Strategies and Forms of Resistance
Focus on Slave Women in the United States

Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Linda Brent, Ellen Craft: History has preserved the names of women who resisted slavery in a variety of ways. Jane, “a mulatto woman, slave,” who was indicted for the murder of her infant child, also may be taken to have resisted, albeit presumably at a high cost to herself. And her name is on record for those who are willing to seek it in the appropriate court records. Those records, like the diaries of such white women as Mary Boykin Chesnut, the narratives of slave men, and the various ex-slave narratives, also provide those who seek a poignant record of the varieties of female slave resistance.¹ Perhaps more telling yet, they bear witness to the resistance of women, whom the record keepers did not even deem worthy of being named at all: “the Rolling-house was maliciously burnt by a Negro woman of the Defts. [defendants] whereof she was Convicted . . . and Executed for it.” The court was unwilling to convict the woman’s master, deciding that he “is not Chargeable for the willful wrong of his servant.”²

Such testimonies to women’s opposition to enslavement, or to those who enslaved them, shed an invaluable light on the resistance of Afro-Americans as a people, as well as on slave women themselves. Not least, they help us to fill out the record of multiple forms of resistance—a subject to which I shall return. Perhaps more important yet, they demonstrate that the slaveholders, including, and indeed especially, those most deeply committed

to a paternalistic ideology, recognized on some level the intentional resistance of their bondwomen: The nameless female arsonist was “malicious” and “wilful.” Perhaps the slaveholders knew in their hearts that she differed only in degree from the house servant, whom they dubbed “impudent” and “uppity.” But the records provide, at best, an imperfect guide to the nature, extent, and meaning of slave women’s resistance to their enslavement.

The fortieth anniversary of the publication of Herbert Aptheker’s pioneering study *American Negro Slave Revolts* provides an especially appropriate context in which to consider the role of slave women in the resistance of Afro-Americans to their enslavement. For Aptheker, long before the emergence of women’s history in its contemporary guise, insisted upon recording the presence of women among slave rebels wherever he found it. He may rank among the few historians of his generation to have understood that any people includes both men and women, and to have written history as if it resulted from the combined efforts of men and women. I can find no place in *American Negro Slave Revolts* in which women should have been included and were not. If anything, Aptheker errs in the opposite direction. One suspects that at least occasionally he added “and women” following “men” because his human instinct, knowledge of the world, and commitment to women’s social significance told him that women must have participated in forms of resistance, even if the records did not mention them. His willingness to credit women’s contribution to the resistance of the enslaved cannot, in short, be questioned. But even his determined quest for evidence of women’s participation did not unearth a plethora of forgotten female leaders of revolts; in fact, he found few specific female names. Women figure primarily as members of groups of resisters, or embodiments of specific forms of resistance. Historians of Afro-American women have recently called attention to what we might call gender-specific forms of female resistance that Aptheker did not directly address. But resistance, although an essential dimension of his work, was not his main story.

That main story concerned revolts. And in telling it, Aptheker demonstrated, beyond contention, that Afro-American slaves not merely resisted degradation and dehumanization but revolted against their enslavement. Aptheker’s critics have suggested that he may have exaggerated the number and significance of slave revolts, but their very differences with him have implicitly underscored his central point, namely, that some slaves, under the most adverse circumstances, engaged in armed political struggle—armed class struggle, if you prefer. The point at issue between Aptheker and these critics concerns how best to distinguish full-scale revolts from ubiquitous acts of violent resistance. The very existence of this debate confronts historians of slave women with the problem of how to interpret the role of slave women
in the collective struggle of their people. For North American slave women appear not to have participated significantly in the direct planning and execution of the most explicitly political revolts of the nineteenth century, notably those of Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner. And women probably also did not participate in large numbers, if at all, in the smaller but explicitly military insurrections, or attempted insurrections, that punctuated the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Yet however we ultimately draw the line between revolt and non-insurrectionary resistance, the explicitly political and military revolts cannot be understood in isolation from the backdrop of steady resistance that could, at any moment, be both collective and violent, and in which women indisputably did not participate. Recognition of these two aspects of the struggle against slavery helps to establish a viable context for a preliminary assessment of the role of slave women in the resistance of Afro-American people.

It is impossible to discuss the specific roles of women in the general struggle of Afro-American slaves without taking account of male and female roles—gender roles—among the slaves. Gender roles, like gender relations, among the slaves remain a topic of considerable debate, and insufficient study. Scholars are slowly beginning to acknowledge that notions of what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman, as well as the notion of appropriate relations between the two, are among the most sensitive and deeply rooted aspects of any individual’s or any people’s sense of identity. But to date, most of the attention to gender relations among Afro-Americans, under slavery and thereafter, has focused on discussions of family life. This ideologically charged literature has taken as its standard middle-class, Euro-American ideas of normal, in contrast to pathological, male and female roles and relations. Even at its best, and at its most appreciative of Afro-American cultural vigor, it has assumed that commitment to nuclear families and to companionate marriages under firm male leadership offers the most convincing evidence of health and stability. The Afro-Americans’ struggle to defend these values under adverse conditions is presented as evidence of the slaves’ successful resistance to the most brutal and dehumanizing aspects of enslavement. But the discussion has not adequately assessed the perturbing problem of the extent to which these norms derived from African traditions, or the extent to which they reflected white values. Nor has it fully penetrated the yet more perturbing problem of the sources of and the links between behavior and belief: Masters could impose some forms of behavior on their slaves and encourage others, but the slaves retained considerable latitude to endow those forms that they adopted or observed with their own meanings. It remains extremely difficult to ascribe precise measures to the respective parts of African traditions and American conditions.
in Afro-American practice and belief, all the more since the slaves’ experience of American conditions led them to reinterpret African traditions. It remains more difficult yet to determine the extent to which slaves appropriated any of the values of American culture and, to the extent that they did, the degree to which they modified them to conform to either their experience of enslavement or their transformed African values. If the discussion, at this level, appears abstract, it nonetheless casts a long shadow over the possible history of slave women in resistance and revolt. Let us consider a concrete example: If slave women can be shown to have been decisively more active in resistance and revolt than their white counterparts in time and place, should their activity be attributed to the survival of African patterns of female strength—and, if so, which ones—or to the demoralizing impact of enslavement on male leadership and authority? For the moment, the point is less to solve the problem than to recognize that it is highly charged.

