
ROLL, JORDAN, ROLL

THE WORLD
THE SLAVES MADE
EUGENE D. GENOVESE

*The earth is the Lord's, and
the fulness thereof; the world,
and they that dwell therein.*

—Psalms 24:1



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of separation from loved ones since the risk of sale from insolvency now arises from the condition of having two masters instead of one. But especially, interplantation marriage "creates a feeling of independence, from being of right, out of the control of their master for a time."⁶⁷

The slaves preferred to marry off the plantation for the very reasons their masters preferred them not to, although they too feared the higher risk of sale and permanent separation. That risk took a particularly dreaded form, for a slave on his usual Wednesday or Saturday visit might discover that his wife had disappeared. A wife whose husband did not appear at the appointed time had much more to worry about than the possibility of his being sick, punished, or unfaithful.⁶⁸ Still, as Ella Thomas, a slaveholder of Georgia, said with some exaggeration, the slaves "all preferred having husbands off the plantation [and] thought it was exceedingly hard if they could not marry away from home." The slaves themselves stressed the much greater variety of choice of mates that interplantation marriages afforded and the pleasures of getting away, visiting, and changing pace.⁶⁹

Many whites suspected that the women and especially the men enjoyed the sexual freedom distance made possible and were restoring African polygamy. These suspicions were wildly exaggerated, but some black men with freedom of movement did help create the image of the "travelin' man" who was to emerge so picturesquely in postwar black folklore. No doubt some of the wives had lovers in between their husbands' visits.⁷⁰ There is no reason to assume greater irregularity than such circumstances made inevitable. Living apart during the week generated tensions and fed jealousies. The men, as an ex-slave remarked, would be "stracted" by jealousy all week long, the more so the more they loved their wives.⁷¹

Polygamy, travelin' men, and young women with a taste for adventure spiced but by no means typified interplantation marriages, many of which gave every indication of being held together by devotion and a high sense of responsibility. A man who could only visit his wife once or twice a week had to cook for himself or eat at a communal kitchen most of the time, but he could expect special treatment when he saw his wife. The women took pains to prepare a "big dinner" and to make the visits as festive as possible. They cleaned and repaired their husbands' clothes and made a fuss over them. When the men could, they brought an opossum or chicken or some vegetables or a little gift. Husbands and wives

turned to each other for care and comfort, as when Mary Bell's mother would patiently bathe her husband and attend to the effects of frequent whippings. The whip had always played a big part in the slaves' preference for marrying off the plantation. By living apart the men and women did not have to witness the beatings and humiliations their loved ones took.⁷²

The masters, despite pretenses, knew that these interplantation marriages rested on affection and commitment. They often made efforts to unite the couple through purchase when the slaves found the physical distance too difficult. Those masters who took their slaves' feelings lightly paid for their mistake during the war. Forbidden to visit 'broad wives because their masters feared desertion, the slaves responded by deserting in larger numbers.⁷³ Masters could not afford to believe their own propaganda about slave infidelity and marital indifference. The determination of the slaves to have their own way could not so easily be turned aside.

BROOMSTICKS AND ORANGE BLOSSOMS

As masters became convinced of the social and economic utility of stable unions among their slaves, they reflected on the importance of ceremonies to celebrate the seriousness of the marital tie. Weddings, simultaneously dignified and gay, received sanction from the masters, who saw them as necessary for the preservation of social control.¹ Planters themselves often performed wedding services, and many took impressive pains with the festivities. They paid special attention to the weddings of the house servants, but did not ignore those of the field hands. Many planters married their house servants in the Big House, and some married their field hands there. Curiously, the Big House occasionally hosted broomstick weddings—the customary slave wedding in which the ceremony consisted of having the couple jump over a broomstick—each planter having his own idea of what was proper to celebrate the occasion.²

To avoid loss of work time and also to provide maximum fes-

tivity, masters preferred weddings to be held during the Christmas holidays. During the year the masters tried to schedule the weddings for the weekends; but their motives were not entirely mercenary, for they often made arrangements for Saturday night, rather than Sunday, and allowed the hands to quit work early to dress up for the party. Christmas weddings had the additional advantage of permitting the white children who had returned from boarding school to attend and the white family as a whole to gather, the attendance of the whites at slave weddings being considered no small matter.³

White ministers often officiated at the weddings of slaves who worked in the Big Houses of the elite plantations and sometimes officiated at the weddings of ordinary field hands as well. Particularly in the aristocratic low country of Georgia and South Carolina, many ministers performed this service on the plantations, although some resisted by insisting on performing all weddings in their churches, thereby encouraging masters to take care of their slaves' weddings themselves.⁴ In North Carolina and Tennessee white ministers reputedly regularly married the slaves on the farms and plantations.⁵ Quite possibly, the practice would have become more general if the slaves had wanted it, for in many cases they had a choice and opted for a black preacher or even their own master.⁶ Black preachers performed many weddings in all parts of the South, and many slaves clearly preferred them.⁷

The whites, especially the ladies, often went to considerable lengths to prepare big wedding parties for their house servants and sometimes put themselves out almost as much for the field hands. Many of the white ladies enjoyed the fuss and filled days with writing invitations to their own relatives and friends, as well as to neighboring planters, who were invited to bring their slaves. They wanted their people, especially the bridal party, to enjoy a memorable occasion, and they expected to enjoy it themselves.⁸

Two descriptions of slave weddings in Mississippi provide an idea of the event. Ingraham wrote during the 1830s:

The negroes are usually married by the planter, who reads the service from the gallery [of the Big House]—the couple with their attendants standing upon the steps or on the green in front. These marriages, in the eye of the slave, are binding. Clergymen are sometimes invited to officiate by those planters who feel that respect for the marriage covenant, which leads them to desire its strict observance, where human legislation has not provided for it.

The ladies, he added, would bring delicacies and presents for the couple.⁹

In October, 1856, Francis Terry Leak of Mississippi recorded preparations for the wedding of some of his slaves:

Oct. 2, 1856. Wrote to Margaret [his daughter who was away at school] informing her that her Mother would send for her on the 18th to help prepare for the Negro wedding on the 25th.

Oct. 17, 1856. Wrote to Jane telling her that we would send for her next Friday to attend the Negro wedding, etc.

Oct. 27, 1856. Mr. Mayo came down to the Negro wedding on Saturday night. Several white persons besides the owners of the Bridegrooms attended the wedding.

