northup explains, "aloud and boldly, that I was a free man—a resident of Saratoga," but Burch "denied that I was free" (23). Burch proceeds to whip Northup so brutally that Northup ceases to propound his right to freedom, at which point Burch trades him into slavery. In an attempt to exact justice against Burch, Northup files a lawsuit against him upon his return to freedom—and loses. The court refused to hold Burch accountable for violating the purported freedom of a black man. For all his assertions to the contrary, Northup never possessed ineradicable legal freedom. Through his kidnapping and sale into slavery, *Twelve Years* lays bare the ultimate impossibility of black freedom in a context in which black life remains devalued and legally unprotected.

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[109] *Dred Scott*, 60 U.S. at 407.

Legal freedom thus constituted the limit of liberal abolitionism, the horizon at which liberal abolitionism buckled under the weight of internal contradiction. The problem was this: liberal abolitionism, like Bass, advocated for legal emancipation, the lifting of the legal possibility of enslavement, without demanding the simultaneous recognition of enslaved people within the domain of the human. So long as enslaved people could be considered an inferior species, they could not possess the same freedoms as their white male counterparts. The legal abolition of slavery would not by itself amount to the extension of liberal freedoms to the formerly enslaved. It would render them unable to be owned as property by others but would not render them able to possess property in themselves. Freedom in the United States cohered around personhood—one had to be considered a legal person in order to lay claim to the rights of liberal democracy. Well before the founding of the United States, enlightenment philosopher John Locke captured this principle. He writes in the second of his *Two Treatises on Government* (1690) that “every Man has a *Property* in his own *Person*.”[110] The operative word in this axiom is “person”—the possibility of personhood functioned as the basis of all liberal democratic rights arising out of what Locke understood to be the individual’s natural entitlement to property in the self. Liberal freedom derived from the right to property in the self and consisted of the license to exercise autonomy over one’s property as one saw fit. To the extent that the only individuals legally considered full people in the antebellum United States were white men, it was white men alone who could lay full claim to liberal freedom. On account of their recognition as legal persons, white men could possess property in themselves and could therefore possess the liberal freedoms contingent upon the possession of that property. This fact—what Cheryl Harris has

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[110] See John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* [1690], ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), original emphasis 287.

called "whiteness as property"—would not change in the event of legal abolition.[111] White men would remain the only people to whom liberal freedom would belong after the chains of black slavery fell away. The vision of liberal abolitionism thus remained limited, incomplete—simply breaking the bonds of enslavement would not accomplish freedom for black folks so long as black folks were understood to constitute a different species of animal and could thereby be excluded from legal personhood.

Abolition or no abolition, white men could exercise liberal freedom—the right of autonomy over property in the self, the right to do with the self as one saw fit—in violation of others who did not possess that right. Burch could participate in the kidnapping of Northup, he could whip him brutally, he could sell him into slavery, all as an exercise in liberal freedom. It was the liberal right of Burch to do with himself as he willed so long as it did not infringe upon the liberal freedoms of other legally recognized persons, other liberal individuals who, too, possessed property in the self. It did not matter that Northup was nominally free, a "citizen of New-York" (39); Northup remained unrecognized as a full person according to the terms of the law. As such, he did not possess in his person liberal freedom that could be violated. The same was true for Patsey. Epps could rape Patsey without legal consequence, whether she held enslaved or free status. She did not possess liberal personhood as a slave nor would she possess it even after slavery's legal abolition. In *Twelve Years*, the prevailing argument of liberal abolitionism—that freedom would overcome slavery and, more specifically, that freedom would overcome the sexual violence of slavery—therefore turns out to be a ruse. Liberal freedom, in fact, becomes in the narrative the very basis for the perpetuation of violence against those excluded from the domain of the human, the liberal-legal principle by which racial and sexual

[111] See Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1707-91.

violence can continue to be justified in the context of nominal black freedom and in the wake of emancipation. *Twelve Years a Slave* is thus characterized by a profound internal tension: it reproduces the logic of liberal abolitionism in the selfsame moment that it reveals liberal abolitionism's limits. Freedom does not foreclose the possibility of slavery for Northup nor does the promise of abolition do away with the possibility of sexual violence against Patsey. So while the text, on the one hand, adheres to the conventions of liberal abolitionism in its systemic critique of slavery and its representation of enslaved women as victims, it also, on the other, calls into view the inability of liberal abolitionism to resolve the problems of racial and sexual slavery.

It is through the story of Patsey that *Twelve Years a Slave* most powerfully stages the limits of the liberal abolitionist project. Northup recounts midway through the narrative that Patsey went missing one afternoon from the Louisiana plantation of Edwin Epps. When the slaveholder inquired after her whereabouts, he was met with a general ignorance in the slave quarters that likely constituted a concerted effort to protect her: no one knew when or where she had gone. Epps sought after Patsey frantically, his urgency betraying his investment in the enslaved woman. Her disappearance threatened to throw the economic order of the plantation into disarray. Northup notes that, as a highly dexterous laborer, she picked upwards of five hundred pounds of cotton a day, three hundred above the amount Epps required of others. The loss of such an industrious worker would certainly have translated into a struggle to maintain end-of-harvest profits. Yet Northup indicates that it was not financial concern that most troubled Epps. Well before this scene, the narrative reveals the triangulation of sexual violence between Patsey, Epps, and his wife. Northup adds here that to escape the spite of her mistress, Patsey stole frequent visits to Harriet Shaw, the neighboring slave owner's black bride, herself an example of the coerced intimacies forged under slavery. Harriet Shaw took pity on Patsey and

extended her certain kindnesses. This time, Patsey had slipped off for soap, denied her by Mary Epps in a calculated attempt to punish Patsey if not unsettle her husband's interest in the bondwoman by refusing to allow her to properly bathe. Epps, however, got it in his head that the soap was a pretext for a covert affair between Patsey and the neighboring slaveholder, well-known in the region for his wandering eye. In a fit of jealous rage on her return, Epps stripped Patsey, staked her to the ground, and lashed her until her back became "literally flayed" (198).

Recounting this scene, Northup frames it in the superlative, calling it the "most cruel whipping" (194) he ever witnessed. But he never directly discloses what makes Patsey's whipping so extraordinary. Despite the fact that the narrative devotes nearly an entire chapter to the incident, the text leaves readers to conclude that it is the sexualized nature of this ritual of torture as punishment for her attempt to mitigate her sexual victimization that sets it apart from other scenes of violence in the book. *Twelve Years* is populated with scenes of brutality, doubling as an account of Northup's enslavement individually and as a testament to the physical cruelty of slavery generally. It catalogues episode after episode of terror, many involving Northup himself, including the beating intended to break him of his freedom, the lynching that would have led to his death had he not been cut free by the man who had mortgaged him, and the "tanning" (193) he received for whispering his wish to be sold to a different master when the wrong ears were listening. Yet many more of these scenes concern the subjection of his fellow slaves. The chapters leading up to the whipping of Patsey flash images of violence in rapid succession: the flogging of the runaway Wiley; the bloody spectacle of another fugitive, Augustus, overtaken by dogs; the punishment of the truant Celeste, scourged with her hands and neck in the stocks; the summary execution of enslaved insurrectionaries betrayed by their leader, Lew Cheney; the stabbing of Uncle Abram in one of Epps's drunken rampages; the routine

beating of Aunt Phebe with "a chair or stick of wood" (194). This sequence of violence leads up to the whipping of Patsey, marked by Northup as the "most cruel" of all. The implication, given the fact that her subjection differs from the rest on the basis of its sexualized nature, is that the sexual violence of slavery epitomizes human bondage at its worst. In this way, the text's representation of the incident appears to reproduce the logic of liberal abolitionism, which so often framed the sexual violence of slavery as the most compelling reason to end human bondage. The scene of Patsey's whipping, in which an abused enslaved woman receives punishment for attempting to assuage the spite-driven backlash of her own sexual exploitation, should thus constitute the most powerful case for liberal abolitionism in the narrative.[112]

Yet it doesn't—the scene instead turns liberal abolitionism on its head. Describing the incident, Northup suggests that Epps's fury stems from his obsession with maintaining sexual autonomy over Patsey. Accounting for her calls on Shaw, he explains:

> Her visits were prompted by friendship merely, but the suspicion gradually entered the brain of Epps, that another and a baser passion led her thither—that it was not Harriet she desired to meet, but rather the unblushing libertine his neighbor. Patsey found her master in a fearful rage on her return. (195)

The description of Epps's rage as "fearful"—a curious adjective for the slaveholder given that he has hitherto been daunted by nothing—contains the clue to the challenge *Twelve Years* poses to the logic of liberal abolitionism. That Epps experiences fear when Patsey exits the borders of his plantation raises questions about what precisely constitutes the substance of that fear. Northup makes it clear that Epps feared Patsey had entered into liaisons with another slave master. Such

[112] For these scenes of violence, see Northup, *Twelve Years*, 23-27 (beating of Northup); 82-88 (lynching of Northup); 183 (flogging of Wiley); 185-86 (attack on Augustus); 186-88 (punishment of Celeste); 189-90 (execution of revolutionaries); 193-94 ("tanning" of Northup); 194 (stabbing of Uncle Abram); 194 (beating of Aunt Phebe); 194-202 (whipping of Patsey).

an admission might lead one to presume that Epps possessed some kind of romantic affection for Patsey and that his fear derives from the threat of her sexual attentions being directed elsewhere—yet I want to roundly refuse this thinking, despite the fact that it holds precedent in historical scholarship on slavery. Eugene D. Genovese in *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (1972), his field-making study of paternalism and the antebellum South, suggests through a reading of *Twelve Years* that slaveholding men often fell in love with their enslaved mistresses:

> It would be hard to live with a beautiful and submissive young woman for long and to continue to consider her mere property or a mere object of sexual gratification, especially since the free gift of her beauty has so much more to offer than her yielding to force. The *prezzo d'affezione* was usually just that: it would not be astonishing if many of these fancy girls, like their famous free quadroon sisters in New Orleans who entered into an institutionally structured concubinage with wealthy whites, often ended up falling in love with their men, and vice versa.[113]

Aside from the fact that such relations of intimacy were always conditioned by the legal bondage of the enslaved woman—she possessed no legal capacity to refuse her master's "love"—and were thus far from the romanticized vision of affection Genovese ventures here, the problem with his suggestion is that it is historically impossible to know exactly what happened inside the

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[113] Genovese ventures these claims after citing the passage in which Northup describes Maria, an enslaved woman he encountered while in passage to New Orleans. Northup writes: "Maria was a rather genteel looking colored girl, with a faultless form, but ignorant and extremely vain. The idea of going to New-Orleans was pleasing to her. She entertained an extravagantly high opinion of her own attractions. Assuming a haughty mien, she declared to her companions, that immediately on our arrival in New-Orleans, she had no doubt, some wealthy single gentleman of good taste would purchase her at once!" (41). Genovese takes from this passage the suggestion—itself quite a leap based on the details included in the anecdote—the idea that enslaved fancy girls fell in love with their masters. He disregards the possibility the statement might tell us more about what Northup himself thought of Maria than what Maria in fact did or said. He also gives little attention to the possibility that Maria's statements may have been performative for any number of reasons. Genovese, in other words, not only reads the passage as self-evident, which forecloses the historical possibility of a wide range of alternative accounts of Maria, but also draws conclusions from her story that are wholly unsupported by it. See Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* [1972] (New York: Vintage, 1976), 417.

head of any slave owner, including Epps, and any slave, including Patsey. In fact, if, as Darlene Clarke Hine has argued, enslaved women often concealed their emotional lives, which were diverse and varied, then the position that enslaved women *in general* fell in love with their masters becomes even more unsustainable.[114] Rather than guessing at the psychology of an individual slave owner like Epps, one might instead examine the laws of slavery and ask a different question: namely, what legal right of Epps's did Patsey place into jeopardy by absconding temporarily to the neighboring plantation? Framing the "fearful rage" of Epps as a symptom of the potential loss of legal rights, rather than of some kind of romantic love, gets to the heart of the conflict in the scene of Patsey's whipping.

I want to submit for consideration the possibility that, by leaving the plantation, Patsey unsettles the liberal freedom of Epps and that it is the risk at which she places his liberal freedom that constitutes the basis of his "fearful rage." As her master, Epps exercised the legal right to do with Patsey as he saw fit. The *Civil Code of the State of Louisiana* left no room for ambiguity on this point. Article 35 of Book I on "Persons" defined the slave as "one who is in the power of a master to whom he belongs. The master may sell him, dispose of his person, his industry and his

[114] The historiographical problems with Genovese's claim that enslaved women in general fell in love with their abusers are nearly as great in number as the ethical problems with making such a claim in the first place. For one thing, Genovese here falls into the trap of reproducing the logic of paternalism he purports to analyze from a distance throughout the book. Paternalists throughout the slaveholding South justified slavery on the grounds that it led to the care of enslaved people by their masters and that masters developed ties of affection, in at least a familial sense, to their slaves just as slaves developed ties of affection to their masters. Genovese here ventures proslavery ideology as history. The claim of mutual love between slaveholder and slave remains at best a guess, in Genovese's book, unsupported by historical evidence, and at worst a justification for the rape of enslaved women at the hands of their owners. Sexual violence constituted the very terms of the bondwoman's enslavement, not evidence of the bondwoman's "love" for her master. Genovese, in this passage, does the same thing that Harriet Beecher Stowe does, as described earlier in this chapter, when she frames Cassy's purchase for sex as a romantic encounter in which the enslaved woman and her purchaser fall in love. This move on the part of Genovese is also of a piece with the ahistorical one that Kenneth Stampp makes, when he asserts that enslaved women were unapologetically promiscuous because they were either excessively sexual or strategically opportunistic. See Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 417; Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 516-18; Kenneth Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution*, 359. For Darlene Clark Hine's discussion of enslaved women's interiority and what she calls the "culture of dissemblance" through which many preserved their interior lives for themselves, see Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989): 912-20.

labor [.…]"[115] Article 173 reiterated the definition: "The slave is entirely subject to the will of his master" (28). As the property of Epps, Patsey existed legally as an extension of the property Epps held in himself. It was for this reason that he could "dispose of her person" as he desired, for this reason that she was "entirely subject to his will." She was his property, not in a negative sense but a positive one: her status as property did not mean the stripping away of her legal personhood and her reduction to an object—for she held no legal personhood in the first place—but rather the expansion of the property that Epps held in his own person and could administer at his discretion. So long as the liberal freedom of Epps derived from his legal right to exercise autonomy over his property, including Patsey, his subjection of Patsey to rape became the very expression of his exercise of liberal freedom. Liberal freedom in this sense constituted both the condition of possibility for and the materialization of sexual violence. When Patsey ducked off the plantation for soap, she placed Epps's capacity to exercise exclusive authority over his property in her at risk. Outside of the domain of his plantation, in the house of another slaveholder, his claim to property in Patsey could be violated. The possibility of a clandestine affair between Patsey and his neighbor would subvert his control over her and by extension undermine his liberal freedom to do with his property as he willed. The "fearful rage" of Epps, in this reading, has nothing to do with love—it constitutes instead affective evidence of a threat to his liberal freedom.

It is in this light that the lengthy commentary on freedom following Patsey's whipping makes fullest sense. Disputing claims to the contrary, Northup, having summarized the brutal

[115] *Civil Code of the State of Louisiana: With the Statutory Amendments, from 1825 to 1853, Inclusive; and References to the Decisions of the Supreme Court of Louisiana to the Sixth Volume of Annual Reports*, comp. and ed. Thomas Gibbes Morgan (New Orleans: Bloomfield & Steel, 1861), 6; hereafter cited parenthetically.

incident, immediately explains that even the humblest slave understands the true meaning of freedom:

> It is a mistaken opinion that prevails in some quarters, that the slave does not understand the term—does not comprehend the idea of freedom. Even on Bayou Boeuf, where I conceive slavery exists in its most abject and cruel form—where it exhibits features altogether unknown in more northern States—the most ignorant of them generally know full well its meaning. They understand the privileges and exemptions that belong to it—that it would bestow on them the fruits of their own labors, and that it would secure to them the enjoyment of domestic happiness. (200)

This passage might be easy to read as an unqualified affirmation of desire for liberal freedom on the part of enslaved people if not for the fact that it appears immediately after the whipping of Patsey, which functions in the narrative as the reassertion and expression of Epps's liberal freedom over the enslaved woman. Framed by the preceding scene, this passage elaborates a much more complex vision of freedom, both a critique of liberal freedom and what Robin D. G. Kelley might call the "freedom dreams" of an alternative liberty not rooted in the racial and sexual violences of enslavement.[116] On the one hand, Northup explains, the slave understands freedom to mean a reality yet to come, including the opportunity to labor for oneself and to exercise autonomy in matters of family and home. Yet between the lines of the passage, Northup suggests, on the other hand, that the slave also understands liberal freedom as a structure of violence that already exists—liberal freedom as the kidnapping and enslavement of Northup, the subjection of Patsey to rape, the concubinage of Eliza, the sale of fifteen-year-old Emily for sex, the flogging of Wiley, the rending of the flesh of Augustus, the punishment of Celeste, the

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[116] I refer here to Kelley's study of the twentieth-century black radical intellectual tradition, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon, 2002).

execution of countless enslaved revolutionaries, the stabbing of Uncle Abram, the beating of Aunt Phebe—all in the name of the law. The slave understands liberal freedom in this sense, Northup intimates, as the right of those with legal personhood to exercise individual autonomy, to do with themselves as they see fit, at the expense of harm to those denied legal personhood altogether.

