Turning wounds into wisdom and pain into power: recognizing strategy in enslaved women's resistance to bodily exploitation in the antebellum US South

Schute, M.C.R.

Turning Wounds into Wisdom and Pain into Power: Recognizing Strategy in Enslaved Women's Resistance to Bodily Exploration in the Antebellum US South

Schute, M.

TURNING WOUNDS INTO WISDOM AND PAIN INTO POWER RECOGNIZING STRATEGY IN ENSLAVED WOMEN'S RESISTANCE TO BODILY EXPLOITATION IN THE ANTEBELLUM US SOUTH

Marcella Schute
Leiden University and Roosevelt Institute for American Studies,
Leiden and Middelburg, the Netherlands

Whereas the scholarship on enslaved women's resistance to the most intimate forms of bodily exploitation has grown over the years and developed into different directions, not enough attention has been paid to the use of strategy by enslaved women. As a result, enslaved women's resistance to bodily exploitations has wrongly been interpreted as impulsive. To correct this myth, this study broadly explores enslaved women's strategic gendered resistance by looking at a variety of different sources. It looks at how enslaved women were strategic in resisting sexual abuse, it recognizes enslaved women's adopted strategies in the practice of wet-nursing, and it explores how enslaved women thought strategically about using methods of resistance such as abortion and infanticide. In an effort to combine these different sources and bring separate directions into which enslaved women's resistance developed together, this study aims to elucidate that, without denying their victimhood, enslaved women were intellectually decisive and calculated in their acts and methods of resistance used when resisting the most intimate forms of bodily exploitation.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, more scholars have begun to explore how enslaved women resisted to not only slavery in general, but also to sexual and reproductive

exploitation in particular. As early as 1942, Raymond and Alice Bauer turned to gender specific forms of resistance in the antebellum US South, arguing that one method of resistance was "the possibility that a significant number of slave mothers killed their children".[1] Whereas there was a noticeable lack of follow up on Bauer and Bauer's findings, historians turned their attention to enslaved women's resistance in the 1970s due to the rise of the discipline of women's history. Darlene Clark Hine, for example, expanded on Bauer and Bauer's observations by focusing on how enslaved women resisted sexual exploitation and used abortion and infanticide as methods to resist their masters' reproductive desires.[2] Hine demonstrated that the body of enslaved women was more than only a personal and private matter, becoming a political sphere through which Black women resisted. Whereas since the 1980s more scholars picked up on the topic of enslaved women's resistance and particularly how most forms of resistance for enslaved women were closely connected to their bodies, these scholars also began to argue that enslaved women's resistance was less confrontational than male resistance because enslaved women rarely participated in or organized slave revolts and rebellions in contrast to men. Foremost, enslaved women aimed to survive dehumanization and abuse, it was argued.[3]

More recently, historian Stephanie Camp strongly disagreed with this claim. In her groundbreaking work *Closer to Freedom*, Camp argued that enslaved women participated in "everyday forms of resistance" that could be every bit as challenging to white slaveowners' dominance as the actions of enslaved men.[4] Camp asserted that the attention of historians needed to shift from public rebellions and revolts that were visible and organized to acts of resistance in the private sphere which were frequently hidden and informal. Only when these private spaces were recognized and analyzed could it be understood that the bodies of slave women were inevitably "political arenas" and served as a site of "both domination and resistance".[5] Since Camp's study, the scholarship on how enslaved women resisted bodily sufferings in particular has developed in

1 Raymond A. Bauer and Alice H. Bauer, "Day to Day Resistance to Slavery," *The Journal of Negro History* 27, no. 4 (1942): 388–419.

2 Darlene C. Hine, "Female Slave Resistance: The Economics of Sex," *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 3, no. 2 (1979): 123-127.

3 See Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women Of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988); David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, *More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

4 Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 2.

5 Camp, *Closer to Freedom,* 3, 62.

many different directions. Several scholars, for example, have researched how enslaved women resisted sexual abuse.[6] Other scholars have focused more on the methods used to resist reproductive exploitations by looking at infanticide, abortion and contraception.[7]

Whereas the scholarship on resistance to intimate forms of bodily suffering in the antebellum US South has thus certainly grown over the years, scholars have also argued that these acts and methods of resistance were often "desperate" or "impulsive".[8] As Veta Smith Tucker argued, the "crafty tactics that black women used to resist slavery have been understudied and generally mischaracterized as either impulsive or mystical".[9] As a result, our understanding of how strategic Black women's gendered resistance remains rather clouded. Since the scholarship on enslaved women's resistance to bodily exploitation has developed in separate directions, this asks for revisiting and combining the existing sources in order to recognize strategy in these acts and methods of bodily resistance more broadly.

