

Conceived in Violence: Enslaved Mothers and Children Born of Rape in Nineteenth-Century Louisiana

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Abstract:

Through the examination of testimony from formerly enslaved people who had been fathered by white men under slavery, this paper considers how enslaved women negotiated motherhood when their child had been conceived through rape. Evidence reveals that the relationship between enslaved mothers and their children remained strong, despite sexual violence and interference into childrearing by slaveholding families. Informants had close knowledge of the non-consensual nature of their conception, and their willingness to discuss sexual violence reflects the lack of stigma attached to rape victims in the slave community, and hints at the way that enslaved communities coped with sexual violence on an institutional level.

Keywords:

Sexual Violence, Slavery, Louisiana, Children Born of Rape, Slave Family

Early in Lalita Tademy's historical novel *Cane River*, the author imagined a conversation between an enslaved mother, Elisabeth, and her 13-year-old daughter, Suzette: '[w]e love all our babies in this family', Elisabeth told Suzette as she first held the new-born conceived through the rape of Eugene Daurat, the mistresses cousin, 'no matter how they come to us.'¹ Set in Natchitoches, Louisiana, Tademy used archival records alongside family oral histories in order to chronicle multiple generations of her own enslaved female ancestors whose lives had been shaped by slavery's violence. The desire for a sense of family amongst the female protagonists persisted in spite of disease, high mortality rates, separations, and a range of sexual interferences by slaveholders. The historical records brought to life through this work of fiction highlight the way that sexual violence permeated and shaped enslaved family life, but also the remarkable capacity of enslaved women to adapt, survive -- and love --

¹ L. Tademy, *Cane River* (New York: Warner Books, 2001), pp. 56-7.

regardless of their personal and collective trauma.

Since the 1970s, scholars of slavery have been interested in the ways that enslaved people coped with and responded to the everyday tragedies of enslavement. They have found that family, alongside social networks, religion and folk culture, was an important coping mechanism that needed to be strong, but adaptable. Early studies of slavery stressed the matrifocality of the enslaved family, but historians have long fought against this overgeneralisation. Instead, they have found that while the ‘nuclear’ family was always seen as the ‘ideal’, an openness to alternative family structures developed as a response to disruption caused by the institution of slavery. This openness included the acceptance of families headed by single mothers.²

This article builds on this literature through probing the ways that enslaved mothers in Louisiana endeavoured to maintain a family-centred ideal when, like Lalita Tademy’s ancestors, they were faced with raising children conceived through a violent and traumatic rape. Evidence first examined complicates the perceived ‘agency’ of enslaved women in situations where sexual relationships with white masters led to ameliorated working conditions, or emancipation. In the previous article in this issue, Meleisa Ono-George found that a portion of the free black population in 1830s Jamaica saw sexual relationships between black women and white men as a threat to respectable black motherhood.³ Conversely, the evidence examined here for slavery-era Louisiana shows that the mother-child relationship

² E. D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage, 1972); H. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Random House, 1976); J. W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); B. E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); A. P. Malone, *Sweet Chariot: Slave Family and Household Structure in Nineteenth-Century Louisiana* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); E. West, *Chains of Love: Slave Couples in Antebellum South Carolina* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); H. A. Williams, *Help Me to Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Lussana, S., *My Brother Slaves: Friendship, Masculinity, and Resistance in the Antebellum South*, (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2016)

³ M. Ono-George, ‘Motherhood and the Movement for Civil Equality in Jamaican Slave Society, 1829-1833’, *Slavery and Abolition Special Issue Mothering Slaves: Motherhood, Childlessness and the Care of Children in Atlantic Slave Societies*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (2017)

did remain strong and resilient despite ubiquitous and profoundly depraved forms of sexual violence by white males: formerly enslaved people made it clear that such relationships were non-consensual and abusive, and associated no stigma to victims of sexual violence.⁴

Table 1. Louisiana interviewees: Frequency with which rape and white fathers were mentioned in 1930s

		Number of interviews	% of LA interviews
1	Rape by white male (that did not result in birth of interviewee)	18	7.3
2	Interviewee had white father	18	7.3
3	Interviewee had white grandfather	7	2.8
4	Other white ancestor (e.g. white great-grandfather)	3	1.2
5	Combined total of column above	46	18.7

Note: The total number of interviews in the Louisiana sample is 246. Row 1 shows the number of interviewees who mentioned a heteronormative rape that did not involve their own mother. The number in the final row is the total of interviews that contained any reference to rape or a white ancestor. These figures do not take into account nineteenth century narratives in which the frequency of references to sexual violence is much higher.

⁴ The concept of ‘agency’ when applied to the actions of enslaved people has become increasingly contentious over recent years. Walter Johnson has written that that ‘by applying the jargon of ‘self determination and choice to the historical condition of civil objectification and choicelessness, historians have, not surprisingly, ended up in a mess’. This is especially true when it comes to discussions of sexual relationships between enslaved women and white men, and will be discussed later in this article. W. Johnson, ‘On Agency’, *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (2003), pp. 113-124, and W. Dusinger, ‘Power and Agency in Antebellum Slavery’, *American Nineteenth Century History* Vol. 12, No. 2 (2011), pp. 139-148.