The limit of liberal abolitionism exists precisely in this: that liberal freedom, conceived of in this way, would continue to constitute the condition of possibility for racialized sexual violence even in the event of abolition. Put simply, the legal termination of slavery would not dissolve the possibility of sexual violence for those formerly enslaved. What *Twelve Years* makes available for thought through the scene of Patsey's whipping is that the exclusion of enslaved people from the domain of the human would function as the grounds for their continued subjection in the wake of emancipation. Having detailed the beating of Patsey, Northup explains Epps's relation to the enslaved woman in a telling line: "She had been reared no better than her master's beast—looked upon merely as a valuable and handsome animal" (199). The passive voice masks the agent performing the action of the sentence, and while readers are meant to presume that it is Epps to whom Northup refers, Epps who relates to Patsey as a "beast" and who looks upon her as an "animal," one might also read in the line a reminder of the fact that Patsey held such status not only in the eyes of Epps but also in the eyes of the law. So long as the law rendered black personhood an impossibility, the abolition of slavery would fail to accomplish the liberation of black people from the violence of slavery. Slavery might be discontinued in name but the right of Epps to exercise the liberal freedom of his personhood over and at the expense of Patsey without legal consequence would continue.[117] If liberal freedom as such remained legally

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[117] Recent scholarship has demonstrated that sexual violence against black women continues well after the abolition of slavery and that black women rarely find redress for sexual violence in the law. See especially Painter, *Southern*

intact, freedom would never overcome the sexual violence of slavery as so many abolitionists thought. Freedom, rather, would function as the limit of liberal abolitionism. The liberal abolitionist insistence upon freedom as the antidote to enslaved sexual abuse collapsed in on itself as the simultaneous allowance for the perpetuation of the sexual violence of slavery.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that the dominant antislavery movement from at least the 1830s to the 1860s was characterized, among other things, by a fixation on the sexual violence of human bondage. Abolitionists protested this sexual violence in writing and oration. Most often, this protest took the form of representing enslaved women as victims of horrific abuse including rape, concubinage, sale into the fancy trade, and sadistic punishment for refusing the sexual demands of their masters. These often graphic depictions of sexual violence were thought to help bring about the abolition of slavery, which for many antislavery thinkers represented the inevitable telos of history within liberal modernity. The underlying logic of the discursive and epistemological formation that I have called "liberal abolitionism" was that liberal freedom would ultimately overcome not only slavery but the sexual violence that resulted from it. Liberal abolitionists preferred a systemic view of sexual violence in so far as they understood

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History Across the Color Line; Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*; Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Vintage, 2010); Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies*; hooks, *Ain't I a Woman*; Sarah Haley, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Shatema Threadcraft, *Intimate Justice: The Black Female Body and the Body Politic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); and Weinbaum, *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery*. This scholarship builds on the longstanding black feminist observation that sexual violence persists in the wake of abolition. See Davis, *Women, Race, and Class*; Hine, "Female Slave Resistance: The Economics of Sex;" Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe;" Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*; Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West;" Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*; Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*.

the legality of slavery to be responsible for the relations of forced sexual behavior and illicit intimacy throughout the institution. They believed that changing the law—legally doing away with the possibility of human enslavement—would remove the root cause of the sexual violence prevalent throughout the South.

Yet, as I have also demonstrated, liberal abolitionism had its limits. While *Twelve Years a Slave* draws upon many of the conventions of liberal abolitionism, especially in its representation of enslaved women as victims of sexual abuse, it also reveals the incapacity of liberal abolitionism to achieve anything but nominal freedom for the enslaved. In what by the standard practices of the day should comprise the most compelling case for liberal abolitionism—the scene of Patsey's whipping—*Twelve Years* instead brings into view the internal contradictions and boundaries of the liberal abolitionist project. The text demonstrates through the sexualized punishment of Patsey that liberal freedom does not eradicate racialized sexual violence but in fact constitutes both its ongoing condition of possibility and its material expression. As such, liberal abolitionism could not and would not accomplish freedom for the enslaved—it would only end slavery and sexual violence according to the law.

Chapter Three:
Celia and Proslavery Paternalism

Celia killed her master in 1855, just thirty-five years after the passing of the Missouri Compromise. Her master, Robert Newsom, had purchased Celia in 1850 and had raped her on the way to his farm in Callaway County, Missouri. He continued to sexually assault Celia in the years that followed. One, if not both, of Celia's children were his. Late on the twenty-third night of June, five years after her purchase, Newsom approached the enslaved woman's cabin, one he had built especially for Celia about sixty paces from the main house, its proximity conveniently necessary for his nighttime visits since she cooked the family's meals. Newsom likely expected that he would have his way with Celia that evening, as he had often before. But, this time, things went differently. As he entered the cabin, she wielded a club and bludgeoned him on the head. Newsom sank to the floor and she struck him again, rendering him dead. Unsure what to do next, Celia passed an hour or so in indecision. She then stoked a fire in the hearth, heaved Newsom's corpse into the flames, and burnt his body to ashes. The following morning, bribing him with a handful of walnuts, Celia had Newsom's twelve-year-old grandson carry the ashes out and scatter them along the path to the stables. The next day, an inquest into Newsom's absence was issued. Ever-increasing threats to her life and the lives of her children succeeded in soliciting a confession from Celia. The nineteen-year-old admitted to killing Newsom and was incarcerated to await trial on the charge of murder. Six months later, after delivering a stillborn third child, this one perhaps also Newsom's, she was found guilty of murder in the first degree and was sentenced to death. With her hanging on the twenty-first of December 1855, the legal proceedings of *The State of Missouri v. Celia, a Slave* drew to a close.

Though it receives no mention in the trial record, the Missouri Compromise played a direct role in the decision of the case. The bill, signed into law by President James Monroe in 1820, allowed the State of Missouri to enter the union as a slave state on the condition that Maine be admitted as a free state, the terms thereby maintaining the balance of representation between slave and free states in the United States Congress. The core provision of the bill for the emergent State of Missouri was the legal protection of the right to own enslaved human chattel. Included in this right to own property in people was the implicit right of the owner to exercise autonomy over that property. Masters could do with their property as they saw fit, even if that autonomy involved subjecting enslaved people to rape and other violent forms of sexual assault. In establishing the right to own property in people, the Missouri Compromise established the legal right of masters to sexually abuse their slaves. It was precisely this idea—that the property right inherently entailed a sexual right—that came into play in *Missouri v. Celia*. In this chapter, I show how the logic of property embedded in the Missouri Compromise was the deciding factor in Celia's case. Neither the prosecution nor the defense explicitly argued that the case was about Newsom's property rights. The most immediate question for them concerned whether Celia had committed murder or homicide. Yet both litigants took for granted and shaped their arguments according to the logic of property on which the State of Missouri had been established. For this reason, Celia could not have been found anything but guilty, for, in refusing his sexual advances, Celia had violated the right of Newsom to do with his property as he saw fit.

The fact that the case went to trial at all raises several questions about representation. The first and most immediate form was legal: in order to for the case to be adjudicated, Celia had to be represented by legal counsel. As an enslaved woman, she could not represent herself. Missouri law prohibited enslaved people from testifying in cases that involved white litigants or

witnesses. Celia could not legally speak in court against the deceased Newsom, any member of his family, or his white neighbors, several of whom were called to the stand. Judge William Hall of the Thirteenth Circuit Court of Missouri in which Celia's case was tried therefore appointed the enslaved woman three attorneys, all of whom were either slave owners or came from slave owning families. Curiously, these three attorneys defended Celia adamantly and with sincerity despite their ties to slavery and the fact that they may have known or been friends with Newsom personally. They argued that Missouri law provided Celia a right to self-defense against rape as a woman. In killing Newsom, they contended, she exercised that right. Her actions, for them, constituted not murder but justifiable homicide. Had their arguments swayed the verdict, Celia would have necessarily been spared the death penalty. But they lost the case. The judge refused to allow the defense to present the bulk of its instructions to the jury. These instructions contained the defense's core arguments in Celia's favor. While all were written down and included in the trial record, making them available to us today, only four of the defense's thirteen instructions reached the jurors' eyes. So when the jury delivered the guilty verdict, Celia's defense immediately appealed it on the grounds of a mistrial. The appeal was accepted by the Supreme Court of Missouri, but the higher court issued no stay of Celia's punishment for the duration of the appeal process. Celia was executed before her case had a chance to be retried. These facts leave us not only with an awareness of the blatant injustice of Celia's trial. They also beg a question about how three white men with immediate ties to slavery could represent—that is, serve as the legal representatives of—Celia in full sincerity, knowing that their attempts were likely in vain.

Throughout this chapter, I answer this question by framing Celia's defense attorneys as agents of what I call the liberal disavowal of the State of Missouri. When the State entered the

union through the Missouri Compromise, the laws it established regarding slavery were markedly paternalistic—they openly recognized enslaved humanity and mandated that enslaved people be provided certain protections, including the right to legal defense in cases involving extreme and arbitrary brutality by their masters. While these protections existed more in name than in fact, they nevertheless promulgated Missouri's ideological stance toward enslaved people. The State assumed the position of protector and caregiver of those whose enslavement it allowed. Of course, this stance existed in contradiction with its simultaneous legal treatment of enslaved people as property who could be used as their masters saw fit. This contradiction was the foundation on which the State of Missouri was built and through which it was constituted. As a result, in the writing and execution of its laws, the State and those working on its behalf—including Celia's three defense attorneys—had to participate in an act of disavowal. The State and its agents had to openly acknowledge Celia's humanity and afford the enslaved woman a committed defense. Such action appeared to repudiate the laws that turned Celia into property and made her subject to her master's sexual whims. But, in fact, this act of disavowal safeguarded the violent laws of property right on which the State had been built. By granting Celia a trial and advocating on her behalf, Celia's lawyers helped to cover up the founding contradictions of Missouri and fortified the basis on which Celia could be legally subjected to violence as property in the first place.

In what follows, I call this act of disavowal liberal. Contrary to the liberal progressivist assumption that the antebellum South was characterized by a certain political and ideological backwardness, I demonstrate that slave states such as Missouri, alongside free states such as Maine, defined themselves according to an idealized notion of property perfectly consistent with the liberal tradition. Throughout this chapter, I use the term "liberal" to describe ideas and

practices that arise out of the schools of European philosophical thought that understand economic freedom to be achieved through wage labor and the free market, political emancipation to be achieved through citizenship in a state and protection under its laws, and civilization to be achieved through training in forms of national and aesthetic culture.[1] More specifically, I understand the liberal tradition to be defined foremost by a particular set of notions about property—namely, property understood as the ineluctable measure of individual political personhood and the protection of property as the sole and originary purpose for the existence of civil society and its laws. In so far as slave states like Missouri and, as I show, free states like Maine founded themselves on the idea that protecting the property of the individual was not only their highest aim but their primary reason for acquiring formal statehood, slave states were just as liberal as the purportedly more progressive free states that outlawed slavery from the outset. In examining *Missouri v. Celia*, I therefore treat Missouri as a liberal state. Understanding Missouri in such a way brings into view the processes of disavowal at play in Celia's case that would otherwise remain invisible.

If *Missouri v. Celia* raises questions about the legal representation Celia received, it also raises a host of historiographical questions about the enslaved woman's representation in the trial record. Put differently, the trial asks us to consider how the archive depicts or portrays what it ultimately produces as the historical person Celia, and what the stakes of such representations are. The way that Celia was legally represented in the courtroom is different than the way that she is represented in the trial record. In one sense, the trial record presents a fuller account of the arguments in Celia's favor than the defense Judge Hall allowed in court. Whereas Hall precluded the jury's exposure to arguments on both sides, the trial record gives us a clearer window onto

[1] I draw this formulation of liberalism from Lisa Lowe's magisterial study of the liberal tradition and the violence on which it depends, *Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 3-4.

the case the defense attempted to make. In light of this fact, one might say that the judge allowed Celia to be represented only as guilty but that the archive permits representation of Celia as either guilty or innocent. On its surface, the possibility of Celia's innocence might appear to countervail the violence by which she was rendered exclusively guilty in the courtroom. But, contrary to that surface reading, I show that the archive, too, commits a violence against Celia, for it permits a reading of Celia exclusively in relation to the criminal charges against her, locking historical understanding of the enslaved woman in what might be called a dialectic of innocence and guilt.[2] The archive in this way pushes the historical person Celia out of reach, erasing her from history by representing her exclusively as an enslaved woman who killed her master, whether in an act of murder or homicide, whether guilty or innocent. The Celia of the archive is not the historical Celia—the latter has been irretrievably obscured by the former.[3]

This dialectic of innocence and guilt defines the methodological challenge taken up here. Throughout this chapter, I do not attempt to recuperate the historical person Celia from the scraps of the archive. But I do reject the archive's ongoing demand for a verdict.[4] Laying aside

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[2] For help on this point, I thank Micol Seigel, who commented on an early draft of this chapter in conference paper form at the Annual Meeting of the American Studies Association in Chicago, Illinois, November 2017.

[3] Other than the trial record of *Missouri v. Celia*, little historical documentation of Celia exists. The primary source of information about Celia's life is her trial record. See State of Missouri v. Celia, a Slave, File 4496 (13th Cir. 1855), Callaway County Courthouse, Fulton, Missouri. All references to the trial record will be taken from File 4496 of the Callaway County Courthouse unless otherwise noted. To my knowledge, the only other sources from which historical knowledge about Celia can be drawn are the archival materials on Celia's case housed at the Missouri Supreme Court, the probate records of the Estate of Robert Newsom, and a handful of newspaper articles in which Celia's trial and execution were covered. For the Supreme Court of Missouri record, see State of Missouri v. Celia, a Slave, Box 356, Folder 14, Missouri Supreme Court Case Files, 1855, Missouri Supreme Court, Jefferson City, Missouri. For the Newsom Estate probate records, see the Estate of Robert Newsom, H. Tichner and D. Newsom, Box 141, Bundle 16, Kingdom of Callaway Historical Society, Fulton, Missouri. Newspaper articles on Celia include the following: "Fiendish Murder," *Missouri Republican*, June 28, 1855, 2; "Fiendish Murder," *Randolph Citizen*, June 28, 1855, 2; "Horrible Murder: A Man Killed and Burned by His Own Slave!," *Boonville Weekly Observer*, July 7, 1855; "Fiendish Murder Near Fulton, Mo.," *New York Times*, July 2, 1855, 8; "Horrible Murder," *Missouri Whig*, July 12, 1855, 2; "Fiendish Murder," *Liberator*, October 19, 1855, 4; "Escaped from Jail," *Weekly Brunswicker*, November 24, 1855, 3; "Escaped from Jail," *Daily Missouri Democrat*, November 27, 1855, 2; "Recovered," *Weekly Brunswicker*, December 1, 1855, 3; "Hung," *Daily Missouri Democrat*, January 9, 1856, 2; "Hanging a Negress," *New York Times*, January 16, 1855, 2; "Hanging a Negress," *Baltimore Sun*, January 17, 1856.

[4] That the archive continues to demand a verdict is perhaps best illustrated by the website devoted to Celia's case developed in conjunction with the 2004 documentary series, *Slavery and the Making of America*, produced by PBS

the question of culpability, I take up a different one: how might we develop an alternative framework, one that refuses overdetermination by the dialectic of innocence and guilt, for understanding Celia's case and, more generally, telling the history of enslaved people's resistance to sexual violence within slavery? To pursue an answer to this question, I close read a handful of passages taken from a variety of historical documents relevant to Celia's case, including the court file of *Missouri v. Celia*, newspaper accounts of the enslaved woman's trial, and portions of the founding Constitution of the State of Missouri as well as the Missouri Compromise. Each passage I close read functions as a moment of archival contradiction, a blip in the logic of the archive that reveals its strained attempt to tell a consistent and coherent story. Close reading these moments both with and against the archive's dominant grain, I unpack an account of state power in Missouri. I show how the historical record of *Missouri v. Celia* operates as a technology of liberal disavowal to produce an account of Celia's case consistent with the State's outward stance of paternalist benevolence toward enslaved people. At the same time, reading with and against the grain of the archive yields insight into that which it attempts to conceal and contain. In what follows, I elaborate how Celia's killing of Newsom posed a direct challenge to the liberal logic of property on which Missouri was founded. Fundamentally at issue in *Missouri v. Celia* was the question of whether the property right would continue to include the right to sexual enjoyment of that property or whether the enslaved woman's challenge to this logic would stand. It is precisely this question that the historical record of Celia's case attempts to cover up. Locking historical representation of the case in the dialectic of innocence and guilt

member station Thirteen/WNET, that includes coverage of Celia's trial. The interactive web content on Celia's case, titled "You Be the Judge: Missouri v. Celia," invites readers to examine relevant Missouri State laws as well as excerpts from the trial record, including witness testimony called by both the prosecution and the defense. After looking over arguments from both sides, readers are asked to decide for themselves whether Celia was guilty or innocent. See "You Be the Judge: Missouri v. Celia," *Slavery and the Making of America*, Thirteen/WNET New York, accessed June 5, 2018, https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/slavery/experience/legal/feature2.html.

effectively eclipses the profound challenge Celia posed to the logic of property embedded in the Missouri Compromise. In eschewing the dialectic of innocence and guilt, this chapter brings into view the representational tricks by which Celia's challenge to property was obscured from view.

Ultimately, this chapter understands Celia's challenge to the idea of property to be an act of political refusal—refusal of the liberal paradigms that imagine the human to be most fully expressed in the achievement of political personhood and the exercise of proprietorial rights. Celia's act of killing invites us to imagine alternatives to the most fundamental notion of liberal humanism—the idea of the human being as commensurate with the white, male, property-owning citizen, the ideal political subject of Missouri State envisioned in and by the Missouri Compromise. In the latter half of the chapter, I discuss how Celia's defense, while purporting to make a case in her favor, in fact reified this patriarchal and white supremacist idea of the human by claiming that Celia held title to legal protections against rape on account of her gender. The defense's deployment of gender functioned as the means by which the State of Missouri accomplished the work of liberal disavowal in and through her case: in protesting that Celia was a woman, the defense sought to humanize her; yet insisting on her humanity reproduced the liberal vision of the human at the heart of the Missouri Compromise and required Celia's erasure as the property of Newsom, the idealized figure of the human according to the founding logic of the State. The main argument of this chapter is that Celia's act of killing invites us to imagine alternatives to this liberal vision of the human. In a confession extorted from her the night before her execution, Celia claimed that, when Newsom approached her, "the Devil got into me" and that in such a state she fatally refused his advances. Taking up Sylvia Wynter's notion of the "demonic ground" as the vantage point from which alternatives to liberal humanism might be imagined, I argue that Celia's invocation of "the Devil" invites us to occupy such a "demonic"

perspective, not only in the reading of Celia's case but in our attempts to understand the sexual violence of slavery more generally. Rather than capitulating to the dialectic of innocence and guilt or working within the epistemologies of liberal humanism by which the defense reified the historical impossibility of sexual violence against Celia and enslaved people like her, we might, in representing Celia, pursue new grounds—"demonic" ones—for the production of historical knowledge about slavery and the people whose violent sexual subjection it made possible.