In an effort to thus not only broaden but also deepen our understanding of the relationship between gendered resistance to bodily exploitations and strategy, this study brings together sources which cover 'acts of resistance' and those which cover 'methods of resistance'. By looking at strategy in these sources, as well as at inventiveness and "intellectual decisiveness", it pays attention to how enslaved women could be just as strategic and calculated as men in resisting slavery.[10] Enslaved women premediated their actions too and thought carefully about planning *how* and *when* to resist. Although not denying that enslaved women were victims of sexual and reproductive exploitation, this study shows that they also found inherently strategic ways to turn their wounds into wisdom and their pain into power.

This article is divided in two parts. The first part focuses on 'acts of resistance'. It looks at how enslaved women were strategic in resisting to sexual abuse and

6 See Thelma Jennings, "'Us Colored Women Had to Go Though A Plenty": Sexual Exploitation of African-American Slave Women," *Journal of Women's History* 1, no 3 (1990): 45–74; Renee Harrison, *Enslaved Women and the Art of Resistance in Antebellum America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2009).

7 See Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "Strategies and Forms of Resistance: Focus on Slave Women in the United States," in *In Resistance: Studies in African, Caribbean, and Afro-American History,* ed. Gary Y. Okihiro (Amherst, Mass., 1986), 143–65, esp. 147–48; Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman ? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985); Liese M. Perrin, "Resisting Reproduction: Reconsidering Slave Contraception in the Old South," *Journal of American Studies*, 35 (August 2001), 255–74; *Dorothy Roberts, Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997),* 46-49; Jennifer L. Morgan*, Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 113-114. See also Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 110.

8 Angela Davis, for example, considers abortion and infanticide to be

how they found ways to exert agency and power in the practice of wet-nursing. Especially since the history of enslaved women being hired out as wet-nurses remains severely understudied, this article deems it important to include the practice of wet-nursing and to demonstrate how—although resisting the practice remained extremely difficult—enslaved women found particular strategies to deal with the bodily exploitation of wet-nursing.[11] The second part focuses on 'methods of resistance'. It recognizes abortion and infanticide as methods and demonstrates that women were strategic rather than impulsive in carrying out these methods. Primary source materials consulted for this study include slave narratives, journals, newspaper articles, reports, interviews, and letters. Since many enslaved women were illiterate, accounts of slaveholders, journalists, abolitionists, politicians and physicians in which acts of resistance to bodily exploitation can be spotlighted will also be used. It has to be acknowledged that, due to intimacy of bodily acts of resistance, source material overall is scarce. This is especially the case with sources related to birth-control, which was a topic that was often "frowned upon" in the western world until approximately the mid-twentieth century.[12] Nonetheless, this study not only reuses, reinterprets and combines the existing sources on gendered resistance to bodily exploitation, but it also reads between the lines, which is necessary to spotlight strategy in resistance to bodily exploitation at all.

Acts of Resistance: Strategies Adopted to Resist Sexual Abuse and the Practice of Wet-Nursing

Before explaining how enslaved women served as strategic agents in resisting bodily exploitation, it is first necessary to take a closer look at the role enslaved women served both on the plantation and in the household. "Slavery is terrible for men, but it is far more terrible for women", wrote enslaved woman Harriet Jacobs in her diary *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.[13] Indeed, several circumstances made the lives of enslaved women particularly more challenging than those of enslaved men. Enslaved women carried the double burden

"acts of desperation," motivated by "the oppressive conditions of slavery". See Davis, *Women, Race and Class*, 212. Darlene Clark Hine and Kate Wittenstein have argued that enslaved women's resistance was "impulsive". See Darlene Clark Hine and Kate Wittenstein, "Female Slave Resistance: The Economics of Sex," in *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*, ed. Filomina Chioma Steady (Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman, 1981), 289.

9 Veta Smith Tucker, "Secret Agents: Black Women Insurgents on Abolitionist Battlegrounds," in *Gendered Resistance: Women, Slavery, and the Legacy of Margaret Garner*, ed. Mary E. Frederickson and Delores M. Walters (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 78.

10 "Intellectual decisiveness" is a term borrowed from Veta Smith Tucker. See "Secret Agents: Black Women Insurgents on Abolitionist Battlegrounds," 78.

11 On wet-nursing, see Emily West and Rose J. Knight, "Mothers' Milk: Slavery, Wet-Nursing, and Black and White Women in the Antebellum South," *Journal of Southern History* 83, no. 1 (2017).

