CHAPTER 15

Reproduction in Bondage

Dorothy Roberts

When Rose Williams was sixteen years old, her master sent her to live in a cabin with a male slave named Rufus. It did not matter that Rose disliked Rufus “cause he a bully.” At first Rose thought that her role was just to perform household chores for Rufus and a few other slaves. But she learned the true nature of her assignment when Rufus crawled into her bunk one night: “I says, ‘What you means, you fool nigger?’ He say for me to hush de mouth. ‘Dis my bunk, too,’ he say.” When Rose fended off Rufus’s sexual advances with a poker, she was reported to Master Hawkins. Hawkins made it clear that she had no choice in the matter:

De nex’ day de massa call me and tell me, “Woman, I’s pay big money for you, and I’s done dat for de cause I wants yous to raise me chillens. I’s put you to live with Rufus for dat purpose. Now, if you doesn’t want whippin’ at de stake, yous do what I wants.”

Rose reluctantly acceded to her master’s demands:

I thinks ‘bout massa buyin’ me offen de block and savin’ me from bein’ sep’rated from my folks and ‘bout bein’ whipped at de stake. Dere it am. What am I’s to do? So I’cides to do as de massa wish and so I yields.¹

The story of control of Black reproduction begins with the experiences of slave women like Rose Williams. Black procreation helped to sustain slavery, giving slave masters an economic incentive to govern Black women’s reproductive lives. Slave women’s childbearing replenished the enslaved labor force: Black women bore children who belonged to the slaveowner from the moment of their conception. This feature of slavery made control of reproduction a central aspect of whites’ subjugation of African people in America. It marked Black women from the beginning as objects whose decisions about reproduction should be subject to social regulation rather than to their own will.

For slave women, procreation had little to do with liberty. To the contrary, Black women’s childbearing in bondage was largely a product of oppression rather than an expression of self-definition and personhood. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr., writes about the autobiography of a slave named Harriet Jacobs, it “charts in vivid detail precisely how the shape of her life and the choices she makes are defined by her reduction to a sexual object, an object to be raped, bred, or abused.”² Even when whites did not interfere in reproduction so directly, this aspect of slave women’s lives was dictated by their masters’ economic stake in their labor. The brutal domination of slave women’s procreation laid the foundation for centuries of reproductive regulation that continues today.

All of these violations were sanctioned by law. Racism created for white slaveowners the possibility of unrestrained reproductive
control. The social order established by powerful white men was founded on two inseparable ingredients: the dehumanization of Africans on the basis of race, and the control of women’s sexuality and reproduction. The American legal system is rooted in this monstrous combination of racial and gender domination. One of America’s first laws concerned the status of children born to slave mothers and fathered by white men: a 1662 Virginia statute made these children slaves.

Slave masters’ control of Black women’s reproduction illustrates better than any other example I know the importance of reproductive liberty to women’s equality. Every indignity that comes from the denial of reproductive autonomy can be found in slave women’s lives—the harms of treating women’s wombs as procreative vessels, of policies that pit a mother’s welfare against that of her unborn child, and of government attempts to manipulate women’s child-bearing decisions through threats and bribes. Studying the control of slave women’s reproduction, then, not only discloses the origins of Black people’s subjugation in America; it also bears witness to the horrible potential threatened by official denial of reproductive liberty.

REPRODUCING THE LABOR FORCE

The Vitality of Slavery

The essence of Black women’s experience during slavery was the brutal denial of autonomy over reproduction. Female slaves were commercially valuable to their masters not only for their labor, but also for their ability to produce more slaves. The law made slave women’s children the property of the slaveowner. White masters therefore could increase their wealth by controlling their slaves’ reproductive capacity. With owners expecting natural multiplication to generate as much as 5 to 6 percent of their profit, they had a strong incentive to maximize their slaves’ fertility. An anonymous planter’s calculations made the point:

I own a woman who cost me $400, when a girl, in 1827. Admit she made me nothing—only worth her victuals and clothing. She now has three children, worth over $3000 . . . I would not this night touch $700 for her. Her oldest boy is worth $1250 cash, and I can get it.