Missouri v. Celia was exceptional in that most accusations of crime against enslaved women were not adjudicated by trial.[5] But Celia's experiences of sexual intimidation and assault are representative of enslaved women's experiences of slavery at large. Feminist scholars have demonstrated at length that enslaved women's daily experiences of slavery were defined by exposure to sexual violence.[6] Moreover, I understand Celia's case to be representative of the way that liberal disavowal worked in Missouri in general. I treat the case file of *Missouri v. Celia* as

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[5] In her nearly exhaustive compilation of judicial cases involving enslaved people across the United States prior to the abolition of slavery, Helen Tunnicliff Catterall lists no instances in which enslaved women were put on trial for the murder of their masters in Missouri. Though Catterall missed Celia's case, which was rediscovered after the publication of her compendious book, the absence of such instances in Catterall's account speaks to their infrequency. See *Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the Negro*, Vol. V., ed. Helen Tunnicliff Catterall and James J. Hayden (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1937).

[6] See Angela Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," *Black Scholar* 3, no. 4 (1971): 2-15; Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1985); Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64-81; Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989): 912-20; Saidiya v. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage, 1997); Nell Irvin Painter, "Soul Murder and Slavery: Toward a Fully Loaded Cost Accounting," in *Southern History Across the Color Line* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 15-39; Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Daina Ramey Berry, *Swing the Sickle for the Harvest Is Ripe: Gender and Slavery in Antebellum Georgia* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Sowande' M. Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016); Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); and Deirdre Cooper Owens, *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2017); Daina Ramey Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved, from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation* (Boston: Beacon, 2017).

part of what others have called an “archive of liberalism,” by which I mean, on one hand, that the legal file contains the trace of liberal disavowal that characterized the defense’s litigation of the case and, on the other, that the file itself performs the work of liberal disavowal in so far as it appears to humanize Celia even as it produces the dialectic of innocence and guilt that overdetermines her historical representation and reifies the liberal vision of the human that contributes to her historical erasure as property.[7] Of course, any number of cases might be employed to illustrate how the law and its adjudication accomplish the work of liberal disavowal, but I choose Celia’s case for two reasons. First, it has in recent years achieved a degree of widespread familiarity in academic and popular circles, making it ideal for addressing the question of how we might narrate the history of enslaved people’s resistance to sexual violence in new ways.[8] Second, *Missouri v. Celia* brings into view the ways in which race, gender, and

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[7] In framing Celia’s case file in this way, I expand Lisa Lowe’s notion of the “archive of liberalism” to include the legal record on Celia’s case. In *Intimacies of Four Continents*, Lowe focuses on literary, cultural, and philosophical texts alongside colonial state archives often treated separately. Reading these archives together, Lowe traces the ways in which such texts and archives both mediate the contradictions between liberal ideals of freedom and slavery, settler colonialism, and empire founded on racial violence. In my framing of the file of *Missouri v. Celia*, I suggest that the record mediates the contradiction between the liberal ideal of universal personhood and the organization of capitalist social relations by the formations of patriarchy and white supremacy. See Lowe, *Intimacies*, 4.

[8] Celia’s case was first discussed in academic publication by Thirteenth Circuit Court of Missouri Judge Hugh P. Williamson in “Document: The State Against Celia, a Slave,” *Midwest Journal* 8 (1956): 408-20. Nearly a half century later, the case was taken up again by historian Melton A. McLaurin, who published a monograph on the trial, *Celia, a Slave* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1991). Five years later, Saidiya Hartman published an article on the case, “Seduction and the Ruses of Power,” *Callaloo* 19, no. 2 (1996): 537-60, which she later revised and included in her field-making study of violence in slavery, *Scenes of Subjection* (1997). Since then, *Missouri v. Celia* has found frequent mention in black studies scholarship and historical studies of slavery. Sustained scholarly analyses of the case can also be found in Hugh P. Williamson, “The State of Missouri vs. Mat, a Slave,” *Journal of the Missouri Bar* 20, no. 1 (1964): 19-25; Daina Ramey Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh*, 58-90; Diane Mutti Burke, *On Slavery’s Border: Missouri’s Small-Slaveholding Households, 1815-1865* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2010); 185, 189-91, 240; Brandon R. Byrd, “Teaching Celia in the Age of Black Lives Matter,” *Radical Teacher* 106 (2016): 57-64; Jeanne Elders DeWaard, “‘The Shadow of Law’: Sentimental Interiority, Gothic Terror, and the Legal Subject,” *American Quarterly* 62, no. 4 (2006): 1-30; Annette Gordon-Reed, “Celia’s Case,” in *Race on Trial: Law and Justice in American History*, ed. Annette Gordon-Reed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 48-60; Annette Gordon-Reed, *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2008); 320-25; Suzan Harrison, “Mastering Narratives/Subverting Masters: Rhetorics of Race in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, *Dessa Rose*, and *Celia, a Slave*,” *Southern Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (1997): 13-28; A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr., “Race, Sex, Education, and Missouri Jurisprudence: *Shelley v. Kraemer* in a Historical Perspective,” *Washington University Law Quarterly* 67, no. 3 (1989): 673-708; Harriet C. Frazier, *Slavery and Crime in Missouri, 1773-1865* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001), 184-94; Wilma King, “‘Mad’ Enough to Kill:

sexual formations operated in articulation. More specifically, Celia's killing of Newsom reveals and allows us to challenge the ways that the property right was imagined both as a racialized (white) and gendered (male) right of sexual enjoyment. In examining the ways in which race, gender, and sexual violence intersect in Celia's case, this chapter moves beyond foregoing studies of liberal thought that have treated liberalism in relation to race or gender in isolation in the context of slavery.[9] What emerges through a reexamination of these formations in articulation is an account of the ways that the liberal right of property played out as a sexual right in the context of slavery and an account of the invitation Celia opens up for us to pursue horizons of knowing that imagine the human differently, outside of the property relation.

Enslaved Women, Murder, and Southern Courts," *Journal of African American History* 92, no. 1 (2007): 37-56; Jared Sexton, "People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery," *Social Text* 28, no. 2 (2010): 31-56; Andrea Stone, "Interracial Sexual Relationships and Legal Subjectivity in Antebellum Law and Literature," *American Literature* 81, no. 1 (2009): 65-92, and "The Protective Self: Slave Sexual Health, Crime, and U.S. Legal Personhood; Celia's Murder Trial and Harriet Jacobs's Incidents," in *Black Well-Being: Health and Selfhood in Antebellum Black Literature*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2016), 121-54. On his "Famous Trials" website, historian Douglass O. Linder has devoted an entire page to Celia's case, including a timeline of the enslaved woman's trial and digitized copies of the original trial record. See Linder, "Celia, a Slave Trial (1855)," University of Missouri, Kansas City School of Law, accessed June 5, 2018, http://www.famous-trials.com/celia. In 2012, the University of Michigan launched The Celia Project, an interdisciplinary research collaboration on the history of sexual violence in slavery, directed by Martha S. Jones and Hannah Rosen, and whose members include Adrienne M. Davis, Crystal N. Feimster, Alison M. Gorsuch, Ariela J. Gross, Brandi D. Hughes, Arlene D. Keizer, Andrea Stone, and Megan Sweeny. The Celia Project has hosted talks, made available a public bibliography on Celia's case, and is at work on a forthcoming collection of essays on *Missouri v. Celia*. See "The Celia Project: A Research Collaboration on the History of Slavery and Sexual Violence," University of Michigan, College of Literature, Science, and the Arts, accessed June 5, 2018, https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/celiaproject/. Celia's case has also received recent and frequent mention in magazine articles and think pieces in popular online mediums. See DeNeen L. Brown, "Missouri v. Celia, a Slave: She Killed the White Master Raping Her, Then Claimed Self-Defense," *Washington Post*, October 19, 2017; Brandon R. Byrd, "Celia, #BlackLivesMatter, and the Diffusion of Black Thought," *Black Perspectives*, April 13, 2016; and Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration," *The Atlantic* 361, no. 3 (October 2015), 60-80, 82-84. Finally, Celia's case has been the subject of a recent award-winning play by Barbara Seyda, *Celia, a Slave* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

[9] I refer primarily to Carole Pateman's *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), which examines how patriarchy structures the liberal tradition, but pays little attention to the articulation of gender and sex with race, and Charles W. Mills's *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), which does the inverse, paying attention primarily to the relation of white supremacy to liberalism, but sidelining questions of gender and sex. These two works represent what might be understood as two paradigms for the production of revisionist histories of liberalism in so far as most fall into one or the other category, attending more closely to either race or gender/sex, but not both. One exception is Amy Dru Stanley's *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Whereas Stanley does treat race and gender in relation to liberal contract theory, she focuses on the emancipation and post-emancipation period, rather than taking the antebellum period of slavery as her focus, as I do here.

"Against the Peace and Dignity of the State": The Liberal Right of Property

The notion that property and personhood are intimately bound up together has been a longstanding feature of liberal political thought. The meaning of the term "property" varies widely in liberal philosophy, sometimes signifying one's material possessions and at other times one's life, liberty, estate, labor, or rights. But for all its variation the term remains consistently tethered to the idea of a self-possessed individual who constitutes the irreducible unit of political society. The Enlightenment philosopher John Locke perhaps most famously captured this link in the aphorism that "every Man has a *Property* in his own *Person*," yet the connection between property and personhood has been fundamental to the thought of most theorists of liberalism.[10] Political scientist C. B. Macpherson has argued that the notion of a "possessive individual"—a political agent who owns property in the self and exerts an inherent proprietorial authority over his person and capacities—is central not only to the philosophy of Hobbes, Locke, and other seventeenth-century theorists of liberalism, but remains the centerpiece of liberal philosophy well after their time.[11] Just as central to liberal thought is its position on the purpose of political society. According to Locke, the "great and *chief end* therefore, of Mens uniting into Commonwealths, and putting themselves under Government, *is the Preservation of their Property*."[12] This statement captures the core tenet of liberalism, for, as Macpherson further demonstrates, liberal thinkers in general understand political society, defined as the uniting of individuals into abstract collectivities under the governance of a state and its laws, to be "a human contrivance for the protection of the individual's property in his person and goods."[13] The

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[10] For the quotation, see John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* [1690], ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), original emphasis 287.
[11] See C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962); hereafter cited parenthetically.
[12] Locke, *Two Treatises*, original emphasis 350-51.
[13] Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, 264.

foundational premises of liberal philosophy thus include the following two principles: first, that property originates in the self-possessive character of the individual, and, second, that the protection of property is the primary function of political society.

The double admission of Maine and Missouri to the United States via the 1820 Missouri Compromise reveals the extent to which these liberal ideals could be shared in theory yet differ in practice. The inaugural Constitution of the State of Maine opens with a "Declaration of Rights" that establishes legal and juridical protections for individual property: "Every person, for an injury done him in his person, reputation, property, or immunities, shall have remedy by due course of law."[14] The first Constitution of the State of Missouri contains similar protections, also listed under a "Declaration of Rights," which dictates that "courts of justice ought to be open to every person, and certain remedy afforded for every injury to person, property, or character."[15] Yet if the two states aligned in their promise to protect private property, they differed over what forms that property could and would take. The Missouri Compromise, one of the most hotly debated pieces of federal legislation in the early nineteenth century, passed with the proviso that Missouri be admitted as a slave state only so long as Maine be admitted as a free state, the arrangement maintaining the balance of congressional power between slave and free states. With the passing of the bill, property in human chattel found legal protection in Missouri while slavery's prohibition served as a founding condition of statehood for Maine. The Missouri Compromise might for this reason seem to highlight the polarities between the two states. But it bears emphasizing that they shared constitutional obligations regarding property. While free northern states have commonly been understood as the antebellum centers of liberal democratic ideals like individual liberty and equality, slaveholding states, to the extent they were predicated

[14] Maine Const. of 1820, art. I, §19.
[15] Missouri Const. of 1820, art. XIII, §7.

on related ideals regarding private property, were just as liberal. For all their differences, the states of Maine and Missouri established themselves on a common liberal aim: to protect the property of the individual.

In this way, Missouri was a liberal state. Throughout this chapter, I use the terms "State" and "state" interchangeably with respect to Missouri. When capitalized, the word designates a historical political formation, the State of Missouri, associated with a regional government whose jurisdiction was delimited by arbitrary geographic borders and whose citizens were beholden, by the doctrine of preemption, to the laws of the liberal democratic federation of the U.S. nation. When it appears in lower case, the term gestures more generally to the liberal idea of the state as the abstract guarantor of political rights, that entity that authorizes and protects the property rights of the possessive individual in the name of promoting universal human freedom and equality. In this latter sense, I do not mean to name a pure abstraction, for state formations are always historical. Rather I use the lower case to emphasize the fact that the State of Missouri might be thought of as a liberal democratic state in so far as it organized itself around the liberal promise of protecting the property rights of its citizens. This chapter understands a state to be liberal not primarily on the basis of its explicit avowal of universal freedom and equality but rather on the basis of its self-constitution in and through the guarantee of the right of private property. If the liberal nature of a state were to be determined exclusively by its pronouncement of liberal ideals, one might convincingly argue that Maine was a liberal state, but Missouri was not. Whereas Maine's 1820 Constitution opened with the familiar liberal declaration that "All men are born equally free and independent" and for that reason were endowed with inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, Missouri's founding Constitution contained no

such clause.[16] But the absence of such a declaration does not mean a state is not liberal in character. The mark of the liberal state inheres in its conceptualization of and relationship to property. In so far as Maine and Missouri were founded on liberal ideals of property, both might be understood to be liberal states. The political character of slave states was not by virtue of those states' legalization of slavery inherently incompatible with liberal ideals; in fact, as numerous scholars have shown, liberalism and slavery constitute one another.[17]

The liberal principles on which the State of Missouri was founded might thus be said to have established Newsom's right to property in Celia. Although the State's 1820 Constitution did not include provisions explicitly sanctioning the right to own slaves, it did not alter the slave codes already in place. With the signing of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the United States acquired the territory that included what would eventually become the State of Missouri. A year later, the Louisiana Territory was split into the District of Louisiana, with St. Louis as its administrative seat, and the Territory of Orleans, with New Orleans as its capital. The District of Louisiana was placed under the jurisdiction of the neighboring Indiana Territory, and the laws of the newly acquired district were to be promulgated by then Governor of Indiana and eventual President of the United States, William Henry Harrison, along with the three judges making up the General Court of Indiana. On the first day of October 1804, this governing body enacted the slave codes that would remain intact with Missouri's admission to statehood sixteen years later. These slave codes, based on the French *Code Noir* that had authorized slavery in the region prior to U.S. acquisition as well as the slave codes of colonial Virginia, included the following clause:

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[16] See Maine Const. of 1820, art I, §1.

[17] See Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract*, Lisa Lowe, *Intimacies of Four Continents*, Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); Stephanie Smallwood, "Commodified Freedom: Interrogating the Limits of Anti-Slavery Ideology in the Early Republic," *Journal of Early American History* 24, no. 2 (2004): 298-98.

"That all negroes and mulatto slaves in all courts of judicature within this district shall be held taken [sic] and adjudged to be personal estate."[18] With this clause the territorial government framed enslaved people as one form of property among other types of moveable chattel. When Missouri entered the union as a slave state several decades later, its interpretation of the liberal idea of property continued to include the chattel whom masters like Newsom held in captives like Celia.

Part of protecting the right to that property meant protecting the right of the owner to do with it as he wished. For Locke, the laws of liberal society exist to preserve the freedom of the individual to order his person and property "as he lists."[19] Making a similar point in his analysis of the liberal state, Karl Marx explains that the "right of property is thus the right to enjoy and dispose of one's possessions as one wills."[20] In the context of slavery, this right to private property implied a certain, though not outwardly stated, right to the sexual enjoyment of that property. Carole Pateman has demonstrated at length that liberal society is organized around what she terms the "male-sex right" that inheres in the political right of ownership. While she focuses predominantly on the sexual entitlement men held to property in their wives under coverture, Pateman points out that the slave owner held a parallel entitlement to property in the enslaved, noting that by virtue of his status as owner a master "had sexual access to his female slaves."[21] In organizing itself upon the liberal ideal of the private property right, the State of Missouri thus constituted itself—in quite a literal sense via its Constitution—through the possibility of chattel slavery, which must be understood simultaneously as a form of racial and

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[18] See William Henry Harrison, Thomas Terry Davis, Henry Vander Burg, and John Griffin, "A Law Entitled a Law Respecting Slaves," §27, in *Laws for the Government of the District of Louisiana, Passed by the Governor and Judges of Indiana Territory* (Vincennes: E. Stout, 1804), 118.

[19] Locke, *Two Treatises*, 306.

[20] See "On the Jewish Question" [1844], trans. Loyd D. Easton and Kurt H. Guddat, in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. Lawrence H. Simon (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1994), 16.

[21] See Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, 122.

sexual violence. Slavery in the Americas has usually been understood as form of racial violence, for it shaped and took shape according to the taxonomies of human difference that rendered entire populations disposable on the basis of racial blackness and turned property ownership into the exclusive right of those who could lay claim to racial whiteness.[22] But if the liberal vision of the property right is to be taken seriously we must understand the idea of property in the context of enslavement to be founded on a double violence, both racial *and* sexual in nature, which is to say that racial slavery is always form of sexual violence to the extent that the right of property inherently entails the right to sexual enjoyment of that property, even if no such enjoyment is ever taken.

This chapter therefore defines sexual violence in two related ways. On one hand, by "sexual violence," I refer to material acts now understood to be forms of sexual assault, including—but not limited to—rape (actual and symbolic), forced copulation, coerced intimacy, castration, child molestation, compulsory gynecological experimentation, sadomasochistic rituals of degradation, threats and taunts of sexual subjugation, and pornographic displays of corporeal brutality.[23] When visited upon enslaved people, these forms of violence functioned as mechanisms of physical control and psychological terror that maintained the racialized relations of property on which the institution of slavery hinged. On the other hand, by "sexual violence," I mean a way of thinking, an epistemological violence, namely, the way in which classical liberal

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[22] Cheryl Harris has demonstrated extensively how the law in the North American context has, since colonization, both racialized the right to property ownership and turned whiteness into property that can be individually and collectively owned. See Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1707-91.