12 Perrin, "Resisting Reproduction: Reconsidering Slave Contraception in the Old South," 257.

13 Harriet Ann Jacobs, *Incidents*

of plantation labor and responsibility for the domestic sphere. While enslaved women often performed the same kind of undertakings as men, they were also expected to take care of the plantation household and their own families. On the southern plantations, the hours of work for slave women were longer. Whereas both men and women worked on the plantation during daytime, after their work on the field ended, the women moved on to household labor such as cooking, cleaning, washing, and spinning. While they sometimes carried on their labor within the household of their masters and mistresses, they more often had to provide the primary needs for their own families. Although sometimes slave men also performed extra work in the field at night, the second shift of enslaved women was recognized as "a greater and more consistent burden".[14]

The atmosphere inside the slaveholders' homes also differed from the one found on the plantation field. Whereas enslaved women were not as homebound as domestic White women were, the household was a place where they were constantly surrounded by their slaveholders. The household was a site of production and reproduction, an economically exploitative and an intimately abusive sphere. The home was thus more a public than a private domain. It was a place where enslaved women experienced power dynamics and the economic consequences of the slavery system, where they dealt with race, gender and class relations day in and day out. This also meant that when tensions in the household heightened, the enslaved women working in the household felt the consequences. On many plantations, White planters and non-elite men took advantage of the bodies of enslaved women, which were not only "exploited in the fields and sexually violated in the quarters" but also within the plantation household.[15] Since sexual violence and physical abuse towards enslaved women often took place behind closed doors, this also made it less visible to the public. The household provided a sphere where relations between enslaved people and slaveholders were more personal than on the plantation.

in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1861, 1987), 119. Available at https://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/jacobs/jacobs.html.

14 Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 32.

15 Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 42.

What mostly distinguished the lives of enslaved women from men is, according to Camp, their reproductive labor and sexual exploitation and abuse, which were "unique forms of bodily suffering".[16] Even though reproduction was an ongoing process in the US South, historian Thelma Jennings claimed that "forced interracial sex was more frequent than slave breeding".[17] The prettier an enslaved girl was, the more unfortunate. As Jacobs wrote, "if God has bestowed beauty upon her, it will prove her greatest curse".[18] Some masters would buy enslaved girls and women just because they were pretty. One former enslaved woman from Georgia recalled how "white men went with colored gals and women bold. Any time they saw one and wanted her, she had to go with him and his wife didn't say nothin' 'bout it".[19]

Resisting sexual exploitation was extremely difficult and could lead to whippings or other forms of physical punishment. If an enslaved woman, for instance, refused to bear children, they would make her work to death or sell her. On the contrary, the enslaved were rewarded with more free time and often spared whippings when they participated in the act of forced breeding. Although resistance to these practices existed, there are only a few sources available which focus on the resistance of enslaved women against sexual abuse. This is not only because many enslaved women were illiterate and did not write down their experiences, but also because the prevailing nineteenth-century value system in the United States among the upper and middle classes was The Cult of True Womanhood, which contained the four attributes of piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Embracing these virtues are supposed to form the ideal of a typical Victorian lady and not adhering to these principles could harm a woman's reputation.

Precisely because of this prevailing value system in the United States, the narrative of Harriet Jacobs in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is so insightful. The narrative emphasises that enslaved women struggled on many fronts, one of which was their experiences with sexual exploitation and abuse. Rather

16 Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 64.

17 Jennings, "Us Colored Women Had to Go Through A Plenty," 61.

18 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* 31.

19 Ex-slave from Georgia, in Federal Writers' Project (FWP), Slave Narratives: A Folk History of the United States of America From Interviews with Former Slaves. Typewritten records prepared by the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938, vol. 4, part 4, 133. Available at https://www.loc.gov/resource/mesn.044/?st=gallery

than following the conventions of nineteenth-century discourse of true womanhood, Jacobs made the decision to reject these Victorian principles for a strategic goal: to elucidate the true horrors of the slavery system. She does not appear to shy away from intimate details of her enslavement. In her introduction, Jacobs confesses: "I tried hard to preserve my self-respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery".[20] When she was fifteen years old, she experienced sexual actions which destroyed the "pure principles inculcated by my grandmother".[21] By sharing the horrific consequences of the notion that Black women are not pure, Jacobs is "challenging the norms of white motherhood".[22] Although the recognition of strategy in Jacobs' behavior is not new and other scholars have recognized this as well, this nonetheless forms the perfect epitome from which to proceed.

Jacobs mentions in her diary how, when she reached the age of fifteen, her master began to "whisper foul words" into her ear. "Young as I was", she explains, "I could not remain ignorant of their import". As a response, Jacobs describes how she "tried to treat them with indifference or contempt".[23] Strategically, she paid no attention to her master's acts. In doing so, she made his actions seem ineffective. Later in the narrative, Jacobs narrates how she decided to be impregnated by another man rather than her master to protect herself from her master's verbal sexual abuse. When her master decided to build Jacobs a house, she began to realize that he had started his own plan to keep her close to him and to keep control over her. To circumvent her master's obsessive desires, Jacobs initiated a relationship with a white lawyer named Samuel Tredwell Sawyer. She refers to him in her autobiography as Mr. Sands and describes him as a "a man of more generosity and feeling than my master". Because she was "desperate" and "shuddered to think of being the mother of children that should be owned by my old tyrant", Jacobs chose to be impregnated by Mr. Sands:

20 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 84.

