

WE HAVE RAISED ALL OF YOU:
MOTHERHOOD IN THE SOUTH, 1750-1835

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of History.

Chapel Hill
2011

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ABSTRACT

KATY SIMPSON SMITH: We Have Raised All of You: Motherhood in the South, 1750-1835

(Under the direction of Kathleen DuVal and Jacquelyn Dowd Hall)

Motherhood in the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century South was comprised of multiple roles that white, black, and Indian women constructed, interpreted, and defended. I focus on women in Virginia and the Carolinas to prove that these roles, from nurse and teacher to economic provider, shaped holistic maternal identities that offered women of all backgrounds a sense of power, control and self-worth within the pervasive hierarchies of the South. An examination of women's maternal experiences reveals that the dictates of Revolutionary-Era prescriptive literature regarding "Republican Motherhood" – the belief that women had an obligation to raise the next generation of virtuous male citizens – had little concrete effect on the ways women performed their duties as mothers. On the contrary, motherhood as an institution driven by women exhibited continuities that spanned the Revolution and encompassed roles and responsibilities that were dependent on a woman's race, class, and region. I argue that mothers enjoyed expansive female networks of communication and support, creatively used every available tool to educate their children, and almost universally perceived their maternal roles to be sources of meaning, personal worth, and communal consequence. This study of motherhood examines practices rather than prescriptions in order to reveal the ways in which a diverse group of women struggled to create ennobling definitions of motherhood in the early American South.

*For the continuity of my mothers:
Elise Lawton Smith (1953-)
Elise Nicholson Lawton (1924-1992)
Elise Bates Nicholson (1890-1972)*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There is something about the study of long-dead individuals that makes one all the more grateful for the aid of living women and men. My dissertation committee deserves special praise for helping midwife this often unwieldy project: Kathleen DuVal, who was a friend as much as a mentor, who caught every mixed metaphor I threw at her, and whose dedication as an advisor should serve as a universal model; Jacquelyn Hall, whose unwavering enthusiasm for the project sustained me through periods of doubt; Theda Perdue, who cheerfully redirected my missteps; and Heather Williams and John Sweet, who not only offered advice, but helped guide me through the shoals of my first year of graduate school.

For their generous funding for various stages of research and writing, I want to thank the UNC Center for the Study of the American South, the UNC Medieval and Early Modern Studies Program, the UNC Graduate School, the Newberry Consortium in American Indian Studies at the Newberry Library, the Virginia Historical Society, the North Caroliniana Society, Mount Holyoke College, and the Coordinating Council for Women in History. This project also may not have been finished without timely escapes from Chapel Hill; I want to thank Duncan Riddell in Chicago, Elisa Wirkala in Seattle, and Jen and Joseph Strickland in Austin for sharing their homes and cities with me while I explored both my sources and the world around me.

Historians without archivists are just wanderers in the wilderness. For their guidance and support in the archives, I want to thank Laura Clark Brown at the Southern Historical

Collection; Brent Burgin at the University of South Carolina at Lancaster; Graham Duncan and Brian Cuthrell at the South Caroliniana Library; Mary Jo Fairchild at the South Carolina Historical Society; Katherine Wilkins, Nelson Lankford, Frances Pollard, and Lee Shepard at the Virginia Historical Society; Jim Grossman, Scott Stevens, John Aubrey, Danny Greene, and Jenny Schwartzberg at the Newberry Library; and the staffs of the Library of Virginia, the Swem Library Special Collections at the College of William and Mary; the North Carolina State Archives; and the South Carolina Department of Archives and History.

The women's history community is remarkable for its collegiality and generosity. I sent out chapters like alms-seeking children, and I received invaluable advice and encouragement from Emily Bingham, Anya Jabour, Lynn Kennedy, Catherine Kerrison, and Thavolia Glymph. For their comments and suggestions on conference papers and presentations, I want to thank Emily Bingham, Fitz Brundage, James Taylor Carson, Thavolia Glymph, Laura Gowing, Elizabeth McRae, Deirdre Cooper Owens, Susan Pennybacker, Diana Williams, the UNC-Duke Working Group in Feminism and History, the Triangle Early American History Seminar, and the Triangle African American History Colloquium. I was fortunate enough to receive advice on my work from a range of other scholars, and the critiques of Kirsten Fischer, Chris Grasso, and Karin Wulf have been particularly helpful.

I also have more personal debts. I offer sincere gratitude to Joseph Ellis, who did everything an undergraduate advisor could to get his students enthralled by early American history and whose writing provided me with a model for history-as-storytelling; Christina Snyder, who served as my big sister and Virgil through the underworld of grad school; Crystal Feimster, who shared her energy and her family with me; Ayse Erginer and Dave

Shaw, who demanded that I follow my dreams, however subversive, and whose office was invariably filled with more mirth than seemed legal; CarolAnne Selway, whose study of seventeenth-century English motherhood formed a perfect partner to my own research; Felicity Turner, my guide to all things infanticide-related; Mikaëla Adams, Jonathan Hancock, and Julie Reed, my colleagues in American Indian history, who were at various points my sounding boards, my bunkmates, and my baseball companions; Randy Browne, who was both an honest critic and a staunch defender; Catherine Conner, who inspired me with both her passion and her pies; and Rob Ferguson, my best friend, who brightened my days and held my hand through the very darkest of nights. I would not have made it through graduate school without him.

In most acknowledgments, families tend to earn the final accolade, and this is as it should be. They push us not only academically, but personally. They endure lengthy descriptions of arcane topics and departmental dramas, but they also remind us of a saner, larger world, a world which – in the end – cares not if you’ve read the latest monograph, but only that you’re a kind, loving, and decent human being. This detail can get lost in the cloisters of academia, but it’s never lost to your parents. I want to thank Elise and Steve Smith for inducting me into the mysteries of professorhood, discussing the details of my evolving argument, reminiscing about how easy grad school seemed in the ‘70s, and providing a safe space away from the dissertation when I needed it; my grandfather Bob for believing in the value of education; my brother Matthew for reading a draft of my dissertation just because he saw it sitting on the kitchen table and charting the course that I always wanted to follow; my sister-in-law Kelly, who began the intimate journey of

motherhood just as I was beginning my abstract investigations; and my nephew Simon, whose infectious laughter taught me perspective.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Abbreviations</i>	xi
<i>Introduction</i>	1
I. <i>They Sprung from a Woman: Indian Mothers</i>	24
1. Indian Farmers	32
2. Indian Providers	50
3. Indian Spiritual Guides	74
4. Indian Teachers	91
5. Indian Politicians	110
6. Indian Sufferers	131
II. <i>Sowing Good Seeds: White Mothers</i>	144
7. White Nurses	152
8. White Readers	190
9. White Teachers	229
10. White Sages	272
11. White Judges	295
12. White Sufferers	324
III. <i>She Was with Me in the Night: Black Mothers</i>	354
13. Black Providers	362
14. Black Teachers	389

15. Black Spiritual Guides	409
16. Black Protectors	441
17. Black Aunts	469
18. Black Sufferers	491
<i>Conclusion</i>	535
<i>Bibliography</i>	546

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

LOV	Library of Virginia
NCSA	North Carolina State Archives
SCDAH	South Carolina Department of Archives and History
SCHS	South Carolina Historical Society
SCL	South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina
SHC	Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
VHS	Virginia Historical Society
WM	Swem Library Special Collections, College of William and Mary

INTRODUCTION

“Historians have concentrated so much on the noisy sandbox of history, with its fantastic castles and magnificent battles, that they have generally ignored what is going on in the homes around the playground.”¹

Motherhood has a way of shaping a woman’s identity: the way she conceives of herself and the way that self-conception affects her interactions with the world around her. The identities that motherhood creates are innumerable, splintered, self-aggrandizing, self-effacing, and fraught with doubt. (Am I a good mother? Am I leading my children to a brighter future?) No two mothers experience parenthood in the same way. In the 1820s, Charleston resident Catherine Read wrote her niece, “I am often tempted to exclaim how much Judgement & good Sense is necessary in the education of Children! How much more than I am Mistress of!”² We can almost see her throwing her hands up in despair. In the same decade, Sojourner Truth fought for her enslaved son in the courts of New York, and the verdict she received, which would have been a foreign one to black mothers in the South, would have confirmed their understanding of motherhood: “the boy [should] be delivered into the hands of the mother – having no other master, no other controller, no other

¹ Lloyd DeMause, *The History of Childhood* (New York: Psychohistory Press, 1974), 1.

² Catherine Read to Mary Clarkson, August 21, n.d., Read Family Papers, SCL.

conductor, but his mother.”³ These two women lived in different worlds; Catherine Read, supported by wealth and position, quaked at the thought of her maternal responsibility, while Sojourner Truth, enslaved for much of her life, rejoiced as a judge finally validated her position as the ultimate arbiter of her child’s fate. Status, then, did not determine a mother’s confidence, and even enslavement could not obscure a mother’s belief in her right to her child.

Through an examination of letters, diaries, wills, court records, plantation journals, and missionary accounts, this dissertation reconstructs the emotional and intellectual lives of women in Virginia and the Carolinas who declared their worth and authority through their identities as mothers.⁴ I pick up this story in the 1750s, when falling mortality rates, increasing prosperity, and new waves of evangelism in the South created, among white families, a new focus on children as individuals and on mothers as their natural guardians. Mid-century also saw the solidification of large-scale plantation slavery and increasing political interactions between Southeastern Natives and their European neighbors. I end in 1835, when most Cherokee women – nearly a third of the mothers I examine – were forcibly removed from their homes by the U.S. government. These dates are not meant to serve as firm historical bookends, but rather to mark a general period of American history in which, despite the changes around them, most mothers expressed common and constant goals. This is not a story about those few women who maneuvered their way into national politics or

³ Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern Slave, Emancipated from Bodily Servitude by the State of New York, in 1828*, ed. Olive Gilbert (Boston: The Author, 1850), 53-4.

⁴ I have had several readers who are anxious to see where fathers fit into this world of parenthood that mothers seem to be so effectively dominating, so I must assure them that these men are not unimportant – they simply must be the subject of another project.

onto battlefields; this is a story about the majority of women – white, black, and Indian – who derived their sense of importance from how they raised their children.

Motherhood was a potent institution. Its breadth allowed for women of all classes and colors to raise sons and daughters according to their own principles; its generational continuity united women with their mothers and grandmothers while still providing ample room for modifications and innovations; its common tribulations connected female friends and relatives in networks of sympathy, exchange, and debate; and its link to the next generation afforded women a strong influence over the evolving face of slavery, regional communities, Indian nations, and the United States. Mothers were well aware of the power they wielded. The diversity of roles they embodied as mothers – the vast landscape over which their motherhood stretched – meant that their influence reached the arenas of politics, agriculture, religion, medicine, and education. These roles, from nurse and teacher to economic provider, shaped holistic maternal identities that granted women of all backgrounds a sense of control and self-worth within the pervasive hierarchies of the South. The power of early Southern mothers emerged from their engagement with, rather than insulation from, the world around them. These women followed intellectual trends, were attuned to environmental changes, and grappled with questions of race, class, and belonging. The popular understanding is that in early America, motherhood was an entirely domestic pursuit and most women suffered under a host of tyrannies with little recourse. I argue, however, that motherhood offers the key to understanding women as powerful actors in their own lives and the lives of those around them. Motherhood, for most of the women who experienced its joys and agonies, provided a multifaceted identity that was a source of personal worth and communal consequence.

Motherhood is a surprisingly understudied subject, and the power implicit in motherhood has gone virtually unrecognized in the past few decades of scholarship. This oversight is partly due to the fact that motherhood formed the constant background of most women's lives; in letters written by elite white women, for example, mention of motherhood is not the exception but the rule, and its very ubiquity means that many historians have taken it for granted. But what about the power that motherhood seemed to afford women? Historians are always on the hunt for agency, so why not turn to this common role for evidence? I define power as a constellation of feelings, actions, and results that are involved when individuals pursue specific desires in an attempt to regulate either their own lives or the lives of those around them. Power typically involves the achievement of that desire – success, in other words – but it can also emerge in the pursuit itself. Even though few enslaved women secured their children's freedom, for instance, they actively mitigated their children's experiences by defending their bodies, filling their bellies, and expressing love. I would also argue that maternal power is a difficult thing to recognize *unless* we look at motherhood cross-culturally. When we begin by examining the lives of women in matrilineal Native American societies, where female power was self-evident, and apply that same lens to the experiences of seemingly house-bound elite white mothers and seemingly defenseless enslaved black mothers, we learn to view power as a nuanced property, which can be defined by women even if it is denied by larger social or cultural prejudices. Historians have traditionally viewed power as a collective prize, a right that is parceled out by a community as a whole (thus, in its starkest terms: planters had power, slaves did not; men had power, women did not). But I argue that power can also be self-generated, and it finds expression in the emotions of self-worth, personal control, and consequence that are sustained by a

community of peers. If power can be generated by individuals, then it was certainly generated by mothers, who – no matter what their economic or ethnic background – saw their children as markers of their own physical, spiritual, and emotional strength. These women believed in their own maternal power, had that power validated by a network of fellow mothers, and used that power to shape the lives of their children and families.

The most remarkable thing may be that we can find evidence of such strong belief in maternal power across such a diverse array of women. Motherhood itself was a culturally constructed institution, deriving from childbirth but expanding well beyond that to incorporate distinctive social variations. Not all women who called themselves mothers bore children, and not all women who bore children chose to take on the title of mother. A Cherokee woman who gave thanks to the powerful fertility of the Corn Mother understood motherhood very differently from a Christian plantation mistress who believed that Eve earned the pain of childbirth from her deep sinfulness. A Catawba woman who claimed complete legal rights over her children could exercise her motherhood in entirely different ways from an enslaved woman whose children could be snatched from her at any hour of the day or night. Poor women used children as laborers, while wealthy women used them as markers of class status; rural women found children to be their chief companions, while urban women placed them in conversations with friends, neighbors, cousins, and visiting strangers. One woman might have viewed her motherhood as a heavy burden, weighted as it was with the responsibility to rear moral offspring, while her sister a few streets over might have seen that same motherhood as a license to meddle in all aspects of her children's lives. The current that ran throughout these mothers' lives, despite their individual and cultural

differences, was the power that they believed their motherhood afforded them, and even that power took innumerable forms.

I use the terms motherhood, power, control, and responsibility because they have a broad, suggestive appeal that is evocative for contemporary readers, but I also use them contextually with an eye to the distinctive meanings shaped by historical actors. These terms meant different things to different women in early America, just as they carry different meanings today. The heterogeneity of these women resists any blanket theoretical model, so while I have discovered certain maternal trends for this period, there will always be variations and divergences. Historical actors, human as they are, will never fully fit into the arguments that we as historians take pleasure in making. By tracing the similarities that emerge within a world of difference, though, we can come closer to understanding motherhood not as a cultural imposition, but as a powerful identity crafted, configured, and reconfigured by the women who claimed that title. A reexamination of motherhood with an eye for power can thus upend our assumptions about the ways in which motherhood has served as a cage, a means of oppression, an antithesis to careerism or self-fulfillment, those very categories that feminists have been working within or fighting against for decades. The construction of motherhood is still vitally important.

Themes

Motherhood as Southern

In the late 1970s, Linda Kerber introduced historians to the “republican mother,” an archetypal woman who, with the help of her unshakeable moral compass, would raise the

next generation of virtuous male citizens in the young Republic.⁵ Kerber's study of the laws and rhetoric affecting women's lives during America's Revolutionary era proved that the war for colonial independence had a very different valence for women than for men. But this ideology emerged from the Northeast, and the vast majority of mothers had little access to, and even less interest in, the opportunities of "republican motherhood." Male authors constructed these prescriptions for a limited circle of elite white women in the North, who may also have had doubts about this ideology, but when this discourse trickled down to the South, it encountered a very different landscape. In the post-Revolutionary South, white, black, and Indian women were caught in a complex web of violence and interdependency that offered barren ground for such dictates. What did the lectures of Benjamin Rush offer an enslaved woman on a rice plantation?⁶ How did American patriotic sermons sound to matrilineal Cherokee mothers? How did elite white mothers, fiercely proud of both their daughters and sons, react when told their main duty was to their male children?

A cross-cultural study of motherhood in the American South illuminates a broad spectrum of roles that women themselves defined, enacted, and passed down. Mothers in the South were travelers, orators, laborers, and teachers, and motherhood, whether physical or figurative, shaped these identities. From the white mistress to the black laborer, from the Cherokee farmer to her impoverished white neighbor, mothers constructed their lives in

⁵ Linda K. Kerber, "The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment – An American Perspective," *American Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (1976): 187-205; Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980). See also Ruth H. Bloch, "American Feminine Ideals in Transition: The Rise of the Moral Mother, 1785-1815," *Feminist Studies* 4, no. 2 (1978): 101-126.

⁶ See Rush's address to the Young Ladies' Academy of Philadelphia in *Thoughts upon Female Education, Accommodated to the Present State of Society, Manners, and Government, in the United States of America* (Boston: Samuel Hall, 1787).

relation to broader social networks, intellectual trends, economic imperatives, and political responsibilities. A close examination of these distinct and intersecting responsibilities reveals that motherhood in the South was often practiced differently from Northern motherhood, even while basic maternal themes (love, faith, education, suffering) remained the same. The extent of Southern slavery, the matrifocal societies of Southeastern Indians, and the proximity and interdependency of white, black, and Native women combined to create a landscape in which motherhood assumed distinctive meanings. While many of my arguments, especially regarding maternal power, may be extrapolated to Northern or Western women, the specific social make-up of the South requires its own investigation and an awareness of its particular maternal challenges and supports.⁷

Motherhood as Continuity

Motherhood provides an opportunity to consider the continuities within history, a project which is not typically championed by scholars who have been taught to focus on change over time.⁸ Histories of change have a tendency to alight on battles, elections, inventions, and economic booms and busts, which, while certainly affecting women, rarely claimed them as principal actors. Turning our attention instead to the key dramas of most women's lives – marriage, motherhood, friendship – continuity becomes the dominant

⁷ In other words, I am not arguing for Southern exceptionalism but rather Southern distinctiveness. For the arguments against Southern exceptionalism in historical research, see Laura F. Edwards, "Southern History as U.S. History," *Journal of Southern History* 75, no. 3 (2009): 533-564. For one of the first articles detailing why the colonial South promised a distinctive future for women, see Lois Green Carr and Lorena S. Walsh, "The Planter's Wife: The Experience of White Women in Seventeenth-Century Maryland," *William and Mary Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (1977): 542-571.

⁸ Women's historians have debated whether to structure their narratives around changes in women's status, or whether a focus on historical continuities represents the most honest assessment of patriarchy's oppressive reach. Judith M. Bennett argues in favor of continuities in "Theoretical Issues: Confronting Continuity," *Journal of Women's History* 9, no. 3 (1997): 73-94.

narrative. Certainly these institutions took on different hues by decade and by generation, but a childbearing woman's decisions and behavior resembled those of her own mother more than Jefferson's politics resembled Adams's.⁹ This is certainly not an argument for female continuity and male change, but rather for the value of including everyday lives in the historical record, and the recognition that stasis can be as historically revealing as the drama of upheaval.¹⁰

Motherhood as a Sisterhood?

Motherhood is one of those rich historical veins that runs through the entire social spectrum; it was embodied and performed by women who were poor, rich, religious, criminal, educated, and illiterate. Because of this near universality, motherhood provides a testing ground for the "sisterhood" model of women's history, which posits that certain

⁹ Nancy Theriot argues persuasively that each generation of mothers made amendments to the "lifescrypt" of their own mothers. "The woman's life experience may provide a challenge to her inherited script; the material conditions of one generation usually do not fit exactly with the ideology produced by the previous generation. Women create a new, altered version of the feminine script out of the contradictions and similarities between their worlds and their mothers'." Nancy M. Theriot, *Mothers and Daughters in Nineteenth-Century America: The Biosocial Construction of Femininity* (1988; repr. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 2, 7. Certainly these alterations existed, but I would argue that they were overlaid onto deep generational continuities, and it is these continuities that most interest me.

¹⁰ Early women's historians had their work cut out for them convincing the profession that women's lives did indeed change at the same pace as men's; I have no intention of chipping away at that work, but rather want to emphasize that periods of continuity, no matter where they are found, are also useful subjects of inquiry. Later historians have recognized that, whether they were undergoing moments of continuity or change, women were subject to very different historical periods than those which, bookended by battles and coups, had traditionally defined a patriarchal chronology. These scholars have stressed the significance of access to contraception and changing inheritance laws, for example, rather than shifts in party politics. See Amanda Vickery, "Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History," *The Historical Journal* 36, no. 2 (1993): 383-414; Joan Kelly, "The Social Relations of the Sexes: Methodological Implications of Women's History," *Signs* 1, no. 1 (1976): 809-823; and Gerda Lerner, "Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges," *Feminist Studies* 3, no. 1/2 (1975): 5-14.

historical experiences have created a bond among women that can trump differences in race or class. Does motherhood, then, create sisterhood? I argue that there are undeniable similarities in the ways in which women raised their children and the emotions they expressed, but that while these similarities created *theoretical* bridges between groups of women – conduits through which communication and empathy could flow – no amount of commonality could overcome the vastly different worlds these women occupied. Many elite white mothers, for instance, built familial bonds that were predicated on the dissolution of black families. The inheritance patterns that helped create a planter class involved splitting apart enslaved mothers and children. Families were united by expressions of power, not just sentiment. When an enslaved black mother lost a child, many white women would not have recognized her grief as similar to their own. Of those who could make that empathetic leap, a few spoke out and expressed their condolence, bearing witness to the common burden that all mothers bore. But how many white women would then befriend that slave, take her soup and sympathy on a lonely night, emancipate her as a token of their sisterhood? Though commonalities were rampant, connections were few.¹¹

¹¹ Joan Gundersen called the plantation a “community of women but not a community of equals.” Joan R. Gundersen, “The Double Bonds of Race and Sex: Black and White Women in a Colonial Virginia Parish,” *Journal of Southern History* 52, no. 3 (1986): 351-372, quote on p. 351. Feminist scholars have debated whether women can claim a common “sisterhood,” or whether differences in class, race, ethnicity, and religion defy any semblance of “universal” women’s values or experiences. Karen Offen has argued that, for purposes of forming an effective political movement, there must be some recognition of women’s commonality. She contends that “solidarity among women is based not solely on recognition of a common oppression but also, historically speaking, on a celebration of shared and differential experience as members of the same sex, the childbearing and nurturing sex.” See Offen, “Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach,” *Signs* 14, no. 1 (1988): 119-157, quote on p. 155-6. Even early women’s historians and feminists recognized the racial and class fractures among women, though; see, for instance, Lisa Vogel, “Telling Tales: Historians of Our Own Lives,” *Journal of Women’s History* 2, no. 3 (1991): 89-101. For strong arguments against the universal interests of sisterhood, see Nancy A. Hewitt, “Beyond the Search for Sisterhood: American Women’s History in the 1980s,” *Social History* 10, no. 3 (1985): 299-321; and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Feminism Without Illusions: A Critique of Individualism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991). Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham also denies this sisterhood by claiming that the

Motherhood as Public

A study of mothers that incorporates both continuities and cultural diversity disrupts the assumption that motherhood was confined to the “private” sphere in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.¹² The public sphere mapped by theorist Jürgen Habermas first arose during the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment and was a liminal space between the complete privacy of the home and high politics.¹³ The introduction of this intermediate sphere of human action has been crucial to some gender historians who have adopted the concept in order to show how women could participate in politics without being afforded the franchise, and it allows us to envision a space that is neither necessarily politicized nor exclusively male.¹⁴ As a result, scholars have argued that the assumed

interconnectedness of race and gender must always be taken into account, in “African-American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race,” *Signs* 117, no. 2 (1992): 251-274. For an example of how motherhood could occasionally overcome racial or class barriers, see Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women’s Campaign Against Lynching*, revised edition (1979; New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 59-106.

¹² In defining “public” space and “public” activities, I draw on Jürgen Habermas’s and Hannah Arendt’s theories of the public sphere. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991); and Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005). Arendt defined the classical public sphere as any space beyond the “threshold” of the family. Examining ancient Greek and Roman societies, she differentiated the private, individualistic, disconnected world of the family from the active, political, communicative realm of the public. Though she recognized both women and the working class as groups of people who were forbidden access to this public, she failed to explore further the implications of such an exclusion.

¹³ This public sphere diverged from the monarchical, court-based public of previous decades and was based not around elected or appointed officials but rather in an intellectual and cultural realm of communication that was composed primarily of the male bourgeoisie. The Habermasian public sphere was thus centered around well-informed individuals coming together outside the home to discuss significant cultural and political events of the time. This public was located in such arenas as the theatre, the opera, the concert hall, the press, and the coffeehouse.

¹⁴ Seyla Benhabib, “Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition, and Jürgen Habermas,” in *Feminism: The Public and the Private*, ed. Joan B. Landes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Bonnie Honig, “Toward an Agonistic Feminism: Hannah Arendt and the Politics of

divisions between public and private spheres are less stable than imagined, and that the ideology of separate spheres is a prescriptive trope rather than a reflection of daily lives.¹⁵

The shakiness of this classic dichotomy is further undermined by mothers, for an examination of even just elite white Southern motherhood reveals that these trusted guardians of domesticity engaged in distinctly public enterprises, from immersing themselves in discussions of published children's literature to debating educational philosophies with a broad network of female friends. In her study of domestic public spaces carved out and cultivated by elite women in the eighteenth century, Jessica Kross provides a definition of the "public" that extends beyond Jürgen Habermas's gendered coffeehouse:

a body of private individuals who form a public opinion; or who exercise reason and judge the humanistic, natural, social, and political world about them; or who share assumptions, values, or conclusions about that world; or those who connect

Identity," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, eds. Judith Butler and Joan Wallach Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 215-238. For an analysis of another intermediate space, see Ellen Rooney's "A Semiprivate Room," in *Going Public: Feminism and the Shifting Boundaries of the Private Sphere*, ed. Joan W. Scott and Debra Keates (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 333-358. For more recent assessments of women's political and economic roles in the early republic, see Catherine Allgor, *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000); Kirsten E. Wood, *Masterful Women: Slaveholding Widows from the American Revolution through the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Rosemarie Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). Laura Edwards has characterized the household in the antebellum South as standing "at the juncture between private and public life." Laura F. Edwards, *Scarlett Doesn't Live Here Anymore: Southern Women in the Civil War Era* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 3.

¹⁵ Linda K. Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *Journal of American History* 75, no. 1 (1988): 9-39; Susan Moller Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979); Nancy Fraser, "What's Critical about Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender," *New German Critique* 35 (1985): 97-131. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese also argues that a separate analysis of women's private roles "implicitly accepts the dominant male view of women as 'the Other' and merely attempts to turn it to advantage." For Fox-Genovese, the separation of spheres must be seen as a historical construction, since it undoubtedly figured into the self-conceptions of historical actors, but it cannot be reified as a theoretical road map. See her "Placing Women's History in History," *New Left Review* 133 (1982): 5-29.

emotionally or indulge communally in personally rewarding behavior; or who judge the taste, virtue, value, or education of other people.¹⁶

This definition certainly reflects the activities of elite white mothers, who were in near-constant contact with friends and relatives in order to trade advice, ideas, recommendations, and judgments. I argue, however, that it should be expanded to incorporate those individuals who engaged in “public” enterprises out of necessity rather than choice. By pulling back to include African American and Native American women in our frame, we shatter the perception of motherhood as a fundamentally private activity. Enslaved women could lay no legal claim to their children, and their productive and reproductive capacities defined their own bodies as market commodities. Childbirth and child mortality were marked in plantation ledgers below the price of corn and above the acres plowed.¹⁷ Southeastern Indian women, meanwhile, practiced a motherhood that spread its wings over children in cradleboards, fields

¹⁶ Jessica Kross, “Mansions, Men, Women, and the Creation of Multiple Publics in Eighteenth-Century British North America,” *Journal of Social History* 33, no. 2 (1999): 386. In this definition, Kross draws from both Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*; and Karen V. Hansen, *A Very Social Time: Crafting Community in Antebellum New England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). See also Caroline Winterer’s argument that the foundation for women’s engagement in public spheres was the classical, rather than the revolutionary, tradition, and that the identity of the “Roman matron” predated the “Republican Mother.” Winterer, *The Mirror of Antiquity: American Women and the Classical Tradition, 1750-1900* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 8-9.

¹⁷ Patricia Hill Collins has argued that “the assumed split between the ‘public’ sphere of paid employment and the ‘private’ sphere of unpaid family responsibilities has never worked for U.S. Black women.” See Patricia Hill Collins, “Work, Family, and Black Women’s Oppression,” in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 46-52. See also Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 3-4. Enslaved black mothers have endured the historiographic ignominy of being deemed first powerful and pathological, and then subordinate and safe. See the infamous 1965 Moynihan report on the prevalence of single black mothers and the resulting failure of the nuclear family ethic, as well as Eugene Genovese’s and Herbert Gutman’s avowals that the black family was compact and recognizably patriarchal under slavery. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor, 1965); Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, Pantheon, 1972); Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976).

of corn and beans, and the political debates of Indian nations. Whether by compulsion or preference, few mothers had the inclination or luxury to confine themselves to solely “private” enterprises, a fact which in itself begs a reconsideration of the value of the “separate spheres” model.

Motherhood as a Social Network

By naming motherhood a public enterprise, I am implying that women did not raise their children in isolation. Indeed, motherhood generated expansive and long-distance social networks. Eliza Ford gave voice to an era of highly communicative women when she warned her friend Fanny, “If you do not write me a letter of the most unheard of length I shall never forgive you.”¹⁸ In spite of the seemingly isolated environment of the plantation South, mothers of all kinds wrote letters, paid visits, talked in hushed tones as the children slept, traded stories in the field, kept in touch with aunts and sisters and cousins, named their children after loved ones, and relied on family in times of need. Death, sale, and the loss of home and land tested those connections, but could not break them. Female networks of communication offered mothers collegial support as well as judgment, so that motherhood became a profession that was regulated by peers, and a successful mother was one who earned the respect of both her family and her community.

Motherhood as Power

Most importantly, perhaps, motherhood provided women a measure of control within their often circumscribed lives. Alternately restricted, oppressed, belittled, and enslaved,

¹⁸ Anna Elizabeth Ford to Frances D. Harrison, May 14, 1815, John Ravenel Papers, SCL.

women, like all individuals, needed to embrace an identity that would give them a sense of self-respect and self-worth. This identity, for many women, was as a mother. To get a better sense of how motherhood offered this sense of meaning, we must examine the institution in its components; a “mother” calls to mind nursery rhymes and bedtime stories, but when we break “mother” down into the roles that women themselves constructed – farmer, nurse, teacher, spiritual guide, politician – a powerful individual emerges. Power can be difficult to identify, and finding power in the hands of the downtrodden can be particularly controversial. Few women could control whether or when they had children, and no child’s fate was guaranteed. Some women became mothers through rape, and others lost children through sale. To say that an enslaved woman had some control over the fates of her children initially seems absurd, but I argue that individuals cannot retain their sanity without some sense of control, and that for many women, this control emerged from their motherhood. The enslaved woman who could not save her children from sale *could* train them to resist the master, plan for escape, and remember their family in spite of distance. These are things that a mother *could* do, and they were not insignificant. These small shows of power, and the rich and varied roles that mothers inherited, from the Cherokee agriculturalist to the white literary critic, made motherhood not a private, restrictive enterprise but instead a set of powerful identities that provided women with a sense of existential purpose.

Historiography

The lives of early American mothers typically emerge only in broader histories of children or the family, while more explicit studies of motherhood in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries have focused largely on discourse rather than women’s daily

lives.¹⁹ The most influential work to date, Linda Kerber's *Women of the Republic*, popularized the concept of "republican motherhood," which described a newly defined, post-Revolutionary role for women as patriotic, virtuous mothers. Though Kerber intended "republican motherhood" to describe an ideology alone, subsequent authors have failed to fully investigate the effect of this rhetoric on the daily lives of women. That omission has left "republican motherhood" to stand in for the lives of women in discussions of late eighteenth-century America.²⁰ The study of early American motherhood has also largely sidestepped the South, with the exception of Sally McMillen's *Motherhood in the Old South*, Marie Jenkins Schwartz's *Birthing a Slave*, and V. Lynn Kennedy's *Born Southern*, all of which focus primarily on childbirth.²¹ A related gap in the historiography on Southern motherhood is an

¹⁹ Prior to the 1970s, most historians of early American women incorporated women's voices without questioning the basic assumptions and periodizations of a male-driven history. See, for example, Elizabeth F. Ellet, *The Women of the American Revolution* (New York: Baker and Scribner, 1849); Elisabeth Anthony Dexter, *Colonial Women of Affairs*, 2nd edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1931); and Mary Sumner Benson, *Women in Eighteenth-Century America: A Study of Opinion and Social Usage* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935). By the 1970s, women's historians were taking women on their own terms. See Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980); and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750* (New York: Knopf, 1982). For examples of family histories, see Philip J. Greven, *The Protestant Temperament: Patterns of Child-Rearing, Religious Experience, and the Self in Early America* (New York: Knopf, 1977); Carl N. Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in American from the Revolution to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Daniel Blake Smith, *Inside the Great House: Planter Family Life in Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980). For a brief outline of the development of family history up to the 1980s, see Daniel Blake Smith, "The Study of the Family in Early America: Trends, Problems, and Prospects," *William and Mary Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (1982): 4-28.

²⁰ Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 265-288.

²¹ Sally McMillen, *Motherhood in the Old South: Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Infant Rearing* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990); Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2006); V. Lynn Kennedy, *Born Southern: Childbirth, Motherhood, and Social Networks in the Old South* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010). See also Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a*

awareness of the South as a multicultural region. Historians' assumptions about a biracial South have marginalized the story of American Indians, who are often confined to Native American histories and excluded from broader histories of the South.²²

There are models, however, for what I want to accomplish. Margaret Nash and Doris Malkmus have questioned Linda Kerber's focus on Revolutionary discourse and argued that an analysis of prescriptive literature will not suffice for a complete understanding of early women's lives.²³ A number of scholars have produced cross-cultural histories of women, though none has yet devoted equal attention to blacks, whites, and Native Americans in the South.²⁴ Most importantly, some works have begun to reconsider where historians should

Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South (New York: Norton, 1985); Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Born in Bondage: Growing Up Enslaved in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982); and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

²² For comprehensive ethnohistorical studies of Southeastern Indian women, see Theda Perdue, *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700-1835* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998); Michelene E. Pesantubbee, *Choctaw Women in a Chaotic World: The Clash of Cultures in the Colonial Southeast* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005); and Sarah H. Hill, *Weaving New Worlds: Southeastern Cherokee Women and Their Basketry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

²³ Margaret A. Nash, "Rethinking Republican Motherhood: Benjamin Rush and the Young Ladies' Academy of Philadelphia," *Journal of the Early Republic* 17 (1997): 171-191, and Doris Malkmus, "Female Academies in the Early Republic" (M.A. Thesis, University of Oregon, 1993).

²⁴ For integrated analyses of black and white women, see Suzanne Lebsack, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York: Norton, 1984); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Marli F. Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves: Plantation Women in South Carolina, 1830-80* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); and Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). For an excellent study of the interweaving lives of African Americans and Indians, see Tiya Miles, *Ties That Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). For the best examples of cross-cultural histories, see Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches,*

look for value, worth, and success in women's lives. Catherine Kerrison has traced an intellectual tradition among white Southern women that gained traction not from formal instruction and theoretical debates, but through conversations with female relatives, voracious reading, and informal self-teaching.²⁵ Anya Jabour has uncovered an ebullient freedom in the lives of adolescent Southern girls in the years leading up to the Civil War, and has provoked scholars to reconsider where power might be found in women's lives.²⁶ I intend to follow in the steps of these authors by expanding our understanding of women's roles in early America, revealing motherhood as a cross-cultural institution that afforded women a certain degree of power in an otherwise patriarchal landscape.

Sources

This project is constructed on the premise that a shift from prescriptive literature to sources that reveal women's daily lives will change our understanding of eighteenth-century women's history. While I address prescriptive sources insofar as women consumed, questioned, or rejected them, my primary focus is on those documents through which I can

and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); and Kirsten Fischer, *Suspect Relations: Sex, Race, and Resistance in Colonial North Carolina* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002). For a study of the multifaceted development of race in the North, see John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

²⁵ Catherine Kerrison, *Claiming the Pen: Women and Intellectual Life in the Early American South* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006). For a seminal work on reinterpreting the meaning of women's "status," see Lebsack, *The Free Women of Petersburg*; she locates a distinctive women's culture that centered around a value on "personalism," and traces this value through wills and court records, where the consistency of women's voices provides a contrast to the shifting industrialized world around them.

²⁶ Anya Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters: Young Women in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007). Jabour argues that this freedom was largely shut down after young women married and became mothers, but I argue that these women simply found a new kind of power in maternity.

come closest to women's own decisions and actions. No amount of research, of course, can reveal a mother's unmediated "experience."²⁷ Identities are always a mode of performance, and no woman's life was created independently of various systems of meaning. By looking at how mothers enacted these identities, however, rather than relying on prescriptions, we are able to get closer to women's lives and ways of understanding.

This investigation requires careful attention to sources; while elite white women left eloquent records of their maternal strategies, other women's voices are muted or entirely lost. To study elite and lower-class white mothers, I primarily examine women's letters and diaries, court records and wills, and popular children's books and novels published in England and America. I use records of plantations, courts, and churches, letters and accounts of plantation owners and travelers to the South, and slave narratives to explore the daily lives of enslaved and free black mothers.²⁸ For Indian women, I examine mission journals, travelers' accounts, archaeological evidence, oral traditions, laws, and petitions to reconstruct their conceptions of motherhood. It is important to acknowledge what different images these sources evoke; the letters of elite white women have a linguistic immediacy that creates a vibrant portrait of emotions and intentions, while the voices of African American and Native American women are almost universally refracted through the lens of a white or male

²⁷ See Joan Scott for a fuller discussion of the elusiveness of "experience"; "Experience," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 22-40. Nancy Theriot is careful to distinguish between "experience" and "events/happenings"; she believes that "discourses structure experience such that experience is not possible outside of structures of meaning. This is *not* the same as saying 'everything is language' but only that everything is 'made sense of' through language." Theriot, *Mothers and Daughters in Nineteenth-Century America*, 9, 11. I agree with her, but would add that there must be some room for validating those linguistically bounded experiences as somehow "real" in the moment in which the actors underwent and recorded them.

²⁸ I have chosen not to use the WPA narratives for this study because I want to avoid overlaying the experiences of enslaved women in the 1850s and 1860s onto the lives of women prior to the 1830s.

observer. As a result, there is a vividness that emerges in discussions of white women that is solely due to the nature of the sources, not the nature of their lives.

Organization

This dissertation is divided into three sections – one on Indian women, one on white women, and one on black women; in each section, I examine six distinct maternal roles that these groups of women defined, performed, and regulated. The roles, ranging from nurse and provider to spiritual guide and politician, illustrate how Southern women of all classes and colors transformed motherhood from an isolated domestic pursuit to an ennobling profession, one that carved arenas of control within a deeply hierarchical landscape. The roles that I examine are those which emerged after a careful examination of the archival record; for each group of women, the six roles are those which the women themselves most seemed to value and which had a corresponding relationship to their formulations of maternal power. I have chosen this structure to allow myself the space to explore the lives of black, white, and Indian women separately. I am concerned that in a more culturally integrated structure, an equality of voices would be difficult to maintain and connections between groups of women might become artificial. By allowing each group of women its own space, I let their stories speak equally, with the agricultural expressions of Indian motherhood on par with the voracious reading of elite white mothers.

Part One looks at Southeastern Indians, particularly Cherokee and Catawba women. I argue that Indian women from matrilineal societies defined motherhood as a more intrinsically powerful institution than either white or black women. Native women understood motherhood as foundational to their political and economic duties in Indian

communities. Mothers not only claimed authority over children, but also over clans, fields, gardens, and councils. While change rained down upon Native communities in the late eighteenth century in the form of white settlers and missionaries, Native mothers used the introduction of Euro-American opportunities and restrictions to further pursue their understanding of maternal prerogative. For example, Indian women took advantage of Christian missions to procure food, clothing, and education for their children. They intended these tools to bolster the next generation's ability to preserve their land from white encroachments and to prosper as a community. While their methods of motherhood changed in response to the white presence, Southeastern Indian women maintained maternal goals consistent with previous generations: to ensure the survival of their children, their homes, and their communities.

In Part Two, I focus on the lives of white mothers, both elite and lower-class. Scholars have often assumed that white Southern women led highly confined and private lives, but this section argues that white mothers were engaged in broad, extra-domestic discussions of literature, transatlantic exchanges of educational philosophy, and networks of dependency on female friends and kin that turned their minds from the home towards the world. I examine trends in childhood education, the gendering of children, and the construction of female networks of communication. While white mothers often defined their roles based on the exclusion of black and Indian women, they shared a vulnerability to the tragedies of motherhood, from losing young children to undergoing bastardy cases, seduction, and single motherhood. I contend that understandings of motherhood were passed down from one female generation to the next and created a relative continuity of maternal

goals, from a child's survival to its education, despite such political upheavals as the Revolution.

Free black and enslaved women are the focus of Part Three. Their maternal roles illuminate the duality of a black mother's identity: her participation in both a household economy and a market economy, her position as both productive laborer and reproductive laborer, and her ambiguity towards her children as both precious gifts and enslaved chattel. While white employers and slaveowners often controlled definitions of black motherhood, these mothers constructed their own maternal identities. Black mothers were frequently the heads of households, and they became the keepers of communal knowledge and the distributors of family and community history to the next generation, shaping the identities of their children through a transmission of their own history as slaves. They engaged in conversations about escape and freedom, and they instilled in their children a sense of slavery's brutality. Free black mothers worked to earn a living in Southern cities, often placing their children in economic roles as apprentices early in their lives. Like white and Indian mothers, black women maintained a sense of continuity in their childrearing practices, linking their African roots with their American trials. And like other mothers, black women clung to every scrap of power they could, even when such power seemed unreachable.

The Larger Picture

By creating a cross-cultural study, I want to illustrate the multiplicity of Southern experiences and address the vast differences and occasional, even accidental, similarities among women. By focusing on women's daily lives rather than on the discourse surrounding them, I hope to let the voices of early American women ring equally with those of men's.

Finally, I want to reveal the complex layers of maternal lives by bringing to light the values and practices that women themselves professed on a daily basis. These goals combine to create a study that insistently situates early Southern women at the center of their own lives.

A history of motherhood – even limited to a few states and a few decades – is an impossibly broad project. The subsidiary topics are abundant (education, religion, medicine, politics), and the implications are endless (love, morality, sacrifice, abuse). In writing a book about motherhood, I am addressing such a large swath of material that, from the very beginning, I knew this project could never be comprehensive. For every maternal feeling or context that I investigate, I am ignoring a half dozen more. But the purpose of this study is not to compile and conquer every fact of motherhood, but to set before you the stories of the mothers themselves, to offer a few glimpses into the worlds of early American women, to suggest a new way of looking at power and self-worth on both a personal and political level, and to provide a foundational understanding of these women's lives that will lead to undergraduate debates, graduate inquiries, springboards for other scholars, and that long sense of historical perspective that can change the worldviews of engaged women and men in whatever walks of life they are found.

PART ONE
They Sprung from a Woman: Indian Mothers

“I found food for you and I was your food. . . . But your mother will remain a mother to you, even though you kill her; take heed, therefore, and treasure up her words.”¹

Selu, the Mother of the Cherokees

¹ John Howard Payne Papers, volume 1, typescript, p. 43, Newberry Library, Chicago.

How did Indian women define motherhood? For Cherokee and Catawba women, motherhood was not a single thread connecting woman and child, but a multidirectional web that spread out across a town and community. Women were intricately connected to family through elaborate kinship networks that defined the outlines of virtually every individual relationship. As for white and black women, motherhood for Southeastern Indian women was as much a social construction as a biological relationship, but more than any other group of women, matrilineal Indians viewed their motherhood as a justification for a remarkably broad social involvement. Being a mother meant taking responsibility for the agricultural production of one's community, weighing in on political decisions at town councils, and speaking up in treaty negotiations with foreign nations. These activities were not incidental to women's motherhood; they formed the very basis of their maternal identities. To "mother," then, meant to provide for and to protect not only one's own sons and daughters, but a host of symbolic children, including relatives, towns, fields of corn, and nations.

Motherhood for Cherokee and Catawba women was also a very cosmological project and incorporated a variety of spiritual tasks and rituals. From the ancestral corn mother, Selu, who first brought corn and beans to the Cherokees, mothers inherited a very spiritual duty. Responsible for the physical sustenance of their families and the continuation of their communities, women's roles as mother and farmer were linked in spiritual importance. Mothers who planted seeds each spring contended with a natural world that could be unpredictable and violent. When a storm threatened to damage young corn, Cherokees would reason with the storm and persuade it to adjust its path. "Let your paths stretch out along the tree tops on the lofty mountains," a priest would call out; "you shall have them (the paths) lying down without being disturbed." Women who gave birth also entered into a tacit

agreement with the spiritual world; they would raise their children to be respectful if the world did them no harm. During childbirth, women coaxed infants out with both loving words and hollow threats. “You little man, get up now at once. There comes an old woman,” an attendant would warn. “Listen! Quick! Get your bed and let us run away.”² Negotiations with the spiritual world were just as important as treaty discussions for mothers who had to protect their families.

Finally, being a Native American mother in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century South meant understanding one’s own history in order to survive rapidly changing environments. Catawba mothers forged their identities out of the coalescence of dozens of small piedmont and lowcountry nations in the mid-eighteenth century, and they discovered that one way to hold on to their sense of authority and responsibility in the face of enormous population loss was to turn the domestic art of pottery into a marketable trade. Cherokee mothers, long a voice in international negotiations, dealt with the poverty in the aftermath of Revolutionary War violence by turning their children over to Christian missionaries in order to acquire not only food and clothing but a generation of white-educated allies in the fight against Cherokee land loss. Women gauged their surrounding environment as part of the daily process of being a mother. Whether that environment included a seasonal drought, an imbalance in the spiritual world, or the arrival of white traders, women practiced a maternalism that was fluid and responsive while still being grounded in fundamental values.

How did Indian mothers define power? Unlike many other women in the South, who relied on their own initiative to carve spaces of power within otherwise unyielding

² James Mooney, “The Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees,” *Seventh Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1891), 387, 363.

hierarchies, Cherokee and Catawba mothers enjoyed a maternal power that was built into their very social structure. Power entailed being able to direct the course of one's children and one's community, and mothers earned that privilege through the spiritual potency of their fertility and their role in structuring both kin and clan. Lineages, marriages, and inheritance were all under a mother's purview in matrilineal societies, and the mother's prominence in the very foundations of daily life contributed to their own sense of authority. Power, for Native American women and men, was also imbued with spirituality, and it was not a fixed quantity but was in constant balance with the power of others, particularly the natural world. For mothers, this meant that their own realm of control stretched over agricultural production, household creation, and familial networks, but it also jostled and commingled with men's power in the arena of politics. Whether their power was autonomous or shared, women exercised it on behalf of the maintenance and survival of their families, both biological and symbolic.³

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Because mothers were farmers, they translated their bodily fertility onto fields of crops, where they nurtured corn, beans, and squash the way they nurtured children. Women

³ For studies of Cherokee women, see Theda Perdue, "Cherokee Women and the Trail of Tears," *Journal of Women's History* 1, no. 1 (1989), 14-30; Sarah H. Hill, *Weaving New Worlds: Southeastern Cherokee Women and Their Basketry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Theda Perdue, *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700-1835* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998); Carolyn Ross Johnston, *Cherokee Women in Crisis: Trail of Tears, Civil War, and Allotment, 1838-1907* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003); and Fay Yarbrough, "Legislating Women's Sexuality: Cherokee Marriage Laws in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Social History* 38, no. 2 (2004): 385-406. For studies of other Southeastern Indian women, which have generally focused on similar processes of acculturation and adaptation, change and continuity, see Michelene E. Pesantubbee, *Choctaw Women in a Chaotic World: The Clash of Cultures in the Colonial Southeast* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005); and Kathryn E. Holland Braund, "Guardians of Tradition and Handmaidens to Change: Women's Roles in Creek Economic and Social Life during the Eighteenth Century," *American Indian Quarterly* 14, no. 3 (1990): 239-258.

were not compelled to farm, which is what many Europeans assumed when they compared hardworking Indian women to the men who seemed to laze about; they had a right to agricultural production, a responsibility that derived not from any lower social status but from the link between the power of producing children and the power of sustaining them. Among Cherokees, the mythical figure of Selu, who brought forth both children and corn from her belly, proved that motherhood was a sacred role and that the land and all its bounty must fall under women's powerful hands.

Because mothers were providers, they sustained their children's bodies, finding them food and clothing even when poverty's reach suggested that was an impossible task. Using the presence of whites, some mothers received material support from the very people who were threatening their children's lands. By relentlessly pursuing their communities' best interests, mothers could forge beneficial relationships with white settlers, thereby turning hardship into help. Mothers adapted to changing conditions not because their own habits were so mutable, but because adaptation was the only way to pursue unshakeable goals.

Because mothers were teachers, they shaped their children's understandings of the world through lessons in gender roles, practical skills, and cultural identity. When home instruction became inadequate for children who needed to cope with an increasingly white world, some mothers chose to send their children to mission schools to learn those foreign subjects that would best equip them for negotiations with their new neighbors. Whatever lessons mothers advocated, they maintained consistent goals: preparing all their children, from their sons and daughters to their nation, to succeed in an uncertain future.

Because mothers were spiritual guides, their motherhood was a cosmological force, a powerful connection to a world of spirits and omens that solidified their power among their

people. Menstrual blood symbolized maternal power, and Cherokees and Catawbas constructed strict guidelines to prevent this power from overwhelming a community. From this position of authority, mothers raised their children to be cautious of the natural world and to use the balance of spirits in the universe to their advantage. When white missionaries introduced Christianity, some women believed the religion offered a new degree of comfort and security in a new world. If any religious teaching held a chance for a better life for their children, mothers considered it. By the nineteenth century, Indian mothers used a blend of spiritual beliefs and customs to tend to their children's bodies and souls.

Because mothers were politicians, they used their authority over the childlike nation to issue opinions, demands, and suggestions in both local councils and international negotiations. Motherhood was a relationship to one's people, and both Cherokees and Catawbas knew that women's voices were necessary to reach decisions about the fate of the nation. In instances where kin connections were implicated, mothers had virtually complete control. When men brought war captives home, women were the ones to decide whether they were executed or adopted into the fold; mothers had both the symbolic and the actual power of life and death in their hands.

Disease, warfare, depopulation, and an invasion of white settlers, soldiers, and missionaries created a more drastically changed landscape for Indian mothers in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries than for any other group of Southern women. Responding with the strategies they had developed from centuries of adaptation, Cherokee and Catawba mothers endured hardships from child mortality to Indian Removal by relying on their authority as mothers. This authority enabled women to make choices about their children's and communities' futures, and while some Indian elites may have sought to curtail

women's power by the early nineteenth century, women themselves continued to exercise a maternal prerogative that had been shaped and sharpened by generations of their forebears.

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On a Saturday in November 1818, a Cherokee woman arrived on the doorstep of Brainerd mission school in eastern Tennessee, physically drained from her journey, with an eight-year-old girl by her side. Recently abandoned by her husband, the impoverished woman sought to place her child with the missionaries and thus assure her an education and a sturdy set of clothes. The missionaries gladly accepted the young girl but made the mother promise not to take the child away again, as they had witnessed with so many Cherokee mothers who were torn between affection for their children and security for their sons and daughters in a time of economic uncertainty. This particular Cherokee mother, now with neither husband nor child, may have had another goal in mind as well. Five months earlier, a committee of Cherokee women had drafted a petition protesting the discussion of Removal. They reminded the National Council of the Cherokees' unquestionable right to their land, but the women also hinted that their efforts at "civilization" were intended as proof that they were no different than the white settlers overrunning the land. Like many women, this weary Cherokee mother may have placed her child in school as further evidence of her "civilization," and by extension, her own strengthened claim to the land. But Cherokee women were not invulnerable to the pressures on their traditional practices of motherhood. Eight days after the Cherokee mother surrendered her young daughter to the Brainerd missionaries, she returned to claim her, having learned that "the child cried for mother when she was going to bed." The missionaries chastised the "unenlightened" mother to no avail; the woman returned home along the same trail, daughter safe in hand once more. The strong

continuity of women's goals as mothers undergirded a strategic manipulation of opportunities offered by the many social changes in the early nineteenth century. That continuity simply shone through most strongly in those historical moments when mothers sacrificed the promise of food and clothing for the comfort of a child's presence.⁴

⁴ November 14, 1818, November 22, 1818, Joyce B. Phillips and Paul Gary Phillips, eds., *The Brainerd Journal: A Mission to the Cherokees, 1817-1823* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 92, 94.

CHAPTER ONE
INDIAN FARMERS

The mother of the Cherokees was named Selu, a woman whose fertility as a child-producer and a corn-producer was synonymous. At the beginning of time, she provided food for her husband and sons by slipping away to a secret cabin and performing a ritual that linked her body to the earth. Walking in solemn step, she rubbed her belly and her armpits until corn and beans emerged. These she gathered in a basket and brought back to her hungry family. Soon, her sons grew suspicious and plotted to spy on her. Upon witnessing this culinary magic, they feared their mother, calling her a witch and a sorceress, and they decided to kill her. Imperturbable, Selu overheard their plans and told them that after they killed her, they must follow her instructions in order to provide for their people. She told them to drag her body in a circle seven times around the packed earth, for where her blood fell, the corn would grow. The milk and flesh of the corn would be their mother, and like their mother, it would nourish the Cherokees for generations.¹

Connecting the story of Selu to a narrative of maternal power involves no special imaginative powers; the correlation is direct. More than any other group of women in the South, mothers in matrilineal Native societies lived with daily confirmations of their communal and individual value. In the property they owned, the lineages they controlled, and

¹ James Mooney, "Myths of the Cherokees," *Nineteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* (Washington, D.C., 1900), 242-49; see also the Payne Papers, 1:43 and 2:51-6.

the councils to which they contributed, women experienced a general respect for motherhood (both actual and symbolic) that translated into a concrete sense of their own worth and capabilities. This sense allowed Indian women to raise their children with a confidence that weathered the storms of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when white settlers, traders, missionaries, and enslaved Africans and African Americans filtered onto Indian lands.

Land was at the center of the lives of Native mothers; it provided the most basic illustration of their maternal worth, and its vulnerability in the face of white expansion was the greatest threat to mothers' continued control over their families and communities. As a result, women's connection to land and agriculture deserves our first consideration.

Cherokees and Catawbas form the heart of this study; both groups were matrilineal residents of the South, but their experiences within the region were very different. Cherokees were well-established as a dominant political and military force in the region before Europeans arrived, while Catawbas coalesced as a group only in the mid-eighteenth century from the diverse piedmont and lowcountry peoples who had been scattered and picked apart by the Yamasee War, smaller skirmishes, and epidemics of smallpox and dysentery.² When white colonists took on the British in the 1770s, most Cherokees sided with the British while the Catawbas joined forces with rebel Americans; the subsequent years looked very different for the two groups as Cherokees faced retaliation from their newly entrenched neighbors while

² The nation that came to be known as the Catawba was an amalgamation of refugee Esaws, Nassaws, Saponis, Tutelos, Occaneechees, Saxapahaws, Cheraws, Enos, Santees, Congarees, Waterees, Waccamaws, Pedees, and a host of others. James H. Merrell, *The Indians' New World: Catawbas and Their Neighbors from European Contact through the Era of Removal* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 92-133.

Catawbas enjoyed a certain amount of protection.³ To both Cherokees and Catawbas, though, land was an essential part of their identity, whether that land was ancient and ancestral or patched together through treaties and coalitions, and where land was central, so were mothers. For Cherokee women in the eighteenth century, that land looked almost like a rolling seascape, with forested hills plunging into lush valleys, abundant streams, and a climate that, unlike much of the South, retained some hint of coolness in the summer. Catawba women worked a lower ground, covered in loblolly pine rather than spruce and sugar maple, and though they were based in the piedmont, they could access swampy bottomlands for crops that needed richer soil.⁴

As Selu's marvel demonstrates, Cherokees, along with their matrilineal neighbors to the south, believed that the yearly fertility of the earth represented the fertility of Selu, and, by extension, all mothers. Selu's gift emerged not just from her womanhood, but specifically from her maternalism; the fertility of her body represented both the reproduction of Native communities and their agricultural subsistence. This connection was borne out in the gendered division of labor, as women took charge of the land and its bounty, becoming skilled farmers while men focused their energies on the transient hunt and supplemented a crop-based diet with seasonal game. Farming seemed naturally to be women's province, because the knowledge it took to coax crops from the soil was inextricable from the knowledge needed to raise children from seedlings to strong adults. And because both plants and children were necessary to the community's survival, the tenders of those precious

³ Merrell, *The Indians' New World*, 215-221; Tom Hatley, *The Dividing Paths: Cherokees and South Carolinians through the Revolutionary Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 216-228.

⁴ See Sarah H. Hill, *Weaving New Worlds: Southeastern Cherokee Women and Their Basketry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 1-16; Merrell, *The Indians' New World*, 1-7.

objects – the mothers – wielded an enormous amount of social, economic, and political power.

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Cherokee and Catawba lands were threatened by more than the droughts, late frosts, and occasional enemy raids that had marked a farmer’s trials for centuries before. With the arrival of Europeans and Africans in the Southeast, and the diseases and escalated warfare they brought with them, land became newly vulnerable. Women had to find new ways to assert their guardianship of the land, even as the land itself was shrinking. Within the varied communities of the Southeast, motherhood was a particular way of interacting with other men and women that embodied social and economic responsibility. This tie of motherhood to economic production was potent in eighteenth-century Native societies, and despite the threats to their land, Cherokee and Catawba women continued to assert this power in the nineteenth century. They understood that women, as the primary farmers, were also the social producers; like the Corn Mother, women’s role in producing both children and crops sustained Native economies.⁵

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Agriculture, like other social and economic institutions, evolved over time, and female farmers over the centuries embraced squash, gourds, sunflowers, sumpweed, several varieties of corn, and, in the 1700s, sweet potatoes.⁶ By the eighteenth century, women were

⁵ Tom Hatley, for instance, identifies a “female symbolic economic identity” in “Cherokee Women Farmers Hold Their Ground,” in *Powhatan’s Mantle: Indians in the Colonial Southeast*, revised edition, eds. Gregory A. Waselkov, Peter H. Wood, and Tom Hatley (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 307. For more on Southeastern Indian subsistence patterns, see Charles Hudson, *The Southeastern Indians* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1976), 258-316.

⁶ Hatley, “Cherokee Women Farmers Hold Their Ground,” 307-314; William Harlen Gilbert, “The Eastern Cherokees,” *Bureau of American Ethnology, Anthropological Papers, No. 23*, Bulletin 133 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1943), 211, 316.

planting corn, beans, and potatoes in April and May for a harvest in early autumn. Women tended both their personal gardens, packed with vegetables like peas, beans, and pumpkins, and the more distant communal fields, which hosted early corn, hominy corn, and bread corn. Intercropping and crop rotation allowed Native fields to retain their fertility through many seasons; who better to manage fertility than mothers? In addition to the science of soil, they relied on spiritual ceremonies and charms to ensure their success, praying over the fields and seeking help from various forces during times of drought.⁷

While most of the women working in the fields were indeed mothers, the link between farming and motherhood was in many ways symbolic; as a result, women's maternal roles in the field extended beyond their biological childbearing years. Some women, especially the elderly or infirm, watched over the fields during the day to protect them from animals and marauders.⁸ These older women, known as "ravens," would chase away hungry animals while keeping an eye peeled for enemies; they were critical to a town's defenses, both agricultural and military, and when they were unable to perform their duties, other measures had to be taken. After Catawba men burned sections of forest to improve hunting, for instance, women and children in the town would study the burned earth "to discover the

⁷ Sarah H. Hill, *Weaving New Worlds: Southeastern Cherokee Women and Their Basketry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 80-84.

⁸ These Indian women may have been interested to hear the strategy of Mary Brewton Alston, one of their white neighbors, for preventing crows from eating her ripe corn: "One oz. Assafoetida, 4 oz. flour brimstone, 4 oz. Gun powder, mix with 2 oz. hogs lard; shoot a few Crows, stuff down the throats of each of the dead Crows, about the size of a Walnut, let the stuffed Crows remain 12 hours, then tear the bodies to pieces, & hang the limbs &c. on pieces of Sticks dispersed through the Corn-field. It will entirely prevent Crows from alighting to destroy the standing Corn." Mary Brewton Alston and Mary M. Pringle Recipe Book, 1791-1838, Mary Motte Alston Pringle Papers, SCHS.

impressions of their enemys tracts . . . in case the raven should be sick or out of the way.”⁹

The Nottoway Indians of Virginia first learned of William Byrd’s approach in 1728 by the shouts and calls of their “female scouts,” who were positioned to watch for visitors.¹⁰ Just as mothers protected their children, then, women defended their fields. Other elderly women earned a role in ceremonies honoring agriculture; in the Cherokee Ripe Corn Festival, “an old beloved woman” would bring a basket of symbolic food to the ceremonial grounds to represent the continuing survival of the community.¹¹ As women aged, their maternal and agricultural responsibility to their communities hardly lessened. Henry Timberlake witnessed the mother of one Cherokee chief, himself sixty years old, who “still continues her labourious tasks, and has yet strength enough to carry 200 weight of wood on her back near a couple of miles.”¹²

The maternal roles of Southeastern Native women – extending from the immediate relationship between mother and child to the broader need to nurture a village – worked because childrearing itself was often a communal endeavor.¹³ While women enjoyed individual power as mothers and farmers, the communal nature of both agriculture and

⁹ William Gerard De Brahm, “De Brahm’s Philosophico-Historico-Hydrogeography of South Carolina, Georgia, and East Florida” (1772?), in *Documents Connected with the History of South Carolina*, ed. Plowden Charles Jennett Weston (London: Chiswick Press, 1856), 181.

¹⁰ William Byrd, *The Westover Manuscripts: Containing the History of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina; A Journey to the Land of Eden, A.D. 1733; and A Progress to the Mines* (Petersburg: Edmund and Julian C. Ruffin, 1841), 34.

¹¹ Hill, *Weaving New Worlds*, 48.

¹² Henry Timberlake, *The Memoirs of Lt. Henry Timberlake: The Story of a Soldier, Adventurer, and Emissary to the Cherokees, 1756-1765*, ed. Duane H. King (Cherokee, NC: Museum of the Cherokee Indian Press, 2007), 27-30.

¹³ Theda Perdue, *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700-1835* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 46-7.

childrearing meant that women relied on female networks of support to help bring in the crops and bring up the boys and girls. Children came with their mothers and female relatives to the fields when they were young and quickly developed a sense of independence that sometimes carried them beyond their mothers' gaze. This childhood independence emerged because all townspeople kept an eye out for children (as far as you could roam, a friend or relative would be watching), and this freedom allowed women to devote their attention to the fields, free from worry. A kin-based web of oversight, largely female, created a social landscape in which the mothering of communities was predicated on communal motherhood.

Just as mothers were supported by their neighbors, their success as farmers was measured by their community, for almost all maternal endeavors had their external arbiters. Droughts and crop failures affected women's ability to provide for their families, while successful harvests became community celebrations. In ceremonies and dances, women took on roles that connected them to the land, investing their labors with a spiritual element. Cherokee women dressed as maize in many religious events, including the Green Corn ceremony, and "most of the All Night Dances refer in some way" to the figure of woman-as-corn.¹⁴ The Green Corn ceremony was one of the most celebrated events of the Southeastern Indian calendar, and through dances, feasts, and community gatherings, Indians thanked the spirits (and the women) for the year's harvest. Mothers participated as honored citizens during this festival and also took the event very seriously. Even in the early nineteenth century, when land was disappearing to unscrupulous white settlers, Cherokee mothers pulled children out of mission schools to join the celebration, reasserting their ownership of the land by continuing to honor their own agricultural labors. Cherokee mothers contributed

¹⁴ John Howard Payne Papers, typescript, vol. 1, p. 24, Newberry Library.

to local missionaries' sense of outrage during the month of August as they removed their sons and daughters for this "feasting time," when the "green corn & watermelons are plenty," but some white teachers quickly adapted to this annual event and released their Indian charges for three weeks every August.¹⁵ The community's respect for farmers elevated women and mothers to a spiritual pedestal of sorts, and because their work was thus marked, their influence in towns and villages was never in doubt, even when the world around them began to reflect new ideals of female labor.

The spiritual element of agriculture made explicit the tie between women as mere workers and women as communal mothers. Nineteenth-century Cherokees, for instance, honored a spirit called "agawe'la, 'the old woman of the corn,' who is also regarded as a mother"; the presence of this spirit made it clear that, no matter their age, women who oversaw corn production became mothers, for they provided food for their kin. Cherokees also paid their respects to the Woman of the East, a mythical figure who brought rain to the fields, further nurturing and sustaining villages.¹⁶ When crops suffered as a result of drought or cold, a male priest or conjurer would perform a series of ceremonies, starting with appeals to various male spirits and culminating in a sacrifice to the Woman of the East. While men were often responsible for summoning them, the female form of these spirits suggests that women's power over agricultural production was so ingrained into the community's practical and religious ideologies that a rain spirit – a symbol of fertility – would naturally be female.

¹⁵ August 9, 1819, Joyce B. Phillips and Paul Gary Phillips, ed., *The Brainerd Journal: A Mission to the Cherokees, 1817-1823* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 128; and August 20, 1808, Rowena McClinton, ed., *The Moravian Springplace Mission to the Cherokees, Volume 1: 1805-1813* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 279. For more on Green Corn, see Hudson, *The Southeastern Indians*, 365-375, and Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 25-7.

¹⁶ Gilbert, "The Eastern Cherokees," 300.

The Woman of the East may have been connected with Selu, the Corn Mother, for both women promised to watch over the people and their fields. One story that may link these figures tells of a corn woman in the sky who “bade [the corn’s] spirit or seed, whenever in trouble, to look up to its mother above.” Whoever she was, the Woman of the East eased the Cherokees’ troubles, for “no appeal for rain was ever known to fail.” Summoned by an offering of tobacco, she was “sure to answer them with rain in plenty, but always without thunder.” A maternal spirit, she brought much-needed succor without the threat of violence or destruction. In addition to watering crops, the Woman of the East ushered in warm weather after heavy frosts and generally nursed the land into fertile fields, much as Cherokee mothers nursed their infants into farmers and warriors.¹⁷

Because their communities judged and respected them, women in turn had a responsibility as community hosts, cooking for guests as well as their families, and this duty tied their daily work in the field to a larger maternal goal: nourishing their people. When one traveler visited the Arkansas Cherokees in the 1830s, he found himself warmly welcomed by the men and heartily fed by the women. One man’s wife, sister-in-law, and niece prepared for the visitor a feast of “boiled pork, Connokana, (which is made of Indian corn pounded into grits & boiled with water until it is cooked . . .) bread mixed with beans; & sweet potatoes.”¹⁸ Because women produced the food, they earned the rights of hosts, and in their absence, guests were occasionally denied sustenance. Lady Liston visited a Catawba town in 1798 and sat down with a chief she called “the Colonel,” but though food was cooking on his

¹⁷ Payne Papers, vol. 1, 164-169. See also Gilbert, “The Eastern Cherokees,” 336.

¹⁸ John Ridge, “The Cherokee War Path, written by John Ridge in Washington City, as narrated by the Cherokee Warrior of Arkansas John Smith, who was present & principal actor in the Warlike Expeditions in the Prairies of the far West,” March 25, 1836, Huntington Library Collections, HM 1730, p. 8.

hearth, he made no signs of hospitality. “On the Colonels fire there stood a pot, & there was a hoecake on the hearth,” she observed. “I asked what was in the Pot, he said Deers flesh for breakfast; but did not offer us any.” Lady Liston likely went hungry because there were no women present; not being the producer of the food, the “Colonel” was also not the server.¹⁹ A decade earlier, another visitor to Catawba lands had better luck; though he came to meet with General New River, he also enjoyed the ministrations of his wife, Sally New River, who “fed my horse, and supplied me with a meal of smoked venison, placed in a small tub upon the floor.” By doing “all in her power to render me comfortable,” Sally New River participated in this cross-cultural encounter in a particularly maternal fashion. As a mother and a sustainer of her community, she was also responsible for sustaining visitors.²⁰

After a day spent weeding, watering, or chasing away birds, Southeastern Indian mothers returned home, and just as they had managed the fields, they managed their familial households, which included knowing how to control limited resources. Many Cherokee women stored corn and other crops over the winter to continue feeding their families, leading one observer to declare that they “equal, if they do not surpass, many of the poor white farmers of that desolate region, in economy and frugality in their household affairs.”²¹ Seventeenth-century Powhatan women appeared to be exceptional housekeepers to visitor William Strachey; they “plant and attend the gardeins, dresse the meate brought home, make their broaths and pockerchicory drinckes, make matts and basketts, pownd their wheat, make

¹⁹ *Lady Liston, Journal, Robert Liston Papers, Manuscript 5697, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, Scotland, p. 25-28.*

²⁰ Winslow C. Watson, ed., *Men and Times of the Revolution, or Memoirs of Elkanah Watson* (Dana and Co., 1856), 256-7.

²¹ James Buchanan, Jr., “Life Among the Cherokees,” *Southern Home Journal*, Dec. 19, 1867, p. 1.

their bread, prepare their vessels, beare all kindes of burthens, and such like.”²² Mothers tended crops, but they also harvested, prepared, and distributed them, clothed their families, cared for their children, and occasionally created wares for sale or trade.²³

For much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Anglo-Indian trade in the Southeast was heavily shaped by Indians, including Indian women, who determined the availability of goods and the accessibility of their communities to external visitors.²⁴ This, too, was a maternal role, for the regulation of trade could provide for communities in difficult economic times or insulate families against loss and exploitation. Though the increase in trade with Euro-Americans, particularly in deerskins, amplified men’s roles in ensuring community subsistence, women continued to carve out small spaces within trading networks to assert their continued power as producers. Cherokee and Catawba women provided services to their communities that extended from their roles as maternal producers. Many wove baskets or fired pottery; others sold the crops they grew to traders or other towns. Catawba women were carrying their pots and baskets for sale in nearby towns by the 1780s, and though one English observer deemed them to be “ill-formed,” “half-baked,” and sold for “the most worthless invaluable consideration,” these objects were in fact both useful and

²² William Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile into Virginia Britannia: Expressing the Cosmographie and Comodities of the Country, together with the Manners and Customes of the People*, ed. R. H. Major (London: Printed for the Hakluyt Society, 1849), 111-112, quoted in John Swanton, *Indians of the Southeastern United States* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1946), 710.

²³ Gilbert, “The Eastern Cherokees,” 316.

²⁴ See James H. Merrell, “‘Our Bond of Peace’: Patterns of Intercultural Exchange in the Carolina Piedmont, 1650-1750,” in *Powhatan’s Mantle: Indians in the Colonial Southeast*, revised edition, eds. Gregory A. Waselkov, Peter H. Wood, and Tom Hatley (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989; 2006) 267-304. For more on how colonial trade fundamentally shaped Southeastern Indian cultures, see Kathryn E. Holland Braund, *Deerskins and Duffels: The Creek Indian Trade with Anglo-America, 1685-1815* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993).

artistically rendered, and brought much-needed income to Catawba communities, which were suffering from depleted populations and relative abandonment by their white allies.²⁵

A Southeastern Indian mother's duty was to provide for her family and community, and as modes of sustenance and production changed in the late eighteenth century, so too did mothers' tactics. Catawba women selling pottery to outsiders in the 1780s were going well beyond their responsibilities as farmers, but their adaptation was based on that same, fundamental goal of providing for their families. In 1815, a traveler observed women in one town "making pans – Clay from the river – shape them with their hands and burn them with bark which makes the exposed side a glossy black." He noted that a clay pitcher could sell for a quarter of a dollar, while pans brought in even more.²⁶ Women continued to rely on the economic value of their pots later in the nineteenth century; in the 1890s, "the women still make plain and fancy black clay pipes and other pottery, which they exchange for other merchandise at the neighboring towns," and by the early twentieth century, Catawbas were the only group of eastern Native Americans who still regularly produced traditional pottery for sale.²⁷ As an illustration of the link between her roles as economic provider and mother, one Catawba woman proudly showed a visitor a figurine of an infant she had fashioned out

²⁵ J. F. D. Smyth, *A Tour in the United States of America* (London: G. Robinson, 1784), 193-194. See also Merrell, *The Indians' New World*, 210-211.

²⁶ July 17, 1815, Calvin Jones Papers, SHC.

²⁷ W.B. Ardrey, "The Catawba Indians," *The American Antiquarian* 16, no. 5 (Sep. 1894): 266-268; M.R. Harrington, "Catawba Potters and Their Work," *American Anthropologist* 10, no. 3 (1908): 399-407. For a more detailed description of Catawba potters' technical and artistic process, see Vladimir J. Fewkes, "Catawba Pottery-Making, with Notes on Pamunkey Pottery-Making, Cherokee Pottery-Making, and Coiling," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 88, no. 2 (1944): 69-124. Fewkes notes that in 1941, Catawba pottery was still "essentially a woman's calling" (72). For an examination of the role of pottery among twentieth-century Catawbas, see Thomas J. Blumer, *Catawba Indian Pottery: The Survival of a Folk Tradition* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004).

of clay. The woman not only brought it out for visitors; she kept the baby on her mantel, where she could admire the symbol of her motherhood daily.²⁸ In addition to making pots and growing crops for their village, women in some Catawba towns produced corn primarily for their more nomadic husbands and brothers; one village in the 1790s boasted a field of woman-tended corn that was intended “for travelling with, [rather] than to use as bread.”²⁹ The production of both pots and corn lay at the heart of Catawba mothers’ self-conceptions, for only through providing for their communities as farmer-artisans were they able to fulfill a sense of maternal purpose.³⁰ Women tailored their production of crops and other goods, then, to their specific communities’ needs. Like children, these communities relied on the economic offerings of women to sustain them.

As Catawba potters had already discovered, social and environmental changes heralded changes to women’s daily lives, but through their actions, mothers continued to assert their bond with land, agriculture, and nourishment. Motherhood was not an institution so flimsy as to splinter in difficult times, but women did have to fight for their vision of a

²⁸ Brent Burgin, director of the Catawba archives at the University of South Carolina-Lancaster, believed this was the only instance he knew of an early Catawba potter depicting a purely human form. Whether this woman had been struck by a creative urge, or whether the pottery infant represented some aspect of her motherhood (either infertility or a lost child), the rarity of such work makes it significant. W.B. Ardrey, “The Catawba Indians,” *The American Antiquarian* 16, no. 5 (Sep. 1894): 266-268.

²⁹ J. F. D. Smyth, *A Tour in the United States of America* (London: G. Robinson, 1784), 193-4; Journal of Lady Liston, Robert Liston Papers, Manuscript 5697, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, Scotland, pp. 25-28. Catawba pottery continued to be central to local economies, and as an artisanal form, survives into the twenty-first century. For more on the matrilineal traditions of pottery in the early twentieth century, see James H. Merrell, *The Indians’ New World: Catawbas and Their Neighbors from European Contact through the Era of Removal* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 267-271.

³⁰ This purpose continued into the twentieth century; in the 1930s, when asked about the origins of Catawba pottery, Sally Brown responded, “I have heard it said that our people knew how to make pots and how to grow corn since a very long time ago.” Fewkes, “Catawba Pottery-Making,” 72.

maternal identity in the face of enormous upheaval. As a result of increasingly frequent epidemics and wars involving both their European and Indian neighbors in the late eighteenth century, many Cherokee towns lacked a sustaining population; towns dispersed to become family units, while communal fields became individual farms.³¹ Even where women remained farmers, the loss of communal female agriculture threatened collective female power. The new economic order transformed complementary male and female economies into competing forces.³² Beginning with the early encounters of whites and Cherokees in the eighteenth century, Cherokee women sold their corn and other crops to white settlers, while men transformed the hunt from a subsistence-based practice to a profit-driven trade. As the trade expanded into new markets, the sale of deerskins afforded men economic clout in an increasingly stratified society. Cherokee men also adopted horses, which both plowed and trampled women's fields.³³ Both the immediate presence of whites and their more distant effects on Cherokee lands provoked a slow shift in native economies towards an individualism that threatened to undermine traditional female economic power. Without communal agriculture, there could be no communal farming; when women did not congregate in the fields to reap their harvest, there was no longer an explicit connection

³¹ M. Thomas Hatley, "Three Lives of Keowee: Loss and Recovery in the Eighteenth-Century Cherokee Villages," in *American Encounters: Natives and Newcomers from European Contact to Indian Removal, 1500-1850*, eds. Peter C. Mancall and James H. Merrell (New York: Routledge, 2000), 245-46; see also Hill, *Weaving New Worlds*, 74-6.

³² Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 75-77.

³³ William McLoughlin, *Cherokee Renaissance in the New Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 66; Hatley, "The Three Lives of Keowee," 251-54; Richard A. Sattler, "Women's Status Among the Muskogee and Cherokee," in *Women and Power in Native North America*, eds. Laura F. Klein and Lillian A. Ackerman (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 214-15. James Adair, visiting Cherokee towns in the 1760s, observed women in the fields "scold [the horses] and give them ill names, calling them ugly mad horses." Adair, *Adair's History of the American Indians*, ed. Samuel Cole Williams (1775; reprint, Johnson City, TN: Watauga Press, 1930), 436.

between a women's maternity, her physical labor, and her productive worth within her community.