The truth is that we have no comparative study of the role of slave women in resistance, and no consensus about what would constitute an appropriate comparative framework. Comparison of women’s roles in the slave revolts throughout the New World would elucidate an additional dimension of those revolts, and of the various slave systems. Comparison of the roles of slave women in revolts with the roles of women in the revolts of other oppressed peoples and popular classes would presumably add an important element to our understanding of the dynamics of popular rebellion in different societies, and assuredly contribute to our understanding of women’s participation in different peoples’ resistance to oppression. But this work has not yet received sustained attention. Some recent scholarship is beginning to compare the experience of Afro-American women to that of North American white women, but has not yet addressed specific outbreaks of violent class struggle. Nonetheless, recent work on the multiple contributions of women to war, resistance, and revolution among various peoples at various times leaves no doubt that women have everywhere and at all times participated in the struggles of peoples for national liberation and self-determination. Analogous work on class struggles also reveals the ubiquity and importance of women’s contributions. In any particular struggle, women can be found in almost any role, from leadership to armed combat to spying to providing a variety of support services. In struggles for national or class liberation, it is not uncommon for at least some women to depart radically from what are taken to be normal female activities among their people. It is uncommon, historically, for women to assume primary leadership of armed combat, or even to engage directly in combat on a regular basis—but women have done both. It is, in short, probably safe to say that there is no form of insurrectionary struggle in which some women have not, at some time,
engaged. But that being said, it is also true that historically, as in the con-
temporary world, women are less likely than men to assume the political and
military leadership of the struggles for liberation of their people and class.12

Whatever women’s roles in the struggles of the oppressed against their
oppression have been, they have been singularly difficult to document, espe-
cially among nonliterate peoples. Sources on the role of slave women in
resistance and revolt have proved especially sparse, and those that exist must
be recognized as themselves the product of a continuing historical struggle.
Most of the early sources are white. In assessing them, we must take account
of the blinders that white assumptions imposed on white perceptions. White
commentators may well have missed many female contributions to resis-
tance because they did not expect them. Enslaved and oppressed peoples, as
Frantz Fanon so movingly demonstrates in “Algeria Unveiled,” are quite
prepared to capitalize on the “invisibility” of their women in the interests of
a victorious struggle.13 Many of the other sources on Afro-American slave
revolts derive from black men who were actively engaged in a total struggle.
For such men, their testimonies concerning events constituted part of that
struggle. It is not impossible that they borrowed more than the ideology of
revolution and democratic rights from the emerging Euro-American ideol-
ogy of their period. It is also not impossible that they have drawn especially
on those African traditions that emphasized the leadership of men in politi-
cal and military affairs. Whether drawing upon one or the other of these cur-
rrents, or combining the two, black men may—consciously or unconsciously,
and for a variety of reasons—have made a political choice to prefer the lead-
ership of men in the struggles of the enslaved.

If the nature of the sources shapes our perceptions of slave women’s
contributions to resistance and revolt, the conditions of enslavement, which
were also those of struggle, shaped the historical possibilities for slave men’s
and women’s actual contributions to resistance and revolt. And however
much we have learned to recognize the role of slaves in setting limits to their
oppression and in shaping their own lives, the master class did establish the
conditions. Those conditions varied according to time, place, and size of
plantation, but, overall, scholars concur that they never invited the kind of
massive rebellions or establishment of maroon societies that occurred else-
where in the Western Hemisphere.14 I cannot in this essay begin to do jus-
tice to the impact of variations in size and location of plantations on women’s
roles in resistance and revolt, although it must have been considerable. But
however much the conditions imposed by individual masters varied, they also
fell within the general structures of prevailing legal and political relations,
and of a society that can, in important respects, be viewed as a network of
households that included the decisive productive as well as reproductive
relations. These general structural conditions changed significantly over time. From the perspective of slave revolts and resistance, the most important changes probably occurred toward the first third of the eighteenth century, as the fluidity and experimentation of early settlement gave way to more rigid structures that reflected the greater stability and will to ordered domination of white society, and following the wave of revolution that characterized the late eighteenth century. Both of these shifts confronted slaves with an increase in the resolution and sophistication of white society, but both—especially the second—also offered slaves new sources of collective identity and purpose as Afro-Americans. The net result can perhaps best be grasped in the tendency of nineteenth-century slave revolts to claim the explicit political purpose of realizing for Afro-Americans the promises of the new democratic ideology of individual freedom. And by the time that the slaves were claiming this message for themselves they indeed constituted a distinct Afro-American people—creoles who had become the only self-reproducing slave population in the New World.