Another report confirmed that “[a] breeding woman is worth from one-sixth to one-fourth more than one that does not breed.” Slave births and deaths were not recorded in the family Bible but in the slaveholder’s business ledger.

The ban on importing slaves after 1808 and the steady inflation in their price made enslaved women’s childbearing even more valuable. Female slaves provided their masters with a ready future supply of chattel. Black procreation not only benefitted each slave’s particular owner; it also more globally sustained the entire system of slavery. Unlike most slave societies in the New World, which relied on the massive importation of Africans, the slave population in the United States maintained itself through reproduction. As Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner deplored, “Too well I know the vitality of slavery with its infinite capacity of propagation.” Here lies one of slavery’s most odious features: it forced its victims to perpetuate the very institution that subjugated them by bearing children who were born the property of their masters.

To be sure, female slaves were primarily laborers and their capacity to reproduce did not diminish their masters’ interest in their work. As we will see below, when a female slave’s role as worker conflicted with that of childbearer, concern for high productivity often outweighed concern for high fertility. Slaveholders were willing to overwork pregnant slaves at the expense of the health of both mother and child. But even if, as some historians contend, “slave childbearing and
rearing were not among slaveowners’ top priorities,” there is convincing evidence that whites placed a premium on slave fertility and took steps to increase it. Indeed, it seems incredible that whites, who dominated every aspect of their slaves’ existence, would neglect the attribute that produced their most vital resource—their workforce. Nor can we ignore the sentiments of slaveholders like Thomas Jefferson, who instructed his plantation manager in 1820, “I consider a woman who brings a child every two years as more profitable than the best man on the farm.” Slaveowners who overworked their pregnant slaves operated under general ignorance about prenatal health combined with stereotypes about Black women’s natural propensity for childbirth. They were not fully aware of the extent of the damage their labor practices inflicted on their long-term human investment.

A more realistic assessment is that because female slaves served as both producers and reproducers, their masters tried to maximize both capacities as much as possible, with labor considerations often taking precedence. Even then, the grueling demands of field work constrained slave women’s experience of pregnancy and child-rearing. Every aspect of slave women’s reproductive lives was dictated by the economic interests of their white slave masters.

The Carrot and the Stick

Slaveholders devised a number of tactics to induce their female slaves to bear children. Although these methods were neither uniformly practiced nor uniformly successful, most slave masters used some techniques to enhance slave fertility. They rewarded pregnancy with relief from work in the field and additions of clothing and food, punished slave women who did not bear children, manipulated slave marital choices, and forced slaves to breed. The owner of one Georgia plantation, for example, gave slave families an extra weekly ration for the birth of a child; a Virginia planter rewarded new mothers with a small pig. Some women seemed especially to appreciate presents that recognized their femininity, such as a calico dress or hair ribbons. On P. C. Weston’s estate, the Plantation Manual prescribed that “women with six children alive at any one time are allowed all Saturday to themselves.” Slave women were sometimes guaranteed freedom if they bore an especially large number of children. Rhoda Hunt’s mother was promised manumission when she had her twelfth child, but died a month before the baby’s due date.

Even without these concrete rewards, slave women felt pressure to reproduce. Because a fertile woman was more valuable to her master, she was less likely to be sold to another owner. So women could reduce the chances of being separated from their loved ones if they had children early and frequently. In addition, women could expect some relief from their arduous work load in the final months of pregnancy. (Records show, however, that expectant mothers received little or no work relief before the fifth month.) Although data are scanty, it appears that slave women had their first child at an earlier age than white women of the time. A Virginia slaveholder reported in the early 1860s that “the period of maternity is hastened, the average youth of negro mothers being nearly three years earlier than that of the free race.” The first generation of slaves born in America also had more children than their African mothers, who avoided pregnancy for two or more years while nursing their infants. It was natural increase, and not importation of slaves, that explained the enormous growth in the slave population to 1.75 million by 1825.