21 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 60.

22 Melissa Daniels–Rauterkaus, "Civil Resistance and Procreative Agency in Harriet Jacobs' Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl," *Women's Studies* 48, no. 5 (2019): 502.

23 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 30.

> I knew the impassable gulf between us; but to be an object of interest to a man who is not married, and who is not her master, is agreeable to the pride and feelings of a slave, if her miserable situation has left her any pride or sentiment. It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment.[24]

This section in Jacobs narrative reflects Jacobs' intellectual decisiveness in resisting sexual exploitation. The passage reflects her selective choice as a way to escape from the abusive situation with her master that she found herself in. When her baby was born, her master continued to visit her, both to check on her health and to remind her that her child was "an addition to his stock of slaves".[25] By choosing to become impregnated by another man—a selective choice Jacobs was able to make as a victim—Jacobs nonetheless strategically resisted her master's sexual abuse.

Other examples in which sexual abuse occurred are present in the Works Progress Administration (WPA) narratives. The WPA was an American New Deal agency that recruited interviewers for the Federal Writers Project from 1936 to 1938. The aim was to gather the stories of former enslaved people so that these stories would not be lost. It has to be pointed out that the people employed for this administration were mostly White men, and interviews were conducted many years after emancipation which may have affected the answers of the respondents and created problems concerning reliability. Although some controversy exists around the WPA narratives serving as a primary source, the respondents still provided the interviewers with rich, personal observations about their motivations to resist forms of bodily exploitation. The fact that the dominant power structures at the time likely incentivized respondents to sugar-coat their experiences of slavery makes the insights they provide into resistance even more powerful.[26]

24 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 61.

25 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 68.

26 Scholars who discuss the value of the WPA narratives, see Vann. C. Woodward, "Woo," *American Historical Review* 79 (1974): 470–81; Thomas F. Soapes, "The Federal Writers' Project Slave Interviews: Useful Data or Misleading Source," *Oral History Review* 2 (1977): 33-38.

As someone who was interviewed by the WPA narratives explains, enslaved women who were considered pretty did not always accept the exploitation of their bodies. One enslaved girl, described as "a mulatto of fine stature and good looks", was sold by a slave trader. One night, the slave trader took the girl to his room to "satisfy his bestial nature". The girl, who was "of high spirits and determined position" could not be "coerced or forced" to have sex with the slave trader, which is why he attacked her. The person who was interviewed mentioned how, in the struggle with the slave trader, the girl "grabbed a knife" and "sterilized him". As a result, the slave trader died the following day and the girl was charged with murder. Evident in this highly rich example of resistance is that the man who plans to sexually abuse the enslaved girl was a slave trader and not her master. The status of the perpetrator in this example could have influenced the girl's decision to resist the act, knowing that she was not his property and that she did not live in the same house as him. The fact that she was described as a girl with a "determined disposition" who "could not be coerced or forced" increased the likelihood that she had decided beforehand to resist any form of sexual abuse. It is also worth wondering where the knife suddenly came from with which the girl murdered the slave trader. Although it remains unclear in this situation whether she had noticed the knife beforehand or not, or even brought the knife with her herself, it is very unlikely that she was 'lucky' to find it during her struggle with the slave trader. As such, some kind of tactical ingenuity can most certainly be recognized in this girls' behaviour.

A clearer example from the WPA narratives in which the strategy of enslaved woman to resist sexual abuse is recognized is a story told by respondent Anna Baker. Her mother had decided to run away from the plantation because of the abusive behavior of the overseers. Baker informed the interviewer that "Dey kep' a-trying to mess 'roun' with her an' she wouldn' hav nothin' to do wid 'em". When her mother was in the field one time and the overseer asked her to go over to the woods with him, she said: "'All right, I'll go find a nice place

an' wait'". In reality, however, she "swum de river an' run away. She slipped back onct or twict at night to see us, but dat was all".[27] This example reflects the inventiveness of enslaved women in resisting sexually abusive behavior. By using trickery and cunning as a strategy to distract the overseer, the enslaved woman turned herself from a victim to an agent in a setting where the overseer normally exercised control.