The following preliminary discussion of the role of slave women in resistance rests on a series of working assumptions—all of which must be advanced tentatively. (1) However hard it may be to draw the lines, violent resistance and revolt should be distinguished. Revolt, to paraphrase Clausewitz, is the continuation of violent resistance by other means. (2) The relation between violent resistance and revolt changed over time, with the decisive shift occurring in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when the slaves appropriated for themselves the ideology of democratic revolution. (3) The African legacy, if difficult to identify precisely, made a central contribution to slave women’s self-perceptions and hence to their patterns of resistance. (4) White culture and institutions constituted the conditions of oppression and hence shaped the patterns of resistance. (5) Although it is not uncommon that a cataclysmic struggle against oppression encourages the temporary disregard of prevailing gender roles, it is more than likely that a protracted struggle of resistance will build upon and shape the continuing life of a people, including its gender roles. In short, the resistance activities of women are likely to reflect their roles as women, as much as their commitment to resistance. Or, to put it differently, though women may fight as soldiers, they will normally resist as women. (6) Any attempt to understand the resistance of slave women as women must acknowledge the dreadful paucity of sources that testify directly to those women’s self-perceptions. If we can make a preliminary attempt to identify women’s patterns of behavior, we must simultaneously recognize that we have very limited evidence of the meaning that the women themselves attributed to their behavior. (7) Any assessment of slave women’s resistance must make a
preliminary and cautious attempt to understand the complex relation between the resistance of the individual and collective resistance and to attempt to identify the institutions and movements through which women might have contributed directly, as opposed to indirectly, to collective resistance.

The fragmentary sources and partial, if growing, scholarship on the middle passage, the early period, and other New World slave societies strongly suggest that in the early periods of enslavement women were likely to participate in nearly direct proportion to their numbers—which were fewer than those of men—in revolt and violent resistance. Certainly on the slave ships, women, whom white slavers chose to see as more docile than men, enjoyed greater freedom of movement than men and were, consequently, well positioned to play important roles. Then, as later, their occasional betrayal of revolts can at least be taken as an indication of their participation in, or proximity to, the planning of them. The fragmentary evidence from the early period of settlement further suggests that arrival in the New World did not dissipate the rebelliousness many women had evinced on the middle passage. In fact, at least some women appear to have rebelled or resisted in whatever way available, whenever the opportunity offered itself or could be seized. But precise patterns remain difficult to establish. High demographic casualties among both black and white populations, as well as increasing importations of fresh Africans themselves from different peoples and states, delayed the establishment of distinct social patterns. There is no reason to doubt that during this early period, which was characterized by a constant influx of Africans and the complex class and race relations of a slave society in the making, women rejected their enslavement as wholeheartedly as men. Nor is there any special reason to believe, given the patterns of African slave trading, that women necessarily made the crossing or began life in the Americas in the company of the men of their families and communities. It is more than likely that the violent removal first from their native societies and then from Africa not merely separated women from the men of their kinship but also at least temporarily disrupted accepted patterns of relations between men and women. Many women must have confronted their enslavement as uprooted individuals. And the white society into which they were introduced may not yet have developed, or been able to implement, a fixed notion of the gender relations and roles appropriate to their new servants. With a firm eye on rapid profits, many planters proved entirely willing to exploit female slaves to the limits of their physical endurance—if not beyond—with little regard to the niceties of male and female tasks. The forms of female resistance in this early period may safely be taken to have been as varied and as violent as the complexity of the class, race, and gender relations of an emerging, frontier slave society.
The increasingly cohesive slave society that emerged during the eighteenth century, especially in Virginia and South Carolina, generated considerably more information on the resistance and rebellion of slaves, just as the slaveholders manoeuvred more systematically to set about mastering and to prevent revolts by their slaves. With slaves distributed, however unevenly, throughout the colonies, slave revolts occurred throughout them as well. The records of these revolts testify to women’s participation in them, and frequently to their leadership as well. There was, for example, the revolt in Louisiana in the early 1770s, after which Mariana received one hundred lashes and lost her ears for her part. Although with respect to white perceptions, it is worth noting that she received a substantially lighter punishment than did the men, Temba and Pedro, despite her apparent status as leader. But women could be punished as severely as men for their roles in conspiracies, or for suspicion of having committed arson. Frequently they were burned alive.

The eighteenth century witnessed the emergence of forms of violent resistance, notably arson and poison, that would characterize the entire ante-bellum period. Women regularly played their part, or were accused of so doing, in these activities. Peter Wood has argued that in the wake of the Stono Rebellion in South Carolina the white ruling class systematically curtailed the de facto liberties that the slaves had theretofore enjoyed. The comprehensive Negro Act of 1740 deprived slaves of those personal opportunities to which they had never been entitled, but had nonetheless seized under the frontier conditions of the early years of the colony: “freedom of movement, freedom of assembly, freedom to raise food, to earn money, to learn to read English.” This legislation, and above all the determination of the masters that it represented, established the ownership and discipline of slaves as a matter of class, not merely individual, responsibility. It may also have sharpened the distinction between male and female forms of resistance and revolt if only by systematizing the constraints of enslavement and thus making some forms of women’s activities more visible. Or, to put it differently, it may have begun to subject female slaves to the same structural constraints that relegated white women to households and male supervision.