Women who did not produce children, on the other hand, were often sold off—or worse. Slaveholders, angered at the loss on their investment, inflicted cruel physical and psychological retribution on their barren female slaves. A report presented to the
General Anti-Slavery Convention held in London in 1840 revealed:

Where fruitfulness is the greatest of virtues, barrenness will be regarded as worse than a misfortune, as a crime and the subjects of it will be exposed to every form of privation and affliction. Thus deficiency wholly beyond the slave’s power becomes the occasion of inconceivable suffering.14

One witness testified that a North Carolina planter ordered a group of women into a barn, declaring he intended to flog them all to death. When the women asked what crime they had committed, the master replied, “Damn you I will let you know what you have done; you don’t breed, I have not had a young one from one of you for several months.” Slaveholders treated infertile slaves like damaged goods, often attempting to pawn them off on unsuspecting buyers. Southern courts established rules for dealing with sellers’ misrepresentations about the fertility of slave women similar to rules governing the sale of other sorts of commodities.

Slave-Breeding

Another aspect of reproductive control made the common inducement of slave childbearing even more despicable. Some slaveowners also practiced *slave-breeding* by compelling slaves they considered “prime stock” to mate in the hopes of producing children especially suited for labor or sale. While slave masters’ interest in enhancing slave fertility is well established, slave-breeding has been the subject of greater controversy. That debate, however, has revolved around the extent and purpose of the practice, not whether or not slaveholders engaged in it at all.

In their 1974 bombshell *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery*, historians Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman contested the key assumptions about the management of slaves, the material conditions of slaves’ lives, and the efficiency of slave agriculture. Among the myths they debunked was “the thesis that *systematic* breeding of slaves for sale in the market accounted for a major share of the net income or profit of slaveholders, especially in the Old South.”15 Their disagreement with prevailing accounts of forced mating centered on the claim that whites widely employed livestock breeding techniques to raise slaves for market. Fogel and Engerman argued that such a practice was unsupported by plantation records and would have interfered with slave masters’ overriding objective of maintaining a stable workforce. Unlike animals, slaves would rebel against massive breeding, the authors argued, thus wiping out any potential gain achieved by pushing their fertility rate to its biological peak. Rather, planters usually encouraged fertility through the positive economic incentives described above.

But Fogel and Engerman did not dispute evidence that slaveowners at least occasionally engaged in breeding to enhance the productivity of their own plantations and more rarely to increase their slaves’ marketability. In her extensive review of slave narratives, for example, Thelma Jennings discovered that about 5 percent of the women and 10 percent of the men referred to slave-breeding.16 It is from slaves’ stories, such as Rose Williams’s experience with Rufus, that we learn of the indignities of forced mating. Frederick Douglass recorded in his autobiography how Edward Covey purchased a twenty-year-old slave named Caroline as a “breeder.” Covey mated Caroline with a hired man and was pleased when a pair of twins resulted. Douglass observed that the slaveowner was no more criticized for buying a slave for breeding than “for buying a cow and raising stock from her, and the same rules were observed, with a view to increasing the number and quality of the one as of the other.”17
Darling, an ex-slave from Texas, described the practice in these words: “massa pick out a p’otly man and a p’otly gal and just put ’em together. What he want am the stock.”  

Slaveholders had a financial stake in male slaves’ marital choices, as well, since the children of the union belonged to the wife’s owner. Although marrying “abroad” was common, some masters forbade their male slaves to court a woman from another plantation. Nor could a slave marry a free Black man or woman. The obstacles to finding a mate of one’s choosing led one slave to complain that Black men “had a hell of a time gittin’ a wife durin’ slavery. If you didn’t see one on de place to suit you and chances was you didn’t suit them, why what could you do?” Slave marriages were not recognized by law; these were partnerships consecrated by slaves’ own ceremonies and customs.