There were seven couples married at the Negro wedding on Saturday night. The ceremony employed here is copied for future use. It was as follows, viz:

We are assembled together tonight on an occasion of much interest. It is a marriage occasion, but it is of a novel and peculiar character. It is not the ordinary occasion of the marriage of one couple of persons, but the very unusual one—perhaps unprecedented one, of the marriage at the same time, and with the same ceremony, of seven separate couples. The parties, who are to be married now stand in a circle before us, each couple hand in hand. The couples are Alfred & Ermine, Isaac & Rosa, Bennett & Catherine, Allen & Harriet, Ben & Emma, Lewis & Peggy, & Horace & Betty.

With this brief statement of the nature & unusual character of the occasion that has brought us together tonight, we will now proceed to solemnize the rites of matrimony between the several couples, by asking the usual question & exacting the usual vow, of the parties individually.

Alfred—Do you agree, before me & these witnesses to take Ermine as your wife, & to solemnly pledge yourself to discharge towards her the duties of an affectionate & faithful husband?

Ermine—Do you agree, before me & these witnesses, to take Alfred as your husband, & Do you solemnly pledge yourself to discharge towards him the duties of an affectionate & faithful wife?
 . . . [Questions repeated to each couple]

We have now gone through with every form necessary to authorize me to pronounce each of these several couples as man & wife. We have heard each party, of each couple, agree to enter into the married relation with the other party; and we have heard, from each to the other, a solemn vow of fidelity to the obligations of the

married state. It only remains, therefore, that I should pronounce, and accordingly, in the presence of these witnesses, I do pronounce Alfred & Ermine, as man and wife, Isaac & Rosa . . . [etc.]

And in conclusion I enjoin, according to the good old custom of our fathers and mothers, that each Bridegroom now salute the bride.¹⁰

Tempie Herndon remembered her own wedding to a slave from another plantation:

When I growed up I married Exter Durham. He belonged to Marse Snipes Durham who had de plantation 'cross de county line in Orange County. We had a big weddin'. We was married on de front porch of de Big House. Marse George killed a shoat and Mis' Betsy had Georgianna, de cook, to bake a big weddin' cake all iced up white as snow with a bride and groom stand' in de middle holdin' hands. De table was set out in de yard under de trees, and you ain't never seed de like of eats. All de niggers come to de feast and Marse George had a dram for everybody. Dat was some weddin'. I had on a white dress, white shoes, and long white gloves dat come to my elbow, and Mis' Betsy done made me a weddin' veil out of a white net window curtain. When she played de weddin' march on de piano, me and Exter marched down de walk and up on de porch to de altar Mis' Betsy done fixed. Dat de prettiest altar I ever seed. Back 'against de rose vine dat was full of red roses, Mis' Betsy done put tables filled with flowers and white candles. She done spread down a bed sheet, a sure 'nough linen sheet, for us to stand on, and dey was a white pillow to kneel down on. Exter done made me a weddin' ring. He made it out of a big red button with his pocket knife. He done cut it so round and polished it so smooth dat it looked like a red satin ribbon tied round my finger. Dat sure was a pretty ring. I wore it about fifty years. Den it got so thin dat I lost it one day in de wash tub when I was washin' clothes.

Uncle Edmond Kirby married us. He was de nigger preacher dat preached at de plantation church. After Uncle Edmond said de last words over me and Exter, Marse George got to have his little fun. He say, "Come on, Exter, you and Tempie got to jump over de broom stick backwards. You got to do dat to see which one gwine be boss of your household." Everybody come stand round to watch. Marse George hold de broom about a foot high off de floor. De one dat jump over it backwards, and never touch handle, gwine boss de house. If both of dem jump over without touchin' it, dey won't gwine be no bossin', dey just gwine be congenial. I jumped first, and you ought to seed me. I sailed right over dat broom stick same as a cricket. But when Exter jump he done had a big dram and his feet was so

big and clumsy dat dey got all tangled up in day broom and he fell headlong. Marse George he laugh and laugh, and told Exter he gwine be bossed 'twell he scared to speak lessen I told him to speak. After de weddin' we went down to de cabin Mis' Betsy done all dressed up, but Exter couldn't stay no longer den dat night 'cause he belonged to Marse Snipes Durham and he had to go back home. He left de next day for his plantation, but he come back every Saturday night and stay 'twell Sunday night.¹¹

The paternalistic effort of the whites had its less attractive side, as Kenneth Stampp has well said:

The weddings, balls, and other social functions which a generous master arranged for his slaves were equally "irresistible." The white family found it a pure delight to watch a bride and groom move awkwardly through the wedding ceremony, to hear a solemn preacher mispronounce and misuse polysyllabic words, or to witness the incredible maneuvers and gyrations of a "shakedown." . . . In the sentimental recollections of the whites, these gay times in the quarters gave plantation life much of its charm. But these affairs were as much performances for the whites as celebrations for the slaves.¹²

But for the slaves the occasions had their own meaning, which they valued and converted into a mark of their own humanity. More than one white had to acknowledge the dignity and seriousness that the slaves brought to the ceremonies. The Reverend John Hamilton Cornish of South Carolina wrote in his diary an account of a wedding at which he had officiated:

Paul & I took tea with Mr. Andrew Johnston. Between 8 & 9 in the evening the room was cleared, & a company of servants came in. Six Bride grooms & six Brides ranged themselves in order about the room, all decently, & some of them quite tastefully dressed—and I joined them together in a holy state of matrimony. There was no trifling or levity on the occasion—but a decent reverence & solemnity was preserved through the whole ceremony [*sic*].

We then went to another building where a supper table was spread for the newly married & their near relatives—covered with Venison, wild Ducks, ham & rice—Nice pound cakes, custards & coffee. We saw them seated, which was done very decently—then went to another part of the yard where was a large pot of rice & Venison for a general feast. Mrs. J. staid [*sic*] by table till she saw them seated, & everything in order. The wild Ducks were, I suppose, mostly shot by the master—Mr. Wm. caught the Venison for them. I looked in upon them before we returned to the house. They were conducting

themselves with order, & as ceremoniously as any company of Gentlemen & Ladies.