[23] I deliberately use these contemporary terms to characterize "sexual violence" throughout this chapter. I understand that in doing so, I am imposing anachronistic definitions of sexual violence onto a period whose discursive and ideological paradigms did not necessarily share these terms or define "sexual violence" in these ways. As Saidiya Hartman has famously observed, it is difficult, from the perspective of historical precision, to call rape "rape" in the context of enslavement in that enslaved people, as property, were not legally understood to possess the will or capacity to refuse consent. See *Scenes of Subjection*, 79-112. However, I choose to call these forms of violence by their current names in an attempt to unsettle the discourses and ideologies that rendered them invisible as forms of violence under slavery.

thought and the legal discourse derived from it construe the property right as a right of enjoyment, which normalizes the sexual subjection of enslaved people as an expression of the slave owner's individual freedom and political personhood. In both senses, I use "sexual violence" to designate a constitutive feature—at once material and epistemological—of social formations structured by patriarchy and white supremacy in articulation, by which I mean that sexual violence cannot simply be explained by the slave owner's psychology or by the fiction of black lasciviousness but rather that sexual violence inheres in the historical process of enslavement. Under slavery, the liberal vision of property as a right of enjoyment materialized in practices of sexual violence while at the same time practices of sexual violence helped to define the liberal meaning of the property right in the context of slavery. To be clear, I am not suggesting that we adopt a reductive or deterministic notion of the relationship between property and sexual violence, for it is not in relation to sexual violence exclusively that the idea of property takes shape, nor is it the case that the liberal conceptualization of property is the sole reason for sexual violence. My point is rather that we can reach a fuller understanding of Atlantic slavery as well as the liberal right of property if we understand slavery to be a historical formation characterized by racial and sexual violence operating in articulation.

Newsom's rape of Celia might thus be understood as an expression of the liberal right of property. Celia's sexual subjection reveals the manner in which the right to own enslaved property (a form of racial violence) could be and was practiced as a right to enjoy that property (a form of sexual violence). It was precisely this liberal right that the State of Missouri had been established to protect. For this reason, when Celia stayed Newsom's approach that summer night in 1855, she not only infringed on the slave owner's right of enjoyment but also challenged the liberal notion of property on which the state had been founded. Celia's act of refusal denied

Newsom the legal right to sexual violence that inhered in his status as property owner. At the same time Celia struck Newsom, she struck a blow to the liberal idea of property, raising for the court a question about whether property should and would continue to take the form of enslaved human chattel, the question that had framed the debates over Missouri's entrance to the union decades before, and about whether the right of property should and would include the right to sexually enjoy that property with impunity. Celia's act of killing in this way demanded more than just a return to ongoing disputes over the existence of racial slavery in the State; it also dredged up a question about how sexual violence was to be understood throughout the expanding American republic. At the heart of *Missouri v. Celia* lay not simply a refusal, in other words, of the property rights of one slave owner in Callaway County but a challenge to the racial and sexual logic of property that held sway over the entire nation.

When viewed in this way, *Missouri v. Celia*—a trial framed as a dispute between the abstract State of Missouri and the individual enslaved woman—yields an insight into the logic of the trial that the legal record perhaps did not intend to make available. The nature of Celia's challenge to the idea of property meant that the case indeed was, in an abstract sense, as its name *Missouri v. Celia* implies, a contention between the State and Celia. As much as Celia's actions demonstrated a refusal of Newsom's sexual advances, they also represented a refusal of the property laws the State of Missouri itself had promulgated. Upon her arraignment, the prosecution, led by R. G. Prewitt, a circuit attorney from the Howard County district northwest of Callaway, charged Celia with having murdered Newsom "against the peace and dignity of the State."[24] As is true in many criminal proceedings, Celia's prosecution was conducted in the name

[24] Historian Melton A. McLaurin discusses the selection of Prewitt for the prosecution in *Celia, a Slave*, 79. For the quote, see the Statement of Indictment, *Missouri v. Celia*, File 4496 at 27-28. N.B. the court clerk paginated the trial record inconsistently, sometimes numbering both sides of the page, sometimes numbering only one, and other times

of the legislative body that had enacted the laws violated by the defendant, in this case the State of Missouri. To contend that the enslaved woman had committed a felony "against the peace and dignity of the State" was, in one way, a matter of formal legal procedure. The Missouri Constitution of 1820 held that "all prosecutions shall be conducted, in the name of the 'State of Missouri'" and that "all indictments shall conclude, 'against the peace and dignity of the state.'"[25] The prosecutor, in this sense, was simply doing his job. But in another perhaps unintended sense, his charges against Celia captured the manner in which Celia's refusal to be subjected as property might be framed as a form of war on the State of Missouri, for it challenged the very foundations of State law. In killing Newsom, Celia struck a blow to the liberal idea of property on and through which the State had been constituted. Her act of killing in this way amounted to an attack upon the State itself.

Yet neither the prosecution nor the defense framed Celia's actions in this way. The question before the jury concerned whether Celia had committed first-degree murder or justifiable homicide. The prosecution argued that Celia's actions constituted murder in the first degree because she had killed Newsom with "malice aforethought."[26] According to the 1845 Revised Statutes of the State of Missouri, the mid-century update to the laws originally passed by the Governor of Indiana in 1804, first-degree murder was defined as an act of "willful, deliberate, and premeditated" intent.[27] Proving that Celia killed with malicious intent was thus the prosecution's primary strategy, one that revealed itself most forcefully in its direct examination of the witnesses. The prosecution's questions are not recorded in the trial record, but

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entering no page number at all. For this reason, page number citations—when possible—may refer to both sides of a page or only to one side. Subsequent references to the trial record will be made parenthetically.

[25] Missouri Const. of 1820, art. V, §19.

[26] See the Statement of Indictment, *Missouri v. Celia*, File 4496 at 11.

[27] See Chapter 47, Article II, §1 of *The Revised Statutes of the State of Missouri* (St. Louis: W. J. Dougherty, 1845), 344.

the witnesses' answers to those questions are, making it clear that the prosecuting attorneys repeatedly asked witnesses to relate Celia's confession, which was delivered in court by the three white men, two of them slave owners, who had interrogated the enslaved woman prior to trial.[28] In relating Celia's confession, one witness offered confirmation of malicious intent: Celia had warned Newsom against coming to her cabin the night of his death. Sometime prior to the night of the killing, she had developed romantic ties to another slave on the farm, George, who had given Celia an ultimatum: she must "quit the old man," George had said, or he would end his relationship with her.[29] Having fallen ill and likely in response to George's threat, Celia responded by delivering an ultimatum to Newsom: she cautioned the slave owner to stay away from her cabin or else "she would hurt him."[30] A second witness corroborated this story, claiming that Celia "had made threats" to Newsom and had "said she intended to hurt him."[31] It cannot be known whether Celia in fact made such statements, since her testimony was not recorded by her or in her own words. But it is clear that the prosecution solicited this supposed threat in the attempt to frame Celia's act of killing as an act of first-degree murder.

The defense countered that Celia had killed Newsom legally in an act of self-defense against rape. According to this line of reasoning, her actions constituted justifiable homicide. If this argument won out, the jury would be required to return a verdict of not guilty as per Missouri's 1845 Revised Statutes.[32] Article II of the Revised Statutes on "Crimes and Punishments" held that

[28] These included William Powell, the neighboring slave owner who had led the search party for Newsom the morning of his absence, Jefferson Jones, an up-and-coming Missouri lawyer and Whig politician, and Thomas Shoatman, a local wagoner, both of whom were appointed by the court to inquire whether Celia had accomplices in her crime. See McLaurin, *Celia, a Slave*, 33, 49-50.
[29] *Missouri v. Celia*, File 4496 at 33.
[30] *Missouri v. Celia*, File 4496 at 33.
[31] *Missouri v. Celia*, File 4496 at 35.
[32] See Chapter 47, Article II, §6 of the *Revised Statutes*, 345.

> Homicide shall be deemed justifiable, when committed by any person in either of the following cases: *First*, in resisting any attempt to murder such person, or to commit any felony upon him or her, […] or, *Second*, When committed in lawful defence of such person […].[33]

This clause provided the defense an opportunity to argue that Celia had killed Newsom legally. So long as the defense could demonstrate that Newsom had attempted to "commit a felony" upon Celia by trying to rape her, it could argue that Celia had responded "in lawful defence" of her own person by killing him. The problem with this strategy was that Celia held the status of property, which meant that Newsom's assault on Celia was not a felony but an act protected by state law. To make an argument on behalf of Celia required that the defense attorneys contend with the longstanding implicit liberal consensus that the property owner holds the right to enjoy his property. But rather than challenging this liberal idea directly, the defense took a tack that ultimately reified the liberal framework that had legitimated Celia's rape under the law. The argument that Celia had acted in self-defense rested on the supposition—never openly stated by the defense but implied by its logic—that Celia possessed property in her own person and was for that reason legally endowed with the right to protect that property. This approach did not unsettle the liberal idea of property as had Celia's act of killing; it rather appealed to the logic of liberal personhood such that Celia could be understood to possess property in herself, property protected by the laws of the Missouri.

What might have been understood as challenge to the liberal foundations of the State came thus to be disputed as an act of either premeditated injury (murder) or spontaneous self-defense (homicide). And though they argued opposing positions, the defense and the prosecution

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[33] See Chapter 47, Article II, §4 of the *Revised Statutes*, 344.

addressed Celia's killing of Newsom in the same way: as a form of violence directed against an individual slave owner rather than the State at large. This framing stripped Celia's act of its insurrectionary connotation and allowed the trial to be conducted at a remove from the threat Celia had posed to the liberal idea of property. The result was that the case could be adjudicated within the existing terms of the law. It perhaps goes without saying that Missouri law contained no clause that would legitimate a challenge to the supremacy of private property. The protection of private property constituted the origin of the State, the end and raison d'être of the law itself, the taken-for-granted principle of political society that could not be called into question. Litigating Celia's case as a murder trial translated the enslaved woman's act of killing into the register of the law, making it possible for the prosecution and the defense to dispute Celia's guilt without unsettling the liberal foundations of the State's government. So, although its name belies the confrontation between the enslaved woman and the State, *Missouri v. Celia* was treated as a conflict between two individuals, Celia and Newsom. From the standpoint of the State, the upshot of this framing was twofold: on the one hand, it allowed the State to assume a stance of neutrality and even benevolence toward the enslaved woman, and, on the other, it shuttled responsibility for violence from the State onto Celia.

"Treat Them with Humanity": The Liberal Paternalism of the State

Missouri's stance of legal neutrality and benevolence toward enslaved people had been written into law since its founding. The 1804 slave codes enacted in the region, then the District of Louisiana, held that "no negro or mulatto shall be a witness" in legal proceedings, establishing a code of racial discrimination whereby enslaved people were denied the right to take the witness

stand in a court of law.[34] For this reason, Celia was unable to testify at her own trial. But, while Missouri did not repeal this law when it transitioned to formal statehood in 1820, it did guarantee enslaved people what appeared to be neutral treatment before the law when charged with crime. The 1820 Constitution of Missouri legislated that

> In prosecutions for crimes, slaves shall not be deprived of an impartial trial by jury, and a slave convicted of a capital offence shall suffer the same degree of punishment, and no other, that would be inflicted on a free white person for a like offence; and courts of justice before whom slaves shall be tried, shall assign them counsel for their defence.[35]

This clause required Missouri's juridical apparatus to be non-discriminatory in criminal proceedings against enslaved people by promising them "impartial" judgment before the law, forbidding their excess punishment, and providing them formal assurance of legal representation. This declaration of legal neutrality was consistent with what might be described as the State's stance of benevolence toward the enslaved, also written into the Constitution of 1820 and the Revised Statutes of 1845. The twenty-sixth section of the Missouri slave codes obliged the owners of slaves to "treat them with humanity," and criminalized forms of enslaved abuse "extending to life or limb."[36] Through the enactment of these laws, Missouri assumed a stance of benevolence toward the enslaved and represented itself as a neutral arbiter in cases concerning enslaved people.

The State's official stance toward enslaved people took the form of what might be called liberal paternalism. While Missouri did not, like Maine, profess the familiar liberal tenets of universal freedom and equality, its constitutional imperative that masters treat slaves "with

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[34] See *Laws for the Government of the District of Louisiana*, 107.
[35] Missouri Const. of 1820 and 1845, art. III, §27.
[36] Missouri Const. of 1820 and 1845, art. III, §26.

humanity" formalized the liberal character of the state in paternalist terms. As historians have shown, to affirm a paternalist position in the antebellum South meant to presume that enslaved people possessed free will and volitionally acquiesced to the conditions of their exploitation in exchange for the care and protection of their masters.[37] Proslavery apologist and New York minister Samuel Seabury, widely known for his paternalist defense of slavery, epitomized this position when, in 1861, he claimed that "slaves and masters are equally free […] to choose and determine their own actions."[38] What made the paternalist position ideologically liberal is the fact that it cast the master-slave relationship as a form of liberal contract. Contract theorists Charles W. Mills and Carole Pateman have demonstrated how advocates of slavery drew on the idea of the liberal contract to argue that slavery was consistent with the order of nature.[39] What is key is that this argument usually entailed forthright admission of enslaved personhood on the part of the paternalist. Seabury defined the slave as "a person who is related to society through another person, called a master, to whom he owes due service, or labor, for life, and from whom he is entitled to receive support and protection."[40] Seabury's comments make clear the centrality of enslaved humanity to paternalist thought: attributing personhood to the enslaved made possible the belief that slaves, as people, could willfully acquiesce to their purportedly natural obligation to lifelong service. Paternalism thus not only offered a justification for slavery but presupposed enslaved humanity, thereby laying the groundwork for recognition of enslaved rights, such as neutral treatment before the law and the protection of "life and limb." From the perspective of the slave contract it was not a contradiction for Celia to appear in court as

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[37] On the ideology of paternalism, see Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon, 1972).
[38] See Rev. Samuel Seabury, *American Slavery Distinguished from the Slavery of English Theorists and Justified by the Law of Nature* (New York: Mason Brothers, 1861), 41.
[39] See Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract*, and Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, 39-76.
[40] See Seabury, *American Slavery*, 43-44.

property and at the same time be defended as a person whose humanity entitled her to protection against the abuses of her master. *Missouri v. Celia* in this way simply materialized the liberal paternalism of the State.

But the State's understanding of enslaved people as property, of course, ran counter to its paternalist profession of enslaved humanity. As chattel, enslaved people possessed no legally recognized free will. The master's license to control the sexual and reproductive lives of his property trumped any enslaved rights formalized in law. Celia therefore possessed no legal capacity by which she could refuse Newsom's sexual assault. In her discussion of *Missouri v. Celia*, Saidiya Hartman famously calls into question whether the term rape can adequately describe the sexual violation of the enslaved given that the normative understanding of rape implies a legal subject with the capacity to refuse consent. Enslaved volition in the moment of sexual encounter was a legal impossibility. In this way the sexual exploitation of the enslaved, Hartman reminds us, was "cloaked as the legitimate use of property."[41] No moment in the trial record reveals this fact so clearly as the prosecution's instructions to the jury. Prior to deliberation of the verdict, the prosecution reminded the jury that Celia "had no right to kill him [Newsom] because he came to her cabin and was talking to her about having intercourse with her or anything else."[42] The unstated logic of this directive was that Celia "had no right" precisely because she was the property of Newsom and as such was subject to his demands. So long as the right of private property entailed the right to do with that property as one saw fit, the enslaved could not be legally understood to possess a capacity for free will. The trial against Celia was thus founded on a contradiction that rendered her simultaneously both property, therefore rights-less, and person, therefore rights-bearing.

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[41] See Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 80.
[42] See the prosecution's instructions to the jury, *Missouri v. Celia*, File 4496 at 14.

That the State understood Celia to be rights-bearing is perhaps most evident in the fact that she received excess legal representation. While the law only required an enslaved person to be assigned one defense attorney, Celia received three. The lead attorney, John Jameson, then fifty-three, possessed the distinction of a long political and legal career. He had served as Speaker of the Missouri State Legislature and had held a Democratic seat in the U.S. House of Representatives for three terms before returning to Callaway County, where he had earned himself a reputation as a dependable advocate in the courtroom. Though he did not participate openly in the slavery debates, he owned slaves himself, and far exceeded his associates in age and experience. Nathan Chapman Kous, then barely older than Celia at twenty-two years of age, had graduated from St. Charles College in 1852, his education likely financed by his slave-owning father's local estate, and had been admitted to the Missouri bar the same year as Celia's trial. Celia's third lawyer, Isaac M. Boulware, though slightly older than Kous at twenty-six, had also been admitted to the bar in 1855, after graduating from Kentucky's Transylvania University School of Law a year prior. His family owned over a dozen slaves and held title to one of the wealthiest estates in Callaway County.[43] Though they differed in age and experience, Celia's three attorneys possessed one thing in common: all either owned slaves or came from slave-owning families. As such, they composed what might seem to be an unlikely bunch to defend an enslaved woman who had been charged with the murder of a slaveholder, and far from "impartial" as state law required. If they were to relate to any party in the trial on the basis of experience, it would have been Newsom, not Celia. The State's requirement that Celia receive an "impartial" trial seems thus to have been foreclosed by the legal counsel she received.

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[43] McLaurin discusses the backgrounds of Celia's attorneys at length. See *Celia, a Slave*, 70-76.