Wet-nursing forms another practice through which the bodies of enslaved women were brutally exploited. Several studies have pointed out that wet-nursing in the antebellum US South appeared more often than historians have previously recognized. Several reasons existed for White women to desire to hire a wet-nurse. Whereas some women believed that they were too weak for breastfeeding, others were convinced that breastfeeding was unhealthy. Some White women refused to breastfeed due to their elite class status. For example, WPA respondent Betty Curlett, a 66 year old woman from Arkansas whose mother had been enslaved, recalled: "White women wouldn't nurse their babies cause it would make their breasts fall… Rich women didn't nurse their babies, never did, cause it would cause their breasts to be flat".[28] The perspective of some White mistresses was that the children of enslaved women grew up healthy while their own children died of illnesses and poor health. While it was certainly a myth that Black women were better at breastfeeding than White women, such ignorance was not uncommon in the antebellum US South.[29]

Precisely because of the intimacy and brutal exploitation of the practice of wet-nursing, some enslaved women were also able to carry out small acts of resistance. For example, as Cassia Roth demonstrates in her article on wet-nursing in nineteenth-century Brazil, enslaved women would tell stories about Africa to the children whom they nursed, in which they also detailed their hatred towards the child's parents. Other enslaved wet nurses would eat lots of pepper, which served as a strategy to ruin their milk. In very rare

27 Anna Baker, in Federal Writers' Project (FWP), Slave Narratives: A Folk History of the United States of America From Interviews with Former Slaves. Typewritten records prepared by the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938, vol. 7, part 2, 13. Available at https://www.loc.gov/resource/mesn.001/?st=list.

28 Betty Curlett, in Federal Writers' Project (FWP), Slave Narratives: A Folk History of the United States of America From Interviews with Former Slaves. Typewritten records prepared by the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938, vol. 2, part 2, 77. https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn022/.

29 Stephanie Jones-Rogers, "'She Could…Spare One Ample Breast for the Profit of Her Owner': White Mothers and Enslaved Wet Nurses' Invisible Labor in American Slave Markets," *Slavery and Abolition* 38 (2017): 339-340.

cases, they would overfeed the white infants, or wrap them so tight that they would suffocate.[30] Although in recent decades, more studies on wet-nursing in households in the American South have appeared, the practice is still assumed to be one in which resistance was almost impossible. For example, historians Emily West and Rose Knight argue that resistance by Black wet-nurses was rare.[31] Wet-nursing created a physically close relationship between an enslaved woman and her mistress, leaving no room for disobedience. Whereas it is certainly the case that resisting wet-nursing was challenging and almost impossible, this is not to say that enslaved women were innovative in finding particular forms of agency in the practice. Although the sources that could be found on wet-nursing do not necessarily demonstrate direct forms of resistance to wet-nursing, a close reading between the lines of advertisements in antebellum US southern newspapers suggests that enslaved women who were hired out as wet-nurses invented particular forms of negotiations to benefit themselves. These negotiations can be interpreted as strategies to deal with the ways in which their bodies were being taken advantage of.

For example, in *The Southern Patriot*, a local South Carolina newspaper, the southern broker and auctioneer Theodore Whitney hired out both a wet nurse and her child. He wrote:

> WET NURSE; SEAMSTRESS, WASHER, IRONER, AND HOUSE SERVANT TO HIRE – A young healthy Woman with her child about six weeks old, and a boy to attend to it. She will be hired either as a Wet Nurse, or either of the above capacities.[32]

The words "and a boy to attend to it" emphasize that the woman in this example was trying to negotiate to serve as a wet nurse only if she was allowed to bring her own child with her. Against the backdrop that medical doctors sometimes discovered that mothers whose children had been taken away from them suffered from emotional trauma which subsequently affected their

30 Cassia Roth, "Black Nurse, White Milk: Breastfeeding, Slavery, and Abolition in 19th-Century Brazil," *Journal of Human Lactation* 34 (2018): 804-809.

31 West and Rose, "Mothers' Milk".

32 *The Southern Patriot* (Charleston, South Carolina) 10 May 1842: 3, quoted in Jones-Rogers, "'She Could…Spare One Ample Breast for the Profit of Her Owner," 344.

breast milk, this example of negotiation makes sense. But enslaved women might also have used this information as a way to negotiate about the presence of their own children while serving as a wet-nurse. Whereas bringing their own children along while being hired out as a wet-nurse was thus considered a necessity by some, it is also possible that enslaved mothers were aware of this form of leverage and only claimed to be able to serve as a wet-nurse if their children would be allowed to come along with them. This inventive form of systematic concession making demonstrates that enslaved women were knowledgeable about particular spaces in which they could find implicit forms of power and agency.