This is the first wedding I have attended in Caroline except my own. I do not know that I ever attended one in any place that left with better feelings. Mr. J. & Mrs. J. are doubtless well repaid [*sic*] for their trouble & kindness they have ministered to so bountifully this evening.¹³

To the Reverend Mr. Cornish's report we may add that of Judith Page Rives of Albemarle County, Virginia:

Pauline took it into her wise young head to be married, and though the arrangement is anything but convenient to me I could not object on the score of her youth as she is a year older than I was when I took that important step. We expected to have a little fun in this exhibition of "high life below stairs," but the imitation of a fashionable bridal was really so perfect that it ceased to be ridiculous. The kitchen and wash house were decorated with evergreens, and lighted up for the reception of the company which was numerous—the gentlemen in white gloves and cravats, the ladies in white muslins and pink ribbons—even the wreath of orange blossoms was conspicuous on the head of the bride, while the bridal veil, modestly drawn down, concealed the blushes of the bashful wearer. To our surprise the ebony minister drew from his pocket an episcopal prayer book, and with the exception of the interpolation of one word which would have puzzled a lexicographer, as it did me, and making the lady promise to obey the gentlemen, at which there was a suppressed titter among the brides-maids and grooms-men, the services were as impressive as they often are on such occasions.¹⁴

Not many slaves could expect such lavish weddings; the great majority were undoubtedly married in broomstick ceremonies. But these cannot be dismissed as without ritual value and significance. The slaves may well have resented the implicit slight; at the least, they came to resent it after they had tasted emancipation. Resentment or no, they often did what they could to make a ceremony out of it. To some extent the whites helped. If many whites demanded broomstick weddings as the form appropriate to slaves, others did so to avoid the embarrassment of having to perform a Christian ceremony that had no status in law and could not include the usual words "Till death do you part." Where possible, the slaves seized the chance to make the occasion as dignified as this central indignity allowed. Where masters made even that much difficult, the slaves often arranged a prayer meeting of their own

and provided what formality they could. Most slaves, largely through their own efforts with or without their masters' sanction and support, got married "right"—or as right as circumstances made possible.¹⁵

No matter how simple, some ceremony was necessary if the slaves were to feel properly married at all. For Africans, white southerners, and black slaves too, the wedding ceremony served the vital function of lifting the couple out of their private relationship and reminding them that the bond between them also bound them to their community and entailed wider responsibilities. Masters and slaves both sought this effect as a means of social control, but not quite the same kind of control.¹⁶

The great trouble with the slave wedding ceremonies, even the most solemn, elaborate, and dignified, lay in the inevitable collapse of the essential Christian message during the exchange of vows. The slaves knew very well that weddings were supposed to reach a climax with "Till death do you part," and they were bound to react grimly to the absence of such words in their own ceremonies. Not many blacks could have thought it clever when a white minister offered "Until death or distance do you part."¹⁷ Matthew Jarrett, an ex-slave from Virginia, remarked on the usual practice:

We slaves knowed that them words wasn't bindin'. Don't mean nothin' lessen you say, "What God has jined, caint no man pull asunder." But dey never would say dat. Jus' say, "Now you married."¹⁸

Whites apparently found it amusing when a popular black preacher in Alabama, whose miseries with the King's English and alleged clownishness provided them with great sport, offered his own version: "Now before God and the witness, I pronounce you man and woman. And whomsoever God hap solated to be jined together, let no man part a thunder. Cursed is he that part man and wife—Amen."¹⁹ But if the whites had trouble getting that message, which one would think clear enough, perhaps they did better with that of an old Gullah preacher who had a particular penchant for crispness: "Till death or buckra part you."²⁰

HUSBANDS AND FATHERS

According to the slaveholders, slave men had little sense of responsibility toward their families and abused them so mercilessly that Ole Massa constantly had to intervene to protect the women and children. Skeptics might wonder how these allegedly emasculated men so easily dominated the strong-willed and physically powerful women of the matriarchal legend, but the slaveholders never troubled themselves about such inconsistencies. "Negroes are by nature tyrannical in their dispositions," Robert Collins of Macon, Georgia, announced, "and, if allowed, the stronger will abuse the weaker; husbands will often abuse their wives and mothers their children." Thus, he concluded, masters and overseers must protect the peace of the quarters and punish aggressors.¹ "Foby," writing on the proper way to manage servants, proudly announced: "The husbands are taught by sad experience to know that they shall not abuse their better halves." Planters frequently instructed their overseers to protect the poor black women against their unfeeling husbands.² The great white fathers spoke without a touch of irony. Listen to W. W. Hazard of Georgia:

I never permit a husband to abuse, strike or whip his wife, and tell them it is disgraceful for a man to raise his hand in violence against a feeble woman, and that woman too, the wife of his bosom, the mother of his children, and the companion of his leisure, his mid-night hours. If the wife teases and provokes him by her nightly chatter, or crabbed deportment, and he complains and establishes the fact, she is punished, but it sometimes happens that the husband petitions for his freedom, which I make it a rule not to refuse, as it imposes a strong obligation on the wife to use her tongue with less bitterness, and be more conciliating in her behavior.³

This outrage at the thought of a man's beating a woman—unless, of course, the man was white and the woman black, in which case, one supposes, she metamorphosed from a woman into a "wench"—reached imposing theoretical heights in the pronouncements of leading proslavery ideologues. Chancellor Harper, deeply con-

cerned over the world-wide tendency of lower-class men to abuse their women, sighed with relief at the protection offered by slavery.

The [slaves] are placed under the control of others, who are interested to restrain their excesses of cruelty or rage. Wives are protected from their husbands, and children from their parents. And this is no inconsiderable compensation of the evils of our system and would so appear, if we could form any conception of the immense amount of misery which is elsewhere inflicted.⁴

Life in the quarters, like lower-class life generally, sometimes exploded in violence. Court records, plantation papers, and ex-slave accounts reveal evidence of wife-beating but do not remotely sustain the pretension that without white interference the quarters would have rung with the groans of abused womanhood. Too many black men did not believe in beating their wives, and too many black women, made physically strong by hard field work, were not about to be beaten. So, why should slaveholders, who thought nothing of stripping a woman naked and whipping her till she bled, express so much concern? The pontificating of the ideologues might be dismissed as politically serviceable rubbish, but the concern of the slaveholders who wrote in agricultural journals primarily for each other's eyes and who penned private instructions for overseers demands explanation.

The slaveholders needed order and feared that domestic abuse would undermine the morale of the labor force. But, then, why not require the drivers to enforce peace and quiet? Why not refrain from intervening unless plantation morale actually sagged? After all, the intervention and whipping might easily provoke a worse reaction than the incident itself. But, by asserting himself as the protector of black women and domestic peace, the slaveholder asserted himself as *paterfamilias* and reinforced his claims to being sole father of a "family, black and white." In this light, the efforts of the drivers or plantation preachers or other prestigious slaves to restrain abusive husbands represented an attempt by the quarters to rule themselves. When a driver intervened and usurped the role of *paterfamilias*, he may have thereby underscored the paternalist ideology of the plantation; but, by keeping the white man out of the picture, he set limits to the slaves' internalization of racist norms.