Some have conjectured the opposite was the case: that in selecting representation for Celia the presiding judge was able to safeguard the Thirteenth Circuit Court against accusations of bias from slavery's critics and advocates alike.[44] Missouri had been at the crux of heated national debate over slavery since its admission to the United States three decades before. This debate had intensified in 1854 with the passing of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which nullified the Missouri Compromise and stripped away the ban on slavery above the thirty-sixth parallel. In 1855, political tensions were high and bound to erupt over a case like Celia's if it were deemed unfairly adjudicated on either side of the slavery debate. To assign Celia inadequate legal representation would have been to inflame anti-slavery observers of the trial, likely drawing accusations that the court possessed a pro-slavery bias. To assign her lawyers untrustworthy or unsympathetic to slavery's apologists would have conversely been to risk accusations that the court harbored anti-slavery sentiment. Either situation would have turned the courtroom into a combustion chamber for proslavery-abolitionist conflict. The over-assignment of legal representation to Celia thus may have helped to maintain the court's appearance of impartiality. Of course, that Celia received a trial at all might seem surprising given that little de facto punishment existed for whites who took the law into their own hands. It is likely that, regardless of the State's protection of the "life and limb" of the enslaved, had one of Newsom's family members or neighbors extra-judicially executed Celia prior to her arrest, there would have been no legal repercussions. Just as the State's prohibition of the wanton abuse of the enslaved amounted to more of a promise than a reality, so too did the court's profession of impartiality. Whatever the judge's motives in selecting the defense, it needs little proving that Celia's three

[44] See McLaurin, *Celia, a Slave*, 70.

lawyers, all white men who directly benefitted from slavery, can hardly be said to have held neutral positions on the killing of Newsom, one of their peers.

Yet the trial record suggests that, whatever they thought and felt about Celia, they defended her sincerely and adamantly. Upon hearing the verdict, Celia's lawyers immediately moved for a retrial. When the judge overruled their motion, they promptly appealed the verdict to the Missouri Supreme Court.[45] To suggest that these men defended Celia in good faith is neither to beg overdue trust in the way the archive represents them—for, as a technology of state power, the archive is far from a neutral repository of facts—nor to make apology for slavery by appealing to the good character of slave owners. It is rather to point out that although the lawyers' personal ties to slavery seem out of keeping with the courtroom task they were assigned, they defended Celia by all appearances in earnest. The selection of the defense thus raises questions about how it is that slave owners and members of slave-owning families could defend enslaved people much to the opposition of their own interests and those of their slave-owning neighbors, and, moreover, how it is that such a conflict of interest seems in no way to have appeared as such to those involved. The idea that a slave owner could effectively and impartially lead Celia's defense seems, from the vantage point of the present, absurd. Yet the trial record suggests that in Missouri in 1855 it made perfect sense for the enslaved woman to be represented by a group of white male lawyers with direct ties to slavery. From the perspective of the court and the lawyers themselves, the situation did not impair their capacity to be faithful and fair advocates of Celia.

These lawyers' relationship to Celia appears thus to be characterized by the same attitude of outward impartiality assumed by the State. For the purposes of the present inquiry, whether

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[45] See the courtroom transcript, *Missouri v. Celia*, File 4496 at 36 and the notice from the State Supreme Court refusing a stay of execution, *Missouri v. Celia*, File 4496 at 4.

the defense's neutrality was real or a production of the archive matters less than the fact that the trial record renders Celia's attorneys to be impartial agents of the State and that this rendering is consistent with the way the State declared itself to be juridically unbiased toward enslaved people. The trial record thus figures Celia's lawyers metonymically: the defense lawyers stand in for the State, acting out its promise of neutrality; they embody the liberal paternalism of the State. For this reason, *Missouri v. Celia* might be understood as a trial in which both sides of the litigation represented the State of Missouri. Though the defense did not represent the State in an official legal capacity, as did the prosecution, both embodied its liberal ideals, albeit in different ways. The prosecution sought to protect the State's guarantee of the property right as a right of enjoyment and the defense put the State's liberal paternalism into practice. Both litigants materialized an official position of the State. *Missouri v. Celia* might therefore be understood as a case that revealed how the State had constituted itself in and through a contradiction. The dispute to be settled was not, in the end, a clash between a master and an enslaved woman but a conflict within and between the liberal terms by which the State had brought itself into being. The State's liberal understanding of property rights had existed in conflict with its paternalist doctrine since its inception. The State remained in conflict with itself in 1855. Celia's killing of Newsom simply brought this contradiction to a head.

This contradiction could not be adjudicated in or by law. In quite a literal sense, the court could not address the case as a conflict between equal claims to property rights and enslaved humanity because both claims were backed by the Missouri Constitution. To have approached the case in this way would have been to reveal the limit of the law, the point at which the law could not resolve a conflict because the law was the source of that conflict. So, while *Missouri v. Celia* reduced the matter at hand to a question of murder or homicide, it ultimately tasked the

jury with deciding whether liberal property rights or the State's paternalist commitment to enslaved personhood would take precedence. The nature of this charge raises questions about what authority could and would determine which part of the law would be given primacy. In "On the Jewish Question," Marx explains that the liberal state is characterized by an internal tension between its avowal of liberal ideals and its simultaneous self-obligation to preserve the property relations necessary for capitalist modes of production, property relations that, as later scholars have explained, turn on racialized and gendered forms of exploitation.[46] Contradiction thus arises in the liberal state when the imperatives of capital run counter to the liberal ideals it espouses. In the case of *Missouri v. Celia*, the juridical apparatus was called upon to mediate this contradiction. Since it could not adjudicate the trial according to law—to do so would have been to reveal the law's internal contradiction—the court took recourse to another order, the one on which the State of Missouri had been founded: the racialized and gendered order of property.

What decided the case, in other words, was the liberal principle of property embedded in the Missouri Compromise. That the liberal notion of property is racialized has been demonstrated powerfully by legal scholar Cheryl I. Harris, who argues that, in the nineteenth-century United States, racial whiteness constituted a form of property in a double sense: it not only betokened a political subjectivity white people possessed intrinsically and exclusively in themselves but also served as a necessary precondition for property ownership and legal personhood within the

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[46] See Marx, "On the Jewish Question." For an elaboration of Marx's theories attentive to the ways that capitalist relations turn on racialized and gendered forms of exploitation, see Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), Grace Kyungwon Hong, *Ruptures of American Capital: Women of Color Feminism and the Culture of Immigrant Labor* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Grace Kyungwon Hong, "Property," in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, ed. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 180-83; and Lisa Lowe, *Intimacies of Four Continents*.

liberal state.[47] That the liberal understanding of property is gendered has been demonstrated extensively by feminist scholars such as Carole Pateman, who have shown how the patriarchal ordering of U.S. modernity construes property ownership primarily as the political right of the male.[48] That Missouri had been founded on both a racialized and gendered order of property is nowhere as evident as in the third clause of the Missouri Compromise, which delineated who would count as political agents within the emergent state: "all free white male citizens of the United States," it read, "shall be qualified to be elected, and they are hereby qualified and authorized to vote."[49] To extend the right of suffrage exclusively to the white male citizen was to formalize a system of unequal property rights based on race and gender, for, as Marx points out, the abstract citizen is the sole political subject whose proprietorial rights the liberal state acknowledges and guarantees.[50] In granting its "white male citizens" the right to vote, the State of Missouri set the protection of these individuals' property rights as its highest objective. When the law proved incapable of resolving *Missouri v. Celia*, the State's originary purpose came into play. Whatever official legal claim Celia held to humanity could be and was overridden by the State's imperative to protect the property rights of her white male master, Newsom.

Missouri v. Celia thus brings to light how the juridical apparatus was not an "impartial" mediator but an instrument of violence by which the State preserved existing relations of property while maintaining its paternalist stance of neutrality and benevolence toward the enslaved. The State had come into being through the possibility of violence against Celia, for it took as its end the protection of Newsom's right to own and sexually assault her. The trial compounded this violence by putting Celia to premature death, all while Missouri law promised

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[47] See Harris, "Whiteness as Property."
[48] See Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*.
[49] See Missouri Compromise of 1820, §3.
[50] See Marx, "On the Jewish Question."

the preservation of her "life and limb." The framing of the trial as a question of murder or homicide not only failed to deliver on this promise but made Celia (rather than the State) out to be the agent of injury—whatever the verdict, she was a violent killer. The State in this manner obscured its violence against her while shuttling culpability for violence onto the enslaved woman whose subjection, according to the terms of the Missouri Compromise, were necessary in order for Missouri to achieve statehood. Throughout this chapter, I understand this process of reversal—by which the victim of state violence becomes the perpetrator of violence "against the peace and dignity of the State"—to be the work of liberal disavowal.[51] My usage of the term "liberal disavowal" highlights a double move on the part of the liberal state whereby culpability for the violence through which it is constituted is borne by those whose dispossession and exploitation it violently requires and whereby the state, at the same time, presents itself as the guarantor of the rights of those whose subjugation it demands. *Missouri v. Celia* exemplifies the process of liberal disavowal in precisely this: that the State of Missouri was constituted in and through the possibility of violence against Celia yet put her to death for violence "against the State" while professing paternalist recognition of her humanity. What must not be missed is that her lawyers, as agents of the State, did not, however, profess her humanity directly. Instead, they

[51] My use of this term stems from Grace Kyungwon Hong's definition of "neoliberal disavowal" in *Death Beyond Disavowal: The Impossible Politics of Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015). Hong writes: "I define neoliberalism foremost as an epistemological structure of disavowal, a means of claiming that racial and gendered violences are things of the past. It does so by *affirming* certain modes of racialized, gendered, and sexualized life, *so as to* disavow its exacerbated production of premature death." See *Death Beyond Disavowal*, 7. Whereas Hong focuses on the neoliberal order of U.S. modernity, whose emergence she locates in the rise of formalized recognition by the U.S. state of racial and gender difference during the processes of decolonization and desegregation in the aftermath of World War II, I focus on the structures of affirmation particular to the liberal order of nineteenth-century Missouri. Although the State of Missouri did not affirm racial and gender difference in mid-twenteith-century terms, its legal protections guaranteeing enslaved "humanity" and women's rights to self-defense against rape functioned analogously to post-war neoliberal structures of disavowal in that such protections allowed the State to affirm the rights of racialized and gendered peoples so as to disavow the violence to which it necessarily exposed them in order to maintain the existing structures of property in the State.

professed her humanity by claiming she was a woman. This process of liberal disavowal in *Missouri v. Celia* played out through the rubric of gender.

"Slave Women, as Well as Free White Women": Liberal Disavowal and the Violence of Gender

It is impossible to understand the process of liberal disavowal in *Missouri v. Celia* without understanding how the defense's deployment of gender constituted a vital part of that process. Throughout the trial, the defense never directly claimed Celia's humanity. The assertion of Celia's humanity came clothed as an appeal to her womanhood. In its instructions to the jury, the defense proposed that Celia possessed the legal right to protection against rape because she was a woman. While the judge refused to deliver them to the jury, the defense's tenth, eleventh, and twelfth instructions made a case for Celia in gendered terms:

10. An attempt to compel a woman to be defiled by using force, menace, or duress, is a felony within the meaning of the fourth section of the second Amt. concerning crimes + punishments, in Missouri statutes for 1845.
11. The using of a master's authority to compel a slave to be by him defiled, is using force, menace, and duress, within the meaning of the 29 section of the 2nd article of Missouri statue for 1845 concerning crimes and punishments.
12. The words of any woman in the first clause of the 29th section, of second article of laws of Missouri for 1845, concerning crimes + punishments, embrace slave women, as well as free white women.[52]

[52] See the defense's proposed instructions to the jury, *Missouri v. Celia*, File 4496 at 12-13.

The latter two instructions borrow language almost identical to that of the clause they cite in Missouri's 1845 Revised Statutes, which reads as follows: "Every person who shall take any woman, unlawfully, against her will, with intent to compel her by force, menace or duress […] to be defiled, upon conviction thereof shall be punished by imprisonment in the penitentiary, not exceeding five years."[53] Emphasizing this legal doctrine, these three instructions contain the crux of Celia's defense and might be summarized thus: 10) rape is a crime; 11) forcing a slave into sexual submission is rape; and 12) enslaved women count as women under the law. What is striking about this sequence is that it forms a faulty syllogism. If one reads instructions ten and eleven as syllogistic premises, the twelfth names a conclusion that does not deductively follow. Presuming that rape is a crime and that coercing a slave into sex is rape sets the defense up to conclude that coercing a slave into sex is a crime. According to this logic, Newsom would have been guilty of a felony and could have, if not dead, been held accountable for committing the crime of rape. But the conclusion skews toward a claim about gender: in statutes concerning rape, it asserts, the term "woman" includes "slave women, as well as free white women."

The sudden shift in the logic of the instructions suggests that the syllogism led to a claim the defense could not make. To have followed the syllogistic reasoning to its anticipated end would have been to render Newsom originally responsible for crime. But the formal organization of the trial, premised as it was on official charges against Celia, protected the slave owner from criminal accusation. The defense could not flip the case so as to prosecute Newsom on an indictment for rape. The surprising deviation in logic also suggests the defense quite possibly could not see what was right before its eyes. To call Newsom criminally culpable would have been to contest the idea that the slave owner could wield unchecked sexual right over his

[53] See Chapter 47, Article II, §29 of the *Revised Statutes*, 349.

property and, by that token, to challenge the founding logic of the State. As agents of the State, operating within and according to its contradictory logics, it is likely that the defense possessed an ideological blind spot where slave-owning property rights were concerned. Whatever the case, what matters for the present inquiry is that the argument of the defense performed the work of liberal disavowal precisely by shifting the focus of its argument to gender. Celia's actions had opened up a question about whether the property right included the right to sexually violate; the defense transformed this question into one about whether enslaved women counted as women. The turn to a dispute about gender, in other words, obscured the deeper question about property, the question that sought to rupture the legal foundations of the State. The ostensibly humanizing claim of Celia's womanhood put the State's violent configuration of property out of view. The seemingly radical enlistment of "slave women" in the ranks of woman served the ideological interests of the State. Through the defense's deployment of gender, the State affirmed the possibility of enslaved humanity while safeguarding the logic of property at its heart. In this way, *Missouri v. Celia* instrumentalized gender to accomplish the work of liberal disavowal.

The act of making humanity available to Celia exclusively in gendered terms functioned as the mechanism whereby her challenge to the liberal logic of property could be reduced to an instance of homicide. If, as Hartman reminds us, enslaved women could not be raped in the eyes of the law because they were considered property, attributing humanity to Celia by gendering her created the possibility for legal recognition of sexual violence against her. Only as a woman could Celia be understood as a victim of rape. Establishing that enslaved women counted as women, then, made the sexual violence against Celia legally legible. But at the same time, the defense's insistence that the law protected "slave women, as well as free white women" brought a case that otherwise could not be adjudicated by law into the law's scope. Had the defense

argued that Celia's claim to humanity legitimately trumped Newsom's claim to property, it would have revealed the contradictory nature of the law. Tension between the liberal ideals of the State—that is, between its paternalist recognition of enslaved free will and simultaneous protection of the slave owner's autonomy—had surfaced in Celia's case, bringing the law to the point of internal crisis. But gendering the conflict between Celia and Newsom made recourse to the law available. Rather than understanding Celia's act of killing as a challenge to liberal property rights, it could be framed as homicide, one woman's in-the-moment strategy for refusing immanent sexual violence, an act fully permissible by State law. The gendering of Celia thus, on one hand, made formal recognition of her sexual violation possible and facilitated legal justification for her actions. On the other, it stripped her actions of their disruptive potential. As homicide, Celia's killing of Newsom possessed no power to challenge the authority of the law or the State's conceptualization of property. It became an individualized instance of spontaneous self-protection. Gendering Celia translated her case into the terms of the law in a way that preserved the supremacy of the State and its founding principles.

The defense's deployment of gender thus not only obscured the challenge Celia posed to property but reified the patriarchal social order. In an abstract sense, arguing that Celia was a woman reproduced the epistemological category of woman crucial to the patriarchal organization of property. Without gender difference, there could be no such thing as the male property right; with gender difference, the term woman signified a legal and social relation to the right of property. To call Celia a woman was thus to name a different relation to property than slave, but a relation to property nonetheless. While some women did possess property, their proprietorial status did not come with the political right of suffrage or the same guarantee of protection promised to Missouri's "white male citizens." And married women occupied the legal standing

of property itself. According to the common law of coverture, husbands held property in their wives. To characterize and protest this situation, women's rights activists throughout the nineteenth century compared wives to slaves. Writing on the subjection of women, liberal philosopher John Stuart Mill famously claimed that "no slave is a slave to the same lengths, and in so full a sense of the word, as a wife is."[54] In novels and political leaflets, at club meetings and national conventions, women's rights leaders like the Grimké sisters, Susan B. Anthony, Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and others analogized women and enslaved people to fight for women's equal access to property rights and political recognition.[55] While the defense in *Missouri v. Celia* also drew an analogy between "slave women, as well as free white women," it put the analogy to different work. Whereas women's rights activists employed it to make a case for women's liberation from patriarchal laws, Celia's attorneys used the analogy to argue for the enslaved woman's protection under them. Unlike women's rights advocates, they wanted the law to remain the same. In lieu of changing the law, they sought to defend Celia within the existing patriarchal order of property and political right.

At the same time, the defense's deployment of gender reproduced white supremacist hierarchies of race. For all its insistence that the law paid no mind to racial difference between women when it came to rape, the defense could not strip the category "woman" of its racialized connotations. Black feminist thinkers including Hazel Carby and Hortense Spillers, among others, have demonstrated that gender always exists as racialized gender and that the very idea of woman signifies racially as white.[56] Put simply, gender functions in U.S. modernity as a marker

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[54] See Mill, "The Subjection of Women" [1859], in *On Liberty: with The Subjection of Women, and Chapters on Socialism*, ed. Stefan Collini (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 148.
[55] Angela Davis covers this history in depth in "The Anti-Slavery Movement and the Birth of Women's Rights," in *Women, Race, & Class* [1981] (New York: Vintage, 1983), 30-45.
[56] See Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, and Spillers, "Mama's Baby."

of race. To possess female gender in the context of antebellum America was to possess racial whiteness. For this reason, there exists a crucial distinction between what the defense appeared to do and what it did when it argued that Celia could claim legal protection against rape on the basis of her womanhood. On the surface, the argument seemed to dissolve racial difference into gender sameness, placing “slave women, as well as free white women” in equal standing before the law. Yet, paradoxically, the claim preserved racial difference. To think in gendered terms inevitably meant to think in racial terms, as the language of the twelfth instruction makes clear. It quite literally differentiates “slave women” from “free white women,” thereby marking racial incommensurability between the two groups. The argument for Celia’s inclusion in the domain of woman could thus be said to have accomplished the opposite of its intention. Rather than erasing racial difference, it produced it. Claiming Celia’s (slave) womanhood in fact emphasized her distance from the category of the (white) woman. In making a case for Celia, the defense reified not only patriarchal divisions of gender but white supremacist taxonomies of race.