The source base used in this study consists of every interview conducted with a formerly enslaved person from Louisiana in the 1930s Works Progress Administration (WPA) ex-slave interview collection, alongside several longer nineteenth-century Louisiana narratives. While historians have extensively studied the WPA interviews from other state collections, few of the interviews conducted in Louisiana survived into the archival record, and those that did failed to be included in George P. Rawick's highly influential *American Slave* series. Nonetheless, when these are coupled with WPA interviews with people born in Louisiana but who had moved elsewhere after the Civil War, this body of testimony can provide valuable new insights into what it meant to grow up enslaved in Louisiana.⁵

Significantly, 10 per cent of this sample reported that a white man was their father (7.3 per cent), or their grandfather (2.8 per cent).⁶ A number of these interviewees had both white fathers *and* white grandfathers, and thus offer evidence for intergenerational sexual victimhood for enslaved mothers and their daughters in Louisiana. The apparent ease with which the interviewees discussed this topic with predominantly white, Jim Crow era interviewers -- and when they were not specifically asked for this information -- hints at the way that enslaved people in the United States coped with sexual violence on such a wide scale. This openness around the discussion of sexual violence, and a willingness to share at least some of the details with enslaved children, helped to preserve the lack of stigma

⁵ The WPA-funded Federal Writers' Project interviews with the formerly enslaved were conducted in the period from 1937-1941. . In the collections of WPA interviews from states other than Louisiana, 172 interviews have been found in which the interviewee had been enslaved in Louisiana, but after freedom had moved elsewhere. These interviews form the bulk of the Louisiana data set. These can be found in G. P. Rawick, (ed.), *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, Series One & Two, Vols. 1-19*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1972), hereafter *TAS*; G. P. Rawick, (ed.), *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, Supplement Series One, Vols. 1-12*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1979), hereafter *TAS SS1*; G. P. Rawick, (ed.), *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, Supplement Series Two, Vols. 1-10*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1979), hereafter *TAS SS2*. Other Louisiana interviews can be found in R. Clayton, (ed.), *Mother Wit: The Ex-Slave Narratives of the Louisiana Writers' Project* (New York: P. Lang, 1990) and in various archives throughout Louisiana where Lyle Saxon (head of the project) chose to disperse them at the close of the Louisiana Writers' Project. For a useful discussion of the wider Federal Writers' Project see S.A. Musher, 'The Other Slave Narratives: The Works Progress Administration Interviews', in J. Ernest (ed.), *The Oxford handbook of the African American Slave Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 101-118.

⁶ Statistics presented in this essay come from research originally conducted as part of my ESRC PhD project: A. Livesey, 'Sexual Violence in the Slaveholding Regimes of Louisiana and Texas: Patterns of Abuse in Black Testimony', Unpublished PhD thesis submitted to the University of Liverpool (2015).

attached to rape in slave communities, and fulfilled a key role assigned to all enslaved mothers - that of ensuring that their child was prepared to for the realities of enslaved life.⁷

Sexual relationships between white men and black women in Louisiana has been a subject of special attention since the Antebellum era. During a visit to New Orleans in 1837, Harriet Martineau wrote that the ‘Quadroon girls of New Orleans’ were ‘brought up to be the mistresses of white men’. Yet the ‘quadroons’ referred to by Martineau were free women of colour who were able to support themselves and their children through long term, often contracted, sexual relationships with white men.⁸ The nature of this relationship when the woman involved was living under slavery has been the topic of some debate. Institutions such as *plaçage* (a ‘common-law’ marriage between a white man and a free woman of colour), and ‘quadroon balls’ (where white men could meet free women of colour in order to initiate a relationship that might lead to *plaçage*) formalised sexual relationships between free black women and white men. Some studies based on legal documents, however, have argued that enslaved women were sometimes similarly able to manipulate the system in order to alleviate their position and gain eventual freedom for themselves and their children.⁹ Both Federal Writers’ Project interviewees and nineteenth-century autobiographers generally presented a less optimistic view of this relationship.

Victor Duhon had lived under slavery on the Lafayette Parish plantation of Jean Duhon and his wife, Emily Prejean. He was described by his WPA interviewer Fred Dibble as ‘showing the white strain in his blood very definitely’. Duhon’s mother, Euripa Dupuis, had been a domestic in the white family home, a ‘hairstresser’, who had been forced

⁷ See S. J. Shaw, ‘Mothering Under Slavery in the Antebellum South’, in E. Nakano Glenn, G. Chang & L. R. Forcey (eds.) *Mothering: Ideology, Experience and Agency* (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 237-58.

⁸ H. Martineau, *Society in America*, Vol. 2 (London: Saunders and Otley, 1837), esp. pp. 80-1.

⁹ For this debate, and further discussion see J. Blassingame, *Black New Orleans* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973); J. Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order in Early New Orleans* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2009); E. Clark, *The Strange History of the American Quadroon: Free Women of Color in the Revolutionary Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); J. Millward, “‘The Relics of Slavery’: Interracial Sex and Manumission in the American South’, *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* Vol. 31, No. 3 (2010), p. 26; J. K. Schafer, *Slavery, the Civil Law and the Supreme Court of Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana Southern University Press, 1997), esp. pp. 90-95.

to become the sexual partner of the son of the white family. Duhon told his interviewer: ‘[o]ne day she barbered master’s son, who was Lucien. He say that he’ll shave her head if she won’t do what he likes. After that she his woman till he marries a white lady.’ In this case, Duhon reported that the son of the master (Lucien) unashamedly sexually abused his mother whilst she continued to live in the house with his parents.¹⁰ After Lucien Duhon had married a white lady, Euripa Dupuis married a black man on the nearby Landry plantation; Victor Duhon joined them after emancipation. Duhon remembered his mother with affection. Additionally, his close knowledge of her experience as a victim of white sexual violence, and the fact that he joined her as soon as he was able indicates that their relationship was not significantly harmed by the fact that he was born of rape.¹¹

Cases of former slaves who disclosed that their father was a white man would not all have indicated that a violent and forceful rape occurred, although many certainly did. Evidence indicates that in some cases, such as Duhon’s, occurred out of a prolonged process of grooming or entrapment that equalled rape; and other cases further complicate conceptions of ‘agency’ under slavery. One such case was presented by Olivier Blanchard, who had lived in Martinville Parish under slavery. He told his white interviewers that his father had been a white carpenter on the plantation, but when freedom came ‘daddy and mama didn’ lib dere on de place no mo. My mama tuk me and atter w’ile she marry ‘gin’. There is no census record to indicate that Olivier’s father and mother lived together, as he stated. Instead, the only white male of the same name listed in St Martinville in the 1850 census lived nearby in the household of Therese Guidry, a female head of house. Blanchard spoke affectionately of the

¹⁰ There was no clear sampling method used by the Louisiana Writers’ Project. Documents from the LWP collection reveal that the writers walked the streets of New Orleans to ask black residents for information such as ‘do you know anybody who knew Marie Leveau?’, or, ‘do you know anybody who was alive during slavery time?’. Nevertheless, domestic slaves were overrepresented. In the Louisiana and Texas Writers’ sample they comprise around 50 per cent of the total sample, whereas a contemporary estimate in the 1850s put domestics at 14% of the overall enslaved population. See Anonymous, *The American Cotton Planter and the Soil of the South*, Vol. 2 (Montgomery: N. B. Cloud, 1858), pp. 160-6.