Wet nursing was one of the most traumatic experiences for enslaved mothers because slaveholders monitored them constantly. Enslaved mothers were often not allowed to bring their own children into the house of their master and mistress, since this would distract them from breastfeeding the White infant. Mistresses wanted to prevent competition between their own children and the infants of enslaved women. They desired their own child to receive the wet nurse's full attention and milk supply. This harmed the affectionate relationship between a mother and her own children. Some sources even demonstrate that the children of slave mothers were taken away from them so that the enslaved mother could pay full attention to the White infant.

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that southerners who hired out their enslaved women as a wet-nurse specifically mentioned that the enslaved mother was available to be hired "without a child".[33] Several advertisements show that southerners looking for wet-nurses specifically wrote that they desired to hire a Black wet-nurse "without incumbrance" or "without a child".[34] In contrast, other advertisements suggest that enslaved women who agreed to be hired out as wet nurses tried to bring their children with them. For example, *The Charleston Daily Courier* included the following advertisement: "TO HIRE, a WET NURSE, young and healthy, with her first child".[35] Since in some cases

33 *The Charleston Daily Courier*, November 16, 1858.

34 *Richmond Dispatch*, April 1, 1856; *The Charleston Daily Courier*, July 8, 1859.

35 *The Charleston Daily Courier*, June 23, 1847.

it was not mentioned whether the hirer preferred a wet-nurse without a child or not, these advertisements provided enslaved women with the opportunity to negotiate whether they could bring their child with them. As this shows, even when it came to the most intimate and bodily exploitative practices such as wet-nursing, enslaved women were able to exercise tactical ingenuities to empower themselves.

Abortion and Infanticide as Strategic Methods of Resistance

Historians David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine consider "attempts to limit reproduction" to be the most prevalent form of enslaved women's resistance.[36] First of all, the practice of forced breeding of enslaved women was not uncommon in the antebellum US South. Various circumstances contributed to this. In 1662, the Virginia House of Burgess passed a law stating that a mother conferred her own legal status onto her baby. Other British colonies in the Americas, and later the United States, soon adopted the same legislation, which made every baby born to an enslaved mother one born into slavery, even despite the father being White or a free man. After the international slave trade was abolished in 1807, the domestic slave population could only be increased by methods of natural reproduction. As a result, slaveholders put their economic aspirations in enslaved women's reproductive capacity. Slaveowners began to view the reproductive lives of enslaved men and women as comparable to their agricultural products and materials, where a slaveholders' property consisted both of livestock and enslaved people. As Angela Davis writes, slave owners classified Black women as "'breeders' as opposed to 'mothers'". When their children were sold, they were taken away from their mothers "like calves from cows".[37] By treating the enslaved like domestic livestock, slaveholders could distance themselves from the wrestling thought that reproduction was immoral. Just as domestic livestock was meant to reproduce, they believed, enslaved women were meant to "increase".[38]

36 Gaspar and Hine, *More Than Chattel*, 240.

37 Davis, *Women, Race and Class*, 19.

38 Morgan, *Laboring Women,* 82.

Primary source analysis reveals that the main reason for using methods such as abortion was because pregnant women and mothers refused to allow their children to become enslaved. These women understood that their acts could impact their masters' capital. If the process of reproduction was central in the economics of slavery, resistance through reproductive choice was an aggressive act through which enslaved women aimed to undermine the slavery system.

Many enslaved women seemed to have been knowledgeable about birth control and found the most creative ways to carry out these measures. During the Middle Passage, men and women had brought knowledge regarding fertility control from Africa to the Americas. From the early seventeenth century onwards, enslaved women had practiced several methods to limit births. Plants were mainly used as abortifacients, which came from different parts of the world. Okra and aloe, for instance, were effective abortifacients coming from West-Africa. John H. Morgan, a doctor from the US South, wrote in the mid-nineteenth century that the plant most used amongst enslaved women was tansy, because it often grew in gardens: "single tansy (Tanacetum vulgare) is probably employed more than any other herb, because it is more convenient, and its reputation as an abortive more generally known, being commonly cultivated in our gardens". Medicine and plants often used by enslaved women to effectively practice abortions were "the infusion or decoction of tansy, rue, roots and seed of the cotton plant, pennyroyal, cedar berries and camphor, either in gum or spirits".[39]

Cotton root, a plant growing on large cotton trees in the US South, was, as Morgan mentioned, also considered useful. When enslaved women worked on their knees on the cotton plantations, they often recognized the plant and used it for birth control. Mary Gaffney, a former enslaved woman born in 1846 in Seville but brought to Texas in 1860, used this type of abortifacient when her master forced her to marry a man she did not like. When she became pregnant, she used the cotton plant to get rid of the fetus:

39 John H Morgan, "An Essay on the Causes of the Production of Abortion among Our Negro Population," *Nashville Journal of Medicine and Surgery* 19, no. 2 (August 1, 1860): 117-8.