The case of runaways suggests that slave society hedged in women even more stringently than men. At least the scholars who have analyzed the advertisements for runaways during the eighteenth century have found far fewer women than men: Wood estimated one woman to three men during the middle decades of the century; Gerald Mullin found that 11 percent of the advertisements for runaways that specified gender were for women in Virginia between 1736 and 1801. It would be rash to conclude, on the basis of this evidence, that women were intrinsically more reconciled to slavery.
than men. More likely, for reasons discussed below, they had more trouble in passing unobserved outside the plantation. But it is also possible that the fewer ads for female runaways also reflected masters’ assumptions that a temporarily missing female had not really run away, but might only have gone to visit kin in the neighborhood. An advertisement from the Carolina Cen- tinel of Newberry, North Carolina, in 1818, requested help in securing the return of a female runaway who had already been known to be absent for a considerable period of time during which she had been “harboured” by slaves on various plantations in the neighborhood.22 Another advertisement from the Virginia Gazette of Williamsburg, in 1767, sought assistance in securing the return of a female slave who clearly had been anything but docile: “Hannah, about 35 years of age, had on when she went away a green plains [sic] petticoat, and sundry other clothes, but what sort I do not know, as she stole many from the other Negroes.” Hannah was further described as having remarkable “long hair, or wool,” and being “much scarified under the throat from one ear to the other,” and having “many scars on her back, occasioned by whipping.” The master clearly regarded Hannah as a serious runaway. “She pretends much to the religion the Negroes of late have practised, and may probably endeavor to pass for a free woman, as I understand she intended when she went away, by the Negroes in the neighbourhood.” He believed that under the pretense of being a “free woman” she was heading for Carolina.23 The two ads reflect the combination of actual conditions and masters’ perceptions: A slave woman might “visit” neighboring plantations, where she would disappear among the other slaves without causing comment or provoking a search, at least initially. If she undertook serious flight, she would probably have to attempt to pass for a “free woman” in order to have a plausible reason to be abroad. To be sure, some women did run away to join groups of maroons, but probably in far fewer numbers than men, and probably with diminishing frequency as the possibilities for establishing maroon societies were eroded. Women also, like men, ran away to the British during the Revolution.24

The evidence from the eighteenth century remains difficult to interpret. There has been little work on slave women during the eighteenth century, and none on their roles in resistance and revolt specifically. Given the continued influx of new Africans, we can be sure that African influences played a more direct role than they would after the closing of the trade. But we lack adequate studies of the nature of those influences on gender roles and relations. Recently Afro-American and Pan-African feminists have begun to call attention to the importance of women’s roles and the degree of women’s authority and autonomy in African societies. They have correctly reminded us of the prevalence of matrilineality and matrifocality among West African
peoples, and of the presence of queens and female leaders among them. The example of Nanny the Maroon in Jamaica has also been advanced as evidence of women’s leadership in New World revolts.25 As I have tried to suggest, the evidence from the middle passage, the early period, and the eighteenth century testifies to women’s active participation in resistance and revolt. But other evidence suggests that from very early, and certainly by the time of Stono, some forms of revolt were considered primarily male affairs. No record survives, for example, of a female leader during the Stono Rebellion itself. Furthermore, scattered evidence indicates that at least some organized insurrections assumed a distinct military and masculine cast. The Stono Rebellion began with twenty black men who marched southwest toward St. Augustine with “colors flying and two drums beating.” Vincent Harding emphasizes the importance that those rebellious slave men attached to their having become soldiers: “Sounding the forbidden drums, they were warriors again.”26 African history offers reason to believe that African women might fight as soldiers, but it also suggests that Africans normally viewed warfare as primarily an affair of men. It is, in short, probable that even during the early period African arrivals and Afro-Americans themselves assumed that armed insurrection constituted an essentially male activity.27 The conditions imposed by white society, not to mention the whites’ own visible commitment to male soldiers, can only have reinforced the Afro-American’s indigenous tendencies to ascribe warfare to men.

As the eighteenth century gave way to the nineteenth, a series of interrelated events set the distinctive contours of antebellum slave society in the Southern states. In their various ways, the American Revolution, the French Revolution, the revolution in St. Domingue, the invention of the cotton gin, the closing of the African slave trade, and more set Southern society on the course that would lead through the development of a mature slave society to the conflagration of war with a rapidly developing industrial capitalist society. These developments established not merely the social relations within which slave resistance became endemic but also the terrain on which the great slave revolts of the period 1800–1831 would be launched, and they drew the lines within which slavery and its abolition would become national issues. Not incidentally, the same period also witnessed the consolidation of the bourgeois ideology of gender roles in general, and the distinctive Southern ideology of the lady—to be distinguished from the Northern ideology of true womanhood—in particular. Although there is scant reason to believe that Afro-American slaves grasped that ideology to their breasts, there is some reason to believe that its development had indirect consequences for the role of slave women in resistance. Assuredly, the implementation of the Southern ideal of the lady included a tendency to confine women to households
and to discourage their freedom from a male “protection” that imposed special burdens and limitations on slave women.

The consolidation of North American slave society, for well-examined reasons, hedged in Afro-American slaves. The role of maroons and other groups of outlyers (runaway slaves) declined. Spontaneous violent revolts of large numbers of slaves probably also declined—although Aptheker might disagree. But the political character and self-consciousness of those revolts that did materialize were heightened. Revolt seems to have become even more a specialized political and insurrectionary male responsibility. And resistance, which became the very essence of the system, fell into some recognizable patterns. As the slaveholding class attempted to impose its own paternalistic ideology upon the enslaved, and to encourage the reproduction and expansion of the slaves, it also seems to have made a minimal effort to apply general notions of gender roles in its treatment of slaves and allocation of tasks. The gender ideology of the master class bore no organic relation to the values of the slaves themselves, although they too had their own ideas of manhood and womanhood. Moreover, with respect to their slaves, the masters clearly observed the ideology of gender difference erratically and according to their own convenience. Nonetheless, the existence of notions of gender difference and gender roles among the masters and the slaves clearly shaped the distinctive patterns of female resistance.