¹¹ *TAS SS2*, Vol. 4, Part 3, pp. 1238-41.

white mistress, but said nothing of the master, Clairville LeSan, and so the master's views on the relationship of Blanchard's mother with the white carpenter are unknown. It is significant, though, that after freedom his mother was keen to leave the plantation, and Blanchard's white father.¹² Saidiya Hartman has written that 'if desperation, recklessness, and hopelessness determine "choosing one's lover", absolute distinctions between compulsion and assent cannot be sustained', this statement urges a reconsideration of cases such as Blanchard's where women 'chose' to enter into sexual relationships with white men because of the external pressures that the institution of slavery presented.¹³ The relationship between Blanchard's mother and his white father was rendered meaningless without slavery, thus indicating that the relationship was coercive in nature, or, in a similar manner to Harriet Jacobs when she took a white lover for protection against an abusive master, Blanchard's mother may have chosen to enter into an arrangement in order to protect herself against more sinister threats over which she had no control.¹⁴

Some enslaved mothers, like Blanchard's, who entered into a longer-term sexual relationship with white men may have done so out of hope for a degree of protection for themselves and their children, but the case of the aforementioned mother of Victor Duhon, who was made to enter into a long term sexual relationship with Lucien Duhon under the threat of violence, highlights the danger of this assumption. Louisa Picquet, who was interviewed in 1860 in Buffalo, New York, was born a child of a her white master's rape in Roanoke, Virginia, to a 15-year-old enslaved 'seamstress'. When Picquet reached a similar age, she was purchased as a 'housekeeper' by 'Mr Williams' from New Orleans, and she gave birth to four of his children. Williams eventually emancipated Picquet alongside his one

¹² TAS SS2, Vol. 2, Part 1, p. 324.

¹³ S. V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997), p. 111.

¹⁴ Year: 1850; Census Place: *St Martin, Louisiana*; Roll: M432_240; Page: 154A; Image: 312. Accessed at Ancestry.com; H. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (New York: Dover Publications, 2001; originally published Boston: 1861).

surviving enslaved child through his will after his death. Picquet recalled that Williams threatened to ‘blow [her] brains out’ if she dared to escape his abuse. She thought to herself, ‘if that be the way, all I could do was just to pray for him to die’. Picquet submitted to her life of sexual slavery, knowing that the risk of resistance was too great, a strategy described in modern-day studies of sexual violence as ‘learned helplessness’.¹⁵ Picquet demonstrated a remarkable ability to emotionally survive her abuse: she maintained a close relationship with her one surviving daughter, had a strong marriage to Henry Picquet (also a child born of rape) and she maintained a fierce desire to be reunited with her mother and brother, despite having been separated from them as a young teenager. But while Picquet seemingly had the emotional and psychological strength to survive sexual trauma, she certainly did not actively pursue a sexual relationship with her master in an attempt to secure emancipation for herself and her daughter. In cases such as that of Louisa Picquet, a ‘positive’ outcome for enslaved women (such as emancipation) did not indicate that the relationship was consensual, or that the enslaved woman had been calculating and deliberate in entering into an arrangement that might lead emancipation.

Stories of emancipation for enslaved women who gave birth to the children of the master are rare in the testimony of the formerly enslaved. While some of the formerly enslaved children fathered by white men in Louisiana did not specifically mention their white families in negative terms, none indicated that they had been promised their freedom. Some of the sexual relationships resulting in the birth of the interviewee (or their parent) could have blurred the boundaries between consent and coerced sex, but slave testimony indicates that such relationships were most often abusive and coercive in nature. Enslaved women rarely

¹⁵ H. Mattison, *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon, or, Inside Views of Southern Domestic Life* (New York, NY, 1861), pp. 20, 19. Psychological studies of rape survivors have found that women can opt to submit to sexual abuse when the risks associated with direct physical resistance are just too high: this allows the woman a sense of control over her own body and is an important cognitive resistance and coping strategy. See A. Burgess and L. Holstrom, ‘The Coping Behavior of the Rape Victim’, *American Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 133, No. 4 (1976), pp. 413-18.

had the power to secure emancipation or ameliorated working conditions for their children. Nevertheless, enslaved mothers who gave birth as the result of a rape were still able to find the strength to raise their children, and to equip them to similarly survive the trauma (sexual or other) that might lie ahead.

The scale of sexual violence and its implications for the mothering experience

The scale of sexual violence referred to in the WPA interviews (see Table 1) is remarkable considering the conditions in which the interviews took place. Interviewees commonly betrayed the fact that they were uncomfortable with the interview situation, as well as their uncertainty with the motivations of the interviewer. Zoe Posey of the Louisiana Writers' Project interviewed Mary Harris, the daughter of a slaveholder who later sold her away from the plantation. When Harris discussed the cruel treatment of slaves, she was met with a defensive reaction from Posey. Posey responded, and recorded in the typescript: '[w]e admitted that slavery was a most unfortunate thing – but that all masters were not cruel. Old slaves still tell of their love for 'ole Miss' and 'ole Marse'...'. Immediately Harris retracted her statement and clarified that it was the foreign slave-owners that were cruel, rather than the 'American' slave-owners. Posey had manipulated the interview significantly. It was not until Posey returned to Harris' house a second time that Harris' son angrily dismissed the white woman, '[y]es'm I'm bitter...Look at me they say I could pass for white. My mother is bright too. And why? Because the man who owned and sold my mother was her father'. Harris' son told Posey, '[a] brute like that who could sell his own child into unprincipled hands is a beast- the power, just because he had the power, and thirst for money'. Posey left the interview and made light of the situation at the end of the typescript: 'it was our first experience with a madman'.¹⁶