The slaveholders intuitively grasped something else. A black

man whose authority in the house rested on his use of force may have picked the worst way to assert himself, but in a world in which so much conspired to reduce men to "guests in the house" and to emasculate them, even this kind of assertion, however unmanly by external standards, held some positive meaning.

The slave women did not often welcome Ole Massa's protection. They preferred to take care of themselves or, when they needed help, to turn to their fathers, brothers, or friends. As any policeman in a lower-class neighborhood, white or black, knows, a woman who is getting the worst of a street fight with her man and who is screaming for help usually wants relief from the blows; she does not want her man subjected to an outsider's righteous indignation and may well join him in repelling an attack. When Ellen Botts's mother—the much-respected Mammy of a sugar plantation—showed up with a lump on her head inflicted by her hot-tempered husband, she told her master that she had had an accident. She would deal with her husband herself and certainly did not want to see him whipped. When James Redpath asked a slave woman in South Carolina if slave women expected to leave their husbands when they fell out, he got the contemptuous answer meddlers in other people's love lives ought to expect: "Oh, no, not allus; we sometimes quarrel in de daytime and make all up at night."⁵

The slaveholders did not want their slaves to abuse each other. Rather, they could not abide their slaves' living together without outside interference. They therefore read the signs as they wished. The slaves, for their part, did not live like saints but did take care of each other quite as well as any other people raised in a less than genteel world.

The slaveholders, in their tender concern for black women who suffered abuse from their husbands, remained curiously silent about those who fell back on their husbands' protection. Laura Bell's father won her mother's hand by volunteering to take a whipping in her place. Most slaveholders had the sense to prohibit such gallantry, but no few black men braved their wrath by interposing themselves between their wives or daughters and the white man who sought to harm them.⁶ Not only husbands but male friends killed, beat, or drove off overseers for whipping their women.⁷

Black women fell victims to white lust, but many escaped because the whites knew they had black men who would rather die

than stand idly by. In some cases black men protected their women and got off with a whipping or no punishment at all; in other cases they sacrificed their lives. Knowledge of their inevitable response prevented many outrages from happening.⁸ Eliza Frances Andrews need not have expressed surprise when one of the first acts of the freedmen in Georgia was to organize a "Sons of Benevolence" to protect "female virtue." And Kate Stone should have known better than to say of the battle of Milliken's Bend, "It is said the Negro regiments fought like demons but we cannot believe that. We know from long experience they are cowards."⁹

In view of the risks, the wonder is not that more black men did not defend their women but that so many did, especially since the women had to caution restraint or risk their men's lives. With children and each other to consider, the slaves had to strengthen each other in a course of acceptance of what could be prevented only at too high a price. If submission to outrage sometimes revealed cowardice, so did it often reveal a far greater strength than most men and women are ever asked—or ever should be asked—to display.¹⁰

Even short of death, the pride of assertive manliness could reach fearful proportions. An overseer tried to rape Josiah Henson's mother but was overpowered by his father. Yielding to his wife's pleas and the overseer's promise of no reprisal, the enraged slave desisted from killing him. The overseer broke his promise. Henson's father suffered one hundred lashes and had an ear nailed to the whipping post and then severed.

Previous to this affair my father, from all I can learn, had been a good-humored and light-hearted man, the ringleader in all fun at corn-huskings and Christmas buffoonery. His banjo was the life of the farm, and all night long at a merry-making would he play on it while the other Negroes danced. But from this hour he became utterly changed. Sullen, morose, and dogged, nothing could be done with him.

Threats of being sold south had no effect on him. The thoughts running through his mind as he came to prefer separation from the wife he loved to enduring life there must remain a matter of speculation. His master sold him to Alabama, and he was never heard from again.¹¹

What kind of evidence and how much of it is needed to convince skeptics that the essential story of black men in slavery lay with

the many who overcame every possible hardship and humiliation to stand fast to their families? Elizabeth Keckley's father, sold away a long distance from her mother, returned to visit his family every Christmas and Easter. Later sent to the Caribbean, he regularly exchanged letters with the wife he was never to see again. A slave in Georgia prevailed on his master to sell him to Jamaica so that he could find his wife, despite warnings that his chances of finding her on so large an island were remote. Renty, a slave on the George Noble Jones plantation in Florida, divorced his wife and married again only when his new favorite promised to take care of his children. George Payne of Virginia wept when his child was sold away from him, and another slave in Virginia chopped his left hand off with a hatchet to prevent being sold away from his son. Stepfathers everywhere reportedly treated their newly acquired children as if they had been their own. Freedmen in Louisiana stubbornly resisted impressment by the Union army because, as their old master explained, their families were suffering. John Blassingame has convincingly demonstrated how the slave men of the Union border states flocked into the army once their families were guaranteed freedom in return for their enlistment.¹²

Slave men provided for their families to a greater extent than has been appreciated. The overwhelming majority of the masters gave their slaves enough to eat but did not err on the side of generosity; and the fare was coarse and monotonous. The slaves would have suffered much more than many in fact did from malnutrition and the hidden hungers of nutritional deficiencies if the men had not taken the initiative to hunt and trap animals. "My old daddy," recalled Louisa Adams of North Carolina, "partly raised his chil-luns on game. He caught rabbits, coons an' possums. He would work all day and hunt at night."¹³ Mothers sang to their babies:

Bye baby buntin'
Daddy's gone a-huntin'
Ter fetch a little rabbit skin
Ter wrap de baby buntin' in.¹⁴

The men took pride in their effort. Edgar Bendy of Texas boasted, "I used to be plumb give up to be de best hunter in Tyler and in de whole country. I kilt more deer dan any other man in de country. . . ." And the boys took pride in their fathers, grandfathers,

and uncles. A half century later John Glover of South Carolina remembered his grandfather as "a great 'possum hunter."¹⁵ The men had some justification for their boasting. Trapping wild turkeys, for example, required considerable skill; not everyone could construct a "rabbit gum" equal to the guile of the rabbits; and running down the quick, battling raccoon took pluck.¹⁶ For a boy growing up, the moment when his father thought him ready to join in the hunting and to learn to trap was a much-sought recognition of his own manhood.