> Maser was going to raise him a lot more slaves, but still I cheated Maser, I never did have any slaves to grow and Maser he wondered what was the matter. I tell you son, I kept cotton roots and chewed them all the time but I was careful not to let Maser know or catch me.[40]

Mary Gaffney was aware of the fact that this type of plant would obstruct her pregnancy. She used cotton root regularly yet made sure that her master would not catch her, demonstrating that she strategically premediated her act of resistance and that chewing cotton root served as a calculated ploy to obstruct her masters' reproductive desires.

According to historian Marie Jenkins Schwartz, this "herbal wisdom" of enslaved women was an alternative to "orthodox medical care" and challenged the scientific knowledge of doctors.[41] Doctor John H. Morgan wrote in his journal about a family who, for a period of twenty-five years, had four to six female enslaved women. While these women were all of "the proper age to breed", only "two children had been born on the place at full term". The master of this family noticed that every fourth month, the women had terminated the pregnancy, and at some point "finally confessed that they did take medicine for this purpose, and showed their master the weed which was their favorite remedy". The master had brought the "weed" to the doctor, but Morgan confessed: "I do [know] not what it is".[42] In this case, acts of resisting reproductive capacities were not only strategically planned, but also inventively carried out.

Other enslaved women were inventive in their ways of obstructing reproduction by openly admitting that they refused to bear children. Cynthia was an enslaved woman who confessed that she refused to reproduce. She used abortifacients as a method of resistance. Cynthia was enslaved by Edwin Fay and his wife, purchased for the purpose of bearing children. When Edwin Fay was away to fight in the Civil War as a Confederate soldier, his wife stayed on their plantation in Louisiana. In 1863, Sarah Fay wrote to her husband that she had

40 Marry Gaffney, interviewed in George P. Rawick, *The American Slave: Supplement Series 2, Volume 5: Texas Narratives, Part 4*, ed. George P. Rawick (Greenwood Press, 1979), 1453, quoted in Liese M Perrin, "Resisting Reproduction: Reconsidering Slave Contraception in the Old South," *Journal of American Studies* 35, no. 2 (2001): 262.

41 Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave*, 110.

42 Morgan, "An Essay on the Causes of the Production of Abortion among our Negro Population," 122.

trouble handling Cynthia. Edwin Fay answered: "Tell Cynthia that if she does not begin to show some signs that way when I come home that I'll either whip her to death or sell her to the meanest man I can find on Red River". Edwin Fay's threatening did not seem to help. As expressed in letters, both Sarah Fay and her husband "agreed that Cynthia was trifling" and that her "behavior consisted of a steadfast refusal to either work or bear children". When Edwin Fay discovered that Cynthia used abortifacients, he told his wife to forcefully convey the message to Cynthia that her behavior was unacceptable: "If she does not have children, I will not keep her for the work she does herself".[43] While they had both threatened Cynthia before that she should remain pregnant or face sale, Cynthia continued to avoid a full-term pregnancy. What makes Cynthia the rational agent in this particular situation is the effectiveness of her refusal, which serves as her calculated ploy. Both Sarah Fay and her husband were puzzled by her attitude and desperately tried to find new ways to manage her behavior – seemingly to no avail.

In addition to birth control, some mothers sought ways to intentionally end the lives of their babies because they refused to let their children grow up in slavery. It was not always clear to the master that enslaved mothers had murdered their own infants. Some mothers rolled over during the night in bed and thereby smothered their children. Many babies also died of natural causes, such as diseases. Some mothers were unable to provide their children with adequate nutrition, since slaveowners often denied mothers the right to nurse their babies. While several babies certainly died accidently and unintentionally, enslaved mothers also used other specific methods so that infanticide was not necessarily recognized by their slaveholder if it occurred. Mothers understood that infanticide came with significant risks, especially since slave owners viewed it as "a crime against their master's property".[44] As such, they often kept silent about their actions.

43 Edwin Fay to Sarah Fay, June 4, 1863, in *This Infernal War: The Confederate Letters of Sgt. Edwin H. Fay*, *ed. Bell Irwin Wiley* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1958), 279-80, quoted in Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 116.

44 Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 324.