¹⁶ Zoe Posey interview with Mary Harris, WPA Ex-Slave Narrative Project Collection at Louisiana Southern

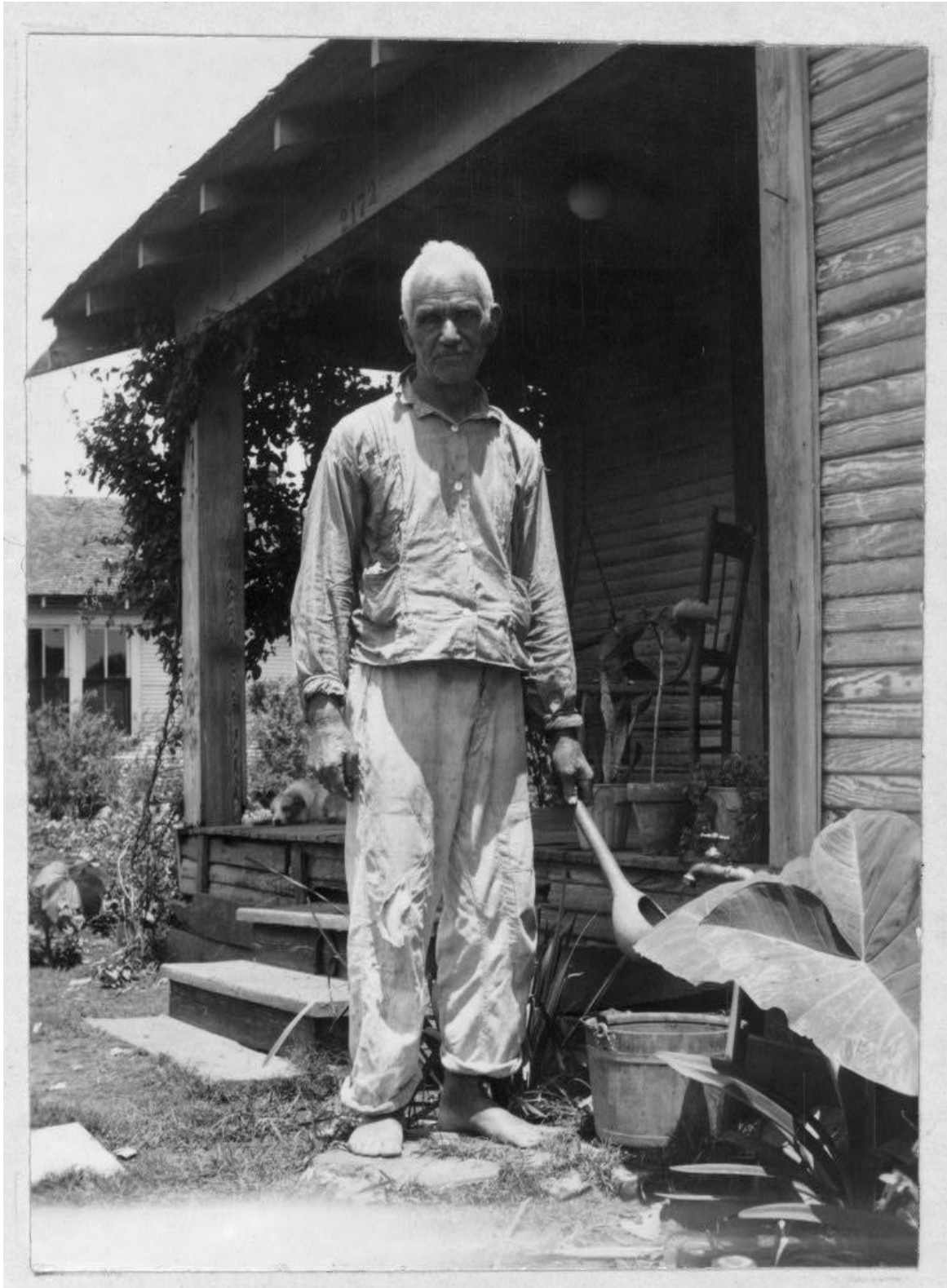


Figure 1. Donaville Broussard.

Source: Portraits of African American ex-slaves from the U.S. Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project slave narratives collections, Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress, lc-usz62-125188



Figure 2. Valmar Cormier

Source: Portraits of African American ex-slaves from the U.S. Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project slave narratives collections, Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-125203

Donaville Broussard (Figure 1) was similarly worried by the potential consequences of what he might say in his interview. He told his interviewer, ‘I hear tell dat Mr. Emile Mouton uster beat his slaves ‘till de blood run, but Madam, I don’ like you to write dat down ‘cause I nebber see dat myself’.¹⁷ The recording of this in the edited version of the interview, when Broussard specifically asked for it to be omitted, is representative of the general lack of understanding of the part of the interviewers as to what it meant to be black and formerly enslaved in the Jim Crow South. Such a dynamic is likely to have limited the frequency of references to sexual violence by some interviewees who were more easily intimidated. The fact that so many formerly enslaved people did feel comfortable enough to discuss the rape of their mothers with white interviewers, even in this context, suggests a strong tradition of discussing sexual violence within their own social networks.