Slaveholders’ interference with bonded men’s intimate lives was often more blunt. Some masters rented men of exceptional physical stature to serve as studs. Using terms such as “stockmen,” “travelin’ niggers,” and “breedin’ niggers,” slave men remembered being “weighed and tested,” then used like animals to sire chattel for their masters.  Of course, this also meant forcing slave women to submit to being impregnated by these hired men. Jeptha Choice recalled fulfilling the role of stud: “The master was mighty careful about raisin’ healthy nigger families and used us strong, healthy youngbucks to stand the healthy nigger gals. When I was young they took care not to strain me and I was as handsome as a speckled pup and was in demand for breedin’.” Elige Davison similarly reported that his master mated him with about fifteen different women; he believed that he had fathered more than one hundred children. Although this was quite rare, some slaveholders also practiced a cruel form of negative breeding. An ex-slave reported that “runty niggers” were castrated “so dat dey can’t have no little runty chilluns.”

Victims of “The Grossest Passion”

“Slavery is terrible for men,” wrote Harriet Jacobs, “but it is far more terrible for women.” Slave women’s narratives often decried the added torment that women experienced under bondage on account of their sex. Female slaves were commonly victims of sexual exploitation at the hands of their masters and overseers. The classification of 10 percent of the slave population in 1860 as “mulatto” gives some indication of the extent of this abuse. Most of these mixed-race children were the product of forced sex between slave women and white men. Of course, the incidence of sexual assault that did not end in pregnancy was far greater than these numbers reveal.

Black women’s sexual vulnerability continued to be a primary concern of Black activists after Emancipation. A pamphlet entitled The Black Woman of the South: Her Neglects and Her Needs, published in 1881 by the prominent Black Episcopalian minister Alexander Crummel, emphasized the violation of female virtue:

In her girlhood all the delicate tenderness of her sex has been rudely outraged. . . . No chance was given her for delicate reserve or tender modesty. From her childhood she was the doomed victim of the grossest passion. All the virtues of her sex were utterly ignored. If the instinct of chastity asserted itself, then she had to fight like a tiger for the ownership . . . of her own person. . . . When she reached maturity, all the tender instincts of her womanhood were ruthlessly violated.

The law reinforced the sexual exploitation of slave women in two ways: it deemed any child who resulted from the rape to be a slave and it failed to recognize the rape of a slave woman as a crime. Legislation giving the children of Black women and white men the status of slaves left female slaves vulnerable to sexual violation...
as a means of financial gain. Children born to slave women were slaves, regardless of the father’s race or status. This meant, in short, that whenever a white man impregnated one of his slaves, the child produced by his assault was his property.

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. Rape was an act of physical violence designed to stifle Black women’s will to resist and to remind them of their servile status. In fact, as historian Claire Robertson points out, sexual harassment was more likely to have the immediate effect of interfering with the victim’s productivity both physically and emotionally. Its intended long-term effect, however, was the maintenance of a submissive workforce. Whites’ sexual exploitation of their slaves, therefore, should not be viewed simply as either a method of slave-breeding or the fulfillment of slaveholders’ sexual urges.

The racial injustice tied to rape is usually associated with Black men. We are more familiar with myths about Black men’s propensity to rape white women, which served as the pretext for thousands of brutal lynchings in the South. In the words of Ida B. Wells, who crusaded against lynching during the nineteenth century, “white men used their ownership of the body of white female[s] as a terrain on which to lynch the black male.” But white men also exploited Black women sexually as a means of subjugating the entire Black community. After Emancipation, the Ku Klux Klan’s terror included the rape of Black women, as well as the more commonly cited lynching of Black men. White sexual violence attacked not only freed Black men’s masculinity by challenging their ability to protect Black women; it also invaded freed Black women’s dominion over their own bodies.

I nevertheless think that sexual exploitation belongs in a discussion of reproductive control. Because rape can lead to pregnancy, it interferes with a woman’s freedom to decide whether or not to have a child. In addition, forced sex and forced procreation are both degrading invasions of a woman’s bodily integrity; both pursue the same ultimate end—the devaluation of their female victim. Although sexual assault and slave-breeding are distinguishable, both were part and parcel of whites’ general campaign to control slave women’s bodies. A contemporary example of this point is the rape of Muslim women by Serbian soldiers as part of the Serbians’ “ethnic cleansing” campaign. Here, too, rape was a form of mass terrorism inflicted on a group of subjugated women. But there are reports that soldiers boasted to their victims, “You will have a Serbian child.”

