

Reproductive Labor throughout Institutional Slavery in America: An Intersectional Analysis

Mainstream history often ignores the various social analyses that contribute to a holistic understanding of American labor history. These gaps are usually the important contributions of Women's History, Feminist History, and Black History. Thus, an intersectional analysis via these three historical lenses is necessary for the continued growth of the field. These lenses will be applied to Black female reproductive labor throughout institutional slavery in America. A historical analysis of the reproductive labor of Black female slaves is critical to understanding three main concepts. The first concept is the legal and social processes that stripped Black people of their personhood, and thus their human rights. The second concept is the various dimensions of labor for Black women. The final concept is the reconciliation between slaves as unpaid workers in both agricultural and reproductive labor. Although White women were also not paid for their reproductive labor either, they did not fall into the legal and social folds of "chattel" that was forced upon Black women. The compounded status of "chattel" reduced Black women to the social equivalent of cattle, in that they could be bought, sold, breed, and killed at the whim of their White owners. Thus, White women's access to First Amendment rights allowed them to advocate for abolition in a way that was forbidden to enslaved Black women. To understand the importance of the roles of female slaves, and their compacted status as woman and worker, is to redefine and critique traditional definitions of labor, race, and womanhood.

I. Background

Slavery in the Atlantic World was a labor system distinct from any other form of slavery practiced in the world. Although slavery was practiced by West African nations, it does not compare to the coercive means by which Europeans captured Africans for perpetual servitude in the 15th century. The intra-African slave trade was never formatted for permanent and inter-

generational slave status. Enslaved persons were often people from different African tribes that were war captives, criminals, concubines, or debtors. Their commodified slave status was not inherited or permanent, but a way to increase the captor family's wealth (Dubois, p.28).

Ownership of enslaved persons, not the production of slave-made goods, was a building block for modest wealth. Thus, slavery in Africa was not critical to the preservation of tribal nations nor the most profitable means for wealth accumulation.

Intra-African slave trading was an accepted institution as a means of forced labor that was contingent on social and civil rights protections for enslaved persons. These protections meant there was no formation of a slave class with any inherent claim to their rights, but instead a temporary slave status in which their humanity was still intact. While slaves worked for their debtor, they received small wages in order to pay off their debt and buy their freedom (Testart, p. 174). This meant enslaved persons were not only able to own their own property, but maintain social status in the community and hold property rights. So although people held slave status, their positions were not permanent and had an inherent claim to certain protections. The same applied to enslaved women in the Intra-African slave trade. The reproductive capacity and agricultural skills of enslaved females was seen as a way to increase personal wealth. Women in West Africa held high amounts of social power in their societies due to their role as the main producers of food, such as rice (Dubois, p. 28). In terms of their reproductive capacity, concubinage was "a form of sexual slavery that typically ended in freedom if the concubine bore a freeman's child" (Bay, et al., p. 9). So the child was automatically born free through the legal status of the father and the mother was freed for bearing an heir. These females were also afforded social and civil protections since their slave status was not permanent; they were folded into their master's family through childbirth, and provided agricultural skills necessary for the

continuation of a community. Institutional slavery in Africa thus asserted the humanity of enslaved persons through various civil protections, access to freedom, and inherent rights.

This system was disrupted in the 15th century through the invasion of Europeans on African soil. The process of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, also known as the Triangle Trade, was a three-point system wherein, “Europeans brought goods to Africa to trade for slaves, slaves in the New World to trade for slave-grown agricultural commodities...and these commodities to Europe for consumption” (Dubois, p. 28). The three main differences in the transatlantic slave trade from the African slave trade were levels of coercion, dispossession, and human rights abuses. Through coercive means—such as rape, pillaging, and kidnapping—Europeans took Africans from all tribes throughout their lands. Women made up approximately one-third of the total number of captive Africans sent to the New World (Lindsay, p. 4). These critical distinctions between the intra-African slave trade and the triangle trade are critical to explaining how the kidnapping and forced labor of black women became a global enterprise in which only European men could capitalize on. Through these three modes, African people found themselves within a white, capitalist institution that only respected their monetary value rather than human value.