Though the shrinking practice of communal farming seemed to weaken maternally-based agriculture, women's identities as mother-farmers could not be so easily shaken. Cherokee and Catawba women continued to adhere to customary farming cycles in spite of the presence of white settlers who were hungry for both corn and land. Like their ancestors before them, Native women in the 1790s found themselves sharing their crops with their new white neighbors until the newcomers haltingly mastered the cultivation of corn. When some Cherokees were concerned about a shortage of corn in 1819, the mission school of Brainerd matter-of-factly reported the community's fear, perhaps unaware that its very presence may have contributed to their neighbors' lack.³⁴ But the presence of mission schools did not shake the centrality of the agricultural calendar among Cherokees. When a new school opened among the Cherokees near Hiwassee Creek in 1820, the local women politely informed the missionaries that if there was to be education or conversion, it would take place on their terms. As a result, the white missionaries "do not expect to begin their school untill corn is ripe."³⁵ After schools became more firmly established, missionaries still contended with the calendar of planting and harvest. "The children do not all return as soon as we could wish," complained one missionary at Brainerd, but he acknowledged "how much their parents need their assistance at this season of the year in putting in their corn," and excused the absent

³⁴ February and March 1819, *Brainerd*, 108.

³⁵ April 27, 1820, *Brainerd*, 167.

pupils.³⁶ Because the land came first, no matter how much it was depleted, so too did the mothers, and daily life proceeded either with the farmers' blessings or not at all.

Cherokee and Catawba mothers may have faced the greatest obstacle to their exercise of agricultural power when the young United States government began dictating "civilization" programs to Southeastern Indians in the late eighteenth century. These programs promised that in exchange for adjusting their ways of life to reflect Euro-American norms, Native peoples would enjoy protected land, physical safety, and even citizenship. White onlookers attempted to redefine agriculture as male labor, which baffled those Indians who saw an unbreakable link between women and corn.³⁷ Thomas Jefferson and like-minded politicians saw themselves as rescuing Indian women from unseemly physical labor; by urging men to pick up the hoe and adopt mechanized food processing techniques, Jefferson believed women would be able "to spin & weave more."³⁸ Jefferson may have also envisioned that when Cherokee women remained in the home, behind their looms, they would be more immediately accessible to their children, and would behave more like white mothers. What he could not understand was the much broader definitions of motherhood that these women employed. Producing cloth rather than food was women's work in the eyes of whites, but for Cherokees, cloth was tangential. Corn, on the other hand, was generative, and it made no sense for men with their hands tainted by war to coax seedlings up from the soil. Though some mothers took up the spinning wheel, they did so in order to provide clothing

³⁶ May 24, 1822, *Brainerd*, 268.

³⁷ Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 109-113.

³⁸ President Jefferson to the Chiefs of the Cherokee Nation, January 10, 1806, Letters Sent by the Office of the Secretary of War Relating to Indian Affairs, 1800-1824, National Archives Record Group 75 (M15 Roll 2, 147).

for their families and sometimes to earn additional cash by selling their cloth. The drive to provide for their family was certainly nothing new to Native mothers; the spinning wheel simply offered another avenue to the same goal. Across most of the Cherokee nation in the early nineteenth century, whether women were spinning or not, mothers remained inextricably tied to the land, growing crops in gardens if not in fields and filling their children's bellies with food that had been hybridized, domesticated, cultivated, and perfected by their own mothers and grandmothers. With every pull from outside forces came a corresponding push from within, as farming mothers clung to familiar methods and innovated on their own terms.³⁹

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Native fields were sacred, practical, and maternal. Women tended them, and the fruits of their labor testified both to the spiritual health of the community and to the everyday nourishment of its denizens. While men assisted in clearing the fields during the spring, women quickly shooed them away, for men could no more nurture crops than they could rear children. By the twentieth century, when gendered systems of labor were less stark, some women still responded viscerally to the thought of a man in a cornfield. Mollie Sequoyah, friend and teacher to anthropologist Raymond Fogelson, informed him that a man's presence would interfere with the crops, and that men were unwelcome because they were "bloody." Blood was, in some sense, the essence of maternity, for blood determined both fertility and kinship. But blood was a powerful substance, and a man's blood – poisoned by the violence

³⁹ Tom Hatley identifies at least four generations of Cherokee agriculture, which highlight the ways in which women adopted new crops and adapted to changing social and economic landscapes. Hatley, "Cherokee Women Farmers Hold Their Ground," 305-335.

of war – would negate the positive growth and abundance of fields tended by symbolic mothers.⁴⁰

Not all women who worked the fields in Southeastern Native towns were mothers. But biological maternity in this case was irrelevant, for these women were nurturing – *mothering* – a community, and the corn they grew was the transubstantiated flesh of their own spiritual mother. What did it mean that “maize . . . was said to have been first obtained at the beginning of the world by two brothers from their mother’s blood”?⁴¹ What were those multicolored kernels of white, gold, and ruby red, but the nourishing drops of Selu’s lifeblood? Women farmed because the corn was sacred, because it came from a mother’s body. Like Selu, Southeastern Native women retired to the fields every day and returned to their families bearing baskets of corn, beans, and squash. Like Selu, these women saw motherhood as an identity that allocated power to a network of women and extended from their wombs to their crops to their communities.

⁴⁰ Raymond D. Fogelson, “On the ‘Petticoat Government’ of the Eighteenth-Century Cherokee,” in *Personality and the Cultural Construction of Society: Papers in Honor of Melford E. Spiro*, eds. David K. Jordan and Marc J. Swartz (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1990), 174.

⁴¹ William Harlen Gilbert, *Eastern Cherokee Social Organization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Libraries, 1935), 3.

CHAPTER TWO

INDIAN PROVIDERS

As an extension from their role as farmers, Cherokee and Catawba mothers were responsible for ensuring their children's and their communities' material wellbeing, from the security offered by clan membership to the practical benefits of food and clothing. The eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries issued a series of challenges to maternal providers; Cherokee mothers were confronted with several wars, a smallpox epidemic, developing factionalism between pro- and anti-American Cherokees, and the growing presence of white missionaries. Catawba women raised their children in refugee communities made up of Esaw, Wateree, and Saponi families, and they too were hit hard by smallpox and human enemies. Despite these tears in the social fabric, mothers continued to exercise the power of providing for their children, for survival was always a priority. A community depended on the youngest generation to redeem the future and sustain the people, and because the lives of these children fell into the protective hands of mothers, Cherokee and Catawba women could claim an enormous influence over not only their children, but their nations.

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The role of provider began at the most basic level of social organization; without even having to think about it, Cherokee and Catawba mothers provided a sense of belonging to their children. Among Cherokees, the matrilineal clan system relied on the roles of mothers for its coherence, and clans shaped both daily interactions and community decisions.

Lineages determined which relatives one joked with, which peers one married, and which elders one most respected. Within a given kin network, many women took on the name of “mother,” despite the fact that some were childless. One white observer noted with confusion that it seemed “all the female relatives are called *Mother*.”¹ Fathers, on the other hand, were less central to a child’s upbringing. Ethnographer William Gilbert realized in the 1930s that “the father was not always in a position of high authority in the Cherokee family”; instead, a woman’s brothers educated, protected, and mentored their sister’s children, while biological fathers had little authority. These multifaceted kin relationships condensed into seven Cherokee clans; passed from mother to child, clans provided the basis for Cherokee citizenship. Without clan, as both Indian war captives and white settlers discovered, one could not be fully Cherokee and so were not legally protected. Because clan was only heritable from one’s mother, Cherokee women carried the power to define their communities.² The conglomerate nature of Catawbas in the eighteenth century seems to have either prevented or erased clan formation, but the disparate peoples that sheltered under the

¹ John Gambold, May 22, 1809, quoted in Sarah H. Hill, *Weaving New Worlds: Southeastern Cherokee Women and Their Basketry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 27. See also Theda Perdue, *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700-1835* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 46-7. Indeed, ethnographer William Harlen Gilbert imagines the “Cherokee male informant” telling us, “My mother I call ‘gidzi.’ I also say ‘gidzi’ when speaking to my mother’s sisters or to any woman of my clan who marries someone of my father’s clan.” William Harlen Gilbert, *Eastern Cherokee Social Organization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Libraries, 1935), 4.

² Payne designates the seven clans as Wolf, Blind Savannah, Paint, Long Hair, Bird, Deer, and Holly, though there are several variations. John Howard Payne Papers, 4:92, Newberry Library. See also William Harlen Gilbert, “The Eastern Cherokees,” *Bureau of American Ethnology*, 203, 249, 252, 324; Charles Hudson, *The Southeastern Indians* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1976), 185-196, 229-232; Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 42-51; John Phillip Reid, *A Law of Blood: The Primitive Law of the Cherokee Nation* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006; 1970), 38-9; and Gilbert, *Eastern Cherokee Social Organization*.

Catawba name maintained their matrilineality, so that mothers still defined a child's belonging.³

Matrilineal descent was a powerful social organizer, and it determined both inheritances and marriages.⁴ A child belonged to his or her mother's clan, and both property and power thus followed the mother's line. When a young Cherokee man and woman wanted to marry, their mothers decided whether the match was appropriate, and if they approved, "the young man was admitted to the woman's bed." The groom's mother provided "a leg of venison and a blanket" to the couple, while the bride's mother contributed "an ear of corn and a blanket." Cherokee mothers were responsible for dressing the marital stage with symbolic objects, ensuring that the husband would be a good hunter, the wife a good farmer, and that the couple would thrive under communal protection.⁵ Cherokee myths are filled with mothers directing their children's marital affairs, and the trope of the demanding mother, even in legend, reveals the clarity of their maternal role as providers. In one story, an owl approached a girl's mother to ask for her hand, but the mother told him "that only a good hunter could have her daughter." In another, a bullfrog courted a young woman, but her mother "was so much opposed to him that she would not let him come near the house." A giant in disguise tried to placate his lover's mother by bringing her gifts of deer meat and wood, since she had declared that her daughter "must be sure to take no one but a good

³ Frank G. Speck, "The Question of Matrilineal Descent in the Southeastern Siouan Area," *American Anthropologist* 40, no. 1 (1938): 1-12; F. G. Speck and C. E. Schaeffer, "Catawba Kinship and Social Organization with a Resume of Tutelo Kinship Terms," *American Anthropologist* 44, no. 4 (1942): 555-575; James H. Merrell, *The Indians' New World: Catawbas and Their Neighbors from European Contact through the Era of Removal* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 109-117.

⁴ Gilbert, *Eastern Cherokee Social Organization*, 3.

⁵ Gilbert, "The Eastern Cherokees," 339-340.

hunter for a husband, so that they would . . . always have plenty of meat in the house.” In yet another tale, a man tricked a young woman into thinking he was such a great hunter that the girl’s mother went to consult with the hunter’s mother in hopes of arranging a marriage, since “the old woman are usually the matchmakers.”⁶ An ideal husband would offer a woman meat to supplement her corn. But when a Cherokee couple separated, the husband moved out while the mother continued to provide for her children within her own home. Mothers felt responsible for their children even after marriage, and when Charles Reece’s mother-in-law began interfering, perhaps because he kept three of her daughters as wives, he deserted his family “on account of the insolence of their mother.” The Cherokee man may have abandoned his wives, but they kept “a good plantation, & a valuable stock of cattle,” along with their children. While Charles Reece centers this story, hidden in the margins are two generations of mothers overseeing and providing for their children, despite the vagaries of men. Reece may have “taken another woman” after fleeing his mother-in-law, but his wives retained control of the plantation and property.⁷

Mothers’ roles as farmers led to their roles as familial providers, for no matter where their children were, women sought to feed them. One eight-year-old Cherokee scholar at the Brainerd mission reported that her schoolfellows’ parents often “bring us sweet potatoes, and bean bread.” She took it as evidence of her Christian education that “if any of the children take it from us without leave, they have to repeat the eighth commandment, and the tenth verse of the sixth chapter of the first of Corinthians,” which would have reminded them not

⁶ James Mooney, “Myths of the Cherokees,” *Nineteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* (Washington, D.C., 1900), 291, 310, 337-338, 398.

⁷ January 25, 1817, Joyce B. Phillips and Paul Gary Phillips, ed., *The Brainerd Journal: A Mission to the Cherokees, 1817-1823* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 28.

to steal and that thieves would not inherit the kingdom of heaven. The letter of this young pupil was recorded in a partially fictionalized account of Cherokee mission schools in which two white girls discuss their Indian counterparts. When one character asks why the Cherokee parents brought them “*bean* bread, and sweet potatoes,” her cousin replies, “For the same reason that our mothers bring or send us oranges, dates, and nice cakes, when we are away at school,” thus aligning Cherokee and white women in a bond of maternal indulgence, though both the treats and the circumstances were very different.⁸

Mothers also provided their families with clothing, and when their children began wearing trousers and cotton dresses in the late eighteenth century, many mothers quickly adapted to the sartorial change. In 1831, missionaries observed that while “twenty years ago most of the Cherokee children, of both sexes, were entirely naked during most of the year,” the current landscape was full of “habitually clothed” children, and “especially a Cherokee girl, without decent clothing, is an object very seldom seen.” This observation may not signal a progression from poverty to prosperity so much as a simple shift in clothing styles.⁹ A group of Cherokees visited Washington, D.C., in the early 1800s and endured a host of ignorant questions from white Washingtonians. One woman guessed that Cherokee women must fawn over an Indian delegate who “had been to Washington & Philadelphia, for he would bring her a calico petticoat.” Her companion politely replied that “Washington Husbands are of no use to our women now, for they can weave their own petticoats.”¹⁰ When

⁸ Sarah Tuttle, *Letters and Conversations on the Cherokee Mission*, Vol. 2 (Boston: T. R. Marvin, 1830), 64-5.

⁹ Gottlieb Byham, D.S. Butrick, William Chamberlin, Evan Jones, et al., “Cherokees,” *Missionary Herald* 27, no. 3 (March 1831), p. 79.

¹⁰ Payne Papers, 2:3, Newberry Library.

another Indian woman on a political visit to Washington in 1822 “appeared greatly delighted” after being “handsomely dressed by Madame Neuville,” her interest in the garments may have been a combination of novelty and an awareness of the favorable impression she made on white observers.¹¹ Even when Cherokee children grew up and served as Christian missionaries on their own homeland, some continued to rely on their mothers for basic apparel. Elias Boudinot, a Cherokee missionary at Brainerd, informed his fellow missionaries that he “thinks it his duty to spend the winter with his mother.” As a result, when a few of the Brainerd staff traveled to a nearby mission in January, Boudinot first had to stop at Oothcaloga to go “to his mothers to get cloathes &c.”¹²

Even when some mothers sought to clothe their sons and daughters the best way they knew how, unruly or perhaps embarrassed children sometimes rejected their efforts. Cherokee mother Dawnee of Oostanauala knit a pair of stockings for her sixteen-year-old son Robin, but when they proved too small, she asked her son to return them so that she could reuse the yarn to make larger stockings. The boy, a scholar at the Springplace mission, who probably attended class with children in European clothing, “tore the stockings out of her hand” and “sprang out of the house with them.” Once the stockings were rescued by a intervening Sister, he “tore into two parts a neck scarf his mother had given him and hid it so that she could not demand it from him.” Whether Robin held on to the torn clothing to have some keepsake of a familiar home or to prevent his classmates from seeing the embarrassing homespun is unclear, but the son’s violent reaction left Dawnee “crying and shaking in the

¹¹ Eliza Haywood to John Haywood and Eliza Williams Haywood, February 21, 1822, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

¹² December 28, 1822, *Brainerd*, 326; January 7, 1823, *Brainerd*, 330.

yard.”¹³ The following year, Dawnee’s ten-year-old son George was dismissed from the mission for disorderly behavior and expressed a similar disdain for his mother’s clothes; in his departure from the mission, George “sold on the road his clothing and also a new hat when he left here.” When Dawnee heard of this sacrilege, she promptly set off after her son “to get them again” and succeeded in rescuing “the hat and various other things.”¹⁴

While many women could knit stockings and weave their own petticoats, increasing poverty prevented some mothers from providing for their families to the degree to which they were accustomed. News of Cherokee poverty reached the ears of the United States government, and President Thomas Jefferson probably struck a chord when he told the chiefs of the Upper Cherokees, “We wish to do whatever will best secure your people from suffering for want of Clothes or food,” adding that “it is these wants which bring sickness & death into your families & prevent your multiplying as we do.”¹⁵ Mothers were resourceful, though, and rather than relying on an American president to save them, they took advantage of the presence of white settlers to find new ways to provide for their families. Southeastern Indian women incorporated new plants, animals, and materials into their daily routines and adapted their hospitality to take advantage of new market conditions; many women, for instance, started selling – rather than offering – their corn.¹⁶ Catawba women began selling their pottery by the 1760s, and colonial South Carolinians soon relied on these women’s pots,

¹³ May 28, 1817, Rowena McClinton, ed., *The Moravian Springplace Mission to the Cherokees, Volume 2: 1814-1821* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 163.

¹⁴ December 29, 1818, *Springplace*, vol. 2, p. 252.

¹⁵ Thomas Jefferson, Letter to the Chiefs of the Upper Cherokee, May 8, 1808, LOV.

¹⁶ James Taylor Carson, “Dollars Never Fail to Melt Their Hearts: Native Women and the Market Revolution,” in *Neither Lady nor Slave: Working Women of the Old South*, eds. Susanna Delfino and Michele Gillespie (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 15-33.

pans, and jugs to stock their kitchens.¹⁷ Archaeological evidence suggests that female potters may have even adjusted the style of their pots to align more closely with the needs of their white customers. While women were marketing their wares to the English, they were also supplementing their own kitchens with English ceramics.¹⁸ Many tribes in the Southeast depended on men's involvement in trade to supplement their livelihoods, but Catawbas were one of the few peoples whose women maintained such an active role in external trade. Even in the 1890s, "the manufacture of pottery" remained the "chief occupation" of the Catawbas, and women dominated this industry. These "graceful pitchers, flower-jars, vases, and various kinds of toys and ornaments," in addition to more functional pots, entered eighteenth- and nineteenth-century commercial spheres, bringing money and trade goods to Catawba women and their families.¹⁹

Cherokee women, too, fought to fill their children's bellies and maintain a roof over their heads even in times of widespread poverty. Many women began trading and selling the woven baskets that they generally made for the use of their families.²⁰ In 1830, a visitor to Cherokee lands observed that "many of the Cherokees have good houses; as good if not better than most of their white neighbors. . . . Their farms are well cultivated, and are productive; their children and people generally are well clothed." He added that "in some of

¹⁷ Merrell, *The Indians' New World*, 210-211.

¹⁸ R. P. Stephen Davis, Jr. and Brett H. Riggs, "An Introduction to the Catawba Project," *North Carolina Archaeology* 53 (2004): 1-41; Mark R. Plane, "Catawba Ethnicity: Identity and Adaptation on the English Colonial Landscape," *North Carolina Archaeology* 53 (2004): 60-79.

¹⁹ H. Lewis Scaife, *History and Conditions of the Catawba Indians of South Carolina* (Philadelphia: Office of Indian Rights Association, 1896), 19.

²⁰ Sarah H. Hill, "Made by the Hands of Indians: Cherokee Women and Trade," in *Neither Lady nor Slave: Working Women of the Old South*, eds. Susanna Delfino and Michele Gillespie (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 34-54.

the contiguous counties, I saw many ragged children, but next to none in the nation.”²¹ By combining their own efforts with food, clothing, and material assistance offered by missionaries, Cherokee mothers tried to ensure that their children would not suffer. The mother of Cherokee linguist Sequoyah, for instance, raised the boy by herself and maintained her family “by her own exertions.” In addition to “managing her little property” of eight acres, she owned a “considerable number” of horses and cows and also “opened a small traffic with the hunters,” whereby she raised additional money through involvement in the deerskin trade. Though this woman was “perfectly untaught and illiterate,” according to one of Sequoyah’s biographers, she cultivated a diversified household economy to provide a comfortable life for her son. Her actions, from farming to negotiating for a share in the deerskin trade, reveal that she had actually been taught quite well, most likely by her own mother, who had instructed her daughter in how to provide for a family.²²

The role of provider was a communally supported duty, and when mothers found themselves suffering from hardships that made maintaining maternal duties difficult, extended kin networks stepped in to protect them and their families. If a Catawba woman “lost her husband, and had a large family of children to maintain, she was always assisted.” If her fellow women farmers were unable to spread their labor to cover hers, “the young men of the tribe were made to plant, reap, and do anything she was not capable of doing herself.”²³ If

²¹ “Communication of ‘A Traveller’ on the Condition of the Cherokees,” *Connecticut Observer* 6 (1 November 1830): 178, quoted in Eugene L. Schwaab, ed., *Travels in the Old South: Selected from Periodicals of the Times* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1973), 223.

²² James Hall and Thomas L. McKenney, *History of the Indian Tribes of North America, with Biographical Sketches and Anecdotes of the Principal Chiefs*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: E. C. Biddle, 1836-1844), 64.

²³ Alexander Gregg, *History of the Old Cherokees* (New York: Richardson and Co., 1867), 26.

a Cherokee woman died and left an infant motherless, “any of the woman’s relations that gives milk will take the child and give it suck and they will make no distinction betwixt that child and their own children.”²⁴ For eighteenth-century Cherokees, “orphan” was an unknown category.²⁵ Even when kin networks stood ready to provide for those who needed assistance, the absence of a mother in a child’s life occasionally left it vulnerable. The Creek migration legend included an instance of a motherless child being sacrificed in order to capture a roaming monster, and in his explanation of this detail, ethnographer Albert Gatschet remarked that “when the mother of a new-born babe died, several tribes . . . were in the habit of burying the *forsaken* child alive with the corpse of the mother.” This practice, though extremely uncommon if not unheard of among Southeastern Indians in the eighteenth century, speaks to the perceived power of the mother in providing for her child. While other family members could certainly have cared for children who lost a mother, the sense that mothers were the ultimate providers, both physically and spiritually, evoked this image of children being sacrificed to a powerful sense of maternal ownership.²⁶

Native mothers, like all mothers in the South, manipulated social changes to ensure their children’s success, and one significant change in the Cherokee Nation was the enslavement of Africans and African Americans. Though slavery was not foreign to Cherokee society, the systematized bondage of Africans was new in the late eighteenth

²⁴ Alexander Longe, “A Small Postscript on the Ways and Manners of the Indians Called Cherokees,” ed. David H. Corkran, *Southern Indian Studies* 11 (1969): 34.

²⁵ By the nineteenth century, though, as families and communities were split apart by disease, poverty, and Removal, the Cherokee Nation took on the role of the national parent, creating institutions that would provide for Cherokee children who had no kin support. See Julie L. Reed, “Family and Nation: Cherokee Orphan Care, 1835-1903,” *American Indian Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2010): 312-343.

²⁶ Albert S. Gatschet, *A Migration Legend of the Creek Indians, With a Linguistic, Historic and Ethnographic Introduction*, Vol. 2 (Philadelphia: D. G. Brinton, 1884), 43.

century, and Cherokee women used slavery, like other changes, to promote their children's happiness. In 1824, Jane Wolf, the widow of Young Wolf, was brought to court by her two daughters who desired the bills of sale for the black slaves they had inherited from their father. Jane, who had held onto the slaves' titles in defiance of Young Wolf's will, had other ideas; she promised her two oldest daughters she would give them their female slaves *after* "getting some of their increase" in order to provide her younger children with slaves as well. The daughters wanted the rights to the female slaves and their future children, but Jane, canny enough by 1824 to understand the intricacies of heritable bondage, decided to skirt the dictates of her husband's will in order to provide equally, in human flesh, to all her children. The National Committee under John Ross, arguing that Jane "has raised her children with that maternal regard which is peculiar to the trait of a fond mother," dismissed the daughters' claims.²⁷

Other Indian mothers dealt with the advent of racialized enslavement in less aggressive ways; some welcomed runaway slaves into their communities, adopting them and occasionally offering them clan membership, while a few Native women intermarried with blacks and created culturally and ethnically mixed families. The ability to decide the fate of captives had been a predominantly female role well before Europeans arrived, and the nature of women's involvement in race-based slavery was, to some extent, simply a variation on a

²⁷ Order of the National Committee, May 25, 1824, John Howard Payne Papers, 7:58-61, Newberry Library. For more on slavery in the Cherokee Nation, see Theda Perdue, *Slavery and the Evolution of Cherokee Society, 1540-1866* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1979); Fay A. Yarbrough, *Race and the Cherokee Nation: Sovereignty in the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Celia E. Naylor, *African Cherokees in Indian Territory: From Chattel to Citizens* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Tiya Miles, *Ties That Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); and Christina Snyder, *Slavery in Indian Country: The Changing Face of Captivity in Early America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

theme. The descendants of these unions often had a difficult time establishing their legal identities, for most white courts were invested in a biracial social system in the nineteenth century. Still, enslaved people who proved Indian heritage had a chance to sue for freedom. In 1811, five slaves in Louisa County, Virginia, petitioned the circuit court, claiming that “they are intitled to their freedom, in as much as their Grand Mother was a free Indian.” The attorney who worked with these slaves acquired several depositions, probably from neighbors who knew the families and could attest to their lineage, and concluded that “they have a good cause of action to recover their freedom.” Similarly, in Norfolk County, Virginia, another group of slaves all swore to being “of Indian descent” and received certificates from the county court to that effect. Though these Indian grandmothers and great-grandmothers may have already died, they were providing for their children from the grave, ensuring that the color of their skin did not doom them to enslavement.²⁸

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Along with blacks came whites, and many Cherokee mothers facing hardships in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw the benefit of adapting to white definitions of “civilized” behavior as a means to provide for their children. Sending their sons and daughters to mission schools could ensure them food and clothing, while learning to spin cotton rather than mound soil seemed to promote the protection of their land for the next generation.²⁹ Understanding the repercussions of the Euro-American presence on their lands,

²⁸ October 15, 1811, Louisa County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV; July 15, 1833, Norfolk County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

²⁹ For a discussion of the project of acculturation in mid-nineteenth-century Cherokee boarding schools, see Devon A. Mihesuah, *Cultivating the Rosebuds: The Education of Women at the Cherokee Female Seminary, 1851-1909* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Devon Abbott, “‘Commendable Progress’: Acculturation at the Cherokee Female Seminary,” *American Indian Quarterly* 11, no. 3 (1987): 187-201; and Devon Mihesuah, “Out of the ‘Graves of the Polluted

Cherokee women sometimes chose to bring an open mind to their cross-cultural interactions. Missionaries at Brainerd recorded the visit of a man seeking religion who was accompanied by his wife and mother; the women, to the missionaries' relief, "pay decent attention to instruction when spoken to and manifest no disposition to ridicule or oppose," unlike, presumably, many other Cherokee women the men had encountered.³⁰ The religious men also noted the "decent . . . appearance" of one Cherokee mother "dressed neatly in the fashion of our country."³¹ The missionaries' surprise suggests that most women continued to behave as they always had, dressing in clothing they found most comfortable and raising their children no differently. Those women who did choose to "pay decent attention" and "dress neatly" may have done so for a variety of reasons. They may have preferred the new fashions or were married to white men who gave them these clothes. Some, though, may have sensed that larger battles would be fought down the road. If they wanted education for their children, perhaps it was wisest to seek the missionaries' approval.

By the early nineteenth century, many Cherokees expressed a belief in the Indian right to Euro-American education as a supplement to a Cherokee education, for knowledge of English became increasingly crucial as traders and speculators attempted to hoodwink natives through legal loopholes and unfaithful translations. One Cherokee elder, the Elk, conveyed this sentiment to the Moravian missionaries at Springplace by telling the story of how education was first stolen from Indians. The two sons of Kanati and Selu, the first

Debauches': The Boys of the Cherokee Male Seminary," *American Indian Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (1991): 503-521.

³⁰ August 12, 1821, *Brainerd*, 234.

³¹ April 9, 1818, *Brainerd*, 50-51.

people, received a book from their father “from which they should learn trade and commerce.” One brother, however, “forcefully snatched the book away and ran away from his father’s house.” After Kanati created a great sea between the two brothers, the first brother’s book became inaccessible to the second brother, who had stayed behind with his father.³² Thus had the whites tricked the Indians out of education, but through their words and deeds, Cherokees made it clear that they could no longer remain ignorant of the skills that whites had stolen.

Cherokee mothers thus understood the importance of mission schools in their communities, and they adjusted the expression of their maternal roles in response to this combined threat and opportunity. One evidence of mothers’ abilities to sift through European imports is their acceptance of the educational opportunities of missions and their concurrent rejection of Christianity. Missionaries, who educated in the hopes of conversion, were understandably dismayed, and their successful conversion stories usually pitted a saintly Cherokee student against her barbarous and misguided parents. Though some Cherokees did convert to Christianity, in varying degrees of syncretism, most Cherokee families sought out the missionaries for their ability to teach reading, writing, and the English language.³³

Cherokee mothers sent their children to school in hopes that they would return with valuable knowledge for their families as well as themselves. Indeed, after just a few months, scholars

³² October 13, 1815, *Springplace*, vol. 2, 87. A similar story was told to a writer for the *Cherokee Phoenix*: “Soon after the Creation, while the Indian & the white man were together, God visited them, and presented to the Indian a written paper. He was at first unable to read it, but, after studying a while, was beginning to make out a few words, when the white man very unceremoniously snatched the paper from his hand, read it without hesitation, and put it in his pocket. Hence, the white men came to have learning, while the Indians were unable to put language on paper.” *Cherokee Phoenix* 2:3 (April 1, 1829), 1-2.

³³ William McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Missionaries, 1789-1839* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 53; McClinton, *Springplace*, vol. 1, 20-21.

at the Baptist Tinsawatee school in Georgia “already say to those who stay at home, ‘you will be of no account if you do not go to school.’”³⁴

In spite of the vastly different culture of the mission schools, Cherokee women maintained their sense of maternal responsibility, for it was this duty that connected them so powerfully to their children. Mothers, for instance, continued to play a commanding and vocal role in their children’s upbringing. It took little time for missionaries to discover that “the mothers among this people are considered as having the right to the children in preference to the father,” and that “the family tree rests on them; the father counts for little or nothing.”³⁵ Mothers controlled their children’s involvement in mission schools by regularly extracting them for Green Corn ceremonies, ball plays, family illnesses, and other reasons that they felt no need to share with the missionaries.³⁶ These periodic breaks from the school routine helped remind children of their cultural and familial roots. But with the changing cultural climate, some women also found themselves disagreeing with husbands and brothers about the best course for their children. When Little Peggy’s mother decided to remove the child from Brainerd in 1818 so the family could move west of the Mississippi, the stepfather, “believing it would be good for her to stay,” chose to leave Peggy at the mission school, thus

³⁴ Humphrey Posey to William Staughton, n.d., printed in the *Latter Day Luminary*, May 1821, p. 401, and the *American Baptist Magazine and Missionary Intelligencer*, 1821, p. 185, quoted in Robert G. Gardner, *Cherokees and Baptists in Georgia* (Atlanta: Georgia Baptist Historical Society, 1989), 37.

³⁵ September 5, 1818, *Brainerd*, 80; September 23, 1818, *Brainerd*, 82; John Gambold to Jacob Van Vleck, July 1, 1820, Moravian Archives in Salem, quoted in McClinton, *Springplace*, vol. 1, 36.

³⁶ August 20, 1808, *Springplace*, vol. 1, 279; August 3, 1811, *Springplace*, vol. 1, 444; April 28, 1816, *Springplace*, vol. 1, 114; May 16, 1818, *Springplace*, vol. 2, 220; May 14, 1817, *Brainerd*, 34; April 5, 1823, *Brainerd*, 350.

separating mother from child.³⁷ When another Cherokee mother heard that her daughter was not being fed properly at Brainerd, an uncle came to remove the girl, but after "some further conversation with the girl, he concluded not to take her even for a visit."³⁸

Cherokee mothers upheld their own understandings of maternal duty even when their actions seemed foreign and unnatural to concerned missionaries. Used to the showers of tender affection represented in idealized depictions of white mothers, missionaries often interpreted Cherokee culture as lacking in natural love. Missionaries praised one Christian Cherokee for adopting and raising a Creek orphan whose "unnatural mother had cast [it] off to die, because she would not have the trouble of bringing up twins."³⁹ Given the heavily laden spiritual significance of twins, which signaled the presence of a evil power to many Indian cultures, this Cherokee woman likely had a better understanding than the missionaries of why the child had been "cast off."⁴⁰ Similarly, when a Cherokee mother left her daughters at the Brainerd mission, the "children screamed & cried very much, but the mother put on the fortitude to leave them in that situation." Rather than valuing this "fortitude" as a Christian virtue, the missionary witness pointed to permissive parenting styles among the Cherokee and chided the mother for her aberrance, arguing that "when we consider how much parents indulge their children in this country, we are surprised that they appear so willing to leave them at school so much against their own will." This Cherokee mother probably did

³⁷ January 25, 1818, *Brainerd*, 44.

³⁸ September 5, 1818, *Brainerd*, 79.

³⁹ "Moravian Missions: Extracts from the Journal of the Mission at Spring-Place, among the Cherokee Indians," *The Missionary Herald* 20, no. 9 (September 1824), 296.

⁴⁰ Hudson, *The Southeastern Indians*, 322; William Gilbert also notes that "twins are regarded as potential witches." Gilbert, "The Eastern Cherokees," 255.

“indulge” her children when they were at home, but in 1820, her duty as a mother was to provide for her children by securing them an education in white ways as well as Cherokee ones.⁴¹

The changing face of the Cherokee Nation in the early nineteenth century occasionally drove women to revisit their theories on parenting and discipline. Men’s and women’s responses to the demands of mission schools, for example, highlight the different expectations and investments of mothers and non-mothers. When a white father attempted to place his children under the care of missionaries at Brainerd and was turned down for lack of space, he “could understand our reasons for not receiving them” and “appears well satisfied.” A few days later, a Cherokee mother left her daughter at the mission, and when the child cried to be taken away, the mother “brought her to submission by the rod.” This woman had probably never beaten her child before, but the stakes were too high to risk losing a spot at the mission school. Whereas the white father accepted his children’s fate without protest, the Cherokee mother fought to protect her daughter’s educational future, even if that meant disciplining her child in a way her own mother might not have recognized.⁴²

Mothers certainly sought education for their children by placing them in mission schools, but the schools also provided a solution for women suffering from unprecedented poverty. Missionaries at Springplace sympathized with one mother, who enumerated the effects of disease and poverty on her family. The missionaries exhorted her to pray, and she seemed to listen “cordially,” but “at her request,” the missionaries sent her home with “as

⁴¹ September 20, 1820, *Brainerd*, 189.

⁴² July 13, 1818, *Brainerd*, 71; July 15, 1818, *Brainerd*, 75.

many white turnips to take on the way as she and her daughter could carry.” This woman came for the turnips, not the prayers. She could hardly feed her family, and the mission school where her child was enrolled was a reliable source of assistance. Another woman brought her daughter to the Springplace mission in 1819 and begged the missionaries for a piece of bread. That night, “she completely emptied three apple trees and afterward . . . stole our cucumbers, melons etc.”⁴³

Other Cherokee mothers faced similar pressures; one woman claimed “her husband (a white man) had burned up her house, destroyed all her furniture, sold her cattle & horses, & she was left destitute.” The woman’s complaint was not merely her own destitution but that a *white* man had destroyed *her* property; even in her despair, she was careful to define the extensive boundaries of her economic power. When her husband’s wrath stripped her of her female prerogative, though, she became unable to care for her children and was glad to find a home for them at the mission school.⁴⁴ One missionary formally adopted a Cherokee student “by the consent of her mother,” and she “was taken to reside in his family, & to finish her education at his expense.”⁴⁵ For a mother who could not shelter her child in times of need, especially when kin networks were becoming increasingly distant and tenuous, such a sacrifice was commensurate with the maternal goal of ensuring a child’s survival.

Along with looking to missions to provide food, mothers discovered that missionaries gave out free clothing. One Cherokee woman brought her daughter to the Brainerd mission

⁴³ January 29, 1807, *Springplace*, vol. 1, 162; July 20, 1819, *Springplace*, vol. 2, 306.

⁴⁴ May 7, 1821, *Brainerd*, 214.

⁴⁵ September 30, 1823, *Brainerd*, 379.

and “expressed a great desire to put her child into the school if only she could find some way to furnish her with clothes.” Knowing the missionaries could not resist a potential convert, this mother played on their charitable zeal to dress her child. Indeed, “ascertaining that the woman was really poor,” the missionaries “proposed to take the girl and clothe her as our own . . . untill she had acquired a good education.”⁴⁶ Occasionally Cherokee mothers expressed no interest in acquiring education along with the clothes. One pair of women stealthily removed their young relatives from the school while the missionaries were at evening prayer; upon discovering the removal, the missionaries seemed stymied. “We can think of nothing which would induce them to such conduct,” they exclaimed, “except the expectation of obtaining clothes which might be put onto the children.” If this was the case, the women had timed their visit well, for “a few articles had been given [the children] which were taken away.”⁴⁷

When the mission schools failed to live up to maternal expectations, Cherokee mothers were not shy about voicing their displeasure or making additional demands; mothers’ role as providers meant that the caretakers of their children must be closely monitored. One mother made repeated visits to Springplace, and along with disrupting the mission with “loud displays of pleasure and laughter,” she asked the missionaries for extra food and other favors. Her hosts complained that “all of her demands were impossible to meet.”⁴⁸ When Cherokees heard that missionaries were selling clothes to the students rather than offering them freely, their expressions of “dissatisfaction” forced the missionary council

⁴⁶ November 14, 1818, *Brainerd*, 92.

⁴⁷ April 5, 1823, *Brainerd*, 350.

⁴⁸ January 6, 1806, *Springplace*, vol. 1, 82.

to resolve that “we take no more pay for clothes.”⁴⁹ Mothers wanted their children to profit from the missionaries’ presence on their lands, and when whites seemed to benefit from Indian labor, mothers pushed back. Mothers of Cherokee pupils at the Dwight Mission in Arkansas pulled their children out of school once the demands for their physical labor seemed to get out of hand, causing missionaries to complain that Cherokee parents “are incapable of judging, as to what will be really and permanently useful to their children.”⁵⁰ Mothers probably failed to see the usefulness of having their sons farming mission lands and their daughters doing the washing for whites. Certain Arkansas Cherokee chiefs considered circumventing this system in 1822 by forming a school of their own, believing that their “children could be brought forward much faster, if they were not required to labor.”⁵¹

Sending a child away to school must have been frightening for a concerned mother, for it removed the child from her immediate oversight. In the 1830s, pupils at the Baptists’ Bread Town School, based on the eastern edge of the Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma, could take advantage of an Indian-run boarding house that sprung up outside of the mission to cater to Cherokee students. Mothers undoubtedly felt better leaving their children in the hands of other Cherokee women, no matter how distant, than unintelligible white missionaries. It might have helped that an “old Indian matron” was running the boarding house, lending her

⁴⁹ December 6, 1819, *Brainerd*, 143.

⁵⁰ American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Annual Report, 1823, p. 94.

⁵¹ Dwight Mission Journal, September 14, 1822, American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Annual Report, 1823, p. 95. It does not appear that this Cherokee-led school ever came to fruition.

maternal oversight to other women's children.⁵² Mothers who placed their children in these boarding schools were undoubtedly trying to avoid what missionaries took such pride in at the Dwight Mission, namely "that all the children taken into the school, be received also into our family, that they may be constantly under our care and direction."⁵³

Rumors of illness among the distant mission school pupils elicited Cherokee mothers' worst fears. Brainerd missionaries in 1819 confessed that a "report of the sickness prevailing among our children . . . has alarmed many of the parents, & they are coming to take their children home." When visitors came to the school several weeks later to observe a few classes, many of the Cherokee children were indeed absent, "having been taken away in consequence of the frights of their parents on the appearance of Dysentery, & not yet returned."⁵⁴ One man presented himself to the missionaries as the uncle of one of the young scholars, and "frankly told us that the mother of the girl, having been informed that the children were not well fed, requested him to come & take the girl away."⁵⁵ Other mothers who considered the mission "a sickly place" chose to "delay bringing their children," and when the mission experienced its first student mortality, one missionary painted the despair of the child's grandmother, who arrived at the school "inexpressibly borne down with

⁵² Jesse Mercer to Lucius Bolles, September 24, 1827, *American Baptist Magazine*, 1828, p. 21, quoted in Robert G. Gardner, *Cherokees and Baptists in Georgia* (Atlanta: Georgia Baptist Historical Society, 1989), 50.

⁵³ Alfred Finney and Cephas Washburn, "Mission among the Cherokees of the Arkansaw," *Missionary Herald* 17 (May, July 1821): 147-52, 211-14; 18 (April 1822), 107-9, quoted in Eugene L. Schwaab, ed., *Travels in the Old South: Selected from Periodicals of the Times* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1973), 61.

⁵⁴ November 6, 1819, *Brainerd*, 136-7; December 13, 1819, *Brainerd*, 145.

⁵⁵ September 5, 1818, *Brainerd*, 79.

grief.”⁵⁶ When a mother enrolled her child in a mission school, she expected some degree of education along with adequate food, clothing, and health care. The death of a child who left home to secure a better future dealt a cruel blow to mothers who increasingly found themselves making such compromises.

Cherokee women were not merely mothers of children, but also mothers of communities, and though they sought individual success for their children in mission schools, they also hoped that education in white ways would provide the strongest defense of Cherokee land. The missionaries instructed their Cherokee pupils not only in such foreign subjects as “Orthography, Etymology, and Syntax,” but also in the gender divisions of labor they considered appropriate.⁵⁷ Boys toiled at field labor and building construction, while girls engaged in “sewing,” “assisting in the dining room,” “milking,” and “mending the boys clothes.”⁵⁸ While some parents may have looked at these tasks skeptically, others were “well pleased with the whole.” One father who observed his sons laboring admitted that “he wanted his boys to work for a living when they left school, & if they worked none here they would not know how.”⁵⁹ Cherokee Chief John Ross allegedly recalled his childhood in the 1790s as deeply conflicted between the customs of his white father and the traditions of his matrilineal clan. One day his Cherokee mother dressed him “in his first suit of nankeen, brand new, made after the white man’s style,” but the suit quickly drew jeers from his young Indian companions. Retreating in tears to his Cherokee grandmother, he emerged the

⁵⁶ September 2, 1823, *Brainerd*, 375; November 21, 1821, *Brainerd*, 247.

⁵⁷ January 3, 1822, *Brainerd*, 252.

⁵⁸ July 2, 1821, *Brainerd*, 224; June 11, 1823, *Brainerd*, 361.

⁵⁹ July 20, 1819, *Brainerd*, 123.

following day in an outfit of her choosing: “hunting shirt, leggings, and moccasins.”⁶⁰

Despite the best interests of parents who struggled within a changing society, the adoption of white social and material practices was rarely smooth and never absolute.

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Southeastern Indian mothers had to contend with very different definitions of appropriate “providing” in their struggle to ensure their families’ survival. The United States government in particular attempted to dictate how Indian men and women should protect their families. President Thomas Jefferson promised a delegation of eastern Plains Indians that if they settled down in peace, “your Women & Children will lie down to sleep in their Cabins without fear of being surprised by their enemies & killed or carried away.” He informed them that he had given the same advice to “your red Brethren on this side [of] the Mississippi,” and their adherence to his recommendations led them “to clothe and provide for their families as we do.”⁶¹ But when Jefferson recommended a system of “civilized” behavior to Cherokee delegates in 1808, his understanding of how Cherokee men and women provided for their families clashed with how Cherokees had structured their familial identities for generations. Jefferson’s vision included “the men working that farm with their hands,” while the women sat in their houses, “spinning & weaving clothes for their husbands & children.”⁶²

⁶⁰ Rachel Caroline Eaton, *John Ross and the Cherokee Indians* (Menasha, WI: George Banta Publishing Co., 1914), 3-4. Eaton does not cite the provenance of this story, though she did consult Cherokee records in Oklahoma, the Newberry Library, the U.S. Indian Office, and personal letters kept by John Ross’s descendants during her research. Though the story may be apocryphal, the tension between white and Indian markers of identity would certainly have been a common strain to elite Cherokee children.

⁶¹ Thomas Jefferson, Letter to a Delegation of Indian Tribes, January 4, 1806, LOV.

⁶² Thomas Jefferson, Letter to the Chiefs of the Upper Cherokee, May 8, 1808, LOV.

Cherokee women *did* provide clothing for their families, but that was far from the extent of their involvement.

Cherokee and Catawba children in the colonial southeast could not survive on their own; part of mothers' incredible power was their ability to meet the needs of their sons and daughters in a historical context in which those needs were rapidly transforming. A Catawba mother who supported her son through communal agriculture in 1730 may have had to sell her pottery on the streets of Charleston in 1800 to achieve the same goal. A Cherokee mother who taught her daughter how to weave baskets in 1750 may have sent her to a mission school to learn English in 1810. These women shared a common purpose, and the evolution of the world around them merely altered their methods, not their motivations. Despite the changes on their lands, for Indian mothers in the Southeast, providing for their families meant clothing and feeding them, but it also meant farming, speaking out in council meetings, educating their children, and ensuring that their sons, daughters, and larger communities were armed with the necessary tools for both survival and success.

CHAPTER THREE

INDIAN SPIRITUAL GUIDES

For all Southern women, the root of motherhood was the blood that spilled monthly; Cherokee and Catawba mothers simply amplified menstruation from a biological to a spiritual force. From a woman's first menstruation, she developed an awareness of the power in her body, her blood, and her womb. Southeastern Indian women viewed their motherhood as spiritually potent, a connection with the earth that fortified their role in the community but also prepared them to pass spiritual knowledge on to their children. Women protected their children from evil spirits with prayers and amulets, and they raised their sons and daughters to respect spirits of the natural world, to understand how their people first emerged, and, occasionally, to evaluate and adopt portions of other spiritual practices that would enable them to make sense of their surroundings. Spirituality was often a moving target, and most Indian mothers used what they could to ensure their children's health and happiness. By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, some Southeastern Indians were also converting to Christianity, or incorporating aspects of missionary teachings into their own spiritual worldviews. Mothers practiced and adopted a variety of beliefs, but for almost all women, their spiritual motives were wrapped up in the survival of their children. Like guides through a wilderness, Cherokee and Catawba mothers used spirituality to lead their children safely through the hazards of their young lives. Beyond the immediacy of childrearing, being tied to religious structures gave mothers a particularly powerful voice in their communities,

for when motherhood was positioned as a cosmic role, its power became indistinguishable from a people's most basic worldview.

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Unlike some of their neighbors in the South, most Indian women enjoyed spiritual roles that were codified and respected by their communities, which made the exercise of spiritual power that much easier. The building blocks for Native religions were the tales and legends that explained why and how the world was ordered, and Southeastern creation myths set up powerful roles for women by associating them with sustenance and survival.

Cherokees believed that the very first woman, from whom they were descended, was also the first farmer; she introduced the cultivation of corn and beans to the Cherokees, and earned a sacred status in annual ceremonies and the nightly tales parents told their children.¹

Catawbas, among several other Southeastern tribes, recognized the sun as a female deity, further emphasizing the connection between women and life-sustaining power.² When John Lederer traveled among the Monacans in Virginia, he recorded that they viewed themselves as descending from one god and four powerful women that birthed their four primary tribes and the very "Race of Mankind."³ During the eighteenth century, the Algonquian-speaking Rappahannocks of coastal Virginia believed that God created woman first, and then man.

Each newly created person received a plot of land, and with each separate plot came a lesser

¹ John Howard Payne Papers, 1:43 and 2:51-6, Newberry Library; James Mooney, "Myths of the Cherokees," *Nineteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* (Washington, D.C.: 1900), 242-49.

² Frank G. Speck, "Catawba Religious Beliefs, Mortuary Customs, and Dances," *Primitive Man* 12, no. 2 (April 1939): 38.

³ John Lederer, *The Discoveries of John Lederer, in Three Several Marches from Virginia, to the West of Carolina, and Other Parts of the Continent*, trans. by William Talbot[,] Baronet (London: Samuel Heyrick, 1672), 4.

god who protected that land's people. These "tribal deities" boasted several names, but the most common was Okee, meaning, "he (tribe) has a mother," or simply, "Mother." For Rappahannocks, the world began with women, and tribes emerged only through the protection and guidance of these land-mothers. Rappahannocks viewed war between neighboring tribes or clans over land boundaries as an affront to the order of the world and a disrespect to the mother-gods that created these land-based tribes.⁴ In the most basic spiritual sense, mothers ordered the world for their Rappahannock children. Unlike the Christian Eve, whose painful maternalism was punishment for the sin she introduced, the female forebears of most Southeastern Indians solidified the connection between motherhood and a people's endurance.⁵

These stories were not just primordial legends; they were told and retold and fundamentally affected how eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Native peoples understood each other and the world around them. The connection between religion and maternalism, then, was difficult to sunder, especially for white settlers and missionaries who sought to replace Indian myths with Christian ones. In 1808, a Cherokee chief named The Bird visited the Springplace mission in Georgia to learn more about the intricacies of Christianity. After the missionaries explained the link between Jesus's self-sacrifice and the salvation of humanity, The Bird asked "if He shed *all* of His blood. And did it fall on the earth?" The missionaries, perhaps perplexed by this quibbling, confirmed that yes, Christ's blood fell on the earth. The Bird was not interested in minor details, however; he understood the story of

⁴ Charles Edgar Gilliam to Joseph Sawin Ewing, September 21, 1953, Joseph Sawin Ewing Papers, LOV.

⁵ For more on Cherokee cosmology, from the centrality of the mother figure to the spiritual significance of the natural world, see Lee Irwin, "Cherokee Healing: Myths, Dreams, and Medicine," *American Indian Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (1992): 239-242.

Christ's sacrifice only as it related to the creation story *he* knew. He had also learned as a child that his people were saved, nourished, and sustained by the bodily sacrifice of an ancient figure, but his savior was a woman, Selu, and her blood did not turn into symbolic wine but sprang from the earth as life-giving corn. What was confusing to The Bird was how a man could fill this obviously maternal role.⁶ Similarly, when missionaries to the Cherokees translated "Lord" as "*une:hlanv':hi*," or "the one who provides," women would have quickly associated the role of provider with Selu, the first mother.⁷ In a warning to the Cherokees in 1811, Chief Koychezetel equated "God" and "mother"; he told that "God was dissatisfied" with the relationship between Cherokees and whites, and continued, "The mother of the nation has left you Your mother is not pleased." He concluded by saying, "Now I have told you what God's will is." For Chief Koychezetel, God was indistinguishable from the mother figure who sustained and guided his people.⁸

The role of women in religious stories translated directly into the spiritual symbols of daily life, and Cherokees and Catawbas acknowledged the power of real women by honoring the markers of their motherhood. The first of these markers was menstrual blood. Blood was a powerful substance in general, and just as men unleashed this power in the blood-letting of warfare, women unleashed it in menstruation. Such spiritual power demanded social seclusion for warriors after battle and women during their periods and following childbirth.⁹

⁶ December 15, 1808, Rowena McClinton, ed., *The Moravian Springplace Mission to the Cherokees, Volume 1: 1805-1813* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 292.

⁷ Alan Kilpatrick, "A Note on Cherokee Theological Concepts," *American Indian Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (1995): 394.

⁸ February 10, 1811, *Springplace*, vol. 1, 411.

⁹ John Howard Payne Papers, 3:76-7, Newberry Library, Chicago; Charles Hudson, *The Southeastern Indians* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1976), 319-21; Theda Perdue, *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700-1835* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 29-30;

Women in both Cherokee and Catawba societies confined themselves during such periods of intense spiritual resonance, but this practice stemmed from neither fear nor shame; the quarantine arose from communal respect. For Cherokees, “the clan is regarded as being identical with the mother’s blood,” a substance which linked generations. Because the spiritual potency of blood was inextricably tied to women who literally and figuratively birthed their communities, blood was only dangerous when it emerged from a menstruating “woman with clan . . . , not a white woman.”¹⁰ Because white women could not give birth to Cherokee children or afford their children clan protection, their motherhood could not have the same spiritual force as that of Cherokee women; because they had no spiritual power within Cherokee communities, their menstrual blood had no stigma.

Like menstruation, both pregnancy and childbirth were rife with spiritual symbols and careful ceremonies that honored the implicit power of motherhood. Most Cherokee pregnancies were surrounded with a series of warnings and restrictions, for pregnant women were vulnerable to the competing spiritual forces of the world around them. If a woman ate certain kinds of animals, from rabbits to fish, her fetus would develop associative physical traits, from large eyes to birthmarks. Soon-to-be mothers often avoided meat, especially if it was killed in a way that spilled its blood.¹¹ The natural world was a powerful place, and women felt connected to its vagaries through their own spiritual engagement. It made sense, therefore, for a baby to be affected by how its mother interacted with the surrounding

William Harlen Gilbert, “The Eastern Cherokees,” *Bureau of American Ethnology, Anthropological Papers, No. 23*, Bulletin 133 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1943), 345.

¹⁰ Gilbert, “The Eastern Cherokees,” 207.

¹¹ Frans M. Olbrechts, “Cherokee Belief and Practice with Regard to Childbirth,” *Anthropos* 26 (1931): 19-29; Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 31.

landscape. Many Cherokee women gave birth near water and quickly washed the infant afterwards, a practice which cleansed the child while introducing it to the natural and spiritual world in which it would live. Afterwards, they would sometimes coat the child in bear grease and wrap it in a blanket – a panther skin for boys, and a deer skin for girls, which signaled future gender roles as predator and grazer, or hunter and farmer.¹² Part of a mother's duty as a spiritual agent was filling her children with spiritual qualities that would protect them in a dangerous world.

After childbirth, mothers continued their children's spiritual education by situating them within a natural environment that was filled with signs and omens and that could either help or harm a child. The first step was to produce a strong and healthy child, a goal which was essentially gender-blind. Though Cherokees constructed gender identities for their children at the point of birth, the tinctures and treatments mothers gave to their infants often encouraged gender-neutral traits. By using parts of plants and animals, from cockleburs to feathers, mothers warded against weakness and fostered strength, wisdom, health, and amiable tempers in boys and girls alike.¹³ After a child was born, the mother waved it over a fire to gain that powerful element's protection. Similarly, mothers bathed their infants regularly in rivers, occasionally joined by a male priest who would wish the child "long

¹² John Lawson, *A New Voyage to Carolina; Containing the Exact Description and Natural History of That Country: Together with the Present State Thereof* (London, 1709), 189-190; John R. Swanton, *Indians of the Southeastern United States* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1946), 709-718; Hudson, *The Southeastern Indians*, 321-2.

¹³ Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 33. As the children grew older, relatives initiated a more gender-defined education. William Gilbert reported that "the boys are taught by the mother's brother various formulas for success in hunting and obtaining success in love affairs; the girls are taught to make baskets, pottery, and to perform various household tasks." Gilbert, "The Eastern Cherokees," 255.

life.”¹⁴ At a ritual cleansing among Cherokees in Georgia in the 1820s, mothers were responsible for dipping their children in the river, while other Cherokees washed themselves.¹⁵ Preparing a child for a spiritual life also entailed the pursuit of certain aesthetic qualities. Many Southeastern Indian mothers carried their children in cradleboards so they could tend them in the fields, tying their heads to the back of the boards in order to protect their children’s weak neck muscles. This practice led to slightly flattened heads in infants, which became a visible sign of responsible mothering.¹⁶ Though the effect of flattened heads may have been a byproduct of a more practical need to watch over children in the fields, many Native mothers came to believe that practicing head-flattening techniques would ensure that their children grew up strong, smart, and beautiful. Waxhaw mothers thought that head-flattening also had its functional benefits, including helping their children’s “eyes stand very wide apart,” which improved their vision “so that they became better hunters.”¹⁷ A practice born of a protective impulse thus became a vehicle for a child’s material success. Wide-eyed children could catch the deer, while children with weaker eyes might fall prey to the larger spiritual forces teeming in the woods and fields around them.

The spiritual power in plants and animals was also present in humans, and mothers could find themselves defending their children against threats from unexpected quarters.

Cherokee and Catawba mothers saw the world as a perilous jumble of forces for good and

¹⁴ Gilbert, “The Eastern Cherokees,” 340, 344.

¹⁵ Evan Jones, Journal, March 18, 1828, American Baptist Foreign Mission Society Correspondence 98/25, quoted in Robert G. Gardner, *Cherokees and Baptists in Georgia* (Atlanta: Georgia Baptist Historical Society, 1989), 15.

¹⁶ Albert S. Gatschet, *A Migration Legend of the Creek Indians, With a Linguistic, Historic and Ethnographic Introduction*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: D. G. Brinton, 1884), 55.

¹⁷ James Mooney, *The Siouan Tribes of the East* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1894), 75.

evil; their role was to recognize the difference and protect their children.¹⁸ In 1798, a strange British woman visited a Catawba town and entered a house where a woman was nursing her child. The Catawba mother promptly covered her baby with a blanket and looked suspiciously at the visitor. An interpreter conveyed to the mother that this stranger wanted to see her infant, and after several protests, the Catawba woman grudgingly uncovered the child. The British woman asked the interpreter “the reason of her reluctance, & was told, she was afraid lest the eyes of a stranger should be evil.” The stranger, perhaps laughing at this response, “assured her that mine, though not beautiful, had been very fortunate.” As a wary mother, the Catawba woman saw every unusual occurrence as weighted with spiritual meaning; an unknown woman in strange dress would have been a sign that the mother needed to quickly interpret in order to best serve her newborn child.¹⁹

As women watched their infants become toddlers, they continued to observe a host of traditions and injunctions surrounding the well-being of their children, and much of this advice turned spiritual charms and tinctures to practical gain. In the early twentieth century, an elderly Catawba woman named Margaret Brown describing her childhood remembered that women typically placed bags of sand on their children’s foreheads in order to ensure them “a heap of sense.” Other women promoted long life by drying, pounding, and then stirring the heart of a turtle into water, which mixture they then gave their children to drink. Some warded off speech problems by having their children blow upon the ash from burnt

¹⁸ Most eastern Native Americans believed in a spiritual saturation of the world; plants, animals, friends, and foes all contained spiritual powers that must be balanced and negotiated to ensure personal and communal safety, health, and happiness. For a good description of this cosmology, see Daniel K. Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 83-87.

¹⁹ Journal of Lady Liston, Robert Liston Papers, Manuscript 5697, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, Scotland, pp. 25-28.

sweet gum balls.²⁰ Certain women became respected physicians in their communities, perhaps a role accrued from their daily duties as mothers. One missionary in Georgia noted the presence of “a sorceress or female Physician” and a “female Doctor” among the Cherokees.²¹ There was no clear line between medicine and the spiritual world for most Southeastern Natives, so protecting their children from disease and poor health often fell under a mother’s spiritual duties.²²

Mothers maintained clear control over their children’s health as they grew up, despite the presence of male doctors and priests in many communities. Although one man complained of his sick grandson’s treatment by a host of older Cherokee women who “attempted to dispel his fever by magic, by blowing on him and such things like that,” he also realized that he had no say in this process, for “only the mother and the grandmother and the relatives from the mother’s side have the right to rule over the child.”²³ When a woman named Qualiyuga came to fetch her sick son from the mission school at Springplace in order to “have spells cast over him,” according to the missionaries, the teachers refused to let the boy go. Qualiyuga “left silently in displeasure,” probably unused to having her maternal prerogative questioned.²⁴ Dawnee of Oostanauala also believed her sons’ illnesses were best

²⁰ John R. Swanton, “Catawba Notes,” *Journal of the Washington Academy of Sciences* 8, no. 19 (Nov. 1918), 624, 627.

²¹ Evan Jones, Journal, April 17, 1830, American Baptist Foreign Mission Society Correspondence 98/27, and February 26, 1828, ABFMSC 98/25, quoted in Gardner, *Cherokees and Baptists in Georgia*, 17.

²² For an explanation of Cherokee conceptions of disease and healing, see Irwin, “Cherokee Healing,” 243-251.

²³ March 1, 1815, Rowena McClinton, ed., *The Moravian Springplace Mission to the Cherokees, Volume 2: 1814-1821* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 59.

²⁴ May 16, 1818, *Springplace*, vol. 2, 220.

treated at home. In 1816, Dawnee removed her son Robin from Springplace ostensibly for a trip to a neighbor's house, but the missionaries later learned that she had arranged to meet with a conjurer who could "perform magic on her son." The missionaries, unable to see Dawnee's actions as related to maternal responsibility, were outraged, claiming that "this woman legitimized her actions and conduct . . . as if she were a rational mother." But Dawnee was perfectly rational; her son was ill, and as his mother and spiritual guide, she needed to remove the boy from school and seek help from a healer. The missionaries never succeeded in keeping the boys from Dawnee when they were sick; in 1818, she removed her son George to "have him treated according to the heathen way." When George returned to school, the missionaries learned that "his mother had had a spell cast over him, and after that he seemed near death for ten days." They explained George's return to health by remarking that he had also benefited from "the advice and help of a white man," but from Dawnee's perspective, she had taken her sick son from school and treated him, and now the boy was healthy once again. As a mother, she had fulfilled her duty.²⁵

Children were vulnerable to diseases and accidents, but also to larger spiritual forces, and when boys and girls were at risk, mothers became their defenders. The Catawba woman who shielded her child from the stranger's eye could probably recount stories in which children were hurt or snatched away by mysterious powers. One early Catawba tale tells of a mother whose child was stolen, and who searched for it among all the animals in the forest. A red-headed woodpecker told her, in exchange for her bright earrings, that the old owl-woman had absconded with the child to the north. The mother, ever patient, journeyed across

²⁵ May 11, 1816, September 9, 1818, and October 25, 1818, *Springplace*, vol. 2, 116, 237, 246.

the mountains to rescue her baby.²⁶ Stories such as this reveal that the duties of Catawba mothers, like all mothers, extended well beyond simply feeding and clothing a child. In a world where the surrounding land and animals were imbued with distinct roles, intentions, and powers, mothers found themselves protecting their children from much more than human enemies.

One group of spirits that plagued vigilant mothers was the Wild People, or *yehasuri*, a spirit people who lived around the Catawbas and preyed on young children. These Wild People were small and mischievous creatures who sometimes captured little boys and played pranks on young girls and babies. They cried in the woods at night, and snuck babies out of their cradles. One of the tricks of the *yehasuri* was to prowl around Catawba homes after the sun had set and place spells on any children's clothes that were hung up to dry. Clothing that had been touched would give babies colic, and "to keep this from happening, a wise Catawba Indian mother will take her infant's clothing in at dusk, wet or dry."²⁷ Catawba mothers continued to be proactive in their defenses in the twentieth century; one woman remembered that when she and her siblings "left tracks in the yard and it was getting dark," her mother would "take a broom and wipe them out – go out there and sweep them away."²⁸ Mothers

²⁶ Swanton, "Catawba Notes," 628-9.

²⁷ Tom Blumer, "Get in touch with Yehasuri, the wild spirits," *The Rock Hill Herald*, May 13, 1999, p. 1C.

²⁸ Thomas Blumer, "Wild Indians and the Devil: The Contemporary Catawba Indian Spirit World," *American Indian Quarterly* (1985): 151. See also Speck, "Catawba Religious Beliefs, Mortuary Customs, and Dances," 31-2. Little people in Cherokee belief systems appear to have had a broader range of pranks and focused less on harassing children, though "once a woman in Big Cove left her baby alone in the house and when she returned she found a dwarf woman rocking the baby in its cradle." See John Witthoft and Wendell S. Hadlock, "Cherokee-Iroquois Little People," *Journal of American Folklore* 59, no. 234 (1946): 413-422, quote on p. 415; and Raymond D. Fogelson, "Cherokee Little People Reconsidered," *Journal of Cherokee Studies* 7, no. 2 (1982): 92-97. For more on the stories that Frank Speck collected and the frequency of tales involving children stolen somehow by the natural world, see James H. Merrell, "Reading 'an almost erased page': A

knew their children were vulnerable to all sorts of illnesses, and if some were provoked by roguish spirits, then mothers must do what they could to outwit them.

Cherokee and Catawba mothers derived their spiritual power from primeval female deities, but in their daily lives, they adapted and adjusted their religious sense to encompass both new threats and new possibilities. The introduction of Christianity to Indian communities in the eighteenth century offered many mothers an opportunity to re-evaluate their spiritual toolkit and assess the spiritual needs of their children in this world that looked increasingly different from that of their grandmothers. Most Southeastern Indians had long practiced inclusivist religious traditions, which incorporated those elements of foreign religions which were most useful or which seemed to parallel their own understanding of how the world worked. The arrival of Christianity, then, was less a novelty than simply another entry in a long parade of religious adaptations.²⁹ Some Cherokee and Catawba women listened eagerly to readings of the Bible, searching for new spiritual means to raise their children in an increasingly dangerous world. But women also interpreted Christianity as a chance to procure food and clothing from generous missionaries or to participate in a new set of festivities.³⁰ Some Cherokees in the 1860s, for instance, flocked to readings of the Bible, but these were also accompanied by celebrations, and “the women come well supplied for these religious feasts. . . . They take great pleasure in appearing in red—in any color that

Reassessment of Frank G. Speck’s Catawba Studies,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 127, no. 4 (1983): 253.

²⁹ Cherokee women were not the only Southeastern Indians who saw no contradiction in holding onto their cultural identity while adopting Christian beliefs. See Michelene E. Pesantubbee, “Beyond Domesticity: Choctaw Women Negotiating the Tension Between Choctaw Culture and Protestantism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67, no. 2 (1999): 387-409.

³⁰ See Meg Devlin, “Cherokee Conversion to Christianity: American Board Missions, 1817-1839” (MA Thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2003).

is bright and gay.”³¹ Occasionally Cherokee women stepped up as interpreters when missionaries arrived with the English gospel. One woman who translated a sermon in 1822 was “herself affected to tears,” and her emotion, combined with a sense of hospitality and perhaps business savvy, prompted the woman to lend the struggling missionaries four of her cows.³² The varied responses of Indian mothers to the hymns and sermons of Christian missionaries reveals that spirituality was, at heart, the melding of a communal tradition and an individual’s needs, and that even when their choices differed, mothers continued to control their children’s spiritual educations.

Those women who did embrace certain aspects of Christianity had a host of motives, but many converts expressed the relief it gave them as mothers. Most women saw themselves as responsible for the spiritual lives of their children, a duty which provoked near-constant concern, but Christianity offered a guaranteed future for well-behaved children that must have relieved some maternal pressure. The omnipotence of the Christian God also shouldered many of the burdens that women felt. Tahneh, a Cherokee woman living in Arkansas, converted in 1826 and lost her son two years later. *The Missionary Herald*, the organ for the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, reported that Tahneh’s grief was tempered because of her new faith, quoting the bereaved mother:

When I think how soon my son was laid aside by sickness, how he suffered and languished away, and now is gone, to come back to his mother no more, I sometimes feel my heart say, it is hard, it ought not to be so. But then I remember . . . that my Saviour has done this, my heart says it is well.³³

³¹ James Buchanan, Jr., “Life Among the Cherokees,” *Southern Home Journal*, Dec. 19, 1867, p. 1.

³² July 31, 1822, Joyce B. Phillips and Paul Gary Phillips, ed., *The Brainerd Journal: A Mission to the Cherokees, 1817-1823* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 293.

³³ “Cherokees of the Arkansas: Biographical Notice of a Cherokee Woman,” *The Missionary Herald*, October 1828, Vol. 24, Issue 10, p. 311.

The teachings of Christianity could provide Indian women with the potentially comforting thought that dead children were not lost but were merely waiting for their mothers to join them in a better world. In an era of continuing disease and the dissolution of towns and communities, such a conviction could have understandable appeal. For those mothers who could not adhere to Christian teachings, or who saw themselves as unpardonable sinners, the thought that their converted children were destined for an afterlife to which they had no access was painful. One young Cherokee girl at the Brainerd mission wrote her brother that “Mother says she is grieved to think her children are going to leave her behind. But she says she will pray as long as she lives, and that the Savior will pardon her sins, that she may go with her children to heaven.”³⁴ If Christianity offered some mental relief from suffering, it may have seemed worth adopting to mothers who saw no better recourse.

Other women converted not because it made their jobs as mothers easier, but because it provided their children with a seemingly brighter future. Lydia Fields, a Cherokee woman who “was brought to Jesus Christ” in the 1830s, believed that her duty was to raise her children in the light of a Christian god. Lydia remarked that this conviction arose from learning “how other mothers have done.” While conversion brought a sense of right behavior in an increasingly Christianized community, it also provided tangible benefits to Lydia’s children. Her children attended mission school and were present each day, rain or shine. Indeed, her children “sometimes entered the school-house completely drenched with rain.” Becoming a Christian mother allowed Lydia to engage in a foreign society that offered her children a chance at both education and eternal salvation. Like Tahneh, Lydia used the tools

³⁴ Elias Cornelius, *The Little Osage Captive, an Authentic Narrative* (Boston: Samuel T. Armstrong, 1822), 97.

available in an increasingly white-dominated world to ensure her children's happiness and prosperity.³⁵

After a couple of decades of missionary presence, an increasing number of Cherokee families professed Christian beliefs, or at least took advantage of Christian offerings, though these families remained in a small minority. One missionary traveling in Tennessee observed a white family whose children were “totally ignorant, . . . unchristianized, and sinking into the savage state,” and compared them with their Cherokee neighbors, who by 1822 were “acquainted with family prayer, decent and orderly in all family duties, christianized and civilized.” Using the language of civilization as synonymous with Christian beliefs, this missionary viewed the Cherokee family as socially advanced, more religious and thus more worthy than their white counterparts.³⁶ Another missionary recalled traveling south to the mission of Brainerd within Cherokee lands and observing the scope of Christian influence; according to his calculations, the missionary “begins to discover the light when he gets within 40 miles of Brainerd.”³⁷ This adherence to Christianity, then, allowed Cherokees a foothold in the white imagination; if Cherokees could be more religious than whites, they could also be more “civilized,” and could thus assert their claim to their homelands, a claim which went far deeper than any spinning wheel or Christian psalm.

Cherokee mothers who rejected the offerings of the missionaries found solace in Native religious revivals, including the Ghost Dance movement of 1811-1812. To counter the spread of white religion and culture, some Cherokees, along with individuals from many

³⁵ “Lydia Fields,” *The Missionary Herald*, February 1834, Vol. 30, Issue 2, p. 57.

³⁶ May 30, 1822, *Brainerd*, 269-270.

³⁷ February 11, 1823, *Brainerd*, 337.

other Indian nations, argued that an adherence to Native-derived customs, particularly Native spirituality, would protect against cultural losses. When articulating the bounds of this spirituality, which drew from pan-Indian traditions and created an amalgamation of old and new religious structures, Cherokees cited mothers as central religious symbols. In 1811, Chief Koychezetel warned a few Cherokees at Springplace mission that the suffering of their people could be attributed to the anger of the Cherokee deities. “The mother of the nation has left you,” Koychezetel said, and will only return “if you get the white people out of the country.”³⁸ Many Cherokee women who had witnessed the loss of communal agriculture would have been pleased to hear their forebear, Selu, earn a little belated respect. In the winter of 1811-1812, the tremblings of the earth caused by the New Madrid earthquakes seemed to align with the warnings of Cherokee prophets; Selu, the Corn Mother, the earth itself, was displeased.³⁹

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Mothers made choices, then, when raising their children as spiritual beings, and their continued power over their sons’ and daughters’ spiritual lives speaks both to women’s sense of individual control and the respect and support of their communities. Some mothers clung to older belief systems, trusting in charms and prayers to protect their children from evil spirits and little people alike; others adopted aspects of Christianity, taking advantage of

³⁸ February 10, 1811, *Springplace*, vol. 1, p. 411.

³⁹ For more on the Ghost Dance movement, which William G. McLoughlin called nativistic, revivalist, apocalyptic, messianic, and millenarian, see McLoughlin, “New Angles of Vision on the Cherokee Ghost Dance Movement of 1811-1812,” *American Indian Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (1979): 317-345; McLoughlin, *Cherokee Renaissance in the New Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 178-185; and Michelene E. Pesantubbee, “When the Earth Shakes: The Cherokee Prophecies of 1811-12,” *American Indian Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (1993): 301-317. Pesantubbee argues that what scholars call the Ghost Dance movement among the Cherokees is a misnomer, and that it was in fact a series of three smaller movements that were heavily influenced by other Native religious revivals.

missionaries' generosity or embracing the idea of heaven as an attractive future for their children. Mothers combined a variety of practices when raising their children, and it was this conscious inclusivism that allowed them to adapt to the incursions of other religious traditions while retaining their maternal prerogative as spiritual guides. From the immediate power of their menstrual blood to their insistent voices in mission contexts, Native mothers in the Southeast provided compelling – and enduring – spiritual models for their children and families.

CHAPTER FOUR

INDIAN TEACHERS

Southeastern Indian women in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries faced a barrage of change, from warfare and epidemics to new trading networks and growing white settlement, but through it all, they sought to teach their children how to be Cherokee, Catawba, Pamunkey, and Nottoway. Sometimes this meant emphasizing a few unchanging truths – that men hunted and women farmed, perhaps – but often this meant creating new educational programs that revolved around how a child could best survive in an increasingly white world. Through a marriage of familiar methods of childrearing and a conscious manipulation of the changing world around them, mothers taught their children how to retain a Native outlook on the world while ceaselessly fighting for their health, happiness, and material success.

It may seem counterintuitive to highlight continuities in an era of such massive change, but like both white and black mothers, Native women absorbed and manipulated external developments in order to achieve a very basic set of maternal goals. Motherhood may be seen as the ship that weathers all storms – taking on new supplies and crew members, abandoning dead weight, but maintaining a structure that remained fundamentally sound from one shore to the other. As teachers, Cherokee and Catawba mothers held the power to put those continuities into action, to instruct the next generation in the ways of the generation before. As teachers, these women also understood the importance of incorporating new

educational philosophies into their curricula. The mothers that oversaw the education of Cherokee and Catawba children in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – whether it was at their knee or in a distant classroom – controlled, to some degree, both the identities of their children and the development of their nations. This was no small power.

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When Cherokee and Catawba mothers raised their children at home, their educational programs were similar to those of other women in the South: they trained their sons and daughters in appropriate gendered behavior, moral sensibilities, and practical skills. Within most Native societies, the distinction of gender was one of the key social foundations, and mothers early on distinguished between the educational needs of their sons and daughters. Because men and women were generally understood to be complementary (two sides of a coin) rather than hierarchical (two rungs of a ladder), mothers typically devoted equal attention to their young sons and daughters, though their lessons proved very different.¹ Unlike white mothers in the South, whose attention to both boys and girls challenged a more general social understanding that sons had more value, Native women's sense of gender equity was largely reinforced by those around them. Women enlisted their brothers to teach little boys to make bows and arrows, while young girls trained in agriculture and food preparation. When a Scottish traveler visited a Catawba town in 1798, she first noticed a ten-year-old boy with "a bow & arrow in his hand," and his four-year-old brother, who had "a pipe in his mouth & was smoking with all the gravity of a Philosopher."² These children

¹ Theda Perdue, *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700-1835* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 17-40; Carolyn Ross Johnston, *Cherokee Women in Crisis: Trail of Tears, Civil War, and Allotment, 1838-1907* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003), 23-27.

² Journal of Lady Liston, 1798, pages 25-28, Robert Liston Papers, Manuscript 5697, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, Scotland.

seemed precocious to the European observer, but to the mother who made sure the boys knew how to shoot and to smoke, they had been well-trained in proper masculine behavior and would make fine warriors, council men, or priests.

While schooling in the hunt usually took place with the help of an uncle or other male relative, mothers also provided guidance to their young sons struggling to wield a bow and arrow, helping them perfect skills that would earn them communal respect. Among the Powhatans, “to practize their children in the use of ther bowes and arrowes, the mothers doe not give them their breakfast in the morning before they have hitt a marke which she appoints them to shoot at.” A Powhatan mother would throw a piece of moss, or some other remarkably frail target, into the air and if her son failed to hit it, he failed to earn his breakfast, and could try again the following day.³ Cherokee mothers encouraged their sons to play with toy bows and arrows and to learn the game of “hunter and deer.” Once the boys grew older, however, they often came under the supervision of their mother’s brother, who would teach them “various formulas for success in hunting and . . . love affairs.”⁴ Even after many Indian communities acquired guns from Europeans, bows and arrows were still the most practical choice for many hunting situations, and mothers and their brothers continued to teach boys how to shoot with a bow. In 1733, William Byrd observed that the Nottoway Indians “use nothing but fire-arms” for hunting and warfare, “except . . . amongst their boys,”

³ William Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile into Virginia Britannia: Expressing the Cosmographie and Comodities of the Country, together with the Manners and Customes of the People*, ed. R. H. Major (London: Printed for the Hakluyt Society, 1849), 110-11, quoted in John Swanton, *Indians of the Southeastern United States* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1946), 709.

⁴ William Harlen Gilbert, “The Eastern Cherokees,” *Bureau of American Ethnology, Anthropological Papers, No. 23*, Bulletin 133 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1943), 252, 255.

who were still being taught those skills by their mothers.⁵ Two centuries later, young Cherokee boys still used bows and arrows to “shoot at crickets and apples in the trees,” suggesting that mothers continued to teach their children these fundamental skills because they, as representatives of a broader community, still valued those skills.⁶

Mothers could occasionally choose more distinguished roles for their sons, and women were often pleased if their sons seemed marked for the priesthood or a high political position. Among Cherokees, some roles devolved on a child through the nature of its birth (twins, for instance, were seen as inherently powerful), while others had to be learned. In some circumstances, then, mothers could decide if they wanted to raise a child in the unique way necessary for a spiritually potent role. If a woman wanted her son to become a priest, she followed a strict set of rules, from relinquishing the baby during her menstrual cycles to segregating him from other children. In order to ensure a child’s future as a Chief Speaker in the War, a Cherokee mother made sure the boy avoided eating frogs, or “the tongue or breast of any animal.” When the boy came of age, an older priest took over the educational process with a series of holy trials that helped determine the boy’s future.⁷ Though these priests propelled the boys into careers, Cherokee mothers were often the ones who first marked notable paths for their sons, obeying detailed injunctions so that their children would succeed. Occasionally, Cherokee mothers early identified their children as capable of some evil power, and because these infants threatened the community’s stability, they were often

⁵ William Byrd, *The Westover Manuscripts: Containing the History of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina; A Journey to the Land of Eden, A.D. 1733; and A Progress to the Mines* (Petersburg: Edmund and Julian C. Ruffin, 1841), 35.