The defense thus preserved the categories of racial and gender difference necessary for the reproduction of existing property relations. Black feminists have overwhelmingly shown that nineteenth-century property relations were structured in and through the articulation of patriarchy and white supremacy. Who could own property, how the property right would be transmitted, and how property itself would be reproduced was decided not on the basis of race or gender but both together. Whereas enslaved and married women were each considered property, they held different relationships to it within white patriarchal society. In her chapter on Celia, Hartman argues that racial difference between women marked a difference between the ends to which their reproductive capacities were put, or what she calls the disparity between the “transmission of property” in the context of white kinship and the “reproduction of property” in

the context of black captivity.[57] Making the same distinction in her discussion of the cult of true womanhood, Hazel Carby explains that married white women were "viewed as the means of the consolidation of property" and as those who "gave birth to the inheritors of property." Black women, by contrast, were viewed as those who "gave birth to property and, directly, to capital itself in the form of slaves."[58] Differentiating the enslaved woman from the wife was the understanding that free white women reproduced the relations of kinship through which property relations were organized and transferred from one generation to the next while enslaved black women, according to the law of *partus sequitur ventrem*, which held that children born to an enslaved woman inherit the legal condition of the mother, reproduced formations of black dispossession and kinlessness as well as the chattel property to be transmitted through and organized by relations of white kinship. In preserving the distinction between "slave women" and "free white women," Celia's defense reproduced the categories of racial and gender difference necessary for the ordering of property in Missouri. Racialized gender was crucial to the maintenance of a State that privileged the property right of the "white male citizen" above all else. The argument for Celia's innocence thus bolstered existing property relations.

It was precisely in this way that the defense's deployment of gender served the function of liberal disavowal. What might seem an unlikely and even radical claim about the equal protection of women against rape irrespective of race, or a surprising affirmation of an enslaved woman's legal entitlement to self-protection against sexual assault, in fact reproduced the liberal logics of property embedded in the Missouri Compromise and thereby fortified the conditions of possibility for sexual violence against Celia, conditions endemic to the constitutional makeup of the State. Gender, that is to say, performed at least a double function in *Missouri v. Celia*. As an

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[57] Harman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 84.
[58] Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 24-25.

official category of State recognition—the category "woman" had been formalized in Missouri's rape laws—gender operated as a mechanism through which the State of Missouri could effect its paternalist affirmation of enslaved humanity while at the same time maintaining the property relations that legally and materially excluded enslaved people like Celia from the domain of the human by reducing them to chattel. The violence of the liberal State of Missouri materialized in and through the deployment of gender even as (racialized) gender masqueraded as the rubric through which Celia could attain personhood and protection under State law. The central paradox and constitutive contradiction of the argument for Celia's defense was the paradox and contradiction of liberal disavowal expressed in gendered terms: gender promised Celia protection from sexual violence while it simultaneously bolstered and obscured the State's ongoing preservation of the conditions of possibility for that violence. Put simply, the violence of liberal disavowal in *Missouri v. Celia* took the form of state-sanctioned gender.

"The Devil Got into Me": Liberal Humanism and the Politics of Refusal

If the State sought to humanize Celia by gendering her, Celia might be understood to have refused the imposition of liberal personhood altogether. The only known statement that has entered the historical record in Celia's voice is a short sentence taken down by an anonymous interlocutor the night before her death. Interviewed one last time, likely by some court-appointed informant, and questioned again about the fatal encounter between herself and Newsom, Celia confessed to killing the slave owner. Two weeks later the *Fulton Telegraph*—a local Missouri newspaper, copies of which from this period do not exist—included Celia's statement in a short piece announcing that the enslaved woman had been executed. Two weeks later still, the *New York Times* picked up the piece and ran it again, verbatim. This news clipping, republished in the

Times and a handful of other papers, contains the only remainder of Celia's voice in the archive—a heavily mediated confession filtered through many hands and by all appearances recorded under the pressure of immanent death by someone not only incapable of ameliorating Celia's situation but working on behalf of the State to solicit any information that would further clarify the case.[59] As the *Times* presents it, the purpose of the final interrogation was to suss out, through one last round of questioning, whether Celia had help killing the slave owner:

> She has, at various times, implicated several persons; but, by her dying confession, all of them are exonerated from any participation in the murder. She said on the evening of the occurrence she procured a large, stout stick, (much larger and heavier than before described by her,) and took a position behind the door, leaving it slightly ajar; that her master came to the cabin, pushed the door open and entered; as soon as he entered she struck him with the stick, felling him to the ground. She did not, at first, intend to kill him, but she said, "as soon as I struck him the Devil got into me, and I struck him with the stick until he was dead, and then rolled him in the fire and burnt him up." She denied that anyone assisted her, or aided or abetted in any way.[60]

It is impossible to verify the accuracy of the quote, to determine the exact extent to which Celia spoke these words or her unnamed interlocutor manufactured them. But it is worth noticing that, whatever the case, the statement traps Celia within the same dialectic of innocence and guilt that overdetermines Celia's representation in the trial record. Depending on how the reader of the

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[59] In her article on the Celia case, Andrea Stone notes that, after its original publication run, the story appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Baltimore Sun*, and the *Daily Missouri Democrat*. See Stone, "Interracial Sexual Abuse and Legal Subjectivity in Antebellum Law and Literature," 83. Stone makes a similar point in her chapter on Celia called "The Protective Self: Slave Sexual Health, Crime, and Legal Personhood; Celia's Murder Trial and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents*," in *Black Well-Being: Health and Selfhood in Antebellum Black Literature* 121-54. For the original newspaper articles, see "Hanging a Negress," *The New York Times*; "Hung," *Daily Missouri Democrat*; and "Hanging a Negress," *The Baltimore Sun*.
[60] See "Hanging a Negress," *The New York Times*.

clipping interprets the article, the confession Celia delivered becomes self-incriminating evidence of her culpability for murder or vindicating evidence of an act of justifiable homicide. Though it calls the killing murder, the article seems to favor the verdict of homicide, for it provides a clear indication that Celia lacked intent to kill. Yet rather than reading this confession back into the dialectic of innocence and guilt, I close by showing that a third reading of the statement is available. This reading exceeds the dialectical framing of Celia as either guilty or innocent and reveals the politics at the heart of Celia's act of killing, a politics of refusal that might be thought of as a rejection of the very liberal humanism by which the defense sought to absolve Celia of guilt.

Scholars routinely interpret Celia's reference to "the Devil" as genuine evidence of madness or a strategic performance of it. Literary critics have read Celia's mention of the supernatural as a simultaneous calling up of the gothic and repudiation of the sentimentalist literary mode. In this reading, the claim of demonic possession performs an ambivalent function: it at once allows Celia to refuse responsibility for the crime and to eschew the role of helpless female victim so common to sentimental fiction.[61] Yet some have argued that, at the same time, it contributes to her representation as a figure of "gothic criminal madness."[62] Unconcerned with the literary implications of her statement, historian Melton A. McLaurin, whose 1991 monograph on Celia brought her to widespread scholarly attention, understands her confession to be a characterization of her feelings toward Newsom. He argues that the quote in the newspaper clipping "seems an apt description of the rage she must have felt on that night."[63] The madness

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[61] See Andrea Stone, "Interracial Sexual Abuse" and "The Protective Self."
[62] Jeanne Elders DeWaard suggests that we might read Celia's invocation of the devil as an ambivalent "depiction of gothic criminal madness" in "'The Shadow of the Law': Sentimental Interiority, Gothic Terror, and the Legal Subject," 13.
[63] See McLaurin, *Celia, a Slave*, 114.

McLaurin reads in her reference to "the Devil" has less to do with psychological disposition than it does with affect; he hears Celia metaphorically indicating that the encounter with the slave owner threw her into a fit of uncontrollable anger. Historian Wilma King makes a similar point but refuses the singularity of the angry black woman trope by arguing Celia likely felt a range of emotions, including loneliness, desperation, and fear in addition to rage.[64] King also argues that it is plausible the enslaved woman experienced an episode of temporary insanity, but emphasizes that the precise nature of Celia's madness, whether "vernacular or clinical," matters less than the fact that it was her experience of sexual violence under slavery—what Nell Irvin Painter has called "soul murder"—that made Celia "mad enough to kill."[65]

Rather than diagnosing Celia, King leaves open the possibility that Celia's invocation of "the Devil" functioned as last-minute legal strategy. Pointing out the inevitability of the enslaved woman's death, King observes that "neither 'madness,' nor 'temporary insanity,' nor the 'instigation of the devil' could win a reprieve for her."[66] Although it is no more than an aside in the essay, King's comment suggests that Celia's words might index the enslaved woman's bid for an insanity defense. Perhaps the madness to which Celia confessed was not a description of her mental condition as much as it was a performance of madness designed to instrumentalize the law in her favor. Legal precedent for the insanity defense had been set in 1843 when Scottish woodturner Daniel M'Naughten was acquitted of murder on the defense of insanity. M'Naughten had assassinated British civil servant Edward Drummond while mistaking him for then Prime Minister Robert Peel, whom he had meant to kill. Following the delivery of M'Naughten's

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[64] See Wilma King, "'Mad' Enough to Kill: Enslaved Women, Murder, and Southern Courts," 48.
[65] See King, "'Mad' Enough to Kill," 38, 47-48. Nell Irvin Painter's definition of "soul murder" derives from contemporary psychology, which defines the term broadly as the psychological aggregation of the effects of various forms of violence, including rape, sexual abuse and harassment, emotional deprivation, and torture both physical and mental. See Nell Irvin Painter, "Soul Murder and Slavery: Toward a Fully Loaded Cost Accounting," in *Southern History Across the Color Line*, 15-39.
[66] King, "'Mad' Enough to Kill," 50-51.

verdict, the House of Lords convened fifteen judges to clarify existing legal doctrine regarding the criminal insanity defense. The principles developed by these judges became known as the M'Naughten Rules, which served as the legal standard by which most American courts adjudicated criminal insanity cases well into the twentieth century.[67] The M'Naughten Rules held the insanity defense tenable so long as "at the time of committing the act, the party accused was laboring under such a defect of reason, from disease of the mind, as to not know the nature and quality of the act he was doing."[68] In accordance with these rules, had her invocation of "the Devil" served as sufficient evidence that she was suffering from a "disease of the mind," whether in the moment of her confession or in the moment of her encounter with Newsom, Celia may have been able not only to challenge her guilty verdict but, more pressingly, to stay her own execution. The 1845 Revised Statutes of Missouri legislated that "No such insane person shall be held to bail, nor shall his body be taken in execution on any civil or penal action."[69] If Celia could have proved herself insane, she might therefore have escaped death. King's passing observation that not even temporary insanity could "win a reprieve" for Celia suggests that Celia, far from "mad," may have been making an ingenious and last-ditch effort to save her own life.

Yet, without disputing the value of these readings, I leave aside the rubric of madness. To read Celia's confession as an indication of madness is to presume the abstract liberal individual as the normative human subject from which Celia in her madness deviates. Put differently, we cannot understand Celia to be mad in any sense of the term unless we simultaneously posit the

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[67] See Samuel Jan Brakel and Alexander D. Brooks, "The M'Naughten Rule: Cognition," in *Law and Psychiatry in the Criminal Justice System* (Littleton, CO: Fred. B. Rothman, 2001), 18-24; and John Kaplan, Robert Weisberg, and Guyora Binder, "The *M'Naghten* Rule and Cognition," in *Criminal Law: Cases and Materials*, 7th ed. (New York: Wolters Kluwer Law & Business, 2012), 615-32. Throughout this chapter, I use the spelling of M'Naughten preferred by Brakel and Brooks as the most authoritative spelling of the name.

[68] See "The Queen against Daniel M'Naughton," in *Reports of State Trials, New Series, Vol. IV, 1839 to 1843*, ed. John E. P. Wallis (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1892), 847-934, quote 931.

[69] See Chapter 85, §33 of the *Revised Statutes*, 597.

existence of a rational norm from which her condition represents a departure. Classical liberalism understood the liberal individual to be characterized foremost by the capacity for reason, which distinguished the human from the non-human animal. The "humanity" of the human for Immanuel Kant inhered in the individual's rational agency leading one into compliance with the categorical imperative of universal moral law.[70] Refusing the idea of a universal morality, Thomas Hobbes nevertheless believed the liberal individual would comply with civil society's moral code on the basis of rational self-interest.[71] John Locke, for whom moral principles could be discerned by any person through the use of reason, argued that as humans "we are *born Free*, as we are born Rational."[72] Though different, these accounts of the liberal individual stem from the common assumption that human beings possess an innate capacity for rational thought and that civil society is a community of such beings ordered according to the abstract law of reason. To deviate from the practice of reason was therefore to relinquish liberal personhood. For Locke, the failure to exercise rational agency constituted criminal behavior and amounted to one's exit from the domain of the human. "Crime," Locke argued, "consists in violating the Law, and varying from the right Rule of Reason, whereby a Man so far becomes degenerate, and declares himself to quit the Principles of Human Nature, and to become a noxious Creature."[73] This statement figures obedience to the law as evidence of the exercise of reason and, by contrast, criminal behavior as indicative not only of madness but of one's willful deviance from human subjectivity. According to this logic, Celia's refusal of rape was irrational and dehumanizing to

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[70] See Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Thomas E. Hill, trans. Arnulf Zweig (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
[71] See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* [1651], ed. Richard Tuck (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
[72] See Locke, *Two Treatises*, 309.
[73] Locke, *Two Treatises*, 273.

Celia. Her killing of Newsom, by this account, rendered her a madwoman and stripped her of the defining quality of human beings.

This idea that the rational human subject does not commit crime accords all too easily with the widespread evangelical idea that non-human spirits of evil were often responsible for criminal activity. Throughout the nineteenth century, the “Devil” most immediately signified the chief satanic figure of Christian mythology. Uncapitalized, the noun referred generally to any malevolent demon of the spiritual netherworld. Both the satanic head of Hell and demonic fiends were understood to possess human beings, meddling in terrestrial affairs by occupying human hosts and directing the course of their actions. The extreme result was thought to be gruesome violence—including the killing of one or many individuals by the individual possessed. Enslaved people were routinely likened to devils or discussed as having been possessed by demonic spirits in moments of forceful physical resistance to their enslavement. Perhaps most famously, Thomas Gray characterized Nat Turner, the leader of an 1831 uprising of enslaved people in Southampton, Virginia, as one possessed by a devil. Much like Celia’s unnamed interlocutor, Gray had interviewed Turner in jail prior to execution and had recorded his *Confessions*. In his closing comment on Turner’s statement, Gray described the enslaved man as a “complete fanatic” with a “fiend-like face” and a “spirit soaring above the attributes of man.”[74] Throughout the *Confessions*, as he does in these final pages, Gray carefully makes Turner out to be other-than-human, a lunatic driven to massacre by religious fanaticism and likely incarnated by some demonic power, perhaps the Devil himself. Gray’s representation of Turner turns the enslaved man’s fully reasonable pushback against the conditions of his bondage into the work of either madness or supernatural evil. Much could be said about the way such an account mounts a

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[74] See *The Confessions of Nat Turner* [1831], in *Slave Narratives*, ed. William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Library of America, 2000), quotes 261 and 262.

defense for the institution of slavery by construing it as the natural order of the world disrupted by demonic power or criminal insanity. But what matters for the present argument is the way Gray's account reveals the danger of interpreting Celia's confession as an indication of the enslaved woman's madness. It would be quite easy to read Celia's claim "the Devil got into me" the way Gray might: as an expression of warped psychology and as an admission of possession by some demonic force. But the problem with the madness reading, whether we understand madness literally as incarnation by an evil spirit or metaphorically as a fit of passion analogous to demonic possession, is that it risks consigning Celia to non-human status. In short, if we read Celia to be mad, we reify the liberal logics that refuse Celia, in her killing of Newsom, the possibility of being human.

To caution against the madness reading on the ground that it strips Celia of humanity might seem strange given the danger of insisting on Celia's humanity outlined above. To claim Celia's humanity the way the defense did is to materialize the liberal disavowal of the state. Yet Celia offers us other ways of imagining the human. Over and against the reading of enslaved madness, I read Celia's confession as a gesture toward the possibility of a different epistemology of the human, one that poses an alternative to liberal humanism rather than playing back into it. Instead of interpreting "the Devil got into me" as evidence of demonic possession or criminal insanity, one might hear in the line a gesture to an otherworldly perspective, the transcendence of the anthropocentric point of view. One might understand the demonic to refer not to a deviation from normative psychology and rationality but to the acquisition of a superhuman standpoint on human affairs. Such a standpoint would supply Celia with a perspective on her situation that exceeds the limits of the knowable within liberal and ecclesiastical paradigms of knowing. This notion of the demonic as an epistemological vantage point appeared in the natural sciences at the

beginning of the nineteenth century and existed contemporaneously with other connotations of "the Devil." The idea of the demonic had been instrumentalized most notably in physics to mark the position from which a superhuman perspective on the universe and its workings could be hypothetically obtained in scientific thought experiments. As early as 1814, French physicist Pierre-Simon Laplace had argued for a theory of causal determinism by proposing that a being with omniscient knowledge could divine in a single instant how the present state of the universe exists in any given instant as both the result of its past and as the accumulation of determinants of its future. From this demonic stance, one exceeding human epistemic capacity, nothing would be uncertain; all the causal forces of the universe would be at once known and anticipated.[75] In recent years, black feminist scholars Sylvia Wynter, Katherine McKittrick, and Sarah Haley have taken up this notion of the demonic not to defend the determinist position but to argue for the possibility of systems of meaning beyond what Wynter calls "our present mode of being/feeling/knowing."[76] This view of the demonic I take up here, arguing that Celia's confession should be seen not as the mark of madness but as a commentary on the limits of liberal humanism as well as the suggestion of alternative epistemologies for imagining the human outside the liberal logic of property.

Wynter characterizes the position from which alternative epistemologies come into view as "demonic ground." In her usage, the term captures what might be thought of as the terrain, or

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[75] Sarah Haley discusses this history in *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 229. For a sustained discussion of Laplace's theories, see Lorraine Daston, *Classical Probability in Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988) and Boris Kožnjak, "Who Let the Demon Out?: Laplace and Boscovich on Determinism," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 51 (2015): 42-52.