II. The New World & the Creation of the Black Slave

The stark difference from African slavery, in which people sometimes entered willingly and were guaranteed a form of manumission, was the concept of personhood. Through a series of legal processes and institutions, enslaved Africans were no longer persons but units of production. A commodity, or unit of production, has no claim to personhood or human rights. According to scholars Lindsay, Blight, and Davis, “it is estimated that a total of 10.7 million captives arrived from Africa [to the Americas]” (Davis, et al., p. 197). Thus, over 10.7 million

Africans lost their rights of personhood, with about 3.5 million of them being women. As displaced persons in a White, patriarchal slave society, Black women became the most vulnerable social group since they had no claim to personhood or human rights. The legal folds of racial commodification and mass agricultural production reduced the reproductive and productive work of Black women to that of chattel. The experiences of Black women under institutional slavery have to be examined because of their unique social, legal, productive, and reproductive burdens.

From the moment Africans boarded European ships, they were considered commodities and not persons. A primary document called “Africans Forced to Dance on Deck of Slave Ship”, shows European men forcing three African men to dance for them as entertainment aboard the slave ship with the threat of violence (1837). African women especially suffered due to sexual violence at the hands of European traders that viewed them as animals because of her race but also as sexual prey because of their biology. These were the first steps in the psychological dehumanization process of transatlantic slavery in which African people were used as the playthings of White men through intimidation and violence. Yet, there was a larger process in the Americas that socially and legally codified the status of Black men and women as chattel. Franklin cites Orlando Patterson’s concept of social death as a larger process in which a group of people are physically in a community but are not granted the rights, protections, privileges, and immunities as other persons in the community (Franklin, p. 212-213). Resulting from a series of American colonial laws from 1640 to 1705, social death was both racialized and gendered thus placing Black women on the lowest rungs of colonial society.

Original court transcripts, from the *Minutes of the Council and General Court of Colonial Virginia 1622–1632, 1670–1676*, show how colonial courts made blackness synonymous with

perpetual servitude. This was established through the legal system when three indentured servants, two White males and one Black male, ran away from their master Hugh Gwyn on July of 1640. When they were recaptured, the two White males named Victor and James Gregory were sentenced to “receive the punishment of whipping and to have thirty stripes apiece... [and] shall first serve out their times with their master according to their Indentures, and one whole year apiece after the time of their service is expired” (p. 466-467). So in addition to being publicly whipped thirty times, the men had to fulfill the remainder of their servitude and an additional year. The Black servant, John Punch, was told that he too would be whipped and in addition, “shall serve his said master or his assigns for the time of his natural Life here or elsewhere” (p. 466-467). Even though all the men were servants that committed the same crime, John Punch was specifically singled out because of his race to perpetual servitude. This set a social hierarchy in which white servants had greater access to rights than black servants, even though they occupied the same strata of employment. It also set the legal precedence in Virginia, which was then copied by the surrounding colonies, that servants can be sentenced to slavery on the grounds of race. John Punch became representative of the loss of legal and human rights in American slavery. Thus, the coinciding ruling and the rise of the Atlantic Slave Trade paved the way for racialized labor, in which Black persons were treated as mere commodities. The commodification of Black lives, and the creation of an unlimited free labor source, was a crucial step of the transformation for the colonies to move out of a sustenance economy to a capitalist economy.

III. Black Women, the Legal System, & their Labor

This creation of a racialized free-labor system was a detrimental burden to Black women. Whereas African women obtained equitable social status with men through their agricultural

skills in Africa, their productive and reproductive labor had no social value in the colonial United States. The productive labor of enslaved Black men and women in the Chesapeake and Carolinas were physically toiling since they, “cleared land, cultivated tobacco and other crops” (Bay, p. 62). White plantation owners in the Carolinas during the 17th and 18th centuries especially profited from Black women’s knowledge of cultivating rice crops. It was said that by the early 18th century, the Carolinas “had begun to export nearly ten million pounds of rice a year” (Bay, et al., p. 64). The mass output of agricultural products like rice and tobacco stimulated massive wealth for Southern male plantation owners since they did not have to pay wages. Their economies had become entirely reliant on the free labor of enslaved Black persons. Original slave testimony from Francis Henderson and Mary Reynolds provide insight into this aspect of Black women’s labor and daily lives. Francis Henderson worked on a plantation near Washington D.C. in which she,

raised wheat, corn, and tobacco, and vegetables, -about forty slaves on the place...I would frequently hear the mistress say to them, ‘you yellow hussy! you yellow wench!’ etc...I only remember having but one blanket from my owners up to the age of 19, when I ran away. (Drew, 1856, p. 154-57)