⁶ Gilbert, “The Eastern Cherokees,” 255.

⁷ John Howard Payne Papers, Newberry Library, 1:63-68.

killed. Mothers who practiced infanticide in these situations did so to protect their larger family: the clan.⁸

Young girls, meanwhile, grew up at their mothers' sides, and by watching older women cook, tend the fields, and weave baskets, they learned the skills of Southeastern Native womanhood firsthand. Cherokee mothers taught their daughters "the arts of life," and when they were old enough, girls learned "to make baskets, pottery, and to perform various household tasks."⁹ Other traits mothers encouraged were gender-neutral; Powhatan women washed boys and girls alike in nearby rivers to "make the children hardye," while applying ointments to their children's skin to toughen it so that "no weather will hurt them."¹⁰ Catawba mothers "learn their children swimming before they can walk, which greatly increases their strenght [sic], and of course forwards their growth." They began this process by routinely bathing their children in rivers, "be it ever so cold," from the time they were infants.¹¹ Cherokee mothers encouraged their young sons and daughters to participate in games and sports, from learning simple dances to "rolling stones down the mountains."¹² Strength, hardiness, and general good cheer were understandably valued traits in any Southern community, where the shadows of disease and intercultural conflict threatened children's lives.

⁸ Gilbert, "The Eastern Cherokees," 255.

⁹ Gilbert, "The Eastern Cherokees," 250, 255.

¹⁰ Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile into Virginia Britannia*, 110-11.

¹¹ William Gerard De Brahm, "De Brahm's Philosophico-Historico-Hydrogeography of South Carolina, Georgia, and East Florida" (1772?), in *Documents Connected with the History of South Carolina*, ed. Plowden Charles Jennett Weston (London: Chiswick Press, 1856), 217.

¹² Gilbert, "The Eastern Cherokees," 255.

Southeastern Indian mothers spent much of their children's early years forming their foundational identities, both as gendered individuals and community members, but they also shaped their sons' and daughters' moral compasses and taught them right from wrong. Most Native mothers believed discipline stemmed from shame, and that to ridicule children for their behavior entailed questioning their place in the community, a strategy which was more embarrassing and thus more effective than physical beatings.¹³ John Lawson remarked in the early eighteenth century that he "never saw . . . a Parent correct a Child," and that the Indians "do not practise beating and correcting their Children, as we do."¹⁴ By the early nineteenth century, simple ridicule was not always effective in dealing with the external challenges their children now faced. In 1819, one Cherokee mother encountered a dilemma when her son, Distant Dew, attacked another Indian boy at the mission school he attended. After the fight, the victim's mother came to the school and hit Distant Dew as punishment for abusing her son. Learning of this mother's outburst, Distant Dew's mother grew enraged at the thought of another woman disciplining her child. "Children *must* fight," she was heard to have said. "I will go, however, and take revenge on the person who hit my son! I will fight with her."¹⁵ These two mothers both leaped to physical violence as the solution for a situation that was wholly new; it was easy to control a child's self-image and sense of proper behavior when he was constantly under your care, but when he was removed many miles and placed in a

¹³ Charles Hudson, *The Southeastern Indians* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1976), 323-4; Rowena McClinton, ed., *The Moravian Springplace Mission to the Cherokees, Volume 1: 1805-1813* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 33.

¹⁴ John Lawson, *A New Voyage to Carolina; Containing the Exact Description and Natural History of That Country: Together with the Present State Thereof* (London, 1709), 201, 238.

¹⁵ May 12, 1819, Rowena McClinton, ed., *The Moravian Springplace Mission to the Cherokees, Volume 2: 1814-1821* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 287.

foreign environment, violence may have been used as a desperate attempt to regain some sense of maternal control.

Mothers typically led the meting out of justice among young children, and their consistent strategies of discipline reflect continuity across generations of Indian mothers. When John Lederer marched his pony through a Cheraw town in the 1670s, he drew a volley of arrows from a young Cheraw boy who clearly enjoyed such novel target practice. When other boys from the town joined in the fun, Lederer cried for mercy, observing with some pique that the town elders could only stem the mischief through “intreaties and prayers, not commands.”¹⁶ By the early nineteenth century, there were new models of discipline, and Indian children faced harsher systems of punishments from Europeans, especially missionaries. Though Distant Dew’s mother may have turned to corporal punishment as a last recourse, most Cherokee women fought to preserve their maternal duties by importing a shame-based mode of discipline to the mission context when children misbehaved in school. Mothers particularly had no patience for Europeans who interfered with their childrearing strategies. A mother and a set of grandparents visited the Brainerd mission in 1819 and “expressed great dissatisfaction that one of the girls had been whiped,” promptly removing their charges.¹⁷ After another child stole some items of clothing from the school, missionaries spoke with the child’s parents and “endeavored to impress on their minds the importance of parental government.” Unwilling to perform the necessary discipline themselves in the presence of the child’s ultimate arbiters, the missionaries enjoined the parents to make the

¹⁶ John Lederer, *The Discoveries of John Lederer, in Three Several Marches from Virginia, to the West of Carolina, and Other Parts of the Continent*, trans. by William Talbot[,] Baronet (London: Samuel Heyrick, 1672), 17.

¹⁷ May 29, 1819, Joyce B. Phillips and Paul Gary Phillips, eds., *The Brainerd Journal: A Mission to the Cherokees, 1817-1823* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 117.

“correction” and left the family alone.¹⁸ It is impossible to know what occurred once the parents were left with the unruly child, but it is probable that the child endured ridicule rather than corporal punishment. As missionaries at Springplace Mission noted, “the Indians being independent characters, will carry their opinions, although we do not neglect to remonstrate with them on the subject.” White observers on both sides of the Atlantic bemoaned Cherokee mothers’ indulgence; one German missionary declared that schools would succeed only within the borders of Indian communities, because “the Fondness the *Indians* have for their Children will always prevent them from sending, any competent Number of them at least, into the Colonies to have them educated.”¹⁹

Mothers disciplined their children for positive results as well as simple deterrence, and sometimes mothers chose to relinquish their children for a while in order to guarantee them a stronger moral character. One eighteenth-century tradition among some Southeastern Indians was a process called husquenawing, by which mothers allowed their sons, and occasionally their daughters, to undergo a strict series of rites in order to toughen children and prepare them for life as an adult. John Lawson described this ceremonial education among North Carolina Indians as being “the same to them, as it is to us to send our Children to School, to be taught good Breeding and Letters.” During the winter months, children gathered at a distant house and practiced fasting, purges, and trances. Kept within near-total darkness, the children – mostly boys – ate very little other than hallucinogenic plants, which must have turned their blackened cabin into a frightening whirl of color. Passersby could

¹⁸ September 25, 1822, *Brainerd*, 306.

¹⁹ “Moravian Missions: Extracts from the Journal of the Mission at Spring-Place, among the Cherokee Indians,” *The Missionary Herald* 20, no. 9 (September 1824), 296; John Daniel Hammerer, *Account of a Plan for Civilizing the North-American Indians* (London: 1765).

hear their screams from within, and most of them could not speak for several days after the intense process, either physically or emotionally unable to express the alternate worlds they had seen and the suffering they had endured. By the time the young adults emerged several weeks later, they were inured “to the Fatigues of War, Hunting, and all manner of Hardship,” while the brutal regimen served to weed out weaker children, who “would have been only a Burden and Disgrace to their Nation.”²⁰ Some seventeenth-century Powhatan boys endured a slightly more violent husquenawing, which occasionally left a child dead, but mothers accepted this process, for the successful boys would emerge as “priests and conjurers.” Their acceptance of this ceremony, though, did not prevent “mothers and kinswomen” from “looking on, weeping and crying out very passionately, and some, in pretty waymenting tunes, singing (as yt were) their dirge or funeral song.”²¹ Mothers who surrendered their children to such an intensive system saw this as a crucial component of their education. Mothering meant grooming the most viable children possible, and in a culture where the vicissitudes of seasonal agriculture and the hunt often limited the sizes of villages and families, only those children who learned physical and spiritual endurance could become productive members of their societies.

One of a mother’s most important yet imprecise tasks was to form her child’s familial, communal, and eventually racial identity; by teaching children who they were, mothers protected them from an outside world that was attempting to impose its own definitions of what “Cherokee” or “Catawba” should mean. Mothers were often responsible for instructing their children in tribal history, though fathers sometimes stepped in to tell

²⁰ Lawson, *A New Voyage to Carolina*, 232-4.

²¹ Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile into Virginia Britannia*, 94-6.

stories about the past.²² John Lederer observed that young Indians in western North Carolina and Virginia learned about the past through “Counters,” “Emblemes or Hieroglyphicks,” and “by Tradition delivered in long Tales from father to son.”²³ Cherokee mothers were responsible for introducing their sons to “the age-old lore of the tribe.”²⁴ Training children to identify with their pasts would give them a sense of place and belonging that would go far in ensuring their cultural cohesion in the face of dramatic changes, including intermarriage, enslavement, and enormous loss of land.

By the nineteenth century, surrounded as they were by Americans both black and white, Southeastern Indian mothers began teaching something they had virtually no conception of a century earlier: race. Because women defined kin, clan, and eventually racial belonging through their maternity, they often found themselves responsible for policing the boundaries between Indian, white, and black. Like enslaved black women in the South, Native women marked their children with their own status; unlike black women, however, whose bodies were conscripted for the economic service of their masters, for Native women this system of maternal lineage defined their power in their communities. A child born to a Cherokee woman was a Cherokee, no matter the father, while children born to Cherokee men and non-Cherokee women were clan-less, and thus non-Cherokee.²⁵

²² Among the Nahyssan and Saponi of Virginia, children learned their history from their fathers, who required them to memorize long segments of oral narrative. James Mooney, *The Siouan Tribes of the East* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1894), 33.

²³ Lederer, *The Discoveries of John Lederer*, 3.

²⁴ Gilbert, “The Eastern Cherokees,” 250.

²⁵ Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 54-5. For more on how Southeastern Indians defined their identities in response to an increasingly diverse social landscape – and increasingly diverse families – see Theda Perdue, *“Mixed Blood” Indians: Racial Construction in the Early South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003). See also Nancy Shoemaker, *A Strange Likeness: Becoming Red and White in Eighteenth-Century North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Defining outsiders was nothing new to Southeastern Indian mothers; Catawbas, despite their demographic need for inclusion, routinely mocked Iroquois, Cherokees, and whites for being “short-tailed eunuchs,” “a swarm of tame fowls,” and “*Nothings*.”²⁶ For most of the eighteenth century, the world was divided into Cherokees and non-Cherokees, or Catawbas and non-Catawbas; it made little difference if an outsider’s skin was white or black. By the late eighteenth century, though, Indians found themselves engaged in an increasingly race-based world. As Catawbas trolled the South Carolina backcountry for fugitive slaves on behalf of local white governments, they must have wondered what history had led to such single-minded animosity toward Africans and African Americans. As the settler population – both white and black – skyrocketed after 1800, Catawbas and their Indian neighbors were brought face to face with that history and forced to find their own place within it.²⁷ When racialized slavery spread to Indian country by the early nineteenth century, mothers had to make new choices about how to articulate their children’s identity, and this often involved defining Indianness in opposition to whiteness, and especially blackness. While Cherokee slaveowner James Vann regularly invited blacks into his home in the late eighteenth century, by the time his son Joseph took over the management of the plantation, African Americans were no longer welcome in the big house.²⁸ In 1817, Catharine Brown enrolled as a student at the Brainerd mission school with the firm belief that “the Cherokees

²⁶ Samuel Hazard, ed., *Minutes of the Provincial Council of Pennsylvania*, vol. 4 (Harrisburg: Theo. Fenn and Co., 1851), 721; Samuel Cole Williams, ed., *Adair’s History of the American Indians* (Johnson City, TN: Watauga Press, 1930), 34, 140.

²⁷ James H. Merrell, “The Racial Education of the Catawba Indians,” *Journal of Southern History* 50, no. 3 (1984): 363-384.

²⁸ Tiya Miles, *The House on Diamond Hill: A Cherokee Plantation Story* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 21-22.

were a different race from the whites.”²⁹ In 1824, the Cherokee National Committee decreed that intermarriage between “Negro slaves” and Indians or whites was illegal and subject to heavy fines or public whippings.³⁰ For much of the nineteenth century, Catawbas chose not to “mix with the Negro,” though “they frequently marry the white man & some of them men marry white women.”³¹ By excluding African Americans from their clans, except in rare cases of adoption, some Indians hoped to retain a distinct racial identity in a world in which race was hierarchical and survival could be dependent on skin color.³²

²⁹ Rufus Anderson, *Memoir of Catharine Brown, a Christian Indian of the Cherokee Nation*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1825), 19.

³⁰ “Cherokee Laws,” *Cherokee Phoenix*, April 24, 1828, 1:10. At the same time, the Committee condoned marriages between Cherokee men and white women, even bestowing citizenship on the children of these unions, which severely limited the matrilineal power and continuity of Cherokee communities. See Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 146-8. For more on how Cherokee marriage laws articulated a developing racial ideology in the Cherokee Nation, see Fay Yarbrough, “Legislating Women’s Sexuality: Cherokee Marriage Laws in the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of Social History* 38, no. 2 (2004): 389-400.

³¹ D. G. Stinson to Lyman C. Draper, July 4, 1873, Draper MSS, Thomas Sumter Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 9 V V, 274-279.

³² For a wonderfully concentrated example of the changing ideas of kinship and race in the Cherokee Nation, see the case of Molly, an enslaved African American woman who was freed and adopted by the Deer Clan in the 1770s to replace a murdered woman. By the 1830s, Cherokees had outlawed the incorporation of African Americans into clans, and even Molly’s freedom was being questioned. Theda Perdue, “Clan and Court: Another Look at the Early Cherokee Republic,” *American Indian Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (2000): 562-569. For more on the development of racialized slavery and racial ideologies among Cherokees and Catawbas in the early nineteenth century, see Tom Hatley, *The Dividing Paths: Cherokees and South Carolinians through the Revolutionary Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 233; Theda Perdue, *Slavery and the Evolution of Cherokee Society, 1540-1866* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1979); Merrell, “The Racial Education of the Catawba Indians,” 363-384; Gregory Evans Dowd, “North American Indian Slaveholding and the Colonization of Gender: The Southeast Before Removal,” *Critical Matrix* 3, no. 1-2 (1987): 1-30; Circe Sturm, “Blood Politics, Racial Classification, and Cherokee National Identity: The Trials and Tribulations of the Cherokee Freedmen,” *American Indian Quarterly* 22, no. 1-2 (1998): 230-258; Claudio Saunt, “‘The English Has Now a Mind to Make Slaves of Them All’: Creeks, Seminoles, and the Problem of Slavery,” *American Indian Quarterly* 22, no. 1-2 (1998): 157-180; Circe Sturm, *Blood Politics: Race, Culture, and Identity in the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Celia E. Naylor, *African Cherokees in Indian Territory: From Chattel to Citizens* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Christina Snyder, *Slavery in Indian Country: The Changing Face of Captivity in Early America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press,

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An external world, largely controlled by whites, was fast descending upon Southeastern Indians by the late eighteenth century, and with cross-cultural interactions came new ideas about education. By the early 1700s, Southeastern Indians were countering European ideas about education and plots to educate (or re-educate) Indian children. Education was often the foundation to larger programs of acculturation or assimilation, and whites were full of ideas, from removing children from their homelands to sending missionaries or other white educators to Native towns.³³ After the Tuscarora War of 1711-1712, Governor Alexander Spotswood of Virginia decided that re-educating young Indians, especially those of smaller, less powerful tribes, could produce a generation of sympathetic, English-speaking allies. If these children were sent to Williamsburg to gain this education, the program would have the added benefit of providing “so many hostages” in case their fellow Indians should attempt another uprising. Governor Spotswood also experimented with sending an English schoolmaster to an Indian town, but since the teacher was called away after only a brief sojourn among the Saponi, his presence there, in a white observer’s opinion, “had no other effect but to make them something cleaner than other Indians are.”³⁴ The Indian school in Virginia was apparently still functional by the 1750s, when the English, in an attempt to secure Cherokee support during the French and Indian War, proposed that the

2010), 182-212; and Tiya Miles, *The House on Diamond Hill: A Cherokee Plantation Story* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 75-207.

³³ For more on Cherokees’ reception of white educational methods (albeit a dated and slightly biased perspective), see Abraham E. Knepler, “Eighteenth Century Cherokee Educational Efforts,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 20, no. 1 (March 1942), 55-61.

³⁴ William Byrd, *The Westover Manuscripts: Containing the History of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina; A Journey to the Land of Eden, A.D. 1733; and A Progress to the Mines* (Petersburg: Edmund and Julian C. Ruffin, 1841), 36.

Cherokees “send some of your Boys to *Virginia*, where we have a School erected for their Education.” The English further added that “when they come to be Men, they will be acquainted with the Manners and Customs of us both, and our Children will naturally place such a Confidence in them, as to employ them in settling any Disputes that may hereafter arise.” Later, the appeal of grooming their children to be cultural intermediaries would convince many mothers to send their children to white schools, but in the 1750s, such concessions did not yet seem valuable. In their response to the English delegation, the Cherokees ignored the offer of education and instead demanded a fort to protect their families.³⁵ In an era of near-constant warfare, military protection was much more immediately useful than learning English.

Cherokee and Catawba mothers may also have objected to the style and cultural arrogance of European education. One missionary living in England, for instance, published a “Plan for Civilizing the North-American Indians” in the 1760s in which he proposed to send a host of white men and women into Native communities to teach trade, business skills, and agriculture to men, and to instruct Indian women in “Needle-work, how to manage a Family, and other Employments fit for Women and Girls.” A gang of young English boys and girls would also accompany the mission in order to “tame the rude and undisciplined Minds of the *Indian* Youths.”³⁶ Indian women may well have wondered why their styles of education appeared so threatening, or even invisible, to English governors and reformers.

³⁵ *A Treaty Held with the Catawba and Cherokee Indians at the Catawba-Town and Broad-River, in the Months of February and March 1756* (Williamsburg: Order of the Governor, 1756), 13. For more on the valuable role played by cultural intermediaries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Andrew Frank, *Creeks and Southerners: Biculturalism on the Early American Frontier* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2005).

³⁶ Hammerer, *Account of a Plan for Civilizing the North-American Indians*.

One answer was that Indian mothers trained their children to be effective members of specific clans, while European and eventually American politicians and reformers could only conceive of a united citizenry. The strong bond between Native children and their Cherokee, Catawba, or Saponi identities prevented the kind of cultural assimilation that many whites saw as necessary to American nation-building. Mothers were the chief instruments of identity-based education, and mothers and children thus became targets of missionary zeal and broad-based efforts to turn hunters into farmers and farmers into housewives.

While many Southeastern Natives resisted European educational plans, viewing their physical and ideological encroachment as a threat, others found value in mission schools. Cherokee David Brown observed in 1824 that “the generality of the Cherokee people are anxious to have their children educated and brought up as the white children.” While “generality” may have been too strong a term – Brown was writing to a potential benefactor, after all – he understood that for some of his fellow Cherokees, white education was an important acquisition in an increasingly white world.³⁷ The sheer persistence of Southeastern mission schools in the early nineteenth century is a testament to some mothers’ decision that a new educational system would be required for this new cultural landscape. Some had already begun to teach their children English on their own. When a white traveler visited a few Catawba towns in the 1780s, he was “not a little surprised to find that they all spoke English very intelligibly; and they informed me that they understand, and pronounce it as well as their own language.” Thirty years later, another visitor to the Catawbias deemed the “learning of the Indians quite useless,” though he observed that the “children can read &

³⁷ “Extract of a Letter from Mr. David Brown, to a Lady in Wilmington, Del., Dated Dwight, (Arkansas,) 29th May, 1824,” *Missionary Herald*, December 1824, Vol. 20, Issue 12, p. 398.

write” English and many families spoke English, presumably along with their native languages.³⁸

By the late eighteenth century, when mothers did decide to send their children to mission schools, they were not seeking basic instruction so much as an alternative education. Children had already learned the rudiments of what their mothers intended to teach, so mission schools became a place of educational layering. Some women had even begun teaching English and other new skills within the home; the teenage son and daughter of a respected Cherokee chief came to the Brainerd mission in 1817 already exhibiting “some knowledge of letters.”³⁹ Similarly, when a Cherokee girl showed up at the Dwight mission in Arkansas, the teachers were astonished to find that “her whole deportment was so perfectly correct, that no person ever gave her a word of reproof,” and that “she was a fine scholar, and displayed uncommon skill and taste in needlework.” The mystery was that her parents were “ignorant degraded heathen,” and that she “resided with her mother entirely, until she entered the mission school.”⁴⁰ The missionaries’ disbelief belied the hard work of this young scholar’s mother, who clearly trained the girl in such basic Cherokee qualities as respectful behavior and obedience to her elders, and perhaps even English and needlework, long before the child ever reached the mission’s door.

In the classrooms of the mission schools, Cherokee students arrived already having rich educational backgrounds, which provided any number of obstacles for white teachers.

³⁸ J. F. D. Smyth, *A Tour in the United States of America* (London: G. Robinson, 1784), 185; July 16, 1815, July 17, 1815, Calvin Jones Papers, SHC.

³⁹ May 14, 1817, *Brainerd*, 34.

⁴⁰ Sarah Tuttle, *Letters and Conversations on the Cherokee Mission*, vol. 1 (Boston: T. R. Marvin, 1830), 112.

Most commonly, Cherokee children simply had a difficult time acclimating to such a foreign lesson plan. Springplace Mission in northeast Georgia was fortunate to have teachers that spoke Cherokee, for many children either were reluctant to learn English or could not grasp the difficult and idiosyncratic language. Missionaries complained that “it seems as if a certain laziness has crept upon them that prevents them from learning our language.”⁴¹ As the missionaries learned, many Cherokee mothers chose to practice established methods of education and childrearing well after mission schools appeared on their lands, which continued to disturb and vex white observers. On their visits to the mission, Cherokee women heard stories of exemplary white mothers or converted Cherokee mothers, which missionaries told to remind Indians of appropriate maternal behavior. One perpetual sticking point was Cherokee mothers’ reluctance to employ European methods of discipline. When the wife of a famous nineteenth-century missionary died, the *Missionary Herald* published an obituary that enumerated the woman’s virtues, including a lengthy eulogium of her strict beliefs on “the unqualified submission of the will of the child to the will of the parent.”⁴² Similarly, when a Cherokee mother at the Creekpath mission passed away, the *Missionary Herald* proudly published her dying injunctions regarding her orphaned son’s upbringing: “Don’t be afraid to punish him when he does wrong, and *teach him to pray soon*.”⁴³ Both cultural groups had their own ideas about appropriate discipline, and what made a good English mother did not necessarily make a good Cherokee one.

⁴¹ September 5, 1819, *Springplace*, vol. 2, 312.

⁴² “Cherokees; Biographical Notice of Mrs. Ann Worcester,” *Missionary Herald*, September 1840, Vol. 36, Issue 9, p. 376.

⁴³ “Cherokees, Extracts from a Journal Kept at Creekpath,” *Missionary Herald*, July 1835, Vol. 31, Issue 7, p. 261.

Mothers who saw education as a valuable part of their children's upbringing occasionally tried to glean some knowledge of Euro-American methods from their children, for only by keeping abreast of change could they adequately respond to it. When their sons and daughters were coming home from mission school with books under their arms, making jokes in English, it makes sense that some mothers sought to acquire some of this new information. In 1818, one wealthy Cherokee woman asked her two slaves to teach her how to read, with the "occasional assistance of her little son," who was a student at the Brainerd mission. For this mother, living in a household with a literate son as well as two literate slaves, learning to read may have seemed the only way to keep up.⁴⁴

The advent of reading and writing on Indian lands prompted the kind of careful manipulation that mothers employed to extract the best of white offerings while retaining a core Indian identity. One version of a Cherokee creation story emerged in the early nineteenth century that incorporated both Europeans and literacy into a traditional form; God offered a "written paper" to the Indian man, who, "after studying a while, was beginning to make out a few words, when the white man very unceremoniously snatched the paper from his hand, read it without hesitation, and put it in his pocket." By stealing the paper, the white man hoarded literacy, but by integrating whites into their creation story, Cherokees co-opted the white presence and converted new cultural differences into comprehensible, age-old traditions. This, in one sense, was also the work that mothers were doing. By the 1820s, one writer found it difficult "to distinguish accurately between ancient traditions of the Cherokees

⁴⁴ June 7, 1818, *Brainerd*, 63.

and modern fictions,” and this blurring of boundaries reflected the careful work that mothers had long done to ensure the continued coexistence of old and new, history and innovation.⁴⁵

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Some mothers embraced the religious teachings and cultural knowledge that mission schools offered, others sent their children to the missionaries with great reluctance, but most kept their sons and daughters at home, teaching them how to be boys and girls, Cherokees and Catawbas, using the same methods they had learned from their mothers and grandmothers. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, programs of education centered on a child’s individual and communal identity, character, and moral and physical strength. By the nineteenth century, Indian mothers found themselves in new territory; they had to decide whether their children had a better chance of survival if they stayed in their village or moved to a mission school. They had to teach their children not just what it meant to be a Cherokee, but what it meant to be an Indian. The continuing presence of Indian mothers in the historical record, as the educators behind both skilled hunters and talented basket-weavers and the shadowy figures approaching mission schools, attests to their continuing power as teachers. Change was a constant in Indian societies, as it was in all societies, and Cherokee and Catawba mothers used the changes around them to guide, rather than to disrupt, their lesson plans.

⁴⁵ “Indian Traditions,” *Cherokee Phoenix*, April 1, 1829, 2:3, pp. 1-2. A similar story was told by a Cherokee man in 1815, who claimed that King George III was the white man who stole the book from the Indians. October 13, 1815, *Springplace*, vol. 2, 87.

CHAPTER FIVE

INDIAN POLITICIANS

Southeastern Indian women lived in communities in which their association with motherhood afforded them a political voice. Unlike other women in the South, who could only access local or national politics through husbands and sons (or, for enslaved women, not at all), Native women in matrilineal societies enjoyed the happy correlation of believing in their own maternal power within a society that reinforced that power. Although their power was so visible – or perhaps because it was – Indian women faced enormous threats to their political roles in the early nineteenth century, to a greater extent than any other group of women during this time period. As the Cherokee and Catawba nations reorganized in the face of both external and internal pressures, women saw the public acknowledgment of maternal power fading. The prospect of Indian Removal in the 1830s, however, once more brought a surge of women's voices to the council floors, proving that despite the ebbs of communal recognition, women continued to locate their political rights within maternalism and refused to be silenced. The power of motherhood, then, depended not on the definitions of a society, whether white and patriarchal or Indian and matrilineal, but on the self-definitions of the mothers in questions. A feeling of power could be harbored in the hearts of women long after a community seemed to deny it to them.

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Most Southeastern Indian women in matrilineal societies drew their political power from their roles as the guardians of the clan and the definers of lineage, but they also occasionally served as chiefs. The seventeenth-century Tappahannocks, a tributary group of Powhatans, promoted one mother to chief regent when the previous chief was deposed for kidnapping the wife of Opechancanough and the heir to the chiefdom was too young to reign.¹ The Pamunkeys swore their allegiance to a female chief named Cockacoeske who became the leader of the Powhatans, a larger umbrella group, in the 1650s. At one negotiation with the English in 1676, Cockacoeske arrived with dual signs of her political sway: “on her right hand an Englishman interpreter, and on her left, her son.”² Even earlier, the sixteenth-century Wateree boasted two female chiefs, while the town of Cofitachequi was famously ruled by a woman when Hernando de Soto begged there for bread. Hitchitis in the nineteenth century also maintained a legend that “the first chief that ever stood at the head of their community was a woman.”³

¹ Charles Edgar Gilliam to Joseph Sawin Ewing, September 21, 1953, Joseph Sawin Ewing Papers, LOV.

² Martha W. McCartney, “Cockacoeske, Queen of Pamunkey,” in *Powhatan’s Mantle: Indians in the Colonial Southeast*, revised edition, eds. Gregory A. Waselkov, Peter H. Wood, and Tom Hatley (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989; 2006), 243-266; Peter Force, *Tracts and Other Papers Relating Principally to the Origin, Settlement, and Progress of the Colonies in North America*, vol. 1, book 8 (Gloucester, VA: Peter Smith, 1963), 14-15, quoted in McCartney, “Cockacoeske, Queen of Pamunkey,” 246.

³ James Mooney, *The Siouan Tribes of the East* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1894), 80; Charles Hudson, *The Juan Pardo Expeditions: Exploration of the Carolinas and Tennessee, 1566-1568* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 302; Albert S. Gatschet, *A Migration Legend of the Creek Indians, With a Linguistic, Historic and Ethnographic Introduction*, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia: D. G. Brinton, 1884), 19-20. For more on the Lady of Cofitachequi, see Christina Snyder, “The Lady of Cofitachequi: Gender and Political Power among Native Southerners,” in *South Carolina Women: Their Lives and Times*, eds. Joan Johnson, Valinda Littlefield, and Marjorie Spruill (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 11-25.

Indians often saw motherhood as intrinsic to nation-building, and women believed their maternal power invested them with political authority. In 1757, when the Cherokee chief Little Carpenter observed that no women joined the councils of the British in Charlestown, he was perplexed and asked whether “White Men as well as the Red were born of Women.”⁴ By locating the absence of women in an understanding of kinship and polity, Little Carpenter betrayed his view that women were mothers above all; clans could not exist without the evidence of maternal power, so how could nations? One Cherokee woman wrote to Benjamin Franklin in an effort to cement peace between the two nations and similarly staked her claim to political sway on her authority as a mother. “Woman is the mother of all,” she reminded Franklin, and because “the Woman does not pull Children out of Trees or Stumps nor out of old Logs, but out of their Bodies, . . . they ought to mind what a woman says.” For this writer, the sheer power involved in pulling a child from one’s body accorded her the privilege and the responsibility of looking after her nation. Like Little Carpenter, she was skeptical of Franklin’s ability to perceive this power, and so she took the time to explain exactly why he “ought to mind.”⁵ The connection between political authority and motherhood seemed natural to many Southeastern Indians, but for most white (male) leaders, who were working to domesticate women’s political voices in the late eighteenth century, this link was a foreign concept.

⁴ South Carolina Journal, Minutes of 9 February 1757, quoted in John Phillip Reid, *A Law of Blood: The Primitive Law of the Cherokee Nation* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006; 1970), 69.

⁵ Samuel Hazard, ed., *Pennsylvania Archives 1787*, 12 vols. (Philadelphia, 1852-56), 11: 181-82, quoted in Theda Perdue, “Cherokee Women and the Trail of Tears,” *Journal of Women’s History* 1, no. 1 (1989): 14-30.

In the eighteenth century, Cherokee women frequently exercised their political power by joining diplomatic parties, which explains why Little Carpenter was so confused by the absence of women among the British councils in 1757. In 1743, a delegation of Pedees met with the British governor in Charleston, and the men and three women who made the journey seemed to have equal voice in the talks, or at least made an equal impression on the British sense of diplomacy. After their visit, the governor sent each of the three male chiefs home with “a gun and knife,” giving the remaining men knives, while the three women each received “a looking glass, twenty bullets, [and] half a pound vermilion to be divided among them.”⁶ While his gifts were clearly gendered, the governor understood the need to please or placate these female delegates, and by extension, he implicitly recognized the women’s power.

When they were not serving as chiefs or diplomatic emissaries, most Southeastern Native women at least had a seat around the council fire and took part in discussions about their community’s future. Both Cherokees and Catawbas valued women’s voices in political meetings, and when a group of Cherokees gathered to discuss recent offers of annuities from the United States government in 1835, they made up “an assembly of about a thousand, men, women, & children.” Nor were the women silent observers; rather, after “the proceedings of the Delegation were all read & explained to the people unreservedly & in the open air, . . . by a voluntary & spontaneous movement, among the people on the ground, a paper was drawn up, protesting against any disposition of the annuity money.”⁷ In 1820, a group of missionaries proposed to establish a school on the lands of the Arkansas Cherokees; after

⁶ Alexander Gregg, *History of the Old Cheroaws* (New York: Richardson and Co., 1867), 10.

⁷ John Howard Payne Papers, volume 2, typescript, p. 123, Newberry Library.

cementing the proposal by shaking hands with the head chief, the missionaries were told that “a number of women wished to give us their hands also.” The men agreed, a little bewildered, and “received in succession, the hands of two long rows of women, who had been sitting without, in the rear.”⁸ Catawba women also earned a voice in many of the tribe’s deliberations, and when one Scottish visitor in 1798 introduced herself to a Catawba chief, she also was introduced to “his Lady,” who sat on a stool next to him. This pair was “surrounded with Sons Daughters & grandchildren.” Rather than paying her respects to a single ruler, the visitor found herself faced with a phalanx of interested parties, women among them.⁹

Older women had a particularly prominent hand in political decisions and viewed their motherhood as a justification for their vocal advice rather than a role that clouded their judgment. One visitor to the Arkansas Cherokees in 1836 noted this hierarchy when he was welcomed by a strict progression of his hosts: “After their wise men, came the young warriors, . . . [t]hen came the old women, with the young maidens, . . . then last of all came along the boys.”¹⁰ When captive David Menzies was brought before the local Cherokee chief’s mother to learn his fate in 1760, he was “overjoyed,” expecting “good usage and caresses” from this maternal figure. Instead, “this mother of heroes” used her platform as a

⁸ Alfred Finney and Cephas Washburn, “Mission among the Cherokees of the Arkansas,” *Missionary Herald* 17 (May, July 1821): 147-52, 211-14; 18 (April 1822), 107-9, in *Travels in the Old South: Selected from Periodicals of the Times*, ed. Eugene L. Schwaab (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1973), 156.

⁹ Journal of Lady Liston, Robert Liston Papers, Manuscript 5697, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, Scotland, 25-28.

¹⁰ John Ridge, “The Cherokee War Path, written by John Ridge in Washington City, as narrated by the Cherokee Warrior of Arkansas John Smith, who was present & principal actor in the Warlike Expeditions in the Prairies of the far West,” March 25, 1836 (Huntington Library Collections, HM 1730), 11.

Cherokee mother to dole out strict justice. Rather than embracing the white man as a replacement child, which she could have done, she “gargled out my rejection and destruction.” For Menzies, the sympathetic mother quickly became “as nauseous a figure as the accumulated infirmities of decrepitude . . . could make her.”¹¹ But for Cherokees, a woman’s power as mother was self-evident. Speaking to a crowd of men in the midst of eighteenth-century treaty negotiations, one elderly Cherokee mother admonished them, “I hope my warriors will all remember they sprung from a woman.”¹²

Other Cherokee mothers who wielded a significant amount of power in political decisions were War Women, or Beloved Women, who had taken an active part in battle and earned certain traditionally male privileges, such as participating in war dances and exercising the power to save the lives of war captives.¹³ In the eighteenth century, War Women controlled the fates of captives, “which is a priviledge no man can enjoye, not even their emperor, kings, nor warriors.” Deciding the fate of captives was a distinctly maternal responsibility, for these women were choosing whether captives would die or be adopted into the clan system as substitute children. Once again, women had the job of determining the membership and make-up of their communities. The rarity of War Women provoked some

¹¹ David Menzies, “A True Relation of the Unheard-Of Sufferings of David Menzies, Surgeon, Among the Cherokees,” *The Royal Magazine* 27-28 (July, 1761), quoted in Reid, *A Law of Blood*, 190.

¹² *Pennsylvania Packett and Daily Advertiser*, August 25, 1789, quoted in Sarah H. Hill, *Weaving New Worlds: Southeastern Cherokee Women and Their Basketry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 88.

¹³ William Bartram, “Observations on the Creek and Cherokee Indians, 1789,” *Transactions of the American Ethnological Society* 3, part 1 (1853): 32; William Harlen Gilbert, “The Eastern Cherokees,” *Bureau of American Ethnology, Anthropological Papers, No. 23*, Bulletin 133 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1943), 318, 348-350; Theda Perdue, *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700-1835* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 38-39, 53, 56, 144. John Phillip Reid questions the extent of War Women’s concrete political power, suggesting they may have had more general influence than actual rights; Reid, *A Law of Blood*, 187-8.

warriors to try to circumvent this hierarchy of retribution, and “they in great hurry drive a hatchet in the prisoner’s head before the war woman can reach him.” To counteract this subversion, some War Women would “disguise themselves as traders” to reach the battlefield and claim their captives before the warriors noticed this trickery.¹⁴ This political power was carefully guarded, and women clearly understood their rights within this system.

Some mothers used their position as powerful political players to extend their maternal understanding of the world to other nations. Nancy Ward, a War Woman who accompanied a diplomatic mission to the 1781 Treaty of Long Island, sought to include white Americans in her vision of a kinship that stemmed from women’s roles as mothers. “Let your women’s sons be ours,” she told the soldiers gathered there, “and let our sons be yours.” She then told the white men to carry her message back to their women, assuming that Euro-American mothers held a similar diplomatic role as Cherokee mothers.¹⁵ Four years later, she brought a similar outlook to the treaty proceedings at Hopewell, South Carolina, as she related the political issues at hand to a Cherokee world based on broad systems of kinship. Her motherhood extended beyond the borders of her community to encompass the young United States; she welcomed both “you and the red people as my children,” and offered her political experience in the terms of motherhood: “I am old, but I hope yet to bear children, who will grow up and people our nation.” These future children of Ward’s were not biological, but symbolic; they belonged to her clan because of her position in the community

¹⁴ William Gerard De Brahm, “De Brahm’s Philosophico-Historico-Hydrogeography of South Carolina, George, and East Florida” (c. 1772), quoted in Plowden Charles Jennett Weston, ed., *Documents Connected with the History of South Carolina* (London: Chiswick Press, 1856), 219.

¹⁵ “Report on the Proceedings, 26 Feb. 1781,” Greene Papers, quoted in Hill, *Weaving New Worlds*, 87. For more on Nancy Ward, see Theda Perdue, “Nancy Ward,” in *Portraits of American Women: From Settlement to the Present*, eds. G. J. Barker-Benfield and Catherine Clinton (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), 83-100.

both as a mother and as a War Woman. Her knowledge as a mother was inherently political, for it gave her the authority to speak to treaty commissioners in a position of power.¹⁶

Because mothers claimed a political voice in Native communities, many women viewed their children as political instruments. Daughters often became an item of hospitality or trade between Southeastern Indians and their visitors, and while some mothers may have objected to such barter, others saw the value in their children thus serving their community. One Nottoway mother regretted that her daughter was slightly too young to offer William Byrd's surveying team in 1733, and "whispered one of the commissioners very civilly in the ear, that if her daughter had been but one year older, she should have been at his devotion."¹⁷ Later in their trip, the surveyors encountered four Saponi women "of the first quality" who accompanied a diplomatic party and offered sex in exchange for trade goods. Whether they came of their own accord or were sent by their mothers or village chiefs, their offer was rejected, though Byrd admitted that "the price they set upon their charms" was more than reasonable, since "a princess for a pair of red stockings cannot, surely, be thought buying repentance much too dear."¹⁸ Several decades earlier, John Lederer presented a Nyhassan community with "some trifles of Glass and Metal," after which the Nyhassans proposed that he "stay amongst them by a Marriage with the Kings or some of their great Mens

¹⁶ "Excerpts from Talks at the Treaty of Hopewell, November 22 [1785]," in *Cherokee Voices: Early Accounts of Cherokee Life in the East*, ed. Vicki Rozema (Winston-Salem: John F. Blair, Publisher, 2002), 79.

¹⁷ William Byrd, *The Westover Manuscripts: Containing the History of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina; A Journey to the Land of Eden, A.D. 1733; and A Progress to the Mines* (Petersburg: Edmund and Julian C. Ruffin, 1841), 35.

¹⁸ Byrd, *The Westover Manuscripts*, 88.

Daughters.”¹⁹ Mothers would certainly have been a party to this discussion, and while a few may have resented their daughters being used to snare valuable trade connections, others probably viewed such barter as natural extensions of their own political identities as mothers. While men offered trade goods and military assistance to cement political alliances, women provided food, hospitality, advice, and occasionally their own children. The very frequency of such offers and strategic unions between Europeans and Indians suggests that mothers were amenable to, if not the primary instigators behind, such alliances.²⁰

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The visible political power that mothers exercised in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries began to wane by the nineteenth, even while most women continued to wield power within their homes. As white politicians and settlers imposed visions of “civilization” onto the people whose lands they were eyeing, Southeastern Indians began adjusting their political systems, both formal and informal, in order to protect their land and, by extension, their cultural identity. In 1800, most Catawbas lived on a plot of land in South Carolina that measured fifteen square miles and that was reserved for them by the colonial government in the 1760s.²¹ Witnessing the diminution of their Cherokee neighbors’ lands probably confirmed the Catawbas’ decision to take whatever measures were necessary to defend themselves from a white takeover; ceding some of their hunting grounds in order to secure a

¹⁹ John Lederer, *The Discoveries of John Lederer, in Three Several Marches from Virginia, to the West of Carolina, and Other Parts of the Continent*, trans. by William Talbot[,] Baronet (London: Samuel Heyrick, 1672), 12. Lederer, “though with much a-do, waved their courtesie” and continued on his way.

²⁰ For more on the gendered and sexualized politics of such arrangements, see Kirsten Fischer, *Suspect Relations: Sex, Race, and Resistance in Colonial North Carolina* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 55-97.

²¹ James H. Merrell, *The Indians’ New World: Catawbas and Their Neighbors from European Contact through the Era of Removal* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 197-200.

recognized boundary was one tactic. Another was siding with the settler rebels during the American Revolution, doing away with all trappings of monarchy in their own society, and establishing a “new” republican government in which the leader changed names from “King” to “General,” much to the colonists’ delight.²² Despite these external changes, women managed to hold on to some semblance of maternal power, for in the mid-nineteenth century, when the Catawba population had dwindled to less than a hundred and their lands had shrunk even more, a group of women was recognized by the South Carolina government for maternal excellence.²³ Either catching on to the importance of motherhood among Catawbas or expressing the respect for mothers within his own society, former South Carolina Governor Robert F. W. Allston awarded medals in 1859 to the Catawba women who were “most orderly, industrious, and of good example to their children.” It remains unclear why these medals were distributed, unless Allston was simply attempting to curry favor among a well-respected group of Indians or to set these women up as “civilized” examples for other Catawbas to emulate. Five women were chosen as meritorious mothers by whites living near the Catawba towns, but interestingly, whether out of an imprecise knowledge of Indian relationships or an awareness of the expansive definition of Catawba motherhood, the women chosen included aunts and grandmothers as well as mothers. The “mothers” were Sallie Harris, “having in charge two nieces”; the unnamed wife of John Harris; Rhoda Harris; Patsey George, also the guardian of a nephew and niece; and “Caty Joe, very old, having

²² James H. Merrell notes that Catawbas had held elections well before the Revolution, and also that leadership continued to be based largely on kinship ties well after, suggesting that the switch to a republican government in the 1780s was primarily a public relations maneuver. See Merrell, “The Indians’ New World: The Catawba Experience,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (1984): 560-562.

²³ For Catawba population estimates, see Theresa E. McReynolds, “Catawba Population Dynamics during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” *North Carolina Archaeology* 53 (2004): 44-46.

charge of grand children.”²⁴ Perhaps after several generations of repeated claims, Catawba women had convinced South Carolina of their maternal, political power.

The shift in Cherokee politics was more dramatic, and, unlike Catawbas, most Cherokee women were forcibly removed from their homelands in the 1830s. Political changes began decades earlier, though, as the Cherokee move from towns to farms divorced women from networks of communal support that assured women’s voices would echo in political councils. Isolation restricted female mobility, and men on horseback took the mantle of political leadership, traveling alone to the town councils which were now more distant. New nineteenth-century Cherokee laws attempted to cement this distinction and prohibited Cherokee women from voting or holding public office, thus mirroring the standards of the United States government.²⁵ Cherokee elites solidified as a result of wealth from the deerskin trade, consolidation of private property, political capital as chiefs, and knowledge of English. This elite status belonged to the men who hunted the deer and oversaw the councils, and political power thus shifted from being shared across gender lines to being firmly located (in the eyes of whites and Cherokee elites) among men. But most Cherokees were not elite men, and the actions of a vocal minority served more to address, mimic, or placate the United States than to affect the daily lives of Cherokees.²⁶

Along with the creation of class divisions came the slow legal shift from matrilineality to patrilineality, which was momentous for patriarchal whites observing the

²⁴ Allston Awards Correspondence, Catawba Archives, University of South Carolina at Lancaster, copied from Robert F. W. Allston Papers, SCHS.

²⁵ William McLoughlin, *Cherokee Renaissance in the New Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 66; Reid, *A Law of Blood*, 68.

²⁶ McLoughlin, *Cherokee Renaissance*, 328-29.

Nation, but which signified little immediate change in the lives of Cherokee women. Composed by elites, the new laws of the Cherokee Nation must be read not as a collective decision but as the specific vision of a handful of powerful men, who had submerged female voices in the political process to create a more hierarchical vision of a Cherokee nation. In 1808, Cherokees legislated that if a man died without a will, his property would pass to his widow and their children rather than his clan kin, thus disrupting one of the most basic understandings of kin responsibility.²⁷ Some men, both Cherokee and white, used the new law (and new white expectations more generally) to connect to their wives' children, but women who had maintained control of their children for generations often found this intrusion unwelcome.²⁸ Brainerd missionaries noted that one father, a "half breed of some education," unceremoniously removed his two daughters from school "against their will," effectively stripping their mother of parental power. This man, after being "much among the whites," believed in his own superior claim to that power and chose to circumvent the girls' mother, who probably enrolled them to guarantee them education, food, and shelter.²⁹ For the most part, however, Cherokee mothers and the maternal line retained a practical, everyday control of their children's lives.

As the law opened new avenues for inheritance, a host of other laws in the Cherokee Nation, often drafted by men who were sympathetic to the United States, helped present a

²⁷ *Laws of the Cherokee Nation: Adopted by the Council at Various Times, Reprinted for the Benefit of the Nation*, vol. 5 of *The Constitutions and Laws of the American Indian Tribes* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1973), 51.

²⁸ McClinton, Rowena, ed., *The Moravian Springplace Mission to the Cherokees, Volume 1: 1805-1813* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 36.

²⁹ August 25, 1819, Joyce B. Phillips and Paul Gary Phillips, ed., *The Brainerd Journal: A Mission to the Cherokees, 1817-1823* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 129.

“civilized” face to white Americans who daily threatened native lands. In 1825, a law provided Cherokee citizenship to the children of white women married to Cherokee men, in response to the marriages of several elite Cherokee men to outsiders; by defining citizenship to override, rather than derive from, clan membership, the Cherokee Nation was also redefining motherhood to the detriment of women’s political power. The Nation granted the status of “mother” to white women who could offer none of the broader kin connections that had made Cherokee motherhood such a powerful institution for centuries. An 1826 law made infanticide illegal, officially removing one power of women to dictate the size, nature, and economic viability of their families. Though there is little evidence that Cherokees practiced infanticide widely or that the new law spurred substantial changes in women’s lives, the fact that the Cherokee Nation outlawed the practice affected women’s symbolic power as mothers. In the 1820s, laws explicitly prohibiting rape tied the crime to women’s “chastity,” an imported European concept that indirectly assigned a foreign and limiting virtue to Cherokee women; if rape violated “chastity,” then women must uphold chastity in other aspects of their lives, which limited the sexual freedom that unmarried Cherokee men and women had historically enjoyed. Within matrilineal systems, the identity of the father was less crucial and property belonged in the hands of women; as a result, sex was something that could be controlled by women without the repercussions of inheritance that plagued many European sexual encounters.³⁰ By painting new perceptions of Cherokee women, the Nation constricted women’s sexual agency. Though most Cherokees remained unaffected by or uninterested in the new laws passed by the relatively elite Cherokee Council, the mere fact of the laws, their visibility to white outsiders and a fledgling Cherokee Nation, was an important

³⁰ *Laws of the Cherokee Nation*, 57, 79, 54, 104.

benchmark for the shifting perceptions of Cherokee women and the multiple threats to their power as mothers, however individuals may have confronted or rejected the laws.³¹

Despite the alterations to their social, economic, and legal landscape, Cherokee mothers continued to uphold a sense of political power that must have been derived from and supported by their own mothers. Some women even managed to convince white Americans of their right to be heard. In 1797, a Cherokee widow petitioned the U.S. government for reparations after her home had been destroyed by white settlers four years earlier.

Transferring her political acumen from the council house to the House of Representatives, the widow carefully reminded her audience that she, “instead of exciting her people to acts of retaliation, has abated nothing in her friendship to the white people.” Used to being heard by her own people, the widow expected a similar respect from white listeners, and while Congress may have been surprised by her forthright claims, they agreed that she deserved “a pension from the government, or some other relief.”³² A generation later, this widow might not have earned an audience in her own nation’s political discussions, but in the late eighteenth century, she was still confident enough of her political voice to personally bring her case to a foreign country’s legislature.

³¹ McLoughlin, *Cherokee Renaissance*, 333-37; Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 139-155. Fay Yarbrough argues that the law against infanticide was intended to protect a dwindling Cherokee population, but given the relative rarity of this practice, it seems more likely that they were attempting to mirror a Euro-American value system. For more on the gendered nature of the nineteenth-century Cherokee laws, see Fay Yarbrough, “Legislating Women’s Sexuality: Cherokee Marriage Laws in the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of Social History* 38, no. 2 (2004): 385-406. For a description of how the standard of justice changed from clan-based blood feuds to a Europeanized jury system – taking even more power from the hands of women and the clans they structured – see Michelle Daniel, “From Blood Feud to Jury System: The Metamorphosis of Cherokee Law from 1750 to 1840,” *American Indian Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (1987): 97-125.

³² United States Congress, House of Representatives, *Report of the Committee of Claims, on the Petition of the Widow of the late Scolacuttaw, or Hanging Maw, One of the Chiefs of the Cherokee Nation of Indians*, January 17, 1797 (Philadelphia: William Ross [?], 1797).

Even more than the changes to the Cherokee legal system, the hunger of white settlers for women's lands threatened their maternal power. Rather than succumbing to this menace, though, mothers used discussions surrounding Removal as an opportunity to flex their political muscles. Mothers as political participants often shared common goals: ensuring the happiness and survival of their children, protecting the coherence of their communities, and defending their fields, homes, and land from threats, whether horses set loose on their crops or white settlers envying their farms. Even young students in the mission schools acknowledged the threat of white intrusion; Cherokee Nancy Reece wrote an account of her school routine to a distant religious sponsor, recounting, "I have been talking to the children about it and one says 'if the white people want more land let them go back to the country they came from,' another says 'they have got more land than they use, what do they want to get ours for?'" Cherokees were vocal about their suspicions, and one missionary conceded that "while so many white people are grasping for their land it is no wonder if the . . . Cherokees sometimes suspect that missionaries (under cover) have the same object in view."³³ Nancy Reece and her fellow students probably learned about the terms of this debate from their relatives, including their mothers.

The looming threat of Removal heralded unprecedented hardship for Cherokee women, for whom a physical upheaval would strip away their ties to both kin and land, their primary sources of power. Because the national council controlled decisions about Removal, rather than town councils in which women had maintained some political voice, men made

³³ Nancy Reece to Reverend Fayette Shepherd, December 25, 1828, John Howard Payne Papers, 8:22, Newberry Library; December 11, 1822, *Brainerd*, 322.

the crucial choices regarding Removal.³⁴ These men constructed a certain image of Cherokee “civilization” to address white expectations, as they sought to maintain their lands and communities by adopting elements of white social, economic, and political norms. Most Cherokee women probably agreed with Young Beaver, who argued with carefully chosen language that his people were “prospering under the exhilarating rewards of agriculture,” and that removing west of the Mississippi would plunge them into “grosser darkness.”³⁵ Agriculture had been a priority for Cherokee women for centuries, and though white politicians placed a different emphasis on its importance, women could agree to the necessity of farming for their people’s survival. Similarly, a handful of Cherokee chiefs wrote the U.S. Secretary of War to argue that even though they had been “unfailing in aggraculture & manufacturing clothing, and educating our Children,” they were still being asked to “go over to the Arkansaw country as hunters and return to that state again which . . . our forefathers lived.”³⁶ Moving to Arkansas did not require an abandonment of agriculture, as native Osages and Quapaws knew, but Cherokees were trying to align their goal of staying in their homeland with the “civilizing” mission of the U.S. government.³⁷ When the citizens of the Aquohee District voiced their opinions about the distant land “where our children would

³⁴ For more on Cherokee responses to Removal, see Theda Perdue and Michael D. Green, *The Cherokee Nation and the Trail of Tears* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007).

³⁵ “Indian Emigration,” *Cherokee Phoenix*, September 17, 1828, 1:29, p. 3.

³⁶ Cherokee Chiefs East to Secretary of War, October 28, 1817, Hiwassee, Letters Received by the Office of the Secretary of War Relating to Indian Affairs, 1800-1824, National Archives Record Group 75 (M271 Roll 2).

³⁷ For a discussion of both the symbolism and reality of the Arkansas Valley, including competing claims about agriculture and “civilization,” see Kathleen DuVal, “Debating Identity, Sovereignty, and Civilization: The Arkansas Valley after the Louisiana Purchase,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 26, no. 1 (2006): 25-58. See also DuVal, *The Native Ground: Indians and Colonists in the Heart of the Continent* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

become involved in the darkness of ignorant and uncivilized neighbours; where we should have to drink out of muddy pools, and most of us perish for want,” their hyperbole speaks to underlying fears that were shared by men and women alike.³⁸

Though Cherokee men’s opinions about Removal earned more attention in the local press and national debates, women were far from silent, and they were certainly not powerless. Instead, they fought hard against the dissolution of families that voluntary removal often necessitated. Missionaries at Brainerd noted that when the families of their students headed west, mothers were the ones who demanded their children accompany them, though sometimes in vain.³⁹ Occasionally mothers stayed behind with their children while fathers “emigrated to the Arkansas,” typically leaving women in impoverished conditions.⁴⁰ And once in a while, the divergent goals and needs of Cherokee men and women exploded into scenes of violence. Charles Hicks, a principal chief of the Cherokees, recounted the story of a man who “murdered his wife & children” over a dispute regarding removal, “he wishing to go, she not.”⁴¹ Whatever their means, Cherokee mothers continually voiced their outrage against Removal, for they were intimately aware of both the power they stood to lose and the emotional trauma they undoubtedly would suffer.

In 1817, 1818, and 1831, specially organized councils of Cherokee women drew up petitions against Removal that illustrated how women both manipulated white expectations and maintained the political power they were accustomed to exercising. These petitions were

³⁸ “To Mr. Elias Boudinott [sic],” *Cherokee Phoenix*, April 15, 1829, 2:5, pp. 2-3.

³⁹ January 25, 1818, *Brainerd*, 44; February 13, 1818, *Brainerd*, 47.

⁴⁰ July 3, 1820, *Brainerd*, 182.

⁴¹ February 13, 1817, *Brainerd*, 29.

intended for the eyes of the all-male National Council, and, with the hopes that it would be heeded and passed on, the United States government. A version of the 1818 petition was drafted and shown to the missionaries at Springplace by a group of “the most respected Indian women,” who, for this particular audience, emphasized “the great advantage they renounced if they allowed themselves to be persuaded to leave their fatherland . . . , since so many opportunities are currently given to them to hear the gospel, through which they could be saved for now and all of eternity!”⁴² In addition to highlighting their own conversions and conversion potential, Cherokee women used other tactics to secure the favor and leniency of the United States. In each of the petitions, for instance, women used the language of fatherhood to dictate a particular relationship between the United States and the Cherokees. The President became “our father,” a term which may have appeased a paternalistic American, but which defined the President in Cherokee terms.⁴³ For Cherokees, fathers were respected and occasionally beloved, but they boasted no control over their children. The Cherokee women sought indulgence from this distant “father” but recognized no direct authority emerging from this man or his people.⁴⁴ The women also employed the language of “savagery” and “civilization,” noting how well they had obeyed the President’s advice “to become farmers, to manufacture our own clothes, & to have our children instructed.” A

⁴² July 1, 1818, *Springplace*, vol. 2, p. 229.

⁴³ Cherokee Women, Petitions of May 2, 1817; June 30, 1818; and October 17, 1821 [1831?], in *The Cherokee Removal: A Brief History with Documents*, 2nd ed., eds. Theda Perdue and Michael D. Green (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2005), 131-134.

⁴⁴ For more on the symbolic language of kinship in Indian-European diplomacy, see Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 84-85; Nancy Shoemaker, “An Alliance Between Men: Gender Metaphors in Eighteenth-Century American Indian Diplomacy East of the Mississippi,” *Ethnohistory* 46, no. 2 (1999): 239-263; Patricia Galloway, “‘The Chief Who Is Your Father’: Choctaw and French Views of the Diplomatic Relation,” in *Powhatan’s Mantle: Indians in the Colonial Southeast*, 345-370; and Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 48-49.

removal from this state of advancement would, they claimed, plunge them back into “a savage state again,” and the women declared they had “become too much enlightened to throw aside the privileges of civilized life.”⁴⁵ No argument could have been better calculated to play on the ostensible goals of white America toward Indians: “civilization” en route to assimilation.

Cherokee women also employed their own understandings of maternal power in the Removal petitions, revealing a cultural foundation that had survived the years of upheaval. These women still maintained their symbolic relationship to the land and used mythological imagery to defend their claims to it. In the 1818 petition, a group of women responded to the threat of removal by proclaiming their own authority as inheritors of the earth. “The land was given to us by the Great Spirit above as our common right, to raise our children upon,” the women argued, and they “claim the right of the soil” under clearly maternalistic terms. By filling the petition with pleas for “our rising generations” and “our beloved children,” the women recalled a long-standing relationship between motherhood and land that male Cherokee readers would have recognized.⁴⁶

These women’s political strategy of writing petitions stemmed from their role as mothers, and the language of the petitions often cycled back to the more intimate relationship between mother and child. In 1817, Cherokee women began their petition by invoking their larger political role and “their duty as mothers,” admonishing the council that “we have raised all of you.” These women then proceeded to mention their economic role, reminding the chiefs and warriors that the Cherokee land was “our land. We say ours. You are our

⁴⁵ Cherokee Women, Petition of June 30, 1818, in *The Cherokee Removal*, 133.

⁴⁶ Cherokee Women, Petition of June 30, 1818, in *The Cherokee Removal*, 132-33.

descendants.” Finally, the women writers returned to the most basic responsibilities of motherhood; the physical act of moving would be particularly hard for mothers, “for as soon as one child is raised, we have others in our arms.” Cherokee women thus knowingly utilized new methods such as the discourse of “civilization” to defend both their families and, in the same breath, their role as political players.⁴⁷

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The political power of Indian women in the Southeast was threatened, but not destroyed, by the social and economic upheavals of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Though few women could boast of the extensive political control enjoyed by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century chiefs like Cockacoeske or the Lady of Cofitachequi, most women continued to view their motherhood as a justification for involvement in political conversations. As mothers of their communities, women believed they had earned the right to hear treaty negotiations, pronounce the fate of war captives, receive gifts from neighboring nations, and use their children as political instruments. After a century of dislocation and decimation, the political importance of Catawba mothers was still strong enough to earn commendations from a former South Carolina governor in the 1850s. And though Cherokee mothers witnessed attacks on their political power from both Cherokee and United States governments, they were secure enough in their political identities to loudly

⁴⁷ Cherokee Women, Petition of May 2, 1817, in *The Cherokee Removal*, 131-32. For more on Cherokee women’s petitions and their insistence on retaining their culture in the midst of crisis, see Carolyn Ross Johnston, *Cherokee Women in Crisis: Trail of Tears, Civil War, and Allotment, 1838-1907* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003). Tiya Miles also provides an excellent discussion of the maternal heart of the anti-Removal petitions, and eloquently observes, “If, as Linda Kerber has explained, republican motherhood ‘integrated political values into . . . domestic life,’ indigenous motherhood as evinced by these women did the opposite: it integrated domestic values into political life.” Tiya Miles, “‘Circular Reasoning’: Recentering Cherokee Women in the Antiremoval Campaigns,” *American Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (2009): 221-243, quote on p. 227.

vocalize their resistance to Removal, a scheme that would forever divorce them from their home, their land, and their locus of maternal power.

CHAPTER SIX

INDIAN SUFFERERS

Like all women in the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century South, Native American mothers suffered from forces beyond their control, especially the loss of their children. Before (and after) the adoption of more precise medicine, children of all races and classes fell victim to illnesses, infections, and accidents. But while Indian children were being claimed by common misfortunes, Indian ways of life were also undergoing radical changes, changes that often turned motherhood from a familiar role into a confusing and unknown one. How did an Indian mother respond when white missionaries asked to enlist her children? When Removal split families and towns apart, how did a mother keep her children alive and with her? When an Indian woman was enslaved and saw her children placed under someone else's thumb, how could she raise the child with a proper sense of its place in the world? Like all Southern women, these mothers occasionally lost control over their children and families, and in those moments, we can see most clearly their continuing struggle for a sense of maternal identity and a modicum of maternal power.

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Mothers had the power to define clan relationships and kinship bonds, and thus when those bonds were broken, their cries were the loudest. Death provoked a number of elaborate ceremonies among Southeastern Indians, and women often were at the forefront of grieving. Cherokees during the nineteenth century allowed women the greater part in mourning the

dead, and at ceremonies honoring fallen kinspeople, “the males did no weeping, but the wailing of the females was excessive.”¹ The more significant role of women in these ceremonies did not derive from the community’s sense of their greater emotionalism or sensibility, as was the case for white women during this period, but rather from an awareness that women had a greater claim to the deceased than men. As mothers, they owned the bodies of their community, and when those bodies perished, mothers were the ones to usher them from this world.

Death came under many guises, and Cherokee and Catawba mothers learned to prepare for many kinds of tragedies. Disease struck hard among seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Southeastern Indian communities, and the rate of mourning increased rapidly.² Cherokee towns, for instance, suffered from repeated rounds of smallpox in the 1690s, 1730s, 1760s, and 1780s, while the Catawbas lost over half their population in the smallpox epidemic of 1759, leading them to desert their old villages.³ By the late eighteenth century, groups such as the Catawba understood quite well where these diseases stemmed from; though neither they nor their white neighbors could explain germ theory, they saw how the proximity of Europeans ushered in an era of unparalleled hardship. Intermittent warfare

¹ William Harlen Gilbert, “The Eastern Cherokees,” *Bureau of American Ethnology, Anthropological Papers, No. 23*, Bulletin 133 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1943), 347.

² For accounts of epidemics and the tolls they took on Native communities, see Alfred W. Crosby, “Virgin Soil Epidemics as a Factor in the Aboriginal Depopulation in America,” *William & Mary Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (1976): 289-299; Paul Kelton, “Avoiding the Smallpox Spirits: Colonial Epidemics and Southeastern Indian Survival,” *Ethnohistory* 51, no. 1 (2004): 45-71; and Paul Kelton, *Epidemics and Enslavement: Biological Catastrophe in the Native Southeast, 1492-1715* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007).

³ Peter H. Wood, “The Changing Population of the Colonial South: An Overview by Race and Region, 1685-1790,” in *Powhatan’s Mantle: Indians in the Colonial Southeast*, revised edition, eds. Gregory A. Waselkov, Peter H. Wood, and Tom Hatley (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 87-92; James H. Merrell, *The Indians’ New World: Catawbas and Their Neighbors from European Contact through the Era of Removal* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 193-197.

throughout the eighteenth century also splintered communities and put women and children at risk. Mothers watched their sons and daughters fall to the guns, hatchets, and arrows of the British, Creeks, French, and Iroquois.⁴

Most painful, perhaps, was when children died at mission schools, far from home; mothers had chosen to trust that white missionaries would help save their children, and when death came instead, it seemed the ultimate betrayal. Many Native mothers in the early nineteenth century sent their children to schools such as Brainerd and Springplace in order to remove them from the poverty of Native communities and provide them a foothold in a newly white-dominated world. These maternal decisions meant separation from one's children, but they were made in the hopes of giving children a better life. When these children died under the missionaries' watch, then, mothers felt themselves doubly cursed. Missionaries understood the necessity of keeping Indian children healthy and happy in order to ensure that mothers would continue to offer the schools their sons and daughters. Student deaths were marked in mission journals with great unhappiness, and missionaries seemed to understand how important these children were in their Native communities. When Brainerd lost its first Indian pupil, the mission's diarist recorded that "this dear child was almost the only hope of an aged grandmother" and commiserated with the bereft woman, who traveled to the mission to fetch the child's body.⁵ Two years later, a second Cherokee pupil died at Brainerd, and a few weeks after that, a girl named Louisa passed away after having developed consumption at the mission school. When Louisa first showed signs of illness, her

⁴ For more on the Catawba-Iroquois wars of the early eighteenth century, see Richard Aquila, "Down the Warrior's Path: The Causes of the Southern Wars of the Iroquois," *American Indian Quarterly* 4, no. 3 (1978): 211-221.

⁵ November 21, 1821, Joyce B. Phillips and Paul Gary Phillips, ed., *The Brainerd Journal: A Mission to the Cherokees, 1817-1823* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 247.

mother fetched her home and tended to her for two months before her death, hoping to “give medicine that would soon remove the disease.”⁶ Deaths like these must have caused Cherokee mothers to bemoan their own maternal decisions that led to their children’s placement in an unhealthy environment.

All Native women would have lived with the shadow of death hovering over their loved ones, but the power of mothers was also specifically threatened by certain kinds of sexual liaisons with white traders and settlers, who carried different understandings of kinship and responsibility that did not always work in the interests of both parties. These liaisons occasionally resulted in strategic marriages that offered a trader a kin connection to his suppliers and customers, and provided a woman with additional diplomatic power in her community, along with some material gains.⁷ Sometimes, however, an Indian woman with a white settler’s child could find herself without kin support; when white fathers shirked their economic duty to women’s clans, some clans did not have the material power to provide for those children. In the 1790s, according to a white traveler, one young Catawba woman gave birth to the child of a “Gentleman not far distant” with whom she “had been criminally intimate.” She presented the child to its white father, but the man claimed no knowledge of the young girl, so she “took her child by the heels, and dashed its brains out before his face,

⁶ November 16, 1823, December 17, 1823, *Brainerd*, 387, 392.

⁷ For a discussion of the mutual benefits and intricacies of these cross-cultural relationships within different regions, see Andrew K. Frank, *Creeks and Southerners: Biculturalism on the Early American Frontier* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005); Lucy Eldersveld Murphy, *A Gathering of Rivers: Indians, Métis, and Mining in the Western Great Lakes, 1737-1832* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000); and Kathleen DuVal, “Indian Intermarriage and Métissage in Colonial Louisiana,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (2008): 267-304.

and left it on the ground.”⁸ What could provoke a mother to kill her own child so brutally? Perhaps the woman genuinely did not love the child, and her frustration at the lover/father boiled into a violent rage when she was so blatantly scorned. More likely, however, this woman came from a village of Catawbas that was suffering deeply from disease, decades of warfare and upheaval, and economic hardship. Her family may have told her they would not raise such a child as kin, or perhaps she decided herself that she and her community could not feed another mouth. This struggling mother brought the child to its father not because she envisioned the creation of a harmonious nuclear family, but because she needed help, and without help, the child had no future. Recorded by a white man, this story may be apocryphal, but its shocking conclusion speaks to the very real threats to maternal power in the late eighteenth century. Catawbas had lost nearly ninety percent of their population by 1790, a loss that would have been frightening to behold and emotionally traumatic, and which would have led to a sense of desperation that this Catawba mother starkly illustrates.⁹ Many mothers may have felt their power slipping away along with their population, but such brutal acts – whether real or imagined – speak to how much women would still fight for some control.

Mothers also suffered when white settlers introduced alcohol and other stimulants to Native communities, which sometimes diminished women’s maternal power.¹⁰ Though women were often the ones pleading against men’s consumption of alcohol, some women

⁸ March 23, 1791, Thomas Coke, *Extracts of the Journals of the Rev. Dr. Coke’s Five Visits to America* (London: J. Paramore, 1793), 148-9.

⁹ Theresa E. McReynolds, “Catawba Population Dynamics during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” *North Carolina Archaeology* 53 (2004): 42-59.

¹⁰ See Izumi Ishii, *Bad Fruits of the Civilized Tree: Alcohol and the Sovereignty of the Cherokee Nation* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008).

also fell under its spell. By the late nineteenth century, one anthropologist believed that many Catawba were “more or less addicted to the morphine habit,” and consumed “household medicines” as a cheaper alternative to whiskey, though this may be an exaggerated account. An observer of the Catawbans noted that “it is not an uncommon sight to see these poor creatures, and, frequently, the women, on the streets of Rock Hill late at night, starting on foot in a pouring rain for the reservation, nine miles away.”¹¹ When the search for drugs and alcohol tore women away from their communities, they were abandoning children and kin to seek an individual need, a situation which fundamentally altered and weakened the roles and responsibilities that Southeastern Native women had claimed for centuries.

Some Indian mothers fell into the hands of slave raiders, who stole their children and sold them into slavery, or well-meaning white settlers, who snatched Native children in order to give them a European education. The theft of Indian children began as soon as Europeans reached the American coast, and only increased after the establishment of English colonies on the Eastern seaboard. In 1661, a group of English settlers explored the Cape Fear region in North Carolina, and “incurred the ill will of the Indians by seizing their children and sending them away, ostensibly to instruct them in the ways of civilization, but really as the Indians believed, with a semblance of probability, to make them slaves.” For Indian mothers losing their children to men with guns, education and slavery were indistinguishable, and the “ill will” displayed by Cape Fear Indians was more likely a combination of terror, anger, and grief.¹² Some men with guns had no such pretenses about education; in the 1770s, an eight-

¹¹ H. Lewis Scaife, *History and Conditions of the Catawba Indians of South Carolina* (Philadelphia: Office of Indian Rights Association, 1896), 22.

¹² James Mooney, *The Siouan Tribes of the East* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1894), 66.

year-old Cherokee girl named Nancy was stolen from her mother Olufletoy and sold into slavery in Virginia by white traders, who “held their guns over her mother’s head to frighten her when they took her away.” Nancy eventually sued for her freedom after enduring over two decades of enslavement. She had faced multiple traumas, from her vulnerability to her owner’s sexual advances to the permanent loss of her mother, who was killed by the whites. Her suit was unsuccessful, though, and despite a Cherokee effort to regain her, she slipped back into Southern society as a slave.¹³

In the eighteenth century, some Southeastern Native mothers still found themselves enslaved by white plantation owners or other Native groups, a state which transformed their maternalism from a powerful role based on communal respect to an individual and often lonely enterprise.¹⁴ Maria, an Indian woman in South Carolina, served as a slave to Nicholas De Longuemare in Berkeley County in the early eighteenth century, along with her two children Charles and Elizabeth. After Nicholas died, his widow Mary De Longuemare took over the work of the farm, and in her will of 1712, she freed Maria and her children. Along with their freedom, Mary granted the children “fifty pounds Currtt. Mony” for their education, and to Maria she gave ten acres of the De Longuemare farmland and a “fetherbed with Covering.” The rest of her farm Mary willed to the poor of her church, but she was careful to note that the church could have everything but “Ten Acres of Land Excepted which my Indian shall make Choise as aforesaid.” Mary’s death, then, left Maria and her

¹³ For a complete rendering of the racial and gendered implications of this story, see Tiya Miles, “The Narrative of Nancy, A Cherokee Woman,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 29, no. 2 and 3 (2008): 59-80.

¹⁴ While Virginia was the only Southern colony to officially outlaw Indian slavery, most colonies limited their reliance on Indian slaves in the aftermath of the violent Yamasee War (1715-1718). See Christina Snyder, *Slavery in Indian Country: The Changing Face of Captivity in Early America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 76-79.

children relatively prosperous, with a sum of cash and a plot of rich farmland just outside of Charleston.¹⁵ But what does this will conceal? Whatever group of Indians Mary belonged to prior to her enslavement (whether she was Catawba or, more likely, was a captive from a distant tribe caught in war and sold by South Carolina Indians to a slave trader), she was probably accustomed to a society that valued motherhood as a collective endeavor. Kinship connected mothers and children, but it also incorporated uncles, aunts, grandparents, cousins, and fellow clan members in networks of protection and communal welfare. To be isolated on a farm with a white couple and their three children abruptly removed Maria from her understanding of maternal duties. Based on the generosity of Mary's will, it seems unlikely that Maria and her children were harshly treated or abused, but slavery is not a natural condition, and, unless she came from a community that also kept slaves, Maria must have had trouble understanding why her power as a mother was so constricted. But what if Maria did not come to the De Longuemare farm with children? What if the children claimed a neighboring slave, Indian or black, as a father? What if Nicholas De Longuemare himself impregnated Maria? Perhaps the very identities of her children already confused Maria's notions of appropriate mothering. How might an Indian in captivity mother children who shared no sense of her kin group, her clan, her tribe, or even her Indian identity? The freeing of Maria raises more questions that the archival trail can answer, but her situation hints at the range of violence, from enslavement to rape, that could befall captive Native women and their children, and the multiple ways their power could be constrained.

Some enslaved men and women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries swore to Indian parentage, and while some of them may have been looking for any loophole

¹⁵ Mary De Longuemare, Will, October 18, 1712, SCL.

through which to gain their freedom, many could actually claim Native Americans as mothers and grandmothers. These women probably entered the slave system as captives from Southeastern Indian border wars, though some may have been Cherokee or Catawba women whose children had been kidnapped. Regardless of their origins, the children of Indian mothers fought to claim the freedom that was due them. In 1757, “Indian Sarah” sued for her freedom from Sarah Clarke in North Carolina. The depositions of several white neighbors confirmed that Sarah’s mother Moll was “an Indian wench”; no one knew where she came from, but several people guessed that she “came from Cape Fear” or was a “Cape Fear Indian.” All deponents agreed, though, that Moll had been enslaved as long as they had known her, and based on this testimony, the court refused to grant Sarah her freedom.¹⁶ Twenty-five years later, however, Sarah’s son Ben petitioned for his freedom. In the 1782 case, neighbors testified that his mother Sarah “was looked upon and understood to be the daughter of an Indian free woman, that she often said she had a right to be free,” and that “it was much talked of in the neighbourhood that she ought to be free.” In addition to her adamant insistence on freedom, Sarah had “long hair,” which suggested to her white neighbors that her claim of Indian heritage was accurate. We do not know whether Ben was more successful than his mother, but based on one man’s assessment that “he has no Manner of Chance to get free,” it seems unlikely.¹⁷

Compared to the trauma of kidnapping and enslavement, poverty seems a more prosaic complaint, but economic hardship nonetheless affected women’s ability to raise their

¹⁶ *Indian Sarah vs. Sarah Clarke*, February 10, 1757, Miscellaneous Records of Slaves and Free Persons of Color, Granville County, NCSA.

¹⁷ Petition for Freedom by Benjamin Vicery, August 7, 1782; James Clark to John Penn, October 29, 1781, Miscellaneous Records of Slaves and Free Persons of Color, Granville County, NCSA.

children. Poverty led many mothers to enroll their children in mission schools or bind them out as apprentices to the very people who had encroached on their land. In 1821, one Cherokee woman relinquished her children to the school at Brainerd because her white husband had destroyed all her property in a fit of rage, leaving her with nothing. By the 1820s, Cherokee communities were no longer as centralized as they had been, and even if the woman had a network of close kin, Cherokees could no longer afford to meet such abuse with violent reprisals. This impoverished woman had no recourse but to give up her offspring, and “she appeared thankful that she could find so good a home for her children.”¹⁸ Another Cherokee mother came to visit her child at Springplace and told the missionaries “how bad things are in the nation and that since she had the measles, all of her thread she had spun, and also pieces of clothing, had been stolen.” This mother had given up her child to white missionaries, had then contracted a European disease, and, though she was trying her best to comply with white understandings of appropriately gendered behavior by turning her farming hands to the spinning wheel, had lost all her thread and cloth to thieves. Suffering so from the presence of whites in her country, the Cherokee woman decided that whites must save her, too. They would educate her child, and they would feed its stricken mother. The missionaries advised the woman to “turn to God . . . and in the meantime continue working diligently,” but they also gave her a basketful of white turnips. When the destitute mother left, she said that “she wished she could live closer to us.”¹⁹ Mattamuskeet mothers, who lived on the far eastern coast of North Carolina, saw their population dwindle to just a handful of families in the late eighteenth century; to salvage their homes, a group of women

¹⁸ May 7, 1821, *Brainerd*, 214.

¹⁹ January 29, 1807, Rowena McClinton, ed., *The Moravian Springplace Mission to the Cherokees, Volume 1: 1805-1813* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 162.

sold the last pieces of their reservation in 1792, and several of those women went on to bind their children out as apprentices to local whites. In 1804, Jenny Longtom's ten-year-old son, who was "going at random with out that control & nutrition So Essen[tija]l to his own future good," was bound to a ship master, as was Mary Longtom's nine-year-old son. The two boys, one born to a white father and the other to a black one, left their mothers not because they heard the call of the open sea but because those women could no longer provide for their children and, like both poor white and black women in early America, turned to the apprentice system to relieve their suffering.²⁰

The economic shifts that led to increased poverty also affected women's basic rights over their children. When whites encouraged Cherokee women to give up the "masculine" work of farming and permit their husbands to dominate both their fields and their families, some women, especially the wives of white or elite Cherokee men, began to see some of their power over their children slipping away. Some fathers, typically affectionate but negligible presences in their children's lives, began to assert the rights of patriarchal European men. In 1818, one Cherokee father removed his children from Brainerd after their mother had placed them at the school, explaining that "he thought himself capable of bringing them up better & in a more civilized manner than their mothers were, they being in an uncivilized & heathen state." The father was concerned that the mother would attempt to fetch the children from Brainerd at some point, and "it would then be out of his power to get them." This father recognized the mother's long-standing right to her children, and he attempted to circumvent this acknowledged power by stealing the children away.²¹ The spread of Anglo-American

²⁰ Patrick H. Garrow, *The Mattamuskeet Documents: A Study in Social History* (Raleigh, NC: Archaeology Section, Division of Archives and History, Dept. of Cultural Resources, 1975), 33, 72.