For the slaves fishing was much more than the lazy pastime of white plantation romance. They varied monotonous and inadequate diets by catching fish, crabs, and gathering oysters, clams, conchs, turtles, terrapins, shrimp, and prawns, and anything else available. The coastal lowlands of Maryland, Virginia, South Carolina, and Georgia as well as the bayou country of Louisiana offered special opportunities, but most regions had some kind of stream with something worth catching. According to Mrs. Schoolcraft, every black man on the South Carolina coast made his own canoe "by burning the inside, and then scraping out a great oaken log, some ten or twelve feet long."¹⁷

The archaeological excavation of a slave cabin in Georgia by Robert Ascher and Charles H. Fairbanks turned up evidence of a wide assortment of animals, birds, and fish. "The animals," they write, "were young, old, and in-between, suggesting that their pursuer took whatever he could find." Their study supports the insistence of ex-slaves and antebellum travelers that the men put much effort into supplementing their families' diet. As they conclude: "In sum, through excavation, we have learned that the people in one cabin managed to add considerable protein to their diet, apparently through their own efforts."¹⁸

Many slaves had Saturday afternoons free for hunting and trapping, but many more had to find time after a long day's work during the week. A free afternoon did not always avail anyway since opossum and raccoon, the slaves' great favorites, run at night. When the masters allowed the slaves to roam about at night, they turned the hunt into a great collective sport and shared the spoils. When the masters frowned on this activity, they had to go singly or in pairs and risk punishment. Although few masters wanted their slaves to run about at night instead of resting for the next day's work, most saw the advantage in allowing the slaves to get some of their own food, and the masters also needed these efforts

to help control the ravages of raccoons, squirrels, and crows in their fields.¹⁹

The slaves' great allies in hunting opossum and raccoon were their dogs. The dogs treed the prey and fought them when the slaves had shaken them down. The slaves took particular pride in their dogs and insisted that a first-class 'possum dog should not be confused with a first-class 'coon dog. To each dog his own work.²⁰ The slaves' dogs created many problems for the slaveholders and for the neighborhood generally. They sometimes killed domestic animals; they barked too much; they ran around filthy and constituted a nuisance. In 1752, Virginia's House of Burgesses gravely debated a proposal for destroying the slaves' dogs. During the nineteenth century Alabama outlawed them but could not enforce the law. The slaves everywhere had their way. "Our greatest trial," wrote Elizabeth Hyde Botume, "was the dogs. No colored man considered himself safe, or even respectable, without one or more miserable-looking curs."²¹

Many plantations had at least one slave who used a gun for hunting on a larger scale. Some masters simply allowed one or two reliable men to carry a gun in order to bring in large game for the quarters; others designated one or two slaves as plantation specialists who worked for the Big House table as well or even exclusively. In some cases the hunting guns had been given to slaves assigned to guard the plantation.²² The states generally outlawed the practice of giving slaves guns, although localities often made room for exceptions. With or without legal sanction, masters did as they pleased, and the sight of slaves hunting with guns rarely raised eyebrows.²³

The big all-plantation hunts came during the winter, which by happy coincidence combined an easier work pace with a great abundance of opossum and raccoon. White and black men turned the opportunity into a holiday.

Possum up de gum stump,
Raccoon in de hollow—
Git him down and twist him out,
And I'll give you a dollar.²⁴

As in corn shuckings, the accompanying camaraderie strengthened paternalist ties, especially since the masters so clearly played the leading organizational role while the slaves did most of the work and provided the marvelous stories and gaiety that made the

subsequent bonfires so memorable. At the same time, the slave men accumulated a supply of their favorite foods for their families and gave their women the wherewithal and the occasion to demonstrate their culinary skills.

Sensible masters actually encouraged a limited sexual division of labor among their slaves and saw some advantage in strengthening the power of the male in the household. Many planters identified slave women by their husbands' names: Tom's Sue or Joe's Mary. A strong man who kept his wife and children in line contributed to social peace and good order. William Ervin of Lowndes County, Mississippi, laid down the following as the second point in his Rules for the Plantation:

2nd. Each family to live in their own house. The husband to provide fire wood and see that they are all provided for and wait on his wife. The wife to cook & wash for the husband and her children and attend to the mending of clothes. Failure on either part when proven shall and must be corrected by words first but if not reformed to be corrected by the Whip.²⁵

Hugh Davis, whose scrupulous biographer considers him typical of the bigger planters of the Alabama Black Belt, included among his rules:

Men alone are required to feed and perform all lot work [animal care] at the close of every day. The women are required, when work is done in the field, to sweep their houses and yards and receive their supper [communally prepared] at the call of the cook, after which they may sew or knit but not leave their houses otherwise.²⁶

On the large plantations, which displayed a greater division of labor than the small plantations and farms, men did heavy work on rainy days or in slack periods while the women sewed, cleaned up the grounds, and did assorted lighter tasks. Even then, the foreman of the women's crew was often a man.²⁷

This division of labor and the strengthened male role within it, which so many planters encouraged, helped shape the kind of men who might prove more independent than slaves were supposed to be. The slaveholders, therefore, here as elsewhere, had to live with a contradiction: dispirited slave men could not keep the good order necessary for efficiency and, besides, might become troublesome in their very irresponsibility; spirited slaves with a sense of being men would help keep good order and render the plantation more

efficient, but they too, in different ways, might become troublesome in their very responsibility. Slaves remained a troublesome property.

Meanwhile, in ways wholesome and not so wholesome, the men asserted themselves. If Nancy Williams's mother spent extra hours in making quilts for the family, her father built the shelves and closets to house them. If Mary Ann Lipscomb's mother had to weave when tired from a day's labor, her father did his best to help. Other men asserted themselves at the expense of their wives by contemptuously refusing to do "women's work."²⁸

The struggle to become and to remain men, not the "boys" their masters called them, included some unattractive manifestations of male aggression. The freedmen, Miss Botume noted, spoke affectionately of their wives but in such a way as to suggest that they were property, virtually slaves, helpless children who had to be taught everything.²⁹ Almost everywhere in the South the freedmen demanded wages high enough to allow them to support their families. They wanted their women home with the children, and the women supported the demand vigorously. Many women may have preferred housekeeping to the rigors of farm work and thought they were choosing an easier life, but most seem to have felt a great need to give their children a full-time mother. In any case, these tough women, who so often proved militant during the political struggles of Reconstruction, displayed not merely a willingness but a desire to defer to their husbands both at home and in the new political world they were entering together. For all the deformations introduced by slavery, they knew that many of their men were strong and dependable and wanted the others to become so.

The slaveholders deprived black men of the role of provider; refused to dignify their marriages or legitimize their issue; compelled them to submit to physical abuse in the presence of their women and children; made them choose between remaining silent while their wives and daughters were raped or seduced and risking death; and threatened them with separation from their family at any moment. Many men caved in under the onslaught and became irresponsible husbands and indifferent fathers. The women who had to contend with such men sometimes showed stubborn cheerfulness and sometimes raging bitterness; they raised the children, maintained order at home, and rotated men in and out of bed.