The law also fostered the sexual exploitation of slave women by allowing white men to commit these assaults with impunity. Slaves were at the disposal of their masters. Owners had the right to treat their property however they wished, so long as the abuse did not kill the chattel. Conversely, slave women had no recognizable interest in preserving their own bodily integrity. After all, female slaves legally could be stripped, beaten, mutilated, bred, and compelled to toil alongside men. Forcing a slave to have sex against her will simply followed the pattern. This lack of protection was reinforced by the prevailing belief among whites that Black women could not be raped because they were naturally lascivious.

Louisiana’s rape law explicitly excluded Black women from its protection. Although the language of the Virginia rape law applied to all women victims, there is not a single reported eighteenth-century case in which a white man was prosecuted for raping a female slave. Even if the criminal code did recognize the rape of a slave, the law would have prevented the victim from testifying.
in court about the assault. An evidentiary rule in most slave-holding states disqualified Blacks from testifying against a white person. In short, for most of American history the crime of rape of a Black woman did not exist.

Nor could Black women be raped by Black men. When a slave named George was charged with having sex with a child under the age of ten, his lawyer argued that the criminal code did not apply because the victim was also a slave. The Mississippi court dismissed the indictment, adopting the lawyer’s contention that “[t]he crime of rape does not exist in this State between African slaves.” The laws that regulated sexual intercourse among whites were not relevant to slaves: “Their intercourse is promiscuous” and “is left to be regulated by their owners,” the court wrote. A similar crime committed against a white woman was a capital offense.

SHATTERING THE BONDS OF MOTHERHOOD

The domination of slave women’s reproduction continued after their children were born. Black women in bondage were systematically denied the rights of motherhood. Slavery so disrupted their relationship with their children that it may be more accurate to say that as far as slaveowners were concerned, they “were not mothers at all.”

Prenatal Property

Slave mothers had no legal claim to their children. Slave masters owned not only Black women but also their offspring, and their ownership of these children was automatic and immediate. In fact, the law granted to whites a devisable, in futuro interest in the potential children of their slaves. Wills frequently devised slave women’s children before the children were born—or even conceived. In 1830, for example, a South Carolina slaveowner named Mary Kincaid bequeathed a slave woman named Sillar to her grandchild and Sillar’s two children to other grandchildren. Mary’s will provided that if Sillar should bear a third child, it was to go to yet another grandchild. Sillar’s future baby became the property of a white master before the child took its first breath!

An 1823 case, Banks' Administrator v. Marksberry, confirmed a master’s property interest in the reproductive capacity of his female slaves. The case involved the following clause in a deed executed by Samuel Marksberry, Sr.: “to Samuel Marksberry, my younger son, I do likewise give my negro wench, Pen; and her increase from this time, I do give to my daughter, Rachel Marksberry.” The plaintiff challenged the gift of Pen’s “increase” on the ground that the testator had nothing to give at the time he wrote the will. The court, however, sided with Rachel Marksberry:

He who is the absolute owner of a thing, owns all its faculties for profits or increase, and he may, no doubt, grant the profits or increase, as well as the thing itself. Thus, it is every day’s practice, to grant the future rents or profits of real estate; and it is held, that a man may grant the wool of a flock of sheep, for years. The interest which the donor’s daughter, Rachel, took in the increase of Pen, must indeed, from its nature, have been contingent at the time of the gift; but as the children of Pen were thereafter born, they would, by the operation of the deed, vest in the donee, and her title thus become complete.

The court viewed the slave Pen just like any other piece of property that produces offspring, crops, or other goods. Marksberry owned not only the piece of property itself but also the goods that she bore, as well as her potential to bear future goods. In this way, the law ensured that the relationship between the master and slave existed prior to the bond between mother and child. Owning a slave woman’s future children was
another way of cementing whites’ control of reproduction.