²¹ September 23, 1818, *Brainerd*, 82.

ideas about gendered behavior prompted some Cherokee men to demand rights over their children, often leaving Cherokee mothers bereft and, in some cases, powerless.

Perhaps the greatest cause for suffering among Southeastern Indian mothers in the nineteenth century was the prospect and enactment of Removal in the 1830s, which threatened most sources of maternal power, from kin to land. Even by the 1810s, the debate surrounding Removal created irreparable fractures in some Indian families. In 1817, a Cherokee man fought with his wife over whether to move their family west of the Mississippi River, “he wishing to go, she not.” After the disagreement escalated and the wife refused to leave, the man simply “murdered his wife & children.” While few women died at the hands of their husbands, many shared an understanding of home to which Cherokee men were less attuned. One of the roles of a Cherokee mother was to ensure the survival of her children, and she was well aware of “the hardships & suffering to which . . . the women & children will be exposed by a removal.”²² Leaving her home meant placing her children and her kin in danger. But a Cherokee mother’s duty was also to protect and nurture the fields that sustained her community, and abandoning land that she and her fellow Cherokee women had tended for generations meant abandoning part of their identities as mothers. Threats to maternal power do not lead simply to submission, however, and as we have already seen, Cherokee mothers fought loudly against Removal. Even the greatest suffering could not fully quench the power, however attenuated, held by Indian mothers.

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Suffering among Native mothers took many forms in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, from disease to warfare to enslavement to Removal, but women continued to

²² February 13, 1817, *Brainerd*, 29.

struggle against any limitations placed on their motherhood. When Little Peggy's Cherokee mother learned her husband was moving the family west in 1817, she asked him to fetch the girl from Brainerd so they could be together on the journey. The husband was so impressed with the operations at the mission school, however, and perhaps merely by the provision of food and clothing, that he decided to leave the girl behind, telling the missionaries that he would "try to persuade her mother to go on without her."²³ One can only imagine the scene in the Cherokee household when the husband returned to convey his decision. Three weeks later, the missionaries at Brainerd reported that "Little Peggy . . . left us to go with her mother to Arkansas."²⁴ Though her husband could compel Peggy's mother to leave her home, he could not force her to leave her child. Catharine Brown, another student at Brainerd, wanted to stay behind with the missionaries when her parents moved to Arkansas in 1818, but "her mother said, she could not live, if Catharine would not now go with them," and the girl eventually acquiesced.²⁵ In a period when their power was often questioned at every turn, Indian women fought to maintain control over their rights and roles as mothers, whether that meant taking up sewing and weaving in order to provide for their children, refusing to leave their children behind during Removal, or dying at the hands of their husbands rather than abandon their homeland.

²³ January 25, 1818, *Brainerd*, 44.

²⁴ February 13, 1818, *Brainerd*, 47.

²⁵ Rufus Anderson, *Memoir of Catharine Brown, a Christian Indian of the Cherokee Nation*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1825), 32. See also Theda Perdue, "Catharine Brown: Cherokee Convert to Christianity," in *Sifters: Native American Women's Lives*, ed. Theda Perdue (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 77-91.

PART TWO
Sowing Good Seeds: White Mothers

“I must frequently turn my attention to medicine, I must sometimes be umpire, I must excite the indolent to industry, my house must be . . . governed by good regulations steadily and gently enforced.”¹

Charlotte Drayton Manigault, explaining
the roles of nurse, judge, teacher, and
sage

¹ August 23, 1828, Charlotte Drayton Manigault Diary, Peter Manigault Collection, SCHS.

How did white women define motherhood? For most white women in early America, becoming a mother meant inheriting a host of anxieties, delights, and motivations, absorbed partially from social trends and prescriptions but primarily from a network of other women who shared their own experiences of childrearing. Motherhood, then, was communal. Elite women communicated their travails through letters and could thus spin a broad web of interest in the South, while poor and illiterate women relied on friends and neighbors close at hand to help in childbirth, offer medical advice, and watch their children grow up. Motherhood was thus a shared project, and children became the markers of a mother's talent that other women could witness, judge, and admire.²

Beyond being a communal endeavor, motherhood for elite women entailed the perpetuation of privilege and the cultivation of the individual, the latter of which was largely new to the mid-eighteenth century. The project of passing status down through the generations was partially dependent on men, whose economic and political manipulations ensured the accumulation of property and the dispossession of those deemed outside the circle of privilege, but status also survived in more nebulous ways, including through both practical and social education. Here, elite mothers were at the helm, crafting children who embodied the intangible virtues of honor, civic duty, and gentility. Though they ensured that their sons learned Latin, their daughters spoke French, and their toddlers stayed away from enslaved children, most elite mothers were not consciously defining an exclusionary class when they raised their children. They were, however, seeking to mirror the educational practices of their own mothers and their female colleagues. In its comparative aspect, and the

² The centrality of these networks of communication further undermines the assumed importance of the nuclear family to elite Southern whites. See also Joan E. Cashin, "The Structure of Antebellum Planter Families: 'The Ties that Bound us Was Strong,'" *Journal of Southern History* 56, no. 1 (1990): 55-70.

self-doubts that such comparisons inevitably produced, the anxieties of eighteenth-century childrearing were not so different from twenty-first-century maternal worries. Elite mothers wanted their children to be respectable products of their own craftsmanship, and this pride happened to align with symbols of class status. Elite mothers saw health, wealth, and happiness as markers of maternal success, for though a child's survival was on the mind of all early American mothers, elite mothers viewed survival as not merely physical, but social. The community of women who supported each other was also a community of women who judged each other, and an ill-educated child would not only be a disgrace to his family, but to the many women who had helped oversee his personal growth. White mothers fed into the project of class formation through their own distinct goals: shaping children of whom they and their community could be proud.

In addition to ensuring that their children would be clearly marked as white, elite, and well-educated, elite women by the mid-eighteenth century also saw motherhood as a responsibility for nurturing the individual potential in each child. A culture of affect and sentiment would thus dominate most women's thoughts and expressions of motherhood into the nineteenth century. Though not all mothers loved their children, all mothers were *expected* to, and these expectations gave rise to both outpourings of affection and feelings of guilt. While depictions of idealized motherhood were rampant in popular novels and plays, many of which were written by men, most mothers derived their guilt not from a broad impression of social expectations, but from a keen awareness of what other women in their immediate circle – friends, neighbors, and kin – were thinking and feeling. Though many women worried that they were not doing enough, they also did far more than their grandmothers and great-grandmothers. These were women who played with their children,

read them bedtime stories, fought for their education, and wrote them frequent letters filled with reminders, warnings, and expressions of love. Motherhood meant connecting with one's child on an unprecedentedly personal level.³

Finally, motherhood for most white women provided a sense of purpose within lives that were often limited to the home by foundational systems of patriarchy. Unable to assert themselves in banks, coffee houses, and legislatures, most elite women had to look within the walls of the home for a sense of existential meaning, and most women found that meaning in motherhood. For most people, such meaning is generally derived from the presence of twin factors: control and worth. An individual's identity is intimately wrapped up in what actions they can affect the outcome of and what actions are valued by their communities. Many elite women found meaning in motherhood precisely because they could determine how they wanted to raise their children, could shape the lives of their children and families (in spite of those external pressures, from disease to dissipation, that limited their control), and because other women, male relatives, and society at large valued their labors.

³ See Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (New York: Knopf, 1962); Carl N. Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Daniel Blake Smith, *Inside the Great House: Planter Family Life in Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980); Jan Lewis, "Mother's Love: The Construction of an Emotion in Nineteenth-Century America," in *Social History and Issues in Human Consciousness: Some Interdisciplinary Connections*, eds. Andrew E. Barnes and Peter N. Stearns (New York: New York University Press, 1989); and Steven Mintz, *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 32-93. For a parallel blossoming of middle-class emotion and sentiment in the creation of the republic, see Sarah Knott, *Sensibility and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); and Nicole Eustace, *Passion is the Gale: Emotion, Power, and the Coming of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008). With new ideas about the individual reason and rights of individuals, especially children, came a curtailment of children's legal power; no longer "little adults," children lost the ability to make contracts, stand trial, and draw wills. See Holly Brewer, *By Birth or Consent: Children, Law, and the Anglo-American Revolution in Authority* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

How did white mothers define power? We tend to think of power in absolutes, as part of a zero-sum equation, but the fact is that power has always been exercised in multiple and nuanced ways by every historical actor who has had a will.⁴ Power comes in many guises and has been given many names by historians: agency, control, responsibility, capacity. All of these terms point to the many ways in which individuals conceived of a desire, acted on behalf of that desire, and – this is where it gets complicated – saw their actions in some way succeed. Power does not require total social domination, and control does not entail guaranteeing the survival of your child through malaria, measles, and the bloody flux. But mothers experienced symptoms of power when they chose what forms of medicine to allow into the sickroom, when their husbands acquiesced to those choices, and when their children occasionally improved as a result of their actions. Mothers certainly felt a lack of control as well, and feelings of helplessness centered around the death of children, a sense of religious imperative, and the many ways in which motherhood could be made miserable by poverty, rape, or abuse. But despite the limits to their control, women sought out and defined maternal roles that would accentuate their own sense of self-worth and responsibility. Within their daily lives, then, white women defined power as the ability to positively influence their children’s future, especially through health care, education, and advice. On a broader scale, these mothers believed their power helped determine the face of the next generation of Southerners and Americans.

⁴ Power can even be unconscious and “invisible.” Konstantin Dierks argues that writing letters was a concealed crystallization of power in the eighteenth century, because letter-writing alone was an act that divided the elite from the illiterate. Dierks, *In My Power: Letter Writing and Communications in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), xi-xviii. Along with letter-writing, the practice of keeping diaries rose in the eighteenth century; Walter Ong contends that “the kind of verbalized solipsistic reveries it implies are a product of consciousness as shaped by print culture.” And, one might argue, class status. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982), 100.

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Because mothers were nurses, they healed their families. Poorer women gathered those herbs that their own mothers had told them were useful, elite women decided when to call in doctors for outside assistance, and all women studied both symptoms and cures, trading recipes for “plague water” and tartar emetic. The importance of children’s health was clear not only to mothers, but to their communities and country; children were the future, after all, and the fact that mothers guarded their survival earned them communal respect.

Because mothers were readers, they engaged in intellectual conversations about the merits of literature, and by reading books with their children in mind, they created a new class of consumer. It was largely mothers’ opinions and judgments, for instance, that determined the success of most early children’s literature. Mothers were the ones reading the material out loud to their sons and daughters, and they sought out stories that would either mirror their own experiences of motherhood or fulfill an ideal of familial relations to which they aspired. Maternal readers not only guided the direction of children’s publishing, but motherhood was the very reason behind many women’s increased interest in philosophical, religious, and educational texts. Motherhood provided women the excuse to become an authority in any number of subjects.

Because mothers were teachers, they helped control the knowledge that boys and girls acquired; while this role gained prominence in the 1780s and 1790s, it was hardly new to most mothers. Women made decisions about the nature and content of their children’s education in every generation since the mid-eighteenth century, simply because they considered education to fall naturally under their purview. When fathers had little voice in the day-to-day operations of the household, mothers decided whether their children should be

taught at home, placed under tutors, or sent to local schools, and they constantly evaluated their children's teachers, the progress of their studies, and even colleges like William and Mary, Princeton, and Yale.

Because mothers were sages, they guided their children's moral compasses and took charge of introducing religion in the home. Almost more than any other, the role of advice-giver convinced women that their motherhood was a source of worth, for in helping their children weather the vicissitudes of life, they were doing measurable good. Most women expressed doubts along their maternal journeys, for despite the proliferation of advice manuals in the late eighteenth century, there has never been a clear code for mothers other than what women themselves devise. But though doubts were ever-present, adopting the role of sage enabled women to identify as basically good, sensible, and *useful* individuals. From the sense of how much we are needed comes our sense of how much we are worth.

Because mothers were judges, they flexed their muscles developed from years of nursing, teaching, and guiding to critique the maternal world in which they lived. Mothers, children, husbands, and servants across racial and class spectrums fell under the scrutiny of the maternal judge. Women passed judgment as an expression of the control they wielded. While they could not dictate the course of national politics, they could determine the membership of their own social circles and the qualities that a good mother would embody. In this way, they controlled the development and direction of the very institution of motherhood and, by extension, the family.

When mothers suffered, then, it was because their sense of power and control was threatened or violated. The death of children was often out of a mother's hands, as were rape, abandonment, and poverty. But though these eventualities infringed upon a robust sense of

self-worth, they could not obliterate the larger maternal purpose, which was to usher through the next generation intact, a goal which, despite the inevitable missteps and failures, could not but create a sense of value and self-respect among the women who pursued it.

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Nancy Turner Hall admitted that she “once thought it easy to train up children in the way they should go; but now I think it hard – hard indeed!” Nancy gradually realized that “mother” was a “word big, with importance – with responsibility,” and learned that “a mother must never think of her own ease. She must never relax her efforts for a day. No – not even for an hour!” Instead, “incessant prayers must be added to incessant exertions & the ship must not be relinquished until safely towed into harbor.” These herculean duties led Nancy almost to despair; she asked, “Who is sufficient for these things?” and had no ready answer.⁵ Despite mothers’ frequent doubts about the overwhelming difficulty of childrearing, they turned to the task time and time again, trying their hardest because they saw motherhood as a means to have some control over their personal lives and their contemporary society; a point of connection with female correspondents that expanded a domestic identity into a communal, regional, and even national role; and an institution of such weighty responsibility that it became a source of unshakeable self-worth.

⁵ Nancy Johns Turner Hall, "The Imaginationist or Recollections of an old lady, a native of one of the Southern States, now a resident of the State of Ohio in the Year 1844," p. 40, VHS.

CHAPTER SEVEN

WHITE NURSES

When twenty-year-old Eliza Haywood visited the bedroom of eighteen-year-old Sarah Polk two mornings after that neighbor had given birth, she was surprised to find her sitting up in a hard wooden chair, her door and windows open, enjoying an early spring breeze. It was March of 1802 and Sarah, wearing a thin bed gown and a silk coat, was nursing a healthy baby boy, her first child. Eliza was amazed at the apparent vigor of both mother and infant. When she returned home, she wrote her mother and asked, “How is it my dear Mother, that these Laidys are so remarkable well off when they have a Child. It must be because they have better Constitutions than the Generallity of Women.” The two women, living less than half a mile apart in Raleigh, North Carolina, had much in common. Both women as teenagers had married widowers in their early forties who became influential financial officials in North Carolina’s fledgling government; Eliza’s husband was the state treasurer, and Sarah’s was the supervisor of internal revenue. Eliza already had two young children of her own, and the recent birth of her son John may have been fresh in her mind as she observed Sarah’s condition. Though Sarah’s first birth may have seemed relatively painless, the young mother would eventually lose five of her twelve children before they reached the age of three, and may not have considered herself “so remarkable well off.” Eliza, the youngest in a family of several daughters, turned to her mother as a close correspondent and confidante; both women had given birth multiple times, and they spoke

freely to each other about impending confinements, concerned husbands, and hardening breasts. The serenity of Sarah Polk must have struck both women as a marvel. Eliza Haywood was well aware of how perilous childbirth could be and how tenuous was the health of both women and children in the early South.¹

Though motherhood was an expansive institution that incorporated stepmothers, aunts, friends, and guardians, most women measured their motherhood by the presence of surviving biological children. Some of the greatest threats to mothers, then, were the ailments and accidents that threatened children's health and safety. White mothers in the South, both poor and elite, chose to take on the role of nurse in an attempt to exert some control over the lives of their children. Nursing gave mothers a functional responsibility in the face of dangers which were often unavoidable. By pursuing the necessary skills and knowledge to assist their children and families in a time of need, women worked to circumvent feelings of helplessness, turning the domestic space of the home into a site of knowledge acquisition, practical achievement, and thus self-empowerment. When mothers administered ipecac to sick children, whether the treatment was successful or not, they believed they were positively affecting their children's lives; mothers could not control whether a child would live or die, but they could control their own response, and they often saw their actions leading to filial gratitude, communal respect, and sometimes even positive results. Nursing was an occupation and thus a source of pride for mothers.²

¹ Eliza Haywood to Jane Williams, March 18, 1802, Haywood Family Papers, SHC. Sarah Hawkins Polk was the niece of Benjamin Hawkins, commissioner to the Cherokees and agent to the Creeks in the 1780s and 1790s.

² Sally McMillen has argued that Southern fathers took an active role in their children's health care, and that such attentions may have actually detracted from women's domestic power in the home, but of the women I encountered, most retained a strong sense of their authority in the sickroom, whether

For most white mothers, as for all mothers, nursing was no small chore. The eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century South was a region haunted by disease; microbial illnesses such as dysentery thrived in the hot, humid Southern atmosphere.³ In most early modern communities, infant deaths outnumbered toddler deaths, but in early Virginia, children between the ages of one and four died at equal rates to infants, a result of the ubiquity of such diseases as malaria.⁴ While no data exists to adequately judge child mortality rates in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, by the 1850s, when mortality rates were improving, the deaths of children under five years of age still accounted for roughly forty percent of all deaths in the United States. Just as children's lives were threatened, so too were mothers'; according to the 1850 census, almost four percent of white women in Virginia and the Carolinas died in childbirth, a number which was almost certainly higher in 1750.⁵ When one South Carolina woman complained about her children being "as

or not men were present. Sally G. McMillen, "Antebellum Southern Fathers and the Health Care of Children," *Journal of Southern History* 60, no. 3 (1994): 513-532.

³ James O. Breeden asserts that by 1800, Southern health was "the worst in the nation," and northern life insurance agents even charged more from their southern clients. James O. Breeden, "Disease as a Factor in Southern Distinctiveness," in *Disease and Distinctiveness in the American South*, eds. Todd L. Savitt and James Harvey Young (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), 1-28. See also K. David Patterson, "Disease Environments of the Antebellum South," in *Science and Medicine in the Old South*, ed. by Ronald L. Numbers and Todd L. Savitt (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1989), 152-165; Richard W. and Dorothy C. Wertz, *Lying-In: A History of Childbirth in America* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 24-25; Steven Stowe, "Conflict and Self-Sufficiency: Domestic Medicine in the American South," in *Right Living: An Anglo-American Tradition of Self-Help Medicine and Hygiene*, ed. Charles E. Rosenberg (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 147-169; Thomas A. Horrocks, *Popular Print and Popular Medicine: Almanacs and Health Advice in Early America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), 52; John Duffy, *Epidemics in Colonial America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1953), 215.

⁴ Darrett B. and Anita H. Rutman, "Of Agues and Fevers: Malaria in the Early Chesapeake," *William and Mary Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (1976): 31-60; Daniel Blake Smith, "Mortality and Family in the Colonial Chesapeake," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 8, no. 3 (1978): 403-427.

⁵ See Sally G. McMillen, *Motherhood in the Old South: Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Infant Rearing* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 165-167, 194-196, 81, 192.

wild as two colts,” her mother, more experienced in the trials of childrearing, reassured her, “That is a good sign, sickly children are seldom so – tis better to bear that kind of noise, than the piercing cry of a sickly child.”⁶ Eliza Ravenel agreed that she could not “be too thankful for the share of health which I and my family enjoy thro’ all seasons & their changes.”⁷ While child survival rates were climbing, childbirth remained a perilous juncture in a woman’s life.

The concerns surrounding the birthing process only swelled as children grew and became vulnerable to small pox and whooping cough, sudden fits and mysterious fevers, getting kicked by horses and falling into wells. White mothers in the South were nurses before all else, for a child’s survival undergirded almost all maternal endeavors, and their struggles to usher through the next generation intact consumed their thoughts. Some women even suffered from nightmares about their families’ health. One woman in North Carolina wrote about her daughter, “I am uneasy very uneasy to hear from Becky. I have had several very distressing Dreams about her since she went up the Country.” Ten days later, she received a response from Becky, who shared her mother’s fears. “I have lately had such disagreeable Dreams about you,” she wrote, “that I feel very uneasy.”⁸ The job of nursing their children, families, and communities brought mothers together in a network of mutual concern. Sisters and friends traded cures, and the language of ailments, complaints, and condolences filled letters between women. The quest for health had such a prominent position in women’s expressions of their daily lives because their identity as mothers

⁶ Esther Cox to Mary Cox Chesnut, May 9, 1801, Cox and Chesnut Family Papers, SCL.

⁷ Eliza Ravenel to Fanny Harrison, July 20, 1824, John Ravenel Papers, SCL.

⁸ Jane Williams to John Haywood, August 13, 1810, Haywood Family Papers, SHC; Rebecca C. Moore to Jane Williams, August 22, 1810, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

depended in large part on the survival of their children. The ability to nurse effectively, then, afforded mothers some control in the outcome of their families, and a talented mother-nurse was rewarded not just with her child's health but with the respect of her friends and neighbors. Nursing became a power that was jealously guarded by women, even as medicine became increasingly professionalized.

*

In early Southern communities made up of dispersed plantations, male doctors served across vast geographical terrains, leaving much of the daily health care to white and black women.⁹ For most white Southerners, medicine was a combination of oral tradition and accumulated wisdom from printed material; the hospital was the bedroom, and the doctor was often a mother, neighbor, or slave.¹⁰ The process of childbirth remained largely in the hands of women, despite the rise of professionalized obstetrics in the 1760s.¹¹ Midwives typically attended routine deliveries, while male doctors arrived only during problematic situations. As one female author observed, "A mother is a child's best physician."¹² By the

⁹ According to Elizabeth Barnaby Keeney, "southerners were indeed less apt to have easy access to a physician than many other Americans," and census results show that concentrations of physicians in urban locations left many rural Southerners without immediate recourse to professional medical care (281). Keeney, "Domestic Medicine in the Old South," in *Science and Medicine in the Old South*, 276-294. See also Julia Cherry Spruill, *Women's Life and Work in the Southern Colonies* (1938; repr. New York: W. W. Norton, 1972), 74.

¹⁰ Moss, *Southern Folk Medicine*, 2; Thomas Horrocks argues that books, pamphlets, and especially almanacs would have provided medical advice to laypeople. In the South, between 1751 and 1861, substantially more almanacs contained practical remedies than almanacs in either the North or the Mid-Atlantic states. Horrocks, *Popular Print and Popular Medicine*, 11, 65, 114-115.

¹¹ Charles E. Rosenberg, "Health in the Home: A Tradition of Print and Practice," in *Right Living*, 5.

¹² An American Matron, *The Maternal Physician: A Treatise on the Nurture and Management of Infants, From the Birth Until Two Years Old, Being the Result of Sixteen Years; Experience in the Nursery* (New York: Isaac Riley, 1811), 16. For more on *The Maternal Physician*, see Kathleen Brown, "The Maternal Physician: Teaching American Mothers to Put the Baby in the Bathwater," in

early nineteenth century, however, men were gaining a foothold in a traditionally female space, particularly among urban and elite women. A mid-eighteenth-century boom in the search for knowledge led male doctors to push the boundaries of their practice and investigate the unknown. A medical interest in pregnancy and childbirth arose first in France, then spread to England and eventually America. Riding on the coat tails of the Enlightenment, then, male doctors arrived at midwifery.¹³

The spread of professionalized medicine in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in America coincided with a gradual but inexorable suppression of women's medical prowess. Through much of the eighteenth century, doctors and mothers coexisted, one treating unusual disorders and the other attending to her family's daily health. In the Eustace household of North Carolina, John Eustace was a practicing physician, but his wife Margaret nevertheless kept a copy of *Every Man His Own Doctor* in her personal library.¹⁴ As male doctors gradually replaced midwives as childbirth attendants, though, they began

Right Living, 88-111; and Kathleen M. Brown, *Foul Bodies: Cleanliness in Early America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 191-192, 224-232.

¹³ This form of "social childbirth" among colonial white women was a continuation of English and European birthing traditions. By the turn of the century, a handful of medical colleges offered instruction in "midwifery" for their male clientele. See the Wertzes, *Lying-In*, 1-2, 29-76; Catherine M. Scholten, "'On the Importance of the Obstetrick Art': Changing Customs of Childbirth in America, 1760-1825," *William and Mary Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (1977): 426-45; Judith Walzer Leavitt, *Brought to Bed: Childbearing in America, 1750-1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 36-63; Lamar Riley Murphy, *Enter the Physician: The Transformation of Domestic Medicine, 1760-1860* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1991), 25; and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York: Vintage, 1991). Like medical practice, medical literature spread from British printers to American hands. See Rosenberg, "Health in the Home," 2. For more on the changes in women's experience of childbirth due to the advent of male physicians, see Nancy M. Theriot, *Mothers and Daughters in Nineteenth-Century America: The Biosocial Construction of Femininity* (1988, repr. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 50-61.

¹⁴ J. Bryan Grimes, ed., *North Carolina Wills and Inventories, Copied from the Original and Recorded Wills and Inventories in the Office of the Secretary of State* (1912; repr., Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing, 1967), 491, quoted in Hayes, *A Colonial Woman's Bookshelf*, 92-3.

removing other medical chores from women's hands, replacing herbs with leeches, and hands with forceps. By the 1830s, medicine was largely a man's domain.¹⁵ Writing in the 1850s, when male physicians dominated women's healthcare, Caroline Clitherall had already dismissed the role of the informal maternal doctor. She declared it "revolting to a refin'd mind of either sex, to hear of Modern female Physicians, of Ladies, who profess to be acquainted with the diseases incident to both sexes, and competent to cure them!"¹⁶ For women earlier in the century, however, who had relied on nursing as an expression of maternal competence, male doctors in the home would have seemed intrusive and perhaps even unreliable. For most women who could afford their visits, doctors were summoned only for emergencies.

Despite the spread of professionalized medicine during this period, mothers continued to provide the most immediate and reliable health care to their families, and such nursing was in near-constant demand. Threats to children's health ranged from diseases to accidents. When North Carolinian Sarah Williams Chotard observed her young daughter laying "four o'clocks of every color" on Sarah's newborn infant, the mother, rather than being charmed at how the baby "had been beautified," was instead "very much alarmed for the consequence of such exposure to . . . damp flowers."¹⁷ The young Elizabeth Ford's "nervous paroxysms" increased in strength as she grew older, becoming "truly afflicting to herself & fond &

¹⁵ Murphy also argues that physicians originally had no interest in taking over home health care from women; in the early years of the Republic, male doctors envisioned a "health-care partnership" with women (33); *Enter the Physician*, xv-xvi, 1-69.

¹⁶ Caroline Eliza Burgwin Clitherall Diaries, Vol. 3, Pt. 2, p. 14, SHC.

¹⁷ Eliza Williams Chotard Gould Memoir, 1798-1825, p. 8, Virginia Historical Society.

anxious parents.”¹⁸ Young Sarah Waller suffered from toothaches, and her mother chided her for not being more careful of her health; “you ought to rap it up and use something warm, which mite prevent it from being very bad,” she wrote, adding that “you had better not attempt to have them extracted.”¹⁹ Jane Williams’ daughters suffered from ills ranging from “a bad Head-ack and soreness in the Eyes” to “frequent attacks . . . of the pain in her Stomach.”²⁰ When Louisa Minot’s son became sick, she consulted her husband about the various treatments she gave him, adding, “My mind is so engrossed with him, that I enter very little in to what is about me.”²¹ This sense of constant anxiety would have been familiar to many mothers in the early South. One young boy endured a lengthy illness in 1805, and his mother wrote, “Days & nights have I passed by his sickbed, expecting each moment the last blow which fate can give to my peace.” When the child finally recovered, she exclaimed, “My child thank God is restored to his almost frantic Mother.”²² Catherine Read and her husband learned of a spreading fever in Charleston, and spent their nights listening for noise in the children’s room. “A Cough or a hem makes us both start out of Bed,” Catherine wrote, “& every day that they rise from their Beds in Health seems like a reprieve for which we

¹⁸ [Jacob?] Ford, Plantation Journal, May 1809, Ford Family Papers, SCL.

¹⁹ Jane Henry Meredith Garland to Sarah Armistead Garland Waller, December 25, 1818; Jane Henry Meredith Garland to Sarah Armistead Garland Waller, n.d., 1821, Garland Family Papers, VHS. To prevent the toothaches that were so common in early America, Carolina Laurens taught her son to start brushing his teeth at the age of two. Though “it will be of no service to his present set of teeth, still, the force of habit is so great his mother thinks he cannot fail to take care of a new set of teeth, if he is kept in the practice of cleaning the old ones.” June 1, 1827, Caroline Olivia Laurens Diary, SHC.

²⁰ Jane Williams to John Haywood, December 7, 1798; Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, November 11, 1806, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

²¹ Louisa Davis Minot to William Minot, February 25, 1838, Louisa Davis Minot Papers, SCL.

²² Judith Randolph to Frances Bland Tucker Coalter, April 17, 1805, Brown, Coalter, Tucker Papers (I), WM.

ought to be very thankful.”²³ What ailed a child could also affect a mother, and many women were concerned about spreading illnesses within their families. Young Sally Fairfax recorded in her diary that “on friday the 17th of jannuary poor lucy Colton died of a dropsy 1772 her Child is dead also.”²⁴ Diseases took their toll on Southern families, but mothers viewed threats to health as enemies which they could arm themselves against and, through the power of nursing, occasionally conquer.

Frequent mishaps also took their toll on families, and mothers watched their children’s physical movements with anxiety. Both Eliza Haywood and her niece experienced the occasional stagecoach accidents that happened on the uneven roads of North Carolina, but while Eliza emerged merely bruised from an 1804 run-in, her niece lost her life in 1818, “the horse having taken fright and run away with [the chair].” The girl was “most horridly mangled, and almost all her bones broken, from having been dragged a considerable distance, one of her legs having, in the attempt to jump, caught between the shaft and foot-board.”²⁵ Eliza also had a child fall into a well but emerge unscathed.²⁶ When Charleston resident Sarah Gibbes learned that an earthquake had unsettled the students at Princeton in 1783, including her son John, she confessed that the event “call’d up all the tender sensations of humanity in my bosom.”²⁷ In 1834, Mary Dulles Cheves’s son Langdon, a member of a “clubb which meets every Wednesday in a Neighbouring Field for the purpose of

²³ Catherine Read to Betsy Ludlow, October 20, n.d., Read Family Papers, SCL.

²⁴ Diary of Sally Fairfax, January 17, 1772, Fairfax Harrison Papers, WM.

²⁵ Eliza Haywood to John Haywood, March 30, 1804, Haywood Family Papers, SHC; Alfred Moore to John Haywood, May 22, 1818, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

²⁶ Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, June 30, 1816, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

²⁷ Sarah Gibbes to John Gibbes, January 3, 1784, Gibbes Family Papers, SCHS.

improving themselves in shooting,” accidentally shot himself; the bullet “enter’d just under his Chin and came out just under his Ear,” at which point the young man “with perfect composure said I am kill’d.” Fortunately, a doctor – called for by the men of the shooting club – saved Langdon through the prompt application of several “silk Handkerchiefs,” a remedy which one imagines a mother could have administered equally well.²⁸ Between epidemics of fever and the inevitable accidents of both rural and urban life, mothers had to be perpetually vigilant for their children’s safety.

In an era when medicine, for both men and women, was a matter of trial and error, mothers traded recipes for cures with their neighbors, daughters, and friends, maintaining networks of fellow nurses who, with their sympathy and common knowledge, bolstered women’s feelings of maternal skill and responsibility.²⁹ Harriott Pinckney Horry kept a book of medical cures in which over half of the recipes were direct copies from her mother’s own household book.³⁰ Lady Jean Skipwith kept various medical texts in her massive Virginia library and regularly added to their instructions with handwritten notes and newspaper clippings. In her will, Jean bequeathed these compendiums to her daughters.³¹ A fourteen-year-old Jane Randolph was already practicing for motherhood when she began her commonplace book in 1743, in which she kept recipes for curing gravel, rickets, “fits in

²⁸ Sophia Heatly Dulles to Joseph Heatly Dulles, September 6, 1835, Ann Heatly Reid Lovell Estate and Family Papers, SCHS.

²⁹ Kay K. Moss, *Southern Folk Medicine, 1750-1820* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 12-13.

³⁰ The receipt book of Harriott’s mother, Eliza Lucas Pinckney, included several recipes obtained from friends, including a cure for the “Rhumatism” from a Mrs. King, and a “Salve for Corns” from a Captain Bilby, though Eliza observed, “NB I found no benefitt at all from this salve.” Eliza Pinckney Receipt Book, 1756, SCHS.

³¹ Mildred K. Abraham, “The Library of Lady Jean Skipwith: A Book Collection from the Age of Jefferson,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 91, no. 3 (1983): 320.

Children,” coughs, burns, bruises, colic, and pleurisy.³² Mary Brewton Alston passed her recipe book down to her daughter Mary Alston Pringle, and many of its collected cures were specifically suited for mothers; one told how to prevent a miscarriage, another provided hints for curing “Children who are subject to Fits,” and a third addressed the “bowel complaint when Teething.”³³ Martha Jones Eppes wrote from Virginia to her older sister Ann in North Carolina and commanded, “Do not send the receipt for the ‘Neutralizing Mixture.’ I found it, among some others, copied when I was in Edenton before. Send me the one that is composed of Rhubarb, Magnesia & sugar used for children in summer complaint.” Martha also asked for a recipe she had seen Ann give her own daughter with good results, along with “any receipt that will be useful in a family.”³⁴ Medicine was a language that was centered on the family.

Cures were for sharing, not just recording, and mothers never hesitated to send medical suggestions to their children and relatives. Hannah Corbin sent detailed instructions for a decoction for her ailing daughter, and even included a few ingredients that she feared would be difficult to procure in rural Virginia. In her letter to her son-in-law, Hannah asked, advised, and warned like a trained physician. “I have sent the Lucatellus Balsam unmixed,” she wrote, noting that mixing the waxy ointment with another substance was unnecessary and that “Doctors will often . . . spoil the medicine” by this practice. Though she sent “salve,”

³² Among entries for tartar emetic powder, lucatellus balsam, and plague water, Jane also wrote down a recipe for “Pankakes Extraordinary.” Jane Randolph Walke Commonplace Book, 1739-1743, VHS.

³³ Mary Brewton Alston and Mary M. Pringle Recipe Book, 1791-1838, and Mary M. Pringle Recipe Book, n.d., Mary Motte Alston Pringle Papers, SCHS. These books also included recipes “To Destroy Rats,” “To Prevent Crows from destroying Corn when full ripe,” “To Destroy Bed Bugs,” and “How to cure a passion for Liquor!!!”

³⁴ Martha Burke Jones Eppes to Anna Maria Jones Littlejohn, n.d., Martha Burke Jones Eppes Note and Recipe Book, LOV.

“roots,” and “Balsam,” Hannah also needed more information about the case. “You have never yet wrote me what the discharge was,” she chided her son-in-law, “whether a thin watery humour or a mattery one. If it once comes to a thick white matter I think it must soon cure with safety.”³⁵ Jane Williams advised her daughters to “Take the Bark,” and shared a doctor’s cure for whooping cough (“a preparation of the Indian Turnip in Milk”) with her relatives.³⁶ Mary Tayloe Page of Fredericksburg also recommended that her granddaughter “take a dose or two of Bark now and then,” and sent her daughter a prescription “to strengthen the system, and prevent return of fevers.”³⁷ The “bark” that mothers so often employed came from South American trees in the *Cinchona* genus, which contained quinine, an all-purpose substance used to treat stomach aches, fevers, and malaria.

Consuming a simple gruel was a ready solution for a number of physical complaints, and mothers also advocated the use of rhubarb, calamine, and alum whey.³⁸ Eliza Chotard Gould’s mother, born in New Bern, North Carolina, “saw in a newspaper that blackberry root tea was a remedy for diarrhea and dosed my father with it. The effects were very alarming, but it entirely cured him.”³⁹ Ann Higginbotham Hoskins told her sister Elizabeth about her

³⁵ Hannah Corbin to George Turberville, n.d. [probably May 1778], Peckatone Papers, VHS.

³⁶ Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, August 16, 1798, Haywood Family Papers, SHC; Rebecca Moore to Jane Williams, August 22, 1810, Haywood Family Papers, SHC; Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, May 28, 1799, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

³⁷ Mary Tayloe Page to Susan Burwell, June 24, 1825; Mary Tayloe Page to Maria Mann Page Burwell, January 26, 1825, Louise Anderson Patten Papers, VHS.

³⁸ Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, December 11, 1805, Haywood Family Papers, SHC; Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, January 5, 1807, Haywood Family Papers, SHC; Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, March 18, 1812, Haywood Family Papers, SHC; Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, January 4, 1816, Haywood Family Papers, SHC. For more on specific herbs and their uses, see Moss, *Southern Folk Medicine*, 169-212.

³⁹ Eliza Williams Chotard Gould Memoir, p. 8, VHS.

child's colic, and Elizabeth wrote back to suggest a recipe for "soot tea" which she had found "very useful" for the common ailment.⁴⁰ When William Byrd visited one of his plantations in 1732, he stayed with Mrs. Fleming, who he soon discovered was "a notable quack, and therefore paid that regard to her knowledge" by asking her opinion about the current epidemic of dysentery. Mrs. Fleming provided him with several possible cures, from the use of hartshorn mixed with plantain leaves to a "strong decoction of St. Andrew's cross, in new milk instead of water."⁴¹

Women's sense of maternal competence was far-reaching, and mothers turned to male doctors only when their children's health seemed to be spiraling out of control. Perhaps afraid that her son-in-law had insufficient grasp of the seriousness of her daughter's illness, Hannah Corbin gently reminded him, "Doctor Todd of Caroline is reckoned a very skillfull Doctor as my poor Child is so sadly neglected had you not better send for him."⁴² In 1791, Sarah Jerdone Braikenridge put "2 or 3 drops of sweet oil" in the ear of her son to cure him of deafness – whether or not on the advice of a doctor is unclear – while fifteen years later, Judith Randolph sent her deaf son to England specifically to see Dr. Robinson and to obtain "an operation performed by a skilful hand." When the doctor's diagnosis dashed "the fairy visions [she] indulged" about her son's recovery, Judith conveyed her despair to her sister,

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Higginbotham Fisher to Ann Higginbotham Hoskins, October 17, 1839, Higginbotham Family Papers, VHS.

⁴¹ William Byrd, *The Westover Manuscripts: Containing the History of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina; A Journey to the Land of Eden, A.D. 1733; and A Progress to the Mines* (Petersburg: Edmund and Julian C. Ruffin, 1841), 126.

⁴² Hannah Corbin to George Turberville, n.d. [probably May 1778], Peckatone Papers, VHS.

who was also “a Woman, & a Mother.”⁴³ Mary Tayloe Page suggested a few remedies for her granddaughter suffering from a nervous fever, but added in a letter to her daughter, “If you think a Doct. Necessary call in Doctr. Little.”⁴⁴ Elizabeth Stevens Jocelyn lost her daughter on a family trip to New York, and reported to her remaining children in North Carolina that “they had Cawled in the best Doctors in Aulbaney they . . . did every thing [they] could but to no purpose she remaind insansable to the Last.”⁴⁵ Ann Steele consulted “Doctor Kuhn,” Catherine Read trusted “Dr. Baron,” and Jane Williams turned to “Mr. Blacklige.”⁴⁶ Caroline Clitherall’s two-year-old granddaughter, succumbing to a fever, whispered her last words: “Dod bless you Dottor.”⁴⁷

Relinquishing control over children’s health, however, left some women vulnerable to the worst of outcomes. When Jane Williams lost her daughter through what she considered the mismanagement of a male doctor, she wrote, “Could I be satisfied it was the will of God to take my Dear Child from me . . . I should feel more reconciled, but when I think and beleive [sic] it was wrong Treatment of the Doctr. that Deprived me of her, I am ready to lose my Senses.” For Jane, the sickroom was a contested space that had become a battlefield.

After several months of violent grief, Jane’s anger turned to self-loathing. She determined

⁴³ Sarah Jerdone Braikenridge to Sarah Macon Jerdone, August 3, 1791, Jerdone Family Papers, WM; Judith Randolph to Frances Bland Tucker Coalter, May 20, 1805, December 8, 1805, June 9, 1806, Brown, Coalter, Tucker Papers (I), WM.

⁴⁴ Mary Tayloe Page to Maria Mann Page Burwell, January 26, 1825, Louise Anderson Patten Papers, VHS.

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Stevens Jocelyn to Samuel Russell Jocelyn, September 18, 1805, Giles Family Papers, SHC.

⁴⁶ John Steele to Ann Steele, June 18, 1799, John Steele Papers, SCL; Catherine Read to Betsy Ludlow, October 20, n.d., Read Family Papers, SCL; Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, May 28, 1799, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

⁴⁷ Caroline Eliza Burgwin Clitherall Diaries, Vol. 7, p. 50, SHC.

that she must have been “accessary to the Death of my Dear Ferebee in perswading her to put on those cruel plasters. She was much against it, but my influence prevailed over her and I am sure they materially hurt her.”⁴⁸ Doctors placed irritating plasters on patients’ skin to create a blister that would distract the body’s humors from the existing malady; the strategies that comprised “heroic medicine” – from lancing and cupping to the use of leeches and plasters – were often distressing to anxious mothers who watched their children’s bodies being thus invaded.⁴⁹ While Jane’s conclusion of guilt ate at the bereaved mother’s heart, it reveals two common understandings of maternal duty. First, as a mother, Jane had the final say when following through on the doctor’s instructions. She, rather than the doctor, directed the application of plasters and determined whether the treatment would be performed. Second, Jane held on to a strong sense of her own final responsibility. Whether or not the doctor’s advice was misguided, it was the mother who often made the ultimate medical decisions, and she who would live with the consequences.

Though some children may have been lost through a mother’s perceived mismanagement, others were saved through their decisive action. After Frances Tucker Coalter’s daughter Lisba fell down a set of stairs in 1811, causing severe swelling in her back, Frances called for a doctor while her own mother, perhaps more accustomed to taking matters into her own hands, “covered the spot with rag, and kept wetting it with

⁴⁸ Jane Williams to John Haywood, January 1, 1809, Haywood Family Papers, SHC; Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, May 29, 1809, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

⁴⁹ For more on Southern mothers’ mistrust of heroic remedies, see McMillen, *Motherhood in the Old South*, 158-160. McMillen quotes Mary Anderson, who wrote in 1805 about an ill infant, “I have a great aversion to Doctors for children . . . and therefore ventured to doctor him myself.” Mary Anderson to Rebecca Cameron, September 10, 1805, Cameron Family Papers, SHC.

Camphorated Spirit.” When the doctor finally arrived, he “found the tumor quite subsided.”⁵⁰

Rebecca Moore underwent a life-threatening miscarriage at the end of her first trimester, and only the composure and medical knowledge of her mother and a female neighbor rescued her from a dire situation. The mother recorded:

An alarming and dangerous flooding ensued. So urgent was the case that in one hour after we had to resort to that desperate and dreadfull remedy the application of Cloaths wet in cold Vinegar and water & at last some Salt with the Vinegar alone. She was fainting and the Blood running in torrents. Mrs. Waddells and myself hated to make the Application, but there was no time to hesitate that was the only remedy could have any effect time enough to give Check to the Hemorrhage we had not even time to send for a Doctor, but had to make the application first. She would not have been alive when a Doctr. got here.⁵¹

The two older women were clearly frightened, but they were also fortified with a set of instructions about staunching blood, which had been learned as part of a basic set of knowledge shared among women. While they may have been afraid to use vinegar to treat a hemorrhaging uterus, perhaps knowing that an excess of vinegar could block the placenta, their medical knowledge matched that of the best doctors and midwives of the day.⁵² Perhaps they had endured another such scene when they were younger, had suffered from a similar

⁵⁰ Frances Bland Tucker Coalter to John Coalter, April 20, 1811, Brown, Coalter, Tucker Papers (I), WM. Though these women were vigilant about their charges’ health, they often relinquished them to other hands. After Frances and her mother were assured of Lisba’s recovered health, the two went to have tea with the doctor’s wife, leaving “both her and her Sister with their Mammys.”

⁵¹ Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, December 20, 1814, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

⁵² Perhaps the first physician to recommend the application of vinegar cloths in post-partum situations was Laurent Leroux in *Observations sur les pertes de sang des femmes en couches, et sur le moyen de les guérir* (Dijon and Paris: L. N. Frantin, 1776). Robert Hooper agreed in 1817 that vinegar “applied . . . to the loins and abdomen in menorrhagia, particularly the profluvia after parturition, . . . is said to be very serviceable.” Hooper, *A New Medical Dictionary* (Philadelphia: M. Carey and Son, 1817), 9. Physicians throughout the nineteenth confirmed the usefulness of vinegar, cold water, and salt for post-partum hemorrhaging. See, for example, Jonathan Pereira, *The Elements of Materia Medica and Therapeutics*, second ed., vol. 1 (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1842), 401; W. Newnham, “On Uterine Hæmorrhage,” *Provincial Medical and Surgical Journal (1844-1852)* 15, no. 19 (1851): 514-516; and Theophilus Parvin, *The Science and Art of Obstetrics* (Philadelphia: Lea Brothers and Co., 1886), 515-517.

spontaneous abortion, or had simply remembered the stories and remedies passed down from their mothers. Both the “Doctor” and the older women had the skills to handle this situation, but the women were already present and needed no summoning.

While many elite mothers could choose when to send for doctors, poor white mothers rarely had the financial wherewithal to call in outside help; like women in slave communities, they relied on local midwives and their own knowledge of herbs and cures to weather periods of ill health.⁵³ Some, especially in rural areas, earned reputations as local healers. A woman in western North Carolina, who may have developed her medical knowledge by tending her own children, began marketing her talents and drew clients from the nearby Moravian community, despite the Moravians keeping a male physician of their own. Sister Beck traveled from Wachovia to nearby Abbott’s Creek in 1788 to consult this rural healer about “a sore on her forehead.” She returned seven days later, which suggests that the Abbott’s Creek healer had a rather lengthy cure. The people of Bethabara were convinced this unnamed healer “can cure cancer,” and when she traveled through their town, she “was consulted by various persons about all sorts of things.”⁵⁴ In 1777, Sary Balengar earned ten shillings for “Bringing a negro wench to Bed.”⁵⁵ In 1833, Sophia Cheves Haskell was delivered by “a very experienced old Lady of 71 who rides over the Country by night & by day, through Sunshine & Storm with impunity on horse back”; this midwife in upstate

⁵³ According to Suzanne Lebsack, male doctors in Petersburg, Virginia, charged over eleven pounds to assist in childbirth in 1800, while midwives charged only eleven shillings. In the 1850s, doctors charged up to twenty-five dollars, while midwives charged only three. Lebsack, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), 170.

⁵⁴ “Memorabilia of Wachovia,” April 23, 1788, April 27, 1788, “Bethabara Diary,” May 5, 1788, in Adelaide L. Fries, ed., *Records of the Moravians in North Carolina*, vol. 5 (Raleigh: NCSDAH, 1970), 2219, 2248.

⁵⁵ February 27, 1777, Sary Balengar Receipt, VHS.

South Carolina must have been practicing her art for many years, for Sophia's child was "the fifth generation she has known in the family."⁵⁶ Sarah Griffith performed midwifery services for the owner of a Virginia distillery – whether for his family or his slaves is unclear – and she redeemed the debt owed her by claiming almost six gallons of whiskey, with the balance being paid in cash.⁵⁷ Expecting mothers in Petersburg, Virginia, turned to Elizabeth Swail, who was "a great favourite among the ladies," and her successor Sarah Weatherly, who was also "in very great repute here among the ladies."⁵⁸ Women gained enough of a standing as informal healers in early America that even the well-known physician Benjamin Rush confessed to their usefulness. In an address to his medical students in Philadelphia, he noted, "When you go abroad always take a memorandum book and whenever you hear an old woman say such and such herbs are good, . . . put it down, for, gentlemen, you may need it."⁵⁹

Because male doctors were not always affordable, available, or even desirable, mothers often leaned on other women within their families and communities to assist in diagnosing or treating patients. These consultations further bolstered women's sense of skill and responsibility in the sickroom. Anne Garland Rose boasted to her cousin Polly that "I will learn her how to rais [sic] her boy hardy & that she will see that my plann's not

⁵⁶ Mary Elizabeth Cheves to Ann Heatly Reid Lovell, May 26, 1833, Ann Heatly Reid Lovell Estate and Family Papers, SCHS.

⁵⁷ Account of Sarah Griffith, 1801-1810, Minor Winn Account Book, VHS.

⁵⁸ William Cumming to Margaret Craig, May 2, 1812, Margaret and Mary Craig Letters, Alderman Library, University of Virginia; William S. Simpson to Sarah Lee Simpson, December 3, 1823, William S. Simpson Papers, LOV. Quoted in Lebsack, *Free Women of Petersburg*, 169-170.

⁵⁹ Benjamin Rush quoted in Clarence Meyer, *American Folk Medicine* (Glenwood, IL: Meyerbooks, 1985; 1973), xii. Though this quotation has been used by several authors since, including Bruno Gephard and Kay Moss, Meyer's original use of it is uncited and could potentially be apocryphal.

theory.”⁶⁰ Jane Williams relied on a family friend to supply her with information about her distant daughter, and she did not hesitate to upbraid her daughter with the woman’s reports. “The Old Lady tells me you visited her in Muslin,” Jane chastised, “and she was surprised at yr. putting on such thin Cloaths after being so Ill. She says it was enough to give you either a pleurisy or voilent [sic] complaint in your Bowels.” Jane also received advice about her pregnant daughter from two close friends and reported to the young woman, “The pain in the Thigh Mrs. Ashe and Mrs. John Moore who is here, tells me and I know so too, is often an attendant on Women in yr. Situation.”⁶¹ When Mary Taliaferro learned of her grown daughter’s case of mumps from a cousin, she complained, “I fear you will not let me know when you are unwell, do my Child let me know every thing.”⁶² Learning medical details and sharing them with other women offered mothers a sense of control in a disease-ridden landscape; presumably if Mary had known about her daughter’s mumps, she could have taken some action.

Childbirth, one of the most dangerous junctures in a woman’s life, was a communal event, and female friends and relatives gathered in the sickroom to advise, assist, and commiserate.⁶³ As male physicians attempted to take the reins from midwives, they deemed this social aspect of childbirth both unnecessary and distracting. In 1774, physician William

⁶⁰ Anne Shepherd Garland Rose to Sarah Armistead Garland, April 27, 1819, Garland Family Papers, VHS.

⁶¹ Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, November 5, 1798, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

⁶² Mary Willis Turberville Taliaferro to Martha Fenton Taliaferro, July 2, 1835, Peckatone Papers, VHS.

⁶³ V. Lynn Kennedy argues that the crisis of childbirth also “generated the potential for mutual dependence and the creation of a community of women across race and class lines.” Kennedy, *Born Southern: Childbirth, Motherhood, and Social Networks in the Old South* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 57-83, quote on p. 57.

Buchan pronounced this gathering of women to be a “ridiculous custom,” arguing that they may, “by their untimely and impertinent advice, do much mischief.”⁶⁴ But the communion of women surrounding birth did not begin to wane until the 1820s, suggesting that mothers fought to hold on to this feminine space.⁶⁵ Eliza Chotard Gould grew up in South Carolina, but when she moved to Alabama and had her first child, she must have been pleased to find a similarly strong female community; in telling her daughter about her birth in 1824, she wrote, “Mrs. Hogan and Mrs. Saltonstall took care of you for the first two days, then my dear good friend Nancy Starr came, and remained some time. Your grandmother arrived when you were 4 days old, and took possession of you.”⁶⁶ Throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, female friends and relatives tended to congregate whenever they learned about a medical emergency nearby. When young Clara Jocelyn fell ill with a fever in Wilmington, “Dr. DeRossett . . . came directly as also Mrs. Hooper, Mrs. Schaw, Mrs. Sampson & Campbell.”⁶⁷ In a relatively concentrated town like Wilmington, one can imagine an invisible system of alarms connecting women across various households, summoning concerned matrons who saw that their presence in a sickroom would be a help rather than a hindrance.

Nursing her family to health was a woman’s general duty, but nursing an infant was a mother’s particular privilege.⁶⁸ Breastfeeding provoked a flurry of letters between mothers

⁶⁴ William Buchan, *Domestic Medicine; or, A Treatise on the Prevention and Cure of Diseases by Regimen and Simple Medicines*, 3rd ed. (London, 1774), 582-83.

⁶⁵ Scholten, ““On the Importance of the Obstetrick Art,”” 444.

⁶⁶ Eliza Williams Chotard Gould Memoir, p. 28, VHS.

⁶⁷ Samuel Russell Jocelyn to Elizabeth Jocelyn, August 24, 1800, Giles Family Papers, SHC.

⁶⁸ Though wet nurses, including enslaved ones, were employed when an elite woman had physical difficulty nursing, the majority of Southern women in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries breastfed their own children. See Sally G. McMillen, “Mothers’ Sacred Duty: Breast-feeding Patterns

and daughters, aunts and sisters, for it was one of the primary acts by which women could exert control not only as nurses but as mothers. The task of breastfeeding typically earned early American women the admiration of their communities; in the seventeenth century, colonists considered breast milk to have all-purpose healing and nutritive qualities.⁶⁹ But while women ensured the health and survival of their children through breast milk, they were also determining to some extent the spacing of their pregnancies and thus the terms of their motherhood. Not all women wanted to have children, and many may not have wanted fourteen children, but motherhood was an expected role and also a desired status. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, women's choices regarding their pregnancies led to more limited family sizes. Truncated fertility resulted from many factors, including women's fear of the physical dangers of childbirth and their desire to reclaim an autonomous self. Though some women attempted to regulate their maternal lives through various means of birth control, from abstinence and vigorous exercise to herbs and syringes, most relied on breastfeeding as a helpful, if not fail proof, way to space their young children enough to make motherhood manageable.⁷⁰ Margaret Izard Manigault concluded in an 1809 letter to her

among Middle- and Upper-Class Woman in the Antebellum South," *Journal of Southern History* 51, no. 3 (1985): 333-356.

⁶⁹ Marylynn Salmon, "The Cultural Significance of Breastfeeding and Infant Care in Early Modern England and America," *Journal of Social History* 28, no. 2 (1994): 247-269.

⁷⁰ See Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 232-234; Jan Lewis and Kenneth A. Lockridge, "'Sally Has Been Sick': Pregnancy and Family Limitation among Virginia Gentry Women, 1780-1830," *Journal of Social History* 22, no. 1 (1988): 5-19; Paula A. Treckel, "Breastfeeding and Maternal Sexuality in Colonial America," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 20, no. 1 (1989): 25-51; Susan E. Klepp, "Revolutionary Bodies: Women and the Fertility Transition in the Mid-Atlantic Region, 1760-1820," *Journal of American History* 85, no. 3 (1998): 910-945; Susan E. Klepp, "Lost, Hidden, Obstructed, and Repressed: Contraceptive and Abortive Technology in the Early Delaware Valley," in *Early American Technology: Making and Doing Things from the Colonial Era to 1850*, ed. Judith A. McGaw (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 68-113; Janet Farrell Brodie, *Contraception and Abortion in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca: Cornell University

daughter, “I think it less fatiguing to the constitution to nurse this one, than to bring forth another.”⁷¹ The tension between the desire for children and physical exhaustion, between wanting to be a mother and wanting a break, coalesced in the practice of breastfeeding, which, when it was not excruciatingly painful, could provide mothers some small respite.

Nursing was an unavoidable backdrop to much of early American society. Young Sally Fairfax observed without surprise that at a fancy winter ball, “Mrs gunnell brought her sucking Child with her.”⁷² In a letter from one woman to a female friend, she asked about a third: “Does the Miller child suck yet?”⁷³ But breastfeeding could also be a painful and unwelcome process.⁷⁴ Like many women, Catherine Read’s daughter suffered from a “gather’d Breast,” or mastitis, although she was fortunate that her “Boy thrives well on feeding & what she has to give him.”⁷⁵ A month after giving birth, Nancy Simms Wallach was “recovering quite as rapidly as can be expected – her only suffering is now from her nipples, they are a little sore, and she has not much milk, but the infant feeds well.”⁷⁶ Other women were not so lucky, and found their supplies of milk drying up or trapped within

Press, 1994), 38-56; and Susan E. Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions: Women, Fertility, and Family Limitation in America, 1760-1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009). Klepp rightly observes that “procreation is power,” as is the ability to limit procreation (3).

⁷¹ Margaret Izard Manigault to Elizabeth Manigault Morris, December 16, 1809, Louis Manigault Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University, quoted in Norton, *Liberty’s Daughters*, 233.

⁷² January 2, 1772, Sally Fairfax Diary, VHS.

⁷³ Frances Bland Tucker Coalter to Mrs. F. Davenport, August 1808, Brown, Coalter, Tucker Papers (I), WM.

⁷⁴ Many eighteenth-century mothers had been taught that colostrum, the nutrient-rich substance that first flows from new mothers’ breasts, was harmful to infants, but by withholding milk for the first several days or even weeks, mothers became more vulnerable to such ailments as mastitis and breast infections. See Treckel, “Breastfeeding and Maternal Sexuality in Colonial America,” 29.

⁷⁵ Catherine Read to Betsy Ludlow, December 11, 1821, Read Family Papers, SCL.

⁷⁶ Nancy Douglas Simms to Elizabeth Trist, February 6, 1814, Powell Family Papers, WM.

hardening breasts. Esther Cox warned her daughter to avoid the cold while nursing, lest “lumps gather,” and sent her various remedies for sore breasts. When the pain did not subside, Esther concluded that her daughter was “not likely to make a good Nurse,” and recommended that she transfer the child to a wet nurse, which probably elicited both frustration and relief from the young mother, who had struggled to nurse her five previous children.⁷⁷ Eliza Haywood complained of fatigue as a young mother, and painted a grim picture of the cycle of childrearing and domestic duties: “Fabius keeps me awake what few hours I have to sleep by getting up so often to Suck, for I am up every Night till Twelve or one O’clock at Night, preparing for the next day’s Dinner; and then when I go to bed he disturbs me so often I can’t Sleep, and the other Boys wake me by Day break.”⁷⁸ Perhaps by continuing to breastfeed in spite of the constant interruption, Eliza hoped to prolong the interval before her next boy arrived.

Weaning children became a source of heated contention between female correspondents, revealing that while women prided themselves on the power they had over their children’s health, they were not above asking for advice. When should weaning take place? How gradual should the process be? What were the harms attendant on breastfeeding for too long, or not long enough? For some women, nursing was an act that bound mother and child in an intimate relationship, and giving up this connection was often difficult. One woman confessed to her sister-in-law:

I have not weaned Mary Eliza Jane yet and in fact I cannot say when I’l [sic] be able to commence the task as she is so much more than eaver after me; you would be

⁷⁷ Esther Cox to Mary Chesnut, March 25, 1800, March 7, 1801, April 21, 1805, July 23, 1805, Cox and Chesnut Family Papers, SCL.

⁷⁸ Eliza Haywood to Jane Williams, December 20, 1803, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

diverted to hear her come and ask me to nurse her she will hold her hand out and say 'mama please . . . some tita some' so affectionate that I cannot deny her."⁷⁹

While most women weaned children before they were able to ask so eloquently for milk, the recipient of the letter may have sympathized with her sister's emotional attachment. Other women weaned out of necessity; Caroline Laurens stopped breastfeeding her son at fifteen months when she discovered she was "4 months gone in pregnancy," and she weaned her daughter at nine months because "the pain in her chest increase[d] daily." Both transitions were relatively smooth for Caroline; when her son "woke at night he would ask for 'tee tee' [and] his mother would tell him it was all gone. He would repeat the words 'all gone,' . . . and then [go] quietly to sleep."⁸⁰ Sarah Jerdone Braikenridge had similar good luck and informed her mother that "little John continues to be a very good child as my Dear mother will judge when I tell her I weaned him in Octo[be]r with out any assistance." To reinforce her own power in this endeavor, she pointed out that her husband was traveling "for 12 days & I had nobody in the room with me but the three little children when I weaned him."⁸¹

Weaning was not infrequently the solution to a mother's failing health. When Jane Williams observed that her daughter "is so excessively thin that every person says it is Suckling that gives her the pain in the Stomack," she issued an ultimatum: "Jane will be Twelve Months old next month when I shall insist on her being weaned." Her daughter did not immediately follow her advice, but eight months later, on her own schedule, the baby was

⁷⁹ Hannah S. Adams Hora to Jane Hora, December 22, 1833, William Henry Hora Papers, SCL.

⁸⁰ December 30, 1825, April 17, 1827, Caroline Olivia Laurens Diary, SHC.

⁸¹ Sarah Jerdone Braikenridge to Sarah Macon Jerdone, March 11, 1789, Jerdone Family Papers, WM.

successfully weaned.⁸² Jane Williams also recommended a homemade mixture of gruel and milk as an “Admirable Substitute for Breast Milk.” After having observed that “Mrs. Waddell’s [children] that have been raised on it, are I see the Stoutest and fattest Children she has in six,” Jane passed along the advice to her daughters. She added that the formula also prevented “Gripes,” and that the addition of gruel assured infants would be “well in their Bowels” and would “fatten beyond belief.” Without the gruel, she warned, “it makes them so . . . they will not have a passage in several days, and that like hard curds.”⁸³ Mrs. Waddell had evidently stumbled upon this formula after the birth of some of her children; maternal medicine was an evolving field, and women worked to keep each other up to date on their own successful experiments.

Some male observers considered weaning to be paramount not only in ensuring a woman’s health, but in restoring her to her wifely duties. When the breast was diverted from a husband’s sexual interest to an infant’s nourishment, especially when nursing was accompanied by sexual abstinence, men found themselves at the mercy of their wives’ maternal power.⁸⁴ John Haywood applauded his wife Eliza when she stopped breastfeeding their first child and reminded her, “I always thought it would be wrong in you to nurse her and so you recollect I have often told you.” He turned the process of weaning from a break between mother and child to a renewed bond between wife and husband. “I consider your weaning her at my request,” John remarked, “as a new evidence of that affectionate

⁸² Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, November 11, 1806, Haywood Family Papers, SHC; Ferebee Hall to Jane Williams, July 3, 1807, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

⁸³ Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, April 22, 1805, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

⁸⁴ Some men specifically sought out wet nurses for their children in an attempt to regain their wives’ sexual attentions. Treckel, “Breastfeeding and Maternal Sexuality in Colonial America,” 34-35.

attachment to me.” After much protest, the breast had been regained. Eliza obediently weaned her daughter but hinted that the decision would not have been hers and might not have been in her daughter’s best interests. “She is thin in Flesh at present,” she informed her husband.⁸⁵ Some men also saw weaning as the last stage of a woman’s close devotion to her child. More than twenty years later, John was dismayed by his wife’s continued affection for their young son and observed to his older son that “the Boy is weaned long since, and is a fine hearty Child, and would do well, we believe, with much less of your Mother’s attention.”⁸⁶ Both husbands and children could be needy for a women’s notice, but it was generally within a mother’s purview to direct her attentions as she pleased.

Lack of sympathy among male family members, along with a simple sense of modesty, meant that intimate ailments were often only addressed to female correspondents. As a result, women’s letters come alive with graphic descriptions of pain and suffering. Eliza Haywood scribbled a plaintive letter to her mother, Jane Williams, detailing the treatment of her diseased breast. “Dr. Williams Lanced my Breast that Day week on which you Left me,” she wrote. “I had Excrutiating pains in my Shoulders, Breast and Stomach. The Discharge of Matter was great with much Blood. It still runs a deal twice a Day, Night and Morning. The Orifice is kept open by a Tent and Plaster the Doctor makes, and he Dresses it twice a Day now.”⁸⁷ The specificity of her letter speaks to a shared medical interest among women; these were not gratuitous complaints, but rather one woman’s sufferings documented clearly for another woman to interpret and judge. Similarly, Eliza’s mother was not shy about sharing

⁸⁵ John Haywood to Eliza Haywood, April 10, 1799, Haywood Family Papers, SHC; Eliza Haywood to John Haywood, June 17, 1800, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

⁸⁶ John Haywood to Fabius Haywood, June 17, 1826, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

⁸⁷ Eliza Haywood to Jane Williams, December 20, 1803, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

cures with her for private complaints. Suffering from “one instance very lately where the Bowels were so weakened that with every motion or passage the Rectum would fall down so as to be Obligated to be put up every time,” Jane confidently reported that a dose of rhubarb had cured the prolapsus.⁸⁸ Jane and Eliza also shared detailed descriptions of other women’s ailments. Jane told Eliza of her sister’s “debilitating complaints,” including “profuse discharges of the menses” and “large discharges of limpid Urine.” She also reported on the health of her grandchildren. When one young granddaughter broke out with the “french Measles,” Jane called her “a perfect Lazarus” and documented that “her Bottom . . . was worse than the other Children that were upon their feet. Your sister was obliged to wash it several times in the day to keep the creases in her thighs from sticking together. She was so thickly covered they ran into each other.”⁸⁹ When details were not forthcoming, some women pressed for more information; Sarah Braikenridge chided her mother for not mentioning “how that bad disorder was that you was so troubled with in your stomach & Bowels.”⁹⁰ The realities of a diseased environment prompted many women’s letters, and specific symptoms and cures, however grisly, became a natural part of women’s epistolary vocabulary.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, January 5, 1807, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

⁸⁹ Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, January 4, 1816, Haywood Family Papers, SHC; Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, November 13, 1814, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

⁹⁰ Sarah Jerdone Braikenridge to Sarah Macon Jerdone, n.d., Jerdone Family Papers, WM.

⁹¹ Such conversations were not limited to Southern circles, though the rampant nature of Southern diseases may have amplified them. In her 1835 novel about the Revolutionary War, Catharine Maria Sedgwick, an author from Connecticut, penned the following exchange between two women in New York as they “threaded the mazes of the materia medica”: “Mrs. Linwood . . . furnished the most circumstantial details of her husband’s late illness, told when he took physic and when he did not; when his laudanum made him sleep and when it would not – to all of which Mrs. Meredith ‘lent the pitying ear’ of a thoroughbred lady, while she was mentally wondering [if] the woman could be such a fool as to think she cared whether her husband were dead or alive.” Sedgwick, *The Linwoods; or, “Sixty Years Since” in America* (1835; Hanover: University Press of New England, 2002), 220-221.

Just as the language of illness was mastered by concerned mothers, the sickroom was a mother's domain, and the practical support and emotional comfort that women could offer reinforced their own sense of maternal authority. When Sarah Garland's mother became sick in the winter of 1821, the Richmond resident wrote her sister Anne for details of the illness. Her brother Samuel, who was also present at the sickbed, found the letter and chose to write Sarah directly. "I have discovered your painfull situation; you have been informed of my mother's illness, but not of her real situation," he wrote sympathetically. "You have been held in a state of anxious suspense, which of all feelings must be the most torturing." Similar sentiments of commiseration filled the remainder of the letter, and Samuel concluded by saying, "All that could be done, was done, and we now rejoice th[at] she is recovering." Without offering a single detail as to the nature of his mother's illness, Samuel nevertheless believed that "this will relieve your suspense, dispell the disagreeable phantoms of uneasyness and leave your mind at rest." This eloquently vague letter had nothing in it that could, in fact, leave Sarah's mind at rest. The following day, Anne responded to her sister's letter, knowing full well what level of detail was expected. After reassuring Sarah that their mother was improving, she recounted that "it is three weeks today since I got hear and found her suffering the most excrusiateing pain but soon after a large blister chew most of her angry semtoms left her. . . . She has only set up out of the bead twice and both times it created such a rise of fever that the Doctor thought it best for her to keep still." Anne also included the official diagnosis: "inflammation of the liver." The contrast between these two letters – the consoling, evasive tone of Samuel's and the detailed matter-of-factness of Anne's – illustrates how central the realm of health and nursing was to women's identities.⁹²

⁹² Samuel Meredith Garland to Sarah A. Garland, January 4, 1821; Anne Shepherd Garland Rose to Sarah A. Garland, January 5, 1821, Garland Family Papers, VHS.

Mothers did not stop doling out medical advice once their children took on the mantle of parenthood themselves. On the contrary, the addition of grandchildren only added to women's general concerns. Many women urged their daughters to stage their lying-in at their childhood home, while others traveled great distances to be on hand. Esther Cox cryptically urged her daughter to return home, "should a certain event call for peculiar attentions," and in subsequent pregnancies, she reminded her daughter that "I have always intended to urge your staying with me whenever I heard you were likely to have another."⁹³ Catherine Read's daughter begged her mother to travel from Charleston to Philadelphia to attend her during her first pregnancy.⁹⁴ Jane Williams lured her pregnant daughter Eliza Haywood to come home with the promise of superior medical care. "Here is as good a Midwife as is generally to be met with," she wrote, "and an Excellent wet Nurse in Nancy shou'd you want one." Jane further added, "Your House must be a very inconvenient one in Cold weather and I hardly see how you can Lie-in in it." Finally, she resorted to invoking a stronger familial bond: "Tell Mr. Haywood his anxiety won't equal mine."⁹⁵ With the near-constant cycles of pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation, some grandmothers even stepped in to nurse their daughters' children. Caroline Clitherall remembered when both she and her daughter gave birth a few months apart. The daughter taking ill, Caroline "performed for Georgena the office of Wet-Nurse – it does not often occur, that the gd.child is suckled by the grd.mother."⁹⁶

⁹³ Esther Cox to Mary Cox Chesnut, June 1, 1797, Cox and Chesnut Family Papers, SCL.

⁹⁴ Catherine Read to Betsy Ludlow, September 1, 1821, Read Family Papers, SCL.

⁹⁵ Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, November 5, 1798, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

⁹⁶ Caroline Eliza Burgwin Clitherall Diaries, Vol. 7, p. 35, SHC.

Grandmothers filled many pages with the tips and secrets that they had been taught as young mothers. Jane Williams advised her daughter Eliza to remove a necklace from her newborn baby to avoid chafing her neck, and she recommended that the same child should be taken out of her cradle and be allowed to “roll off all over the floor.” Jane was concerned about her grandchild overheating in the sticky North Carolina summers, and ended her letter with a final injunction: “If she still wears flannel for pity’s sake take her out of the Cradle and off the feathers. It is too warm.”⁹⁷ Through a continuous network of advice, women’s practical knowledge as mothers was regularly renewed. Just as cradles were passed down for generations, a warning about cradles could have undergone decades of retelling before it reached the ears of a nineteenth-century mother.

Mothers also felt a responsibility for others in their immediate communities or under their special purview. When one plantation owner traveled away on business, he left a wife at home who insisted on tending a slave population suffering from an epidemic of dysentery. “My People being sickly,” he wrote, “she don’t wish to go.” Rather than hiring a doctor to tend them while he and his wife escaped the plagued plantation, he left the slaves in Catherine’s care, leaving her exposed to the epidemic. Both husband and wife seemed to recognize her duty as a nurse (and maternal substitute), whether that role had any practical substance or was merely symbolic. A few days later, the plantation owner wrote, “I trust God has drove the destroying Angel away & sent the Angel with healing powers.” He might well

⁹⁷ Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, March 18, 1812, Haywood Family Papers, SHC; August 14, 1814, Haywood Family Papers, SHC. For an interesting discussion of the evolution of cradle styles over the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, from a full-board construction to a slatted style to allow the passage of air, see Karin Calvert, *Children in the House: The Material Culture of Early Childhood, 1600-1900* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), 65-72.

have considered his wife an adequate substitute for this better angel.⁹⁸ Judith Anna Smith felt a similar duty to the enslaved people on her Powhatan County, Virginia, plantation. “Many of our black family have the ague and fever,” she wrote her daughter, and though Judith was also suffering from an illness and thought it “would help my health” to visit her daughter, she decided that “the family is too sick for me to leave them yet.”⁹⁹ Even if these mothers had no higher motive than protecting their economic interests, the inclusion of African and African American bodies under their medical aegis reflects the extent of mothers’ perceived responsibility.

Part of white women’s involvement in the health care of slaves, though, stemmed from a sense of maternalism that crossed racial boundaries. Mary Garrigues Higginbotham tended several enslaved men who came down with “a most violent fever” on her farm, and though one of them died, she took comfort in the thought that she “was with him a great deal during his illness.”¹⁰⁰ Another Virginian woman nursed several of her slaves who had contracted a serious illness; she took note of their symptoms and recorded her cure: “a dose of Rheubarb and Magnesha.”¹⁰¹ Judith Randolph was less generous as a nurse; she complained that “the incessant fatigue & anxiety of attending near thirty sick negroes” made her vulnerable to “a bilious fever, accompanied by the influenza,” at which event her “cup of

⁹⁸ Davison McDowell, March 2, 1830, March 9, 1830, Davison McDowell Papers, SCL.

⁹⁹ Judith Anna Smith Smith to Judith Anna Smith Hawes, October 3, 1815, Katharine Heath Hawes Papers, VHS.

¹⁰⁰ Mary Elmslie Garrigues Higginbotham to Ann Higginbotham Hoskins, December 25, 1833, Higginbotham Family Papers, VHS.

¹⁰¹ Mrs. F. Davenport to Frances Bland Tucker Coalter, September 12, 1811, Brown, Coalter, Tucker Papers (I), WM.

bitterness was made to overflow.”¹⁰² Caroline Clitherall remembered her mother’s advice that all “Masters & Mistresses were liable . . . for the care of their Servants bodies.”¹⁰³ With most white men on a plantation possessing little medical knowledge, this responsibility often fell to the hands of “Mistresses.” Sophia Dulles recognized that the ailing slave Sally, who was “brought up almost as one of my own Children,” would be “a great loss to her Children.” When Sally died, Sophia offered her hope that the woman “has made a happy change,” a sentiment that was repeated word for word when a white woman of her acquaintance died the following year.¹⁰⁴ Through her language and awareness of Sally as a fellow mother, Sophia treated the enslaved woman with a measure of sympathy that was not always common between mistresses and slaves.

While white mothers observed and sometimes assisted in the care of servants and slaves, they rarely expressed a sympathy commensurate with that concern reserved for their own children and the children of other white elites.¹⁰⁵ One of Rebecca Moore’s servants suffered the death of a daughter, to which Rebecca only remarked, “You know she carried it, & left it with Nancy, without my permission.”¹⁰⁶ To Rebecca, the woman’s disobedience

¹⁰² Judith Randolph to Frances Bland Tucker Coalter, October 25, 1827, Brown, Coalter, Tucker Papers (I), WM.

¹⁰³ Caroline Eliza Burgwin Clitherall Diaries, Vol. 2, p. 2, SHC. See also Todd L. Savitt, “Black Health on the Plantation: Masters, Slaves, and Physicians,” in *Science and Medicine in the Old South*, 327-355.

¹⁰⁴ Sophia Dulles to Joseph Dulles, May 8, 1834, June 21, 1834, May 29, 1835, Ann Heatly Reid Lovell Estate and Family Papers, SCHS.

¹⁰⁵ Steven Stowe reminds us that medical care between whites and blacks on Southern plantations was far more likely to be “another contest of power under slavery” than a compassionate and equitable service. Stowe, “Domestic Medicine in the American South,” 159-162. See also Sharla M. Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

¹⁰⁶ Rebecca C. Moore to Jane Williams, November 23, 1815, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

caused, and perhaps even justified, the child's death. When Elizabeth Collins Lee found herself responsible for taking care of Margery, an enslaved woman who had attempted to run away but had instead come down with cholera, she blamed the woman's illness on her "ill conduct." Clearly exasperated, Elizabeth found no other recourse but to nurse the woman herself, for "they took no slaves in at the Hospital." Though Elizabeth complained loudly of the imposition, she still bore the mantle of a dutiful nurse; she placed Margery in a warm bed in the main house, "gave her 2 doses of Parrish's nerve tonic with laudnum," called her own doctor, and "in 24 hours I gave her every hour calomel to the amount of 60 grams in the course of which time her discharges turned to billious with constant pukeing." Margery gradually improved, and while Elizabeth must have been pleased with her own caretaking abilities, she continued to rebuke Margery for her "intemperate habits."¹⁰⁷ Mary Garland was distressed to find that, despite taking precautions, her two daughters showed symptoms of whooping cough in 1822. She concluded, "I expect some little negroe has been near with it." Rather than expanding her concern to the ailing enslaved children, Mary simply blamed them for spreading it.¹⁰⁸ On hearing of a black child's death in the household of her niece, Martha Washington responded coldly, "Black children are liable to so many accidents and complaints that one is heardly [sic] sure of keeping them."¹⁰⁹ In an era when the smallest

¹⁰⁷ Elizabeth Collins Lee to Ann Matilda Lee Washington, September 25, n.d. [1835], Richard Bland Lee Papers, VHS. For more on the whims of Southern hospitals admitting enslaved men and women, see Kevin Lander and Jonathan Pritchett, "When to Care: The Economic Rationale of Slavery Health Care Provision," *Social Science History* 33, no. 2 (2009): 155-182.

¹⁰⁸ Mary R. Garland to Sarah A. Garland, August 2, 1822, Garland Family Papers, VHS.

¹⁰⁹ Martha Washington to Fanny Bassett Washington, May 24, 1795, in Martha Washington, *Worthy Partner: The Papers of Martha Washington*, compiled by Joseph E. Fields (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 287.

maladies of children were amplified by justly concerned mothers, this indifference toward young slaves is especially jarring.