Enough men and women fell into this pattern to give rise to the legends of the matriarchy, the emasculated but brutal male, and the fatherless children. These legends did not merely arise from contemporary proslavery propagandistic fantasies or from the ethnocentricity of later historians and social scientists; they rest on unquestionable evidence, which, being partial, has misled its interpreters.

The inability of the slave men to protect their women against the insults and abuse of masters and overseers hardly put them in a unique or unusual position. For centuries, the mass of European serfs and dependent peasants suffered such indignities at the hands of lords and warlords, yet no one questions their masculinity. Men cannot define the tests of masculinity in a manner abstracted from the web of class power in which they find themselves; women do not normally expect their men to get themselves killed in a fruitless attempt to prevent what cannot be prevented. In a paternalistic system men defer to their lords in a variety of ways without losing a sense of themselves as men in relation to their women. Although slave men suffered deeply, there is no evidence that most felt themselves less than men. But white racism did undermine them in other ways. It created among them and their women a tendency to doubt that black men could play all the roles that whites could, but these generally concerned matters of political, economic, and intellectual leadership rather than male-female relations.

Many men and women resisted the "infantilization," "emasculatation," and "dehumanization" inherent in the system's aggression against the slave family. How many? No one will ever know. At issue is the quality of human relationships, which cannot be measured. But there exists as much evidence of resistance and of a struggle for a decent family life as of demoralization. A brutal social system broke the spirit of many and rendered others less responsible than human beings ought to be. But enough men came out of this test of fire whole, if necessarily scarred, to demonstrate that the slaves had powerful inner resources. A terrible system of human oppression took a heavy toll of its victims, but their collective accomplishment in resisting the system constitutes a heroic story. That resistance provided black people with solid norms for family life and role differentiation, even if circumstances caused a dangerously high lapse from those norms. The slaves from their own experience had come to value a two-parent, male-centered

household, no matter how much difficulty they had in realizing the ideal.

The role of the male slave as husband and father therefore requires a fresh look. If many men lived up to their assigned irresponsibility, others, probably a majority, overcame all obstacles and provided a positive male image for their wives and children. An ex-slave recalled his boyhood:

I loved my father. He was such a good man. He was a good carpenter and could do anything. My mother just rejoiced in him. Whenever he sat down to talk she just sat and looked and listened. She would never cross him for anything. If they went to church together she always waited for him to interpret what the preacher had said or what he thought was the will of God. I was small but I noticed all of these things. I sometimes think I learned more in my early childhood about how to live than I have learned since.³⁰

Protective fathers appeared in the lullabies slave mothers sang to their children.

Kink head, wherefore you skeered?
Old snake crawled off, 'cause he's a-feared.
Pappy will smite him on de back
With a great big club—Ker whack! Ker whack!³¹

Many ex-slaves recalled their fathers as stern disciplinarians, and the slaveholders' complaints about fathers' abusing their children may be read as supporting evidence. Other slave men left their children a memory of kindness and affection that remained through life. Will Adams's father, a foreman on a Texas plantation, came in exhausted after a long day's work but never failed to take his son out of bed and to play with him for hours.³² The spirituals and other slave songs reflected the importance of the father in the lives of the children; many of them sang of the reunification of the family in heaven and of the father's return.³³

Men knew that they might have to part from their wives and children, but that knowledge did not engender indifference so much as a certain stoical submission to that which had to be endured. Under painful conditions, many did their best even while others succumbed. Mingo White's father, upon being sold, did nothing unusual when he charged a male friend with responsibility for looking after his son.³⁴ A principle of stewardship had arisen in the quarters. Even in the absence of a father, some male would likely step in to help raise a boy to manhood. When the war

ended, men crisscrossed the South to reclaim their families and to assert authority over their children.³⁵

Slave children usually did have an image of a strong black man before them. Critical scholars have made the mistake of measuring the slave family by middle-class norms; naturally, they have found it wanting. Even when a slave boy was growing up without a father in the house, he had as a model a tough, resourceful driver, a skilled mechanic or two, and older field hands with some time for the children of the quarters. Some of those men devoted themselves to playing surrogate father to all the children. They told them stories, taught them to fish and trap animals, and instructed them in the ways of survival in a hostile white world. The norm in the quarters called for adults to look after children, whether blood relatives or not. Every plantation had some men who played this role. Under the worst of circumstances, one or two would have been enough; usually, however, there were a number. And there were the preachers. To the extent that the slaves heard their preachers, the children saw before them influential black men whose eloquence and moral force commanded the respect of the adults.

A positive male image existed even in those cabins without resident fathers. In the urban ghettos of the twentieth century, where the one-parent household has taken on greater prominence, the children have not suffered from a lack of a masculine presence. Ulf Hannerz observes: "More or less steady boyfriends (sometimes including the separated father) go in and out. Even if these men do not assume a central household role, the boys can obviously use them as source material for the identification of male behavior."³⁶ And more sharply, Charles Keil:

Clearly, lower-class Negro culture includes a concept of manhood that differs in kind from the white middle-class definition of a man as a head of household, who holds down a steady job and sends his kids to college. . . . But as far as he and his women are concerned, he spends his money freely, dresses well, and is great in bed. That's just the way he is—a *man*—and they like him that way, despite the fact that he's obviously "no good."³⁷

However outsiders may judge the kind of masculinity projected by these circumstances, claims of emasculation and infantilization do not ring true. The slave children, like the ghetto children of later decades, saw a pattern of behavior that implied clear sexual differ-

entiation and a notion of masculinity with its own strengths and weaknesses.

What happened to a slave boy who witnessed, as many did, his father's being whipped by a white man, or worse, his father's standing by helplessly while his mother was being whipped? Clearly, the moment had to be traumatic and the boy's confidence in his father had to be shaken. Children apparently did not often witness such scenes: most masters preferred to discipline their slaves at times and in places unavailable to the children, and the slave parents conspired to keep their children ignorant. As for those children who saw and suffered, many possibly never got over the shock. But there is no evidence that many despised their fathers, especially since their mothers tried to explain the acquiescence and instruct their children in the ways of survival. Nor do we know how many children reacted like that Mexican peasant boy who saw his father collapse helplessly in tears when a treacherous landowner expropriated his land. Emiliano Zapata did not despise his father. He swore vengeance.³⁸

Peter Poyas, Denmark Vesey's lieutenant in the abortive rising of 1822, is remembered as the man who showed his troops how to face execution: "Do not open your lips; die silent, as you shall see me do." He might also be remembered for his restrained comment to the judge who sentenced him to death: "I suppose you'll let me see my wife and family before I die?"³⁹