**The Auction Block**

Perhaps the most tragic deprivation was the physical separation of enslaved women from their children. It has been estimated that nearly half a million Africans were transported to the North American mainland between 1700 and 1861. Many of these Africans purchased or kidnapped from their homelands lost track of their family members forever.

For slaves in America, the auction block became the agonizing site of slave mothers’ separation from their children. Because it was in slaveowners’ economic interest to maintain stable, productive families, they did not frequently tear young children from their homes. But the law permitted such disruptions when it became expedient. A nineteenth-century South Carolina court ruled, for example, that children could be sold away from their mothers no matter how young because “the young of the slaves . . . stand on the same footing as other animals.”

A planter might decide to sell a mother or her children to pay off a debt or to get rid of an unruly slave. Slaves were devised in wills, wagered at horse races, and awarded in lawsuits. Bonded families were disbanded when the heirs of an estate decided not to continue the patriarch’s business.

A mother’s relationship with her children might also be shattered when young children were hired or apprenticed out to labor for others, sometimes for as long as ten years. Mothers often learned the heartbreaking news only when a new master appeared to take their children away. They might even be denied the chance to kiss their babies goodbye. As novelist Toni Morrison so vividly imagined the experience, most of slave women’s loved ones “got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized. . . . Nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included [their] children.”

Most whites owned slaves to work for them, not to sell on the market. Some slaveowners, however, were in the business of purchasing or breeding human chattel for profit. A matter of dispute, the bulk of historical evidence indicates that the interstate slave trade often broke up slave families. Professional slave traders fed, washed, and oiled the slaves they acquired, and marched the merchandise, chained together, to market. On the way, a crying baby might be snatched from his mother and sold on the spot to the first slave gang that approached.

The auction was often a government-sponsored event, taking place on the courthouse steps. In fact, government agents conducted half of the antebellum sales of slaves at sheriffs’, probate, and equity court sales. The South Carolina courts, for example, “acted as the state’s greatest slave auctioneering firm.” The slaves were paraded before potential buyers, who inspected their teeth and pulled back their eyelids as if they were purchasing a horse. The auctioneer sold each slave to the highest bidder. At auction, families might be mercilessly torn apart, with parents and children sold to different buyers. Josiah Henson remembered the moving scene when, as a young child, his family was splintered on the auction block:

My brothers and sisters were bid off first, and one by one, while my mother, paralyzed with grief, held me by the hand. Her turn came and she was bought by Isaac Riley of Montgomery County. Then I was offered. . . . My mother, half distracted with the thought of parting forever from all her children, pushed through the crowd while the bidding for me was going on, to the spot where Riley was standing. She fell at his feet, and clung to his knees, entreating him in tones that a mother could only command, to buy her baby as well as herself, and spare to her one, at least, of her little ones. . . . This man disengag[ed] himself from her with . . . violent
blows and kicks. . . . I must have been between five and six years old.43

The Working Mother

More insidious than the physical separation of mother and child was the slave masters’ control over child-rearing. If an enslaved woman was fortunate enough to keep her children with her, she was deprived of the opportunity to nurture them. Becoming a mother did not change her primary task, which was physical labor for her master. Since most slave mothers worked all day, their children were watched by other slaves who were too weak, too old, or too young to join them in the fields.44 A Florida plantation owner, for example, entrusted forty-two children to the care of an elderly man and woman, assisted by older youngsters. Caregivers were often too inexperienced or overwhelmed to give proper attention to the children in their charge.

Mothers were often forced to leave their nursing babies at home for hours while they worked in the field. Charlotte Brooks remembered how her baby suffered from her long absences: “When I did go I could hear my poor child crying long before I got to it. And la, me! my poor child would be so hungry when I’d get to it!”45 All of Charlotte’s children, like many slave children, died at an early age “for want of attention.” The infant mortality rate among slaves in 1850 was twice that of whites, with fewer than two out of three Black children surviving to age ten.46 Death from malnutrition and disease was more likely to snatch a mother’s children than sale to a new owner.