Not all mothers were enthusiastic nurses even toward their own children, and some women happily relinquished some nursing duties to servants, either too exhausted to manage it themselves or frankly unconvinced that a mother's hand was superior to all others.¹¹⁰ Mary Chesnut employed both "Mrs. Baldwin" and "Sue" to help her nurse and attend her infants when she became ill.¹¹¹ Eliza Ravenel relied on a teenaged girl named Sally, who "has been with me but 4 days but it is long enough for me to know that she is exactly what I wanted." Eliza's brother agreed, describing Sally as "the most pacific, attentive, neat and efficient creature you ever saw and idolized by the children."¹¹² Jane Williams placed all her trust in the enslaved midwife Mary, noting that "we have never had any other in our Family and she has acted in that Capacity for 31 little Black folks among our own, and never lost one but Mothers and Children all do well and Heavens knows how many Black and white for others."¹¹³ Many enslaved women stepped in to fill the role of midwife or nurse for white women, and though typically well-trained and proficient, their services cost much less than those of professional male physicians.¹¹⁴ Eliza Haywood recorded the costs of black

¹¹⁰ For more on both the use of and suspicion toward servants engaged in childcare, see Calvert, *Children in the House*, 72-77.

¹¹¹ Mary's mother hoped that Sue "will have milk enough to spare from her own child to nourish yours also," not considering that employing Sue might also impede the nourishment of Sue's infant. Esther Cox to Mary Chesnut, April 21, 1805, Cox and Chesnut Family Papers, SCL; Esther Cox to Mary Chesnut, July 23, 1805, Cox and Chesnut Family Papers, SCL.

¹¹² Eliza Ravenel to John Ravenel, November 7, 1830; Gabriel H. Ford to John Ravenel, January 6, 1831, John Ravenel Papers, SCL.

¹¹³ Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, August 16, 1798, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

¹¹⁴ Todd L. Savitt, "Black Health on the Plantation," in *Science and Medicine in the Old South*, 355.

women's help in her account book, noting various payments to "Granny Judy," a midwife who assisted her during at least four confinements.¹¹⁵ Some white women, instead of seeking help from black nurses, chose to be responsible for black children. In 1796, Sally Stark, a single woman living with her elderly father in central North Carolina, took charge of an infant not her own; a neighbor who had passed by her house said that she had called out to him, "telling him to look and see what a fine Negro she had got." The young boy, just a few days old, had been born at seven months, possibly to a woman enslaved by the Stark family, and his prospects for survival were not good. His birth mother for some reason "not being able at that Time to afford it that natural Aliment," the child had been passed on to young Sally Stark, who "frequently carried said Child to a Neighbour's House a mile distant, to the Intent that it might obtain nourishment from the Breast of a Woman who gave suck."¹¹⁶ Whether Sally was indulging a maternal instinct, a sense of philanthropy, or a simple curiosity, she and the neighbor who breastfed the infant helped the boy survive.

For many women, though, female servants were a source of constant complaints, perhaps because they absorbed some of the power usually reserved for elite mothers. Jane Williams advised her daughter to avoid leaving her infant with her servants, since "Cate is too Sleepy by day or by night, and Hasty will when left with her be no Safe guard."¹¹⁷ When Charlotte Ann Allston attempted to purchase an enslaved woman for a nurse, she was advised that the woman, "being a raw field negro[,] will poorly answer the purpose of a

¹¹⁵ March 14, 1812, December 29, 1813, September 1, 1814, Eliza Haywood's account book (1812-1814), Haywood Family Papers, SHC. Granny Judy typically earned seven dollars per confinement.

¹¹⁶ Deposition of Mason Mosee, January 26, 1805, Miscellaneous Records of Slaves and Free Persons of Color, Granville County, NCSA.

¹¹⁷ Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, March 18, 1812, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

nurse, the little nice attentions that are expected to be paid a little child, she would not understand this.”¹¹⁸ Many elite mothers were careful to guard their maternal role as nurse by diminishing other women’s capacities, for power was not always willingly shared.

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Just eighteen months after her visit to the unruffled Sarah Polk in Raleigh, Eliza Haywood gave birth to her third child, a boy named Fabius, who “made its appearance 3 weeks before it was expected,” was “born dead,” and who, even after being revived, seemed “very sick.” The boy gradually reclaimed his health, but Eliza “Suffered great Pain” from gathered breasts, was “very weak and Low” from lack of sleep, and confessed to being “almost worn out and Broke down.” Eliza wrote her mother with the details of her and her children’s physical complaints, seeking sympathy from someone who understood that the “Generality of Women” endured many kinds of nightmares as they raised their sons and daughters. Exhausted and overextended, Eliza turned to a servant for assistance but reported bitterly, “Silvea was not to be had, she had washing to do.” If Silvea was not attending to the washing, however, one must assume that it, too, would have fallen on Eliza’s shoulders. Twenty years later, Eliza had solidified her view of servants, at least in relation to maternal responsibilities, and firmly declared that “she will not give up her Child to the Care of another, whilst she is living herself.”¹¹⁹ This declaration may have stemmed partially from a distrust of non-white, non-elite women, but Eliza’s insistence on nursing her children reflects the power that mothers worked for in the home, in spite of their pain and exhaustion. Many

¹¹⁸ O. Potter to Charlotte Ann Allston, February 24, 1823, in J. H. Easterby, ed., *The South Carolina Rice Plantation as Revealed in the Papers of Robert F. W. Allston* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 58.

¹¹⁹ Rebecca Williams to Ferebee Hall, October 26, 1803; Eliza Haywood to Jane Williams, December 20, 1803; John Haywood to Fabius Haywood, June 17, 1826, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

mothers, including Eliza Haywood, lost their children as infants, toddlers, and even young adults, but mothers nonetheless saw nursing as a role that reinforced their usefulness within their families.

The power inherent in nursing provided white mothers with a sense of purpose and self-worth, and many women were wary of medical assistance from those outside the circle of their female community. Rural and laboring women avoided the charity of plantation mistresses, elite women distrusted their servants, and both groups often saw professional doctors as meddling, incompetent, or simply unnecessary.¹²⁰ For most Southern women, nursing was a mother's duty, but it was a duty which was collective rather than isolated and which depended on the gathered wisdom of the preceding generations, as women learned to tend wounds and mix herbs from their mothers and grandmothers. Mothers also welcomed female friends, relatives, and neighbors into their homes to consult and console. From a child's birth, through its tenuous early life, and occasionally to its tragic death, women gathered in parlors and bedrooms, in nursing gowns and mourning robes, to trade cures and words of advice. This network of women, several generations long, thrived because they shared an understanding of a mother's duty as nurse to her family. From the sickly swamps surrounding Charleston to the remote farms of western Virginia, women developed complex maternal identities that linked medicine to motherhood and sustained women's responsibility for family health. Virginian Judith Smith complained that "it is a great disadvantage to my own health to be so much concerned for the sufferings of others." Her daughter observed

¹²⁰ For more on the class divisions between Southern white women, as well as the reluctance to call in outside help, see Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: White and Black Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 43, 169-172; and Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 107.

with sympathy, “Ma you have taken the rounds, after nursing Sister and myself in the summer you have now to go to Brothers.” Judith’s reply was simply, “I am thankful that I have been blessed with strength for such usefulness.”¹²¹ Though professionalized medicine spread through the South in the early nineteenth century, male doctors found themselves synchronizing and contending with a strong foundation of medical knowledge and home care that had been laid by generations of women who saw nursing as a fundamental responsibility of motherhood.

¹²¹ Judith Anna Smith Smith to Judith Anna Smith Hawes, October 27, n.d., Katharine Heath Hawes Papers, VHS.

CHAPTER EIGHT

WHITE READERS

In 1807, Alice Delancey Izard learned of her grandson's death and promptly wrote her son in Charleston, South Carolina, in an attempt to console the bereaved man. "In order to wean my mind from afflictive subjects," she advised, "I have recurred to books." She mentioned the salutary effects of *Paradise Lost*, which she read aloud with her husband in the early days of their marriage, and she gently pressed her son: "I wish you would read it, I think it would please you, & enable you to pass some agreeable moments."¹ While some women may have read Milton solely for the thrill of his language, Alice Izard read him as a mother, viewing most books she consumed as tools for educating her children and sharpening her own maternal authority. Even in 1807, when her children had long since left the home, Alice could summon her knowledge of *Paradise Lost* to comfort a grieving child. To a certain extent, this must have seemed the very purpose of reading to Alice Izard.

For many literate women in the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century South, reading was an activity that helped define their understandings of motherhood, childhood, and proper gender roles. When discouraged from using their knowledge in public spaces, from the floors of the legislature to the pages of broadsides, how did women shape their reading for a practical, even public, use? While some women, like some men, certainly read

¹ While Alice was born in New York, she raised most of her children in and around Charleston, South Carolina, which situated her very much as a Southern mother during the most significant period of her childrearing. Alice Delancey Izard to Henry Izard, September 6, 1807, Ralph Izard Papers, SCL.

for pleasure and the excitement of broadened intellectual horizons, other women had a very specific goal in mind when they traded book recommendations and solicited certain volumes from local booksellers. These women were mothers, and many of them believed that the consumption of printed materials augmented their skills in the nursery in much the same way that men read to bolster their discernment and dexterity in public spaces. They read gothic romances for fun, but they also read religious and educational philosophy, manuals on parenting, and dozens of story books produced specifically for children. For many of these mothers, whose literacy and leisure time marked them as elite, reading elevated the nursery from a scene of domestic toil to a stage for public and intellectual debate.

Print culture expanded rapidly in the eighteenth century as literacy spread, and the infant United States continued to take its literary cues from its own discarded mother, Great Britain, as novels and magazines joined religious texts in elite readers' libraries.² By the 1750s, a growing leisure class in America was spending time in public, informal spaces, from coffee houses to salons, and women's ability to participate in these conversations provided further impetus for consuming history, philosophy, and literature.³ Soon, the pursuit of reading was growing more rapidly in the South than in New England as elites constructed their gentility from the remnants of their European heritage.⁴

² Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, 35-59, 290.

³ See Caroline Winterer, "The Female World of Classical Reading in Eighteenth-Century America," in *Reading Women: Literacy, Authorship, and Culture in the Atlantic World, 1500-1800*, eds. Heidi Brayman Hackel and Catherine E. Kelly (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 105-123; and Caroline Winterer, *The Mirror of Antiquity: American Women and the Classical Tradition, 1750-1900* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 12-39. For more on the European salon tradition, see Evelyn Gordon Bodek, "Salonières and Bluestockings: Educated Obsolence and Germinating Feminism," *Feminist Studies* 3, no. 3/4 (1976): 185-199.

⁴ According to Catherine Kerrison, "By 1770 more than 40 percent of all British books shipped to North America were destined for Virginia." Catherine Kerrison, *Claiming the Pen: Women and Intellectual Life in the Early American South* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 7. However,

By the end of the eighteenth century, then, communities of relatively elite white women were participating in a highly literate landscape.⁵ When we recognize that many of those female readers were *mothers*, we must reconsider our understanding of their literary needs, interests, and implementations.⁶ Several authors have explored Southern women's reading habits and have argued that women were cultivating intellectual spaces for themselves on relatively barren ground. Catherine Kerrison, for example, has proven that their involvement stemmed from both their class and their interest in "public" conversations and that, in the South, "reading women" was not a contradiction.⁷ Women certainly read because they sought a voice in an educated, elite community, but women also read because they were expected to teach.

based on Kenneth Lockridge's data, the rise in elite Virginian literacy was not paralleled by a rise in lower-class literacy, suggesting that a strong class divide between literates and illiterates persisted in the South throughout the eighteenth century. Kenneth A. Lockridge, *Literacy in Colonial New England: An Enquiry into the Social Context of Literacy in the Early Modern West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974), 76-97. For more on American imports of British publications, see James Raven, "The Importation of Books in the Eighteenth Century," in *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*, eds. Hugh Amory and David D. Hall (Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, 2000), 183-198.

⁵ Cathy Davidson argues that the "reading revolution" of the eighteenth century afforded women an "independence as profound as that negotiated in Independence Hall" (vii), while Robert Gross contends that women's reading actually "drove the expansion of print culture throughout the Atlantic world" (253). For more on the spread and secularization of print culture and literacy, see Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 55-79; Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 35-59; Robert A. Gross, "Reading Outside the Frame," in *Reading Women*, 247-254; and Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak*, 154-190. For more on America's dependence on British literary exports, see Gillian Avery, *Behold the Child: American Children and Their Books, 1621-1922* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 36-67. Few authors, however, have tied women's reading to the consumption of children's literature.

⁶ Sociologists Judith A. Howard and Carolyn Allen have argued that certain life experiences, including "having children," has a greater impact on how readers perceive and interpret a text than simply their gender. See Judith A. Howard and Carolyn Allen, "The Gendered Context of Reading," *Gender and Society* 4, no. 4 (1990): 534-552.

⁷ Kerrison, *Claiming the Pen*.

A study of reading that focuses on mothers as its primary actors requires a reevaluation of *why* women read. Examinations of female reading habits tend to portray women readers as elite dilettantes, reading because they were interested, certainly, but also because they could. Elite mothers, on the other hand, read for a more urgent and immediate purpose: to train themselves as moral and intellectual instructors, effectively raise their children, and gain a sense of empowerment both through their expertise in the nursery and their literary fluency in female networks of communication. A mother read to assert her status as both educated and educator. Mothers were not an insignificant percentage of the reading public; the majority of women in early America were mothers at some point in their lives, and even more were aunts, cousins, guardians or caretakers. For most women, then, the books they selected and the ways they read were informed by motherhood.

A reconsideration of maternal readers suggests that women in the early South used reading as a practical tool of the trade, and that reading connected women not only to broader transatlantic conversations, but more importantly to local ones; reading brought otherwise isolated Southern women together in a community of enlightened matrons. When mothers read, they took advantage of a book's concrete role in the nursery-classroom as well as its more ephemeral role in linking friend to neighbor, grandmother to granddaughter, thus elevating reading from a pursuit of pleasure to a condensation of expertise, self-respect, and responsibility. Women read for certain key reasons: to find appropriate models for motherhood; to foster a sense of intellectual confidence that could guide their role as educators; to shape behavioral models for their sons and daughters; to define a gendered understanding of the world that matched their own; and to explore connections with religious, cultural, and social conversations that extended well beyond their front doors.

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Though children's literature reached its height of popularity in the 1780s and 1790s, elite Southern women certainly were readers by the 1750s, and their choice of novels and histories guided their conceptions of appropriate parenting.⁸ Publishers rarely marketed books to women in the mid-eighteenth century, however, leaving eager female readers scouring their husbands' and fathers' libraries. In 1740, South Carolinian Eliza Lucas was enjoying the "little library well furnished" that her father left behind when he moved to the Caribbean, and a few years later, she was taking "recommendation of Authors" for her own reading from her neighbor and soon-to-be husband Charles Pinckney.⁹ When Martha Custis Washington's first husband passed away in 1757, among the few items she saved from his estate was his entire library, comprising almost three hundred volumes.¹⁰ Whether she kept the books out of respect for her deceased husband or because she had fond memories of many of the texts themselves, Martha placed a value on reading when she refused to relinquish her husband's collection. By the 1820s, women were bequeathing their own libraries. In 1828, a dying Caroline Ball Laurens carefully distinguished between her husband's literary collection and her own, recognizing not only her personal ownership of

⁸ For more on colonial women's reading habits, see Kevin J. Hayes, *A Colonial Woman's Bookshelf* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996); and Julia Cherry Spruill, *Women's Life and Work in the Southern Colonies* (1938; repr. New York: W. W. Norton, 1972), 208-231.

⁹ Eliza Lucas to Mrs. Boddicott, May 2, 1740; Eliza Lucas to Mrs. Pinckney, 1741, in Eliza Lucas Pinckney, *The Letterbook of Eliza Lucas Pinckney, 1739-1762*, ed. Elise Pinckney (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 7, 19.

¹⁰ The Inventory of the Estate of Daniel Parke Custis, Things Reserved for the Use of the Estate and Not Sold, 1757, *Worthy Partner*, 101.

some books, but also the gendered nature of her library: she willed her son “all the books left me by his father,” while her daughter received “my books.”¹¹

While many women were introduced to reading by male friends and relatives, they quickly developed their own literary sensibilities and adopted reading as a decidedly feminine venture. The stories and information held within books were not used to supplement the development of abstract thought or to enhance genial tavern conversations. Rather, these women read to perfect their identities as mothers, educators, and moral guardians, turning reading into a highly practical and instrumental pursuit.¹² This penchant for reading among mothers would ensure the literacy of the next generation of women. In the early eighteenth century, though, mothers were primarily reading for their own enjoyment. When William Byrd visited Mrs. Fleming in 1732, he struck up a conversation about the theatre and offered to read a play aloud to entertain the company, at which point Mrs. Fleming “produced the second part of the Beggar’s Opera.” After reading three acts of the satirical play, William turned it over to “Mrs. Fleming and Mr. Randolph to finish it, who read as well as most actors do at rehearsal.” With her husband out of town, Mrs. Fleming not only assumed control of their family library, but she had already developed particular literary preferences, expressing to William that “her taste lay most towards comedy.”¹³ The company’s enjoyment

¹¹ July 19, 1828, Will of Caroline Olivia Laurens, Caroline Olivia Ball Laurens Diary, 1823-1827, SHC.

¹² For an excellent study of how popular novels shaped the moral identities of eighteenth-century Southern women, see Catherine Kerrison, “The Novel as Teacher: Learning to be Female in the Early American South,” *Journal of Southern History* 69, no. 3 (2003): 513-548. For Kerrison, novels played an important role in the practice of mothering by serving “as both guides to older women and as vehicles for conveying their own values to the next generation” (537).

¹³ William Byrd, *The Westover Manuscripts: Containing the History of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina; A Journey to the Land of Eden, A.D. 1733; and A Progress to the Mines* (Petersburg: Edmund and Julian C. Ruffin, 1841), 126.

of this lampoon of social hierarchies, set amongst thieves and prostitutes, may have derived more from their own sense of security as Southern elites than a genuine spirit of democracy, but it seems that they also delighted in the play's humor and biting wit. While Mrs. Fleming likely found the recently published play to be an amusing diversion, she may also have spent the evenings reading it aloud to her children, thus developing the performative skills so remarked by William Byrd.

By the late eighteenth century, many women found that reading could provide one of the few pleasures in a day filled with hard labor, illness, or boredom. Nancy Cleland Kinloch's diary from 1799 reveals a woman close to the end of her life who used reading as a crucial prop, both for her own sanity and as a shared interest with her young granddaughter. When she married her husband in 1751, Nancy was described as "a young lady of fine accomplishments with a large fortune."¹⁴ By 1799, the routines of daily life and the pains of old age seemed to have overwhelmed all of Nancy's "accomplishments" – all, that is, except for reading. In a small journal wrapped in thin brown cloth, Nancy wrote daily entries about her state of mind and whatever book was in hand. On Monday, April 1, she "rose very early went into the Store-room, gave out every thing wanted for the day. Ordered dinner made breakfast." By mid-day, she was suffering from a bad headache and a pain in her face. When she tried to read a few letters by seventeenth-century writer Madame de Sevigne that afternoon, she felt "too unwell to attend with pleasure to what I read." In the following days, her health improved, and she enjoyed perusing Sarah Trimmer's *Sacred History*, David Macbride's *The Moral Library*, and several other religious texts. On Thursday, she was "up very early. . . . Made some Naples Bisquits, not so good as I wished. Oven not hot enough."

¹⁴ Marriage Notice between Francis Kinloch and Nancy Cleland, February 18, 1751, *South Carolina Gazette*.

In the afternoon, she helped her eleven-year-old granddaughter Ann with her lessons and listened to the girl read aloud from *Sacred History*. By Sunday, she was again suffering from “such a pain in my face that I . . . could not read.” The next week she embarked on *Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy*, adding an occasional essay from *The Spectator* as a supplement. In the third week of April, Nancy found her choice of reading particularly fitting; when Madame de Sevigne complained of poverty, Nancy felt relieved that “we can do with very little here,” and when Scottish minister Hugh Blair touched on the “Duties of the aged,” Nancy wrote, “May I never forget that I am old.” After these connections, though, Nancy seemed to lose her sense of purpose. She began to complain, “Alass how many of my days have been spent in the same useless manner”; “These two days have been little more than a blank as I have done nothing worth setting down”; and “I hope I shall not pass many days so unpleasantly as this.” Headaches contributed to Nancy’s malaise, since with “a dreadful headach all the afternoon & evening,” she “could not knitt or read.” By the first week of May, Nancy’s spirits had improved, for she was once more able to read and to share books with others. Her granddaughter Ann was again reading aloud in the evenings, and a female neighbor joined them to add her voice to the reading circle. Like most early American women, Nancy Kinloch’s life seemed to be centered around chores and illnesses, but it was also centered around reading as a source of self-improvement and pleasure, a link to family, and an excuse to convene a broader community of women who also loved to read.¹⁵

When reading novels or plays, women absorbed certain depictions of femininity and motherhood that either resonated or clashed with their own experiences as mothers. Ann Radcliffe’s gothic novels of the 1790s often featured heroines who were avid readers; women

¹⁵ Nancy died only three years after writing these entries. Ann Isabella Kinloch Cleland Diary, 1799, Ann Kinloch Papers, SCHS.

consuming these books would have developed a strong identification with a reading heroine. Samuel Richardson's eponymous heroine in *Pamela* (1740) spent much of her time rationalizing and perfecting her motherhood, reading Locke with a critical eye and testing his theories on her children. In the 1740s, a young Eliza Lucas similarly pored over borrowed copies of Locke, Virgil, and Plutarch, but the text that stirred her most was *Pamela*; when Eliza married and had children of her own a few years later, Richardson's depiction of a philosophical mother must have seemed to mirror her own life.¹⁶ Other novels, however, painted women as unfit or uncaring mothers. Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722) featured a heroine who routinely discarded her infants in the interest of both comfort and survival. While some female readers may have been shocked by this behavior, others may have sympathized with a strong-minded mother who felt burdened, however satirically, by her children.¹⁷

If women's implicit understandings of appropriate maternal behavior served as the scaffolding of their reading lives, the wide array of printed material they consumed filled their intellectual shelves, preparing mothers for the day when a son or daughter would ask where Persia was, why Jesus was crucified, or how to make an apple compote. Lady Jean Skipwith of Virginia, in an unending intellectual search, collected almost four hundred books in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and bequeathed them all to her two

¹⁶ Eliza Lucas to Mrs. Pinckney, 1741; Eliza Lucas to Miss Bartlett, March-April 1742; Eliza Lucas to Miss Bartlett, June 1742, *Letterbook*, 19, 33, 47-8.

¹⁷ For analyses of female characters in eighteenth-century fiction, see Nelson, *Children, Parents, and the Rise of the Novel*, 129-159; Pearson, *Women's Reading in Britain*, 101; and Toni Bowers, *The Politics of Motherhood: British Writing and Culture, 1680-1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 98-124, 153-196. Bowers argues that the rise of certain images of virtuous motherhood in British texts emerged during the reconception of patriarchal authority during the first half of the eighteenth century, and thus sought to confine maternal power within a circumscribed sphere.

daughters and her daughter-in-law (rather than her surviving son). Her personal library ranged from cookbooks and dictionaries to French philosophy and children's tales, but the bulk of her collection consisted of novels. While she possessed a few works by authors such as Walter Scott and Daniel Defoe, most of her novels were written by women, from Maria Edgeworth to Fanny Burney.¹⁸ As a female reader and consumer of female writing, it must have seemed natural to Jean to leave her collection to her female children. Charlotte Drayton Manigault enjoyed travel accounts, expanding her horizons by reading about journeys to Ireland, Brazil, and the South Pacific, but she also read a number of political works by female authors, including Madame de Staël, Madame Roland, and Elizabeth Montagu. By 1828, four years after her last child was born, Charlotte still counted reading one of her chief pleasures; she noted on one day in July, "I have not been able to read at all. I must find time, even if I take it from that which is allotted to sleep."¹⁹ Romances and exotic tales were popular among many women; Martha Washington enjoyed such gothic romances as Regina Maria Roche's *The Children of the Abbey*, while her granddaughter Eleanor Custis Lewis relished the popular *Mysteries of Udolpho*.²⁰ By 1830, Selina Lloyd was consuming a

¹⁸ Only six books in Jean Skipwith's library related to religion. Mildred K. Abraham, "The Library of Lady Jean Skipwith: A Book Collection from the Age of Jefferson," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 91, no. 3 (1983): 296-347. For more on the appeal on early women authors, see Dale Spender, *Mothers of the Novel: 100 Good Women Writers Before Jane Austen* (London: Pandora, 1986).

¹⁹ December 19, 1834, December 31, 1834, January 4, 5, and 6, 1835, January 8, 1835, July 8, 1828, Charlotte Drayton Manigault Journal, Peter Manigault Collection, SCHS.

²⁰ Martha Washington to Frances Dandridge Henley, November 20, 1798; The Editors of the Ladies' Magazine to Martha Washington, May 18, 1793, *Worthy Partner*, 319, 249; Eleanor Parke Custis to Elizabeth Bordley, November 23, 1797, in Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis, *George Washington's Beautiful Nelly: The Letters of Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis to Elizabeth Bordley Gibson, 1794-1851*, ed. Patricia Brady (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 43. In Martha Washington's copy of *The Children of the Abbey* is an inscription by Eleanor Parke Custis dated February 2, 1799, soon after Martha must have read it: "I EP Custis value this old Novel because my revered & loved grandmother Mrs M Washington read and like it." *Worthy Partner*, 319.

historical romance set during the Crusades, which she compared favorably to Walter Scott's *The Talisman*.²¹

Though many women took pleasure in the emergence of romance novels in the late eighteenth century, others stuck to the educational and philosophical treatises on which they had cut their literary teeth, for these were the texts which would aid them most in the classroom of the home. Martha Laurens Ramsay consulted Locke and Witherspoon well into her motherhood.²² Women read philosophy and history, often in spite of their husbands' and brothers' derision. When Rebecca Williams told her married sister that she was reading *The History of England* in 1805, which she found "quite entertaining," she understood what her sister's husband would think of her literary ventures. "Capt. Hall will say that I will never finish it," she declared, "but he shall be mistaken, for I will."²³ While men may have found such non-ornamental reading to be unnecessary for their wives and sisters, women clearly had a different opinion, relishing works that offered them a glimpse beyond their homes. Frances Tucker Coalter wrote to her husband with playful trepidation, "What will my dearest Husband think of me, when I acknowledge that reading a Novel, until dinner was ready, was the cause of my not writing to him?"²⁴ Other male relatives, though, were more supportive. In 1825, Fabius Haywood, studying medicine in Philadelphia, honored a request from his

²¹ Selina Lloyd to Charles L. Powell, April 14, 1830, Powell Family Papers, William and Mary (WM).

²² Ramsay, 25-6.

²³ Rebecca may have enjoyed David Hume's version or the equally popular version by Catherine Macaulay. Rebecca Williams to Ferebee Williams Hall, August 28, 1805, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

²⁴ Frances Tucker Coalter to John Coalter, September 7, 1809, Brown, Tucker, Coalter Papers (I), WM.

sister in Raleigh for a copy of Emma Willard's *Plan of Female Education*.²⁵ There may have also been such sympathetic brothers in the late eighteenth century, but by the 1820s, a rise in the discussion and implementation of female education may have made Eliza's request seem more worthy.

To some women, novels distracted from one of their maternal purposes, which was to raise moral children, and many believed that denouncing fiction was necessary to cementing their credibility as moral guardians. The religious Caroline Clitherall scornfully declared that "Novels I had been *preserv'd* from," but she pored over copies of Isaac Watts' hymns and Samuel Johnson's *The Rambler*.²⁶ Nancy Hall indulged in *Roderick Random* and *Peregrine Pickle* as a young girl in Virginia, since "old musty books on Divinity written in the 14th & even 17th centuries however good, are not very pleasing to the tastes of young misses of thirteen." As she grew older, though, she turned against "such vile books" and even listed the "most prominent sins of the votary of novels," which included "wasting my time, . . . destroying my cheerfulness, injuring my health, . . . and worshiping an idol of mere fancy instead of my Creator." When she became a mother, Nancy instead turned to authors who would help her manage her growing brood with patience, including moralists George Abbot and Hannah More, and she concluded that "the Bible is the best of all."²⁷ As a fifty-year-old mother, Susannah Quince agreed that "Plays & Romances not only indispose the mind for all acts of religion & piety," but also filled the heads of avid female readers with romantic

²⁵ Fabius Haywood to Eliza Haywood, February 28, 1825, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

²⁶ Caroline Eliza Burgwin Clitherall Diaries, Vol. 4, p. 19, 34; Vol. 2, p. 12; Vol. 5, p. 33-4, SHC.

²⁷ Nancy Johns Turner Hall, "The Imaginationist or Recollections of an old lady, a native of one of the Southern States, now a resident of the State of Ohio in the Year 1844," pp. 13, 18-19 and 42, VHS.

visions, such that “the little affairs of their family & housewifery become insupportable to them.” Finishing a novel or returning home after a play, “with minds thus evaporated & filled with these follies, they find everything there disagreeable, especially their Husbands.”²⁸ In 1799, Lucy Battaile Thornton warned her young cousin that “novels viciates [sic] the taste, pleasing the fancy without impressing on the understanding any thing valuable,” though she also confessed to having lately read novels “with such eagerness.” Lucy was careful to distinguish the “folly” of her youth with her more sober aspect as a matron.²⁹

Mothers needed more than philosophy to rear moral children, however, and the prevalence of religious texts on women’s shelves confirms mothers’ sense of spiritual obligation in a society in which a growing religious revivalism linked women with morality in the home. An education in Christianity was necessary for many elite mothers to prepare themselves for appropriately moral childrearing, and taking charge of religion in the home often provided women with a sense of power and control over their children’s fates.³⁰

Frances Tasker Carter of Virginia read extensively in theology in the 1770s, provoking her bemused husband to “bet a Guinea that Mrs Carter reads more than the Parson of the parish.”³¹ When Margaret Ball died in 1783, she left behind only “1 large Bible & prayer

²⁸ Susannah Quince’s *Visitors’ Book* (1802-1804), Quince Family Papers, SCHS.

²⁹ Lucy Battaile Thornton to Martha Jacqueline Rootes Cobb Jackson, November 15, 1799, Lucy Battaile Thornton Papers, VHS.

³⁰ While religious publications continued to make up the bulk of English printed material throughout the eighteenth century, secular works became more popular in proportion to the increasingly literate public and appealed to a broader cross-section of readers. Watt, *Rise of the Novel*, 49-50.

³¹ Journal of Philip Vickers Fithian, January 30, 1774, February 19, 1774, in *The Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian: A Plantation Tutor of the Old Dominion, 1773-1774*, ed. Hunter Dickinson Farish (Williamsburg: Colonial Williamsburg, Inc., 1957), 61 and 66.

book” and a “New Manual [of] Devotion.”³² A generation later, mothers continued to use religion as a prop to their domestic (and communal) authority. When Sarah Tayloe Washington died in 1834, she bequeathed to her sister not only a “small bible” and the popular “New Manual [of Devotions],” but also almost two dozen other religious books (and a stray Walter Scott romance). Her sister chose to accept only half of the books, though, suggesting that she either already owned the others or did not quite match Sarah in spiritual enthusiasm.³³ Eliza Haywood’s religious sensibility propelled her into starting a female tract society in Raleigh that circulated religious texts to interested women in the area; as president, it was her duty to read and evaluate books, from such classics as Solomon Stoddard’s *A Guide to Christ* to new interpretations such as Matthew Henry’s *A Method for Prayer*.³⁴ Eliza likely learned her religious duty from her mother, who continued to read the Bible “one hour or more every morning” late into her life.³⁵ In 1817, on the eve of childbirth, Eliza decided “to arrange and dispose of all my worldly business” in case of catastrophe; this all-important final business involved badgering a female correspondent to publish the tract society’s annual report on time.³⁶ Motherhood and religious duty were inextricably entwined.

Despite the religious tenor of many Southern women’s lives, religious books could be hard to come by in Southern literary markets, even by the 1820s. Eliza Haywood of Raleigh ordered many of her texts from Philadelphia, and had to send to Liverpool for a ten-volume

³² Inventory of the Estate of Margaret Ball, October 29, 1783, Thom Family Papers, VHS.

³³ Sarah Tayloe Washington Washington to Mary Tayloe Page, November 16, 1834, Louise Anderson Patten Papers, VHS.

³⁴ Receipt of books ordered by Eliza Haywood, March 12, 1815, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

³⁵ Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, August 9, 1816, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

³⁶ Eliza Haywood to unknown correspondent, September 21, 1817, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

set of Philip Doddridge's religious writings.³⁷ Wilmington resident Catherine DeRosset asked her son in Chapel Hill to send her a copy of John Newton's works, since books there "sold so low."³⁸ Sophia Dulles wrote from Pendleton, South Carolina, to her son in Philadelphia and asked him to purchase *The Lady of the Manor*, a devotional text for women, and John Mason's sermons, for "here no such things are to be got," and even in Charleston they were "not to be got."³⁹ But while these women sought out religious texts through both relatives and tract societies, not all women shared the same religious views; after circulating books which she considered appropriately devout, Eliza received a notice from several members of her society, declaring that "we the undersigned did not apprehend when we became members of the Raleigh Female Tract Society, that tracts containing altercated subjects were ever to have been brought forward for distribution." It is unclear which particular texts were so objectionable, but at least five women in Raleigh withdrew from the society in moral indignation.⁴⁰

³⁷ Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, January 4, 1817; List of Tracts sent by the "Religious Tract Society of Philada." to the "Female Religious Tract Socy. of Raleigh," October 25, 1820, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

³⁸ Catherine DeRosset to John DeRosset, January 1, 1823, DeRosset Family Papers, SHC.

³⁹ Sophia Dulles to Joseph Dulles, December 7, 1832, November 12, 1833, October 1, 1836, Ann Heatly Reid Lovell Estate and Family Papers, SCHS.

⁴⁰ Mary Ann King, Mary Barnes, Hannah Scott, Eliza Pulliam, Thisbe J. Nigbe [?] to Eliza Haywood, August 1, 1819, Haywood Family Papers, SHC. This protest does not seem to have derailed the society. The Raleigh Female Tract Society gained official status as an arm of the American Tract Society in 1816, when secretary Rebecca Goodwin ordered 6,578 tracts. In 1819, the society purchased 13,568 tracts. American Tract Society, *Proceedings of the First Ten Years of the American Tract Society* (Boston: Flag and Gould, 1824), 203. In 1826, Hannah Callum, the treasurer of the Raleigh Female Tract Society, spent \$54.62 on texts from the American Tract Society, and in 1827, secretary Ann Benedict spent \$20.00 on tracts. The 1826 expenditures outstripped all other tract societies, from Connecticut to Georgia, with the exception of the "Nassau-Hall Tract Soc.," presumably run by students at Princeton. American Tract Society, *First Annual Report of the American Tract Society* (New York: Daniel Fanshaw, 1826), 42, 55.

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Mothers read to supplement their own intellectual confidence as religious, historical, and philosophical educators, but the late eighteenth-century surge in children's literature allowed them to consume books with an even more direct purpose as they sat their children down in the nursery and began to read aloud.⁴¹ Though parenting manuals also began to fill the market, few Southern mothers referenced these in their lists of books, accounts of reading, or letters to friends. Nancy Turner Hall had a positive aversion to them, and could not help "deploring that inundation which has flooded our world in these days with abridgements, compendiums & little things under the name of helps." Nancy suggested that after preserving a few useful texts, mothers should "condemn the rest to a fiery trial which they cannot pass through."⁴² By contrast, many mothers were grateful for the increasing availability of children's books, especially those that provided lessons while they entertained. The didactic and moral tales that stemmed from a new educational emphasis on children's individuality and responsibility were addressed as much to mothers as children. Publishers of children's books marketed the new material overwhelmingly to women, and it was one of the first genres of which female readers could take full possession. Because many of these books flowed from women's pens, a uniquely female conception of motherhood linked the books'

⁴¹ See Elizabeth Segel, "'As the Twig Is Bent . . .': Gender and Childhood Reading," in *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*, eds. Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocínio P. Schweickart (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 165-186; Evelyn Arizpe and Morag Styles, *Reading Lessons from the Eighteenth Century: Mothers, Children and Texts* (Lichfield: Pied Piper Publishing, 2006); Gillian Avery, *Behold the Child: American Children and Their Books, 1621-1922* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); and Samuel F. Pickering, Jr., *Moral Instruction and Fiction for Children, 1749-1820* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993).

⁴² Nancy Johns Turner Hall, "The Imaginationist or Recollections of an old lady, a native of one of the Southern States, now a resident of the State of Ohio in the Year 1844," p. 40, VHS.

authors to their readers.⁴³ Even in families where men controlled most financial decisions, women took the initiative in seeking out, purchasing, and bringing children's books into the home. The book collector Jean Skipwith, for instance, claimed thirty-one children's books in her Virginia library.⁴⁴ While John Haywood kept an account of school books purchased for his children, his wife Eliza used her own money to pay a traveling salesman for "Children's Bookes."⁴⁵ Southern mothers used the burgeoning genre of children's literature to reinforce their own role as moral guardians, identify appropriate models for children's behavior, and solidify a gendered understanding of the world for their children.

When children's literature entered the home, women had to decide how best to use it, for the characters that played across the pages left moral imprints on children's minds. When reading directly implicated children, women had to be doubly cautious. Caroline Laurens's sixteen-month-old son John took "great pleasure looking over little picture books" in 1826, but was remarkably sensitive to the material presented. When Caroline told him a story "of a bad boy who met with a misfortune," John "began to cry bitterly." Caroline was quick to adjust her strategy; she "varied the story immediately, & determined from that time, never to tell a good child the story of a bad child." Several months later, John was already learning to recite the rhyme of Little Jack Horner, which ends with the triumphant "What a good boy am

⁴³ Mitzi Myers, "Impeccable Governesses, Rational Dames, and Moral Mothers: Mary Wollstonecraft and the Female Tradition in Georgian Children's Books," *Children's Literature* 14 (1986): 31-59. Myers notes that the *Female Guardian* of 1784 is dedicated to the public, and, according to the eighteenth-century author, "by the Public the writer means Mothers" (33).

⁴⁴ Abraham, "The Library of Lady Jean Skipwith," 311, 316. Jean's children's book collection included two works by Maria Edgeworth, *Moral Tales* and *Early Lessons*.

⁴⁵ John Haywood to William Boylan, May 1, 1819; Eliza Haywood Account Book, February 7, 1820, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

It”⁴⁶ In North Carolina, Rachel Mordecai raised her younger sister Eliza after their mother died, and she made a point of distinguishing what she saw as the moral and practical tales of authors such as Maria Edgeworth from the more widespread fairy stories popular in such periodicals as *The Young Misses’ Magazine*.⁴⁷ Rachel read bedtime stories to her sister as a reward for good behavior but was careful to alert the child to the insufficiency of the more far-flung tales. When she read aloud stories containing “imaginary beings, fairies, genii, &c.,” Rachel prefaced them by saying, “I am going to tell you rather a foolish story now, for it is about things which could never have happened, and I only tell it to amuse you.” In a society built increasingly on rationalism, the fancy and imagination of traditional European tales seemed extravagant and even corrupt to many American mothers. Young Eliza seemed to take the hint; when asked to judge the behavior of the fictional governess Mrs. Affable from *The Young Misses’ Magazine*, the young girl remarked, “I do not think Mrs. Affable taught her children well, she told them too many fairy tales. I think it would have been better if she had told them . . . true stories about sensible people.” Rachel must have beamed at this comment, and she prided herself that “I could not but percieve [sic] that a plant had grown up, from the seed long since sown.”⁴⁸ Rachel’s (and other mothers’) insistence on logic and reason within children’s tales may have also resulted from a desire to counteract a perceived link between women (and children) and sentimentality. Banishing fairies from the nursery

⁴⁶ January 24, 1826, June 16, 1826, Caroline Olivia Laurens Diary, SHC.

⁴⁷ For more on the eighteenth-century divide between “rational” children’s books and more imaginative ones, see Geoffrey Summerfield, *Fantasy and Reason: Children’s Literature in the Eighteenth Century* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984). For the development of the literary fairy tale in the late seventeenth century, see Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 17-48.

⁴⁸ Rachel Lazarus Diary (May 19, 1816 – December 9, 1820), Myers Family Papers, VHS.

may have been a conscious step in raising sons and daughters who could inhabit those spaces both beyond and within the home that called for sensible decision-making.

Whatever literature women chose for their children, they unavoidably encountered gendered educational models, and the sweeping popularity of authors such as Maria Edgeworth suggests that American mothers had a certain vision of their world that Edgeworth confirmed. Edgeworth's models of childhood behavior seemed to align with many Southern mothers' ideals for their own families. Edgeworth was born into an Irish literary family in 1768, and began collaborating with her father on treatises of educational philosophy as a young woman. Concurring with such theorists as John Locke, Edgeworth believed that children deserved a practical, even scientific, education divorced from a religious foundation, and she offered Southern mothers a literary world in which young boys and girls had equal potential for moral success.⁴⁹ Though she wrote several well-received novels exploring the politics of Irish life, it was her children's books that earned her a place in the hearts and homes of American women. A closer examination of Edgeworth's works reveals that mothers chose models of moral behavior for their children which presented a remarkably egalitarian understanding of gender roles.

Women turned to Maria Edgeworth almost as a companion in the childrearing process. Eleanor Custis Lewis used her books in raising her children in Virginia, seeing them

⁴⁹ Edgeworth and her father co-wrote the treatise *Practical Education*, in which they proclaimed that "to make any progress in the art of education, it must be patiently reduced to an experimental science," also warning that "on religion and politics we have been silent." Maria Edgeworth and Richard Lovell Edgeworth, *Practical Education*, vol. 1 (1798; New York: Garland Publishing, 1974), v – vii. Gillian Avery even claims that Edgeworth was "probably more influential in America than in her own country" (Avery, *Behold the Child*, 65). For more on John Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), see T. G. A. Nelson, *Children, Parents, and the Rise of the Novel* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1995), 85-100, and Mary Hilton, *Women and the Shaping of the Nation's Young: Education and Public Doctrine in Britain, 1750-1850* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 26-34.

as a compensation for her own failings as a maternal “instructress.” Observing her daughter Parke’s “fine genius,” Eleanor was worried about how to train her mind correctly. Not knowing how to proceed on her own, she “purchased Miss Edgeworth” in the hopes that the British author could provide what was lacking.⁵⁰ In South Carolina, Maria Gibbes read Edgeworth’s *Practical Education* and took notes on how to teach science to young women, while Mary Alston Pringle copied down some of Edgeworth’s philosophies about morality and virtue.⁵¹ Rachel Mordecai Lazarus had a more intimate connection with Edgeworth and remained equally convinced of her power to educate. The two women maintained a correspondence stretching from the shores of North Carolina to the Irish countryside for over twenty years. In fond, rambling letters and frequent packages filled with plant seeds and the occasional ill-fated mockingbird, Rachel and Maria discussed everything from politics to horticulture, but Rachel also benefited from her friend’s published stories and moral tales.⁵² When she first received a reply from the famous author, she showed it to her seven-year-old

⁵⁰ Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis to Elizabeth Bordley, March 23, 1806, *George Washington’s Beautiful Nelly*, 69.

⁵¹ Maria recorded this passage from Edgeworth: “A girl who runs through a course of natural history, hears something about chemistry, has been taught something of botany, and who knows but just enough of these to make her fancy she is well informed, is in a miserable situation, in danger of becoming ridiculous, and insupportably tiresome to men of sense and science. But let a woman know any one thing completely, and she will have sufficient understanding to learn more, and to apply what she has been taught so as to interest men of generosity and genius, in her favour.” Maria H. Drayton Gibbes Commonplace Book, Gibbes Family Papers, SCHS; Mary M. Pringle Notebook, n.d., Mary Motte Alston Pringle Papers, SCHS.

⁵² Despite Rachel’s repeated efforts to share the marvels of American fauna with her British friend, all the birds shipped over met an untimely demise. In 1828, Edgeworth finally protested, “I am so exceedingly sorry that this happy little bird perished and so many of his predecessors in the attempt to reach this country that I cannot bear you should ever try to rear any more for me.” Maria Edgeworth to Rachel Mordecai Lazarus, January 20, 1828, *Education of the Heart*, 150. Caroline Clitherall also experienced the joys of the transatlantic avian exchange when she spent her childhood in England; the “little Red-bird” she received from her brother in South Carolina seemed to have more success than Rachel’s mockingbirds, though, as it “liv’d till its plumage became grey and its little voice hoarse.” Caroline Eliza Burgwin Clitherall Diaries, Vol. 3, Pt. 1, p. 6, SHC.

sister, who could not fathom “that the very same Miss Edgeworth who wrote ‘Practical Education’ which lay on the drawers . . . should have written a letter to sister R.”⁵³

Raised by her father, the Jewish headmaster of a girls’ boarding school in North Carolina, Rachel had grown up with an understanding of the importance of education in a child’s life, and her responses to Edgeworth’s stories betrayed a solid understanding of educational philosophy.⁵⁴ While her initial letter was a rebuke for the depiction of Jews in Edgeworth’s adult novels, Rachel’s continued correspondence also addressed the author’s works for younger readers. Rachel had no children when she wrote to Edgeworth in 1815, and she recognized that “I am *not* a mother, but if I were, I could hardly be more deeply interested” in the project of children’s education. The “eldest female of a numerous family,” Rachel was responsible for her siblings’ upbringing.⁵⁵ When Rachel offered critiques of the author’s work (“the ‘Sequel’ . . . appears to me to convey this impression of reality, even more vividly than the preceding parts”), Edgeworth begged for more (“You would oblige me by communicating any little remarks you may chance to hear on the different parts of these little books, for it is only by hearing the free observations of young readers that I can improve”), and Rachel promptly delivered (“I heard one observe that she thought Godfrey was allowed to be too *provoking* . . . for a boy so well and so wisely educated”).⁵⁶ Rachel’s intimate involvement in both the crafting and consumption of children’s literature may seem

⁵³ Diary of Rachel Mordecai Lazarus, 1816-1820, Myers Family Papers, VHS.

⁵⁴ For more on the relationship between Rachel and Maria Edgeworth and Rachel’s devotion to childhood education, see Emily Bingham, *Mordecai: An Early American Family* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003), 58-72.

⁵⁵ Rachel Mordecai to Maria Edgeworth, August 7, 1815, *The Education of the Heart*, 4-5.

⁵⁶ Rachel Mordecai Lazarus to Maria Edgeworth, July 29, 1822; Maria Edgeworth to Rachel Mordecai Lazarus, January 15, 1823; Rachel Mordecai Lazarus to Maria Edgeworth, December 20, 1823, *Education of the Heart*, 30, 34-5, 46.

anomalous, but her interest and sincere engagement in this world reflect the concerns of a broad swath of literate Southern mothers. While Rachel may have had a greater awareness of Edgeworth's authorial rationale, other mothers of the young Republic welcomed her books into their homes with equal fervor.

In Edgeworth's stories for children, the literary landscape was inhabited by both girls and boys who shunned the fantastical realm of sprites and fairies for the practical concerns that prepared them for an adult world: Should one ever lie? What respect and deference was due to one's parents? How could one cure a fiery temper or a lazy disposition? Couched in the logic of everyday situations, Edgeworth's tales instructed young readers in rational morality, while their mothers learned a few lessons about good parenting. One reader in the 1890s, speaking to the lasting power of Edgeworth's moral landscape, waxed fondly, "So much virtue, so much reward; so much work, so many plums."⁵⁷ What can we glean from the moral tales of Maria Edgeworth that were so roundly praised by elite Southern women? What messages did they hold about gender conventions and maternal expectations? Though children's tales, like Edgeworth's didactic "Waste Not, Want Not" and "Forgive and Forget," were a form of prescriptive literature, female patrons deliberately selected and brought them into the home.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Anne Thackeray Ritchie, introduction to *Popular Tales* by Maria Edgeworth (1804; London: MacMillan and Co., 1895), vii.

⁵⁸ Maria Edgeworth, *The Parent's Assistant; Or, Stories for Children* (1796; New York: MacMillan, 1907). Edgeworth also weaved more grand political statements into some of her children's tales; for more on the revolutionary implications of one story, see Mitzi Myers, "Child's Play as Woman's Peace Work: Maria Edgeworth's 'The Cherry Orchard,' Historical Rebellion Narratives, and Contemporary Cultural Studies," in *Girls, Boys, Books, Toys: Gender in Children's Literature and Culture*, eds. Beverly Lyon Clark and Margaret R. Higonnet (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 25-39.

Through pointed comparisons of well-raised children with children run wild, Edgeworth offered concrete advice to mothers who yearned for the girls and boys that she excelled at portraying. To succeed in the education of the young, a woman must display an “accurate understanding, benevolent heart, and steady temper.”⁵⁹ She must focus more on training a good child than an accomplished one, and she should instill in her children a sense of their position in an unwavering class hierarchy.⁶⁰ A concern for the balance between being good and being accomplished was certainly no novelty. The distinction of class, however, was largely peculiar to British texts; American children’s books tended to trumpet the endless possibilities for upward mobility that came, however misleadingly, to define America’s national ideology.⁶¹ To elite Southern mothers, though, the British fixation on social status would likely have been a familiar refrain in a landscape dotted with plantations and populated by enslaved Africans and African Americans. Not only was the act of reading itself a marker of privilege, but the stories mothers consumed often reinforced the importance of status.⁶²

It was the parents’ duty within these tales to provide a role model for their children, whether it was acting within class boundaries or showing temperance and humility in times

⁵⁹ Maria Edgeworth, “The Bracelets,” in *The Parent’s Assistant*, vol. 1 (1796; 1865; New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1976), 3.

⁶⁰ Edgeworth, “Mademoiselle Panache,” in *The Parent’s Assistant*, vol. 2 (1796; 1865; New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1976), 187.

⁶¹ Avery, *Behold the Child*, 104-5.

⁶² By the late nineteenth century, white families were still using reading as a means to assert status. Examining the Uncle Remus stories, Jennifer Ritterhouse has argued that “reading and family intimacy were key components in the creation and cross-generational transmission of a white racial fantasy of intimacy-within-hierarchy.” Ritterhouse, “Reading, Intimacy, and the Role of Uncle Remus in White Southern Social Memory,” *Journal of Southern History* 69, no. 3 (2003): 585-622, quote on p. 587.

of crisis, and Edgeworth made one thing very clear: governesses simply would not do. While Edgeworth's characters included several female teachers, they always fit within the context of a day school; the formative moments at home must be supervised by a parent or the child was sure to fall into ruin. Edgeworth's governesses ran the gamut from absurd foreigners to ignorant working-class girls. In the tale of a particularly caricatured Frenchwoman, Edgeworth vented, "So much mischief may be done by a silly governess in a single quarter of an hour!"⁶³ Caroline Clitherall understood this hierarchy even as a young child, when she formed a "School for about twenty or more rag Dolls – whom I arrang'd at the head of the great-stair case, where I kept my school. The wax & wooden dolls, being the Governess & teacher – Myself the Mamma."⁶⁴ Maria Edgeworth had a very clear understanding of the superiority of mothers in the parenting process, which her female readership must have appreciated.

Daughters faced very different expectations from sons in Edgeworth's work, but girls were always more knowledgeable, versatile, and moral than their brothers and male schoolfellows. One particularly heated exchange between Sophy and her brother Frederick illustrates the superiority of feminine reasoning. When Sophy criticizes Frederick for mixing up grammatical tenses in English, the boy retorts that they are "all the same thing in Latin grammar," hoping to silence his sister by brandishing his masculine education. The sober Sophy stares him down, though, and comments that even if those words were identical in Latin, "they meant perfectly different things in real life." By designating a woman's knowledge as "real life," Sophy negates the importance of dead languages and bolsters her

⁶³ Edgeworth, "Mademoiselle Panache," 171.

⁶⁴ Caroline Eliza Burgwin Clitherall Diaries, Vol. 2, p. 18, SHC.

claim to practical understanding. Frederick refuses to let her get away with this manipulation and claims that women “have no business” interfering in logic or reasoning. After Sophy flushes in anger, her younger sister Marianne comes to her defense, reminding Frederick that Sophy was also more gifted in mathematics and knot-tying than he. The incensed boy then impugns Sophy’s domestic skills. “Let her reason away, . . . she’ll never be able to make a pudding,” Frederick spits out. After calmly explaining to her brother that puddings are not such hard things after all, Marianne concludes the conversation by adding, “O, brother, she can do anything!”⁶⁵

Edgeworth’s confidence in her female characters counterbalanced the republican emphasis on raising sons in the South, and her portraits of heroic mothers reinforced the power that Southern women wielded in the home. Though Edgeworth’s tales arrived in America after the Revolution, their rendering of gender roles mirrored a longstanding pattern of gender expectations that Southern mothers had maintained since the middle of the century. These mothers embraced Edgeworth precisely because she validated already well-developed childrearing practices.⁶⁶

Beyond popular children’s books, many mothers also taught their young children to enjoy the Bible, hoping that an early religious education would result in a lifelong morality. Sons and daughters thus benefited from their mothers’ rigorous spiritual self-education. When Catherine Read received a word of advice from her sister in 1805 about her son’s

⁶⁵ Edgeworth, “The Mimic,” in *The Parent’s Assistant*, vol. 2, 58-67.

⁶⁶ Similarly, the eighteenth-century children’s books of Charlotte Smith portrayed a community of “surrogate mothers” helping to raise children, and particularly daughters, a structure with which elite Southern mothers would certainly have been familiar. Smith also emphasized that motherhood was a learned skill, not a natural ability. For an analysis of Smith’s stories, see Elizabeth A. Dolan, “Collaborative Motherhood: Maternal Teachers and Dying Mothers in Charlotte Smith’s Children’s Books,” *Women’s Writing* 16, no. 1 (2009): 109-125.

religious upbringing, she replied, “I had also anticipated your hint about the Bible – but that goes on slow.” Her son Jacob dutifully studied the Bible at his day school, but he apparently absorbed little.⁶⁷ Alexander Clitherall learned to read the Bible by age five, being taught by a zealous mother.⁶⁸ Eliza Haywood ordered a copy of Sarah Trimmer’s “History of the Bible” from Liverpool, presumably to provide a religious textbook for her children.⁶⁹ Trimmer, a popular children’s book author, had developed several works that abridged and tailored the Bible for young readers. One woman in South Carolina who was “extremely [sic] anxious to bring up her family religiously” requested a relative in Philadelphia to obtain some “Cards or Maps with Scripture . . . for instructing Children to read,” hoping that reading and religious instruction would go hand in hand.⁷⁰ Even when mothers lost direct control over their children’s reading habits, they still found ways to influence their lives. Two brothers attending school at the University of North Carolina received a letter from home that gently reminded them, “Your Mother hopes you and John will not forget the Bibles she placed in your Trunks.”⁷¹

Parents watched eagerly as their young children took to reading and encouraged the habit in boys and girls alike, for a literate child signaled an elite family. As a girl, Caroline Clitherall had a “small book-case, containing my own volumes.” When young Caroline left

⁶⁷ Catherine Read to Betsy Ludlow, January 13, 1805, Read Family Papers, SCL.

⁶⁸ Caroline Eliza Burgwin Clitherall Diaries, Vol. 6, p. 53, SHC.

⁶⁹ This book was probably either Trimmer’s *An Abridgement of Scripture History* or *An Easy Introduction to the Knowledge of Nature, and Reading the Holy Scriptures*. Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, January 4, 1817, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

⁷⁰ Sophia Dulles to Joseph Dulles, November 12, 1833, Ann Heatly Reid Lovell Estate and Family Papers, SCHS.

⁷¹ John Haywood to George Haywood, February 16, 1816, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

home on a voyage, her mother gave her “a beautiful copy of *The Rambler*, recommending me to read one number every morning.”⁷² When Esther Cox learned her eight-year-old granddaughter had already begun to pick up books, she exclaimed, “I am delighted to hear she loves reading.”⁷³ The Lazarus family in North Carolina raised their children to view reading as a reward rather than a chore. When young Eliza Lazarus sat down to count up her life’s pleasures, she “reckoned eighteen,” including “reading for her own amusement.”⁷⁴ Caroline Clitherall had a similar theory that “Education must be won, not forc’d,” rewarding her charges’ good behavior with books of history and religion.⁷⁵ Even after one young woman married and left her family home, she urged her mother to “bring down some ammusing [sic] Books with you” on her next visit.⁷⁶ Reading became a matter of pride for children who could show off their learning to parents and grandparents. When Susan Moore saw her mother writing a letter to her grandmother, she commanded her to include the announcement that “she could read the fables in her Spelling Book.”⁷⁷ Alice Izard, meanwhile, worried about her son’s seeming lack of interest in literature; “I wish I could see Ralph attach himself more to reading,” she lamented. “He has a strong mind but it wants cultivation.”⁷⁸ Before including eleven pages of carefully transcribed quotations from the Marchioness de Lambert, a noted writer and educator, in a letter to her son, Susannah Quince

⁷² Caroline Eliza Burgwin Clitherall Diaries, Vol. 2, p. 24; Vol. 4, p. 19, SHC.

⁷³ Esther Cox to Mary Cox Chesnut, May 31, 1805, Cox and Chesnut Family Papers, SCL.

⁷⁴ Rachel Lazarus Diary (May 19, 1816 – December 9, 1820), Myers Family Papers, VHS.

⁷⁵ Caroline Eliza Burgwin Clitherall Diaries, Vol. 5, p. 33-4, SHC.

⁷⁶ Ferebee Williams Hall to Jane Williams, February 11, 1806, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

⁷⁷ Rebecca C. Moore to Jane Williams, October 12, 1812, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

⁷⁸ Alice Delancey Izard to Henry Izard, December 3, 1807, Ralph Izard Papers, SCL.

coaxed him by framing these literary suggestions not as “dry lectures that carry the air of a mother’s authority,” but “rather the advise of a Friend & have the merit that they come from my heart.”⁷⁹ Susannah may have guessed that a mother’s voice could be notoriously didactic, but she felt strongly that her son needed to read these words she herself had found helpful. Encouraging reading in children not only prepared them for a literate world, but trained their minds to be receptive to the best impulses.

Some mothers were such lovers of literature that their urgency in communicating with their children about the joy of reading was deeply personal. These were not women who were simply doing their duty as purveyors of elite culture but who genuinely relished the thought of educated conversation. Sarah Reeve Gibbes gushed to her eighteen-year-old son at Princeton about her favorite authors in 1783. Shakespeare’s “beauties are exquisite and beam in on the mind like the rays of the Sun upon a cultivated field”; “Pope, my favorite Pope!,” Sarah considered to be a “sweet Author”; Dryden’s poem “on St. Cecilia’s Day is perhaps the best thing of the sort that ever was written in our language”; while Swift had “happy sallies of wit, but wants refinement.”⁸⁰ Two generations later, Mary Motte Alston Pringle was a similarly hungry reader who shared her passion with her sons away at school. Suggesting that the boys form a “reading club,” Mary went on to recommend some of her favorites, including Samuel Johnson, Benjamin Franklin, John Milton, and Samuel Coleridge. She especially loved the Greeks and Romans, quoting to her sons from Cato, Lycurgus, and Cicero, and comparing Homer, who “thrills our hearts with all the hurried, impetuous, heroic feelings of his combatants,” to Virgil, whom Mary considered “more chaste, & more tender than

⁷⁹ Susannah Quince to William Quince, August 18, n.d., Quince Family Papers, SCHS.

⁸⁰ Sarah Reeve Gibbes to John Gibbes, September 30, 1783, Gibbes Family Papers, SCHS.

Homer.”⁸¹ The act of reading allowed mothers to share knowledge and excitement with their children, but it also continued to justify mothers’ involvement in intellectual exchanges.

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As women consumed books for their own edification and the education of their children, they also participated in broader intellectual conversations, which often validated their sense of power within the home. Charlotte Drayton Manigault echoed many women’s sentiments when she observed in 1827, “How much more interesting is conversation that relates sometimes to books . . . than when it merely is the chit-chat of trifling passing events – one is mental and requires information and reflection, the other a mere trivial curiosity.”⁸² Women took pleasure in recommending books to each other, creating regional, national, and even transatlantic networks of female literary advice. This final stage of engagement lent additional purpose and power to women’s domestic duties, for they were supported in their actions by a web of women who reprimanded, advised, and consoled. The reading communities that women formed were, in some ways, radical. Largely confined to isolated plantations, elite women used their reading to connect to distant female friends and relatives, but also to join wider intellectual currents and to plunge into imaginary worlds. Because so many early novels featured women as heroines, reading mothers could envision themselves engaged in a broader, perhaps more exciting, landscape. In return, they sent their favorite works to their friends and relatives, forging a web of educated women.⁸³ Young Lucy

⁸¹ Mary Motte Alston Pringle Diary, 1826- and n.d., Mary Motte Alston Pringle Papers, SCHS.

⁸² November 3, 1827, Charlotte Drayton Manigault Journal, Peter Manigault Collection, SCHS (SCHS).

⁸³ For more on the subversive nature of eighteenth-century women’s reading, see Jacqueline Pearson, *Women’s Reading in Britain, 1750-1835: A Dangerous Recreation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), esp. 2, 96, and 101; for more on book-sharing among women and female

Leppitt, for instance, wrote her friend Elizabeth, “I want to know what you have been reading of late.”⁸⁴ After South Carolinian Ann Heatly Lovell received a few books as a gift from her nephew in Philadelphia, she asked her sister to tell him thank you, but that “you must not make her any presents.” She added, however, that “if you should meet with any new & good books you may send her one now & then.”⁸⁵ Martha Laurens Ramsay, in addition to urging her children to read, frequently loaned books to other children in Charleston, doling out knowledge (and concrete expressions of her own literate patronage) as a public enterprise. When she passed away, Catherine Read mourned her loss, citing, “She often lent the Girls Books.”⁸⁶ After Eliza Haywood’s sister took “great pleasure” in reading Martha Laurens Ramsay’s posthumously published memoirs, she sent the volume to her sister, continuing Martha’s engagement in a cycle of literary lending.⁸⁷

Women took seriously their role as literary recommenders, and reviews of recent histories, novels, and children’s tales passed from grandparents to grandchildren, daughters

reading communities, see Kevin J. Hayes, *A Colonial Woman’s Bookshelf* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996), 8; Kerrison, *Claiming the Pen*, 137; Mary Kelley, “‘The Need of Their Genius’: Women’s Reading and Writing Practices in Early America,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 28 (2008): 1-23; and Mary Kelley, “Reading Women/Women Reading: The Making of Learned Women in Antebellum America,” *Journal of American History* 83, no. 2 (1996): 401-424. The development of female reading networks was not unique to the eighteenth century; elite women in medieval Europe also formed communities of readers whose patronage influenced both the production of books and the direction of their content. This role, like the role of many female readers in the early American South, was founded also on their identities as mothers, and thus conveyors of knowledge. See Susan Groag Bell, “Medieval Women Book Owners: Arbiters of Lay Piety and Ambassadors of Culture,” *Signs* 7, no. 4 (1982): 742-768.

⁸⁴ Lucy Leppitt to Elizabeth DeRosset, January 18, 1830, DeRosset Family Papers, SHC.

⁸⁵ Sophia Heatly Dulles to Joseph Dulles, December 7, 1832, Ann Heatly Reid Lovell Estate and Family Papers, SCHS.

⁸⁶ Catherine Read to Betsy Ludlow, March 27, 1813, Read Family Papers, SCL.

⁸⁷ Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, November 13, 1814, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

to mothers, and friends to neighbors. Eliza Ravenel wrote her friend Fanny, “Do tell me where in the course of your reading you have met with the best ideas respecting the education of children. . . . I think some useful hints may be obtained from Coelebs as well as from Edgeworth.”⁸⁸ In 1836, Sophia Dulles enjoyed reading a book of sermons given to her by a female friend, who had inherited them from her own mother.⁸⁹ Nancy Randolph, cut off from most of her relatives as a result of a scandal in her youth, turned to one of her few remaining friends in 1805, asking, “Can you lend me Caleb Williams? And the poems of Collins? . . . I am not an indiscriminate admirer of his productions – some of them certainly are sublime.”⁹⁰ After Mary Randolph Custis finished reading a history of Charles I, she compared it to Hume’s version of the king’s life, observing to her friend Selina how an author’s skill could color historical opinion: “Did not Mr. Hume make you a partizan of the good the unfortunate King, so devoted to his Henrietta & his children, but a different Author not powerful enough to make me change sides represents him as a relentless tyrant.” Mary and Selina were not only both readers of Hume, but they felt fully capable of critiquing a less gifted writer.⁹¹ Female authors were not exempt from criticism; Charlotte Manigault found Grace Kennedy’s *Dunallan* to be “interesting but too much in the puritanical style; . . . I am afraid that it is the production of some lady who awkwardly performs that for which she is not qualified.”⁹²

⁸⁸ Eliza Ravenel to Fanny Harrison, July 20, 1824, John Ravenel Papers, SCL.

⁸⁹ Sophia Dulles to Joseph Dulles, October 1, 1836, Ann Heatly Reid Lovell Estate and Family Papers, SCHS.

⁹⁰ Ann Cary Randolph to Mary Johnston, February 21, 1805, Nancy Randolph Papers, WM.

⁹¹ Mary Ann Randolph Custis to Selina Lloyd, [?] 14, [before 1830], Powell Family Papers, WM.

⁹² Not all female authors were thus unqualified, however; two years later, Charlotte applauded a work by Jane Taylor for revealing the “deep piety of her mind and heart.” August 16, 1828, November 22, 1830, Charlotte Drayton Manigault Journal, Peter Manigault Collection, WM.

When Esther recommended Henry Hunter's *Sacred Biography* for her granddaughter, she added the testimony of other women, citing that it "gave me a great deal of pleasure in reading, and Hetty Reed also speaks highly of it, and your Sister Harris says she never was more entertained as well as instructed by the perusal." When she passed along another text that was "full of good sentiments, and instruction to Parents," Esther noted that "I am sure you will approve the greatest part of it, notwithstanding some of the reviewers find fault with it."⁹³ Though Esther's awareness of published reviews of the book reveals her engagement in a public literary conversation, her prediction of its effect on her correspondent illustrates how much more important feminine (and maternal) opinion could be in reading matters. In this female literary world, a mother's recommendation could override a critic's, for she was the one who would implement that knowledge in a family setting.

Family members sent each other books as children's gifts and reminders to their parents to raise them judiciously, for maternal power was continually challenged and bolstered by this network of observers. In one package from Philadelphia to Camden, South Carolina, Esther Cox included "a Book to suit Serena, . . . and another for John – I shall also send you, my dear Mary, a little Book which has been found very usefull in large families, particularly in the country, called the Nurse's guide."⁹⁴ But books could be precious gifts, and some women warned their daughters and granddaughters to take special care of these presents. In 1761, Sarah Allen left a collection of books to her grandnieces in her will, but dictated that the treasures were not "to be lent out"; otherwise, "the Sets may be broke before

⁹³ Esther Cox to Mary Cox Chesnut, July 19, 1806, September 1, 1810, Cox and Chesnut Family Papers, SCL.

⁹⁴ Esther Cox to Mary Chesnut, July 19, 1806, Cox and Chesnut Family Papers, SCL.

they can use them.”⁹⁵ Though this caution may be attributed to the mid-century rarity of books, mothers expressed similar concerns in the early 1800s. When Jane Williams mailed several magazines to her granddaughter Betsy in 1807, she suggested that “she is too young tho to have them under her own Management.” She advised the girl’s mother that Betsy should not be allowed to take the volumes to school, nor to lend them to friends. Jane warned, “[I] shall always expect, tell her, to see them without a Scratch.”⁹⁶

Books not only connected women in a bond of mutual interest and even excitement, but also smoothed over traumatic events in women’s lives and provided a conduit to share expressions of grief. Jane Williams suggested her daughter Eliza read Robert Dodsley’s *The Oeconomy of Human Life* after her father passed away. Jane assured the girl, “It has been a comforter to me many times in my Life and my daily companion lately.” She pointed out a few sections to read carefully and closed her letter with direct quotations about overcoming sadness. Two years later, Jane advised Eliza’s husband to read Dodsley as well and promised to bring him a copy, “if he will read it attentively.” As a devotee of *The Oeconomy*, which she called her “Prop and Support,” Jane must have also been familiar with Dodsley’s portrait of an ideal mother: “She informeth the minds of her children with wisdom, she fashioneth their manners from the example of her own goodness.” Through the stream of books that flowed from the mother to her daughters, surely Jane fulfilled this first injunction. In the minds of these women, a mother was not just a nurturer, but a fashioner of youth.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Will, Sarah Allen, 1761, in J. Bryan Grimes, ed., *North Carolina Wills and Inventories, Copied from the Original and Recorded Wills and Inventories in the Office of the Secretary of State* (1912; Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing, 1967), 9-13, quoted in Kerrison, *Claiming the Pen*, 114.

⁹⁶ Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, October 13, 1807, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

⁹⁷ Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, May 28, 1803, May 21, 1805, Haywood Family Papers, SHC; Robert Dodsley, *The Oeconomy of Human Life*, 7th ed. (London: M. Cooper, 1751), 48. Jane Williams

Mothers enjoyed engaging in debates about the books they read with friends and relatives, seeing lively conversation as a necessary part of absorbing and evaluating a variety of texts. Charleston, South Carolina, was a particular hotbed of maternal literary consumption and critique, as many women had better access to printed materials than their rural relatives. Catherine Read, for instance, wrote a passionate letter to her niece about the various faults of the collected letters of the Earl of Chesterfield. Calling him a “great Libertine,” she contended that Chesterfield dwelled too much on the subject of the graces; “had he said less upon the subject he would have succeeded better,” she concluded.⁹⁸ Fellow Charleston resident Sarah Gibbes also warned her son against Chesterfield, recommending that if he had not yet read the letters, “pray forbear until you are three or four years older, your principles will then be fix’d, at present it is dangerous reading.”⁹⁹ While Catherine Read had weak praise for Chesterfield, she was pleased that her niece had read and enjoyed the poems of Ossian. “The language is wild, at the same time Beautiful,” she mused, “replete with Metaphors & fine Figures.”¹⁰⁰ Mary Alston Pringle, a voracious and discerning reader who sent her sons frequent instructions on who and what they should be reading, may have agreed with Catherine’s assessment of Ossian’s wildness, remarking that his poems “leave one in a kind of chaos,” but her overall impression was not as favorable, as she found “something so incoherent & unconnected in the narrative.”¹⁰¹ When Alice Delancey Izard

was not the only woman who shared the *Oeconomy*. Rebeckah Harper also passed along her copy of Dodsley’s popular work to Sarah Harper in 1766. See Hayes, *A Colonial Woman’s Bookshelf*, 8.

⁹⁸ Catherine Read to Mary Clarkson, August 21, n.d., Read Family Papers, SCL.

⁹⁹ Sarah Reeve Gibbes to John Gibbes, August 13, 1783, Gibbes Family Papers, SCHS.

¹⁰⁰ Catherine Read to Mary Clarkson, June 24, n.d., Read Family Papers, SCL.

¹⁰¹ Mary M. Pringle Diary, n.d., Mary Motte Alston Pringle Papers, SCHS.

suggested that her son read Charles Rollin's *Ancient History*, she noted that "the French edition is much superior to the translation," hinting that she had read both and implicitly challenging her son to a discussion of Rollin's merits once he had "read it with attention."¹⁰² Mary Pringle formed a less positive opinion of Rollin, observing that he "too frequently intrudes his opinions, thereby preventing the advantage, to the reader, of forming his own."¹⁰³ This divergence of opinion between mothers within a single city reminds us that while women were engaged in networks of intellectual exchange, they felt comfortable enough as readers to form unique, and remarkably strong, opinions.

Non-elite mothers also understood the value of reading in an increasingly literate society, and some realized that they could ill afford to ignore this broader public. When the cost of printing sank and cheap copies of popular romances fell into working women's hands, some of the late eighteenth-century reading revolution spread to lower classes, both in England and America. As the *Virginia Gazette* noted in 1772, "This contagion is the more to be dreaded, as it daily spread through all ranks of people; and Miss, the Tailor's daughter, talks now as familiarly to her confidante . . . of Swains & sentiments as the accomplished dames of genteel life."¹⁰⁴ Other women had to fight for access to these "Swains & sentiments"; when Mary Horton sent her daughter out as an apprentice in 1751, she dictated that the apprenticeship should include an education in "Reeding . . . soen [sewing] & knit."

¹⁰² Alice Delancey Izard to Ralph Izard, Jr., January 5, 1803, Ralph Izard Family Papers (1778-1826), Library of Congress.

¹⁰³ Mary M. Pringle Diary, 1826-?, Mary Motte Alston Pringle Papers, SCHS.

¹⁰⁴ "Essay on the Modern Novel," *Virginia Gazette*, Purdie and Dixon, June 11, 1772, p. 1, quoted in Kerrison, *Claiming the Pen*, 107. See also Pearson, *Women's Reading in Britain*, 178. Ian Watt argues that the spread of novel-reading to lower classes in England was largely contained to "apprentices and household servants," workers who would have had both leisure time and access to books. Watt, *Rise of the Novel*, 45-49.

When her daughter's employer failed to adequately teach her daughter these skills, Mary took him to court, demanding that he see to "hir Learning."¹⁰⁵ Too poor and perhaps uneducated to oversee the child's education herself, Mary nevertheless understood that reading was an increasingly valued skill for young Southern women in the eighteenth century. Mary probably believed that reading would allow her daughter to make her own way in the world, to draw up contracts and advertise to potential employers. But she may have also seen reading as a more intangible benefit. Perhaps she felt that literacy would give the young girl a certain sense of self-sufficiency in a world in which women, especially working women, had limited control over their lives, or perhaps she hoped that literacy would make the girl one day a better mother. While Mary herself may not have been able to read, reading was still a central component of her maternal toolkit.

The search for involvement in a broader world occasionally led women to redefine the scope of their maternal duties, and every now and then, a woman's interest in reading could overshadow or even supplant her interest in mothering. Maria Margherita Martini DeRieux, born in Paris, moved to Virginia in the 1780s with her husband Justin. The couple was nearly penniless and quickly ran into debt, and even the political connections of Maria's stepfather, Philip Mazzei, could not rescue them from poverty. Thomas Jefferson repeatedly attempted to aid the family, praising Justin DeRieux for "the worthiness of his character." But his money slipped through the family's hands, and by 1800, their house was filled with children and they were "reduced to the utmost poverty." According to Jefferson, Maria became "so corpulent that she cannot move about . . . , & none of the children are big enough. They are generally in rags, & often without bread." Thirteen years later, the family

¹⁰⁵ *Mason v. Pinckard*, May, 10, 1751, Lancaster County Chancery Court Records, LOV, quoted in Kerrison, *Claiming the Pen*, 14.

was still living from hand to mouth, moving around from town to town in rural Virginia “to seek relief from their distresses.”¹⁰⁶

During these years in the South, Maria was devouring books at an astounding pace. She kept a notebook to record all the titles she read from 1806 to 1822, and by the time of her death, she had amassed a list of 1,072 books, an average of slightly more than a book per week. She read popular novels such as *Charlotte Temple*, *Ivanhoe*, and *The Vicar of Wakefield*; histories of Scotland, France, and America; biographies of Bonaparte and Washington; religious and philosophical texts; and even the children’s stories of Maria Edgeworth. Was she reading these last out loud to her sons and daughters? Did she spend the family’s money on this reading habit, or was she borrowing books from friends and neighbors? Was she, perhaps, holding tightly to a last symbol of elite status – the ability and luxury to read – in the face of her deteriorating economic conditions? Leaving no documents besides her meticulous list of books, Maria must remain a cipher. Her love of reading was not wholly private, however; her obituary in 1826 quietly noted her name, manner of death, and “her extensive literary acquirements.”¹⁰⁷ The poignancy of Maria’s poverty and her concurrent hunger for the written word illustrate the urgency of intellectual engagement for women in the South. While most mothers engaged in networks of communication for a very practical and immediate purpose, occasionally a woman like Maria DeRieux preferred the search for knowledge to the application of its benefits. We cannot know whether she brought books into the home in a desperate effort to raise her children properly under extreme

¹⁰⁶ Thomas Jefferson to Philip Mazzei, April 29, 1800, December 29, 1813; Philip Mazzei to Thomas Jefferson, October 5, 1815, in Margherita Marchione, ed., *Philip Mazzei: Selected Writings and Correspondence; Volume III: 1792-1816, World Citizen* (Prato, Italy: Cassa di Risparmi e Depositi di Prato, 1983), 237, 543, 568-9.

¹⁰⁷ Maria Margaret Martini DeRieux Commonplace Book, VHS.

hardship, or whether she read alone. If the former, her diligence was extreme. But if the latter, the jarring quality of her seeming abandonment of maternal obligation only highlights how seamlessly most Southern mothers incorporated reading, intellectual conversation, and the acquisition of literary knowledge into their pursuit of maternal perfection.

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Scholars have proven that many elite women in the South read widely, but it is fundamental to understanding their reading habits to remember that many were also mothers. Motherhood transformed the act of reading from a sweet, if occasionally forbidden, pleasure to a practical act of self-education, a necessary training for a woman's primary position in the home. Reading led to knowledge, and knowledge led to confidence in the nursery and schoolroom. Reading thus provided mothers with a sense of responsibility, intellectual security, and a template for gendered childrearing. Though many women had no further recommendation for a book than its general popularity, others discovered texts through close female networks. In this sense, women were choosing which ideologies to perpetuate, both for themselves and the next generation. Through children's books, romances, spiritual guides, and a host of other texts, women both learned about the world and cemented their own competency as mothers.

These mothers changed reading from a leisurely class-based pursuit to a vital search for knowledge and authority within both familial and communal networks. They consumed a wide variety of printed material to construct and confirm their own models of motherhood, and their broad interest in theology, philosophy, history, and even romance helped stock their mind with answers to their children's questions. The subjects mothers learned from reading became a guide for teaching their sons and daughters. Within literate families, children

learned about the teachings of the scriptures and the rhythms of poetry from their mothers, but they also learned about gendered roles in the early Republic. Mothers consciously brought texts into the home that validated their own sense of maternal prerogative as well as the relatively equal merit and moral character of young boys and girls. Conversations that centered on *Pamela*, Edgeworth's stories, or the Bible also brought women together into literary communities that spanned otherwise isolated plantations. Observations and judgments about books elevated women to positions of intellectual power within those communities. Reading educated women, but it also gave mothers a sense of authority and direction in molding the Southern home into a realm where, according to the very books they read, mothers maintained a certain degree of control.