[76] See Sylvia Wynter, "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's Woman," Afterword to *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature*, ed. Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), 355-72, quote 364. See also Sarah Haley, *No Mercy Here*, and Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

"ground," of a superhuman vantage point that is simultaneously the conceptual basis, or "ground," from which a new science of the human might proceed. While it might be taken up to mark the space outside of any hegemonic knowledge formation, Wynter develops this concept out of an appraisal of the epistemological limits and possibilities of mainstream white feminism. In "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's Woman," the afterword to the first anthology of critical literary essays by Caribbean women writers, Wynter meditates on what she calls the "womanist/feminist" perspective of the volume's essays. According to Wynter, each essay in the anthology takes a distinctly feminist stance in so far as it contributes to the dismantling of the patriarchal order. Each also takes, she argues, what Alice Walker has called a "womanist" perspective by accounting not only for gender and sexual oppression, the primary project of second-wave feminism, but multiple and crisscrossing forms of violence, including those based on race and class inequality.[77] In this way, for Wynter, the essays in the volume pose critiques of both patriarchy and white feminism. Rehearsing the familiar feminist argument that the condition of possibility for the dominance of patriarchal discourse throughout the western world is the "silenced ground" of women, Wynter urges us to consider what silences make possible the emergence of dominant feminist discourse. To answer this question, Wynter speaks through Shakespeare's *Tempest*, arguing that "the partial liberation of Miranda's hitherto stifled speech," Wynter's metaphor for the rise of mainstream white feminism, is contingent upon the utter erasure of "Caliban's woman," her figure for the woman of the diasporic black Atlantic who appears nowhere in the play, neither as the focus of libidinal desire for Caliban nor as his reproductive mate. Miranda accomplishes her self-assertion within the patriarchal order through the silencing and ontological obliteration of Caliban's woman. The

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[77] Alice Walker first used the term "womanist" to characterize such a perspective in her book, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1983).

silencing of Caliban's woman, for Wynter, reveals how dominant feminist discourse turns on the replication of a liberal humanism that achieves its coherence through the erasure of the women of the black Caribbean and the black Americas as figures of non-human difference.

We might understand Celia to number among these silenced black women. Her voice is almost completely absented from the archive, and what appears in the historical record in her defense is an argument that, by virtue of its appeal to a universalized notion of womanhood, approximates mainstream white feminism. Yet in place of Miranda's speech, it is the speech of her three defense attorneys that erases Celia from history. Moreover, what I have called the liberal paternalism of Celia's defense and what Wynter refers to as the discourse of mainstream feminism both turn on an appeal to liberal humanism—each argument for the recognition of the legal and political rights of women is an appeal to the liberal ideal of the rights-bearing human expressed in gendered terms. Universalized female gender functions as the rubric through which the feminist and, in Celia's case, the liberal paternalist appeal to humanity is made. According to Wynter, this argumentative strategy reproduces a homogenized notion of the human, always already racialized white in opposition to the figure of Caliban's woman and, we might add, enslaved women like Celia. For Wynter, the mainstream feminist challenge to patriarchy thus keeps its bid for equality within the closed circuit of liberal humanism by reifying Caliban's woman as non-human, the figure against which Miranda emerges as human by stark contrast. In much the same way, the defense's appeal to Celia's womanhood reproduced the liberal humanist paradigm by which Celia was consigned to the status of non-human property as slave, the property that functioned as the condition of possibility, or what Wynter might call the "silenced ground," from which Newsom's personhood could arise. Wynter argues that the purpose of claiming the "demonic ground" from such a position of silence is precisely to move beyond this

liberal humanist framework toward an epistemology of the human that does not require the violent erasure of the racialized subject. Celia's assertion that "the Devil got into me" might be read in keeping with Wynter as a similar urging, if not posed in the same language, to occupy the demonic ground and thereby to create an opening for a new epistemology of the human.

It may seem that Wynter's critique of liberal humanism has little relevance to Celia's case, for, on the surface, *Missouri v. Celia* was a dispute not about the nature of the human per se but rather about the enslaved woman's legal entitlement to personhood as the grounds for her right to self-defense. Yet it must be remembered that, within liberal thought, the individuated human being is the condition of possibility for and the exclusive recipient of legal personhood and political property rights in civil society. The very possibility of liberal personhood and property rests on the taken-for-granted notion of the rational human subject without whom there would be no liberal individual inherently possessive of rights. To the extent that we understand Celia to have refused the epistemology of liberal humanism we must also, then, understand her to have undercut the foundation on which both sides of her case rested. The defense and the prosecution stood on shared ground in that each based its arguments on appeals to the rights of person and property. The prosecution, albeit implicitly, argued that Celia had no right to resist Newsom's advances because she was his property and that endemic to Newsom's right of property was his right to the sexual enjoyment of that property. The defense, also implicitly, argued that Celia possessed the status of a woman, and therefore held the right to self-defense against rape. These arguments both rested on a larger though submerged notion of the human subject as inherently rights-bearing and worthy of legal protection. The abstract idea of the human held by the defense and the prosecution was the same; what differed was their position on whether Celia could occupy human subjectivity. Celia's confession that "the Devil got into me"

offers an outright rejection of this shared idea of the human. The main point of contention in *Missouri v. Celia*, the enslaved woman's confession suggests, was not who could and could not possess personhood within liberal humanist frameworks. It was rather the framework itself, within which the arguments for and against her had become possible. When read in this way, Celia's reference to "the Devil" functions as evidence not of clinical illness or intense emotion but of political refusal—a refusal on Celia's part to reproduce the epistemologies of the human that constituted the basis for individual liberal personhood and property rights.

Reading Celia's confession as a politics of refusal is not to argue what Celia meant or intended to say, but rather to foreground the stakes of reading her case in the present, which is always an ethical and historiographical act. When I argue that we must understand Celia to have participated in a refusal of the liberal logic of property or the liberal notion of the human, I am not contending that the historical person Celia necessarily intended for her confession to be interpreted in this way. What Celia's words meant to Celia, like her motives for saying them, can only be approached via cautions speculation. What I am saying, however, is that there are stakes to the ways in which we represent Celia in the present, just as there were stakes to the manner in which both the defense and prosecution represented her in 1855. These stakes are at once ethical and historiographical: put more precisely, how one represents Celia matters ethically because it matters historiographically, for the historiographical is inherently ethical as it pertains to Celia. Telling Celia's story in a way that is consistent with the prosecution erases her from history and consigns her to the status of non-human property. Telling the enslaved woman's story in a way that is consistent with the defense requires the reification of patriarchy and white supremacy, both of which rely on the impossibility of her legal personhood. Each interpretation locks our understanding of Celia's act of killing within a dialectic that renders her either guilty or innocent

of crime. Both take for granted the liberal humanist paradigms of personhood and property as the frameworks within which we must produce historical knowledge. Yet reading Celia's invocation of "the Devil" as evidence of a political refusal offers us a way to brush against the grain of the archive so as to produce an alternative reading of her story, one that does not recuperate Celia the person from the silenced ground of liberal humanism but that does open up a critique of the dialectic of innocence and guilt that frames Celia's case and delimits what we can and cannot say about the enslaved woman. What emerges when we read for a politics of refusal, in other words, is an account of the historical record's overdetermination of *Missouri v. Celia* within liberal epistemologies and a means of counter-narrating the story the archive offers.

Conclusion

To insist that Celia expressed a politics of refusal through her confession that "the Devil got into me" is to propose a historiographical revision of her story in at least two ways. First, such insistence contravenes the legal and archival rendering of Celia as property in so far as it understands her to possess political agency. According to Missouri law, by which she was deemed a slave, Celia was refused the possibility of political subjectivity. As property she could hold no legal personhood; she therefore was not understood to exist or possess the capacity to intervene within the political sphere. Liberal philosophy held the same to be true—slaves possessed no political personhood. Understanding Celia's act of killing as a political act helps us to understand both that hegemonic liberal thought has always existed and continues to exist under contest and that the political was and is constituted in and through an epistemological struggle in which enslaved people have always played a part as actors. This view of the political demands a counter-narrative of Celia's case that refuses to capitulate to the liberal erasure of

enslaved people as property. Second, to say that Celia's act of killing Newsom was a political one that equated to a refusal of liberal humanism is not to presumptuously endow Celia with political agency—to "give her back her agency"—from the standpoint of the present in an attempt to recuperate her subjectivity. It is rather to reject the dialectic of innocence and guilt within which the archive demands we understand her story. Insisting that Celia participated in an act of epistemic refusal allows us to say that framing Celia's act as either murder or homicide misses the point—which is to pose a profound political challenge to the foundation of property and personhood as each has been imagined in modern liberal thought. Insisting on a politics of refusal is to open up the possibility of a different historiographical vantage point, what Wynter calls the "demonic ground," allowing us to see how the archive's representation of Celia bolsters the formations of patriarchy and white supremacy on which the State of Missouri was founded. It invites us to refuse liberal humanism in favor of a different way of "being/feeling/knowing" in the world. To be sure, the archive disallows Celia the chance to elaborate the epistemological alternatives that her act of killing opens up. But the incomplete work of elaboration in the record should not prompt a dismissal of the historiographical imperative embedded in Celia's act of refusal. If not in her words, then in her actions, Celia ruptured liberal humanist epistemology, creating an entry point for others to elaborate "demonic" alternatives to liberal humanism.

Coda:
Fannie Berry and the Historiography of Revolt

The story of Sukie is a story of revolt. Formerly enslaved woman Fannie Berry told Sukie's story to Susie R. C. Byrd in early 1937 when Byrd asked Berry to share what she remembered of slavery days. Byrd numbered among the small group of twelve black relief workers hired by the Federal Writers' Project to conduct interviews with ex-slaves throughout Virginia for a historical volume on black life in the state spanning from the early seventeenth century to the early-mid twentieth. The manuscript for what would eventually be published under the title *The Negro in Virginia* (1940) was drafted by November 1937 and included Sukie's story, one of many Berry had shared with Byrd. As Berry told it, Sukie had been employed as the cook of their mutual mistress, whose husband, having taken a fancy to Sukie, endeavored constantly to "make Sukie his gal." One day their master approached Sukie with a reprimand for one thing or another while she was in the process of making soap. She had three pots of lye coming to a boil on the fireplace. When the slaveholder stormed into the kitchen, she ignored him. In a rage he told Sukie to undress, and she told him no. He approached her, pulled her dress down to her shoulders, and attempted to wrest her to the floor. Sukie responded with a strike that broke his hold and a directed push that sent him backwards into the pots of lye. Sustaining severe burns, the master scrambled up and, holding his "hindparts," fled the kitchen in silence lest the encounter—and thus his sexual designs on Sukie—be discovered by the mistress of the house. A few days later, Sukie was sold.[1]

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[1] See interview with Fannie Berry in *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Ex-Slaves*, ed. Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert Phillips (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1976), 30-50, especially 48-49, quotes 48. For information on Susie R. C. Byrd and the context of the interview as well as its inclusion in the manuscript of *The Negro in Virginia*, see Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Introduction to *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Ex-Slaves*, ed. Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert Phillips (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1976), xi-xlv.

The stories—of Sukie and others—that Berry shared with Byrd comprise just one of over two thousand extant interviews with ex-slaves collected by employees of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) between 1936 and 1938. In most cases the interviews were conducted by white correspondents working on behalf of individual state units of the WPA. The narratives of Berry and other formerly enslaved people living in Virginia were exceptional in the sense that they were gathered predominantly by black interlocutors like Byrd. The Virginia narratives have for this reason been considered more historically reliable than those collected in other states.[2] While they share the name "slave narratives," the WPA interviews differ substantially from the testimonies of formerly enslaved people published during the antebellum period. Antebellum narratives tend to take the form of autobiography rather than interview. At nearly twenty pages, Fannie Berry's interview represents one of the longest in the Virginia WPA archives. Earlier narratives, by contrast, consistently occupy the length of a book. These were typically produced to advance the abolitionist cause. The WPA narratives were collected to document the history of slavery and, practically, to provide Depression-era workers with jobs. Antebellum narratives usually trace the life of a formerly enslaved narrator from birth in slavery to the achievement of freedom through flight or some other means. WPA narratives on the other hand are structured by the event of abolition: nearly all WPA informants, while born into slavery, were freed through the legislation that accompanied the end of the Civil War.

Perhaps the most striking difference between the antebellum and WPA narratives is that between their historical moments of production. Antebellum narratives were produced during the antebellum period, that is, prior to the conclusion of the Civil War and the formal abolition of

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[2] Only the WPA offices of Virginia, Louisiana, and Florida hired black interviewers. It should also be noted that not all ex-slave interviews conducted in the state of Virginia were conducted by black correspondents. On the challenges of reading the WPA narratives as history, see John W. Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems," *Journal of Southern History* 41, no. 4 (1975): 473-92.

slavery. Well-known ex-slave narrators such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs wrote their autobiographies while slavery still existed. Their narratives speak particularly to the time in which the authors wrote.[3] Formerly enslaved people continued to write and dictate the stories of their lives well after the war. Following similar conventions of form and genre, Reconstruction-era slave narratives tend to mirror their antebellum antecedents even though they were published under different historical circumstances. The WPA narratives, however, bear little formal resemblance to their antebellum counterparts. They were published at an even greater remove from the legal end of slavery than Reconstruction-era slave narratives: nearly three quarters of a century. At the time ex-slaves like Fannie Berry were sharing their stories, the institution of slavery had been abolished for over seventy years.

The temporal span between the end of slavery and the collection of the WPA narratives raises questions about how they should be historicized. Almost invariably the tendency among scholars of slavery is to read the WPA narratives as records of the antebellum institution. Throughout the seventies and eighties, historians began turning to slave narratives in order to tell the story of slavery from the perspectives of enslaved people themselves. Debates about the historical accuracy of the WPA narratives arose as scholars queried whether the memories of ex-slaves, many of whom were in their eighties or older at the time of interview, could be trusted. Overwhelming consensus, however, ruled that the WPA narratives represented too valuable a resource to be disregarded.[4] Over time, they became indispensable to the historiography of

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[3] See Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself* [1845], in *Slave Narratives*, ed. William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Library of America, 2001), 267-368 and Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, ed. L. Maria Child [1861], enlarged ed., ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard University Press, 2009).

[4] The late historian John W. Blassingame remains one of the best authorities on the value of the WPA narratives. See John W. Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves;" Blassingame, "Critical Essay on Sources" in *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* [1972], rev. and enlarged ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 367-82; and Blassingame, Introduction to *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*, ed. John W. Blassingame (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University

slavery.[5] Scholarship on slavery—particularly on antebellum U.S. slavery—has read the WPA narratives as windows onto the antebellum period, a period that precedes the narratives' own moment of production. Yet little attention has been given to the ways in which WPA testimonies might also speak to their own historical moment. Put differently, the WPA narratives have been read as texts that provide limited historical insight into the nineteenth-century United States but seldom have been historicized and explored as texts that simultaneously engage the social and historical struggles that characterized the production of knowledge in the late 1930s.

This coda invites consideration of the possibility that there is something to be gained by reading Fanny Berry's account of Sukie not only as a record of the kinds of sexual abuse that characterized antebellum slavery but also as an intervention into the historiography of slavery that defined the early twentieth century. The dominant historiography of slavery at the time of Berry's interview held that enslaved people seldom resisted their enslavement on account of the putative fact that they possessed group racial traits that made them naturally inferior to whites. It took for granted the racial science of the day and concurred that, apart from the occasional uprising, slaves accepted their lot. When historians did examine the subject of revolt, they framed it narrowly as violent mass insurrection led by men. The story Berry tells of Sukie, however, challenges these assumptions. It suggests that resistance to domination materialized in

Press, 1977), xvii-lxv. See also Paul D. Escott, "The Art and Science of Reading the WPA Slave Narratives," in *The Slave's Narrative*, ed. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 40-48, and C. Vann Woodward, "History from Slave Sources," in *The Slave's Narrative*, ed. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 48-59.

[5] Since the seventies and eighties, numerous groundbreaking histories of slavery have relied heavily on the WPA slave narratives. See, for example, Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* [1985], rev. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1999); Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard University Press, 2013); Daina Ramey Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved, from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation* (Boston: Beacon, 2017); Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

everyday encounters between slaveholder and slave, that enslaved people rejected the terms of their enslavement not only collectively but individually, and that revolt took many forms, including the refusal to submit to the sexual demands of a master. Read in conjunction with the prevailing historiography of slavery, Berry's testimony possesses the force of a revisionist account of history. It challenges the foundational premises of an entire edifice of historical scholarship.

Yet neither Berry's narrative—nor the testimony of any other WPA informant, for that matter—has been examined as revisionist historiography. At the same time that Berry was recalling slavery days for Byrd and challenging fundamental historiographical assumptions of her day, black scholars elsewhere were writing histories of slavery that made similar revisionist moves. In recent decades, historians and literary scholars have demonstrated that some of the most important revisionist histories of slavery emerged during the early twentieth century, W. E. B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935) foremost among them. In this work, Du Bois critically reframes enslaved people as agents of history and of their own liberation. He shows that it was precisely through collective revolt against slavery—contrary to the then dominant thesis of black inferiority and docility—that enslaved people freed themselves and won the Civil War. For this intervention into the historiography of slavery, Du Bois has been consistently remembered as a forerunning historian of the tradition of black radicalism that expressed itself in slavery through bondpeople's revolt against subjugation.[6]

This coda argues that the slave narratives of WPA informants like Fanny Berry might similarly be engaged as revisionist histories of slavery and as contributions to the historiography

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[6] See W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* [1935] (New York: Free Press, 1992). For the ways that Du Bois has been remembered as a historian of the black radical tradition, see Cedric J. Robinson, Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* [1983] (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000) and Lisa Lowe, *Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

of the black radical tradition. It advances the provocation that Berry, like Du Bois, might be remembered as an early historian of black radicalism, albeit one without the institutional accolades and social prominence to legitimize what she had to say as authoritative history. Berry's story of Sukie accomplishes revisionist historiographical work whether Berry self-consciously crafted her testimony to this end or not. It tells the story of one woman's revolt against a master and in doing so tells the story of one woman's contribution in that moment to the black radical tradition. The coda proposes that by figuring Berry's WPA narrative as revisionist history, one gains insight into the history of black radicalism that other accounts of slavery like Du Bois's do not afford. Whereas Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* frames slave revolt as insurrection primarily against racial oppression, Berry's story of Sukie suggests that black radicalism developed as a rejection of both racial and sexual violence. In this way, Berry's narrative invites an elaboration of the black radical tradition that recognizes its articulation through a politics of revolt against slavery as a form of racial as well as sexual domination. Ultimately, the takeaway of reading Berry's narrative as revisionist history is this: future research might look to the WPA slave narratives as a neglected archive of historiography on black radicalism waiting to be further explored for the insights it holds not only into the formation of the black radical tradition but into the ways its history has already been told.