Mothers who were not allowed time out from work to return to their cabins had to bring their infants with them to the field. Slave women ingeniously combined mothering and hard labor. One North Carolina slave woman, for example, strapped her infant to her back and “[w]hen it get hun-gry she just slip it around in front and feed it and go right on picking or hoeing.”47 On one plantation, the women dug a long trough in the ground to create a makeshift cradle, where they put their babies every morning while they toiled. A former slave named Ida Hutchinson recalled the tragic fate of those babies as their mothers picked cotton in the distance:

When [the mothers] were at the other end of the row, all at once a cloud no bigger than a small spot came up and it grew fast, and it thundered and lightened as if the world were coming to an end, and the rain just came down in great sheets. And when it got so they could go to the other end of the field, that trough was filled with water and every baby in it was floating round in the water, drowned. [The master] never got nary a lick of labor and nary a red penny for any of them babies.48

Ida understood that the deaths of the babies meant a financial loss to the slave master—the infants’ gruesome demise denied him both their future labor and the money he might have gotten from selling them to another owner. No one recorded the horror their mothers must have felt upon discovering their precious babies floating lifeless in their makeshift cradle.

SLAVE WOMEN’S CONFLICTING ROLES

The dual status of slave women as both producer and reproducer created tensions that perplexed their masters and injured their children. A slaveholder was caught in an impossible dilemma—how to maximize his immediate profits by extracting as much work as possible from his female slaves while at the same time protecting his long-term investment in the birth of a healthy child.49 The two goals were simply incompatible. Pregnancy and infant care diminished time in the field or plantation house. Overwork hindered the chances of delivering a strong future workforce.
Bearing children who were their masters’ property only compounded the contradictions that scarred slave women’s reproductive lives. It separated mothers from their children immediately upon conception. This division between mother and child did not exist for white women of that era. The notion that a white mother and child were separable entities with contradictory interests was unthinkable, as was the idea of a white woman’s work interfering with her maternal duties. Both violated the prevailing ideology of female domesticity that posited mothers as the natural caretakers for their children.

The First Maternal-Fetal Conflict

The conflict between mother and child was most dramatically expressed in the method of whipping pregnant slaves that was used throughout the South. Slaveholders forced women to lie face down in a depression in the ground while they were whipped. A former slave named Lizzie Williams recounted the beating of pregnant slave women on a Mississippi cotton plantation: “I’[l]s seen nigger women dat was fixin’ to be confined do somethin’ de white folks didn’t like. Dey [the white folks] would dig a hole in de ground just big ’nuff fo’ her stomach, make her lie face down an whip her on de back to keep from hurtin’ de child.”

This description of the way in which pregnant slaves were beaten vividly illustrates the slaveowners’ dual interest in Black women as both workers and childbearers. This was a procedure that enabled the master to protect the fetus while abusing the mother. It was the slaveholder’s attempt to resolve the tough dilemma inherent in female bondage. As far as I can tell, the relationship between Black women and their unborn children created by slavery is the first example of maternal-fetal conflict in American history.

Feminists use the term “maternal-fetal conflict” to describe the way in which law, social policies, and medical practice sometimes treat a pregnant woman’s interests in opposition to those of the fetus she is carrying. The miracles of modern medicine, for example, that empower doctors to treat the fetus apart from the pregnant woman make it possible to imagine a contradiction between the two. If the mother opposes the physician’s suggestions for the care of the fetus, courts often treat the standoff as an adversarial relationship between the pregnant woman and her unborn child. Pitting the mother’s interests against those of the fetus, in turn, gives the government a reason to restrict the autonomy of pregnant women.

Some feminist scholars have refuted the maternal-fetal conflict by pointing to its relatively recent origin. Ann Kaplan has explored, for example, how current representations of motherhood in popular materials, such as magazines, newspapers, television, and films, allow the public to imagine a separation between mother and fetus. She gives examples of the recent focus on the fetus as an independent subject—sensational pictures in Life magazine of fetal development during gestation or a New York Times enlarged image of the fetus floating in space, attached to an umbilical cord extending out of frame and disconnected from the mother’s body, which is not seen. Rayna Rapp adds that these fetal images were not even possible fifty years ago: “Until well after World War II, there were no medical technologies for the description of fetuses independent of the woman in whose body a given pregnancy was growing. Now, sciences like ‘perinatology’ focus on the fetus itself, bypassing the consciousness of the mother, permitting [the] image of the fetus as a separate entity.”