WIVES AND MOTHERS

Elizabeth Hyde Botume in her wonderful book, *First Days Amongst the Contrabands*, tells of the black women recently emancipated by the Yankee invasion:

When the women found me so unsuspecting, they exhibited their handicraft with no small degree of pride. It was not an unusual thing to meet a woman coming from the fields, where she had been hoeing cotton, with a small bucket or cup on her head, and a hoe over her shoulder, contentedly smoking a pipe and briskly knitting as she strode along. I have seen, added to all these, a baby strapped to her

back. The patient devotion of these negro women was most admirable.¹

The women field hands generally had a longer day than their men. Even the critical Fanny Kemble thought that the middle-aged men did not appear overworked but that the women did. She particularly drew attention to the effects of hard field work in combination with childbearing.² Ex-slaves said much more. In addition to the usual work load, the women had to cook for their families, put the children to bed, and often spin, weave, and sew well into the night. On many plantations masters and overseers released them from field work early to attend to their household chores, but on many others they did not, except perhaps on Saturday to get the week's washing done. Many of the women rose early to feed their men, although most masters sensibly preferred to arrange for communal preparation of the morning's meal. Harrison Beckett of Texas grimly recalled his mother's coming in exhausted from the fields and having to cook for her husband and children: "Lots of times she's so tired she go to bed without eatin' nothin' herself."³

Usually men, not women, plowed on the large plantations, but when the minority of plantation women who did plow are added to those on smaller units who had to work alongside their men or even alone, it would appear that the rigors of plowing engaged the efforts of a substantial minority of southern slave women.⁴ On many plantations the women proved superior to the men in picking cotton; in general, men and women did about equally well. Not unusually a woman would rate as the most valuable field hand on the place or as the single most physically powerful individual. Some excelled in such exacting roles as logrollers and even lumberjacks.⁵ And if the men often helped their wives to keep up with their tasks, the roles could be reversed. "My daddy was a field hand," recalled Pierce Harper, who had been a slave in North Carolina, "and my mother worked in the field, too, right 'longside my daddy, so she could keep him lined up." Her mother had a reputation as the best field hand on the place and her father as the worst. "My mother," she explained, "used to say he was chile-some."⁶

White southerners, who usually knew better, sometimes pretended that black mothers cared little about children. The whites might have been referring to that stoicism toward the death of an infant which appears in all societies with high infant mortality,

especially among the poor; yet even upper-class southern whites suffered too often from the death of their own infants not to understand the necessity for a certain amount of fatalism and self-control. They did not confuse their own self-discipline with lack of grief. The white women and even the men frequently commented on the grief felt by particular slave parents when they lost a child.⁷ The sadistic mistress who whipped a slave girl to death fully appreciated the maternal affection of her slaves: she sent for the girl's mother to watch her die.⁸

The calmness of many slave mothers and fathers in the face of the death of their infants and young children recalls that of many other peoples who simply had to live with the probability of losing some of their children. Keith Thomas writes: "In Tudor and Stuart England men were fully accustomed to disease and a low expectation of life. Parents were slower to recognize the individuality of their children, for they well knew that they might lose them in their infancy."⁹ Philippe Ariès adds that such conditions existed in France well into the nineteenth century: "Nobody thought, as we ordinarily think today, that every child already contained a man's personality. Too many of them died."¹⁰

Mrs. Kemble, commenting on the apparent indifference of parents to the death of a boy, recounted a telling incident: "The mother merely repeated over and over again, 'I've lost a many; they all goes so'; and the father, without a word or comment, went out to his enforced labor."¹¹ This self-protective hardening of parents' attitudes toward their children, reinforced under slavery by fear of sale, did not appear in the quarters any more noticeably than elsewhere under conditions of high infant mortality; it may even have appeared less often. Most black women welcomed their babies as a joy, loved them, and braced themselves for inevitable losses and heartaches.

Some slave women took little interest in their children either because they succumbed to the terrific pressures of overwork, insufficient time for child care, and general demoralization or because they did not want to raise them as slaves.¹² But much of what has been called indifference was no more than the effects of exhaustion on women who loved the children they could not always find patience for. Women who had been forced into cohabitation might especially have resented the children of these unions; yet there is no evidence that even they usually did so.

Women who did not want children knew how to abort or to

arrange to have a child die soon after birth. With childbirth deaths so common from natural causes, the deed could not easily be detected. But birth and reproduction rates remained high. Slave abortions, much less infanticide, did not become a major problem for the slave holders or an ordinary form of "resistance" for the slaves. Infanticide occurred, but so far as the detected cases reveal anything, only in some special circumstance. The white citizens of Virginia petitioned in 1822 to spare a slave condemned to death for killing her infant. The child's father was a respectable, married white man, and the woman insisted she would not have killed a child of her own color. Lou Smith, an ex-slave from South Carolina, recalled a woman who had had one child after another sold away from her. Finally, she poisoned her next child and swore to have no more. The other slaves knew what she had done but protected her.¹³ For the most part, however, the slaves recognized infanticide as murder. They loved their children too much to do away with them; courageously, they resolved to raise them as best they could, and entrusted their fate to God. Nothing like the widespread infanticide of, say, nineteenth-century Japan, with its economic rationale, ever swept the quarters.¹⁴

Particularly humane or closely calculating masters released their slave women from field work for a full month before and after childbirth, but many fell short of this model. Normally, the women would have their tasks lightened or cut in half during the last month of pregnancy and then would not be expected back at work until a month after delivery.¹⁵

Plantation midwives usually attended the deliveries, although mistresses sometimes helped. Slaveholders turned to physicians rarely, but the substantial fees recorded in physicians' account books suggest that they regularly attended the difficult cases.¹⁶ The women often complained bitterly that they needed more time before and after delivery, but they may have been more concerned about the care of their infants than about their own health. The slaveholders thought a month's rest after delivery ample and pointed out, accurately, that the peasant and working-class women of Europe had no such good fortune.¹⁷

Black women supposedly needed less consideration than the weaker white women anyway, but the statistics on death in childbed as well as on disease and deformity following childbirth provide no support for this rationalization.¹⁸ Nor did lectures on

the superiority of their treatment relative to that of, say, English peasant and working-class women who had to endure the physical and psychological hardships attendant upon pregnancy, delivery, and nursing. Kenneth Stampp, admittedly working from shaky data, plausibly estimates many more spontaneous abortions and stillbirths in black women than in white. Whatever the precise differential, the slave women's particular vulnerability to this group of maladies largely resulted from overwork, inadequate prenatal care, and enforced performance of tasks beyond their strength.¹⁹