The Historiography of Slavery and Revolt

At some point along the way, Sukie's story got cut. By the time *The Negro in Virginia* reached publication in 1940, it had retained only fractions of Byrd's interview with Berry. The book includes what Berry had to say about the feasts slaves had on Christmas as well as the dances she had attended on a neighboring plantation. It transcribes some of the sorrow songs she

related to Byrd and highlights her memories of her wedding day. Of Sukie, however, there exists no mention. The book delves briefly into what it frames as the sadism masters only occasionally exhibited against enslaved people but steers clear of its sexualized overtones. It concludes that slaveholding cruelty represented the "exception rather than the general rule" and that enslaved people, when they spoke about slavery's brutality, likely "embellished" their accounts.[7] Perhaps because Sukie's story was understood to represent one such embellishment, perhaps because it was deemed a matter too indelicate for a general audience, perhaps because it was regarded as untenable on the basis of its inconsistency with the racial science of the day that took for granted black female promiscuity—whatever the case, the history of Sukie would not enter the text's sweeping account of black history in Virginia. Although it is unclear to whose hand it belongs, the word "omit" appears in the margins of Sukie's story in the book's first draft. The anecdote made it to the second round of revisions but by the time the final round had been completed the story had been expurgated.[8]

The original manuscript of the book had been drafted by black chemistry professor turned ethnographer Roscoe E. Lewis of the Hampton Institute in Virginia. Lewis had supervised the black branch of the Virginia Writers' Project from its inception and had first suggested that the research for *The Negro in Virginia* include interviews with ex-slaves.[9] Yet Lewis had to cede final say on the book to white state-level supervisor of the Writers' Project, Eudora Ramsay Richardson, who in the end gave little heed to the integrity of his draft and little credit to him for completing the bulk of the work on the manuscript. The book went through four series of

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[7] See Workers of the Writers' Program of the Work Projects Administration in the State of Virginia, *The Negro in Virginia* (New York: Hastings House, 1940). For excerpts by Fannie Berry on sorrow songs, marriage, Christmastime, and dances, see 57, 83, 87, and 92. For the text's discussion of slavery's cruelty, see "Thirty and Nine," 150-58. For the quotes on cruelty as exception and embellishment, see 158.
[8] See Purdue, Introduction to *Weevils in the Wheat*, xvii-xxvi and interview with Fannie Berry in *Weevils in the Wheat*, 48.
[9] See Perdue, Introduction to *Weevils in the Wheat*, xviii-xx.

editorial revisions under the direction of Richardson, the last of which she conducted entirely herself. Prior to its release she retreated with the manuscript to a secluded cottage where she, in her own words, “rewrote the material” because it had “too much of a Negro bias to be accurate,” and slashed Lewis’s wordage about twelve percent. Upon its release in the summer of 1940, *The Negro in Virginia* was hailed an immediate success. It made the Book-of-the-Month club in June that year.[10]

Despite Richardson’s effort at accuracy, several prominent historians called into question the text’s status as history. Herbert Aptheker appraised *The Negro in Virginia* in the September 10, 1940 issue of the American Marxist magazine *New Masses*. The majority of his review Aptheker devotes to the coverage of factual errors in the text, specifically those that result from its insistence upon what he calls its “diplomatic verbiage.”[11] The two-week stint during which Richardson “rewrote” the manuscript had failed to rectify—if it had not produced—numerous inaccuracies in the text. Aptheker took particular issue with the way that the text deals with slaveholding brutality and the sexual relations masters had with slaves. Aptheker notes that, rather than appropriately characterizing Thomas Jefferson as the father of children by the enslaved woman Sally Hemings, the text politely claims that Jefferson found “companionship” among those enslaved on his plantation.[12] It moreover frames the years of barbarism to which planter John Randolph of Roanoke subjected his slaves as a passing “mood,” which for Aptheker constituted a “choice bit of understatement” to say the least.[13] The primary redeeming quality of the text, according to Aptheker, was its integration of testimonies of enslaved people into the weft of its historical narrative: “it is the copious quotations from ex-slaves that make this book

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[10] See Perdue, Introduction to *Weevils in the Wheat*, xvii-xxvi, quote xxiii.
[11] Aptheker, “Negro History,” *New Masses*, September 10, 1940, 22.
[12] Aptheker, “Negro History,” 2 and *The Negro in Virginia*, 53.
[13] Aptheker, “Negro History,” 2 and *The Negro in Virginia*, 39.

really invaluable for all students of Negro history and of American life." [14] One might say that, as he saw it, the volume's most important contributions to the study of history were not Richardson's but Berry's.

In 1941, historian and sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois wrote a similar—though perhaps savvier—review of the book in the September 7 issue of *Phylon*, the semi-annual journal he had himself founded only a year prior. What distinguishes Du Bois's review most from Aptheker's is its angle: Du Bois used the review as an opportunity to plug the continuation of federal funding for the Writers' Project under the contention that it had led to the production of an invaluable work of black history. Du Bois opens and closes his review by suggesting that if President Franklin Delano Roosevelt or any congressman harbored doubts regarding the merits of the Writers' Project as the government sought to redirect spending from welfare programs to the burgeoning defense economy, they had only to read *The Negro in Virginia* to find sufficient justification for its preservation. What further differentiates Du Bois's review from Aptheker's, however, is the fact that the former communicates the historical unreliability of the text much more judiciously than the latter. Du Bois rightly credits Lewis for spearheading the work of the text and notes that, as a chemistry professor, Lewis was "unhampered by some of the narrower conventions of historical research. His work is not overloaded with footnotes or limited in its scope and interpretation."[15] In a partial nod to the ethnography collected by interviewers like Byrd, Du Bois continues to say that the text nevertheless remains buttressed by robust research. While clothed as a compliment to Lewis, Du Bois's comment implies that the text falls short of the mark of sound history, and in this sense his review squares with Aptheker's. Both find the

[14] Aptheker, "Negro History," 2.
[15] Du Bois, "The Virginia Negro," *Phylon* 2, no. 2 (1941): 191-92, quote 192.

text to be a praiseworthy account of black life in Virginia just as much as both remain reluctant to call it history.

Yet the text's representation of slave revolt did tally with the then standard narrative of insurrection throughout the slaveholding South. Ulrich B. Phillips's landmark history, *American Negro Slavery* (1918), dictated the foundational assumptions of historiography on slavery well into the third and fourth decades of the twentieth century. In his five-hundred-plus-page study of the antebellum institution, Phillips prefers the racial science theory that enslaved people constituted a group of people whose innate inferiorities of biology and temperament had naturally accommodated them to their enslavement. Stories of slave revolt, for Phillips, constituted outlying cases. He writes that "the slaves were negroes, who for the most part 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."[16] For Phillips, a few significant instances of revolt punctuate the history of slavery—the uprisings led by Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, and John Brown. Apart from these instances of revolt, he argues, slavery was characterized by few disturbances.[17] While *The Negro in Virginia*, did not openly espouse the scientific racism expressed by Phillips, it did nonetheless present a view of revolt largely consistent with his account of black docility. The book devotes an entire chapter to the insurrections of Prosser, Turner, and Brown—all of which occurred in Virginia. Yet it asserts that "despite many alarms" during the nearly three-decade period separating Turner's uprising from Brown's, "there were no serious outbreaks."[18]

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[16] Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery* [1918] (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966), 341-42. Phillips makes this point directly in a posthumously published volume on Southern history: "Slave revolts and plots very seldom occurred in the United States […]." See Phillips, *The Course of the South to Secession: An Interpretation by Ulrich Bonnell Phillips*, ed. E. Merton Coulter (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1939), 101.
[17] See Phillips, *American Negro Slavery*, 464-88.
[18] *The Negro in Virginia*, 181.

Ultimately, the book replicates the prevailing narrative of intermittent revolt broken by lengthy intervals of relative calm.

Herbert Aptheker would pose a profound challenge to this narrative only three years after the release of *The Negro in Virginia*. In his groundbreaking work of revisionist historiography, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (1943), Aptheker's book counters the dominant historiography of slavery in three key respects. First, it rejects the premise of black inferiority that undergirded the thesis of slaves' consent to bondage advanced by Phillips and the majority of historians in the first half of the twentieth century. Second, eschewing the notion that enslaved people comprised a species of being naturally suited to enslavement and characterized by contentedness with their lot, the text emphasizes through meticulous historical research that resistance to slavery was the norm. The periods of prolonged quiet averred by prior historians were, for Aptheker, less representative of historical fact than of the extent to which paternalist ideology had permeated the discipline of history. Aptheker argues that, for as long as enslaved people had been enslaved, they had also resisted enslavement. Third, the text poignantly reframes the category of revolt. Whereas prior scholarship such as Phillips's had figured revolt primarily as violent mass uprising, Aptheker insists that it also took the subtler forms of individual and quotidian resistance to domination. Revolt could be found not only in the Prosser and Turner insurrections but also in the refusal to submit to a whipping or the acts of theft and arson perpetrated by enslaved individuals. Shamming illness, striking against work or slowing it down, taking flight from the plantation—these too constitute instances of revolt for Aptheker. The central contribution of Aptheker's book is thus the revisionist insight that struggle against bondage defined, rather than interrupted, enslaved people's everyday relation to enslavement.[19]

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[19] See Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* [1943], 50th anniversary ed. (New York: International, 2013).

Several years prior, W. E. B. Du Bois had advanced a similar revision of the prevailing historiography of slavery. Du Bois opens *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), his magisterial rewriting of the history of the Civil War and Reconstruction, with an unambiguous statement of his position on the question of racial inferiority. He takes for granted that "Negro in America and in general is an average and ordinary human being" while the argument that the slave was a "distinctly inferior creation" he dismisses out of hand.[20] Put in different terms, Du Bois, like Aptheker after him, founds his study on the premise that enslaved people did not passively submit to bondage but strove continually against enslavement. He points out that the development of a specialized police force of poor whites meant to keep enslaved people in their place—the slave patrol—testifies to this fact. Du Bois notes that despite outright counterinsurgency, however, open insurrection continued to bubble up and, where direct collective uprising was suppressed, revolt expressed itself in flight. Countless slaves chose fugitivity in defiance of their masters. The most significant instance of revolt through fugitivity Du Bois calls the "general strike against slavery": one of the central interventions of *Black Reconstruction* is the argument that enslaved people accomplished their own wartime liberation by laying down their tools, fleeing plantations, and joining Union military ranks, effectively striking against the conditions of their labor and deciding the outcome of the Civil War.[21] This "general strike" constitutes for Du Bois revolt par excellence. Framing enslaved people's actions in such terms allowed Du Bois to propose a radical revision of the dominant historiography of slavery that had rendered enslaved people historically insignificant by virtue of their supposed complacency. As Du Bois narrates it, enslaved people were not merely agents of historical transformation but the force that determined the outcome of history.

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[20] W. E. B. Du Bois, "To the Reader," in *Black Reconstruction in America*.
[21] See the fourth chapter of *Black Reconstruction*, "The General Strike," 55-83.

Du Bois's revisionist history constitutes what later historians describe as a foundational account of black radicalism. Drawing insight from Du Bois's work, historian and political scientist Cedric J. Robinson argues in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983) that enslaved people contributed to the formation of a tradition of insurgency against western European liberalism and capitalism by struggling for freedom from bondage through the practices of fugitivity and revolt. Like Aptheker and Du Bois, Robinson rejects the historiographical thesis—which sustained itself well into the latter decades of the twentieth century—that enslaved people capitulated to their captivity. The long history of slave revolt, for Robinson, speaks to the fact of the black radical tradition that Robinson himself is the first to name in such terms. Yet Robinson admits that he is not the first to identify the radicalism enslaved people expressed through insurgency. Looking back to Du Bois, Robinson demonstrates that the renowned scholar told the history of the black radical tradition by telling the history of enslaved people's revolt against slavery. He lauds Du Bois as a forefather of the black radical tradition on account of the revisionist historiography Du Bois engendered through his work in *Black Reconstruction*.[22]

Sukie's Story as Black Radical History

This coda takes the foregoing detour through the twentieth-century historiography of slavery in order to stage the following provocation: there is value in reading Fannie Berry's account of Sukie as a revisionist narrative of slavery and, like Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction*, as a contribution of its own kind to the historiography of the black radical tradition. The work of Du Bois and Aptheker—those well-regarded historians who reviewed the volume from which

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[22] See Robinson, *Black Marxism*.

Sukie's story was excluded—invites readers to reconsider how they think historically about slavery and revolt. The story Berry tells of Sukie does the same. The goal of the coda is thus not to speculate on whether or how Du Bois and Aptheker may have differently reviewed *The Negro in Virginia* had Berry's anecdote of Sukie been included. It is rather to use their reviews as occasion to reflect on the stakes of framing the narrative of Fanny Berry as a revisionist and black radical text.

Berry's story of Sukie affords the insight that the black radical tradition materialized in slavery as a revolt against not only racial but sexual domination. Though it is not a work of formal history by conventional standards, Berry's testimony poses a counter to the dominant historiography of its day. The theory of racial inferiority that led Phillips to conclude that enslaved people naturally acclimated to their enslavement Berry's narrative contradicts. Berry sandwiches the story of Sukie between stories of other enslaved people—including Berry herself—who actively rejected bondage. She tells of the time that she helped a fugitive slave named Rachel escape the pursuit of a master. Speaking of herself, Berry suggests that she once set fire to her master's barn in retaliation for the loss of part of her finger through the so-claimed accident of an axe-swing by her master's son. In an anecdote that indicates she experienced the same kind of sexual threats as Sukie, Berry relates that a white overseer once attempted to rape her but that she "scratched his face all to pieces" and thereby threw him off.[23] The way in which Berry tells these stories indicates that, for her, it was not a question of whether enslaved people resisted but a question of when and how. What becomes evident through the reading of her interview is that she takes for granted the premise—contrary to historians like Phillips—that enslaved people resisted slavery continually. Her narrative functions as a revisionist history of

[23] See interview with Fannie Berry, *Weevils in the Wheat*, 34, 36, 47-48, quote 36.

slavery in the sense that it rejects and revises the then dominant account of enslaved people's relationship to bondage.

It also invites a reframing of slave revolt. In *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois had argued that revolt expressed itself not only in violent insurrection but also in fugitivity. As enslaved people fled plantations, they acted in defiance of their masters as well as in defiance of the entire institution of slavery. In *American Negro Slave Revolts*, Aptheker developed the additional notion of everyday acts of resistance as forms of revolt: arson, work slowdowns, theft, and the like. Berry's testimony makes the same moves as Du Bois and Aptheker, and then does more: it recasts revolt in sexual terms. Whereas Du Bois and Aptheker had left questions of sexual violence in slavery to the side, and had thereby passed over the kinds of revolt that developed in response to sexual assault, the story of Sukie indicates that revolt entailed the refusal of intimate abuse just as much as it involved violent mass uprising. Feminist historians of slavery—notably those who have relied most heavily on the WPA narratives—have demonstrated the particularities of black female subjection under slavery and the numerous ways in which enslaved women revolted against sexual domination.[24] Their research has made clear that WPA narratives like Berry's suggest a revision of the dominant twentieth-century historiography of slavery in the sense that the narratives not only substantiate the fact of slave revolt but also reveal slave revolt to entail refusal of racial as well as sexual subjection.

To the extent that one understands slave revolt to index black radicalism, one might read Berry's story of Sukie as a history of the black radical tradition. When she conversed with Byrd, Fanny Berry looked back on the past and produced a historical narrative. The narrative she produced was a story of revolt—the revolt of several enslaved women including Sukie and Berry

[24] See especially White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?* and Camp, *Closer to Freedom*.

herself. If one takes for granted Cedric Robinson's argument that the history of slave insurgency is the history of the black radical tradition, then it follows that Berry's narrative might also be regarded as a history of black radicalism. Scholars have in recent years begun to illustrate the ways in which enslaved women, in addition to enslaved men, uniquely contributed to the black radical tradition. One of the central lessons of the emerging literature on enslaved women and black radicalism is that the black radical tradition throughout the antebellum period found articulation through enslaved women's refusal of gendered reproductive and sexual exploitation.[25] As revisionist historiography of sorts, Berry's narrative substantiates this observation. It makes clear that the black radical tradition developed through revolt against slavery as a form of racial as well as sexual domination.

In closing, however, the coda emphasizes a different but related point: further research on the black radical tradition might take up the WPA slave narratives as a body of relatively untapped insight onto the history of black radicalism in the United States. If Fanny Berry's story of Sukie represents the WPA narratives in general, then the WPA narratives—over two thousand interviews—constitute a rich source of laypeople's historiography on slavery and revolt. This dissertation has argued that enslaved people articulated a tradition of black radicalism in and through the writing of slave narratives in the antebellum period and that reading antebellum slave narratives for the trace of black radicalism reveals the centrality of sexual politics to the formation of the black radical tradition. What the coda adds is that enslaved people were not only inaugurators and articulators of black radicalism but historians of it. Ex-slave narrators like Berry might be understood as historians of the black radical tradition begun by their enslaved ancestors and carried forward by women like Sukie. The WPA slave narratives might be read not simply as

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[25] On this point, see especially Alys Eve Weinbaum, *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery: Biocapitalism and Black Feminism's Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

records of slavery but as historiography on the ways in which black radicalism constituted itself through revolt against sexual and racial violence. To tell the history of black radicalism in the future, therefore, we might begin by looking back to the histories of black radicalism shared by formerly enslaved people like Berry, histories that have yet to be fully explored for the stories of revolt they contain.

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