Others have attributed the current attention to the fetus as a separate subject to a backlash against the successes of the women’s movement during the 1960s and 1970s.

But the beating of pregnant slaves reveals that slave masters created just such a conflict between Black women and their unborn
children to support their own economic interests. The Black mother’s act of bearing a child profited the system that subjugated her. Even without the benefit of perinatology and advanced medical technologies, slaveowners perceived the Black fetus as a separate entity that would produce future profits or that could be parceled out to another owner before its birth. The whipping of pregnant slaves is the most powerful image of maternal-fetal conflict I have ever come across in all my research on reproductive rights. It is the most striking metaphor I know for the evils of policies that seek to protect the fetus while disregarding the humanity of the mother. It is also a vivid symbol of the convergent oppressions inflicted on slave women: they were subjugated at once as Blacks and as females.

The Cycles of Work and Childbirth

The tension between slave women’s productive and reproductive roles also appeared in the fascinating interplay between annual cycles of crop production and the birth of children. It seems that slaves’ procreative activities were subtly orchestrated by the nature of the work they performed. By studying the reproductive careers of nearly a thousand slave women, Cheryll Ann Cody discovered that many bore their children in strong seasonal patterns that tracked plantation work and planting calendars. Slave births on the plantations she surveyed were concentrated in the late summer and early fall. On the Ravenal cotton plantations in South Carolina, for example, one-third of the slave children were born during the months of August, September, and October. Consider the reproductive history of Cate, one of the Ravenal family’s slaves. Cate was nineteen when she had her first child, Phillip, in September 1848. Her second child, who died in infancy, was born in August two years later, followed the next August by a third child. Between 1853 and 1859, Cate gave birth to six more children like clockwork—each born between September and January.

Why did slave women tend to give birth during this period? The timing of births, of course, relates back to the timing of conception. A large proportion of these women became pregnant during the months of November, December, and January when labor requirements were reduced owing to completion of the harvest and to harsh weather, giving slaves more time and energy to devote to their families. As an added factor, the more nutritious diet available after the fall harvest probably increased slave women’s fecundity.

It turns out that the seasonality of conceptions and births had a devastating impact on the survival of slave infants. Late summer and early fall, when many slave women were in their last term of pregnancy, was also the time of the highest labor demand and the greatest sickness. Slaves on cotton and rice plantations spent these months intensely harvesting the crop. There was also a heightened risk of contracting diseases such as typhus and malaria, particularly for slaves who worked in swampy rice fields—diseases that could damage the fetus. Although Cody focuses on the effects of hard work and disease on gestation, the season also took its toll on new mothers and their infants. A woman who gave birth during harvest time, when planters had the greatest need for workers, could expect to be called to the fields soon after the delivery. According to the records of an Alabama plantation, a slave named Fanny had a baby in early August 1844, and was back picking cotton by August 29. Needless to say, Fanny’s fragile baby could hardly have received the type of neonatal care required for healthy development.

Records reveal that season of birth made little difference on plantations with exceedingly high mortality rates: on the Ball rice plantation, for example, nearly half of all infants died before their first birthday, no matter when they were born. But on the
Gaillard cotton plantation, “children born during the summer, when their mother’s labor was in highest demand, suffered nearly twice the level of infant mortality as those born after the harvest.” Data collected by economist Richard Steckel from three large South Carolina and Alabama cotton plantations confirm this finding: Steckel discovered that the average probability of infant death from February to April (the plowing and planting season) and from September to November (harvest) was 40.6 percent—nearly four times greater than neonatal losses in other months. In the conflict between slave women’s service as producers and as reproducers, children ended up the losers.

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