Nonetheless, infanticide was not an uncommon practice in the South.[45] When former slave Lewis Clarke from Kentucky was asked the question "Have you ever known a slave mother to kill her own children?", he responded that he had heard of two stories in particular. He had heard of an enslaved mother who did not want to be separated from her infant and therefore took her child into the cellar and ended the baby's life. Another mother with three children apparently took her children to a well, threw them in and then jumped after them, drowning all of them. Especially the latter case reveals that—despite the abhorrence of the act and the severe hopelessness the mother must have felt—she thought strategically about how to end the lives of her children. Assuming that neither she nor her children knew how to swim, it seems that the well was purposefully chosen as a place where — once the attempt was made — escaping death was not possible. In addition to these two occurrences, Clarke stated that he had frequently heard of other instances.[46]

In another example, a physician from the US called Charles Grandison Parsons wrote about a slaveholding family he visited in Georgia in the 1850s, where he learned that the enslaved woman of the family called Sylva had killed all of her thirteen children with her own bare hands. As Parsons learned, Sylva was a true victim of her master's abuse. One time, her slaveowner was so angry that he wrung off four of Sylva's toes, leaving her with only six toes left; four on one foot, and two on the other. Rather than bringing her children into this evil world, Sylva decided that they should never suffer the same horrors she endured. While she had given birth to thirteen children, it was confessed to Parsons that Sylva had killed all of them in their infancy.[47] Whereas this powerful source has been used and re-used by historians with the purpose to demonstrate not only Sylva's agency but also the fact that infanticide appeared in the US South, it is also important to emphasize Sylva's strategic planning of these acts. The fact that Sylva ended the lives of all thirteen children emphasizes not only her calculated premeditation, but also her awareness of being a victim of the patriarchal system and of the gendered role she had to fulfill in the economy of slavery.

45 One of the most popular cases of infanticide in the case of Margaret Garner, which also served as inspiration for Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*. Due to the popularity of that case and the numerous references of historians, this article has decided to instead focus on other cases of infanticide in the US South. See, for example, *Gendered Resistance: Women, Slavery, and the Legacy of Margaret Garner*, eds. Mary E. Frederickson and Delores M. Walters (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

46 Lewis Garrard Clarke, *Narratives of the Sufferings of Lewis and Milton Clarke, Sons of a Soldier of the Revolution, During a Captivity of More Than Twenty Years Among the Slaveholders of Kentucky, One of the So Called Christian States of North America* (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1845), 111. Available at https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/clarke/clarke.html.

47 Charles Grandison Parsons, *Inside View of Slavery: Or A Tour Among the Planters* (Boston: John P. Jewett and Company, 1855), 212.

One of the most important reasons why infanticide was practiced by mothers is because they did not want their infants to be sold. One of the WPA respondents recalled a story from an enslaved woman she knew and whose master did not allow her to keep her babies: "when her babies would get about a year or two of age he'd sell them and it would break her heart. She never got to keep them". As a result, the enslaved mother "just studied all the time about how she would have to give it up". When her fourth baby was two months old, the woman "got up and give it something out of a bottle and purty soon it was dead". Smith also described how everyone who was aware of what happened kept silent about the incident since otherwise her master would "beat her nearly to death".[48] This very rare yet insightful testimony perfectly demonstrates that enslaved women thought carefully about ways to prevent their children from growing up enslaved, seeking knowledge about plants and other medicine to figure out the best remedy to get rid of their offspring.

CONCLUSION

By combining a wide variety of sources which collectively focus on the bodies of enslaved women and forms of resistance, this article underscored how enslaved women were strategic and inventive in the way they resisted sexual abuse and reproductive exploitation. They also used forms of negotiation to exert agency in the practice of wet-nursing. Additionally, they thought strategically about using methods such as abortion and infanticide to obstruct their masters' reproductive desires. Whereas wet-nursing appears the most difficult practice to resist, enslaved women nonetheless discovered strategic ways by which they could influence the power dynamics. Although infanticide might serve as the most extreme form of resisting bodily abuses — whether it is resisting forced reproduction or preventing infants from growing up in slavery — the sources indicate that even acts of infanticide were sometimes premediated and carefully planned. Altogether, by shedding light on the tactics enslaved women adopted, this article refutes the myth that enslaved

48 Lou Smith, in Federal Writers' Project (FWP), Slave Narratives: A Folk History of the United States of America From Interviews with Former Slaves. Typewritten records prepared by the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938, vol. 13, 302. https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn130/.

women were impulsive in resisting bodily exploitation. Instead of viewing enslaved women as intellectually ill-equipped, the sources in this study clearly show their intellectual decisiveness, which make their acts and methods of resistance no less confrontational than those of their male counterparts.

Marcella Schute is a PhD candidate in American History at Leiden University and the Roosevelt Institute for American Studies. Her PhD project focuses on covert and overt efforts by the state of Louisiana to reopen the transatlantic slave trade in the late 1850s. Besides Marcella's interest in the history of slavery and politics in the mid-nineteenth century American South, she is also interested in women's history. For the master American Studies at the University of Amsterdam (UVA), she wrote her thesis about enslaved women's resistance, which formed the basis for this article.