This excerpt not only shows how arduous the labor was that so many slaves were needed, but how blasé they were about verbal degradation and lack of basic needs. The constant reinforcement that they are not even worth new blankets most likely serves as a reminder to enslaved workers that they had no social claims to personhood. The same can be seen in excerpts from Mary Reynolds that were collected as part of the Federal Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration. She said,

Massa Kilpatrick wasn’t no piddlin’ man. He had cattle and stock and sheep and more’n a hundred slaves and more besides. He bought the bes’ of niggers...swap of the old ones and give money for young ones what could work...Slavery was the worst days was ever seed in the world...I seed them put the men and women in the stock with they hands screwed down...feets tied together...Solomon the overseer beat them with a big

whip...The times I hated most was pickin' cotton when the frost was on the bolls. My hands git sore and crack open and bleed. (Library of Congress, p. 238-40)

Reynolds' narrative is especially revealing since it shows the physical abuse enslaved people suffered. Even when she was picking cotton, her hands bled from the painful labor. Plantation owners like Mr. Kilpatrick understood that younger workers were needed to perform that type of labor, which is why he recycled out the older workers as if they were replaceable parts of a machine. Since enslaved Black persons were considered chattel property and had no claim to legal personhood, owners were free to abuse them as they wished.

The heavy physical labor involved in fieldwork was but one division of enslaved Black women's work. Domestic labor bridged the gap between the physical and reproductive labor. Like Harriet Jacob's grandmother, the roles of house slaves ranged from "cook and wet nurse to seamstress" (Jacobs, p. 9). This type of enslavement was most common in the North since those colonies did not have agricultural-based societies. Yet Northerners were not disassociated from the legal codification of Black inferiority and servitude solely because the work was not as labor-intensive. Article 91 of The Massachusetts Body of Liberties stated, "There shall never be any bond slavery, villeinage, or captivity amongst us unless it be lawful captives taken in just wars, and such strangers as willingly sell themselves or are sold to us" (1641, p. 272-273). By making slavery legally contingent on the notion that the person was sold, Massachusetts became one of the first colonies to legalize slavery. Whether in the North or the South, the enslavement of Black women meant their primary work was to care for the master's children instead of their own. The Library of Congress has a photograph, called "A Child and Her Nanny", in which a Black woman is hiding behind the White child she is caring for (1855). Her hiding behind the child with her eyes peering behind, unveils the power dynamics in which White children were seen as more important than Black adult women. A lot of the domestic work of cooking, cleaning, and

taking care of White children was only part of the unpaid reproductive labor of Black women that was necessary for the home to even function and for the continuation of an American capitalist society.

Although Black men suffered greatly under slavery, Black women were disproportionately affected since their wombs were used as factories for the reproduction of free laborers. It is upon the Black woman's womb in which sustainment of the racialized agricultural-slave system mentioned above was built. Original court transcripts from *The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia from the First Session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619* state,

WHEREAS some doubts have arisen whether children got by any Englishman upon a negro woman should be slave or free, *Be it therefore enacted and declared by this present grand assembly*, that all children born in this country shall be held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother. (1662, p. 170)

This law is one of the most important due to the intersections of race, class, and gender. First, this law structures slavery as the complete opposite of intra-African slavery. Instead of the woman being freed upon the birth of a freeman's child and her child being born free, Black women in America were still slaves and their children were the enslaved property of the White father as well. This becomes a terrible burden for Black women who are now by law the sexual property of White men as well as their agricultural workers. For two centuries following this statute, American capitalist wealth would be built upon the reproductive capacity of enslaved Black women to ensure a readily available workforce that have no legal or social claim to personhood. In *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, bell hooks [1][2] states, "The white slaver could exercise freely absolute power, for he could brutalize and exploit her without fear" (p. 18). The loss of legal claims of personhood led to devastating social effects in which Black women were consistently birthing both Black and Mulatto children, while still engaging in the

productive labor, that were to be the property of another White man. This meant a labor source that kept reproducing itself at the hands of sexual violence for profit. Harriet Jacobs acknowledges this in her memoir in which she says, “Southern women often marry a man knowing he is the father of many little slaves. They do not trouble themselves about it. They regard such children as property, as marketable as the pigs...” (p. 33). With no claims to citizenry or human rights, enslaved Black women had become the sources of income for White male plantation owners.