If we are to believe our sources, black women’s resistance to slavery was much more likely to be individual than collective. The cumulative effect of individual acts of resistance did contribute decisively, as both Aptheker and Genovese, who follows him on this matter, argue, to the undermining of the system from within and to the confrontationist attitudes of the slaveholders without, but I do believe that the implications of the individual acts of resistance varied and that all must be distinguished from explicitly collective resistance. Furthermore, the characteristic forms of individual female resistance differed somewhat from those of men, perhaps because of Afro-American attitudes toward womanhood, certainly because of opportunities offered and denied by white-dominated slave society. Male and female forms of resistance differed most in those instances in which the physiological differences between the genders were most significant and in those instances in which the attitudes of the slaveholders toward gender roles most directly affected the opportunities available to the enslaved. The most difficult problem consists in identifying Afro-American attitudes toward the respective gender roles of men and women, and identifying the specific African components in those attitudes.

By the time that antebellum slave society assumed its mature form, African gender attitudes are not likely to have appeared in their original form.
Like all other aspects of Afro-American culture, African attitudes toward gender had been transformed and reinterpreted in the light of American experience—the discrete experience of the slaves as well as the possible influence of white practices and values. Obviously, male and female physiology constituted the bedrock of gender differences, and physiology did distinguish between some forms of resistance that were specific to slave men and slave women. Women’s reproductive capacities offered both special opportunities for resistance and some possible deterrents against particular forms of resistance. If Afro-American attitudes toward gender began with the slaves’ own interpretation of physiological differences, they also must have been shaped by the gender distinctions imposed by the conditions of life in a slave society. Whether or not the slaveholding class could influence Afro-American belief, it could assuredly influence Afro-American practice. To the extent that masters distinguished between male and female slaves—and they did in innumerable ways—male and female slaves enjoyed gender-specific opportunities for specific kinds of resistance and revolt. It seems likely that those conditions also encouraged slaves to reinterpret their African values, and perhaps slowly to include some elements of white attitudes toward gender in their own distinct emerging world view.

But let me begin with those forms of resistance that were least differentiated by gender. To the extent that slaveholders pressed women into the same kinds of heavy labor in the fields and in clearing ground as they did men, women seem to have resisted in the same ways as did men. The breaking of tools and the challenging—even the murdering—of overseers were not the monopoly of male slaves. Such sources as we have clearly demonstrate—and I shall return to the point—that female slaves took enslavement and wanton oppression personally. In 1857, a slave, David, appealed his conviction for the murder of the overseer whom he had assisted another slave, Fanny, in killing. Prior to the act, Fanny had been heard to say that she was not about to allow that overseer to mess in her affairs—and the affairs in question had nothing to do with sexual exploitation.28 Men’s and women’s conspiring together to kill overseers, and indeed masters, was nothing new. In December 1774, the *Georgia Gazette* of Savannah reported the “following melancholy account, viz."

That on Tuesday morning the 29th ult. six new Negro fellows and four wenches, belonging to Capt. Morris, killed the Overseer in the field, after which they went to the house, murdered his wife, and dangerously wounded a carpenter named Wright, also a boy who died the next day; they then proceeded to the house of Angus McIntosh, whom they likewise dangerously wounded; and being there joined by a sensible fellow,
the property of said McIntosh, they went to the house of Roderick M’Leod, wounded him very much, and killed his son, who had fired upon them on their coming up and broke the arm of the fellow who had joined them. Their leader and McIntosh’s negro have been taken and burnt, and two of the wenches have returned to the plantation.29

The incident provides much to reflect upon. To begin with, why did the white authorities not see fit to punish the “wenches” as severely as the men? There is nothing surprising in recently arrived Africans’ banding together at the point of visible oppression—labor—to strike out at their oppressors. There is also nothing surprising in the persistence of such resentment and violence against overseers, as immediate oppressors, throughout the ante-bellum period. But such concerted actions, which began in the fields, seem to have been less common during the nineteenth century. Furthermore, at least on large plantations, during the nineteenth century masters seem to have frequently organized men and women into different work gangs, even if the women undertook work as heavy as that of the men.30 At this point, it is difficult to determine the precise reasons for the masters’ gender-specific organization of labor gangs. It may only have reflected a desire to cut down on distractions among the slaves during work hours. It may possibly have reflected an attempt to apply the masters’ own notions of male and female spheres—however imperfectly—to their slaves. But it assuredly diminished the opportunities for collective male and female resistance at the point of production. When Fanny and David acted together, they did so, as it were, after hours. But even if male and female slaves did not often engage in collective violent resistance in the fields, there is ample evidence that among field hands, especially on large plantations on which life in the quarters remained sharply separated from life in the big house, female slaves frequently resisted their enslavement in much the same ways as did male slaves.