Donaville Broussard had lived under slavery in Lafayette County, close to Victor Duhon and another formerly enslaved man, Valmar Cormier. All had been fathered by French creole fathers, and had then moved to the Beaumont area of Texas after emancipation.¹⁸ Like that of Victor Duhon, the Cormier and Broussard interviews are both candid about the sexual violence that led to their own conception, and revealing of the routine nature of sexual violence into the lives of enslaved women. Broussard was born in 1850 to an enslaved mother who herself had been fathered by the master’s son. His mother was domestic who had been raised in the house to serve her white biological family. An intergenerational pattern was established when Broussard’s mother became pregnant with the child of a white visitor to the plantation, Neville Broussard. The elder Broussard, who can be identified in the archival record as the son of a nearby planter, went on to marry a white

¹⁷ *TAS SS2*, Vol. 2, Part. 1, p. 454.

¹⁸ These interviewees gave some of the most detailed information about sexual violence. The distance between the former slave and the white descendants of their former owners (distance created by moving from Louisiana to Texas) could be a factor in the willingness of former slaves to give the names of rapists and white fathers.

woman.¹⁹ Donaville and his mother were eventually sold to separate plantations.²⁰

Valmar Cormier (Figure 2), was the son of a ‘white Creole man’, whose name he took only after emancipation. It is likely that Cormier’s father was one of the planters by the name of Cormier that can be located in Lafayette parish census records, as the willingness to take his father’s name would indicate that it was somebody whom he knew.²¹ Cormier told his interviewer that his master was a poor man and owned just three slaves: Cormier, his mother, and sister. The master, therefore, would certainly have known the identity of Cormier’s father. The threat that both Broussard and Cormier’s mothers faced came from outside of the slaveholding unit, thus illuminating the constant threat of sexual violence that enslaved women faced, whether it was from the master or another white family member, or from a visitor to the slaveholding unit. In recent years, scholars such as Stephanie Camp have encouraged researchers to consider regional specificities of slave systems and slave communities.²² While literature on interracial sex in Louisiana has generally been focused on the urban spaces of New Orleans and the *gens de couleur libre* (free people of colour) of the Cane River districts around the first Louisiana colonial settlement of Natchitoches, the 46 interviewees who either mentioned white heritage, or white male rape, almost all lived in locations outside of these areas under slavery. Interracial sex on a pervasive scale thus emerges as a prominent feature of slavery throughout Louisiana.

Jacob Aldrich constructed a horrific image of cruelty and intergenerational sexual

¹⁹ Census records show that Neville Broussard was the son of another planter in nearby Lafayette parish, and is listed on the 1850 census with his twin brother Dupreville as ‘labourers’. See Year: 1850; Census Place: Western District, Lafayette, Louisiana; Roll: M432_232; Page: 257B; Image: 521, accessed at Ancestry.com. When his master and his wife died in 1862, Donaville and his mother were sold. Neither his mother’s father nor Donaville’s father purchased them and they were separated. The former slave does not give his reasons for taking the surname of his father. His father married a white woman but died in 1882. See TAS SS2, Vol. 2, Part. 1, p. 454.

²⁰ 1820 US Census; Census Place: St Martin, Louisiana; Page: 159; NARA Roll: M33_31; Image: 154. Accessed at Ancestry.com.

²¹ TAS, Vol. 16, Pt. 1, p. 253. There were two men by the name of Cormier in Lafayette Parish, Valery and Celestin Cormier were middle-aged planters who lived in Lafayette Parish. Year: 1850; Census Place: Western District, Lafayette, Louisiana; Roll: M432_232; Page: 258B; Image: 523; Year: 1850; Census Place: Western District, Lafayette, Louisiana; Roll: M432_232; Page: 267B; Image: 541, accessed at Ancestry.com.

²² Stephanie M. H Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

violence within the white house and outside of it. Aldrich, born in Terrebonne Parish in 1860, was the grandson of his master, the white planter, Michelle Thibedoux (Michelle in this case being a male name). Aldrich's interview indicates that Thibedoux had more than 20 slaves and that 'Marster would come 'round to de cabins in de quarters. Sometime he go in one and tell de man to go outside and wait 'til he do what he want to do'. Thibedoux, according to Aldrich 'had chillen by his own chillen'. Additionally he had four enslaved women who lived in his house as sex slaves, including 'a light one' from Charleston. This behaviour was passed on to his son. When his son became overseer, Aldrich remembered, he 'had as many mulatto chillens as his daddy had. He was my uncle'.²³ On this plantation, therefore, the fact of sexual violence could not be escaped and the practical tasks of motherhood were likely to have been shaped in response to this social and cultural climate. Women not only had to cope with the trauma of rape themselves, but also with the possibility that the children born of that rape would be similarly victimised. Enslaved mothers would have been forced to make a decision on the extent of knowledge about sexual violence that she would share with her children.

While most WPA interviewees were still very young by the time slavery ended, most were acutely aware of the trauma suffered by their mothers. Anthony S. Parent and Susan B. Wallace wrote that while children were lacking in sexual knowledge, they were not shielded from the social realities of enslavement. Children witnessed 'ritualized humiliation and institutionalised violence, often sexual in content'.²⁴ Louisiana interviewees remembered this childhood trauma. J. W. Terriel was not sexually abused by his master-father, but was

²³ Census records show that Michelle Thibedoux lived on the plantation with one of his elder sons, Lamarque Thibedoux, who was aged 27 in 1860. This is likely to be the young man who was the father of seven enslaved children mentioned by Aldrich. Lamarque Thibedoux married a white woman in 1872 and had a white daughter. See, Year: 1860; Census Place: *Ward 10, Terrebonne, Louisiana*; Roll: M653_425; Page: 87; Image: 415; Family History Library Film: 803425; Year: 1900; Census Place: *Police Jury Ward 2, Saint James, Louisiana*; Roll: 580; Page: 2A; Enumeration District: 0053; FHL microfilm: 1240580. Accessed at Ancestry.com.