The women complained especially about the inadequate conditions for nursing. Landon Carter permitted his slaves to leave the fields three times a day to attend to their babies; the women thought five times would be proper and caused themselves no little trouble by lying or trying to maneuver the overseer into giving them more time. During the nineteenth century three or four times became standard. On M. W. Philips's plantation in Hinds County, Mississippi, the women went into the cookhouse to nurse at breakfast, at 9:30 A.M., at noon, and once during the afternoon. On some plantations mothers could remain with their infants for two hours at midday.²⁰ Often, the nurses brought the children to their mothers in the field. Overseers and nurses had instructions to keep mothers from nursing their children for fifteen minutes or so after they had stopped working in hot weather or had walked the long distance from the fields. Such instructions could not readily be enforced; too often, hot and tired mothers picked their children up eagerly and nursed them under conditions that might easily have done psychological and physical damage.²¹

If slave mothers viewed their infants with indifference as many slaveholders claimed, they had some strange ways of showing it. Notwithstanding the objective difficulties in nursing, they showed, by more recent standards, a marked unwillingness to wean them early. "We sucked till we was a fair size," said Mary Reynolds of Louisiana in expressing a common view. The Gullah slaves, like the West Africans to whom they remained culturally closer than did other slaves, nursed their children two or three years and even longer. The slaves' practice did not vary greatly from southern practice in general, especially that of the lower classes. Mrs. Kemble, Olmsted, and others were taken aback at the prolonged nursing among the whites. The little evidence we have

indicates that the blacks followed the same course and nursed their babies as long as they reasonably could.²²

Many women saw their children only for a few minutes at night and then on weekends. That some became indifferent ought to cause no surprise; and yet, clearly, most did not.

My mammy [recalled Fannie Moore of South Carolina] she work in de field all day and piece and quilt all night. . . . I never see how my mammy stand such hard work. She stand up for her chillen though. De old overseer he hate my mammy, 'cause she fought him for beatin' her chillen. Why she get more whippin' for dat dan anythin' else.²³

Fannie Moore's mother had plenty of company in slave mothers who forcibly defended their children against white abuse.²⁴

Although often accused of indifference to their children, slave mothers could hardly have made a deeper impression on the children themselves. The lifelong love of the children, male and female, for their mothers shines through the narratives, as it does through the earlier writings of successful runaways and the occasional observations of whites. Martha Schofield recorded in her diary the dying words of her male cook: "Lord forgive them. I am coming mother, I am coming. Oh! This is pleasant, my mother's grave."²⁵ William Wells Brown reflected on his mother's having been sold south and on the probability of her early death: "As I thought of my mother, I could not but feel that I had lost, 'The glory of my life/ My blessing and my pride!/ I half forgot the name of slave/ When she was by my side.'"²⁶ Josiah Henson wrote of the mother from whom he was separated by sale only to be reunited by repurchase after he had fallen ill:

We had been in the main very happy. She was a good mother to us, a woman of deep piety, anxious above all things to touch our hearts with a sense of religion. . . . Now, I was once more with my best friend on earth, and under her care. . . .²⁷

George Teamoh of Virginia recalled his mother in a letter to Carter G. Woodson that might have spoken for numerous others:

My mother—whom I well remember—bore the common name "Winnie." She died when I was quite small. My father, who was not her husband by the usages of custom died some time after. She was the mother of three or four children, whether all by the same man I am not prepared to say, but what I do know is, she was a kind and

affectionate mother and true to her offspring. She was raised with my old mistress, to whom we both belonged.²⁸

These were not occasional pronouncements. When added to the powerful image of the mother that comes through the spirituals, as well as to the overwhelming evidence of maternal devotion in the plantation records and the slave narratives, they compel the conclusion that the children felt loved and experienced their mothers' tenderness and warmth. In view of how much conspired to thwart the maternal instincts of these black women, their achievement reached heroic proportions.

The story of the slave women as wives requires indirect examination. To deduce from it an assumption that the man was a guest in the house will not do. A review of the actual position of the men as husbands and fathers suggests that the position of the women was much more complex than usually credited. The women's attitude toward house work, especially cooking, and toward their own femininity by itself belies the conventional wisdom according to which the women unwittingly helped ruin their men by asserting themselves in the home, protecting their children, and assuming other normally masculine responsibilities.²⁹

A remarkable number of women did everything possible to strengthen their men's self-esteem and to defer to their leadership. What has usually been viewed as a debilitating female supremacy was in fact a closer approximation to a healthy sexual equality than was possible for whites and perhaps even for many postbellum blacks. The men did not play the provider for their families in a full and direct sense, but they did everything they could to approximate it. They could have scored few successes without the sympathetic cooperation of their women, many—by no means all—of whom yielded their own prerogatives. This female deference represented an effort by the women to support their men—an effort that could only have flowed from a judgment on what men ought to be and an awareness of the terrible ravages being wrought by slavery. On whatever level of consciousness, many women—perhaps a substantial majority—understood that the degradation of their men represented their own degradation as black women and that of their children. They wanted their boys to grow up to be men and knew perfectly well that, to do so, they needed the example of a strong black man in front of them.

The struggle of the women to define a feminine role for themselves and to strengthen their men's sense of their own masculinity came to fruition after the war when the women so readily deferred to their men without surrendering their own opinions and activities, which were often militant. Black people found themselves in a brutal battle for genuine freedom in a postwar world in which certain norms reigned. They knew that in order to win, they would have to accommodate to those norms—specifically, the norms according to which men, not women, controlled the political process and supported the family. The ease with which black men and women made that transition, when not prevented by forces beyond their control, demonstrates how well prepared they already were.

The slave family had, however, rested on a much greater equality between men and women than had the white family. It had bred strong women. The strength of the women did not necessarily undermine the men; often, it supported them. It took enormous strength for a woman to keep her man from avenging an insult or a beating she had suffered and to convince him that the test of his masculinity was self-restraint, not some action that would deprive her of a husband and her children of a father. He needed that assurance to survive, and only she could give it to him. But with freedom the women had to strengthen their men in ways that separated themselves from some of the major sources of their own strength, especially their place in the economy. Their withdrawal from field work undoubtedly would have gone much further if new systems of exploitation had not forced many of them to help their tenant-farmer and sharecropper husbands. The subsequent history of the black family is another matter. New conditions of oppression made it difficult for black men and women to build on their past and create the new and more sexually equitable family inherent in it.

The postbellum record should not be projected backward. A substantial number of black women came out of slavery just as strong as some historians insist. But, in a sense, they had always been even stronger: strong enough to know that their own dignity required having strong men who could meet their responsibilities; strong enough to support their men in those very aspirations.