CHAPTER NINE

WHITE TEACHERS

Education was vital to many white families in the South; for poorer children, it could be a means to a better future, and for elite boys and girls, it stamped them with an unmistakable class status. Resting largely in the hands of mothers, education was a powerful tool, and it confirmed mothers' sense of their own usefulness and worth. As infants became toddlers, and toddlers became young boys and girls, mothers began a program of education that included practical skills, moral development, and gendered instruction in how to be a valuable member of local and regional communities. Most mothers in the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century South considered education to fall under their purview, and as a result, most children engaged in educational programs that had been devised and implemented by their mothers. To a large degree, mothers controlled what children were taught, where their lessons were held, who could instruct them, and who could be instructed. By overseeing so many elements of their children's education, women constructed maternal roles that placed them at the center of debates about religion, gender, race, and class. These mothers claimed responsibility over the classroom, and thus responsibility for the future of their families, communities, and nation. When Caroline Ball Laurens traveled to Europe in the 1820s, she directed a letter to her sister that "contained directions respecting the manner in which she wished her children to be educated, should she die before her return to

Charleston from Europe.”¹ In case of her death, Caroline asked another female relative, rather than her husband, to carry on her educational program. While fathers provided financial support, and certainly opinions, mothers for the most part oversaw this aspect of childrearing. As a result, the face of the young Republic was molded by mothers who decided how boys and girls would be taught and thus what kinds of men and women they would be.

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The subjects mothers taught were varied, from grammar to housekeeping, and they depended both on networks of fellow mothers and on larger social trends to determine what material their children needed to know. One of the great intellectual and educational shifts in early America was the gradual overshadowing of religion by rationalism. While male writers could debate the finer points of secularism for days, mothers were the ones who chose how to interpret Enlightenment trends and how to translate new ideas into lessons for children. Mothers were therefore at the vanguard of determining how the Enlightenment would affect the next generation of Americans. As the eighteenth century progressed, and Europe and the Americas experienced the increased secularization that accompanied Enlightenment philosophies, most elite white mothers gradually relinquished a religious model for education and began to trust that the study of geometry, history, Latin, and dancing would ensure a place for their daughters and sons in the drawing rooms and academies of the young Republic.²

¹ May 29, 1827, Caroline Olivia Laurens Diary, SHC.

² The secularization occurring during the Enlightenment is often vaguely defined and can have multiple meanings. The brand of secularization that most affected these Southern women was the increasing marginalization of religion as a foundation for public life. However, as Jonathan Sheehan has noted, this shift in the role of “external” religion was not necessarily accompanied by a devaluing

In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, religious education was paramount in the Chesapeake colonies; a dismal mortality rate combined with preexisting religious ideologies to make the salvation of children a familial priority. By the mid-eighteenth century, a growing colonial population, a burgeoning economy, and a new emphasis on the inherent innocence of children significantly altered the practices of childrearing, as religious learning was subsumed under the larger project of secular education.³ By the late eighteenth century, John Locke's writings on education were outselling his treatises on government, and children's books began emphasizing rational duty over religious responsibility. Reluctant to abandon entirely their religious instincts in the raising of their precious charges, Southern mothers made the transition from religious to secular education by way of a heightened discourse of morality.⁴ This secularized emphasis on morality and virtue comforted mothers

of "internal" religion, or the personal faith to which eighteenth-century individuals subscribed. As we will see, this "internal" religion remained a vital component of most Southern mothers' lives. See Jonathan Sheehan, "Enlightenment, Religion, and the Enigma of Secularization," *American Historical Review* 108, no. 4 (2003): 1075.

³ For an examination of both the strength of religion in the Chesapeake colonies and the influence of Puritanism in the early formation of Virginia, see Kevin Butterfield, "Puritans and Religious Strife in the Early Chesapeake," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 109, no. 1 (2001): 5-36. As colonial populations increased and improving infant survival rates challenged the specter of disease, elite families turned to Britain for examples of respectable childrearing. In response to their cousins' stipulations for an appropriately educated gentry, American parents rapidly adopted British programs of classical and rational education in an effort to prove their cosmopolitanism. For more on the relationship between Southern planter families and British educational systems, see Smith, *Inside the Great House*, 88-97; and Edmund S. Morgan, *Virginians at Home: Family Life in the Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville: Dominion Books, 1952), 9-10. This relationship would continue into the early nineteenth century, as new academies were also structured on an English model of education; see Catherine Clinton, "Equally Their Due: The Education of the Planter Daughter in the Early Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic* 2, no. 1 (1982): 42, 49.

⁴ Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1988), 20-21, 45-49; Smith, *Inside the Great House*, 40-41. For the connections between public virtue and ideals of republicanism, see Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), 65-70. For more on the similar educational arc of eighteenth-century England, see Mary Hilton, *Women and the Shaping of the Nation's Young: Education and Public Doctrine in Britain, 1750-1850* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

who feared for their children's souls, but it also allowed children to thrive in a society where their scope of moral duty was widening to encompass colony and country in addition to God.⁵

Though mothers could, to a large extent, control how and to what degree Enlightenment trends were introduced to their children, not all of them expressed perfect confidence in this responsibility. As a young mother in the 1740s and 1750s, Eliza Lucas Pinckney was on the cusp of changing ideas about the role of religion in children's education, and her letters to her children illustrate the tension between an increasingly secular culture and the conviction that God alone could save one's children. Struggling against the "fashionable but shameful vice" among many American youths who joined in the "ridiculeing of religion," Eliza reminded her distant sons that she would disdain a "learned man with every accomplishment" in favor of a "good man without any," thus ranking spiritual virtue above cold rationalism.⁶ Reason united with virtue, however, was a combination of which any mother could be proud. In 1760, Maria Taylor Byrd declared that her grandson Billy would use his education to become "not only . . . a Comfort, but an Honour to his Family."⁷ In the 1820s, Mary Stanford said of her son, "His mother will love him dearly if he will be a

⁵ For an excellent discussion of how morality became the acceptable middle ground between eighteenth-century evangelicals and the secular rationalists of the Enlightenment, see Ned C. Landsman, *From Colonials to Provincials: American Thought and Culture, 1680-1760* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 123-148. See also Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 187-189.

⁶ Eliza Lucas to George Lucas, June 1742; Eliza Lucas Pinckney to Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, February 7, 1761, in Eliza Lucas Pinckney, *The Letterbook of Eliza Lucas Pinckney, 1739-1762*, ed. Elise Pinckney (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 52, 159.

⁷ Maria Taylor Byrd to William Byrd III, April 28, 1760, Byrd Family Papers (1757-1860), VHS.

good boy & learn fast. She can't bear any other idea but that he should be good.”⁸ By the 1840s and 1850s, mothers expressed virtually identical sentiments; Caroline Clitherall warned her children, “Better grow up in ignorance of accomplishments than receive an education of art & hypocrisy,” and Mary Alston Pringle echoed, “It is certainly in the power of every man to be a good scholar, as well as a good man.”⁹ In praising the intellectual capacity of her daughter Harriott, Eliza Pinckney wrote, “I thank God, I have an excellent soil to work upon, and by the Divine Grace hope the fruit will be answerable to my indeavours in the cultivation.”¹⁰ Though she continued to use the religious rhetoric of the child as an uncultivated garden, Eliza also allowed for the importance of French and music as fertilizers in that delicate soil.¹¹

Even into the nineteenth century, mothers still debated the appropriate balance between religion and rationalism; while the rhetoric of “republican motherhood” tried to push mothers into a rational, civic role, mothers understood that they continued to exercise both secular and religious authority in the home. These women were both moralists and Republican mothers, purveyors of both rationalism and sentiment.¹² Martha Laurens Ramsay

⁸ Mary Stanford to Adeline Stanford, April 17, 1825, Richard Stanford Papers, SHC.

⁹ Caroline Eliza Burgwin Clitherall Diaries, Vol. 2, p. 14, SHC; Mary Motte Alston Pringle Diary, 1826-, Mary Motte Alston Pringle Papers, SCHS.

¹⁰ Eliza Lucas Pinckney to Mr. Keate, February 1762, *Letterbook*, 181.

¹¹ In 1817, Rachel Mordecai Lazarus recorded her eight-year-old sister remarking, “you said just now, something about a cultivated mind, and I thought it was pretty, because that seemed like the mind was a garden that seeds could be planted in.” Rachel Mordecai Lazarus Diary, 1816-1820, Myers Family Papers, VHS. See Julia Briggs for a discussion of John Locke’s influence in popularizing the religious child-as-garden metaphor. Julia Briggs, “‘Delightful Task!’: Women, Children, and Reading in the Mid-Eighteenth Century,” in *Culturing the Child, 1690-1914: Essays in Memory of Mitzi Myers*, ed. Donelle Ruwe (Lanham, MD: The Children’s Literature Association, 2005).

¹² In her recent synthesis, Joan R. Gundersen distinguishes between “republican” and “evangelical” motherhood, but I contend that styles of motherhood were never so neatly compartmentalized. Joan

raised eleven children from 1787 to 1811 in Charleston, South Carolina, and perpetually struggled with the tension between her faith in extensive education and her fervent devotion to Christianity. After sending her son to Yale, Martha peppered her letters to the young man with religious injunctions. Between inquiries about his studies, the concerned mother reminded her son that she was “continually addressing the throne of heaven for the welfare of her dear child.”¹³ The Enlightenment notion of public virtue offered Martha a tangible solution; she inculcated a sense of rational righteousness in her offspring as a compromise between a cosmopolitan society’s fixation on secularism and many women’s continuing commitment to spirituality. Eliza Haywood sent her sons to college but frequently reminded them that “you cannot be good or Great and Useful Men in yr. Generation unless you . . . Read yr. Bibles.”¹⁴ As this moral tug-of-war was occurring in America, English education was grappling with similar issues. Caroline Clitherall of North Carolina was educated in England during the 1790s, and while she pored over her “books & dissected maps,” she also “cou’d repeat fluently our Savior’s Sermon on the Mount” at the tender age of eight.¹⁵ The

R. Gundersen, *To Be Useful to the World: Women in Revolutionary America, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 206-209.

¹³ Martha Laurens Ramsay, *Memoirs of the Life of Martha Laurens Ramsay*, ed. David Ramsay, 3rd ed. (Boston: S.T. Armstrong, 1812), 257. See also Joanna Bowen Gillespie, *The Life and Times of Martha Laurens Ramsay, 1759-1811* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), 121. The eighteenth-century history of Yale presents an encapsulation of this gradual trend from religious to more secular education; in the 1740s, head of the college Thomas Clap ushered in a host of reforms that transformed his role from “rector” to “president” and changed the curriculum to include mathematics, astronomy, and philosophy. Mirroring Martha’s own strong ties to religion, President Clap also instituted compulsory attendance at church services for his young charges, and students continued to study scripture, metaphysics, and ethics. Sheldon S. Cohen, “Tradition and Change in the Ivy League: Benjamin Trumbull, The Years at Yale, 1755-1759,” *History of Education Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (1966): 33-48.

¹⁴ Eliza Haywood to George Haywood, January 30, 1817 (Raleigh, NC, to Chapel Hill, NC), Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

¹⁵ Caroline Eliza Burgwin Clitherall Diaries, Vol. 2, p. 12, SHC.

emergence of morality as the sum of spiritual duty and secular responsibility in the eighteenth century was a direct product of Enlightenment ideals, and its effect was felt by mothers on both sides of the Atlantic. Not all women, however, were willing to embrace secular education as a supplement to religious faith. Sarah Anderson Jones, who struggled to convert her children in the 1790s, believed that the word of God was the only teacher necessary, though she also found an ally in Seneca:

Seneca says also wee take a great deal of Pains to trace the wanderings of Ulysses but why not look to our Selves that wee wander not at all. What is it to me whether Penelope was honest or no. Teach me to be so my Self. What am I better for music. Teach me to tune my affections in Constancy to God. Geometry teaches me the art of measuring acres. Teach me to measure my appetites and know when I have Enough.¹⁶

For Sarah, music and geometry were useless if they distracted from the more virtuous task of self-discipline.

In addition to religion, rationalism, and arithmetic, mothers also taught gender roles, and through their interactions with sons and daughters in the classroom, mothers planted the seeds of appropriate gendered behavior. Many women chose to pay particular attention to their daughters' schooling, perhaps in an attempt to make up for the gaps in their own education, while some reinforced the division between miniature citizen-patriots and domestic proto-mothers. The capacity women had to influence the adoption of gender roles through their programs of education was one of their most salient contributions to the face of the new republic.

For the most part, elite Southern mothers encouraged a broad foundation of knowledge that was relatively gender-blind. One of the first divisions between girls and boys may have been the distinct subjects in which they were trained, but neither sex had a

¹⁶ March 16, 1792, Sarah Anderson Jones Diary, WM.

monopoly on their disciplines; young ladies often studied geometry while their brothers were instructed in dancing.¹⁷ In the course of a single day, home-schooled sons and daughters were similarly enlightened and frustrated and often made conscious of their class and race more than of their gender. Both girls and boys were instructed in reading, writing, and “Cyphering,” while Latin and Greek were usually reserved for the brightest sons. In the large Carter family of Virginia, Philip Fithian was enjoined to teach only one son “Languages”; that son was “seventeen years old, and seems to be a Boy of Genius.”¹⁸ From a professed “sense of duty,” Nancy Turner Hall determined to teach both her sons and daughters “some mechanical trade; or some professional business by which to support themselves,” since nothing was “more pitiable than a young lady, or gentleman either, who can do nothing.”

¹⁷ Morgan, *Virginians at Home*, 18; Jane Turner Censer, *North Carolina Planters and Their Children, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 44-5. Margaret A. Nash, *Women's Education in the United States, 1780-1840* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 35-52. Catherine Read remarked that her daughters “Catherine & Cornelia both dance very well,” while her son William “also begins to rub off a little of his awkwardness, by going to dancing school.” Catherine Read to Betsy Ludlow, February 4, 1811, Read Family Papers, SCL. When Esther Cox’s granddaughter began to excel at dancing, she hope that her grandson “will be old enough in the winter to try his steps.” Esther Cox to Mary Cox Chesnut, July 23, 1805, Cox and Chesnut Family Papers, SCL.

¹⁸ Journal of Philip Vickers Fithian, November 1, 1773; Philip Vickers Fithian to Enoch Green, November 2, 1773, in *The Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian: A Plantation Tutor of the Old Dominion, 1773-1774*, ed. Hunter Dickinson Farish (Williamsburg: Colonial Williamsburg, Inc., 1957), 20-1. The taboo on Latin for women persisted into the nineteenth century among Southern families; when consulting Maria Edgeworth about a practical system of education for her daughter, Rachel Mordecai Lazarus inquired if “Latin ought to form a part of female education,” since its study would undoubtedly detract from “other more essential branches.” Rachel Mordecai Lazarus to Maria Edgeworth, January 6, 1827, in Rachel Mordecai Lazarus and Maria Edgeworth, *The Education of the Heart: The Correspondence of Rachel Mordecai Lazarus and Maria Edgeworth*, ed. Edgar E. MacDonald (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 114. Occasionally, however, when a girl did learn Latin, it could prove the delight of her proud parents. One young girl quoted a Latin phrase in a letter to her father, who promptly forwarded the display of learning to his cousin, adding, “But that you may not think her a pedant . . . I ought to inform you that she has been studying that language for 2 years & reads Caesar I think now.” A. Waddell to Eliza Haywood, n.d., Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

Affected by the cycles of economic hardship in the South, many mothers worked to train their children in talents that would provide them with their own security.¹⁹

When children outgrew their mothers' instructional abilities, the different paths they took revealed that mothers were becoming more attuned to social pressures. Even though women may have expressed equal interest in their young sons' and daughters' developing minds, by the time their children reached adolescence, mothers were aware of the positions available to them in the colony or country, and worked to obtain the appropriate education. Despite being one of the most financially independent and well-educated women in South Carolina in the 1760s, Eliza Lucas Pinckney was careful to replicate her colony's tradition of distinguishing between the potential of sons and daughters. Eliza retained only her daughter Harriott under her purview while she sent her two sons to British boarding schools, a decision which would have been common but which provoked constant anxieties in the young mother. In one letter, Eliza detailed "what I have suffered and do still suffer" in parting with her sons "for 2 or 3 year—and considering the uncertainty of life, perhaps for ever!"²⁰ Despite this distinction in educational venues, Harriott received training in both geography and music and was openly "fond of learning."²¹ The primary differences among the Pinckney children arose not from subject matter, but from the formality and length of

¹⁹ Nancy Johns Turner Hall, "The Imaginationist or Recollections of an old lady, a native of one of the Southern States, now a resident of the State of Ohio in the Year 1844," p. 41, VHS. See Jan Lewis, *The Pursuit of Happiness: Family and Values in Jefferson's Virginia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 134-168.

²⁰ Eliza Lucas Pinckney to Lady Carew, February 7, 1757, *Letterbook*, 87.

²¹ Eliza Lucas Pinckney to Mr. Keate, February 1762; Eliza Lucas Pinckney to Master MacKenzie, March 1760, *Letterbook*, 182, 142.

their education. While her sons were misbehaving in British public schools, Eliza kept Harriott close by her side.

For most Southern mothers, the education of young girls was a particular priority, and women's instructions, entreaties, and fears for their daughters reveal a clear understanding of the new opportunities for girls in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and the urgent need for this education. Catherine Read boasted that her daughters effortlessly whiled away the hours on their isolated plantation, for "their Studies engross their whole time." Education, when not a preparation for a career in politics or law, was a godsend to women cut off from a broader social network. Education provided the means by which women created their own public discourses that radiated out from the parlor and the nursery. Catherine hoped her daughters' education would "furnish them with resources in future, that they many not complain of the tediousness of Life."²² Esther Cox saw "the necessity more strongly every day of girls being instructed," and urged her granddaughter to cultivate her reading habit in order that she might "make a sensible woman."²³ Caroline Clitherall trained her daughter in French, drawing, and "many little things, as a future resource."²⁴ When fourteen-year-old Isabel Yates wrote to her mother from school in 1825 and politely asked to learn dancing "if you have no objection," she may well have been addressing a mother who believed in more cerebral achievements. Certainly Isabel had had some training in politics, for she added that "I am afraid Jackson will not be president but Adams."²⁵ In 1807, Betsy

²² Catherine Read to Betsy Ludlow, September 27, 1811, December 26, n.d., Read Family Papers, SCL.

²³ Esther Cox to Mary Cox Chesnut, April 5, 1806, February 20, 1804, Cox and Chesnut Family Papers, SCL.

²⁴ Caroline Eliza Burgwin Clitherall Diaries, Vol. 6, p. 15, SHC.

Watts was distressed to hear that her daughter Sarah was not learning either geography or “Arithmetick” at school, especially since “without the latter, you will be subject to many inconveniences, and impositions, particularly when you get to be an old maid, as was your resolution when we parted.”²⁶ Mothers wanted daughters to be prepared for all possible challenges that might arise, including spinsterhood.

Women protected and encouraged a curiosity in their daughters. When Rebecca Moore discovered a “latent talent for Botany” in her young daughter, she promised that she would “certainly endeavour to have it Cultivated.”²⁷ The Haywood daughters also flaunted a certain educational privilege; while Frances Haywood was “becoming daily more intelligent and interesting,” her sister Becky spent her time at home “boasting much of her Scholarship,” “constantly thrusting a Book . . . at [her] Mother,” and showing signs of developing into a “‘Blue Stocking’ or in other words a Literary Character.”²⁸ Education was a collective concern; after learning of the local school’s annual awards, Jane Williams wrote her daughter, “I see by the papers Sally and Charity Haywood have Medals why had not our Daughter.” “Our Daughter” was technically Jane’s granddaughter, but this young lady served as a communal daughter in a network of interested women.²⁹

²⁵ Isabel Yates to Elizabeth Saylor Yates, February 8, 1825, Yates Family Correspondence, SCHS.

²⁶ Betsy Watts to Sarah C. Watts, April 4, 1807, Sarah C. Watts Papers, WM.

²⁷ Rebecca C. Moore to Eliza Haywood, September 1, 1811, Haywood Family Papers, SHC. Alice Izard, though, feared that botany was quickly becoming an inappropriate subject for young ladies; in a letter to her son, she worried that “Botany ought to be a sweet study, emblematical of innocence; but the learned have made use of such terms for explaining it, that . . . I am at a loss to conceive how a tutor can express them to a young Lady.” Alice Delancey Izard to Henry Izard, February 21, 1808, Ralph Izard Papers, SCL.

²⁸ John Haywood to daughter Eliza Haywood, April 20, 1822, March 21, 1822; Eliza Haywood to father John Haywood, April 8, 1822, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

²⁹ Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, December 11, 1814, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

But not all women shared a vision of an appropriate education. Caroline Clitherall was a consummate conservative when it came to raising young ladies, and yearned for “those times” when men practiced “Manual labor, and scientific pursuits” while women learned how to “render Home a Paradise.” Her assessment of the state of women’s education in the early nineteenth century reveals a bitter distaste for an equality in education:

In these days a rapid course of the really useful is ran through, to give place, to a Collegiate Education; to abstruse Science, & a superficial & smattering acquirements, totally useless to the poor Husband who sought in a Wife, a help meet, & too late discovers that the Mother of his Children has no ability to train them either for Earth or Heaven. I may appear to you severe, but Truth is truth.

Despite her aversion to women learning science and math, Caroline was nevertheless a strong proponent of female education, and after training a number of adopted girls in her own home, she spent her later years operating a number of girls’ day schools from North Carolina to Alabama. Eliza Haywood copied whole sections of Hannah More’s *Strictures* into her commonplace book, signaling a certain respect for the British author’s belief in an expanded, but carefully differentiated, education for women. Haywood copied More’s sentiment, for instance, that women’s knowledge must be “rather fitted for home consumption than foreign exportation.”³⁰ Nancy Turner Hall’s mother would have agreed, for “looking into futurity, and imagining that her daughters would have husbands to comfort; and children to train,” the mother instructed her daughters “in all the common branches of needlework and knitting operations and indeed many other things,” including how to milk cows, strain butter, make soaps and candles, and cure bacon. When Nancy “expressed anything like a wish for the

³⁰ Caroline Eliza Burgwin Clitherall Diaries, Vol. 3, Pt. 2, p. 14, SHC; Eliza Haywood, Commonplace Book, May 10, 1821, p. 15-28, Haywood Family Papers, SHC; Hannah More, “The Practical Use of Female Knowledge, with a Sketch of the Female Character, and a Comparative View of the Sexes,” in *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, Vol. II (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1799), 1-41.

improvement of my mind, I was told for my consolation that I had quite as good an education as my mother, my sister, my aunts or my grandmother.” Coming from a rural background, Nancy’s mother devised a plan of education that would best prepare her children for their likely futures.³¹

Women such as Caroline Clitherall and Eliza Haywood participated in a much broader conversation about women’s education that spanned Europe and America in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as women joined the reading and writing public. Mary Wollstonecraft, Hannah More, Catherine Macauley, and Judith Sargent Murray filled pages of books and newspapers with their theories of women’s learning. Arguments in favor of women’s education ran the gamut from practicality to spirituality, but most authors concurred that some degree of education for women was necessary in a newly Enlightened society. The most conservative proponents of education viewed it as a helpful ornament to women’s roles as wives and mothers, a skill they could use to improve their conversational prowess and to hone their moral sensibility in the interest of childrearing. But women were not mere passive recipients of the gift of expanded educational access; they fought for it, argued about it, and desired it on its own terms.³² When female education became commonplace by the mid-nineteenth century, many older women remembered the difficulties

³¹ Nancy Johns Turner Hall, "The Imaginationist or Recollections of an old lady, a native of one of the Southern States, now a resident of the State of Ohio in the Year 1844," pp. 13, 35-37, VHS.

³² Anne L. Kuhn, *The Mother’s Role in Childhood Education: New England Concepts, 1830-1860* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947); Anne Stott, *Hannah More: The First Victorian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 219-221; Hilton, *Women and the Shaping of the Nation’s Young*, 39-85; A. Kristen Foster, “‘A Few Thoughts in Vindication of Female Eloquence’: The Case for the Education of Republican Women,” in *Children and Youth in a New Nation*, ed. James Marten (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 129-148. For an excellent explanation of how women’s own thirst for learning fueled the spread of female education, see Nash, *Women’s Education in the United States*, 91-94. For a discussion of the rise of European salons in the mid-eighteenth century, see Evelyn Gordon Bodek, “Salonieres and Bluestockings: Educated Obsolescence and Germinating Feminism,” *Feminist Studies* 3, no. 3/4 (1976): 185-199.

they had endured to acquire education as girls in the eighteenth century. Nancy Turner Hall recalled with bitterness that “in those days . . . reading, writing a very little Arithmetic, were thought by most people, quite sufficient for girls.” She was not only grateful that “those days of pitchy darkness are gone by,” but she scolded the spoiled young women of the 1840s who found schooling to be a burden. She warned them to spend as much time as possible cultivating their minds, for “Duty to your parents requires it. Duty to your country requires it. Religion requires it. God requires it.”³³

Though many mothers’ actions and sentiments signaled a sincere affection for daughters in the young Republic, such evidence should not obscure the fact that a higher value was often placed on the education of sons, even when mothers were making the decisions. Women who successfully educated their children earned praise from various quarters, and in the years of the young Republic, the training of sons became a matter of national interest. One man playfully suggested that his pregnant cousin “should receive a pension for her future statesmen and warriors.”³⁴ Alice Delancey Izard hoped that her grandsons would “become excellent Citizens, after being excellent soldiers,” and believed that “Fathers & Mothers must . . . endeavour to make their Sons something more than Merchants or Lawyers.”³⁵ When criticizing the schools of the nation’s new capital, Martha Washington specifically mentioned their inadequacy for her grandson Wash; no mention is made of her other charge, Eleanor Parke Custis.³⁶ Caroline Clitherall evinced a similar

³³ Nancy Johns Turner Hall, "The Imaginationist or Recollections of an old lady, a native of one of the Southern States, now a resident of the State of Ohio in the Year 1844," pp. 9-10, VHS.

³⁴ Franklin L. Smith to Mary Smith, April 13, 1827, Rufus Reid Papers, SHC.

³⁵ Alice Delancey Izard to Margaret Izard Manigault, October 5, 1814, Ralph Izard Papers, SCL.

³⁶ Martha Washington to Fanny Bassett Washington, September 29, 1794, *Worthy Partner*, 276.

sentiment when she worried about the education of her son Alexander; even “tho’ I cou’d educate my girls, as I had educated their sisters – yet Alexr. Was too smart & intelligent a Boy” to be left solely to his mother’s care.³⁷ In North Carolina, Rachel Mordecai Lazarus also fretted over the value of her maternal wisdom; toward her daughters, she noted that “it is very delightful to me to watch and assist the gradual development of their minds and dispositions,” while her son, who was leaving for college, “has scarcely known any instructor but his mother whose tuition is now insufficient.”³⁸

Mothers in the early South certainly had a sense of their own power in shaping the intellects and affections of their children. What caused this modesty in Rachel, then, this belief that her son deserved a higher standard of education than her daughters? Rachel was replicating a gender hierarchy that had been ingrained into mothers’ minds well before the Revolution. Colonial society valued the active promise of boys in war, politics, and the marketplace more than the latent potential of girls with their developing wombs and auxiliary roles in plantation economies. Most mothers gladly embraced their role as social cultivators, and with this responsibility came certain concessions to the gender balance of eighteenth-century society. These mothers were not attempting to undermine gendered roles when they lavished attention on their daughters and taught them geometry; they were instead trying to prepare their children’s hearts and minds for the futures they would inhabit, whether the children were male or female and whether the lessons involved preserving jellies or wielding

³⁷ Caroline Eliza Burgwin Clitherall Diaries, Vol. 7, p. 37-38, SHC.

³⁸ Rachel Mordecai Lazarus to Maria Edgeworth, March 9, 1834, *Education of the Heart*, 254.

arms. Mothers wanted their children to be respectable representatives of their families, but above all, they wanted their children to lead happy lives.³⁹

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Location could prove as important as subject matter in a child's education, and mothers throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries made choices about what constituted a proper setting for their children's education, from home nurseries to Northern colleges. Fathers conscious of the necessity of a genteel upbringing often sent Southern sons abroad, but mothers typically controlled the fate of their daughters. Though a small number of men in the early Republic eagerly oversaw their daughters' schooling (Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr, most notably), girls in most planter families were only educated so far as their mothers saw fit.⁴⁰ Many elite Southern women could claim a large degree of power within their families due to distant fathers or deceased husbands. Whether on an extended sojourn to England or tied up in the colonial legislature, fathers often defined their responsibilities in such a way that children, and especially daughters, were of lesser importance. Thus, when patriotic writers exhorted women to take charge of their children's education in the late eighteenth century, they were merely asking them to follow in their own mothers' footsteps.

In the mid-eighteenth century, mothers had fairly limited choices when deciding where to educate their children, but they nonetheless defined their sphere of control to

³⁹ For an intriguing case study of a family's attempt to educate girls in the midst of waning interest of female education, see Anya Jabour, "'Grown Girls, Highly Cultivated': Female Education in an Antebellum Southern Family," *Journal of Southern History* 64, no. 1 (1998): 23-64.

⁴⁰ Daniel Blake Smith claimed that female education was almost wholly dependent on a father's whims, but my readings of these Southern women's diaries have suggested otherwise (Smith, *Inside the Great House*, 63).

include education. In 1742, with her father engaged in the West Indies, Eliza Lucas “prevailed on Mama” to send her younger sister to boarding school.⁴¹ Even if George Lucas had relayed specific desires for his daughter’s education, the final decision rested with Eliza and “Mama” in South Carolina. Eliza’s experience in making educational decisions proved useful when she was later compelled to relocate her two sons from one English boarding school to another; though her primary motive was concern for her younger son’s health, she was also careful to consider the new school’s reputation, student-teacher ratio, and proximity to London.⁴² When it was time to send her eldest son to a university, Eliza meticulously weighed the merits of a public education and a private one. Her decision to send Charles Cotesworth to Westminster was based on the university’s colonial reputation as well as her sense that Charles’ natural “sobriety and modesty” could withstand the assault of public schools on “the morals of Youth.”⁴³ No man stepped in to make these difficult decisions for Eliza, and judging by her thoughtfulness and efficiency, she fully recognized her own power and responsibility in this common maternal process.

By the 1770s and 1780s, elite families had a variety of options when contemplating the schooling of their children; the Carters of Virginia experimented with public education for their daughters before permitting them to be schooled with the boys under tutor Philip Fithian, while many of their neighbors employed governesses.⁴⁴ Within the Carter family, decisions about schooling were typically made jointly by Robert and Frances. Though

⁴¹ Eliza Lucas Pinckney, September 24, 1742, *Letterbook*, 56.

⁴² Eliza Lucas Pinckney to Mr. Morley, March 14, 1760, *Letterbook*, 145-146.

⁴³ Eliza Lucas Pinckney to Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, February 7, 1761, *Letterbook*, 158.

⁴⁴ Philip Vickers Fithian to Elizabeth Beatty, December 21, 1773, *Journal and Letters*, 36. For more on Southern families’ educational options, see Morgan, *Virginians at Home*, 11-14.

Frances was remarkably well-educated and could speak extensively on politics or theology, Robert was more closely tied to his young family than many Virginia planters and so perceived the upbringing of his children as part of his duty. Thus, it was Robert who engaged Philip Fithian as a tutor – though it is difficult to imagine the spirited Frances absenting herself from any discussion of her children – and it was Robert who disdained the College of William and Mary as a possibility for his sons. Robert’s reasons for shunning the first college established in the South were markedly similar to Eliza Lucas Pinckney’s concerns regarding Westminster. Robert cited the debauchery and drunkenness of William and Mary professors as the primary deterrent to his sons’ enrollment, implying that the quality of education was no more of a deciding factor for a father than a mother; what was crucial was the threat to children’s morality.⁴⁵

As academies and colleges sprang up along the eastern seaboard in the wake of the Revolution, mothers had to decide which were to be trusted. Because a successful education was often a reflection of a successful mother, women took the selection of schools very seriously. Sophia Heatly Dulles watched over the educational progress of her grandson John with great concern; when John was dismissed from West Point in 1833, Sophia could not “help thinking there is much partialty and prejudice at that Institution.” That summer, as the South Carolina family searched for another school for John, they agreed not to send him to Columbia, as “there has been such riots.” By the following fall, Sophia was pleased to report that “John will leave us soon to go to the University in Virginia,” which was conveniently closer to home.⁴⁶ For some women who sent their sons off to school, the mere idea of college

⁴⁵ Journal of Philip Vickers Fithian, February 12, 1774, *Journal and Letters*, 65.

⁴⁶ Sophia Heatly Dulles to Joseph Dulles, February 5, 1833, June 25, 1833, October 9, 1834, Ann Heatly Reid Lovell Estate and Family Papers, SCHS.

seemed like the answer to their educational prayers. South Carolinian Sarah Reeve Gibbes was “inexpressibly happy” to see her son John join the ranks at Princeton in 1783, “a place where we have so long ardently wish’d to have you settled at.” Sarah firmly believed that a college education would make her son “not only a credit to Your Family, but also an honor to Your Country, that you may when Yr. Country calls in the hour of exigency, rise up in her behalf and be enabled to give your voice unbiass’d by party or prejudice.” Noble dreams indeed, but Sarah and her husband were “greatly anxious for the welfare of our Children.”⁴⁷

Though the desire to secure the best education possible for their children guided most of their decisions, many mothers also considered the relative distance of various schools; some women were desperate to keep their children close to home, while others believed the more far-flung schools offered the best opportunities for growth. Sarah Macon Jerdone sent her thirteen-year-old son John to an English academy in 1777, in the midst of war, perhaps to protect his body as much as his mind. John assured her that he was happy and healthy, but that he was concerned for “the health and Welfare of my Mama, my Relations, and friends in Virginia.”⁴⁸ Frances Hume Pinckney sent her son Hodge to “Doctor Thomson’s Academy at Kensington near London,” but by 1785, she may have been regretting her decision; the boy was refusing to send any letters to his anxious mother, and in regards to the one letter she did receive, Frances made “not the least doubt but your Aunt Jenny made you write it, as their [sic] was writing of her own in it.”⁴⁹ One young man’s mother removed him from William

⁴⁷ Sarah Reeve Gibbes to John Gibbes, August 13, 1783, Gibbes Family Papers, SCHS.

⁴⁸ John stayed in England for three years and then studied medicine at Edinburgh University until his death in 1786. John Jerdone to Sarah Macon Jerdone, March 21, 1777, Jerdone Family Papers, WM.

⁴⁹ Frances Susanna Quash Hume Pinckney to Roger Pinckney V, July 14, 1785, Roger Pinckney Correspondence, SCHS.

and Mary in 1792 and decided to send him instead “to the university of Cambridge in New-England, in order that by travelling he may gain a knowledge of men and manners.”⁵⁰

In many families, mothers determined where their sons and daughters would be placed and then left the finances up to their husbands, but this was far from universal. A substantial number of women also controlled the purse strings, from sending in tuition payments to providing their studious children with allowances. Ann Cross paid a tutor six dollars for “1 Quarter’s Schooling her Son” in 1780, and two years later, paid the same tutor “One pound Seventeen Shillings and four pence.” These amounts came out of her own earnings as a tavern keeper; her husband, a slave trader, was rarely at home, and the son she was educating was her child by an earlier husband.⁵¹ Charles Carter Armistead’s education was overseen by both his mother Maria and aunt Anne; he was put to school in 1787 with a tutor in Port Royal, Virginia, and his uncle sent detailed notes to Maria about both the cost of the school and its atmosphere. In 1789, Charles was attending the Fredericksburg Academy while Anne paid for his tuition and books. By 1792, Maria was once more receiving reports from his teacher about his schedule, subjects, and progress. Both the schools and these women’s male relatives understood that Maria and Anne were the ultimate authorities when it came to Charles’s education.⁵² Mary Eppes Cocke was more than willing to humor her son, a University of Virginia student, when she heard that he “wanted more monney,” assuring

⁵⁰ William Munford to John Coalter, May 17, 1792, Brown, Coalter, Tucker Papers (I), WM.

⁵¹ Receipts from Ann Cross to A. Alexander, July 30, 1780, January 15, 1782, April 15, 1782, Paul Cross Papers, SCL. See also Ellen Hartigan-O’Connor, *The Ties That Buy: Women and Commerce in Revolutionary America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 64.

⁵² Landon Carter to Maria Carter Armistead, June 20, 1787; Fredericksburg Academy to Ann Champe Willis, January 11, 1789; Thomas Ryan to Anne Champe Willis, May 15, 1789; J. Woodville to Maria Carter Armistead, n.d., 1792, Armistead-Cocke Papers, WM.

him that “as to the extra expence it is a mear nothing.”⁵³ But Frances Pinckney’s generosity to Hodge seemed to backfire; the mother believed his backwardness in learning was due to “my sending you too great a supply of cash, & all your thoughts . . . runs on spending what is sent you.”⁵⁴

Colleges and academies had been available for sons since the middle of the century, but most mothers were enormously grateful to see the proliferation of schools for girls in the decades following the Revolution. The growth in opportunities for female education was one of the most significant changes to affect mothers’ identities as teachers.⁵⁵ By the 1790s, women who had long wished for more advanced schooling for their daughters were rewarded with boarding schools popping up across the South. The largest surge in formal education for girls occurred in the 1750s, and female enrollment in academies continued to increase in the 1790s and 1800s as the spread of the Enlightenment emphasis on education met the Revolutionary call for an educated citizenry. The first major transition from home schooling through tutors and governesses to external academies and day schools occurred mid-century,

⁵³ Mary Eppes Cocke to Richard Eppes, October 6, 1840, Eppes Family Papers, VHS. After her husband died, Mary changed Richard’s last name from Cocke to her maiden name of Eppes in 1840, when the boy was sixteen, in order for her family estate of “Appomattox” to continue under the name of Eppes.

⁵⁴ Frances Susanna Quash Hume Pinckney to Roger Pinckney V, July 14, 1785, Roger Pinckney Correspondence, SCHS.

⁵⁵ Anya Jabour argues that boarding schools and female academies also “offered elite girls a glimpse of an alternative definition of southern womanhood, one that revolved around self-improvement and female community rather than around self-sacrifice and male dominance” (49). For a rich discussion of girls’ experiences at antebellum boarding schools, see Jabour, *Scarlett’s Sisters: Young Women in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 47-82. Some women also became professional teachers, navigating the waters between performing somewhat feminine labor (teaching) and performing it in a public venue, often with remuneration. See Emily Bingham and Penny Richards, “The Female Academy and Beyond: Three Mordecai Sisters at Work in the Old South,” in *Neither Lady nor Slave: Working Women of the Old South*, eds. Susanna Delfino and Michele Gillespie (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 174-197.

as the range of subjects considered appropriate for Enlightened adults expanded beyond the scope of parents' capacities. As education began to encompass science, history, and philosophy, elite parents often relinquished their charges for a more thorough training.⁵⁶ Some of the earliest boarding schools for girls were operated by Moravians, and establishments in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and Salem, North Carolina, attracted many Southern mothers' eyes.

Wherever they chose to send their daughters and granddaughters, women watched over their improvement with baited breath. When so few girls had the resources to acquire a classical education in the early South, it became imperative for them to succeed, and some older women may also have lived vicariously through their young charges. Mary Steele's granddaughter Ann attended a school in Pittsboro, North Carolina, and received letters from Mary that both encouraged her and demanded a detailed accounting of her time. After Mary learned through a chain of female cousins that Ann spent seven and a half hours a day in the schoolroom, the grandmother wrote, "Recollect your friends feel anxious for your improvement. . . . I hope you may devote your whole time to the improvement of your mind." Did Mary fear that these hours were insufficient? As if to nudge her further, Mary continued, "I wish to know very much what you are studying. Send to me a list of Books and what time you devote to them be particular now." Mary Steele likely had few of the

⁵⁶ Linda Kerber attributes this increase in boarding schools to both "the political revolution" and "the industrial revolution," as girls were offered the expanded educational opportunities befitting a republicanized society and a widening print culture demanded increased rates of literacy for a fully-functioning populace (Kerber, 199-200). Because of the broader chronology of formal education for girls, Kerber's "industrial revolution" model – or what I would call an Enlightenment model – is more compelling than her "political revolution" model. For more on the mid-century spike in women's education, see Thomas Woody, *A History of Women's Education in the United States* (New York, 1929), Vol. 1, 229-33, 301-2. Also see Mary Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America's Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 34-111; and Nash, *Women's Education in the United States*, 15-33, 36-41.

opportunities her granddaughter enjoyed, and when she wrote this letter at the age of sixty-eight, she probably understood well what was at stake for the young girl in the still young republic. Catherine Puller wrote frequently to her distant daughter, who patiently reminded her that she “would write much oftener if I had it in my power. I have to write my composition and get my lessons on saturday and since I have been engaged in the sabbat school I have no time to write on sunday so you see how my time is spent.”⁵⁷

Mothers had very specific visions for what constituted an appropriate setting for their daughters’ schooling, and evaluating the attributes of various boarding schools allowed mothers to educate themselves about education, thereby gaining a sense of competence. When researching schools in Philadelphia for her South Carolina grandchildren, Esther Cox compared the establishments of “Mrs. Rivardy” and “Madam Grielo.” Esther considered both the number of students attending each school and the different subjects taught when making her recommendation, concluding that though “there will be no great difference in their prices, . . . there may be great in their treatment & manners.” Jane Williams praised Caroline Clitherall’s seminary in Smithville, North Carolina, noting the headmistress’s “unremitted attention to . . . their Nails, their Teeth, their Carriage,” her insistence on a strong religious foundation, and her belief in the power of exercise, for “in bad weather when they cannot walk out, they Swing and jump the rope.” Mary Stanford appreciated Salem’s “large & elegant” buildings and the “plainness & simplicity” of the teachers’ dress.

Some parents had different ideas about the effectiveness of these girls’ academies. After investigating the situation at Salem, Mary Stanford reported herself “pleas’d” at the fine accommodations, the methodical and comprehensive approach to education, and the

⁵⁷ Mary Steele to Ann N. S. Ferrand, May 5, 1834, John Steele Papers, SCL; Mary C. Puller to Catherine Puller, December 15, 1828, Thomas Family Papers, VHS.

“cleaver genteel girls.” Her husband, however, took the visit more lightly, arguing that while the school’s sober educational set-up “seem’d complete,” the girls would have to cultivate their “personal accomplishments . . . elsewhere.” Whatever her husband’s opinion of the progressive Moravian academy, Mary Stanford evidently won the day, and a few months later, their daughter was enrolled at Salem.⁵⁸ Mary Steele sent her daughter to Bethlehem, while Jane Williams urged her daughter Eliza to consider sending her granddaughter to Salem, reminding her that “the school is in such high reputation . . . that it is with Difficulty a place there is now obtained.” Other women were more picky; one young woman pronounced of the school at Bethlehem that “I would not wish to send a child of mine there.”⁵⁹ Some mothers still viewed boarding schools as a poor substitute for a mother’s attention. When Caroline Clitherall determined to send her daughter to a “boarding school of celebrity” for a summer to improve her health, she was careful to note that “these few months were the only tuition any of my daughters ever recd. from any but myself.”⁶⁰

Though some hands-off mothers like Martha Washington coolly concluded that children would learn “much better at school than at home,” many women mourned the loss of

⁵⁸ Mary Stanford to Ann Moore, August 4, 1805; Ariana Stanford to Richard Stanford, October 25, 1805; Richard Stanford Papers, SHC. Other parents sent their daughters to boarding schools precisely to obtain these “personal accomplishments”; Caroline Burgwin’s father sent her to an English girls’ school to “learn all the Ornamental in my power.” Caroline Eliza Burgwin Clitherall Diaries, Vol. 2, p. 42, SHC.

⁵⁹ John and Mary Steele to Ann Steele, May 21, 1799, John Steele Papers, SCL; John Steele to John Haywood, April 10, 1798, Haywood Family Papers, SHC; Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, November 11, 1806, Haywood Family Papers, SHC; M. K. to Mary Clarkson, August 12, n.d., Read Family Papers, SCL.

⁶⁰ Esther Cox to Mary Cox Chesnut, April 29, 1809, Cox and Chesnut Family Papers, SCL; Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, February 27, 1815, Haywood Family Papers, SHC; Mary Stanford to Ann Moore, August 4, 1805, Richard Stanford Papers, SHC; Caroline Eliza Burgwin Clitherall Diaries, Vol. 8, p. 7, SHC.

their daughters to distant boarding schools.⁶¹ In 1789, a local school mistress who was teaching the daughters of Sarah Jerdone Braikenridge decided to relocate to a school twelve miles distant; despite being very fond of the teacher, Sarah confessed that “my Children are so small & helpless that I can’t have resolution to part from them.” Several years later, however, after determining that “they learn so little where they are, their time is wasteing [sic] very fast,” Sarah decided that her girls should “go from Home to live at school.” The young mother acknowledged that this was her own decision; her husband “would not take them from me without my consent.” But even though she believed she was doing what was best for the children, she admitted that “I shall have a great miss of them especially of a night when I am by myself.”⁶² When western Virginia resident Betsy Watts sent her daughter off to Leroy Anderson’s female school in Williamsburg in 1807, she swore that “nothing but the improvement of your mind, could have reconciled me, to so long a separation.”⁶³ An extreme example is the experience of Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis, Martha’s own granddaughter. Profoundly attached to her children, Eleanor continually fretted about the health and happiness of her eldest daughter Parke, who was the first to venture from home. In a letter to Elizabeth Bordley, who lived near Parke’s school in Philadelphia, Eleanor peppered her closest friend with advice and injunctions, begging her to watch over Parke, to love her like her own daughter, to quiz her in French and music and to oversee the improvement of her posture. The letter is deeply plaintive, and Eleanor’s maternal anxieties finally overwhelmed her when she declared that she simply must move to Philadelphia to be nearer to her

⁶¹ Martha Washington to Fanny Bassett Washington, April 6, 1795, *Worthy Partner*, 284.

⁶² Sarah Jerdone Braikenridge to Sarah Macon Jerdone, March 11, 1789, n.d., Jerdone Family Papers, WM.

⁶³ Betsy Watts to Sarah C. Watts, April 4, 1807, Sarah C. Watts Papers, WM.

“precious girl,” her “Beloved Child.”⁶⁴ For Eleanor, the knowledge that her daughter’s teacher was “unequaled as a maternal Instructress” failed to soften the pain of separation.⁶⁵

Mothers without the financial resources of the elite also fought for their children’s education, though it was often less formal and closer to home. John Coalter, born on a small rural farm in western Virginia in 1769, spent his days laboring in the fields alongside his father’s few servants and daydreaming about “a liberal education.” When he came home from work, the boy would “kneel down before my mother’s bed & beg her to entreat my Father to send me to school.” John knew that his best chance for an education lay in his mother’s hands; his father merely responded, “But how could he spare me from the Farm . . . ?” His mother, a “weak & sickly” woman who would die shortly thereafter, finally convinced his father to send him to a “Latin school in the neighborhood.”⁶⁶ Mrs. Stump, another rural Virginian, heard that an educated young woman was thinking of starting a school in the area and leaped at the chance, hoping her daughters might learn some practical skills. The mother reported that “my gals wants to go powerful bad bein as how they heerd Miss Ann was a guine to teach flourin [ornamental needlework], and they drather larn that than any o’ this newfangled stuff sich as grammar & geography & the like.” When the girls asked their father if they could attend, “he jest cut um short off as a cornstalk,” certain that the school would be more than he could afford. These were families who would “have to make a power o’

⁶⁴ Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis to Elizabeth Bordley, March 1, 1815, in Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis, *George Washington’s Beautiful Nelly: The Letters of Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis to Elizabeth Bordley Gibson, 1794-1851*, ed. Patricia Brady (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 77-80.

⁶⁵ Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis to Elizabeth Bordley Gibson, July 4, 1817, *George Washington’s Beautiful Nelly*, 82.

⁶⁶ “Autobiographical sketch of John Coalter until his 18th birthday, 1787,” Brown, Coalter, Tucker Papers (I), WM.

tobacker hills to pay for it.” Mrs. Stump, however, would not concede so easily and decided to bargain for her daughters’ future:

We say, that bein as how Miss Ann’s young & has seed so much trouble, and every body was so sorry and done so much for her; & bein as she’s so sickly and can’t do nothin else, and her daddy’s our minister, and she got her larnin cheap; she might gest larn our poor childer for almost nothin to give her a start.

Just like wealthier mothers, Mrs. Stump knew what she wanted for her children – a practical rather than a ornamental education – and, unlike her husband, she was willing to do whatever was necessary to secure it.⁶⁷

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Voicing their opinions about what and where children were being taught was only part of mothers’ duties; they also claimed responsibility for selecting suitable teachers. Women who were freed from other duties by servants and enslaved African Americans and who felt qualified to educate their children within the home often did so, while others took advantage of expanding educational opportunities to enlist tutors, governesses, and dancing masters. Selecting appropriate teachers for their children – or deciding that their own knowledge was sufficient to educate a child – involved a great deal of confidence, especially by the late eighteenth century when the nation’s eye was turned to mothers-as-educators. The facility with which mothers made these decisions, and even their moments of self-doubt or ambivalence, reveals that most women understood education to be their particular responsibility, a responsibility which was not assigned by Republican thinkers but was chosen by women who understood their children’s success to be a marker of their own

⁶⁷ Nancy Johns Turner Hall, "The Imaginationist or Recollections of an old lady, a native of one of the Southern States, now a resident of the State of Ohio in the Year 1844," p. 44, VHS.

competence. Having the power to make educational decisions for their children only added to mothers' sense of self-worth.

Women who chose to educate their children at home, either temporarily or full-time, generally reported a deep satisfaction with the experience. Caroline Clitherall instructed a pair of adopted girls in reading, writing, history, and catechism, and understood well from what this luxury derived. "Having excellent servants, & a good sempstress," Caroline wrote, "I had abundance of time to devote to my precious children."⁶⁸ Elite women in the South often took pleasure in training their children's minds on their own terms, at least until their sons and daughters were old enough to attend colleges, academies, or boarding schools. Catherine Read sent her children to a local day school, but when bad weather kept them at home, she confidently took the reins, becoming "quite a School Mistress." She had few qualms about her abilities as a teacher, but instead observed, "[I] flatter myself they will be no losers by this new arrangement." At some point, Catherine educated her children on a more regular basis at home, perhaps because of a distrust of local schools. She noted that her son "learns more in one day at home than he does in a Month at school," and that "our Mornings begin with writing, reading, spelling, learning by Heart." While Catherine's husband helped an older son along with his studies, she oversaw her younger children's education, which perhaps absorbed more of her time than she had bargained for. Snatching a rare moment of peace to write her sister, Catherine observed, "the Girls are so continually learning their lessons in the Room with me & calling upon me that I can only embrace that leisure that offers whilst they are at their drawing school to write to my friends." Though her children prevented her from enjoying much leisure, Catherine "count[ed] it as one of the

⁶⁸ Caroline Eliza Burgwin Clitherall Diaries, Vol. 5, p. 33-34, SHC.

Blessings . . . to have it in my power to watch over them incessantly.”⁶⁹ In a eulogy to his deceased wife, Jacob Mordecai recalled how Judith had overseen their children’s education, teaching their sons and daughters “to lisp praise & adoration to the Father of Mercy,” “to trace your letters in alphabetic order,” and, for the girls, “to use the needle.”⁷⁰

Other women who took on the role of teacher themselves did so not simply out of personal confidence but because the alternatives seemed so dismal. Southern schools earned no end of scorn from many elite mothers who envied the more established academies and colleges of the Northeast. South Carolinian Sophia Dulles tried to convince her grown son to move back home from Philadelphia, believing the South would be a far superior place to raise a family – that is, “if it was not for the education of your Children.” She frankly admitted that “the greatest disadvantage this places labours under is that of educating the young People.”⁷¹ Washington resident Mary Hazelhurst Latrobe confided to a friend in 1812 that she had “undertaken the education of my children; the schools here are miserable.” The capital’s schools evidently allowed too much ethnic intermingling for Mary’s taste; her son John “used to go to school in the neighborhood to an Irishman, where he learned the brogue so completely that it has taken me six months to cure him of it.”⁷² Catherine Read suffered a similar aversion to boarding schools, where she believed students “are treated & act more like Hogs than human beings.” Catherine despaired when one son became too unruly for her

⁶⁹ Catherine Read to Betsy Ludlow, January 13, 1805, December 20, n.d., January 13, 1805, February 5, n.d.; Catherine Read to Mary Clarkson, n.d., Read Family Papers, SCL.

⁷⁰ Jacob Mordecai to Moses, Samuel, Rachel, Ellen, and Caroline Mordecai, July 20, 1796, Myers Family Papers, VHS.

⁷¹ Sophia Heatly Dulles to Joseph Dulles, December 7, 1832, June 21, 1834, Ann Heatly Reid Lovell Estate and Family Papers, SCHS.

⁷² Mary Elizabeth Hazelhurst Latrobe to Juliana Miller, December 14, 1812, quoted in John Edward Semmes, *John H. B. Latrobe and His Times, 1803-1891* (Baltimore: The Norman, Remington Co., 1917), p. 22-23.

maternal control, for the prospect of sending him off to school was equally troubling. “At one time we thought of the College at Columbia,” Catherine recalled, “but upon enquiring we hear it is an extreme dissipated place.”⁷³ Alice Izard had a similar reaction to the colleges available to her son, even those in New England; “Princeton has little to recommend it,” she observed, while at a certain college in New York, a friend of hers “had seen young Men there . . . utterly incapable of spelling the latin language.”⁷⁴ These mothers understood that whatever education their children received – whether at home or away – would become a reflection on their families.⁷⁵

The majority of elite mothers were content to leave their children in the hands of other educators, as long as they maintained some control over the length, content, and style of learning. Many elite Southern families relied on a host of hired help to ensure their sons and daughters a proper and well-rounded education. Over the course of two years, the Fords of South Carolina placed their five children under the care of Mr. Hughes, Mr. Yates, Mr. Talvande, Miss Marran, Mr. Fayoll, Mrs. Sully, Mr. Baker, Mr. Litchfield, Mrs. Read, and Mrs. Bowen.⁷⁶ John Haywood reported on the whereabouts of his children by listing, “Becky with Miss Benedict, William with Dr. McPhaters, and Frances with Capt. Wittmore. . . .

⁷³ Catherine Read to Betsy Ludlow, n.d., 1812; November 2, n.d., Read Family Papers, SCL.

⁷⁴ Alice Delancey Izard to Henry Izard, January 1, 1807, Ralph Izard Papers, SCL.

⁷⁵ Dissatisfaction with Southern schools was not unique to Southern mothers; their husbands tended to concur. While John Thompson Brown expressed no fondness for “Yankees,” he agreed that when it came to his nephew, “a College boy,” “southern fire would be none the worse for being somewhat cooled by the northern frost.” St. George Tucker agreed that “unless the manners of our youth, or the management of their Tutors, shall undergo a most surprising, and happy change in this Country,” he hoped that young Southerners should “never hear of an Academy or a College.” John Thompson Brown to William B. Steptoe, October 3, 1831; St. George Tucker to John Coalter, June 14, 1809, Brown, Coalter, Tucker Papers (I), WM.

⁷⁶ Folder 1 (1809-1814), Ford Family Papers, SCL.

Rush has been with Mr. Lumsden, but appears dissatisfied and says he is not well, and your Mother has thereupon indulged him for the day at home.”⁷⁷

These instructors were not immune to critiques, however. Southern mothers frequently voiced their opinions of these tutors’ efficacy, sharing their thoughts with other women in a position to patronize local teachers and thus creating a network of assessments and recommendations. Caroline Clitherall warned parents to be “very circumspect . . . as to the Selection of guardians for their children – Schools are either the seminaries of virtue or vice.”⁷⁸ John Coalter was hired as a provisional tutor for John and Richard Randolph in Virginia, provided that “I am reckoned sufficient or capable to teach them.”⁷⁹ Catherine Read found herself particularly out of patience with the Charleston tutors, deeming them “a lazy pack,” while concluding that “such as they are we must put up with them.” Catherine was not powerless, however, and her written expressions of judgment carried the wayward tutors’ names to other women seeking an education for their children. Catherine’s son Jacob was “amazingly neglected” by his writing instructor, causing Catherine to lament that she now had “no inducement” to send her daughter to the same writing school. Catherine warned her sister that the tutor was no more than a “Coxcomb.” The dancing masters were no better; one was “what I call a very lazy Master & the Girls have to coax him to get him to shew them the steps,” while another “had lost all authority with the Boys.” A third “makes very free with the Scholars especially little ones whom he frequently catches up & kisses.” This was not a mother seeking affection or leniency in an outside instructor; Catherine felt her children

⁷⁷ John Haywood to daughter Eliza Haywood, June 23, 1824, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

⁷⁸ Caroline Eliza Burgwin Clitherall Diaries, Vol. 2, p. 14, SHC.

⁷⁹ John Coalter to Michael Coalter, January 28, 1788, Brown, Coalter, Tucker Papers (I), WM.

deserved as rigorous an education as could be obtained in early nineteenth-century South Carolina. When a mother did ensure a respectable external education for her children, she had reason to be proud. John Haywood reminded his sons before their graduation from the University of North Carolina that “your Mother would rejoice at seeing one of her Sons on the stage or rostrum, and acquitting himself well and to the satisfaction of all who feel an interest in our Country.”⁸⁰

Tutors and governesses were not the only outside participants in a child’s education; mothers also called upon a network of female friends and relatives to consult about appropriate educational techniques and strategies. Education was a common female concern among elite mothers of the South, and just as women had chimed in with advice about health care and literature, so too did women consult about the best ways to teach a child. Eliza Ford Ravenel trusted a local academy with the daily instruction of her three sons, but in the evenings, Alfred’s lessons in geography were “perfectly acquired under the care of his two aunts.”⁸¹ Mary Dulles Cheves was happy to allow her eldest daughters to teach the younger children “as regularly as if they were at School,” believing that the girls were “very capable and well addapted for the business.” Indeed, one daughter was responsible for teaching “inglish french & writing and Sifering,” while an older brother taught the young boys “Latten.”⁸² This kind of educational practice would certainly have been useful when the girls had children of their own. When a little girl in South Carolina began her domestic education

⁸⁰ Catherine Read to Betsy Ludlow, August 31, 1810, March 6, 1804; Catherine Read to Mary Clarkson, November 29, n.d., Read Family Papers, SCL; John Haywood to George Haywood, May 27, 1819, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

⁸¹ Gabriel H. Ford to John Ravenel, January 6, 1831, John Ravenel Papers, SCL.

⁸² Sophia Heatly Dulles to Joseph Dulles, April 10, 1829, November 12, 1833, June 21, 1834, Ann Heatly Reid Lovell Estate and Family Papers, SCHS.

in 1821, she saw her learning as a communal concern, and asked her mother, who was writing a letter to an elderly aunt, to “tell her cousin Mary Bacot that she is learning to knit and sew very fast and that she intends to learn to write very soon.” When this young girl learned to sew, at least three other women were promptly informed. Sixty years earlier, Maria Taylor Byrd proudly alerted her son when her granddaughter began “fingering her Needle.”⁸³

As in all aspects of mothering, female friends and relatives weighed in on children’s education, reaffirming mothers’ sense of responsibility. Catherine Read shared her educational strategies with her sister Betsy and frequently requested her advice. When Betsy complied and suggested a few tactics Catherine might take with her children, Catherine responded with gratitude, adding that “it was pretty much the line of conduct I intended to pursue.” When Catherine considered where to send her son to college, she consulted the boy’s aunt and uncle, pointing out that “he may at the end be rejected at N. Haven, what would you all think of Princeton.” Aunts boasted a certain authority in the rearing of their siblings’ children, and many communicated with nieces and nephews about the particulars of their education. Anna Waugh complimented her niece’s handwriting and her artful sampler, while also receiving notices of the girl’s improvement directly from her tutors. Aunts could also hold children to standards as high as those set by parents; Rebecca Moore warned her niece to continue devoting herself to her studies if she intended to “equal, & realize, my fondest expectations.”⁸⁴

⁸³ Sarah Hart White to Mary Brockington, February 7, 1821, Peter Samuel Bacot Papers, SCL; Maria Taylor Byrd to William Byrd III, August 15, 1760, Byrd Family Papers (1684-1842), VHS.

⁸⁴ Catherine Read to Betsy Ludlow, January 13, 1805, October 1, 1810, Read Family Papers, SCL; Anna Waugh to Eliza Jocelyn, May 31, 1800, Giles Family Papers, SHC; Rebecca C. Moore to Eliza Haywood, August 29, 1810, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

Grandmothers could be particularly vocal about their grandchildren's education and, with their own history as educators in mind, often hovered over their daughters to make sure they were not straying too far from the appropriate course of action. Mary Cox Chesnut educated her children at home during their early years in South Carolina, and she received constant support, encouragement, and occasional redirection from her mother Esther. Esther would frequently commend Mary for her "Method of Teaching," and believed that Mary's daughter would be a "pupil worthy all your care in Educating," and that Mary's son would "receive from his parents his early & best instruction." It was not uncommon for women to refer to themselves playfully as "Teacher," but under the veneer of self-deprecation ran a sense of confidence, an assurance that their role as mothers qualified them also as educators. When Mary contemplated sending her daughter to a boarding school, Esther intervened, urging her to "finish her Education at home" and arguing that "a private Education makes the finest women, particularly when they are blest with such Parents as yours have." In the last letter to her daughter before her death, Esther reminded her, "Your children will be as well taught by you . . . as any of those taught in these famous boarding schools."⁸⁵ But Esther Cox also occasionally hinted to her daughter that she hoped to see improvements in her granddaughter's education. When Esther learned, that Mary was training the young girl in "French, English and Musick," she cautioned that such an instructional schedule "is doing a great deal, I do not like to see children pushed too hard." Esther was confident of her prowess as a teacher, for her own children's success was a testament to her ability. When Mary was teaching her daughter how to write a letter, Esther reminded her that "nothing but practice can make letter writing easy – there is yourself, Theodosia & Sally as examples of the good

⁸⁵ Esther Cox to Mary Cox Chesnut, November 18, 1799, January 22, 1800, October 13, 1803, November 15, 1806, November 24, 1810, October 30, 1813, Cox and Chesnut Family Papers, SCL.

effects of being obliged to write.” Esther’s triumph at teaching one generation supported her recommendations for the next, and thus the cycle of women’s control of education continued.⁸⁶

Other grandmothers were similarly invested, marking their daughters’ successes or failures and occasionally taking charge themselves. In North Carolina, when Jane Williams’s daughter died, her son-in-law considered himself unfit to oversee his children’s education, and Jane became a natural overseer of her grandchildren’s formal schooling. Her son-in-law assured her that wherever she sent the children, “I shall be satisfied, as your judgment and not mine must direct in these matters.”⁸⁷ But most of the time, grandmothers were content to opine about their grandchildren’s education from afar. When Elizabeth Yates sent her mother an account of her daughter Isabel’s schooling, the older woman wrote that “to hear . . . how much she had improved in her education gave her inexpressible pleasure.”⁸⁸ Elizabeth Jocelyn observed to her daughter that her granddaughter Augusta “if shee takes a Rite Turn . . . will make a fine woman,” while Almeria “wants some one to . . . get her princeples well fixed,” and as for Edward, “I find know fault with his Letters onely they are so short.”⁸⁹

Occasionally, grandmothers enjoyed more direct control than mothers in the education of the young, proving that sometimes such control was not a given, but was fought for among strong personalities. Maria Taylor Byrd can be called nothing if not a strong

⁸⁶ Esther Cox to Mary Cox Chesnut, October 13, 1803, February 17, 1807, April 5, 1806, Cox and Chesnut Family Papers, SCL.

⁸⁷ Alfred Moore to Jane Williams, October 4, 1816, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

⁸⁸ Sarah Threadcraft to Elizabeth Saylor Yates, August 24, 1823, Yates Family Correspondence, SCHS.

⁸⁹ Elizabeth Jocelyn to Eliza Reston, March 25, 1818, Giles Family Papers, SHC.

personality, and her continuing involvement in her grandchildren's education in the 1750s and 1760s contrasts markedly with her daughter-in-law's relative ineffectiveness. Elizabeth Hill Carter Byrd rarely wrote of her children in her brief letters to her husband, who was serving in the French and Indian War, and when she expressed an opinion regarding their schooling, she did so hesitantly. In 1758, Elizabeth hinted, "I should be extremely glad if it was in my Power to have our darling Daughter Educated in the best manner in England with Her ever Blessed Brothers," but there is no evidence this wish was ever granted.⁹⁰

Meanwhile, Maria wrote her son frequently with plans and even commands for his children's education. The grandmother directly communicated with her brother-in-law, Colonel Francis Otway, who oversaw the boys' English education, and learned from him of their progress in both secular and moral accomplishments. When the children enrolled at Tunbridge School under the leadership of James Cawthorn, Maria learned about it from Francis, who assured her that her grandsons were "in every respect well" and that "they cannot be at a better place nor under a better Master." Francis also confided, "Was your Son to follow my Advice, He would never move Them." The colonel saw Maria as a chief ally and guide for her grandchildren's education, and his detailed reports to her reveal his respect for her judgment. When Maria's son considered moving his children to another English school, the grandmother reminded him of the specific value of James Cawthorn, "he having so charming a Character for the Education of Youth." In her "earnest Supplication," Maria also used a bit of educational philosophy to make her point; she argued that "every Master has a different Method so that if they Change, what they Learnt one year they must unlearn another." What role did the boys' mother have in these discussions? Elizabeth Hill Carter Byrd only wrote, "I

⁹⁰ Elizabeth Hill Carter Byrd to William Byrd III, May 17, 1758, Byrd Family Papers (1757-1860), VHS.

have heard that our Sons are put to School at one Mr. Cawthorns.” Perhaps she cherished no real interest in education, or, more likely, perhaps she was overshadowed, even overpowered, by the strong will and educational interest of her mother-in-law.⁹¹ While most women attempted to retain control over their children’s education, hesitancy and self-doubt could allow room for more confident women to intervene.

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In addition to the nature and style of learning, mothers could also determine, to a large extent, who would have access to certain kinds of education. Many elite mothers chose to define education as a prerogative of elite white children; they might welcome their children’s neighbors and playmates into the plantation schoolroom, but most excluded African American, Native American, and lower-class children from their vision of an educated populace. While Sophia Dulles likely would not have welcomed a black child into her family’s classroom, she was content to send “Anna & Charles . . . to School with a number of other Children mostly Girls to the Prisbetarian Minister.”⁹² Eliza Ford Ravenel was also happy that her eleven-year-old son St. Julien had a suitable companion in learning, and reported to her husband that “Mr. Chester’s nephew . . . & St. J. have commenced the grammar together.”⁹³ Education provided elite children with intellectual stimulation and preparation for their futures, but it also helped define a privileged class. The interactions of multiple classes and races in the South, whether on an ideological or daily basis, shaped

⁹¹ Maria Taylor Byrd to William Byrd III, November 6, 1757, September 20, 1757, December 24, 1757, April 28, 1760, 1758?; Elizabeth Hill Carter Byrd to William Byrd III, August 16, 1757, Byrd Family Papers (1757-1860), VHS.

⁹² Sophia Heatly Dulles to Joseph Dulles, June 25, 1833, Ann Heatly Reid Lovell Estate and Family Papers, SCHS.

⁹³ Eliza Ford Ravenel to John Ravenel, November 7, 1830, John Ravenel Papers, SCL.

family formation and childhood identity. Especially on large plantations, where elite and enslaved children could rarely be kept in isolation, the project of motherhood often meant defining children's identity in oppositional terms. Because education was a realm over which many women had some degree of control, education became one of the primary ways for mothers to define their family's status.⁹⁴

There were certainly exceptions to the use of education as a tool for exclusion. Some plantation mistresses, from a sense of religious duty or genuine interest, taught enslaved women and men about the Bible and, occasionally, to read. In antebellum Virginia, for instance, the vast majority of literate slaves learned to read from either white children or white women; white men were virtually absent in former slaves' recollections of literacy.⁹⁵ This may have been less a factor of women's greater generosity than of their greater control of plantation education. In 1741 on Wappoo Plantation, six miles by water from the bustle of commercial Charlestown, Eliza Lucas taught her younger sister French and "a parcel of little Negroes" how to read. A few years later, Eliza devised a plan to educate the rest of the enslaved African Americans on her plantation by training a handful of slave girls as "school mistress's."⁹⁶ In Virginia, Nancy Turner's family inherited a number of enslaved men and women after her grandfather's death, and Nancy judged that "some of that number were

⁹⁴ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese deals with this issue of the interweaving of gender, class, and racial identity in *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 110-113. See also Nash, *Women's Education in the United States*, 53-76, 99-104. Education was also a marker of class in eighteenth-century England, as "children became important signifiers of their parents' social standing and aspirations." Hilton, *Women and the Shaping of the Nation's Young*, 24.

⁹⁵ William Dusinger, *Strategies for Survival: Recollections of Bondage in Antebellum Virginia* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 188.

⁹⁶ Eliza Lucas to Charles Pinckney, February 6, 1741; Eliza Lucas to Miss Bartlett, April 1742, *Letterbook*, 12, 34.

exceedingly wicked and troublesome.” The young woman attributed their “wicked” natures to the fact that “they had none of them been taught to read and cared nothing for God, or goodness.” To correct their characters, Nancy and two of her unmarried sisters began teaching their African American residents how to read, coming to the conclusion that “colored children . . . possess as good talents as white.”⁹⁷ Whatever their motives may have been, Eliza and Nancy taught enslaved children because they believed that education fell under a women’s purview. Both were unmarried and childless at the time, which suggests that teaching enslaved children may have been a substitute for teaching their own children and that education was part of a broader maternal impulse. Helen MacLeod, another Virginia resident, encouraged her young sons in their decision to teach a Sunday school class to local blacks for several summers in a row. Their class attracted a wide audience of interested African Americans, and Helen remembered that “it used to be a very interesting sight indeed to see a little white headed boy teaching those grey headed old blacks.” Helen praised her sons for their benevolence but also recognized that such cross-race and cross-class exchanges were “a benefit to the teacher as well as the scholar.” Allowing her sons to teach African Americans was thus another facet of Helen’s own educational program as a mother.⁹⁸

While a small fraction of white mothers were willing to educate their children alongside black children, the majority saw little reason for enslaved children to receive schooling at all. When education was transmitted from white mistress to black slave, it was typically religious in nature and conveniently ignored the secularism that was influencing the

⁹⁷ Nancy Johns Turner Hall, "The Imaginationist or Recollections of an old lady, a native of one of the Southern States, now a resident of the State of Ohio in the Year 1844," p. 111, VHS.

⁹⁸ Helen MacLeod to Donald MacLeod, September 4, 1826, MacLeod Family Papers, VHS.

courses of white children.⁹⁹ Mothers who dismissed the education of black children were almost always dependent on black labor in order to free time for teaching their own children. When John Dandridge observed that “it is necessary . . . for my Mother to have some negroes to support her in the education of the young Children,” he did not intend for slaves to serve as tutors for his young brothers and sisters; rather, his mother’s childrearing strategy was directly related to the income derived from slave labor and the accomplishment of other domestic tasks, including nursing, by black women.¹⁰⁰ White women often considered enslaved children to be problematic, if not positively dispensable. For Frances Tasker Carter of Nomini Hall, a principal reason for desiring the end of slavery was that an all-white tenantry would, at the very least, contribute “hardy Offspring to be the strength & the honour of the Colony.”¹⁰¹ For Frances, black children were so far removed in character and capability from her own children that she could not conceive of them contributing to the “honour” of Virginia.

In contrast to their frequently active distaste toward black education, few mothers concerned themselves at all with the education of Native American children, who, when distant, remained non-threatening. In the 1820s, Rachel Mordecai Lazarus saw the establishment of Cherokee schools in North Carolina as evidence that the tribe was “fast advancing in civilisation.”¹⁰² Sixty years earlier, however, Carolinians had very different

⁹⁹ Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 156.

¹⁰⁰ John Dandridge to Martha Washington, January 18, 1788, in Martha Washington, *Worthy Partner: The Papers of Martha Washington*, compiled by Joseph E. Fields (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 203. Frances Tasker Carter admitted to Philip Fithian that “Wenches have suckled several of her [children].” Journal of Philip Vickers Fithian, December 24, 1773, *Journal and Letters*, 39.

¹⁰¹ Journal of Philip Vickers Fithian, April 4, 1774, *Journal and Letters*, 92.

¹⁰² Rachel Mordecai Lazarus to Maria Edgeworth, July 17, 1824, *Education of the Heart*, 62.

relations with Cherokees; in the midst of border wars, they saw their native neighbors as “Barbarians” and “extremely troublesome.” In 1760, Eliza Lucas Pinckney’s daughter Harriott was given a present of a “fann” and “pompon,” and her delight with the trinkets was so great that Eliza declared, “I doubt whether she would part with them to purchase a peace with the Cherokees.”¹⁰³ In the haven of her Charlestown plantation, the privileged white child seemed immune to the reality of intercultural warfare, and such light-hearted jokes could be made with impunity. Many white mothers understood black and Indian children in relation to their own progeny, but that relationship was never egalitarian. Education among blacks was alternately useless and dangerous, while education among native peoples, at best, merely imitated the “civilisation” of white communities.

The education of elite sons and daughters in the South also perpetuated class divisions that remained important to many Southern mothers beyond the nineteenth century. A formal, secularized education trained elite boys for prominent roles in Southern society, and for young girls without independent access to wealth, education was the primary means to maintain their social status.¹⁰⁴ In her admiring description of two young ladies in the 1790s, Caroline Clitherall noted that they were “proficient upon the Piano, well advanc’d in English studies, & spoke French fluently,” which, to young Caroline, was “a sure evidence of the position they held in Society.”¹⁰⁵ As a direct result of their display of education, Caroline deduced their class status and praised them accordingly. On rare occasions, education as a determinant of class could even make up for deficiencies of race: one of Caroline’s

¹⁰³ Eliza Lucas Pinckney to Mrs. King, July 19, 1760, *Letterbook*, 155.

¹⁰⁴ Clinton, “Equally Their Due,” 41; Smith, *Inside the Great House*, 93.

¹⁰⁵ Caroline Eliza Burgwin Clitherall Diaries, Vol. 3, p. 1, SHC.

schoolmates was a “light Mulatto, from Jamaica,” but “as she was accompanied by a young Lady of family and fortune, her shade of complexion passed without remark.”¹⁰⁶ Here, a combination of elite education and connections to “family and fortune” could erase even the stigma of color. In the 1820s, Helen MacLeod was a strong supporter of education for the masses, though she did not offer to share her own children’s tutors with the less fortunate. Her opinion of the schools that trained “poor unfortunate children of lower classes” was that “till we have other institutions which will be more beneficial and do more good I will most heartily approve of them.”¹⁰⁷ The appropriate form of an elite education was often monitored and maintained by mothers who were as class-conscious as young Caroline Clitherall. The failure of most white mothers to mention black, Indian, and lower-class children in their letters and diaries must be read as a choice rather than a mirror of their surrounding landscape. When these mothers chose to ignore other families, they were defining themselves in stark opposition to those on the perceived margins of Southern society.

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The ways in which elite mothers took charge of their children’s education led to the creation of a Southern class constructed on ideas of exclusion, but while it often shut out non-elites, this education also afforded mothers a sense of purpose and self-worth. By taking on the tasks associated with educating children – from choosing subjects to evaluating tutors to selecting schools – mothers actively chose to engage in public conversations extending well beyond the home. Within these conversations, mothers also made choices about how they would raise their children as gendered beings. Contrary to most popular literature, which

¹⁰⁶ Caroline Eliza Burgwin Clitherall Diaries, Vol. 3, p. 4, SHC.

¹⁰⁷ Helen MacLeod to Donald MacLeod, September 4, 1826, MacLeod Family Papers, VHS.

focused on young boys as the natural inheritors of a national vision of Republican citizenship, mothers tended to spend equal time raising their daughters to be morally upright, responsible, and learned. By tracing patterns of gendered education through those responsible for children's upbringing rather than through printed debates about appropriate behavior, we must consider that young women coming to age in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries may have had a much stronger image of themselves as entitled national participants than we have previously assumed. Certainly, a woman whose authority as educator encompassed what her children were taught, where they were taught, who was doing the teaching, and which other children could participate would have seen herself as a vital instrument in the creation of the next generation. Most women could claim less formal education than their daughters could by the early nineteenth century, but through teaching and the oversight of education, these mothers gained a sense of immediate involvement in an Enlightened world.

