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Women, Race & Class

ANGELA Y. DAVIS

WOMEN, RACE & CLASS

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To my mother,
Sallye B. Davis

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Contents

1 The Legacy of Slavery: Standards for a New Womanhood

When the influential scholar Ulrich B. Phillips declared in 1918 that slavery in the Old South had impressed upon African savages and their native-born descendants the glorious stamp of civilization,[1] he set the stage for a long and passionate debate. As the decades passed and the debate raged on, one historian after another confidently professed to have deciphered the real meaning of the "peculiar institution." But amidst all this scholarly activity, the special situation of the *female* slave remained unpenetrated. The ceaseless arguments about her "sexual promiscuity" or her "matriarchal" proclivities obscured, much more than they illuminated, the condition of Black women during slavery. Herbert Aptheker remains one of the few historians who attempted to establish a more realistic basis for the understanding of the female slave.[2]

During the 1970s the slavery debate reemerged with renewed vigor. Eugene Genovese published *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*.[3] John Blassingame's *The Slave Community*[4] appeared, as did Fogel and Engerman's ill-conceived *Time on the Cross*[5] and Herbert Gutman's monumental *Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*.[6] Responding to this rejuvenated debate, Stanley Elkins decided it was time to publish an expanded edition of his 1959 study *Slavery*.[7] Conspicuously absent from this flurry of publications is a book expressly devoted to slave women Those of us who have anxiously awaited a serious study of the Black woman during slavery remain, so far, disappointed. It has been equally disappointing to discover that with the exception of the traditionally debatable questions of promiscuity versus marriage and forced versus voluntary sex with white men, scant attention has been focused on women by the authors of these new books.

The most enlightening of all these recent studies is Herbert Gutman's investigation of the Black family. In furnishing documentary evidence that the family's vitality proved stronger than the dehumanizing rigors of slavery, Gutman has dethroned the Black Matriarchy thesis popularized by Daniel Moynihan et al.[8] in 1965. Yet, since his observations about slave women are generally designed to confirm their wifely propensities, the implication is easily drawn that they differed from their white counterparts only to the extent that their domestic aspirations were thwarted by the exigencies of the slave system. According to Gutman, although institutionalized slave norms accorded women a great degree of premarital sexual freedom, they eventually settled into permanent marriages and built families based as much on their husband's input as on their own. Gutman's cogent and well-documented arguments against the matriarchy thesis are extremely valuable. But how much more powerful his book might have been had he concretely explored the multidimensional role of Black women within the family and within the slave community as a whole.

If and when a historian sets the record straight on the experiences of enslaved Black women, she (or he) will have performed an inestimable service. It is not for the sake of historical accuracy alone that such a study should be conducted, for lessons can be gleaned from the slave era which will shed light upon Black women's and all women's current battle for emancipation. As a layperson, I can only propose some tentative ideas which might possibly guide a reexamination of the history of Black women during slavery.

Proportionately, more Black women have always worked outside their homes than have their white sisters.[9] The enormous space that work occupies in Black women's lives today follows a pattern established during the very earliest days of slavery. As slaves, compulsory labor overshadowed every other aspect of women's existence. It would seem, therefore, that the starting point for any exploration of Black women's lives under slavery would be an appraisal of their role as workers.

The slave system defined Black people as chattel. Since women, no less than men, were viewed as profitable labor-units, they might

as well have been genderless as far as the slaveholders were concerned. In the words of one scholar, “the slave woman was first a full-time worker for her owner, and only incidentally a wife, mother and homemaker.”[10] Judged by the evolving nineteenth-century ideology of femininity, which emphasized women’s roles as nurturing mothers and gentle companions and housekeepers for their husbands, Black women were practically anomalies.

Though Black women enjoyed few of the dubious benefits of the ideology of womanhood, it is sometimes assumed that the typical female slave was a houseservant—either a cook, maid, or mammy for the children in the “big house.” Uncle Tom and Sambo have always found faithful companions in Aunt Jemima and the Black Mammy—stereotypes which presume to capture the essence of the Black woman’s role during slavery. As is so often the case, the reality is actually the diametrical opposite of the myth. Like the majority of slave men, slave women, for the most part, were field workers. While a significant proportion of border-state slaves may have been houseservants, slaves in the Deep South—the real home of the slaveocracy—were predominantly agricultural workers. Around the middle of the nineteenth century, seven out of eight slaves, men and women alike, were field workers[11]

Just as the boys were sent to the fields when they came of age, so too were the girls assigned to work the soil, pick the cotton, cut the cane, harvest the tobacco. An old woman interviewed during the 1930s described her childhood initiation to field work on an Alabama cotton plantation:

> We had old ragged huts made out of poles and some of the cracks chinked up with mud and moss and some of them wasn’t. We didn’t have no good beds, just scaffolds nailed up to the wall out of poles and the old ragged bedding throwed on them. That sure was hard sleeping, but even that felt good to our weary bones after them long hard days’ work in the field. I ’tended to the children when I was a little gal and tried to clean house just like Old Miss tells me to. Then as soon as I was ten years old, Old Master, he say, “Git this here nigger to that cotton patch.”[12]

Jenny Proctor's experience was typical. For most girls and women, as for most boys and men, it was hard labor in the fields from sunup to sundown. Where work was concerned, strength and productivity under the threat of the whip outweighed considerations of sex. In this sense, the oppression of women was identical to the oppression of men.

But women suffered in different ways as well, for they were victims of sexual abuse and other barbarous mistreatment that could only be inflicted on women. Expediency governed the slaveholders' posture toward female slaves: when it was profitable to exploit them as if they were men, they were regarded, in effect, as genderless, but when they could be exploited, punished and repressed in ways suited only for women, they were locked into their exclusively female roles.

When the abolition of the international slave trade began to threaten the expansion of the young cotton-growing industry, the slaveholding class was forced to rely on natural reproduction as the surest method of replenishing and increasing the domestic slave population. Thus a premium was placed on the slave woman's reproductive capacity. During the decades preceding the Civil War, Black women came to be increasingly appraised for their fertility (or for the lack of it): she who was potentially the mother of ten, twelve, fourteen or more became a coveted treasure indeed. This did not mean, however, that as mothers, Black women enjoyed a more respected status than they enjoyed as workers. Ideological exaltation of motherhood—as popular as it was during the nineteenth century—did not extend to slaves. In fact, in the eyes of the slaveholders, slave women were not mothers at all; they were simply instruments guaranteeing the growth of the slave labor force. They were "breeders"—animals, whose monetary value could be precisely calculated in terms of their ability to multiply their numbers.

Since slave women were classified as "breeders" as opposed to "mothers," their infant children could be sold away from them like calves from cows. One year after the importation of Africans was halted, a South Carolina court ruled that female slaves had no legal