²⁴A.S. Parent and S. Brown Wallace, 'Childhood and Sexual Identity Under Slavery', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (1993), pp. 384-6.

instead tortured on account of his being the embodiment of his crime. Terriel told his interviewer that his father, his mother's master, took him away from his mother at six weeks old. He described the cruelty of his father who made him 'wear a bell till I was 21 year old, strapped 'round my shoulders with the bell 'bout three feet from my head in a steel frame. That was for punishment for bein' born into the world a son of a white man and my mammy, a Negro slave'. Terriel also remembered being strapped to a tree and beaten until he was unconscious. This treatment occurred while his mother was still made to be his master's 'mistress'. The mental anguish for Terriels's mother must have been horrific: first, she was a victim of sexual abuse; and, secondly, she could do nothing but watch her child being tortured by her abuser. While long-term sexual relationships between white men and enslaved women rarely ameliorated the living conditions for the children produced in Terriel's case it brought him added attention and made his day-to-day life significantly worse.²⁵

Considering the shared victimhood for the primary victims of the rape (mothers) and the secondary victims of the rape (children born of rape) allows historians to imagine the wide scale implications of sexual violence. Rape under slavery was never an act of violence between two people, but impacted all enslaved people in terms of perceived threats to themselves, and to loved ones. Precisely because of the scale of abuse, evidence builds a picture of a slave sub-community that was understanding, supportive, and resilient.²⁶ Furthermore, while studies on children born of rape, albeit undertaken in different situations and circumstances, can often cite attachment problems between the rape victim and the child that was fathered by the rapist, there is no evidence of this in the interviews given by the WPA interviewees.²⁷ Close knowledge of the sexual violence suffered by mothers of WPA

²⁵ *TAS SS2*, Vol. 9, Part 8, pp. 3772-7.

²⁶ The most commonly discussed sexual issue within the Louisiana sample of interviews was forced reproduction, this was mentioned in 11.4 per cent of the sample.

²⁷ For discussion of this see W. Van Ee and R. J. Kleber, 'Growing Up Under the Shadow: Key Issues in

interviewees indicates that a close relationship persisted between enslaved women and their children in spite of widespread sexual violence against both.

Louisa Picquet was separated from her mother from the age of 15, but already had a detailed knowledge of the sexual violence that occurred on her previous master's slaveholding unit. In addition to her mother's abuse, Picquet had a close knowledge of the experience of 'Lucy', an enslaved woman who had children by a number of white men. Sexual violence had been a part of Picquet's worldview from the time of her birth, and throughout her childhood. It was not a shock, therefore, when her master began to sexually harass her when she reached the age of 13.²⁸ Under such conditions, there seems to have been no real room for children, or their mothers, to have been stigmatised within the enslaved community. Picquet formed a network of light-skinned enslaved people who had experienced sexual violence, and maintained friendships with both women and men.

Just two interviewees from Louisiana mentioned that their white parentage prevented them from forming attachments to other family members. Mandy Billings, born in 1854, was interviewed by Bernice Bowden of the Arkansas Writers' Project, but had lived in Sparta, Louisiana under slavery. Her father was her white master, Charles McLaughlin. She told Bowden that her mother was 'sold on that account. Old Master Charles' wife wouldn't 'low her to stay'. She protested to her white female interviewer (who took a condescending and hostile tone in some of her other interviews), 'I'm tellin' it just like they told it to me'. At the end of her interview, she revealed, 'I been treated pretty well. Look like the hardest treatment I had was my grandfather's, Jake Nabors. Look like he hated me cause I was white—and I couldn't help it'.²⁹ Donaville Broussard reported that his black 'step papa didn't like me. I was light'.³⁰ These two cases represent the only negative attitudes in Louisiana testimony

Research on and Treatment of Children Born of Rape,' *Child Abuse Review*, Vol. 22, Issue 6, pp. 386-397.

²⁸ H. Mattison, *Louisa Picquet, The Octoroon*.

²⁹ *TAS*, Vol. 2, Part 1, *Arkansas Narratives*, p. 162.

³⁰ *TAS SS2*, Vol. 2, part. 1, p. 454.

toward children born of rape. Overall, evidence does not point to any significant impact on family relationships that can be attributed to lighter skin. Additionally, the negative reaction in these cases came from close male family members who themselves were likely to have been tormented by an inability to protect their loved ones from sexual violence.

The ease with which WPA interviewees discussed sexual violence directed against their mothers indicates that there had been a long tradition of openness around this topic. If sexual violence was endemic in Louisiana, as evidence suggests that it was, enslaved mothers would have had to adapt in order to prepare their children for this vulnerability. In doing this, however, they contributed to the destigmatisation of sexual victimhood within enslaved communities, and ensured that single parent families were accepted and valued alongside a range of other family structures.

The fight to maintain maternal influence

Victor Duhon discussed his relationship with his white biological family: '[d]ey was 'bout fifteen slaves on de lan' w'at de Duhon's own', he remembered, 'but I nebber run 'roun' wid dem'. Duhon was given a room at the back of the white family's home home, and worked as a 'coachman' for his mistress. He reminded his interviewer, Fred Dibble, '[y]ou know Missus Duhon she was r'ally my gramma'. Light-skinned children born of sexual relationships between slave masters and enslaved women have had numerous meanings ascribed to their bodies. Writers have conceptualised the 'mulatta' body in a number of ways, not least as a site of 'boundary-transgression', a negotiating terrain either for racial conflicts in the slaveholding sphere, or for contentions about the boundaries of the nation and its slave and free territory.³¹ The children of enslaved mothers and white fathers, however,

³¹ For useful analyses of the role of the 'mulatta' in history, literature, and on stage, see R. Ferguson, 'The Mulatta Text and the Muted Voice in 'Louisa Picquet: The Octoroon' Revising the Genre of the Slave Narrative', Unpublished PhD thesis, Marquette University (1995); E. Fox-Genovese, 'Slavery, Race, and the Figure of the Tragic Mulatta, or, The Ghost of Southern History in the Writing of African-American Women',

had to find a way to negotiate their ‘mixedness’ within the plantation complex where their racial ambiguity was complicated further by servile inequality and the sexually violent nature of their conception. Enslaved children born of rape, such as Duhon, were commonly brought into the white home to live, though always as a domestic slave. In these cases, the mothers of these children had to find a way to maintain their influence in the face of significant interference from the white family.