In a crude way, we could say that female slaves resisted as laborers harsh conditions of labor and unusual abuse of the power to supervise labor. Yet even as laborers, female slaves had recourse to forms of resistance normally denied male slaves. The extent to which the slaveholders attributed social significance to the womanhood of their female slaves—the extent to which they attempted to implement gender distinctions—limited the ways in which those slave women might resist, but also offered them special opportunities for resistance. The gender relations and norms of white society made it unlikely that female slaves would be trained for most of the specialized crafts or hired out for jobs that would provide them with an excuse for mobility. Female slaves were unlikely to become carpenters, blacksmiths, masons, or coopers, or to acquire skills in comparable specialized crafts that would lead
them to be hired around. And the pool of skilled craftsmen provided not merely the leadership for the most important slave revolts but also the largest number of fugitives. Even those female slaves who did receive specialized training, as cooks or seamstresses, for example, would be expected to remain not merely within plantation households but largely within houses. Since female slaves, like white women, were not expected to be abroad unaccompanied, they enjoyed far fewer opportunities for successful flight, unless they dressed as men.

Yet specialization of skills according to gender offered female slaves other opportunities for resistance. As cooks and house servants, they were in a privileged position for poisoning. And there can be no doubt that the ubiquitous fear of poison decisively contributed to exacerbating the disquiet of the slaveholding class. Plantation letters and diaries abound with references to poisonings, and testify to the uneasiness of the whites. Poison could not always be detected as the cause of death, but was frequently suspected. One slave woman poisoner, “an old sullen house negress,” was identified when she complained to a fellow slave, who reported, of having misjudged the necessary amount of arsenic: “I thought my master and mistress would get enough, but it was not sufficient.”31 Another slave woman profited from her specialized position as a nurse to poison an infant and to attempt to do the same to her master. She was burned alive in Charleston, together with the man who supplied the poison.32 These acts of resistance occurred after the South Carolinians had made a concerted attempt to curtail slaves’ knowledge of and access to drugs by an addition to the Negro Act in 1751. The legislation prescribed punishment for any black who should instruct another “in the knowledge of any poisonous root, plant, herb, or other poison whatever, he or she, so offending shall upon conviction thereof suffer death as a felon.” It also prohibited physicians, apothecaries, or druggists from admitting slaves to places in which drugs were kept, or allowing them to administer drugs to other slaves.33 This kind of legislation, and the cautious spirit it reflected, may have decreased whites’ mindlessly introducing slaves to the nature and use of medicinal drugs, but probably did not abolish the practice entirely. Slave women did serve as nurses on large plantations, and as midwives. It is also clear that slave women must have transmitted knowledge of poisonous herbs down through the generations. But white precautions, together with the gender conventions that assigned slave women to kitchens and to nursing, may have resulted in poisoning’s becoming an increasingly female activity.

The position of slave women within the big house gave them uncommon access to the goods of the slaveholders. It is widely recognized that cooks and other house servants supplemented the diets of their near and dear from the
storerooms of the masters. An occasional house servant, such as Clara, could scour the big house for bullets for a son who intended to murder his master. Clara’s son succeeded. And she was convicted with him.34

The position of slave women within the big house further permitted them special kinds of psychological resistance, the consequences of which are almost impossible to assess. Impudence and uppitiness did constitute forms of resistance that provoked responses disproportionate to the acts. House servants proverbially tried the patience and the nerves of mistresses to whom it fell to oversee their work. Since the mistress lacked the full authority that adhered to the master of the plantation, her relations with her servants could easily lapse into a kind of personal struggle. When servants compounded sauciness and subtle disrespect with a studied cheerful resistance to accomplishing the task at hand, the mistress could rapidly find herself losing control—of herself as well as her servant. “Puttin’ on ole massa” must have been, if anything, more trying in its female embodiment. In 1808, a group of South Carolinians acknowledged the undermining potential of mockery in their request to the legislature that slave apparel receive the serious attention it deserved: The citizens of Charleston argued that the dress of persons of color had become so expensive “as to tempt the slaves to dishonesty; to give them ideas not consistent with their conditions; to render them insolent to the whites, and so fond of parade and show as to [make it] extremely difficult to keep them at home.” They should only be allowed to wear coarse materials. Liveries were another matter, for they, no matter how elaborate, constituted a badge of servitude. But it was necessary “to prevent the slaves from wearing silks, satins, crapes, lace muslins, and such costly stuffs, as are looked upon and considered the luxury of dress.” For an orderly slave society required that “every distinction should be created between the whites and the negroes, calculated to make the latter feel the superiority of the former.”35 But slave women who worked in the big house were uniquely positioned to resist that message, to undermine the distinctions, and to make the lives of privileged mistresses an unending war of nerves.

Slave women could also take advantage of their special role as reproducers to resist various forms of labor through shamming. Although male slaves too could fake illness, female slaves could and did claim pregnancy when they were not pregnant, and claim unusual discomfort or weakness when they were pregnant. The tactic did not always work, but frequently it did, and if it undoubtedly reflected a simple desire to be relieved of labor—not to work—it also reflected a marvelous challenge to the master: You want me to reproduce as a woman, treat me as a woman. John Campbell’s recent study of the treatment of pregnant slaves on George J. Kollock’s Georgia plantations demonstrates that, at least in this case, the records suggest that the
master did give the benefit of the doubt to pregnant slave women, especially in their third trimester, and that this latitude helps to account for the successful self-reproduction of Afro-American slaves in the antebellum South.36 So this particular form of female resistance did more than alleviate the workload of the individual slave woman: It contributed to strengthening her people. 