IV. The Elevation of White Women as a Result of Slavery

From the Colonial Era to the 19th century, White women of all classes were considered socially inferior to their male counterparts. This gendered hierarchy forced them to operate under the Cult of True Womanhood. The Cult of True Womanhood is defined as, “four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity” (Welter, p. 152). White women were also considered the property of White men, called *femme coverture*, and were expected to be submissive to them. The differences between the burdens of White women under patriarchy and enslaved Black women under patriarchy were that White women had access to human rights under the law. As the mothers of “true” American children and wives of White males, White women still had social and legal status within their communities. Article XXXVII of the South Carolina Slave Codes states that “And if any person shall on a sudden heat of passion, or by undue correction, kill his own slave or the slave of any person, he shall forfeit the sum of £350 current money” (1740, p. 179). This article not only underscores enslaved persons as chattel property, but shows the delineation of freedom for White women. Their status was based upon the fact that they could not freely be murdered, like enslaved Black women, which shows a claim to human rights.

Quite a few White women in the 19th century used this status of White citizenry to appeal for the abolition of slavery. Since they still had social restrictions, they morphed the Cult of True Womanhood to achieve their goals. Many of these upper class White women organized into coalitions and channeled piety, purity, and concepts of natural rights into their movement, which makes these abolitionist groups even more noteworthy. For example, in her *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South*, A.E. Grimke said,

We must come back to the good old doctrine of our fore fathers who declared to the world, "this self-evident truth that *all* men are created equal, and that they have certain *inalienable* rights among which are, life, *liberty*, and the pursuit of happiness." It is even a greater absurdity to suppose a man can be legally born a slave under *our free Republican* Government, than under the petty despotisms of barbarian Africa. If then, we have no right to enslave an African, surely we can have none to enslave an American; if a self-evident truth that *all* men everywhere and of every color are born equal, and have an *inalienable right to liberty*, then it is equally true that *no* man can be born a slave...(1836, p. 3)

Grimke used the concepts of natural rights and the spirit of the American Revolution to appeal to women that enslaved persons have access to rights as well. She says that the idea that people could be born slave on American land goes against the fabric on which the country was built. It also fits into the structure that women should be submissive to the needs of her country.

Considering women were not supposed to speak publicly on political issues, Grimke used nationalistic appeal to other White women that were in a position to influence their husbands. Anti-slavery societies continuously used the notion of natural rights as an indisputable concept that goes against institutional slavery. In her diary, abolitionist Lucretia Mott quotes delegate leader Sarah Pugh at the World's Anti-Slavery Convention: "Society, that it is contemplated to exclude women from a seat in the convention, as co-equals in the advocacy of Universal Liberty" (June 1840, p. 28). Other women like Sarah Lewis noted the use of the virtues of piety and purity to appeal to the audience at an Anti-Slavery Convention in 1839. She said, "By the pure light...for the sake of your own vitality and influence as a society—in the name of the suffering

and degraded slave....we beseech you come up to this work with earnest hearts, and help us to do it wisely and speedily” (1839, p. 20). The rhetoric she uses is strategic because the terms of “pure light” and “earnest hearts” appeal to women who function under piety and purity. White women’s use of the Cult of True Womanhood allowed them to elevate their own socio-political power to advocate for the end of racialized social death.

V. Concluding the Folds of Gender, Race, Labor, & Human Rights

A holistic examination of institutional slavery in America, from the Colonial Era to the mid-19th century, demonstrates the crucial needs of an intersectional analysis. Without the creation of a legal system, enforcing notions that Black persons had no claim to personhood or natural rights, meant that their social and legal status was reduced to that of chattel. Without that legal system in place, American society would have never risen to become a center for mass-agricultural production contingent on the free and replaceable labor of Black persons. Black women especially suffered under this labor system since it meant their reproductive and productive labor was the property of White males who had no obligations to care for them. White slave owners’ need for a constant source of labor and their personal ownership of Black women meant these women were both sexual prey and productive workers. The degradation of Black people elevated the socio-political power of White women, which they used to appeal abolition through piety and American values. With no way to escape a legal system that does not acknowledge their personhood or natural rights, inherited slave status turned Black women into commodities necessary for the capitalist development of White American society.

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