While reports of affection shown by white fathers towards their enslaved children are rare in the testimony of formerly enslaved people, relationships with white mistresses and free white half-siblings are more commonly mentioned.³² Martha Johnson told her WPA interviewer about her mother, a child of the master’s, who was raised in the white family house. ‘He had two families’, she explained. Martha’s mother was ‘three quarters white’, her master was her father, and she had been born to a mother who was also the child of a white man. While Martha withheld judgement on her white grandfather, she spoke of the white mistress with a degree of positivity. Martha remembered that ‘Master’s white wife kept her and raised her until her death. He was dead I think...’³³ In revealing intergenerational sexual violence, this case also shows some attempt by the white mistress to look after the child born of her husband’s rape.

Victor Duhon was not treated as part of the white family, but he did have a reduced workload. He stated that the ‘[o]nly t’ing I hafter do was to look atter my marster’ hoss w’en

in *Mississippi Quarterly*, Vol. 49, Issue 4 (1996), pp. 791-818; E. A. Raimon, *The ‘Tragic Mulatta’ Revisited: Race and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Anti-Slavery Fiction* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004); T. C. Zackodnick, *The Mulatta and the Politics of Race* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004); Clark, *The Strange History*.

³² The family ‘black and white’ was a key part of the paternalist pro-slavery defence espoused by slaveholders in the antebellum period; in 1991 Eugene Genovese revised this to reflect his belief that the master class’ worldview was grounded in the hierarchies of the plantation household. E. D. Genovese, “‘Our Family White and Black’: Family and Household in the Southern Slaveholders’ World View”, in C. Bleser (ed.) *In Joy and in Sorrow: Women, Family, and Marriage in the Victorian South 1830-1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 69-87.

³³ *TAS SS2*, Vol. 6, Part 5, p. 1948.

he come in', and he became a coachman for his mistress.³⁴ While the Duhons made a limited attempt to ameliorate Victor's working and living conditions, their actions increased the physical distance between Victor and his enslaved mother. Despite Donaville having been 'petted like a white child', no provision was made for his eventual emancipation or that of his mother. When the master and mistress (his great-grandparents) died, Donaville and his mother were sold to separate plantations.³⁵

Whether or not the formerly enslaved person exaggerated the good nature of the relationship between themselves and their biological white family in order to appeal to the prejudices of the white interviewer, some children born of sexual violence could have experienced the life of what Michael Tadman has described as a 'key slave'. Tadman's 'key slave' theory allows for the possibility that some slaveholders were likely to have become emotionally bonded to some enslaved people ('key slaves') while they exploited and displayed cruelty towards others. This allowed slaveholders to maintain a self-image of benevolent paternalist slaveholding.³⁶ Additionally, both Eugene Genovese and Marie Jenkins Schwartz have discussed the daily battles between slaveholders and enslaved parents to assert parental authority. Genovese described a system whereby masters and mistresses 'not only pampered them [enslaved children] but presided over the plantation family in a way that enabled them to get some of the credit for what the slave parents and friends were doing for the children'.³⁷ Under these circumstances, some of the practical tasks of motherhood – namely preparing the child for the harsher side of slavery – was at risk of disruption, and a more sustained attempt by the enslaved mother to maintain her relationship with the child can

³⁴ *TAS SS2*, Vol. 4, Part. 3, p. 1238.

³⁵ 1820 US Census; Census Place: *St Martin, Louisiana*; Page: 159; NARA Roll: *M33_31*; Image: 154. Accessed at Ancestry.com.

³⁶ M. Tadman, 'The Persistent Myth of Paternalism: Historians and the Nature of Master-Slave Relations in the American South', *Race Relations Abstracts*, 23 (1998), pp. 7-23.

³⁷ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, p. 513.

be detected.³⁸ As in the case of Donaville Broussard, despite the interviewees having been physically separated from their mothers on the plantation, they were still acutely aware of their experiences and sought to be reunited once slavery had ended.

Not all plantation mistresses were described as kindly by formerly enslaved people. Octavia V. Rogers Albert in *The House of Bondage* recorded a story that former slave Aunt Lorendo had told her about a woman that had lived on her plantation under slavery. The woman, Hattie, had just given birth to a stillborn child, the third born of the rape of the mistress' son. After she ran away to the woods she returned to tell Lorendo 'I have so many trials with my mistress. I try to satisfy her but nothing I do pleases her'. Lorendo asked her why she ran away and Hattie responded 'old mistress came up to me one morning and went to beating me with a big iron key all over my head and I tell you, she almost give me a fit'.³⁹ Whilst the reason for the mistress' rage against Hattie is not stated, it is clear that Hattie was blamed for the white man's abusive behaviour.

Thavolia Glymph has represented the slaveholding domestic space as a site of daily struggles for power between enslaved, and slaveholding women. Slaveholding women were the 'female face' of slaveholders' violent power, and although enslaved women found ways (forthright or clandestine) to resist this power, the simple fact remained: '[p]lantation mistresses were slaveholders...and this status gave them virtually unrestricted power over the slaves who laboured in their homes'.⁴⁰ Some white women did try to alleviate the conditions of enslavement for children whom they recognised as their relations, but while the slaveholding woman sometimes treated the children favourably, there were no instances mentioned in the Louisiana WPA interviews where the mothers and primary victims of

³⁸ M. Jenkins Schwartz, *Born in Bondage: Growing Up Enslaved in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 71-3.

⁴⁰ T. Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 4, 227. See also M. C. Gwin, 'Green-eyed Monsters of the Slavecracy: Jealous Mistresses in Two Slave Narratives', in D. Clark Hine (ed.) *Black Women in United States History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 560.

sexual violence received support from the plantation mistress.