CHAPTER TEN

WHITE SAGES

In addition to the practical skills attendant on nursing, reading, and teaching, mothers also maintained a more nebulous claim on their children's futures. Mothers were repositories of advice, dispensers of generations of wisdom that ranged from career recommendations to religious injunctions. Far from being powerless captives in patriarchal Southern households, women maintained a certain degree of control over their families through a less conspicuous medium. Advice-giving provided an ideal way for women to voice knowledge, judgment, and expectations, for it recommended rather than commanded. When Frances Hume Pinckney sent a letter filled with advice to her son – a student at an English academy who was separated from her by several thousand miles – she drilled into her son the importance of her own suggestions. “Remark, my dear Boy, what I now write to you,” Frances insisted in 1786. “Read it over-&-over and say all this I will most assuredly observe, as it is my Mother's wish that I should.”¹ Even such distance could not blunt Frances's faith in her own maternal wisdom. A female network that extended beyond the relationship between mother and child also fashioned a community of sages, women who had learned from their mothers and grandmothers and were prepared to pass that information along to the next generation. In this way, women shaped their children's sense of right and wrong, of duty, loyalty, and

¹ Frances Susanna Quash Hume Pinckney to Roger Pinckney V, March 18, 1786, Roger Pinckney Correspondence, SCHS.

justice, thus maintaining a current of power within the seemingly domesticated geography of the home. Advice took many forms; mothers might urge their sons to choose the law over medicine, or their daughters to marry Mr. Jones instead of Mr. Smith. Women also supported each other through mourning, offering recommendations on how to soothe grief. And in an era when life was no longer ruled by the tolling of church bells, the maintenance of private spirituality often fell on a mother's shoulders. Whatever situations arose, mothers could promise, "I will give you my Opinion freely."²

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The first concern for many maternal advice-givers was ensuring that their children had a proper reverence for Providence. As young people's education became increasingly secularized, women had to find other outlets for expressing spiritual concern, and many nineteenth-century men and women recalled receiving their first informal lessons in religion from their mothers. As conduits for faith, mothers defined their domestic authority to include their children's very salvation. For evangelical Christians, women became the religious and moral center of the household in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. With this assumed religious tenor came an expectation that women would serve as spiritual guides for their families, raising their children in the fear of God and provoking unrepentant family members to turn to the light. Many religious women saw the conversion of loved ones as their most important task, and some women's skill at raising pious youth served as a justification for more public work, from teaching children in Sunday schools to occasional

² Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, November 5, 1798, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

preaching. Dispensing religious advice, then, connected women both to the intimacy of the home and to broader waves of spiritual reform.³

A sense of faith could provide religious mothers with purpose in the best of times and comfort in the worst. When Mary Alston Pringle began her maternal career on December 2, 1822, with the birth of her first child, she started copying prayers in a commonplace book. The prayers she recorded offer an account of her concerns; first came “A prayer for a woman with Child” (1822), “A prayer, for a woman, when the time of travail draws near” (October 1822), and “A thanksgiving to be said, by a woman, after her delivery” (December 2, 1822). By the 1830s, her anxieties had broadened; she copied, “A prayer for a son who is sent to school & absent from Parental care” (1834), “A prayer for a son going to sea” (1840), and “A Mother’s Thanksgiving for her Son’s having reached a foreign Port” (1841). Tragedy struck in 1844 when Mary lost her four-year-old daughter Elizabeth, and she marked the occasion with prayer: “A Mother’s prayer for a sick Child” (December 27, 1843), and “On the death of my Child” (January 22, 1844). Soon she began to pray once more for the living, copying out “A Prayer for a daughter who is absent from Parental care, for the purpose of receiving the advantages of Education” (1845) and “A prayer for a son on his engaging in Politics” (1846). Whatever trial Mary faced, she found a prayer to answer it.⁴

³ Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 105-115; Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 154-160; and Scott Stephan, *Redeeming the Southern Family: Evangelical Women and Domestic Devotion in the Antebellum South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 1-19, 133-182. Susan Juster has argued that evangelicalism offered a vocal role to women in the mid-eighteenth century that was gradually withdrawn by the beginning of the nineteenth. While women may have been shut out of formal positions of power within the church, they certainly did not relinquish that authority within the home. See Juster, *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics and Evangelicalism in Revolutionary New England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

⁴ Mary Motte Alston Pringle Religious Notebook, 1822-1860, Mary Motte Alston Pringle Papers, SCHS.

Sometimes religious guidance was subtle, as in the case of Eliza Haywood, who packed a pair of Bibles in her sons' college-bound trunks, but other times it was more direct and insistent.⁵ After her son boasted of his Scottish education, Helen MacLeod reminded him that "there is another kind of knowledge I would call some of your attention to." Helen filled a page with pleas for her son to attend to the church's teachings, and ended by asking him, "What will it avail us in that last that trying moment when we are rapidly passing from this scene of existence, if we have acquired even the art and knowledge to scan the clouds to measure the distance of planets nay to revolutionize and reform kingdoms if we are wanting in the 'one thing needful.'" Helen was well aware of the status natural and political science had earned by the 1820s, but she pointed out their uselessness in that one most important moment, when the soul is in the midst of its flight from earth to heaven.⁶ Catherine Fullerton DeRosset held a similar sense of the urgency of conversion, conveying a particularly graphic scene to her unconverted son. Concluding that her son had "not yet been thankful to God for his goodness to you for twenty five years," Catherine sought a more direct route to the young man's soul. "Have you ever thought when visiting the Lunatic Asylum that your Senses are preserved by his goodness . . . ? Did the idea ever occur to you, that . . . the hand of Omnipotence cou'd in a moment make you fit for the dismal cell of the Maniac, or a subject for the dissecting knife of the Anatomist?" After impressing the grisly nature of God's power on her son, she ended with the plea, "Come to Jesus."⁷

⁵ John Haywood to George Haywood, February 16, 1816, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

⁶ Helen MacLeod to Donald MacLeod, September 4, 1826, MacLeod Family Papers, VHS.

⁷ Catherine Fullerton DeRosset to John DeRosset, January 1, 1823, DeRosset Family Papers, SHC.

Religious mothers felt the need to cultivate god-fearing tendencies in their children from a young age, for, given the rates of child mortality, this was a responsibility that could not be delayed. Channeling the lessons they had learned from preachers, devotional texts, and their own parents, mothers freely used the language of death and salvation, with its often frightening vocabulary, towards their children. Caroline Clitherall set out a series of vows for herself that included the promise to “train by precept & example, the precious souls of my little ones, in the path to Heaven.”⁸ Mary Stanford warned her daughter not to “neglect secret prayer,” hoping that the girl was committed to “work out your own salvation with fear & trembling.”⁹ After a friend became ill, Judith Smith wrote her daughter with the news, pointing out that “the young, as well as the old are subject to sickness, and you know to death.” The only remedy was to “prepare for these serious times” by “making Religion the choice of your heart.” If Judith’s daughter was not sufficiently alarmed, Judith reminded her that “although my eyes are not on you, God sees you and knows all that you do. He will love you if you are good, but will be angry with you if you are bad.”¹⁰ After the death of a daughter, Elizabeth Jocelyn wrote her remaining children with an urgent reminder of human vulnerability. “Now my dear Children,” she commanded, “stop short whear you are stand still and consider and reason with your own hearts whether you are prepared to hear thee finall summons. . . . [T]hear is not a moment to be lost wee must work while thee day lasts

⁸ Caroline Clitherall Diaries, Vol. 6, p. 10, SHC.

⁹ Mary Stanford to Adeline Stanford, April 17, 1825, Richard Stanford Papers, SHC.

¹⁰ Judith Anna Smith Smith to Judith Anna Smith Hawes, October 27, n.d., October 3, 1815, Katharine Heath Hawes Papers, VHS.

for thee Nights of death will soon overtake us.”¹¹ The nights of death haunted mothers who watched their children pass before them; every morning that brought their renewed shouts was a moment for prayer. One mother advised her son, “Never go to your rest without asking a Blessing from above, and never rise without returning thanks to your Maker for his protection for the night past.” Away at school, her son may have drawn attention with these regular prayers, but his mother persevered: “Should any Boys make a ridicule of your doing it, pay no regard to it, but mind your Mother’s Instructions.”¹² When children could die at any age from a host of causes, religious mothers considered it their chief duty to ensure the survival of their souls.

Deeply evangelical women were often haunted by the need to convert loved ones, for they believed that an unreligious child would suffer a grisly fate in the afterlife. Sarah Anderson Jones kept a religious diary in the 1790s documenting her own ecstatic experiences as well as the pain she felt at her children’s lack of piety. The mother would often escape to a deserted room or a nearby forest and record how she “Pray’d and wept and Read and Meditated.” After dwelling on how “Zion mourns my children unconverted,” Sarah’s pain was so intense that it became almost unintelligible: “Agony Possess me my heart is Love my breast Painful my Eyes drowned and was it not for hope death must insure.”¹³ The intensity of religious conversion could also flow to parents and siblings as well as children. Eliza Haywood told her mother, “I cease not to pray Dayly for you,” and she sent her sister

¹¹ Elizabeth Stevens Jocelyn to Samuel Russell Jocelyn, September 18, 1805, Giles Family Papers, SHC.

¹² Frances Susanna Quash Hume Pinckney to Roger Pinckney V, July 14, 1785, Roger Pinckney Correspondence, SCHS.

¹³ March 30, 1792, April 23, 1792, Sarah Anderson Jones Diary, WM.

descriptions of her own spiritual rapture. The unconverted sister responded, “O my Sister! why cannot I experience the same. . . . I am almost afraid to take my seat there amongst the Children of God.”¹⁴ Eliza also targeted her children, enjoining them “not by any means to miss Prayer, night and morning.” To Eliza, religion and morality were of the utmost importance, and her fervent wish was for her children to realize that “they cannot be great, unless they are good.”¹⁵

Mothers’ authority as religious guides was not just self-generated, but was reinforced by children and other relatives who relied on their judgment. When wracked with religious guilt or sorrow, children knew where to turn. Young Mary Puller wrote her mother in a fit of doubt, exclaiming, “My Mother how little do I live like a christian how much do I sin against God ther is nothing good in me.” Implicitly begging her mother for help, Mary added, “When I consider all this I am almost ready to sink.”¹⁶ One man in the 1750s, “laboring under the extremities of the greatest affliction,” sent his mother a detailed account of his wife’s death, unburdening his emotions to a sympathetic ear: “I never knew what it was to be happy untill I married her neither knew I what greif was untill I lost her.”¹⁷ When a young Eliza Haywood traveled to Washington for several weeks of parties and social introductions, she wrote home

¹⁴ Eliza Haywood to Jane Williams, January 20, 1813; Rebecca C. Moore to Eliza Haywood, September 21, 1815, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

¹⁵ Eliza Haywood to George Haywood, January 30, 1817; John Haywood to daughter Eliza Haywood, January 8, 1818; John Haywood to unidentified son, November 4, 1819, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

¹⁶ Mary C. Puller to Catherine Puller, November 18, n.d., Thomas Family Papers, VHS.

¹⁷ Robert Spotswood to Anne Butler Brayne Spotswood Thompson, August 9, 1753, Spotswood Family Papers, VHS. Anne Butler Brayne Spotswood earned some small fame by appearing in William Byrd’s travel accounts as the gracious lady who kept a “brace of tame deer” that “ran familiarly” through her Virginia mansion. William Byrd, *The Westover Manuscripts: Containing The History of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina; A Journey to the Land of Eden, A. D. 1733; and A Progress to the Mines* (Petersburg: Edmund and Julian C. Ruffin, 1841), 132.

to announce that “amid all the gaiety & dissipation of Washington . . . I go regularly to St. John’s Church,” adding that “I know Mother will be gratified.”¹⁸ Sally Leftwich Turner’s piety in rural Virginia was memorialized by her daughter Nancy, who remembered “those many christian virtues which caused her to shine like a gem, in the midst of surrounding rubbish.” After Sally’s death, Nancy wondered, “O hopeless sorrow; O remediless grief! What shall? What can we now do to repay our Mother?” The answer seemed to come down to her from heaven: “But stop! Hark! Methinks I hear my Mother say Serve God my child, and I am pleased.”¹⁹ Even beyond the grave, mothers’ voices often rang in their children’s ears.

Beyond a straightforward interpretation of Christianity, mothers also provided their children with their first lessons in morality. The necessity of a moral education for children was a consistent colonial and early national concern. Children’s consciences were first molded to strict religious doctrines, and young people recited catechisms from Massachusetts to Virginia. By the mid-eighteenth century, this moral education was taking more varied forms, as Enlightenment ideals supplemented spiritual morality with secular morality, a sense of right and wrong based on justice and earthly duties. This morality was regulated in schools and public meeting places, but the bulk of moral education still remained in the hands of families, and particularly mothers. Mothers worked in tandem with friends and relatives to provide a broad community of concerned observers that would elevate moral suggestions into

¹⁸ Eliza Haywood to John and Eliza Haywood, March 7, 1822, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

¹⁹ Nancy Johns Turner Hall, "The Imaginationist or Recollections of an old lady, a native of one of the Southern States, now a resident of the State of Ohio in the Year 1844," pp. 130-131, VHS.

concrete expectations.²⁰ Lower-class mothers particularly depended on the eyes of a larger community to safeguard their children's morals. Unable to devote their time solely to educating their children, working women relied on friends and neighbors to help regulate communal behavior.²¹

Morality meant different things to different mothers; many tied it explicitly to Christianity, some linked it to civic duty, while others simply wanted their children to be well-behaved. When Judith Smith traveled away from her nine-year-old daughter in 1815, she instructed the girl to be good to her little sister, adding that "I shall love you better than ever, if I hear you try to behave well."²² Mary Eppes Cocke sent numerous letters to the University of Virginia in which she enjoined her son to "keep to the morrel side." Having heard that her son "wanted advice," she virtually pelted him with it. "Shun all sorts of dissipation what ever," she advised. "If you once brake the Ice al is over with you. . . . Religion will [keep] you clear from all rocks and shols in this Life." "Be now ways

²⁰ B. Edward McClellan argues that this community of friends and neighbors emerged in the plantation South once families began to stabilize in the mid-eighteenth century. Rodney Hessinger, however, contends that communities of moral overseers weakened over the course of the eighteenth century in response to the spread of secularism and the rise of Revolutionary ideals of personal liberty. Whether or not these communities maintained the same degree of influence, mothers and their social networks still expressed a strong sense of responsibility in offering both advice and moral oversight for their children. McClellan, *Moral Education in America: Schools and the Shaping of Character from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999), 9-14; Hessinger, *Seduced, Abandoned, and Reborn: Visions of Youth in Middle-Class America, 1780-1850* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 7. For more on the theories behind moral regulation, see Alan Hunt, *Governing Morals: A Social History of Moral Regulation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1-27.

²¹ This dependence was well established among England's working poor, where "the community of neighbors whose influence on and control of family life had been of the greatest importance." See Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage: In England, 1500-1800*, abridged ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 105-6.

²² Judith Anna Smith Smith to Judith Anna Smith Hawes, October 3, 1815, Katharine Heath Hawes Papers, VHS.

dissipated,” she continued; “go to Church” and “do not . . . get into any disgrace or scrape in the Christmas holladays.” Mary confessed that her effusions were the result of a “Mother who feels all the anxieties for a dear son at Collage for fear of his morrels being corrupted.”²³ Mary Alston Pringle shared Mary Cocke’s concern, but tied her anxiety to civic rather than religious virtue. She warned her sons at college that “each day will but add to her anxiety, until you reach that great climacteric, when she can securely feel that you are firmly fixed in the undeviating road of honor & of virtue.” She explained the motives behind her sagely advice: “a woman who has given birth to a genius,” she wrote to her sons, “I look upon as the very acme of felicity, & the most delightful celebrity. Lend me your aid, my beloved boys, that I may enjoy this happiness.”²⁴ For Mary, and for many others, her children’s success provided the recompense for her labors. Her self-worth was intimately tied to the value of her children, from their health and intelligence to their moral fiber.

Enforcing morality occasionally required a stern hand, and while some mothers quailed at the thought of shaping their children through corporal punishment, others believed the only way to raise a good child was to physically correct them when they went astray. When Frances Coalter Tucker’s two-year-old son displayed more obstinacy than she believed was appropriate, she gave him “a terrible whipping.” Her actions seemed to be based solely on her desire to foster his good nature. “He is so sweet,” she wrote, “it would be a sin to spoil him & I acted accordingly.”²⁵ Eliza Chotard Gould also saw her daughter becoming spoiled

²³ Mary Eppes Cocke to Richard Eppes, October 6, 1840, October 24, 1840, December 21, 1840, Eppes Family Papers, VHS.

²⁴ Mary Motte Alston Pringle Diary, 1826- and n.d., Mary Motte Alston Pringle Papers, SCHS.

²⁵ Frances Bland Tucker Coalter to John Coalter, May 11, 1811, Bland, Coalter, Tucker Papers (I), WM.

by her father, aunts, grandmother, and other relations, and Eliza felt compelled to intervene. As the girl's mother, it seems that Eliza was the only one who claimed responsibility for the formation of her character. When her daughter refused to go to bed one night and desperately asked for those adults who had so indulged her, Eliza responded by getting the switch. "With fear and trembling I had to repeat the punishment," but after three doses, Eliza won the battle. Her young daughter finally relinquished, "said: 'I will be dood,' and went to sleep." Eliza not only had to contend with her own squeamishness, but also the possible disapproval of various men in her life, all of whom she faced with an unshakeable sense of assurance in her actions. When addressing a male visitor who was in the house at the time of the switching, Eliza felt "armed with conscious right for my defense." The following day, she told her husband about the incident, and coolly informed him that "it would not do to lose what I had gained, and if he was not sure he could stand a repetition of the distressing scene, it would be better for him to absent himself." In this instance, certainly no one in the household could claim more control than Eliza, and her method of discipline succeeded; every night thereafter, her daughter "went sweetly to bed."²⁶

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As children grew into young men and women, mothers maintained a sense of direction for their lives; advice shifted from the realm of religion and morality to more practical concerns. Choosing careers and spouses prompted frequent interference from maternal sages, whose self-confidence and sense of assurance led them to issue a great deal of advice unsolicited. Charlotte Allston wrote her collegiate son, "I think you had better stay at West point till next December twelve-month, learn all you can, then choose a Profeshion,

²⁶ Eliza Williams Chotard Gould Memoir, 1798-1825, pp. 29-30, VHS.

study that 2 years in some Healthy Clime, then come Home at 21.” This plan would ensure that the boy would learn to “judge for yourself,” but also that he could “Protect and Comfort your Mother, Aunt, Sisters.” Charlotte had a specific idea of how her son could materially prosper, but she also understood the intangible benefits that descended on the female members of a family from having a distinguished son. When her son waffled between a career in law or medicine, Charlotte suggested that, even though “your Father . . . wished one of you should be a Lawyer,” “Physic I think would be of more real Service to you,” citing the money that could be saved by having a doctor both in a family and on a plantation.²⁷ Frances Hume Pinckney had a similar sense of authority over her son’s future, believing that she would “indeed be blamed if I did not insist on you to fix on some Profession,” although she gave him an opportunity to alert her “if you would rather be any thing else than a lawyer.” Her arguments may have been difficult for the boy to overcome, however; she pointed out, “It is by far the genteelest profession. Ask Mr. Hume. It is what your grandfather Pinckney was.” Like Charlotte, Frances envisioned her son becoming a support to his female relatives and returning home from college as “the pride of his Mother . . . & a protector of his Sister when his Mother may be no more.”²⁸ Anne Cary Nicholas could boast of a son elected to the Virginia Assembly, and she felt no compunction in extending her reign of maternal advice from the nursery to the House of Delegates. After her son’s election, she counseled him on the proper behavior for delegates, and hoped that he was not elected with “those trammels, wch. some People submit to wear for a seat in the house.” Anne asked him to assure her that

²⁷ Charlotte Ann Allston to Robert F. W. Allston, September 27, 1818, April 19, 1820, quoted in J. H. Easterby, ed., *The South Carolina Rice Plantation as Revealed in the Papers of Robert F. W. Allston* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 51, 54.

²⁸ Frances Susanna Quash Hume Pinckney to Roger Pinckney V, July 14, 1785, March 18, 1786, Roger Pinckney Correspondence, SCHS.

he had made no rash campaign promises, “especially that you have not engag’d to lend a . . . hand to puling down the Church.” Anne ended her letter by reminding her son, “I take the privilege of a Mother in advising you.”²⁹ No matter where sons landed in the hierarchy of society, their mothers’ words were sure to follow.

Just as they directed their sons’ careers, mothers fretted over their daughters’ social outings, courtships, and marriages. After Jane Garland heard an account from her eighteen-year-old daughter Sally about her debut at a Richmond ball in 1819, the mother had a great deal to say on the subject. Jane was pleased that Sally appeared to have shown “a certain degree of diffidence and moddestye,” but she pressed her to work for “an ease in your mannars” that would fall just shy of being “forward.” Jane believed that “simplicity and unaffected mannars . . . joined with correctness of principels” would serve her daughters in any sort of society. She recommended that Sally’s dress be “fashanable (so far as it is prudent)” but not “showey,” and warned her that she was at the time of life when “the Hart is susceptibel of the tender passhans” and that she should “gard it well.”³⁰ Many mothers expressed concern at their daughters’ romantic attachments and often tried to delay what must have seemed inevitable. Catherine Read and her husband, for instance, had very different reactions to their apathetic and seemingly heart-sick niece: “Mr. R. says Matrimony would cure her, but would not the remedy be worse that the disease? What a speech for a Married Woman, pray tell it not.”³¹ Sometimes sons-in-law seemed to be misdirecting their

²⁹ Anne Cary Nicholas to Wilson Cary Nicholas, n.d., 1784, Anne Cary Nicholas Letter, VHS.

³⁰ Jane Henry Meredith Garland to Sarah Armistead Garland, February 19, 1819, Garland Family Papers, VHS.

³¹ Catherine Read to Betsy Ludlow, December 17, n.d., Read Family Papers, SCL. Young girls also had doubts about marriage; Davison McDowell bet his niece a “Breast pin that she will be married in

wives. When Richard Stanford told his wife she could not extend overnight hospitality to travelers, a relatively common practice in the early South, his wife's mother intervened. "There is nothing more commendable than doing good to our fellow creatures," wrote Grizey Moore to her son-in-law, "but your desireing Polly not to suffer any one to stay at your house all night, unless it was a relation was a little inconsistent with that principle." Offering a bit of her own advice, she told Richard how a proper Southern matron handled potentially uncomfortable situations: "I have many times had company that was not agreeable and have with my daughters gone into another room but cou'd not tell them to withdraw tho they wou'd sometimes take the hint."³²

Though potential spouses were a clear matter of concern, even friends and acquaintances could provoke warnings from anxious mothers who sought to control every facet of their children's growing up. In 1786, Frances Hume Pinckney advised her son to be circumspect in befriending his school fellows, and "those you take as your Bosom friend, let them be those that you know to have good principles & uncorrupted minds." Frances not only wanted her son's budding morals to be protected, but that he should actually "improve by being in such company."³³ Betsy Watts was equally wary of her daughter's classmates in 1807, and warned the girl that "daily experience proves how few there are who deserve the name of friends." After instructing her to keep her secrets to herself, she imagined her daughter responding, "am I to have no friend, to whom I can make known my Distresses," to

6 years; she bets she will not." April 18, 1828, Plantation Journal (1815-1833), Davison McDowell Papers, SCL.

³² Grizey Moore to Richard Stanford, January 4, 1801, Richard Stanford Papers, SHC.

³³ Frances Susanna Quash Hume Pinckney to Roger Pinckney V, July 14, 1785, Roger Pinckney Correspondence, SCHS.

which Betsy thoughtfully replied, “Yes, in me, you have a friend whom you may trust.”³⁴ A generation later, Mary Alston Pringle was painting an idyllic picture of companionship for her son at college; in her vision, he would find “an agreeable & intelligent companion, I would advise the selection of one a few years older than yourself,” who would accompany her son on pleasant rambles, thereby providing him with “the advantages of fresh air & exercise” along with “a new fund of information.”³⁵ Martha Wright also hoped her daughter would enjoy rewarding friendships at school, but cautioned that if “your School Mates . . . should offend you bear it as long and as well as you can, but if they should continue to do so without any provocation on your part you must inform Mrs. Bobbitt.”³⁶ By meddling in their children’s friendships, mothers hoped to secure happy and enriching experiences for children who had left the protection of their mothers’ homes.

Advice-giving was such a crucial element of mothers’ sense of their own usefulness that it sometimes defined segments of a woman’s life. From 1764 to 1767, a chronically ill Elizabeth Stedman constructed an exhaustive letter for her young daughter in the event of her death, adding new bits of wisdom as she neared her deathbed. The letter is full of tender guidance, and because Elizabeth did not know whether she would be present to oversee her daughter’s moral education, she resolved to “leave you the best advice I am capable of.” Elizabeth bid her daughter to read this final missive daily so that her mother’s words could still guide her through life. Elizabeth’s first task was to remind her daughter that religion should be “the grand business of your life,” and she instructed the girl to give a prayer of

³⁴ Betsy Watts to Sarah C. Watts, April 4, 1807, Sarah C. Watts Papers, WM.

³⁵ Mary Motte Alston Pringle Diary, 1826-, Mary Motte Alston Pringle Papers, SCHS.

³⁶ Martha Crump Wright to Martha William Wright, February 18, 1829, Moody Family Papers, LOV.

thanks every morning and evening. The girl's next task was to take care of her bereft father and her younger brothers, to whom "you must now act the Mother." Elizabeth also warned the girl to be frugal, to choose her friends carefully, and to avoid pride and vanity above all. Elizabeth evidently had some reason to fear on this last count, as she warned specifically, "Do not my Dear Child, when you come into possession of my Clothes, be carried away by the love of Dress and Finery." The detail of this letter reveals the importance of maternal advice to the relationship of mothers and daughters. Elizabeth felt that her duty as a mother was to pass these pieces of wisdom to her daughter. (There is no evidence she left any letters to her sons.) Elizabeth ended by extending the promise of her maternal wisdom beyond the grave: she instructed her daughter to remember her words, and if she were ever in doubt, to ask herself how she would behave "if my Mother were with me now."³⁷

Children often sought to push the boundaries of their parents' restrictions, but mothers reined them in, even over relatively small matters, refusing to relinquish their chief authority as sages. Catherine Read's daughter begged to participate as a bridesmaid in a friend's wedding, but Catherine believed she was too young for such a public showing and "made her directly write & decline the Invitation." "I shall be thought a queer Creature," the mother observed. "N'importe."³⁸ When Betsy Ludlow instructed her daughter to decline a suitor, she turned to her sister, worried that her dictates had been unjust or out of line. Her sister responded warmly in defense of parents' "right . . . to Advise," arguing that their duty was obvious, since "according to the course of nature they must be sleeping in the dust when their offspring are often surrounded with toil & trouble & look in vain, for parental care &

³⁷ Elizabeth Stedman to Peggy Stedman, March 1764, March 1765, September 1767, transcription in Jane Grahame Commonplace Book, SHC.

³⁸ Catherine Read to Betsy Ludlow, November 8, 1810, Read Family Papers, SCL.

assistance.”³⁹ If mothers could not steer their children away from trouble in these early years, when could they? Even when distant, mothers never failed to send gentle reminders to their children. When Charlotte Allston mailed her son one hundred dollars for living expenses in college, she warned him to “take care and Live within Bounds,” reminding him that “your Property is small and we still in Debt.”⁴⁰ When Jane Williams questioned her daughter’s grooming habits, the girl responded, “Many thanks for putting me in mind of my person though I take as much panes with it as ever. . . . As for my teeth I clean them every night with the snuff.”⁴¹ Mary Alston Pringle informed her sons in college that “I disapprove of your beginning, at present, the study of French & Italian.”⁴² When Mary Eppes Cocke’s son seemed inclined to quit the University of Virginia, the mother replied, “I would advise you not to quitt it for one twelve month, for if you do I am afraid that their will be a great deal said about it.” In addition to this scholarly advice, she sent the boy “a pare of sockes” and was very worried that he had lost his umbrella; the thought of her son catching cold provoked Mary to declare, “I had rather you should get a dozen umbrellas than you should suffer for one half hour.”⁴³

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³⁹ Catherine Read to Betsy Ludlow, February 5, n.d., Read Family Papers, SCL.

⁴⁰ Charlotte Ann Allston to Robert F. W. Allston, May 8, 1820, quoted in J. H. Easterby, ed., *The South Carolina Rice Plantation as Revealed in the Papers of Robert F. W. Allston* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 55.

⁴¹ Ferebee Williams Hall to Jane Williams, September 16, n.d., Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

⁴² Mary Motte Alston Pringle Diary, 1826-, Mary Motte Alston Pringle Papers, SCHS.

⁴³ Mary Eppes Cocke to Richard Eppes, October 10, 1840, December 21, 1840, Eppes Family Papers, VHS.

Women not only gained from their mothers' advice, but also endured their hovering presence when raising their own children; once a woman had enjoyed the sense of power that accompanied the act of offering advice, they were often loath to stay silent. As a result, networks of female friends and relatives were typically crowded with knowing sages, thrusting advice on correspondents who may have found their wisdom alternately useful and tiresome. Mary Cox Chesnut enjoyed sharing her children's triumphs as well as foibles with her mother, but in return Mary could expect some pointed hints. "Serena . . . I hear keeps her Beauty but is a little spoiled by indulgence," Mary's mother wrote. "You will soon I hope bring her right." When Mary rejoiced at her daughter's appetite for education, her mother rejoined, "Don't push her too hard though – it will hurt her temper."⁴⁴ Jane Williams had similar concerns about the raising of her grandchildren, instructing her daughter, "Be not austere with Betsy it will make her artfull and mean."⁴⁵ When Elizabeth Yates welcomed a daughter into her family, her mother seemed to have no objection to a little austerity; her first recommendation was that "if she is to be the Bell of the family she must not be spoilt by over indulgence which sows the seed of vice."⁴⁶

One benefit of so many sages was that when mothers were unable to oversee directly their children's lives, they depended on other women to fill the role of advisor and confidante. When Mary Cox Chesnut gave birth six hundred miles from her mother, she depended on the help of a neighbor. Mary's mother blessed the woman's willingness to

⁴⁴ Esther Cox to Mary Cox Chesnut, July 16, 1800, March 19, 1806, Cox and Chesnut Family Papers, SCL.

⁴⁵ Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, January 31, 1804, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

⁴⁶ Sarah Threadcraft to Elizabeth Saylor Yates, October 20, 1824, Yates Family Correspondence, SCHS.

“devote her time to an inexperienced Mother, & not only comfort her in the absence of her old friends, but watch over her that nothing should improperly be given, or omitted.” This woman’s help provoked Mary’s mother to praise her for being “like a sister.”⁴⁷ Caroline Clitherall’s mother-in-law reminded the young mother that her children would be naturally rambunctious and that she should “sour not their temper, check not the joyous laugh, or the merry romp.” This mother-in-law’s advice even extended beyond the grave; after instructing her son to institute a program of daily family prayer in his household, he agreed, but the enactment of this instruction came only after the matriarch became ill and passed away. Caroline and her husband, perhaps feeling guilty, saw to it that, thereafter, “this service was never omitted.”⁴⁸ When Selina Powell traveled for her health, she made sure to leave her daughter in the hands of women who would be equally able to guide her spiritual education. One afternoon, the little girl “was expressing to her Aunt Mary the high gratification with which when she got to heaven she would pick up the sun, moon, and stars and run off and make a baby house with them.” Aunt Mary was probably happy to fill in as confidante and sage when Selina was away.⁴⁹

Mothers also looked to other women in their communities when their children went astray or they encountered some new obstacle. A concerned Catherine Read asked a female friend for advice about her unruly son, recording, “She says it is not to be wondered at that Jacob should be Volatile at his time of life.” The confidante also added slyly that “she thinks

⁴⁷ Esther Cox to James Chesnut, October 22, 1797, Cox and Chesnut Family Papers, SCL.

⁴⁸ Caroline Clitherall Diaries, Vol. 5, p. 40, Vol. 6, p. 2, SHC.

⁴⁹ Charles L. Powell to Selina Lloyd Powell, July 11, 1835, Powell Family Papers, WM.

it is desirable & hopes the Girls have likewise their share of it.”⁵⁰ When Wilmington resident Elizabeth DeRosset failed to develop an interest in religion as she grew into young womanhood, the teenaged girl received a flood of letters from female relatives and friends, each with poorly veiled attempts to convert the girl. “Now while youth & strength are yours try to secure an interest in the Skies,” wrote one family friend, adding that she was merely adding “my testimony to what I doubt not your beloved Mother has often told you.”⁵¹ It seems likely that Elizabeth’s mother called forth the small army of informal female missionaries, though we do not know how Elizabeth responded to this well-oiled network of Southern sages.

When women suffered losses, other women were there to encourage, console, and advise. When Betsy Ludlow lost her husband in the midst of raising a young family, her sister reminded her, “Your two estimable & sweet Daughters – what charming companions – how much you have it in your power to solace each other.”⁵² Later, when Betsy fell into debt and voiced concerns about the fate of her daughters, her sister countered that, the girls having been “blest with good Education,” “whether it is intended they should live in splendour or in Mediocrity I doubt not but they will acquit themselves well.”⁵³ We cannot know how comforting these words were, but Betsy’s continued unburdening of her woes attests to some sisterly power of consolation. Sarah Tayloe Washington felt keenly the loss of several of her friends when she visited a Virginia graveyard in 1811 with her children. The middle-aged

⁵⁰ Catherine Read to Betsy Ludlow, February 4, 1811, Read Family Papers, SCL.

⁵¹ Eliza G. Hasell to Elizabeth DeRosset, April 21, 1828, DeRosset Family Papers, SHC.

⁵² Catherine Read to Betsy Ludlow, June 14, 1815, Read Family Papers, SCL.

⁵³ Catherine Read to Betsy Ludlow, November 11, n.d., Read Family Papers, SCL.

mother pointed out “the graves of Worthy Mrs. Mullin, & her inestimable Brother Mr. Holburne,” and urged her children “to feel a veneration for the Spot.” Sarah’s thoughts tended toward the morbid – “I can’t but regret I am not nearer to all good friends gone before me” – but even in this hour of dark reflection, the succor Sarah felt was from “the tender affection & well doing of my dear daughter & son.”⁵⁴ Other women may have agreed that introducing children into networks of support was one of the best ways to fill the gaps left by friends, relatives, and children who had gone before.

Mothers in the early South were particularly vulnerable to losing children, and in these moments of extreme distress, other women sought to palliate their woes. Jane Williams suffered from intense depression after her grown daughter died, provoking an outpouring of consolation and eventually stern advice from her female friends and relatives. One friend, hearing of Jane’s wild bouts of grief, informed her, “My sister you are not acting the part of a good Christan.”⁵⁵ One of Jane’s surviving daughters, suffering herself from the loss of a sister, finally asked her mother to consider her daughter’s death as “irrevocable and beyond controul.”⁵⁶ Mary Cox Chesnut lost seven of her fourteen children before their first birthday. Her own mother’s letters to her during these years were filled with cycles of congratulations and condolence. Esther Cox, who had only lost one of her children as an infant, offered advice in as many ways as she knew how. When Mary lost a child in 1801, Esther reminded her daughter that for a sickly infant, death could be “a happy releasement from a Life of distress.” Two years later, she instructed her daughter, “Do not grieve that one is taken, but

⁵⁴ Sarah Tayloe Washington’s Notes, June 1811, Louise Anderson Patten Papers, VHS.

⁵⁵ Elisabeth Jones to Jane Williams, January 19, 1809, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

⁵⁶ Eliza Haywood to Jane Williams, June 26, 1809, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

be thankfull that you are spared to cherish, & guide all the others.” She bid Mary look forward to the time when they would join the infant in the “Mansions of Peace.” In 1805, Esther became more straightforward and viewed the infant deaths as a lesson, for as she told her daughter, “when you mourned for her, you were taught resignation.” Finally, by 1810, Esther could only praise her daughter for what seemed an almost willing sacrifice. She told her other daughter Sally that “she ought to imitate your conduct in giving your children to Him who only lent them to you for a while.” Surely Mary did not feel that she was *giving* her children away, but women facing such familial tragedy had only so many ways of rationalizing their grief.⁵⁷ When Esther Cox herself died in 1814, her daughters memorialized her role as both mother and sage, vowing that “Every Child she left will never forget the lessons which flow’d from her lips.”⁵⁸

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Perhaps children could not forget such lessons because they flowed so *freely* from mothers’ lips. Women adopted the role of sage because by directing the morals of their children, by introducing them to religion, and by reminding them to bundle up in cold weather, mothers could to some extent control their children’s future happiness. Women believed that children who were “good” – that is, obedient, pious, and disdainful of vice – would be most likely to earn kindness from the world around them. “Good” children, while

⁵⁷ Esther Cox to Mary Cox Chesnut, August 7, 1801, September 14, 1803, September 27, 1803, October 30, 1805, August 3, 1810, Cox and Chesnut Family Papers, SCL. Craig Thompson Friend argues that the image of “God as patriarch” coming down to reclaim his children had particular resonance in the South, where mothers were accustomed to “the acceptance of earthly patriarchal will.” See Friend, “Little Eva’s Last Breath: Childhood Death and Parental Mourning in ‘Our Family, Black and White,’” in *Family Values in the Old South*, eds. Craig Thompson Friend and Anya Jabour (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010), 67.

⁵⁸ Esther Cox Barton to Mary Cox Chesnut, March 18, 1814, Cox and Chesnut Family Papers, SCL.

ensuring their own future, would also reflect well on their mothers, whose feelings of pride and accomplishment were entwined in their sons' and daughters' fates. By 1819, Jane Garland felt that her maternal toil was largely rewarded by her children's virtue; she wrote her daughter, "My Children little no the many anxious moments I feel on thare account, and as yet I have great caws to be satisfyed that those which are grown up have been dutifull to thare Father and me."⁵⁹ At every turn, women in the South showered children with advice, injunctions, and warnings, and motherhood was not necessarily a requirement for such an invested role. Rather, women in the South depended on one another to create a web of oversight, a network of sages that protected sons and daughters, nieces and nephews, cousins and neighbors. From nurturing children's moral compasses to weighing in on their adult lives as doctors, lawyers, and wives, women in the South joined their voices to form a powerful maternal community. Motherhood was not just a connection between a woman and her child, but a broader role, a more meaningful relationship among women that gained its power through those opinions given so freely.

⁵⁹ Jane Henry Meredith Garland to Sarah Armistead Garland Waller, February 19, 1819, Garland Family Papers, VHS.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

WHITE JUDGES

Southern mothers defined their realms by defining their children. Children became markers of a mother's skill, morality, even race and class. Women were quick to praise their children for their health, intellect, and virtue, but they were also careful to acknowledge moral lapses. Only by judging their own children's actions could women teach them right behavior. But part of molding good children was differentiating them from others. A mother might praise her child for its brightness, while criticizing other women's children for being presumptuous, tiresome, or uncouth. Women's judgments generally expanded from the home with increasing severity. Mothers turned their gaze first upon their own children, whom they generally found handsome and charming; next, upon the children and mothers present in their immediate and extended families, including their children's spouses, who were susceptible to slightly more faults; and finally to the children and mothers outside the protective familial circle, who earned the lion's share of criticism. Why did women devote so much space in their letters and diaries to near-constant judgment of their sons and daughters, other children, and even other mothers? By distinguishing "good" families from "bad" families, Southern women exercised the power to determine the style and content of appropriate childrearing. The act of judging drew lines around communities, separating mothers based on race, class, status, and skill. In a world in which women were not encouraged to exercise their opinions in matters of commerce or politics, childrearing became a conduit for asserting identity.

Women's primary business was manufacturing good children, and like all artisans, they took pride in their handiwork and were quick to critique the products of other women's parenting. A well-behaved and healthy child signaled a successful mother.¹

Many judgments were the product of a single woman's taste, but others rose out of the sea of social consensus. Elite southern women had determined, for instance, that sweetness of temper and obedience would be valued traits, while vulgarity, a term that was used to encompass most of the actions of lower-class families, deserved censure. For the most part, then, elite mothers measured praise and criticism not based on individual actions but based on degrees of belonging. A woman's own children earned her fondest accolades, and the children of her sisters and cousins were similarly indulged. By largely approving of the behavior of her own extended family, a mother was voicing her self-confidence. By judging her own children with pride, a mother was judging herself with satisfaction. Certainly not all mothers expressed boundless confidence in their endeavors; on the contrary, many women were plagued with doubts throughout the childrearing process. But by adopting the role of judge, mothers were working through those doubts, evaluating other women's maternal strategies, and sustaining themselves by comparisons with less skilled mothers.

By the mid-eighteenth century, families looked on children not as corrupt proto-adults but as innocent beings in their own right, which led mothers to be more free with their praise and criticism. Because children were now seen as blank slates on which parents, and especially mothers, should draw with care, maternal judgments became an integral part of guiding Southern children down proper paths. Through the early nineteenth century, elite

¹ Kathleen Brown asserted that "In its juridical and community-defining roles, gossip was perhaps the closest thing to a female public." Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 285.

mothers constructed images of ideal families based on their own experiences and on the behavior of their female neighbors and correspondents. The majority of maternal judgments were shared with other women; mothers were at their most loving and most ruthless in letters to friends, sisters, and aunts. A female network of criticism may have helped elicit the level of honesty that mothers expressed when judging those outside their community, but it may have also clouded women's true sentiments about close companions; few women, after all, would have written their sisters with cutting words about their nieces and nephews. Being situated in expansive networks of communication, though, meant that women could talk about their siblings with their children, or their grandchildren with their cousins. Through these indirect judgments, we can get a better sense of mothers' differentiation between their own social circles and the worlds of non-white, non-elite women. Though some of their critical letters were written to husbands or brothers, mothers relied for the most part on female correspondents because these women were their audience; these women were the ones who, in turn, would be judging *them*.

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Within mothers' first circle of judgment lay their own sons and daughters, whose physical attributes and nascent talents were praised according to maternal visions of an ideal child. The qualities of their children that mothers chose to highlight revealed their hopes for their children's future. Intelligence, affection, and good health were virtues almost universally desired by elite Southern women, and while mothers often had distinct expectations for sons and daughters, the qualities they worked to instill in their toddlers were prized regardless of gender. Young boys in the eighteenth-century South were certainly praised for displays of virility, for instance, but they were equally commended on their

goodness, wisdom, and virtue. Though they were affectionately referred to as “my rough little school boy,” “my dear little man,” and “a sturdy boy,” mothers also sought evidence of intellectual achievement and upright behavior.² In the 1750s, Maria Taylor Byrd praised her grandsons for their “sweet Temper of Mind, . . . & kind Disposition.”³ One mother who deemed her son “a very smart little monkey” was pleased to see that he was both learning to spell and riding his “hobby horse very boldly.”⁴ Martha Washington must have flushed with pride when she received a letter from a dear friend extolling the virtues of her beloved grandson Wash; besides deeming him “a Child of Penetration & Genius,” the female correspondent noted his “sweet conciliating manners like your charming Eleanor.” Good manners and an easy disposition were valued in boys and girls alike because they signaled an appropriate childhood deference and a tractable temper. While this same friend included with her letter a gift of books for Wash and some fine collars for Eleanor, fashion was not exclusively a female concern. Martha Washington delighted in adorning her grandson, and though she refrained from advising him about clothes as she did Eleanor, she took pleasure in acquiring “some rufles for my little Boys bosom.”⁵

² Eliza Lucas Pinckney to Lady Carew, 1754; Eliza Lucas Pinckney to Mr. Gerrard, February 1760, in Eliza Lucas Pinckney, *The Letterbook of Eliza Lucas Pinckney, 1739-1762*, ed. Elise Pinckney (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 83, 136; Martha Washington to Mary Stillson Lear, August 24, 1794, *Worthy Partner*, 273.

³ Maria Taylor Byrd to William Byrd III, n.d. 1758?, Byrd Family Papers (1757-1860), VHS.

⁴ Sophia Haskell to Ann Heatly Reid Lovell, July 26, 1834, Ann Heatly Reid Lovell Estate and Family Papers, SCHS.

⁵ Elizabeth Willing Powell to Martha Washington, November 31, 1787; Martha Washington to Fanny Bassett Washington, June 5, 1791, *Worthy Partner*, 199, 231. Martha’s letters to Eleanor often include such gentle reminders as: “I think your chemese will look much better with a handkerchief than without.” Martha Washington to Eleanor Parke Custis, n.d., *Worthy Partner*, 404.

In the early nineteenth century, mothers' attitudes toward young boys remained much the same; the new role of republican citizen had altered few of a son's desirable qualities. Eleanor Custis Lewis, who received the collars from her grandmother Martha several decades earlier, admired the "affectionate & generous disposition" of one of her grandsons, while she chided another for being "*too violent in temper.*"⁶ Rachel Mordecai Lazarus used nearly identical language when she boasted of her son's "affectionate engaging disposition."⁷ Caroline Clitherall doted on her toddler boy, who was "beautiful in appearance," with an "amiable & affecte. Temper."⁸ Sons who did not equal their mothers' hopes were generally lacking in these displays of sweetness. Sarah Jerdone Braikenridge complained that though her son was a "well grown child," he was a "sad Noisy Michievous little Fellow." This grievance was directed not to a female friend, who might think less of the worried mother, but to Sarah's own mother, who could offer suggestions or advice.⁹ For mothers with young children, affection was universally desired, and though a beloved son might be described as "sturdy" or "rough," he was generally praised for mirroring his sisters in virtue and temperament.

Just as mothers looked for sweetness of temper in their sons, they boasted of their daughters' physical vitality, a particularly valued trait when childhood mortality remained a concern. Beyond a concentration on a young girl's beauty, mothers recorded their growth

⁶ Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis to Elizabeth Bordley Gibson, February 9, 1834, July 6, 1829, in Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis, *George Washington's Beautiful Nelly: The Letters of Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis to Elizabeth Bordley Gibson, 1794-1851*, ed. Patricia Brady (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 214 and 195.

⁷ Rachel Mordecai Lazarus to Maria Edgeworth, July 17, 1824, *Education of the Heart*, 63.

⁸ Caroline Eliza Burgwin Clitherall Diaries, Vol. 6, p. 1, SHC.

⁹ Sarah Jerdone Braikenridge to Sarah Macon Jerdone, August 3, 1791, Jerdone Family Papers, WM.

spurts much as they did that of their sons. Eliza Lucas Pinckney repeatedly informed her friends that her daughter Harriott “grows tall.” Because these words were always accompanied by an account of her “fine state of health,” one can assume that Eliza was pleased at her daughter’s vigor.¹⁰ Jane Williams boasted that one of her granddaughters “grows faster than any Child I know,” while another was “the heartiest Child I ever saw, exceedingly fat.”¹¹ Gabriel Ford praised his infant niece Ella, “who is become positively heavy and fat.” Ella’s mother confirmed that her “cheeks are as round & ruddy as a milk-maids & not a belt of her last summers frocks that will meet around her waist.”¹² Similarly, Martha Washington’s son was delighted at the girth of his newborn daughter, whom he termed a “strapping Huzze,” with “double Chinn” and all.¹³

Children’s height and weight was a common epistolary topic among women, for growth was the best indicator of health and, occasionally, status. With her son Roger away at college, and thus unable to form her own opinion about his physical progress, Frances Hume Pinckney asked Roger to “send me an exact measure of your highth.” After hearing reports that her sixteen-year-old son was “very short indeed,” Frances was worried that he would be “nothing near as high as your Father.” Height was not only tied to health or familial resemblance, however; after criticizing her son for his shortness, Frances observed that her fourteen-year-old daughter Betsy was “above half a head taller than I am,” but worried that

¹⁰ Eliza Lucas Pinckney to Mrs. King, May 1759; Eliza Lucas Pinckney to Dr. Kirkpatrick, February 1760; Eliza Lucas Pinckney to Vigorous Edwards, March 12, 1760, *Letterbook*, 119, 133, 141.

¹¹ Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, May 16, 1808, June 11, 1813, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

¹² Gabriel H. Ford to John Ravenel, January 6, 1831; Eliza Ravenel to John Ravenel, December 9, 1830, John Ravenel Papers, SCL.

¹³ John Parke Custis to Martha Washington, August 21, 1776, *Worthy Partner*, 170.

Betsy was “not very forward in her learning, which is a great disadvantage to a Girl or Boy that grows fast. So much is expected from them, seeing them so tall.”¹⁴ In 1791, Sarah Braikenridge was happy to report to her mother that her son George “is within less than an Inch & a half as tall as his Father,” her daughter Sally “is tall too for her age,” and though her daughter Maria “don’t grow so fast,” she was nonetheless “all Life & spirits.”¹⁵ Sarah’s boastful rendering of her children’s progress was directed toward her mother, and her detail was necessary: she had left her Virginia home in 1788 and moved across the ocean to England, and she desperately wished for her mother to share in her joys and concerns.

Though height was a universal virtue, growth seemed to be a particular concern for daughters, whose appearance of health and fertility was a type of insurance on the marriage market. Mothers marked their daughter’s growth even from a young age, proudly noting when girls were strong and worrying when they were not. Caroline Laurens watched the progress of her infant daughter closely; when the girl was born, she was “remarkably fat but extremely delicate,” and a few months later she was “extremely delicate but perfectly healthy.” As she began to crawl, her mother happily observed that she was “so excessively lively, she cannot stand still . . . so as to take a firm step.”¹⁶ In a letter to her sister, Catherine Read observed that her fifteen-year-old daughter Catherine “tho very tall has a Childish appearance,” while her younger daughter Cornelia “is much grown, & I think will be as tall as her sister.”¹⁷ Delia Lopez praised her young niece for being both “perfectly good natured

¹⁴ Unfortunately, the tall Betsy died only four years later. Frances Susanna Quash Hume Pinckney to Roger Pinckney V, March 18, 1786, Roger Pinckney Correspondence, SCHS.

¹⁵ Sarah Jerdone Braikenridge to Sarah Macon Jerdone, August 3, 1791, Jerdone Family Papers, WM.

¹⁶ June 1, 1826, January 1, 1827, March 1, 1827, Caroline Olivia Laurens Diary, SHC.

¹⁷ Catherine Read to Betsy Ludlow, April 13, 1811, Read Family Papers, SCL.

& as fat as a rice bird.”¹⁸ Eliza Haywood was proud of her “Healthy and . . . Ruddy” daughter, who “grows fast,” and declared that her son was “much Larger than any Child of his Age here.”¹⁹ Alice Izard worried about her daughters; her elder daughter Caroline “is very well grown for her years, but she is timid, & does not wish to be brought forward.” Georgina, meanwhile, “is small, altho’ grown a good deal lately.” Alice was particularly concerned about Caroline’s “excessive timidity,” which she saw as both “a drawback to her acquirements, & a disadvantage to her appearance.”²⁰ Alice had no interest in cultivating a shrinking violet. For these mothers, healthy daughters would not only survive the ravages of childhood but go on to become healthy mothers. Many of these women had experienced what effect childbirth could have on a delicate constitution. Girth, therefore, could sometimes become the subject of a heated competition. Jane Williams observed that “Becky’s little Girl . . . is very fat indeed, out grown Sally’s a great deal. It is nearly as large as Pegg’s but hers is very small of its age,” adding that “Mrs. John Waddell’s youngest about ten months old is much larger than yr. Fabius and excessively Fat and well looking.”²¹

Women also consistently lauded their daughters and granddaughters for displays of intelligence and independence, traits which mothers presumably had a hand in shaping. In 1758, Elizabeth Hill Carter Byrd described her daughter as a “Lovely sensible Girl,” while a mother in the 1760s warned her daughter not to “be carried away by the love of Dress and

¹⁸ Delia Lopez to Eliza Jocelyn, May 4, 1809, Giles Family Papers, SHC.

¹⁹ Eliza Haywood to John Haywood, May 12, 1800, June 17, 1800, November 15, 1801, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

²⁰ Alice Delancey Izard to Henry Izard, January 23, 1807, Ralph Izard Papers, SCL.

²¹ Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, April 22, 1805, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

Finery.”²² Martha Washington’s focus on her granddaughter Eleanor’s external beauty was balanced with a concern for her intellectual growth, and when Martha sent her a packet of hygienic tooth powder, she also included a book.²³ When Eleanor had a granddaughter of her own, she praised her for being “ladylike” and “graceful,” but was also proud that she was “fearless & flies along like a Bird.” Like young boys who were expected to be both strong and sweet, little girls were also encouraged to be simultaneously gentle and independent. When Caroline Clitherall welcomed two orphaned girls into her North Carolina home, she noted their “fair complexions” but sighed to see them “very backward in knowledge.”²⁴ Mothers’ expressions of confidence in their female relatives, and their wish for them to be “as independent as . . . circumstances will admit,” informed their goals for their future happiness.²⁵

Though mothers cultivated such universal virtues as affection, health, and intelligence, some women nonetheless declared a preference for either their daughters or sons. When Caroline Laurens left her children in South Carolina to embark on a journey to Europe with her husband in 1827, she confessed that when she said goodbye to her daughter, she was “more affected parting with her than with my son.”²⁶ In many families, however, and especially among fathers, there was a marked preference for sons, though mothers often responded to this preference with a sense of humor. Jane Williams announced that her

²² Elizabeth Hill Carter Byrd to William Byrd III, May 17, 1758, Byrd Family Papers (1757-1860), VHS; Elizabeth Stedman to her daughter Peggy, September 1767, transcribed in the Jane Grahame Commonplace Book, SHC.

²³ Martha Washington to Eleanor Parke Custis, January 3, 1796, *Worthy Partner*, 289.

²⁴ Caroline Eliza Burgwin Clitherall Diaries, Vol. 6, p. 13, SHC.

²⁵ Martha Washington to Fanny Bassett Washington, September 15, 1794, *Worthy Partner*, 275.

²⁶ June 13, 1827, Caroline Olivia Laurens Diary, SHC.

daughter Rebecca Moore had given birth to “another Daughter to the great, very great, Disappointment and mortification of the whole Family, Judge Moore himself worse than any of them.”²⁷ Esther Cox gently chided her daughter, “Three Granddaughters have been presented to me since the first of August last, now if you chuse to give me a Son, I shall be as well pleased.” Esther was flexible, however, and declared that if another girl was born, “I shall add it to my Number, and make four – Sons or daughters are equally wellcome to me.” Other members of the family were not so patient. Esther reported that “Hetty Reed says in her singular way that you must not expect a letter from her till you behave better, & present your family with a Son.”²⁸ When Selina Powell informed her husband of the birth of their child, he responded gamely, “Well though it is but a gal if it is like the other it is well worth a father’s affection and under God’s protection it may one day ripen into a woman sweet as its mother.” Observing his growing brood of daughters, he added that he had “no notion however of supplying my brother’s and sister’s sons with wives; to prevent which catastrophe I think we shall have to transport them to the wilds of the west.”²⁹

Most mothers expressed pleasure with their children’s progress, especially when they were reporting to other judging women, but when mothers thought they had failed, they responded with emotions as dire as those that accompanied the sickroom. When Charlotte Allston’s son joined the army, married, and then moved back home, she was appalled that he

²⁷ Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, December 28, 1806, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

²⁸ Esther Cox to Mary Chesnut, March 2, 1805, March 31, 1810, Cox and Chesnut Family Papers, SCL.

²⁹ Charles Leven Powell to Selina Lloyd Powell, March 20, 1833, Powell Family Papers, WM. For more on the reasons why Southern families, especially fathers, would have preferred sons, see V. Lynn Kennedy, *Born Southern: Childbirth, Motherhood, and Social Networks in the Old South* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 113-117.

could take these steps “without saying Mother I am going to do so.” She warned her younger son, “I am so disappointed at Joseph, that I shall not survive if you turn out in the same way.”³⁰ Maria Taylor Byrd was similarly shocked when her son embarked on a second marriage without alerting her; after reading a belated letter from him, Maria “was so surprized as to cry out Good God is my Son Married & never acquainted me with it!”³¹ Dissipation and ingratitude were some of mothers’ chief woes, but some women also bemoaned more superficial things. Elizabeth Byrd Farley wrote her brother, “I am Mother of four homely Girls.” In case he doubted her, she reiterated with blunt honesty that “they really are by no means pretty, & I am silly enough to be sorry for it.”³² Sophia Cheves Haskell confessed to her great-aunt that her fourteen-month-old daughter could neither talk nor walk, and “is not at all pretty now, but I hope she may improve by and by.”³³ Jane Williams observed that her granddaughter “is at present the Image of its Father all Nose, but . . . that will not look so large I imagine when its Face gets filled up. The Nose will be always large tho.”³⁴ Appearance, affection, and obedience were traits which, while not always subject to a mother’s control, were nonetheless markers of a mother’s success.

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³⁰ Charlotte Ann Allston to Robert F. W. Allston, September 27, 1818, quoted in J. H. Easterby, ed., *The South Carolina Rice Plantation as Revealed in the Papers of Robert F. W. Allston* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 50.

³¹ Maria Taylor Byrd to William Byrd III, February 17, 1761, Byrd Family Papers (1684-1842), VHS.

³² Elizabeth Hill Byrd Farley to Thomas Taylor Byrd, June 25, 1783, Byrd Family Papers (1684-1842), VHS.

³³ Sophia Cheves Haskell to Ann Lovell Heatly Reid, July 26, 1834, Ann Lovell Heatly Reid Estate and Family Papers, SCHS.

³⁴ Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, February 7, 1805, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

Once they had satisfied themselves that their own sons and daughters were as well-raised as possible, mothers turned their critical eye to the children of other women. Nieces, nephews, cousins, and grandchildren often earned women's affection, and with affection generally came praise. Women could be generous with their praise of other families, especially those of friends and relatives, because they were reliant on women within their social networks to support their maternal projects. This kind of support from friends and peers contributed to mothers' feelings of self-worth, pride, and responsibility, and it ensured that a broad community of sympathetic women would be invested in their children. Anna Waugh wrote her niece to assure her that "few things could give me more satisfaction than to know that you merit the approbation of your Friends."³⁵ Delia Lopez called her niece "without exception the finest child of her age I ever knew."³⁶ Catherine Read begged to know all about her sister's children, and her frequent requests for more details seem more than mere politeness. "I wish when you write you would say a little more about yr. Daughters," Catherine urged. "Every thing concerning them is quite interesting to us all." When her sister playfully accused her of insincerity or perhaps a sense of competition, Catherine rebutted, "I was prompted solely by affection, perhaps a little self interest to catch something that I might copy for my own." When Martha Laurens Ramsay died, Catherine mourned the loss of a family friend and a "sensible pleasant agreeable woman," but noted in the same breath that "her Daughters are all sensible tho' formal in their manner."³⁷ While Catherine also prized intelligence in her daughters, she tried to cultivate a certain graceful ease in them that

³⁵ Anna Waugh to Eliza Jocelyn, May 31, 1800, Giles Family Papers, SHC.

³⁶ Delia Lopez to Eliza Jocelyn, May 4, 1809, Giles Family Papers, SHC.

³⁷ Catherine Read to Betsy Ludlow, April 13, 1811, January 13, 1812, March 27, 1813, Read Family Papers, SCL.

Martha's daughters may have been lacking. In a letter to her daughter, Judith Smith reported on a recent visit to a family friend, whose five daughters were "all young, but amiable, just such pictures as I wish my dearest, my only daughter to imitate."³⁸ The mother in Judith was constantly on the lookout for models of good childrearing, and though her daughter may have taken this comment as a slight, Judith probably found in this encounter a certain inspiration. In an era without mountains of printed material on the duties, methods, and short-cuts of motherhood, women turned to other families to observe and compare. While these comparisons were sometimes lopsided, most women observed their younger relatives with genuine affection and hoped that their children would be similarly embraced by kin.

When women did criticize other children within their network of support, their words were typically more playful than cutting, and some families even maintained a healthy sense of competition. In 1803, Esther Cox wrote her daughter Mary Chesnut about another of her daughters: "I suppose Sally gave you all the information she could, unless she dwelt too long upon the Beauty, and accomplishments of her children." Esther was quick to assure her, though, that "I don't think they understand the art of government half as well as you and Mr. Chesnut do."³⁹ When Sarah Threadcraft compared the merits of her aunt's children, she proclaimed that she "always thought [Mary] a lovely child but Joseph decidedly the handsomest."⁴⁰ Jane Williams took notes on all her grandchildren's physical features and regularly informed her daughters about their comparative merits. In a letter to her daughter

³⁸ Judith Anna Smith Smith to Judith Anna Smith Hawes, September 13, 1818, Katharine Heath Hawes Papers, VHS.

³⁹ Esther Cox to Mary Cox Chesnut, December 10, 1803, Cox and Chesnut Family Papers, SCL

⁴⁰ Sarah Threadcraft to Elizabeth Saylor Yates, October 10, 1824, Yates Family Correspondence, SCHS.

Eliza, she announced that another daughter's child "is the fattest I ever saw at 5 weeks old, but no wonder it is so Voracious it will Suck 3 Breasts at a time and appear to be hardly Satisfied." Jane also praised the infant's "fine Black Eyes," but confirmed that "her Mouth is not so handsome" as that of Eliza's son. Perhaps seeking to smooth any ruffled feathers, Jane added that "yr. Children are Remarkable for handsome Mouths. I see none that equal them in that Feature." Jane felt no compunction in observing to one of her daughters that "Ferebee's Children are as Handsome as Becky's is homely but hers are improving." To each daughter, however, Jane was careful to note that their "dear little ones are universally allowed to be the loveliest Children in this Country."⁴¹ Judging attractiveness or weight was relatively safe territory, for these were traits which reflected less on the skills of a mother than on the hand of providence.

Grandmothers also exercised their powers of judgment, cooing over grandchildren whose management was largely out of their hands. Maria Taylor Byrd admired her grandson Billy for his "manly disposition & sweet Temper of Mind," Thomas for his "good open Heart & kind Disposition," Jack for being "desirous of Pleasing," and her granddaughter for being "one of the most Sensible Children I ever Conversed with" and "extremely Pretty."⁴² Esther Cox admired her grandsons for their physical beauty, remarking that "to be sure Theodore does look like a little Adonis in boy's clothes," and hoping to see her other grandson John "in his new dress." But Esther was also able to criticize when she observed parental management gone astray. Though Theodore was "much better shaped than John," she noticed he had "grown as rude and unmanageable as [John] is quiet." She also yearned to see her

⁴¹ Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, January 31, 1804, May 16, 1808, May 29, 1810, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

⁴² Maria Taylor Byrd to William Byrd III, n.d., 1758?, Byrd Family Papers (1757-1860), VHS.

granddaughter “figuring in the Dance.” But Esther was quick to attribute the good traits of her grandchildren to their upbringing. When children’s behavior was often the sole marker of parental skill, Mary Cox Chesnut must have been pleased to read her mother’s observation that “Mr. Chesnut’s and your management of your children has proved the goodness of your Method, by their good conduct.”⁴³ Jane Williams was impressed by her daughter’s nursing stamina, for “let her be doing what she will if the Child cries, [she] drops it and runs. Maurice tells her it is a pity she had not two that her affections might have been a little Divided.”⁴⁴ Though Maurice, as a husband, may have felt his wife’s attention overly engaged, Jane was proud of her daughter’s maternal commitment. These women’s comments were a continuation of their maternal oversight; once their children were grown, women stopped measuring their height and weight and measured instead their suitability as parents.

While elite white women directed their most pointed criticisms at outsiders, clashes sometimes arose between related women of different generations with different styles of parenting. Maria Taylor Byrd and her daughter-in-law Elizabeth Hill Carter Byrd ruled two plantations a few miles apart on the fertile banks of the James River. In 1757, Maria’s husband was dead, and Elizabeth’s was fighting in the French and Indian War. Maria considered it her particular duty to observe and, if necessary, intervene in her grandchildren’s upbringing, and her correspondence with her distant son reveals the fractures between Maria’s and Elizabeth’s parenting styles. Maria first judged Elizabeth on a personal level; she found her daughter-in-law “unreasonable” and overly demanding. She once received a letter from Elizabeth “which begins without any sort of Epithet thus. Send me twelve pair of

⁴³ Esther Cox to Mary Cox Chesnut, December 10, 1803, June 10, 1813, Cox and Chesnut Family Papers, SCL.

⁴⁴ Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, January 27, 1805, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

Stockings out of the Store for my Negro's. E. Byrd. I obey'd, but upon my word I cant but think this very rude Treatment." Elizabeth's personal failings soon spread to what Maria viewed as faulty motherhood. Elizabeth refused to let Maria see her grandchildren, causing the older woman to declare, "If I am not suffer'd to see those dear Little Souls, I will positively pay no regard to her continual & perpetual Demands for all Things that this Plantation affords." Maria began calling her daughter-in-law "the Lady of Belvidere," and finally complained to her son that "I think truely if the old Dame had a Spark of Humanity in her adamantine Breast, She would bring those little Souls to see me." William conveyed his mother's displeasure to his wife, and in a curt note, Elizabeth promised her husband that "Your commands as to the Children's Visiting their Grandmamma Byrd shall be punctually obeyed."⁴⁵ By 1760, however, Maria had more substantial complaints, and reported to her son, "I am greatly disturbed at the Education of the little Lady at Belvidere who's Mamma ly's in Bed till noon & her chief time is spent with Servants & Negro children her Play Fellows, from whom She has learnt a dreadfull collection of words, & is intolerably Passionate." When Maria found her granddaughter playing with a servant girl, who was probably enslaved, she ordered the girl to fetch something for her, which made her granddaughter "so extremely angerry that she curs'd me in the bitterness of her heart & wished me in Heaven." The six-year-old Elizabeth was learning the boundaries of her race and class, while Maria viewed this episode as indicative of the mother's critical failings. Though Maria "could hardly forbear Whipping her," she determined that the "the Child is not to be blamed so much as them that have the Care of her." She concluded her letter by

⁴⁵ Maria Taylor Byrd to William Byrd III, March 15, 1757, December 24, 1757, n.d., 1758?; Elizabeth Hill Carter Byrd to William Byrd III, May 12, 1758, Byrd Family Papers (1757-1860), VHS.

hinting to her son that, “old as I am,” she might be a better parent and educator than their own mother.⁴⁶ This scene reveals some of the chief fears of elite Southern mothers: that their children would be exposed to the servants and slaves that peopled the plantation and would learn not to control these individuals but to play with them, even to speak their language. The Southern social hierarchy was dependent on a denial of commonality between white children and black children, and Elizabeth Carter Byrd’s lax oversight allowed an encounter which, in Maria’s eyes, was unforgivable.⁴⁷

When their children came into contact with the products of other women’s parenting, from enslaved children to potential suitors, mothers hurried to determine whether these companions were worthy. In letters to her daughter Sarah, Betsy Watts wrote about the other Virginians she encountered with such cutting wit that Sarah could not help but understand what qualities her mother valued. After attending a camp meeting in 1807, Betsy wrote her daughter about the absurdities of the young women there, implicitly steering her daughter away from such companions. The preacher, taking as his theme the evils of improper sexual relations, caused quite a stir among his more delicate listeners. “At the words fornication and adultery,” Betsy wrote, “there was a general alarm. The ladies rose in a body spread their umbrellas looked at a little cloud and showed evident apprehensions of an instantaneous thunderstorm.” Betsy mocked this show of modesty, and was happy to report to her daughter that there were “a number of married Ladies . . . as well as single ones whose heads

⁴⁶ Maria Taylor Byrd to William Byrd III, n.d., January 1760?, Byrd Family Papers (1757-1860), VHS.

⁴⁷ Parents in the South continued to construct boundaries between white and black children well into the twentieth century. For an insightful look at how race was constructed through childhood interactions (and non-interactions) during Jim Crow, see Jennifer Ritterhouse, *Growing Up Jim Crow: How Black and White Southern Children Learned Race* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

contained a little ballast.”⁴⁸ By sharing her judgment of these ladies’ follies, Betsy underscored the kind of woman with whom she wanted Sarah to associate.

Marriage provoked fear in mothers who saw that they would have to relinquish their children to another household, and mothers judged their daughters’ husbands with especial care. Marriage was a top priority in settling daughters in the world, and mothers were well aware of how disastrous a poor match could be. When Eleanor Custis Lewis advised her daughter Parke, she encouraged marriage only because she imagined Parke would be “happier than if single.” Once this conclusion was reached, Eleanor tore apart Parke’s potential suitors, criticizing one for lack of grace, another for lack of beauty, and a third for a volatile temper. Even after Parke was married, Eleanor lamented her husband’s “*inferiority* in talents”; indeed, she confided to a female friend that “every one is forcibly struck with his inferiority, & surprised at her choice.”⁴⁹ When Anne Warham Toomer concluded that her daughter’s husband had a hand in their child’s death, she verbally abused him, harangued him in front of his wife, and finally ordered him “out of the House.”⁵⁰ Catherine Fullerton was surprised that her cousin had married a man who was generally considered “a half witted ill-natured madman,” but decided that “she deserves no pity for marrying when she knew all his faults.”⁵¹ The wealthy Mrs. Fleming’s daughter married a plantation overseer, and the outraged mother did not hesitate to tell her visitors, including William Byrd, how “the man has not one visible qualification, except impudence, to recommend him to a female's

⁴⁸ Betsy Watts to Sarah C. Watts, May 29, 1807, Sarah C. Watts Papers, WM.

⁴⁹ Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis to Elizabeth Bordley Gibson, January 11, 1821, January 17, 1826, *George Washington’s Beautiful Nelly*, 99-100, 171.

⁵⁰ Catherine Fullerton Diary, 1798, DeRosset Family Papers, SHC.

⁵¹ Catherine Fullerton Diary, 1798, DeRosset Family Papers, SHC.

inclinations,” and that “to stoop to a dirty plebeian, without any kind of merit, is the lowest prostitution.”⁵² Intellectual inferiority, moral failings, and class divisions could all lead a mother to bemoan her child’s choice.

When the proposed marriage involved a female friend or relative rather than a daughter, women felt free to level their harshest criticisms against the gentleman, since their own children’s hearts were not intimately engaged in the matter. When Charlotte Drayton Manigault heard that a young friend of hers was to be married to a wealthy bachelor, her first response was not happiness for the bride but outrage at the bride’s mother, who had “been long accused” of pursuing financial gain. Charlotte asked, “How can she with one daughter suffering under an unfortunate match of her own making persuade another to marry a man whose greatest & almost only recommendation is wealth!” The concerned mother pointed out that the prospective husband was “neither clever, nor handsome, nor well-informed nor well-born,” implying that she would never agree to such a match for her own daughter.⁵³ Betsy Watts was more bemused than offended by her niece Mary’s admirer, whom she described to her own daughter as being “washed in lotion and highly perfumed with bergamot.” Both Betsy and Mary seemed to take pleasure in poking fun at the gentleman, and Betsy informed her daughter that “for an exact description of his head . . . I refer you to number 275 of the Spectator,” an essay entitled “Dissection of a Beau’s Head” from the popular eighteenth-century series by Addison and Steele. The authors, upon cutting into the fictional brain, discover none of the necessary glands, but instead “Billet-doux, Love-Letters, . . . Fictions,

⁵² William Byrd, *The Westover Manuscripts: Containing the History of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina; A Journey to the Land of Eden, A.D. 1733; and A Progress to the Mines* (Petersburg: Edmund and Julian C. Ruffin, 1841), 125.

⁵³ November 13, 1830, Charlotte Drayton Manigault Journal, Peter Manigault Collection, SCHS.

Flatteries, and Falshoods, Vows, Promises, and Protestations.”⁵⁴ Mary, quoting *The Spectator*, assured her aunt that his head “contains little else but wind and froth and that the ogling muscles are very much worn and decayed for the time they have been in use.” Betsy remarked, “This I take to be nothing more than a girl’s malice and make no doubt they will hold out to ogle an hundred others yet.” In closing, Betsy reminded her daughter that while other individuals might suffer from her wit, she earnestly hoped that “your heart be stored with every virtue and your head cleared of every bubble.”⁵⁵

Other women saw the acquisition of a son-in-law as a chance to add to their daughters’ happiness and even further their personal development. Catherine Read pronounced herself “really . . . pleased” at her daughter’s selection, adding that, after spending a good deal of time at home with the suitor, “I think I never saw a person that combin’d so many good qualities to render domestick life happy.”⁵⁶ Alice Izard also seemed pleased at her daughter’s choice of husband, though when she gave him her permission, she warned that, due to “the difference of their ages,” he must “be a father, as well as a Husband to her.”⁵⁷ Jane Williams greatly admired her son-in-law John Haywood, counting him “as one of my best Freinds” and judging him “a Husband . . . above price.” Another of her daughter’s husbands did not earn such praise; she wrote John Haywood to complain about Captain Hall being “always away from the House” and leaving his children alone “with the Negroes.” She bemoaned, “If [only] Capt. Hall was such a Father as you are and would see

⁵⁴ Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, *The Spectator*, vol. 4, no. 275 (1712; London: John Sharpe, 1803), 112-116.

⁵⁵ Betsy Watts to Sarah C. Watts, May 29, 1807, Sarah C. Watts Papers, WM.

⁵⁶ Catherine Read to Betsy Ludlow, September 21, 1821, Read Family Papers, SCL.

⁵⁷ Alice Delancey Izard to Henry Izard, March 5, 1809, Ralph Izard Papers, SCL.

as much about the Children's welfare as you do."⁵⁸ Susannah Quince, a widow, agreed to let Abraham Motte wed her daughter Mary in 1795, but she drafted an agreement that detailed Abraham's financial settlement on the bride and Susannah's offer of dowry, with the final stipulation, "Mrs. Quince & her daughter to live together so long as agreeable to both free of expence to Mrs. Quince." While this widowed mother may have been able to exercise more legal power over her daughter and son-in-law, most mothers voiced judgments about their children's suitors, whether they were widowed or not. Susannah was fortunate, and though she did not object to Abraham's attentions, she had no intention of fully giving up her daughter.⁵⁹ Such conflicting desires were not rare; though Charlotte Drayton Manigault swore that "my most ardent wish is now accomplished and my Daughter settled in the way I have long desired" when her daughter Ann married in June 1828, only ten months later, the bereft mother confessed, "My heart trembles and sinks within me when I recollect that she is now entirely at the disposal and direction of another."⁶⁰

Within family circles, not all women were fanatically engaged in this game of parental observation. In reporting on a new infant in the family, Eliza Hasell informed her friend that "he is indeed a sweet babe but I doubt not you have seen many such."⁶¹ A newly married seventeen-year-old Eliza Lord DeRosset remarked to her sister, "I suppose you have heard Aunt Sally has another Daughter, they say it is a beautiful little thing, they sent a lock

⁵⁸ Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, October 10, n.d.; Jane Williams to John Haywood, March 28, 1809, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

⁵⁹ James McAlester to Abraham Motte, n.d., 1795, Quince Family Papers, SCHS.

⁶⁰ June 26, 1828, April 19, 1829, Charlotte Drayton Manigault Journal, Peter Manigault Collection, SCHS.

⁶¹ Eliza Hasell to Elizabeth DeRosset, April 21, 1828, DeRosset Family Papers, SHC.

of its hair down . . . but I had not curiosity enough to look at it.”⁶² Perhaps when the first of Eliza’s eleven children was born the following year, she cultivated a new interest in locks of baby hair. Some mothers saw the constant shower of praise to be tiresome. One female visitor to the Haywood household was shown a baby who was “generally thought very handsome,” but the guest announced that the child was “not quite so handsome as she expected from what she had heard.”⁶³ Catherine Read saw her duty as more than a cycle of adulation and concern. “I shall never fear to point out the faults of a Child,” she wrote. Several of Catherine’s female acquaintances in the social circuit “have said to me you must be delighted to look at your Daughters & to see them dance. I very easily answer: it is no novelty, I see them all day long.”⁶⁴ This response was perhaps disingenuous – after all, Catherine devoted much of her letters to reports of her daughters’ accomplishments – but it illustrates a growing sense that a mother’s duty involved a certain manipulation, rather than simple expression, of sentiment.

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Mothers directed their harshest judgments toward women outside the protective circles of family and friendship; while the maternal choices of other elite women were certainly a topic of frequent gossip, the most damning appraisals were leveled at non-white or working women, whose childrearing approaches seemed foreign enough to warrant censure. By distinguishing their own maternal strategies from those of other women, elite mothers were patrolling the boundaries of their own identities. After spending an afternoon in

⁶² Eliza Lord DeRosset to Sarah M. Lord, July 8, 1829, DeRosset Family Papers, SHC.

⁶³ Eliza Haywood to John Haywood, May 19, 1800, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

⁶⁴ Catherine Read to Betsy Ludlow, n.d., 1812, March 24, 1814, Read Family Papers, SCL.

1805 with a family of “indifferent” young women in Charleston, Catherine Read, who had given birth to five children of her own, laughed when she heard of their mother “rising before day to attend to them.” Catherine, who had proudly educated her own children before relinquishing them to day schools, had a keen sense of a mother’s potential as an educator; after spending time with these children, though, she quipped, “When I saw them I could not help thinking she might as well have taken her rest.” A few years later, another family came to call at the Read house and the visiting daughters proudly performed on the pianoforte, showing off their musical education. Catherine declared that “such strumming and squalling I never heard & such a choice of Songs, Vulgar & Low.” When her own daughter took over the piano bench, Catherine confessed that “her playing, Comparatively, to my Ear was like the Musick of the Spheres.” Both mothers had taken pains to instill a sense of music and the art of domestic entertainment in their children, but having successful daughters sometimes required that other women’s children were less so. When a young lady paid an extended visit to the Read household, Catherine could not help comparing the lady’s lack of manners with the merits of her own daughter. “I often in mind contrasted her with Cornelia,” she wrote. “She was too light, too giddy, too unreflecting.” Catherine also condemned mothers who seemed to neglect their children. One Mrs. Rose came to Charleston during the winters to enjoy the town’s social season, and Catherine remarked coldly that “her Daughter was very sick of the sore throat but that did not hinder the Mother from going out.” Catherine herself was generally reluctant to attend large gatherings, and confessed, “I often tremble when I look forward to the time . . . when my Daughters will draw me out into Society.”⁶⁵ The social

⁶⁵ Catherine Read to Betsy Ludlow, January 13, 1805, August 31, 1810, November 21, n.d., April 13, 1811, August 31, 1810, Read Family Papers, SCL.

whirl of elite society became a stage for young men and women to show off their breeding and provided ample opportunities for mothers to observe and criticize.