The relation between slave women’s roles as mothers and their resistance to enslavement has generated considerable interest, albeit with contradictory conclusions. If none doubts that slave women frequently took advantage of real or claimed pregnancy to avoid labor, some have argued that they also practiced abortion and infanticide as systematic resistance to the perpetuation of the system. Court records do reveal prosecution of slave women for infanticide. And surely some cases of infanticide and numerous abortions escaped the attention of the masters and authorities. But Michael P. Johnson has recently, and convincingly, questioned whether all cases of infant death that were attributed to infanticide should have been. His discussion of the Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) suggests that the death of slave infants by apparent smothering should be linked to their mother’s labor in the fields rather than to any attempt to deprive the system of slave infants.37 In any event, it would be difficult to argue that infanticide and abortion dealt a decisive blow to a slave society that boasted a self-reproducing and expanding slave population. And those who argue for resistance against reproduction—if it occurred with any frequency—must take into account the well-documented attachment of slave mothers to their children. It may be that some slave women practiced abortion and infanticide and that other slave women did or did not run away because of attachment to their children. But it is difficult to fit these contradictory patterns into a single explanation for female slave resistance, much less a general explanation of the significance of that resistance. We have no way of knowing whether slave women practiced abortion—and perhaps infanticide—selectively: Could they, for example, have been more likely to terminate pregnancies, if not lives, that resulted from the sexual exploitation of white men? That, indeed, would have been resistance—perhaps the primary resistance with which to counter the predatory sexuality of white men. At the present state of research, we can, at best, say only that the sexual vulnerability and reproductive capacities of slave women influenced the ways in which they resisted. We can say little about the social significance that they attached to that womanhood.38

The list of slave women’s acts of resistance to their enslavement in particular and to the slave system in general could be extended indefinitely. Some scholars, notably Deborah Grey White and Darlene Clark Hine and Kate Wittenstein, are beginning to address that history.39 As women, female
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slaves engaged in various forms of resistance associated with their sexuality and reproductive capacities. As female slaves, they especially engaged in poisons and theft, and were much less likely than male slaves to be fugitives or even truants. Although when they did become truants, they could melt into the slave community of another plantation, which may hint at special links among women that bound slave kin and fictive kin networks. As slaves, they engaged in murder, arson, and grand larceny. However deeply their acts of individual resistance undermined the slave system, their direct contribution to political revolt appears to have been considerably less than that of men. In short, the current state of scholarship—that is, the current reading of available evidence—that is, the current reading of available evidence—suggests that female slaves, for reasons closely associated with their gender, were more likely to engage in individual than collective resistance in the period following the consolidation of North American slave society and the beginnings of an Afro-American revolutionary tradition.

But this bald assessment will not do, even for a preliminary reading. The very use of the categories of “individual” and “collective” forces us to ask other questions—with full recognition that the answers will depend upon a fresh look at the sources. For a broad gap separates the random acts of individual resistance from the political and military resistance of revolt. And if we accept Aptheker’s general assessment of the systematic and cumulative resistance of Afro-American people to their enslavement, we must force ourselves to identify and understand the networks and institutions through which that people forged itself as a people and supported the efforts of its most self-conscious rebels against slavery as a social system.

As Vincent Harding has especially insisted, the various records of revolts invariably make some mention of churches or funerals or religious gatherings as a backdrop for revolt itself. As we all know, there is wide acknowledgment of secret black churches and religious meetings and networks. The significance of religion in the forging of Afro-American culture can hardly be disputed. But my point here is somewhat different. In my judgment, the churches and secret religious networks undoubtedly provided the institutional links between acts of individual resistance and revolts in the name of collectivity. And women were integral members of those churches and religious associations. If our sources seem not to have revealed the roles of women in continuing, collective resistance, it may be that we have not read them with the most interesting questions in mind. It seems obvious enough that those who were caught and tried for their leadership in the great revolts would not mention the networks and institutions on which their plans depended. Why sacrifice brothers and sisters needlessly? Even more, why jeopardize the future revolts of the enslaved by betraying their collective underground organizations? Long-term resistance had to have some collective
focus, and its institutions and networks had to remain invisible to the oppressor. But recognizing the likelihood that such institutions and networks bound the daily lives of individuals to the most spectacular attacks against the system that oppressed them, we must also recognize the certainty of women’s integral participation in them.

This recognition itself commands a further effort of research and imagination. Albert Raboteau explicitly and other scholars of Afro-American religion implicitly have minimized the importance of women’s roles in the leadership of slave religion. Female religious leaders surfaced occasionally, especially in New Orleans and in conjunction with the persistence of voodoo. But slave women appear not to have become preachers and leaders of Afro-American Christianity—certainly not in large numbers. It is nonetheless difficult to believe that informal—and perhaps formal—associations of women, or sisterhoods, did not take shape in association with slave religious communities. Especially after the prohibition of separate black churches, such associations would likely have been as secret as the congregations to which they were linked. But Betty M. Kuyk’s recent work on black fraternal orders in the United States opens new possibilities. For she finds that the black men’s associations that took shape so rapidly during Reconstruction had roots in slavery, and beyond slavery in African culture. If men’s organizations, why not women’s? Such gender groupings are reasonably common in societies in which gender constitutes one of the principal forms of social organization, as it did among many West African peoples. But for all the reasons advanced throughout this essay to explain the greater constraints on slave women than slave men, notably, the conditions of gender divisions within the dominant white society, should such women’s organizations have existed in whatever form, they would surely have been even less visible than those of men. Deborah Grey White has been insisting on the importance of the female community of slaves in work and as the locus of female traditions of rites of passage, motherhood, and female identity. It appears at least plausible that the community of female slaves generated some kind of religious sisterhood, however fragile and informal. At the least, it remains indisputable that slave women saw themselves as sisters in religion, as essential members of the religious community of slaves. To the extent that the religious community provided the context or underpinnings for the revolts, the women of that community constituted its backbone—not least because not being active members of the revolt they did not risk being cut down with their brothers, but would persist and keep the tradition alive.