Children fathered by white masters and interviewed in the 1930s were still young by the time they were emancipated at the end of the Civil War. Some were positive about the relationships that they had with their white families, but had they lived longer under slavery their story is unlikely to have remained so. Stephen Jordan, who spoke to Octavia V. Rogers Albert in the late nineteenth century, was an adult by the time he was emancipated. He told Albert: '[m]y first old master was a mighty good man, and my mistress used to love me like her own children. In fact, my old master was my own father; but, of course, the thing was kept a sort of a secret, although everybody knew it.' Jordan's mother was a domestic slave, and Jordan was also raised in the white house. He remembered that 'after I was old enough to be weaned old mistress had me to sleep in a couch with her own children in her own room, until I got to be a great big boy'. Although Jordan was close to his half-siblings and his white stepmother, this domestic situation did not last forever. He told Albert that when he was 15 '[s]omehow or other old master got broke, and his big plantation and all his slaves were seized and sold for debts.'⁴¹ Jordan's case demonstrates that despite this perceived closeness, Jordan could not escape his enslaved status. He was sold like any other enslaved person when the finances required it.

Colonel Mallory, a former Louisiana slave who published his autobiography in the nineteenth century, wrote that amongst the 'sad pictures of slave life...the saddest was that of slave women pleading with their masters (and erstwhile husbands) not to sell their children'. He wrote that their pleadings were 'in vain'. Mallory described the prolonged psychological torture of a master's rape; firstly the sexual violence, and then the constant prospect of the sale of any children produced. He asked: '[w]as it not the acme of cruelty to rob a female of that priceless jewel--virtue--and then tear from her already bleeding heart that which would

⁴¹ Albert, *The House of Bondage* (New York, Hunt & Eaton, 1890), p. 101.

serve, in a measure, to sear over the wounds inflicted on her by her ruthless owner?’⁴² More than 10 per cent of WPA interviewees who stated that the master was their father were later sold by him. Had the average age of this sample been older than 13 at emancipation, then the percentage of those sold by the master is likely to have been much higher.

Victor Duhon’s mother became separated from her son once her master’s son (and abuser) had married a white woman and she was allowed to marry a slave of Polite Landry. After emancipation, Duhon showed a desire to be reunited with his mother when he also went to work for Polite Landry as a free labourer. Similarly, Donaville Broussard and his mother were sold to separate plantations in the second year of the war. Their separation did not last long: Broussard remembered that ‘[w]hen war was finished I left M’sieur Arceneaux and lived with mama’. When Henry Louis McGaffey’s master moved to Sabine Pass, Texas, his mother took the opportunity to run away. After the Civil War, his mother made the still perilous journey back to her old slaveowner in order to be reunited with her child. As the work of Heather Andrea Williams has recently shown, formerly enslaved people sought reunification with their family in any number of ways, thus showing a depth of emotion still felt in relation to their lost relatives, whether that be in the form of a persistent love, or a continuing grief at separation.⁴³ In McGaffey’s case, the mother made the potentially perilous journey back to the home of her old slaveowner, and sexual attacker, in order to be reunited with her child.

While there was no uniform experience of mothering for enslaved women, the mothers of interviewees examined in this article were linked through their determination to fulfil a meaningful parental role in the life of their child conceived in the most traumatic of circumstances. Through highlighting the emotional resilience of enslaved women, these

⁴² Col. W. Mallory, *Old Plantation Days* (Hamilton, Ontario 1902), pp. 20-1.

⁴³ Williams, *Help me to Find my People*.

cases reveal that power and agency were always restricted by an enslaved status. A limited number of enslaved women could have used children born of the master's rape to ameliorate the conditions of slavery and to gain emancipation for their family, but in the cases mentioned here, sexual relationships between enslaved mothers and white fathers were presented as non-consensual. Additionally, enslaved mothers were far more likely to have been sold away from their families or their children than to be emancipated. If some enslaved mothers did decide to enter in sexually abusive relationship out of hope for emancipation, they would have done so knowing the chances of achieving this would have been slim.

The sustained effort by enslaved women to maintain maternal influence over her child is significant for three main reasons: first, through embracing the child born of the rape of white men, the enslaved mother defiantly rejected a victim status, and proactively turned the child born into rape into a symbol of survival. Even when the white family attempted to distance the child of mixed enslaved-free parentage through either moving the child into the white family home, or selling the mother away, the enslaved mother fought to maintain the relationship – even if they were only to be reunited after emancipation.

Secondly, the way that enslaved mothers fought to maintain the bond with their children demonstrates the continued importance of family in the lives of enslaved people, even when ideas of family had to be reconfigured to fit in with the harsh realities of enslaved life. As discussed, family has long been seen as an important survival strategy for enslaved people. Enslaved people in the Deep South had to reshape expectations and meanings of family in order to survive daily trauma, but family relationships remained at the centre of enslaved life.

Finally, the number of formerly enslaved people who referred to, in varying detail, the rape of their mothers under slavery is indicative of a lack of stigma surrounding sexual

violence that could only have emerged from its occurrence on an unimaginable scale. Sexual violence is often obscured by its victims -- but testimony reveals that in the US South sexual abuse was discussed, albeit with deep sadness and often reluctance, within the enslaved, or formerly enslaved communities. Close to eight per cent of Louisiana WPA interviewees reported that their mother had been raped by a white man. This revelation in itself could have had harmful consequences for the interviewee and their family; and therefore many more are likely to have held back on such detail. The extent that the results for Louisiana are typical of slave communities throughout the South is outside of the scope of this study, but evidence indicates that these patterns are unlikely to be state-specific. From the 1840s, abolitionists increased their attempts to bring wide-scale sexual violence to wider attention, and at the same time, through the creation of terms such as ‘mulatto’, ‘griffe’, ‘quadroon’, ‘octoroon’, slaveholders sought to measure degrees of ‘whiteness’, and as such left behind a rich, while incriminatory, documentary trail of rape. The presence of these terms in legal documents and court records, in addition to slave traders records, newspapers, plantation records, and slaveholders’ diaries, documented generations of enslaved mothers throughout the South who had given birth to children by white men. Motherhood that resulted from white male rape had become a horrific, but quite normalised part of being enslaved and female.

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