The preoccupations of historians have, perhaps, mirrored the biases of antebellum white Southerners and of subsequent bourgeois ideology in missing the contributions of slave women to collective violent resistance and
even insurrectionary revolts. By the same token, they may also have failed to take adequate account of the full individual opposition of slave women to their enslavement. There is a danger to which we all, including women’s historians, are vulnerable in insisting upon the specific experience of women as women: We can miss the recalcitrant and determined struggle of the individual soul or consciousness against reduction to the status of thing. It has become a commonplace that slave women suffered under a double burden of enslavement as workers and as women. I should be the last to dispute that harsh truth and, indeed, shall argue shortly that its implications for the growing commitment to antislavery were decisive. But first, let me point out that, however deeply slave women themselves felt their exploitation and vulnerability as women, they also seem to have insisted, in the end, on their oppression as slaves. Despite the extensive commentary that has arisen from Judge Thomas Ruffin’s celebrated decision in *State vs. Mann*, there has been almost no comment on the gender of the slave who provoked the action that led to the case. Lydia “had committed some small offence, for which the Defendant undertook to chastise her—that while in the act of so doing, the slave ran off, whereupon the Defendant called upon her to stop, which being refused, he shot at and wounded her.” The Supreme Court of North Carolina acquitted the white man. In Ruffin’s words: “The Power of the master must be absolute to render the submission of the slave perfect.”

Power and submission: The conflict here is one of wills. Happily, we possess direct confirmation of a slave woman’s perception of that conflict as one between the will of her master and her own.

Harriet Jacobs, who published her narrative under the name of Linda Brent, structured her entire account of her escape from slavery as a remorseless and unmediated struggle against the imposition of her master’s will. Although the narrative includes much on her sexuality and her children, and her master’s sexual designs upon her—so much as to have earned it a description as a modern *Pamela*—in the end everything falls by the wayside except her own refusal to accept the imposition of his will. Her womanhood accounts for many of the specific forms of her oppression, but not for her rejection of oppression. And that refusal of his will was the refusal of his power, the refusal to submit perfectly, or indeed at all. Psychologically, her struggle with her master is one with the most celebrated revolts. The object is not to ease oppression, to lighten a burden, even to protect loved ones: The object is to reject slavery.

The Brent narrative is all the more remarkable for being cast in the language of Northern, sentimental domestic fiction. Brent, ably seconded by the editorial efforts of Lydia Maria Child, apparently intended to ensure the recognition of her tale by Northern, middle-class women, who were steeped
in their own culture’s pieties of vulnerable womanhood. But her tactical adoption of the literary conventions does not obscure the inner logic of her account, which remains not the violation of womanhood but the conflict of wills. Withal, the rhetoric of the Brent narrative has its own significance and adds a final dimension to the resistance of slave women. Northern abolitionists insisted on assessing slavery from the perspective of their own concerns. And the growing success of their opposition to the slave system depended in no small measure on their casting it as the antithesis of their own bourgeois values—presented as absolute moral standards. To their credit, they did flatly oppose enslavement. But as abolition swelled to join a more general antislavery movement, the emphasis fell increasingly upon the inherent opposition between slavery and the work ethic, slavery and initiative, slavery and democracy. In this context, the growing perception of the exploitation of slave women as a violation of the norms of true womanhood gained in importance. However deeply Northern women may have misperceived and misinterpreted the experience of slave women by imposing on them white, middle-class norms, their very misrepresentations added indispensable fuel to Northern opposition to slavery and thus, albeit ironically, added a discrete female component to that national resistance which would result in the abolition of slavery.

Notes
4. Aptheker, *Negro Slave Revolts*, e.g., 84, 89, 92, 127, 138, 148, 181, 201, 259. Aptheker does not pay special attention to women’s gender-specific forms of resistance, but systematically includes them as challenges to the system.
day-to-day resistance, see Raymond A. Bauer and Alice H. Bauer, “Day to Day Resistance to Slavery,” *Journal of Negro History*, 27 (October 1942), 388–419.


23. Ibid., 33.
32. Ibid.
35. Phillips (ed.), *Judicial Cases*, II, 113. The citation is from the “Memorial of the Citizens of Charleston to the Senate and House of Representatives of the State of South Carolina [Charleston 1822].”
38. Bauer and Bauer, “Day to Day Resistance,” 50–57. Angela Davis and bell hooks (see references in note 5, above) emphasize the sexual exploitation of slave women, but do not discuss this in relation to slave women’s resistance.


40. Harding, There Is a River, 55, but throughout; Genovese, Roll; and Mechal Sobel, Trabelin’ On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith, Westport, CT, 1979.


42. White, “Female Slaves.”


44. Linda Brent [Harriet Jacobs], Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, ed. by Lydia Maria Child, new ed. by Walter Teller, New York, 1973, orig. 1861. For the identification of Brent as Harriet Jacobs, and as her own author, see Jean Fagan Yellin, “Written by Herself: Harriet Jacobs’ Slave Narrative,” American Literature, 53:3 (November 1981), 479–486. The Brent narrative should be compared with that of Ellen Craft, who was no less determined, but who ran dressed as a man and in the company of her husband. See her “Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, The Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery,” in Bontemps (ed.), Great Slave Narratives.