While Catherine Read directed her barbs at mothers of a similar status, Caroline Clitherall turned her gaze toward mothers who had more serious faults than ostentation or absurdity. In the 1810s, while living on a South Carolina plantation with her husband and four young children, Caroline Clitherall adopted an infant who was cast off by its own mother, “dreadfully emaciated” with “several blue & green marks.” Caroline noted that “these marks were pinches, given by its savage Mother – who in a fit of intoxication had taken the child, wrapping it in a blanket, and plac’d in the sidewalk.” The father, having no other recourse, allowed Caroline to take the child, informing her that “three times has my wife cast this helpless Babe away” and that “she swears, if it ever is brought back – she will kill it.” The mother, who was perhaps suffering from post-partum depression, became a “savage” in Caroline’s eyes. For Caroline, perhaps the worst offense among elite mothers was a disregard for religion. She railed against mothers who “lead their young ones in folly’s path, & obscure the infant vision by the glare of Fashion’s vanities.” She warned that these mothers, as well as their misled children, could expect “solemn accountability” in the afterlife for privileging fashion over spiritual growth. “Alas Mothers now,” she chided.⁶⁶ From rescuing abused children to chastising fashionable mothers, Caroline clearly delineated her own maternal identity. Her judgments of “savages” and “Mothers now” served to bolster her own sense of religious and moral duty, thus cementing her feeling of self-worth and competence.

⁶⁶ Caroline Eliza Burgwin Clitherall Diaries, Vol. 5, p. 35 and 30, SHC.

While fellow mothers received the majority of critical judgments, children were not immune to critiques, for many mothers saw poorly behaved or ill-educated children as products of incompetent childrearing. Catherine Read lamented the return of extravagant and revealing fashions in 1813, and aimed her barbs particularly at young women from the North “who exhibit the bare backs & Bosom. . . . Some people thought they had put on their gowns hind part before. I think the back a frightful part of the human form particularly when squeezed together as it is.”⁶⁷ An English woman was equally surprised in 1755 when she attended a ball in Maryland “which was compos’d of Romans, Jews, & Hereticks,” and where “the Ladys danced without Stays or Hoops.”⁶⁸ Other young people, meanwhile, failed to live up to their own career aspirations. Helen MacLeod remarked about a young acquaintance of hers, “I do not think him a very bright youth, it is laughable to hear him and some such others styled Doctor.”⁶⁹ Overly boisterous children, meanwhile, reflected indirectly on parental control. When Jane Williams shared a house with several young visitors, she could not understand why they should keep up “such a singing and laughing and romping,” complaining that “they feel nothing except to gratify themselves in riding and walking and taking their pleasure.”⁷⁰ Occasionally even the legitimacy of children could be called into question within particularly gossip-ridden communities, and it was a blessing to the widow Sarah Winston Syme that her son “has all the strong features of his sire, not

⁶⁷ Catherine Read to Betsy Ludlow, December 17, 1813, Read Family Papers, SCL.

⁶⁸ September 20, 1755, Charlotte Browne Diary, VHS.

⁶⁹ Helen MacLeod to Donald MacLeod, September 4, 1826, MacLeod Family Papers, VHS.

⁷⁰ Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, August 24, 1816, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

softened in the least by any of hers, so that the most malicious of her neighbours cannot bring his legitimacy in question, not even the parson's wife."⁷¹

Divisions of race and class engendered the starkest critiques from mothers. Non-white mothers earned the harshest opprobrium from white maternal critics; black mothers were harsh, Indian women were lax or uncaring. For elite women, poor mothers were cruel, and for lower-class women, wealthy mothers were often unjust. One impoverished mother bound her child as an apprentice in the care of an elite woman until the girl was old enough to "assist her . . . in earning a living." But the informal apprenticeship did not divest this mother of her sense of justice. After the child was taught to sew and read, the mother took her home again with the complaint that the wealthy woman "drest [my] child in Homespun, & [her] own, in callico."⁷² Charlotte Drayton Manigault may have responded that working women could not even be trusted to dress their children at all; as a benefactor of the Charleston Orphan House, Charlotte visited the children regularly and expressed gratitude that they were receiving "a good plain education," especially since they "would otherwise be reared in the abodes of immorality and vice."⁷³ While differences in class may have brought out some mothers' charitable instincts, differences in color met with less tolerance. When Catherine Read met the wife of the celebrated Benjamin Latrobe in Philadelphia, she expressed no interest in a further acquaintance, citing that "Mrs. L. is a very large . . . woman, very coarse,

⁷¹ William Byrd, *The Westover Manuscripts: Containing the History of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina; A Journey to the Land of Eden, A.D. 1733; and A Progress to the Mines* (Petersburg: Edmund and Julian C. Ruffin, 1841), 142.

⁷² Caroline Eliza Burgwin Clitherall Diaries, Vol. 7, p. 9, SHC.

⁷³ March 23, 1830, July 15, 1830, Charlotte Drayton Manigault Journal, Peter Manigault Collection, SCHS.

dark with the features and whole deportment of a Woman of colour.”⁷⁴ Despite Mrs. Latrobe’s social standing, Catherine’s assessment of her appearance led her to exclude the woman from her circle of friends. A “dark” woman was not one she wanted to know further. Jane Williams, house sitting for a female relative, observed “two Women Servants, the Mother Willoughby and her Mullatto Daughter both as artfull and as subtle as serpents.” She accused them of having “an evil Eye” and of corrupting her own servants, seeing nothing familiar or valid in the powerful relationship of an African American mother and daughter.⁷⁵ In a fictionalized account of the founding of Brainerd, a Cherokee mission school in eastern Tennessee, author Sarah Tuttle constructed this imaginary conversation between two white women concerning a Cherokee woman:

Cornelia. . . . One little girl of twelve years of age attended the school at Dwight several years; the missionaries there said when she was eighteen, that her person was beautiful, and ‘in manners, she was not exceeded by any female of any nation.’ *Mrs. Claiborne*. Who were her parents? *Cornelia*. They were ignorant degraded heathen, like most of their tribe.⁷⁶

Both Sarah Tuttle and her fictional conversationalists allowed for the possibility of a Cherokee woman acquiring an education in gentility, but Cherokee parents, who stayed beyond the reach of missionaries, were “ignorant” and “degraded.” Even foreign mothers were subject to curious speculation and occasional disdain. Esther Cox invited a pregnant French woman to one of her gatherings and was pleased that the lady accepted, since “French Ladies don’t keep out of company, as ours do, when they are rather clumsily shaped.”⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Catherine Read to Betsy Ludlow, n.d. 1812, Read Family Papers, SCL.

⁷⁵ Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, September 3, 1816, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

⁷⁶ Sarah Tuttle, *Letters and Conversations on the Cherokee Mission*, Vol. 1 (Boston: T. R. Marvin, 1830), 112-113.

⁷⁷ Esther Cox to Mary Cox Chesnut, October 10, 1809, Cox and Chesnut Family Papers, SCL.

Catherine Read poked fun at the fashionable French children with whom her own children attended dancing school, remarking that “‘Tis true we there see a Great deal of finery but nothing we would wish to imitate & I have pitied the Mothers that must have spent so much time in disfiguring their Children.”⁷⁸ Clearly marking the boundaries between their own children and those children who neither looked nor behaved the same allowed mothers to control how their families were defined.

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These conversations, which often seem pointed or unkind, were more often outgrowths of a simple interest in admiring, and yes, judging, women’s handiwork. Eliza Ravenel described a common complaint when she wrote a friend in 1822, “You are in some danger in writing to a Mother, of being obliged to hear long accounts of the wonderful genius or rather indications of it in her child.”⁷⁹ The process of mothering children required women to step into central roles in the family drama, a venue which rewarded experts and veterans while punishing novices and clumsy performers. This atmosphere of judgment and criticism among eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century mothers may seem surprising or even unnecessary – are not mothers, after all, supposed to be paragons of love and acceptance? – but these women were engaged in a high-stakes performance. Passing judgment on their own children, the families around them, and those mothers and children that fell outside their social sphere, white mothers created and policed definitions of appropriate parenting that validated their own established practices. In a society in which they were denied access to most political, economic, legal, and even creative stages, women elevated the job of

⁷⁸ Catherine Read to Betsy Ludlow, n.d. 1812, Read Family Papers, SCL.

⁷⁹ Eliza Ravenel to Fanny Harrison, January 30, 1822, John Ravenel Papers, SCL.

motherhood from an inescapable duty to a treasured role, an identity which, if perfected, could earn them the applause of a broad community of sisters, daughters, neighbors, and friends, who were in many respects the most important audience of all.

CHAPTER TWELVE

WHITE SUFFERERS

Caroline Clitherall proudly recorded in her journal, “Few Mothers can boast as I can, that I have never had one pang, caus’d by the intentional ill conduct of my children.” Though Caroline’s children may have behaved as perfect angels, few mothers in the early American South escaped the pangs of motherhood. Caroline herself lost several young children, including two-year-old Henry, whose last words were “take me, my Mamma.” Caroline developed an obsession with death, that “King of Terrors” who “rules, & slays in every climate,” leaving “Sever’d hearts . . . to mourn.” Caroline was not alone; death fell indiscriminately among Southern families, taking infants and the elderly, sisters and brothers. But the death of loved ones was only one facet of white mothers’ suffering. Women also became mothers through seduction, rape, and abandonment. Some mothers could not afford to take care of their children, while others had to kill their children to rescue themselves or their families. Motherhood was not simply an avenue to feelings of joy and self-worth; it could also translate into penury, exploitation, and grief.¹ Despite my arguments to the contrary, motherhood could never be fully controlled or defined by women. A host of other

¹ Caroline Eliza Burgwin Clitherall Diaries, Vol. 7, p. 34, Vol. 5, p. 37, Vol. 6, p. 38, SHC. For more on the role of suffering as a facet of maternal identity, see Nancy M. Theriot, *Mothers and Daughters in Nineteenth-Century America: The Biosocial Construction of Femininity* (1988; Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 26-28. For the suffering of children as a metaphor for colonial conflict, intercultural violence, and national identity, see Anna Mae Duane, *Suffering Childhood in Early America: Violence, Race, and the Making of the Child Victim* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010).

factors stepped in to usurp women's power over their roles as mothers; diseases felled children of all ages, men sexually abused women of all classes, and poverty often turned childrearing from a joy into a burden. Even when women held onto maternal choices, their decisions could be sharply constrained, and some mothers chose abortion or infanticide as the only practical decision in light of their circumstances. But even when motherhood was unwanted, or when it seemed the very pinnacle of misery, women consistently struggled to have some say over their experience of the maternal role. Whether this entailed rationalizing grief through Christian teachings or taking the life of an unwanted infant, mothers fought back against their lack of ultimate control by manipulating whatever elements remained in their hands.

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The first blow most mothers experienced was the death of an infant. Women who saw motherhood as a source of meaning in their lives felt that a child's death also entailed the death of some crucial part of themselves. Though mothers assiduously read nursing manuals and warned their children to wear warm clothes and carry umbrellas in the rain, the death of a son or daughter was almost always beyond a mother's control. Women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were in a period of transition between the early eighteenth-century reliance on Providence either to protect or dispose of one's children and the Victorian period of near-complete maternal responsibility. These were the women who blamed both God and themselves.² In comforting her bereaved daughter in 1801, after she had suffered the first loss of an infant, Esther Cox described a mother's agony, observing that "the little creatures are no sooner born than they entwine themselves round our hearts, & the

² Nancy Schrom Dye and Daniel Blake Smith, "Mother Love and Infant Death, 1750-1920," *Journal of American History* 73, no. 2 (1986): 329-353.

separation by Death, is like tearing Soul from Body.”³ In 1821, Sarah Hart White informed her aunt that “when I wrote you last I think I had three dear children left me, but alas, I have now only one.” In the intervening months, the “Almighty has thought proper to call all my Dear babes home.” As for Sarah’s remaining daughter, “how long I shall be blessed with her is uncertain, I am almost afraid to carry her.” Many mothers like Sarah attempted to resign themselves to what they saw as God’s will, but a belief that their dead infants were “transplanted into the Garden of Paradise” was often difficult to grasp in the midst of grief. Sarah probably spoke for many women when she lamented, “It is with difficulty I can realize my past troubles and bear them as a Christian.”⁴ Anne Porter also linked her suffering with her religion, but she saw her baby’s death in 1822 as direct retribution for her sins. “Yes my dear Sister,” Anne wrote,

God has in mercy justly punished me. I had completely forgotten my duty and placed my whole affections on that dear Child, which we are strickly forbidden by our bible. No one knows what a depraved and desperately wicked heart I have, how often have I said any other child I could willingly give than that.⁵

Anne equated her excessive love for her child with sinfulness, for seemingly only sin could bring such suffering. Even after her children were grown, Sarah Tayloe Washington shared Anne’s feeling of guilt, confessing, “I fear I set too high a value on my Children, or allow’d my heart to be too much devoted to them, and then kind Heaven thinks fit to chastise.”⁶

When one Virginia man reported to another that “Mrs. Tucker has lately been so unfortunate

³ Esther Cox to Mary Cox Chesnut, August 7, 1801, Cox and Chesnut Family Papers, SCL.

⁴ Sarah Hart White to Mary Brockington, February 7, 1821, Peter Samuel Bacot Papers, SCL; Caroline Eliza Burgwin Clitherall Diaries, Vol. 6, p. 24, SHC.

⁵ Anne Saylor Porter to Elizabeth Saylor Yates, July 17, 1822, Yates Family Correspondence, SCHS.

⁶ January 1, 1826, Sarah Tayloe Washington’s Notes, Louise Anderson Patten Papers, VHS.

as to lose a newborn child,” and that “tho’ melancholy on that account is otherwise well,” he undoubtedly underestimated how “well” Mrs. Tucker was actually feeling.⁷ These mothers embraced their guilt and their grief as a means to understand, or at least survive, such tragedy.

Women who suffered loss were rarely alone, though, for they could rely on mothers, cousins, and friends to support them through their trials. When young Eliza Haywood lost a sister, she relayed the news to her friend Sarah Wool, who had also recently lost a sister to the “unrelenting hand of death.” Sarah confirmed that “you were right, my dear Eliza, in believing the perusal of your letter would awaken a corresponding chord of sympathy in my bosom!” Sarah also received consolation from Eliza’s mother Jane, who forwarded her a poem about the mourning of dead infant. Perhaps the poem was the same as one of the poems which Jane received when she lost a child the previous year; one, “Lines, On the death of a child at daybreak,” was carefully copied by hand, while the other, “A Mother’s Lament for an Infant Daughter,” was clipped from a newspaper.⁸ Hearing about the sufferings of other women could ease mothers’ sense of isolation, and communal sympathy was a sought-after tactic for recovery.

In a climate of disease and frequent accidents, grown children could be equally vulnerable, leaving mothers wondering what vengeful God could ask a mother to outlive her children. When Elizabeth Jocelyn informed her surviving children of the death of their sister, she added, “And what shall I say now shall I tell you of our distress hear No that you can better feel than I can describe.” In Elizabeth’s mind, God had “seen fitt to trye me againe by

⁷ William Munford to John Coalter, December 13, 1793, Brown, Coalter, Tucker Papers (I), WM.

⁸ Sarah N. Wool to young Eliza Haywood, March 11, 1824; Unknown correspondent to Eliza Haywood, October 22, 1823, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

taking away from me another of my Earthleay Comforts.” She attributed the grief she experienced to an “admonishing from God.”⁹ The case of Ann Snipes, who, “after eating a hearty supper with her Mother last ev’ning, . . . was taken to Eternity in less than ten minutes,” proved what all Southern women knew: that “in the midst of Life we are in death.” Ann’s mother was beside herself with despair; Ann was “the greatest comfort of her life too, for she lives too miserably with her Husband to have any with him.”¹⁰ Where children provided the glue for a troubled family, their sudden departure could be catastrophic for the unhappy wives left behind.

Perhaps few mothers felt the trauma of losing children more deeply than Jane Williams, who lost her daughter Ferebee in 1808 and her daughter Rebecca in 1816, both around the age of thirty. When Ferebee died of a prolonged illness, Jane sank into a state of near hysteria. Jane’s first response was to place blame; after asking, “Oh! God Almighty what have I done to deserve such Severe Affliction,” she turned to the doctor who cared for her daughter, deeming him incompetent, and then blamed herself for offering faulty advice in the sickroom. Guilt turned to self-pity, as Jane poured her heart out to all who would listen, calling herself a “miserable Wretch” and her life “such a miserable one that except to vent these wretched and Dreadfull feelings . . . I have nothing to write.” In a letter to her ten-year-old granddaughter, Jane spoke of her “Dead Heart,” her “wretched feelings” and her conviction that she was “ready to run and throw myself into the Pond.” Soon, Jane’s only fear was that “Oh! my God I shall live too long.” Neighbors began to report on Jane’s increasing agony, and one woman wrote Jane’s daughter to report that “so far from appearing

⁹ Elizabeth Stevens Jocelyn to Samuel Russell Jocelyn, September 18, 1805, Giles Family Papers, SHC.

¹⁰ Catherine Fullerton Journal (1798), DeRosset Family Papers, SHC.

in any degree reconciled to her late Unfortunate deprivation, she seems daily to become more & more afflicted, insomuch as I greatly fear the consequence must be the loss of life, or of what is of infinitely greater importance, her Senses.” The more friends attempted to aid her, the deeper Jane sank. Two years after Ferebee’s death, one of Jane’s visitors observed that the mother appeared to be improving. Jane promptly corrected this interpretation, declaring that “Mr. Henderson’s report of my being resigned and chearfull was a mistake.” “I am sure he has never seen me Smile or Laugh since my too Heavy Misfortune,” she added, “as I have not felt the least inclination to do either.” In 1816, just as she was recovering her equanimity, Jane lost the second of her daughters, and “Oh! I am once again left like an Old and forlorn Wretch.” She pleaded that her remaining daughter might “never experience [one] part of the trouble and Griefs your unfortunate Mother has. . . . To be almost alone in the world, you cannot conceive how dreadfull such is.”¹¹

Even when their children survived, mothers remained in a state of constant anxiety, especially when they found themselves separated from their children. With her fifteen-year-old daughter at a distant boarding school, Mary Steele admitted to “great uneasiness” and awaited each post with trepidation.¹² When traveling without her children, Catherine Read experienced a “usual terror,” for “leaving my . . . Daughters at such an awful distance from me fill’d my mind with so much gloom.”¹³ Elizabeth Hill Carter Byrd found herself “quite

¹¹ Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, n.d. 1808, May 29, 1809; Jane Williams to John Haywood, January 1, 1809; Jane Williams to young Eliza Haywood, March 15, 1809; Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, July 11, 1809; Rebecca Moore to John Haywood, April 2, 1809; Jane Williams to John Haywood, August 13, 1810; Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, May 28, 1816, June 30, 1816, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

¹² John Steele to Ann Steele, August 26, 1799, John Steele Papers, SCL. Mary’s daughter died four years later, justifying the mother’s fears.

¹³ Catherine Read to Betsy Ludlow, December 11, 1821, Read Family Papers, SCL.

away from my much Beloved Children” when they traveled to England for boarding school, and her only recourse to seeing them was through a distant husband, whom she begged to return and “carry me to England to Visit my Dear Children.” Her husband, William Byrd III, was otherwise engaged in the French and Indian War, leaving his own mother to lament that her “only Son that is invaluable to me, is continually exposed to the very worst sort of Enemies upon the face of the whole earth.”¹⁴ Writing from one part of Virginia to another in 1819, Judith Smith told her grown daughter, “I am rather gloomy. Would you believe it is for want of your cheerfull company?”¹⁵ When Martha Wright wrote a letter to her distant son William, she must have expressed her love and worry, for William confessed that her letter “caused me to shed tears” and to realize “I am a Stranger in a strange land and among strangers.”¹⁶ Before her daughters died, Jane Williams felt a perpetual (and justified) dread of something happening to them; she suffered from “an Hundred fears” and “a Thousand Apprehensions.” When her daughter Eliza first left home as a newlywed, Jane regretted the distance between them, promising that “I will never consent to another Child going so far from me as you are.” “We can neither of us be happy,” she continued, adding, “I did not think it wou’d be half so Bad.” Two of Jane’s daughters underwent pregnancies during the same months in 1805, causing the anxious mother to enjoy “neither rest nor Appetite.” Jane

¹⁴ Elizabeth Hill Carter Byrd to William Byrd III, August 16, 1757, May 13, 1757; Maria Taylor Byrd to William Byrd III, July 18, 1760, Byrd Family Papers (1757-1860), VHS.

¹⁵ Judith Anna Smith Smith to Judith Anna Smith Hawes, October 4, 1819, Katharine Heath Hawes Papers, VHS.

¹⁶ William H. Wright to Martha William Wright, April 28, 1829, Moody Family Papers, LOV.

spoke for many women when she observed that “a Mother’s fears and anxieties especially for Daughters never I beleive end but with her life.”¹⁷

Mothers’ anxieties about being separated from their children were not simply hysterics, but were worries developed in response to very real dangers. After Sarah Macon Jerdone watched her daughter Sarah Braikenridge board a ship from Virginia to England in 1788 with her new husband, the two women exchanged letters filled with desperate longing for the next five years. Despite the fact that the younger Sarah had children of her own, she swore that “of all the tryalls that ever Crossed me that of parting from my Dear mother has been the hardest.” After a rough ocean crossing, Sarah wrote her mother that she would endure it “a thousand times” if she “could survive it to return to you again.” While the daughter was crossing the Atlantic, though, the mother heard reports “of the ship being lost & every soul perrishing.” Sarah quickly reassured her mother, “the Dearst & best of parents,” that all were safe; she well understood “how cruel it is to distress the distressed.” Her mother had already lost three children, and felt the grip of tragedy strongly. Once in England, Sarah continued to yearn for her mother, and “hoping it will please god to see it fit I shall one day or another return to you . . . is what is constantly uppermost in my thoughts & what nothing can take from my mind a minute.” As if their desperation were prescient, in 1793, the younger Sarah caught the measles in Bristol and died, along with two of her own daughters, without seeing her mother again.¹⁸

¹⁷ Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, August 16, 1798, November 5, 1798, December 11, 1805, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

¹⁸ Sarah Jerdone Braikenridge to Sarah Macon Jerdone, June 29, 1788, December 10, 1788, March 11, 1789, Jerdone Family Papers, WM.

Other mothers suffered from more general fears, including their children's ingratitude or moral dissolution. Charlotte Allston saw her sons deserting her for their careers, leaving her alone in a "Wide, Wide, unfriendly World."¹⁹ Other women felt persecuted by the domestic needs of a large household. Eliza Haywood complained of "how frequently I am Intruded on; how noisy my House is," blaming her children for both her headaches and her loss of free time.²⁰ Catherine Read found that her "Household cares seem to increase as the Children advance in age" and pronounced herself exhausted of "providing for Man & Beast." But Catherine would face greater afflictions. Her son Jacob lost his moral compass when he began attending school, spiraling down into an obsession with "Amusement & Dress," earning his tutors' dismay for his use of "prophane language" and his addiction to "Game." The "Profligate Child" finally ran away to New York, leaving his parents in South Carolina in a state of despondency. Catherine felt the delinquency strongly, and she and her husband "meet at our Meals to weep over them." As many Christian mothers, Catherine sought to explain this tragedy as part of God's plan, concluding pitifully that "perhaps Heaven in his Mercy has sent this check to prevent any undue fondness." Catherine may have been remarkably philosophical about her son's dissipation ("Silly parents! Blind mortals!" she wrote wryly), but her grief was palpable; even as she described heaven's plan, "my eyes now swim in Tears."²¹ Charlotte Allston observed with some poignancy that "those who have no

¹⁹ Charlotte Ann Allston to Robert F. W. Allston, April 5, 1819, quoted in J. H. Easterby, ed., *The South Carolina Rice Plantation as Revealed in the Papers of Robert F. W. Allston* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 52-3.

²⁰ Eliza Haywood to Jane Williams, January 21, 1808, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

²¹ Catherine Read to Betsy Ludlow, January 6, n.d., October 1, 1810, February 28, 1812, Read Family Papers, SCL.

Children would give any thing for some, and those who have them are in constant Dread and Anxiety.”²²

Mothers were also more than just indirect victims of their children’s illnesses, deaths, or bad behavior. Occasionally they became the targets of their children’s violence. In 1790, seventeen-year-old Betsey Tretton attempted to poison her mother with a hefty dose of “Tarter Emetic.” After a few applications of this medicine left her mother severely unwell, a doctor attended the woman but could not place her symptoms. In the middle of his examination, Betsey brought her mother a cup of tea, also poisoned, in hopes of finishing her off more quickly. The extra dose of emetic, however, affected the tea’s taste, and the doctor, “pretty well satisfied what was the matter,” decided to test the concoction on the family dog. The distress of the dog led Betsey to “conclude that she was discovered,” and the girl packed a bag and headed north, hoping to escape the law. She made it to a bridge on the far side of town before she was caught. The man who found her reported that “she was carried home & continued with the family . . . , but no one dared inform her mother of what she had done for several months.” Why was the mother left ignorant in the same house as Betsey? Why did the chronicler of this story playfully refer to it as “the Damndest caper”? In other words, why was attempted matricide taken so lightly? Part of the explanation may lie in the Trettons’ class; they were relatively poor and occupied a lower rung in their town’s social hierarchy. Perhaps no one took Betsey’s actions seriously, or perhaps no one placed a high value on the life of her mother. To elite witnesses, Betsey’s murderous tendencies came across as antics, and the town’s reaction to the crime reveals the vulnerability of lower-class mothers.²³

²² Charlotte Ann Allston to Robert F. W. Allston, April 5, 1819, quoted in Easterby, *The South Carolina Rice Plantation*, 52-3.

²³ Unknown correspondent to [Amaziah?] Jocelin, July 23, 1790, Giles Family Papers, SHC.

Motherhood itself was a perilous profession, and most women approached the moment of childbirth with justifiable concern. In the spring of 1835, when Selina Powell informed her husband in a cramped postscript that “we shall have another babe next December,” she added that “this is a little of a trial to me, . . . & I know too that you will be sorry for it, but I must & I do cast my care on the Lord.” This pregnancy may have been a trial because the couple was scheduled to migrate west that fall, or perhaps Selina had already undergone a difficult pregnancy and both husband and wife were concerned about her health.²⁴ Just five months after the birth of a child, Elizabeth Higginbotham Fisher discovered she was pregnant once more and expressed a trepidation similar to Selina’s; in a letter to her sister, she wrote, “Only to think of my being confined again next summer just a year from the last. Oh! my sister, nature dreads the approaching suffering.” Her pregnancy was doubly painful, for “the approaching prospect of another babe recalls my little departed one often painfully to my heart.”²⁵ In addition to losing children, mothers often lost their own lives. On the day Eliza Ford Ravenel died in 1831, her brother informed her husband that late the night before, “she was delivered, without the least pain or inconvenience, of a still born infant, being in about the 7th month of her pregnancy.”²⁶ In the 1790s, John Coalter’s first and second wives both died in childbirth within a year of their marriages. A friend who wrote him to inquire about his first wife’s delivery noted hesitantly that because of John’s “unaccountable silence,” he was “afraid of offering you & her my congratulations on that

²⁴ Selina Lloyd Powell to Charles Powell, April 15-19, 1835, Powell Family Papers, WM.

²⁵ Elizabeth Higginbotham Fisher to Ann Higginbotham Hoskins, March 10, 1842, Higginbotham Family Papers, VHS.

²⁶ Edward Ford to John Ravenel, May 8, 1831, John Ravenel Papers, SCL.

Event,” a fear that was warranted.²⁷ For most women – poor or rich, black, red, or white – pregnancy and childbirth were dangerous junctures that were all the more frightening because mothers had little control over their outcomes.

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While all mothers were vulnerable to losing children, poor and working women often encountered a wider range of violence that included more numerous occurrences of rape, illegitimacy, and infanticide. For some white women in the South, both elite and poor, motherhood was a burden rather than a joy, a role that was forced upon them, but the meaning of which they nonetheless struggled to control. Poverty was the first blight that many mothers had to overcome, and when women had children in extreme poverty or were abandoned by husbands or lovers, they often turned to poorhouses to secure food and lodging. But entering an almshouse generally meant sacrificing one’s children to the state’s work programs. Many of the children who entered a poorhouse with their mothers found themselves bound out as apprentices before too long.²⁸ In Charleston, poor mothers could relinquish their children to the city orphanage, founded in 1790. The orphan house provided food, lodging, and some education to these children and, when they reached their teenage

²⁷ St. George Tucker to John Coalter, October 21, 1792, Brown, Coalter, Tucker Papers (I), WM.

²⁸ Merril D. Smith, “‘Unnatural Mothers’: Infanticide, Motherhood, and Class in the Mid-Atlantic, 1730-1830,” in *Over the Threshold: Intimate Violence in Early America*, eds. Christine Daniels and Michael V. Kennedy (New York: Routledge, 1999), 179. For more on poverty-driven apprenticeships, see Michael Grossberg, *Governing the Hearth: Law and the Family in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 263-268; John E. Murray and Ruth Wallis Herndon, “Markets for Children in Early America: A Political Economy of Pauper Apprenticeship,” *Journal of Economic History* 62, no. 2 (2002): 356-382; Bradford L. Rauschenberg, “Evidence for the Apprenticeship System in Charleston, South Carolina,” *The Journal of Early Southern Decorative Arts* 29, no. 1 (2003): 1-67; and Ruth Wallis Herndon and John E. Murray, eds., *Children Bound to Labor: The Pauper Apprentice System in Early America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009). For essays on poverty in early America, including among white, black, and Indian families, see Billy G. Smith, ed., *Down and Out in Early America* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004).

years, bound them out as apprentices to local merchants and artisans. Of the children who were enrolled by their parents rather than a public official, eighty percent were signed in by their mothers. Two-thirds of the children were boys, suggesting that some impoverished mothers may have been able to keep daughters to help them in such trade work as laundering and sewing. Mothers also had some say in what profession their children were bound to, and the orphan house recorded when mothers rejected a proposed trade and lobbied for something better, safer, or potentially more lucrative. If a mother's situation improved, she was allowed to reclaim her children from the orphan house; at least a third of Charleston's "orphans" were eventually taken home again, and a child dropped off by its mother was almost twice as likely to be reclaimed as a child left by its father. More than any other relatives, mothers were determined to salvage their children the moment it became economically feasible, and children with surviving mothers had a far better chance of rescue from the orphan house than any other group of children.²⁹

Other women endured poverty in rural areas of the South without recourse to urban poorhouses. The wife of Cornelius Keith lived in southern Virginia in what William Byrd called "the wretchedest scene of poverty I had ever met with in this happy part of the world." Raising her six young children in a "pen . . . without any roof over their heads," she endured a husband whose poverty stemmed from idleness, for he "had good land, as well as good health and good limbs to work it." While Byrd berated Cornelius Keith for failing to provide for his family, he praised Mrs. Keith for having "a little more industry." The mother, doing

²⁹ John E. Murray, "Fates of Orphans: Poor Children in Antebellum Charleston," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 33, no. 4 (2003): 519-545. Mothers also played a crucial role in transmitting literacy to their children, and literate children in the Charleston Orphan House were significantly more likely to make it home again. See John E. Murray, "Family, Literacy, and Skill Training in the Antebellum South: Historical-Longitudinal Evidence from Charleston," *Journal of Economic History* 64, no. 3 (2004): 773-799.

what she could, “spun cotton enough to make a thin covering for her own and her children's nakedness.”³⁰ Many mothers who had no safety net, no access to poorhouses or more prosperous kin, did what they could to provide for their children’s most basic needs.

Poverty and a lack of familial protection could leave some women vulnerable to rape. Rape often brought about unwanted motherhood, despite the fact that the cultural understanding of rape in early America precluded the possibility of conception. Based on medical conclusions from the sixteenth century claiming that only “love causeth conception,” many colonial legal codes dictated that if a pregnancy resulted from intercourse, both the man and woman must have been willing partners. As a result, a pregnant woman could not bring a charge of rape upon her assailant; from her very pregnancy, “consent must be inferred.”³¹

Like other laws regulating sexual conduct and morality, laws surrounding sexual violence shifted by the mid-eighteenth century, becoming secularly motivated rather than religiously founded. Fornicators used to public penance began enjoying some degree of privacy. In Connecticut in the 1740s, fornicators were no longer sent directly to county courts, but instead could keep their crimes to themselves if no one directly charged them or could confess briefly before a justice of the peace. By the 1790s, fornication shifted from the

³⁰ William Byrd, *The Westover Manuscripts: Containing the History of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina; A Journey to the Land of Eden, A.D. 1733; and A Progress to the Mines* (Petersburg: Edmund and Julian C. Ruffin, 1841), 87.

³¹ Philip Barrough, *The Method of Physick* (London: Vautroullier, 1583), 157, quoted in Angus McLaren, *Reproductive Rituals: The Perception of Fertility in England from the Sixteenth Century to the Nineteenth Century* (London: Methuen & Co., 1984), 20-21; Michael Dalton, *The Countrey Justice* (London: Company of Stationers, 1655), 350-351, quoted in Else L. Hambleton, “The Regulation of Sex in Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts: The Quarterly Court of Essex County vs. Priscilla Wilson and Mr. Samuel Appleton,” in *Sex and Sexuality in Early America*, ed. Merrill D. Smith (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 89-115, quote on 96. See also Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 47.

criminal courts to the less stigmatized arena of paternity suits. As the laws changed, so too did the popular understanding of women's sexuality. As women's perceived carnality shifted in the mid-1700s to an innate chastity and virtue, their sexuality was seen as less aggressive but also less natural; women were expected to protect their own honor. As a result, accusations of rape became increasingly contestable in early American courts; since all women should resist a sexual encounter outside the boundaries of marriage, and since men's sexual appetites were considered to be inherently aggressive, there was no clear line between "normal" illicit sexual relations and rape. As Sharon Block has noted, women's sexual personae were "always resisting, therefore never *really* resisting."³²

Courts also distinguished between white assailants and black ones, fathers and strangers. As rape became increasingly difficult to prove, rapists became less easily defined and convicted. Fathers who raped daughters were typically charged with incest rather than rape. Black men were overwhelmingly convicted when brought before the bar in rape cases, while white men, especially if they were wealthy or had some local status, more frequently earned acquittals.³³ Even the woman herself was carefully inspected, and female plaintiffs who seemed less "respectable" and more promiscuous often had their testimony questioned.³⁴

³² Cornelia Hughes Dayton, *Women Before the Bar: Gender, Law, and Society in Connecticut, 1639-1789* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 159-162, 234; Sharon Block, *Rape and Sexual Power in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 5, 12, 37-8, quote on p. 40.

³³ Dayton, *Women Before the Bar*, 233, 243-274; Block, *Rape and Sexual Power*, 53-4, 126-162; Barbara S. Lindemann, "'To Ravish and Carnally Know': Rape in Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts," *Signs* 10, no. 1 (1984): 63-82.; A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr. and Barbara K. Kopytoff, "Racial Purity and Interracial Sex in the Law of Colonial and Antebellum Virginia," *Georgetown Law Review* 77 (1989): 1967-2029; Kirsten Fischer, *Suspect Relations: Sex, Race, and Resistance in Colonial North Carolina* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 181-190. Despite the disparities in conviction rates, Diane Miller Sommerville has argued that the specific fear of the lust of the black rapist was a product of the postbellum South. Convictions in earlier decades focused less on race and more on status; both poor white and black men were convicted more frequently than men of some

Rape, poverty, and abandonment could all lead to women having children out of wedlock, children who were deemed illegitimate by their communities and by colonial and state courts. Colonial attitudes toward bastardy shifted from the seventeenth to the eighteenth centuries, as concern about the regulation and punishment of sin gradually transformed into an overarching concern about the economic repercussions of illegitimate children.³⁵ Laws began to emphasize monetary penalties, especially for men involved in bastardy cases, as towns and parishes sought to avoid bearing a financial responsibility for children without a support system. Several communities even petitioned state governments to enact harsher bastardy laws. Some South Carolina residents claimed that poor and immoral women were producing “Base, Loose, Vagabond, Ungovern’d and Unlearned Children” that would become a burden on local poor relief, and they demanded that the mothers of bastard children should be required to come forward and admit their immorality to local officials.³⁶ The

means. See Sommerville, “The Rape Myth in the Old South Reconsidered,” *Journal of Southern History* 61, no. 3 (1995): 481-518.

³⁴ Sommerville, “The Rape Myth in the Old South Reconsidered,” 494-502. For more on the intricacies of race and class in Southern rape trials, see Diane Miller Sommerville, *Rape and Race in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); and Hodes, *White Women, Black Men*, 1-16. The examination of plaintiffs and defendants on a very personal level also arose from a more localized legal system in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; see Laura F. Edwards, *The People and Their Peace: Legal Culture and the Transformation of Inequality in the Post-Revolutionary South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

³⁵ Fischer, *Suspect Relations*, 101-110. For more on antebellum laws surrounding bastardy, see Grossberg, *Governing the Hearth*, 196-233. For statistics on premarital pregnancies, which seemed to rise dramatically in the last half of the eighteenth century, see Daniel Scott Smith and Michael S. Hindus, “Premarital Pregnancy in America, 1640-1971: An Overview and Interpretation,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 5, no. 4 (1975): 537-570. For rates of illegitimacy in antebellum Wake County, North Carolina, which were the same in 1850 as they were in 1970, see Susan Newcomer, “Out of Wedlock Childbearing in an Ante-Bellum Southern County,” *Journal of Family History* 15, no. 3 (1990): 357-368.

³⁶ Their demands were rejected. Inhabitants of S. C., Petition for the Repeal of the Present Law on Bastardy and for the Enacting of Stricter Measures, July 4, 1810, SCDAH; and Committee on Grievances, Report on the Memorial of Sundry State Inhabitants Asking for Stiffer Laws Concerning

economic repercussions of bastards were particularly prominent when indentured servants became pregnant, and laws emerged that extended the time of servitude for these women so that their value as laborers would not be lost.³⁷ Single mothers, then, endured a host of laws aimed to belittle their motherhood, but those women who embraced a maternal identity searched for ways to protect their children and retain their self-respect.

Women who bore illegitimate children often fought to have their offspring's parentage recognized, for securing a child a decent name was one way that mothers could exercise protection. Martha Ellis had a son with her partner before the two were married; in 1813, after the birth of additional children in wedlock, Martha and her husband petitioned the South Carolina courts to retroactively legitimize their first, bastard son so that he would "inherit their Estate equally with their other children." The courts, willing to take mercy on a woman now that she had a legal husband, granted the request.³⁸ They were not so kind to Margaret Lauerhauffer and her partner Arthur De Bardelaben, who had six children together despite the fact that Arthur was married to another woman. His wife, however, "shortly after

Bastardy, 1810, SCDAH. See also Judiciary Committee, Report on the Petition of Inhabitants of Abbeville District Concerning an Alteration in the Bastardy Act, 1814, SCDAH.

³⁷ Some masters who understood this system, however, raped or otherwise intentionally impregnated their female servants in order to prolong their servitude. Soon, lawmakers developed stipulations whereby a servant impregnated by her master would serve her extended sentence in another household. See Robert V. Wells, "Illegitimacy and Bridal Pregnancy in Colonial America," in *Bastardy and Its Comparative History*, eds. Peter Laslett, Karla Oosterveen and Richard M. Smith (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 355-358. Bastardy laws as early as the sixteenth century, however, had an economic thrust to them. A Parliamentary act of 1576 gave justices of the peace power to demand child support payments from parents of bastards, extending the right that church parishes had previously maintained. See John Ruston Pagan, *Anne Orthwood's Bastard: Sex and Law in Early Virginia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 83-85.

³⁸ William Ellis and Martha, his Wife, Petition Asking that the Name of their Son, Born Out of Wedlock, be Changed to William Washington Ellis and that He be Considered a Legal Heir, 1813, SCDAH; Judiciary Committee, Report on the Petition of William and Martha Ellis Asking that their Son be Legitimized, 1810, SCDAH.

. . . marriage became insane,” and despite enlisting “the best medical talents,” Arthur could not cure her. In 1819, he and Margaret asked for a legal sanction of their children, given the circumstances, but the courts, predicting Jane Eyre’s response almost thirty years later, rejected the claim.³⁹ Similarly, when Bud Davis’s wife Elizabeth ran off to Savannah with another man, the two both began procreating with other partners. Bud wanted his children with his second partner legitimized; his defense was not that his wife was mentally ill, but that she was “a woman of bad character.” Bud brought in witnesses to attest to her domestic unfitness; one man swore that he saw “Elizabeth Davis a liven in savannah and i have every resson to belief she kep a disordley house thair,” while a woman confirmed that she “kept a house of Entertainment where sailors frequented and had their frolicks.” With this testimony, Elizabeth was painted as someone unsuitable to call herself a wife or to raise children. For Elizabeth, however, motherhood was simply contingent on finding the right partner; once she moved to Savannah and started her own business, she had at least two children.⁴⁰

Mothers of illegitimate children struggled not only to gain recognition, but also basic respect. Barbara Snider bore a daughter out of wedlock in the 1790s, and Jacob Speale, the father of the child, bequeathed virtually his entire estate to the girl. When the child died at the age of two, Barbara continued to claim the rights to Jacob’s land and personal property. Jacob’s sister Elizabeth, however, felt strongly that someone who had a “pernicious or immoral effect on society” should not be rewarded with the legal title to valuable land.

³⁹ Arthur De Bardelaben, Petition Asking the Legitimization of His Children, 1819, SCDAH; Judiciary Committee, Report on the Petition of Arthur De Bardelaben Asking that Certain of His Children be Declared Legitimate, 1819, SCDAH.

⁴⁰ Bud Davis and Subscribers, Petition and Supporting Papers Requesting Passage of an Act that Will Enable His Illegitimate Children to Inherit His Property and Estate, October 27, 1828, October 30, 1828, November 8, 1828, SCDAH.

Elizabeth took Barbara to court in an attempt to regain the estate, and her arguments were founded on the very definition of a mother. First Elizabeth reminded the courts that bastards, by “common law,” were “the children of no one,” so that illegitimacy and inheritance were mutually exclusive. Then she attacked Barbara’s own identity, claiming that “the word mother . . . must be taken in a legal and definite sense only comprehending and extending to Mothers of Persons born in wedlock.” Barbara, therefore, was not really a mother. Without a mother and “for want of heirs,” Elizabeth argued, the estate should be awarded to the closest legal relative. Both Elizabeth and Barbara were “poor persons” and illiterate, but they both used the law to defend different definitions of motherhood. Barbara believed in the anti-aristocratic promise of her new nation and cited “the act of Assembly for abolishing the rights of primogeniture” to bolster her claim to the land. Elizabeth, meanwhile, leaned on unwritten codes of Christian morality to parse the wording of relevant laws and prove Barbara’s non-maternity. Illegitimacy was a heated issue, for it touched on both the potential of American liberalism and a long history of moral regulation. It also touched real women, though; when she heard the petition read, Barbara must have ached to hear her motherhood denied.⁴¹

Some women pre-empted this public humiliation by abandoning their illegitimate children. Rebecca Eliott left her eight-month-old daughter on the doorstep of a local man whom she believed would be able to provide a better life for the child. The father of the child was evidently unreliable and possibly destitute, since suits brought by the Commissioners of the Poor could extract no financial support from him. Rebecca’s chosen benefactor and substitute father, on the other hand, though the child was left “contrary to his wish,” was

⁴¹ John Berry and Elizabeth Berry, Petition Concerning the Disposition of the Estate of the Late Jacob Speale Who Left His Estate to His now Deceased Bastard Child, 1799, SCDAH.

nonetheless “moved by feelings of humanity” and “used every care and attention in raising & educating her.” The desperate Rebecca was not an irresponsible or unfit mother, then; she was aware of her inability to raise the girl in the manner she would wish, and so she consciously selected a foster parent who, though no relation to the child, would ensure her education and her material happiness.⁴²

White women who had illegitimate children by black men were especially vulnerable to laws and social opinions controlling both sex and motherhood.⁴³ Most Southern states maintained statutes that ordered the illegitimate mixed-race children of poor white women (along with poor free black women) to be bound as apprentices. The white mother of Fielding Balass, for example, hired her mixed-race son to local men in Essex County, Virginia, in 1829.⁴⁴ The children of these liaisons were markers of the porousness of Southern society, a trait which those in power were quick to deny. Children who bore phenotypical traces of “blackness,” but who were as free as their white mothers, challenged the carefully crafted link between race and slavery, and white mothers rarely escaped social or legal ostracism.⁴⁵ Sarah Christian’s white husband petitioned the county for a divorce from his wife after she gave birth to a mixed-race child; in his eyes, her adultery was “aggravated” because it involved “a man of color.” Sarah may well have been left on her own to raise the

⁴² James Powell, Petition Asking Compensation for Raising a Bastard Child, November 21, 1819, SCDAH; Committee on Claims, Report on the Petition of James Powell Asking Compensation for Raising and Educating an Illegitimate Child, 1820, SCDAH.

⁴³ For more on Southern courts’ response to poor mothers in cases of illegitimacy, miscegenation, and apprenticeships, see Victoria E. Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), esp. 88-110.

⁴⁴ Fielding Balass, August 17, 1829, Free Negro Registrations and Certificates, Essex County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

⁴⁵ Hodes, *White Women, Black Men*, 56, 96-98; Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 258-259.

infant.⁴⁶ A white woman named Polly Boyd, unable to financially support her son Bob, “a man of Colour,” allowed him to be raised by another family in central Virginia, who probably used his labor in exchange for room and board. When Bob was “nearly grown,” however, one of the sons of his adoptive family/employers claimed Bob as a slave and refused to acknowledge his free status. Though Bob eventually won his freedom after taking his captor to court in 1819, women such as Polly Boyd must have often watched on in horror as their children’s appearance and ancestry led to abuse, harassment, and even illegal enslavement.⁴⁷ Other women who shared Polly’s predicament and wanted to protect their children made sure their free status was marked in county records. In early nineteenth-century Virginia, Judy Perkinson, Betsy Hendrick, and Nancy Burgess all directed their mixed-race children to sign the free negro registers held by their county clerks.⁴⁸ Milly Marsh did not have her mother at hand when she registered in 1826, but testimony of four white men proved that her mother was white, and that Milly had lived with her “from the time that she was 4 weeks old until she was a woman growd.”⁴⁹ From 1775 through the 1850s, mixed-race children named twenty different white mothers in the free negro register of Surry County, Virginia.⁵⁰ These children were lucky; some mothers who gave birth to

⁴⁶ Petition of Joseph Gresham, December 2, 1833, James City County Petitions, quoted in Philip D. Morgan, "Black Education in Williamsburg-James City County, 1619-1984" (1985), p. 29, WM.

⁴⁷ Bob Boyd vs. Godfrey Toler, July 19, 1819, Amherst County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

⁴⁸ Free Negro Registrations, n.d., William Perkinson and Jordan Hendrick, Amelia County Circuit Court, Free Negro Registers, LOV; Free Negro Certifications, September 19, 1831, Ann Burgess, Westmoreland County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

⁴⁹ August 20, 1826, Milly Marsh, Lancaster County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

⁵⁰ Dennis Hudgins, *Surry County Virginia Register of Free Negroes* (Richmond: Virginia Genealogical Society, 1995), in Surry County Clerk Records, VHS.

mixed-race children resorted to infanticide to protect their own reputations. In 1821, Betsy Crabtree drowned her newborn “colored” child in a tub of water with the help of an enslaved man named Harry, who was there “aiding assisting comforting supporting and abetting.” Harry, who had been hired by Betsy from a neighboring plantation, was deemed the father of the child, and Betsy, a “spinster,” may have felt she could not support a mixed-race child, either financially or in the face of her town’s scorn.⁵¹

The English laws regulating bastardy assumed that the birth of an illegitimate child would often lead to attempts at infanticide, and in some cases, mothers did choose to end the lives of their children in order to protect their own. In 1624, an English law “to prevent the murdering of bastard children” noted that “many lewd women . . . , to avoid their shame, and to escape punishment, do secretly bury or conceal the death of their children.”⁵² Laws regulating infanticide lay the burden of proof upon the mother, typically stating that unless the mother could prove the child had been stillborn, a dead child (especially one that had been concealed) would bring charges of infanticide upon the mother. Courts believed that lower-class, single mothers – the majority of women charged with infanticide – had sufficient cause in wanting to conceal illegitimate births that infanticide became the first assumption in the case of a dead infant. When Rhoda Lindsey’s child was found dead after it had been “buried four days,” the courts ordered that a physician examine the infant, since it was

⁵¹ *State v. Elizabeth Crabtree*, September 1821, Criminal Actions Records, Superior Court, Orange County, NCSA.

⁵² The 1624 law was “21 James I, cap. 27.” For more on the history of bastardy in England, see Alan Macfarlane, “Illegitimacy and Illegitimates in English History,” in *Bastardy and Its Comparative History*, eds. Peter Laslett, Karla Oosterveen and Richard M. Smith (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 71-85.

“supposed to have been murdered.”⁵³ Infanticide was a problem for the courts not only because it involved a murder, but because it entailed a woman displaying a powerful control of her offspring that was both violent and inimical to patriarchal hierarchies of power.⁵⁴

Like laws overseeing bastardy, laws that managed infanticide cases became less punitive over the course of the colonial period. In Massachusetts, for instance, though instances of infanticide tripled from the 1630s to the 1780s, prosecutions of that crime fell markedly. By 1784, Massachusetts law encouraged fines or brief imprisonments for “concealment of death” rather than outright murder. Some of these changes in legal attitudes arose from a new understanding of the home and its crises as intrinsically private, separate from the business of the state. As a result, prosecution of domestic violence, from wife-beating and child abuse to infanticide, became less prominent in the eighteenth-century courtroom. But this growing leniency towards women accused of infanticide may have also stemmed from a simultaneously growing sense of women’s innate morality; unlike their views of the harlots and fallen women of the seventeenth century, judges and prosecutors in the late eighteenth century assumed a woman’s basic good sense when it came to childcare.⁵⁵

⁵³ Samuel Fair, Physician, Petition Asking Compensation for the Postmortem Examination of Rhoda Lindsey, Possibly Murdered, 1831, SCDAH.

⁵⁴ The law linking the concealment of a bastard child with presumed murder was enacted in England in 1624. For more on the shifting social and legal attitudes toward early modern infanticide, see Peter C. Hoffer and N.E.H. Hull, *Murdering Mothers: Infanticide in England and New England, 1558-1803* (New York: New York University Press, 1984); G. S. Rowe, “Infanticide, Its Judicial Resolution, and Criminal Code Revision in Early Pennsylvania,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 135, no. 2 (1991): 200-232; and Smith, “Unnatural Mothers,” 173-4, 176. For a good discussion of abortion practices in early modern England, see McLaren, *Reproductive Rituals*, 89-112.

⁵⁵ Elizabeth Pleck, *Domestic Tyranny: The Making of American Social Policy against Family Violence from Colonial Times to the Present* (1987; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 32-33; Mary Beth Norton, “The Evolution of White Women’s Experience in Early America,” *American Historical Review* 80, no. 3 (1984): 593-619; Hoffer and Hull, *Murdering Mothers*, 65-91. In early nineteenth-century Maryland, for instance, statutory laws tended to place domestic abuses in the category of “private wrongs,” and children therefore had few claims against abusive parents. See

Lower-class and working women, however, did not always merit that assumption in the court's eyes.

Most cases of infanticide involved a single, often lower-class mother and an illegitimate baby.⁵⁶ These impoverished mothers took their children's lives for a variety of reasons, but most of them stemmed from a sense of economic necessity. Unable to care for the child, or at risk of being ostracized by her community, a single mother attempted to save her own life by sacrificing that of her child. Many mothers felt that the child's life would be so miserable that it would be almost a cruelty to keep it. Most records of infanticides emerge when they are being prosecuted, though, and through the lens of a court case, intentions are rarely clear. Take the case of Eliza Howell, a literate woman who gave birth to an illegitimate daughter in November 1825, hit the infant across the face until it died, and then concealed it in a smokehouse in eastern North Carolina. Eliza was already a mother, and in fact borrowed her living daughter's apron to wrap up the dead child. Jane Howell, a likely relative, testified against Eliza and asserted that the bloody apron belonged to Eliza's family. Both women and men joined in giving testimony against the accused mother, and though she pleaded her innocence, Eliza was convicted and sentenced to two months in prison.⁵⁷ Eliza's motives cannot be determined; the presence of another child suggests that perhaps she was not averse to motherhood, but simply did not want this particular infant, either because of its father, the

James D. Rice, "Laying Claim to Elizabeth Shoemaker: Family Violence on Baltimore's Waterfront, 1808-1812," in *Over the Threshold: Intimate Violence in Early America*, eds. Christine Daniels and Michael V. Kennedy (New York: Routledge, 1999), 192.

⁵⁶ See Hoffer and Hull's analysis of infanticide cases in early modern England and colonial New England in *Murdering Mothers*, 95-111. The reasons a mother would kill a child are varied; for a discussion of both environmental causes (i.e. economic conditions) and psychological causes (depression, fear, shame, even altruism), see Hoffer and Hull, *Murdering Mothers*, 113-158.

⁵⁷ Eliza later earned a pardon from Governor James Iredell. *State v. Eliza Howell*, March 1826, Criminal Action Papers, Northampton County, NCSA.

conditions under which it was conceived, or the current economic status of Eliza and her family. Or perhaps after having one child, Eliza knew she could not handle another. Other women left even less evidence behind. In 1822, Sally Belk “did murder hir Child in the wood,” and was physically examined and deemed guilty by a jury of fifteen women.⁵⁸ Patience Rudd also left her child in the woods, but the jury could not determine “whether it came by its death this way, [or] whether it was born dead.” Patience was not entirely alone or bereft, for the forest in which she deposited her infant was on the grounds of her mother’s plantation.⁵⁹

Most women who were accused of infanticide in antebellum North Carolina were actually situated within remarkably vocal and observant communities of women. This does not diminish whatever sense of desperation they may have felt, but it does temper the image of isolation that such cases often conjure up. These were women who sometimes did have other recourse in the form of concerned neighbors, but they nonetheless chose to exercise control over their lives and the lives of their children in violent ways. Patience Rye was accused of “choaking and strangling” her newborn son to death in 1808, but she had a network of supportive women who were anxious about her condition. Elizabeth Cole came to visit Patience shortly after she had given birth, and while Patience was cagey about the delivery, she finally admitted that she had had a son, and Elizabeth “saw cloths that appeared as if a child had been wrapped in them.” Patty Bregman also visited Patience, and the mother acknowledged “that the child was dead and that she . . . buried it.” Even her own daughter Rachel joined in these concerned visits; after being away from home for a week, she returned

⁵⁸ *State v. Sally Belk*, May 1822, Criminal Action Papers, Haywood County, NCSA.

⁵⁹ *State v. Patience Rudd*, January 1812, Criminal Action Papers, Caswell County, NCSA.

to find her mother “in bed apparently very sick” and asked “if she should go for some assistance for her.” Patience declined the help, telling her daughter “that her child was born the night before, that it was a boy, born alive and that . . . it would have been living till then if there had have been any person there to take care of it.” Patience then admitted to burying the infant “in a small box in the field.” Patience’s claim that her son’s death could be attributed to a lack of communal care seems disingenuous, given the number of female visitors she received that week. A judge or jury member seemed to agree, scribbling facts on the margins of a paper that “do prove clearly that she is the murderer,” including: “She had a child, . . . next this child is gone, . . . she refused the company of her daughter, . . . her evasions, . . . could not go far to bury it.” Whatever her purpose in concealing the death of her child, Patience had an accomplice. The court issued a warrant for the arrest of John Delaney, who was not Patience’s husband, for helping to “conseale the murdring of a childe.”⁶⁰ Patience may not have wanted to lean on her female friends because she was ashamed of her adultery.

Another mother who did not lack for communal interest was Elizabeth Beaver, who may have been only fifteen years old when she strangled her newborn daughter on April 11, 1811, and hid the body on the property of Rebecca Lyon, a widow. Among the women who visited with Elizabeth during the previous few months and testified to her growing condition were Rebecca, Mrs. Haddock, Mrs. Quinn, Mrs. Dunn, and Mrs. Womack. The neighborhood doctor confirmed that when he saw Elizabeth several weeks earlier, she was “big as sure as the world,” but recently she “appeared to be a great deal less.” On April 21, a team of men began searching for a body on Rebecca Lyon’s property, and after digging in a stack of straw down to “about 15 or 18 inches deep we came to the child.” Mrs. Hall, another

⁶⁰ *State v. Patience Rye*, September 1808, Criminal Action Papers, Richmond County, NCSA.

matron in the community, then took Elizabeth aside and asked if she could examine her on behalf of the state. Elizabeth retorted that “if she had deserved for one she would not mind it a bit.” After assuring her that they would be in a closed room with no men present, Mrs. Hall and Pattey Lyon examined Elizabeth’s body. The older woman reported to the court, “I saw a plenty to convince me she had had Child lately,” including that she “milked yellow milk out of her Breast.” In addition to Elizabeth, the court indicted Charles, an enslaved man who worked for Rebecca Lyon, for “being guilty of concealing and burying a female child.”⁶¹ Like Patience Rye, Elizabeth may have simply been embarrassed, or perhaps she was afraid of what of her mother and her mother’s friends might say. The cases of infanticide that made it to county courts are but a small sampling of the women who took their fertility into their own hands; most women in Elizabeth’s situation would have used abortifacients earlier in the process, but these are the women whose experiences rarely emerge in the court record. Women such as Elizabeth are simply the most drastic, most violent examples of a more systemic uncertainty about motherhood among women who could not afford its tolls.

The trope of the desperate and impoverished single mother does not cover all cases of infanticide. Kitty Shields of Baltimore apparently beat and poisoned her eighteen-year-old daughter in 1811, killing her in an attempt to punish her for unruly behavior. In her pardon petition to the governor, Kitty painted herself as an upright mother, deeply concerned for her child’s moral welfare and willing to take extreme measures only to rescue her daughter from the brink of dissipation. In fact, however, Kitty had been involved in waterfront brawls and working-class scandals for several years before her daughter’s death. The mask of a virtuous and concerned mother emerged from Kitty’s understanding of contemporary ideals of

⁶¹ *State v. Elizabeth Beaver* and *The State v. Charles a Negro*, April 1811, Criminal Action Papers, Caswell County, NCSA.

motherhood, and her gamble worked. Gearing up for war with Britain, the U.S. Navy requested her husband's services in Virginia, and the governor of Maryland, perhaps eager to get this couple out of his state, pardoned Kitty.⁶² Did Kitty Shields have some vendetta against her daughter, or was she actually attempting to shape her daughter's moral character in the only way she knew how – with corporal punishment? If so, were her goals any different from the elite mothers who read passages from the Bible to their children in order to teach them the difference between right and wrong? Kitty may have been an abusive mother, but her intentions were not necessarily murderous. Another difficult case to decipher is that of Nancy Randolph, the young aristocratic woman who allegedly bore a child to her sister's husband and, with his assistance, quickly dispatched with it in 1792.⁶³ However the events actually unfolded, the scandal left a bitterness in the heart of the accused woman that lasted the rest of her life. Though she went on to marry and bear a son to Gouverneur Morris, the respected peg-legged politician from New York, Nancy never escaped the pall of shame. In letters sent to a friend after she was exiled from her home in 1805, Nancy described a "a Mind which has been tortured beyond description." She suffered from "a degree of oppression which reduces the Mind to it's Native simplicity" and "wounds" that were "frequently probed" by family and friends. In her descriptions of "the machinations of malevolence" and "the vortex of persecution," Nancy revealed a mind already blasted by

⁶² For the complete story of Kitty Shields and her daughter, see Rice, "Laying Claim to Elizabeth Shoemaker," 185-201. Rice also argues that the Shields case reveals how open and intersecting the working-class family was, even being "thoroughly infiltrated by unrelated members of the community." Indeed, Kitty and her family "possessed no private 'inner sanctum,'" and the events of the daughter's death were witnessed, aided, and debated by a host of women in the community. Rice, "Laying Claim to Elizabeth Shoemaker," 194.

⁶³ For the complete account of this case, see Cynthia A. Kierner, *Scandal at Bizarre: Rumor and Reputation in Jefferson's America* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004).

what in all likelihood were her maternal decisions, decisions made not in the grip of poverty, but nonetheless out of a need for self-preservation.⁶⁴

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White mothers in the early South faced a host of potential threats to their children and families, and few women enjoyed unmarred maternal experiences. Mothers fell victim to the ever-present specter of death, ungrateful or immoral children, and the physical and emotional violence of rape, poverty, and abandonment. But even the seemingly most victimized women – the poor, the uneducated, those most likely to have large families – consistently maintained some measure of control over their own bodies. Despite most historians confirming a depressing lack of birth control in pre-industrial societies, Angus McLaren has traced a history of English women that emphasizes the rituals, practices, and general manipulations of fertility. In early modern England, women who wanted to avoid becoming a mother had recourse to abstinence, contraceptives, magic spells and potions, abortion, and infanticide.⁶⁵ Southern women had access to most of the same preventatives, and many chose to define their motherhood on their own terms. Motherhood was not just about wanting children, having children, and loving children; it was a delicate dance between pursuing individual needs and desires and managing the presence of children with great enough authority and responsibility to foster a sense of personal worth. In spite of the many ways in which their motherhood was under assault, from the ubiquity of disease to the violence of rape, women

⁶⁴ Ann Cary Randolph to Mary Johnston, July 3, 1805, n.d., February 21, 1805, Nancy Randolph Papers, WM. For more on the familial webs of bitterness that spun out from this scandal, see Christopher L. Doyle, “The Randolph Scandal in Early National Virginia, 1792-1815: New Voices in the ‘Court of Honor,’” *Journal of Southern History* 69, no. 2 (2003): 283-318.

⁶⁵ McLaren, *Reproductive Rituals*, 1-11, 57-112.

still retained the drive to assert some control over their own lives, a drive which was present no matter the degree of oppression or the seeming lack of power.

PART THREE
She Was with Me in the Night: Black Mothers

“O, how I longed for the arrival of my poor mother, . . . her, whom I almost adored and worshipped--who had given me life,--and nourished me through infancy, clad and upheld me, and taught me to place confidence in the Supreme power of God.”¹

William Hayden, describing his mother
Alcy Shelton

¹ William Hayden, *Narrative of William Hayden, Containing a Faithful Account of His Travels for a Number of Years, Whilst a Slave, in the South, Written by Himself* (Cincinnati: The Author, 1846), 61.

How did black women define motherhood? Like their white and Indian counterparts, black mothers relied on a broad community of support to raise their children, but unlike other women who could carefully select their allies, enslaved mothers forged communities out of necessity. The older black women on a plantation who watched over infants and toddlers while their mothers labored in the fields were chosen by slaveowners, not by a democracy of black mothers. Slaveowners largely dictated the make-up of any plantation community; most bought and sold humans indiscriminately, regardless of any ties of affection. Even while enslaved mothers had little say over the people in their children's lives, few had the luxury to remain wholly independent. These were women who worked twelve and fourteen hours a day in fields of cotton, rice, and tobacco. Their children would not join them there until close to puberty, which meant that most young children rarely saw their mothers during the day. Being a mother in slavery, then, meant constantly negotiating between the limited selection of friends and allies and the ever-present need for help. Networks of sisters and aunts, pieced together from blood relations and new acquaintances, picked up where biological mothers left off. Motherhood thus became less about an individual relationship between a woman and her child and more about the mutual reliance of women and children.²

Motherhood was also defined by the relentless hunt for freedoms. Many enslaved women felt a responsibility to pursue the physical freedom of their children – either through emancipation or escape – but freedom was not limited to acquiring a Northern address.

² This broadened understanding of motherhood has survived in many African American communities for centuries. See, for just one example, M. Rivka Polatnick's comparison of two women's liberation organizations of the 1960s, in which a white group saw motherhood as a individualistic source of oppression and a black group "considered it a source of power for women. . . . The Black women defined the mother role more broadly; it encompassed caring for all the children of their community and fighting for a better future for the community." Polatnick, "Diversity in Women's Liberation Ideology: How a Black and a White Group of the 1960s Viewed Motherhood," *Signs* 21, no. 3 (1996): 679-706.

Women bargained with their masters, winning the right for their families to hire themselves out or manipulating coercive sexual relationships to secure favors for their children. Free black women knew that freedom was rarely a finite and guaranteed prize; they worked tirelessly to enroll their children in local free black registries, to ensure their families carried their free papers, and to instruct their children in the arts of laying low, of evading the grasp of the unscrupulous slave trader. Enslaved and free black mothers kept an eye out for the cracks in the system of white supremacy where their children could gain a foothold, could potentially flourish. Those cracks were the freedoms that mothers sought.

Finally, for enslaved and free black mothers, protection was at the heart of their maternal drive. Because children were vulnerable to an overwhelming array of dangers – from the diseases that targeted all Southern children to the malnutrition, physical abuse, and threat of sale that were unique to black childhoods – women funneled their maternal energies into defending their children. Being a mother meant watching out for masters and drivers with whips, mistresses with grudges, and the array of drunken and spiteful passersby on urban sidewalks. The urge to protect derived not only from the presence of tangible dangers, but from the need to assert control within landscapes of oppression. Black mothers too needed to feel like they had a purpose, that they were performing worthwhile labor and being correspondingly valued. The labor of slavery – the sowing, the weeding, the husking, the grinding – could not provide this sense of worth, for its profits fed and clothed the oppressor. Children, the products of women's other labor, were also economically tied to the master's gain, but in spite of the legal rights of ownership, and in spite of the violence through which many children were begotten, most enslaved women nonetheless saw their children as their own rightful possessions. Children were symbols of a future that was bleak but not hopeless,

and when women defended their children's bodies and souls, they were defending parts of themselves.

How did black mothers define power? Given the oppressive limits of slavery, from what possible spaces could power be carved, and under what circumstances could black mothers develop senses of self-worth? Power lay in the ability of women to make choices regarding the lives of their children. These choices may seem small, but a mother who informed her children about their African past was not merely telling stories to pass the time; she was consciously protecting her memory and providing her children with a version of the past that emphasized the importance of family and undermined the permanence of slavery. Such choices were made daily, and while they may not have led directly to freedom, they made women feel that they were shaping their children's lives in positive ways. The laws may have told enslaved mothers that they had no control, and slaveowners may have shared in this perception, but through the choices they made, black mothers – like white and Indian mothers – exercised degrees of control in innumerable moments. Enslaved mother Harriet Jacobs observed, “My master had power and law on his side; I had a determined will. There is might in each.”³ Helping their children survive the burdens of blackness, both physically and psychologically, gave many enslaved and free black women a mission, a tangible if sometimes impossible goal, in the midst of seemingly insurmountable limitations.

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³ Harriet Ann Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself*, ed. Lydia Maria Child (Boston: The Author, 1861), 130. Stephanie Shaw highlights this duality between control and lack of control when she argues that enslaved mothers “sought to define the process for themselves while living in a system where others claimed control of the process outright.” Shaw, “Mothering Under Slavery in the Antebellum South,” in *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency*, eds. Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang, and Linda Rennie Forcey (New York: Routledge, 1994), 237.

Because mothers were providers, they snuck kitchen scraps, hired themselves out, and sewed flour-sack dresses at midnight in order to offer their children a chance at survival. Black mothers worked in the fields, at the loom, in kitchen gardens, within urban households, and in their own shops to provide for their children. Beyond securing food and clothing, mothers negotiated with employers and slaveowners to emancipate, educate, or protect their children, and their manipulations of the systems of patriarchy and white supremacy exposed a constant struggle, one in which masters occasionally had to relent because a mother knew precisely how to wield her limited power.

Because mothers were teachers, they regulated their children's response to slavery, poverty, and subjugation. Mothers taught lessons in family history to remind their children of a brighter past, and, whenever they could, pursued literacy. They passed on practical skills to help their daughters secure a trusted position in a plantation household or earn a living on the streets of Richmond or Charleston. They also taught their children how to cope with slavery's everyday realities, from physical abuse to belittlement, to ensure that their children would always hold on to a sense of justice and self-worth. Mothers could not always control what happened to their children's bodies, but they could influence the development of their children's minds.

Because mothers were spiritual guides, they used religion in various forms to offer hope to children in bondage. West African religions provided a link to an autonomous past, while Christianity promised a future in which the wicked would be punished and the meek would inherit the earth. When mothers chose to share stories of the supernatural, mystical, or metaphysical with their children, they were providing the tools to envision an alternate reality, one in which enslavement and oppression were impermanent and mutable states.

Because mothers were protectors, they fought back against injustices and armed their children with the tools and knowledge necessary to defend themselves. Free black mothers who religiously recorded their children's names in local registries defended their families' right to freedom. When enslaved mothers warned their children to be respectful around whites, or physically wrestled cruel mistresses, or demanded that their families be sold as a unit, they were not only protecting their children's bodies, but asserting the primacy of their own maternal identities over their identities as slaves.

Because mothers were aunts, they formed a cohesive network of helpers and maternal assistants. Mothers chose trusted friends to share the burdens of childrearing, and non-mothers in enslaved and free black communities stepped in to nurse infants, provide medical care to toddlers, and advise young men and women. The presence of aunts allowed motherhood to be a communal task, and in moments when individuals could not hope to take care of their own children sufficiently, they could rely on a safety net of other women. Mothers consciously created and fostered these networks, and by doing so, made the project of childrearing feasible.

The roles that black women chose to take on did not preclude the presence of suffering; all mothers in the South suffered, and black women more than most. The slave trader's reach was extensive, and many women lost their sons and daughters through sale. Other women had pregnancies forced upon them through rape and coerced marriages, and these children grew up to be beaten, tormented, and underfed. Mothers nonetheless fought for control even within these moments of suffering by distinguishing between degrees of violence. Some chose to reject the cycle of slavery by killing their infants, and others simply reminded their children of their maternal love in moments of trauma or separation. These

decisions were not inconsequential, for they shaped strong familial bonds that would survive beyond slavery.

Within these various roles, then, African and African American women were able to define their motherhood as active, powerful, and positive, an impulse that connected them both with other Southern women and the women in their own past, mothers and grandmothers who had instilled this sense of justified engagement and demonstrated these merits of motherhood.

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When Frederick Law Olmsted was interviewing William, his enslaved carriage driver, along a stretch of rural Louisiana roads in the 1850s, the two men struck up a conversation about the status of blacks in the North. The talkative William then fell silent, moved by descriptions of such unrestricted freedom. “After a silence of some minutes,” Olmsted recorded, “he said, abruptly, ‘If I was free, I would go to Virginia, and see my old mother.’ He had left her when he was thirteen years old. He reckoned he was now thirty-three.”⁴ Though it had been twenty years since William had last seen his mother, the image of her as a safe harbor persisted in his imagination. In moments like these, which were repeated across the South more times than were recorded, a mother’s powerful salience in her children’s lives is confirmed, despite distance, time, suffering, and loss. The love and protection of mothers – even when that protection was violated – left a lasting imprint on their sons and daughters. Slaveowners may have laughed at the idea of a black woman having any modicum of power, but when children wanted to escape, they thought of their mothers. When they hired themselves out, they used skills that their mothers taught them.

⁴ Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveller’s Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States* (New York: Mason Brothers, 1861), 334.

When they employed Christianity as a weapon against their masters, they repeated lessons from their mother's mouths. And when children grew up on plantations a thousand miles from their nearest kin, when they stopped to think about the most important things in their life, they thought about their mothers.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BLACK PROVIDERS

Enslaved and free black mothers in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century South had their hands tied by various strings: their sex, their race, their status as bound or beholden laborers. Seemingly they could offer their children little. Like other women, though, black mothers found ways to provide food, clothing, education, and employment for their sons and daughters; they took scraps from the kitchen, crafted makeshift garments, and pleaded with and cajoled their masters and mistresses for favors and guarantees. The ways in which these women provided for their children prove that motherhood, for most women, meant seizing control of what little was in one's power and crafting a maternal identity that was based on the material, emotional, and psychological success of one's children.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, plantation slavery had spread across most of the English colonies in the tillable South. The rise of large-scale systems of agriculture restricted most of the freedoms that seventeenth-century Africans and African Americans had enjoyed in the colonies, and it affected the make-up of slave communities. Southern slave populations over the course of the eighteenth century became both more fragmented, as familial and community connections had been broken long before they reached America, but also more cohesive, as improving mortality rates meant that more and more slaves were American-born. By mid-century, African Americans outnumbered Africans in slave societies

along the Chesapeake.¹ Simultaneously, a balancing sex ratio meant that women began assuming a larger role within both agricultural and familial realms by the 1750s. They took up the hoe, raised children, and sustained ceremonies and rituals that reminded them of home.² In this context, black mothers used both West African memories and American innovations to provide for their children within a Southern society that was testing the limits of violence, racism, and greed.

Field labor would not have been alien to most women brought from Africa; most African societies, from the Ibo to the Yoruba, employed women as agricultural laborers to varying degrees, both in tilling fields and tending home gardens, where they grew yams, gourds, onions, and okra.³ In West Africa, where the savannas gave way to lush forest, men felled the trees and cleared the land, while women tilled, planted, and harvested. Among matrilineal societies, such gendered labor was logical, since women held the rights to the land and were thus responsible for tending it. Regardless of matrilineages, over half of all field labor in sub-Saharan Africa was performed by women.⁴ As a result, most women in

¹ Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 95-108, 126-128; Philip D. Curtin, *The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex: Essays in Atlantic History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 113-144.

² Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 170-174. Stevenson calculates that by 1760, women made up forty percent of the adult enslaved population in Loudoun County, Virginia.

³ Though I discuss those African practices and ideologies that were embraced and remembered by enslaved mothers in the Americas, I want to note how little historians really know about precolonial Africa. Donald R. Wright aptly describes “the fog that students of precolonial Africa must exist in, regardless of how smugly honest we are as we peer into that fog, most of the time seeing nothing, but hearing, perhaps, an occasional blast of a distant horn or the bell on some unseen buoy.” Donald R. Wright, “‘What Do You Mean There Were No Tribes in Africa?’: Thoughts on Boundaries – and Related Matters – in Precolonial Africa,” *History in Africa* 26 (1999): 409-426, quote on p. 410.

⁴ Anthropologist Ester Boserup called Africa the “region of female farming *par excellence*.” Ester Boserup, *Woman’s Role in Economic Development* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1970; repr.

West Africa had no sense of a divide between “public” and “private” labor; there were tasks that men completed and others that were assigned to women, but there was little sense of a protected, domesticated, feminized “home.”⁵

Enslaved women’s duties varied by region, and a coastal South Carolina rice plantation required different skills from a Virginia tobacco field or an urban household. In South Carolina, some enslaved women worked with rice, planting, weeding, and harvesting their crops in waterlogged fields under the summer sun, and then winnowing and storing the crop in the winter months. Others farmed indigo, which required intensive and carefully timed cycles of picking, fermenting, and filtering the plant into the rich blue dye. Most field work in the lowcountry was organized by the task system, in which planters, many of whom were operating plantations from afar, set out a specific amount of work to be done rather than holding slaves to certain hours of labor. Most Virginia and North Carolina plantations subscribed to the gang system of labor, in which groups of slaves were required to work together at repetitive labor (planting, hoeing, weeding, harvesting) for as long as the planter deemed necessary. Here, women planted tobacco seedlings in the spring and tended them – pinching the stalks, pulling off suckers, plucking out worms – until the September harvest, after which their hands turned to drying and packing.⁶ The majority of women’s labor, then,

Earthscan, 2007), 4-12. Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 39-40; Hermann Baumann, “The Division of Work According to Sex in African Hoe Culture,” *Africa* 1, no. 3 (1928): 289-319; Jack Goody and Joan Buckley, “Inheritance and Women’s Labour in Africa,” *Africa* 43, no. 2 (1973): 108-121; Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 62.

⁵ Niara Sudarkasa, “The Status of Women’ in Indigenous African Societies,” *Feminist Studies* 12, no. 1 (1986): 91-103.

⁶ Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 146-153; Philip D. Morgan, “Task and Gang Systems: The Organization of Labor on New World Plantations,” in *Work and Labor in Early America*, ed. Stephen

was directed into extremely restricted channels; unlike the wide variety of agricultural and domestic labor that African women performed, or the largely self-determined labor of white and Indian women, black women in the South discovered that their work provided for another woman's family. As a result, enslaved mothers had to adjust their measures of success, looking for new sources of familial security but also new sources of pride.

Whether on the task system or gang system, what mothers could glean for their children from the daily operations of a plantation or a house in the city was limited. Nonetheless, women pieced together food scraps, extra blankets, and snatches of leisure time to construct a separate space of independence and self-determination for their families. Mothers had to work within the strictures of penny-pinching plantation owners, but even reading between the lines of rulebooks and manuals for slaveowners, we can catch hints of mothers' choices. James Henry Hammond's manual for optimal plantation management observed that no deductions in food allowances were made "for light sickness of a day or so, or for pregnancy," which was useful information for a woman needing to make sure her family has enough to eat. A woman on Hammond's plantation could have taken occasional sick days without fear of losing rations. Hammond also ordered that each child be allotted clothing, that mothers wash those garments at least twice a week, and that all families have access to a "piece of ground convenient for a garden."⁷

Land proved particularly important for mothers seeking to provide their families with extra food and sometimes cash. Slaves tied to the gang system of labor in most areas of the

Innes (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 189-220; Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, 190-191.

⁷ James Henry Hammond, *Plantation Manual of James Henry Hammond, Typed from the Original Manuscript* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Library, 1933), 2, 5-6, 14, from the SCL.

Chesapeake had fairly limited amounts of land and free time and tended to focus their energies on small gardens and raising chickens, but tasking men and women in the lowcountry could sometimes carve out enough time to cultivate their own crop fields, with an acre of rice or cotton to sell on their own terms. In garden “patches” close to the slave quarters, enslaved women often grew plants that they had grown in Africa, including groundnuts, benne, and malanga, a starchy tuber.⁸ On the Whitehall Plantation near Petersburg, Virginia, “every married couple” among the slaves had “a garden, a pig-sty, and a hen-roost,” all means to earning money.⁹ When the missionaries at Springplace Mission in northeast Georgia discussed moving their settlement elsewhere in 1811, the resident “Negroes were especially busy dividing our fields and gardens among themselves and there was almost a fight in kitchen over our Pleasant’s small garden.”¹⁰

Not all enslaved women were lucky enough to control a garden of their own, and some mothers even struggled to provide their children with sufficient food and water. One ex-slave remembered a mother who “had often divided the scanty pittance of food . . . between my brothers, and sisters, and me, and gone supperless to bed herself. Whatever victuals she could obtain beyond the coarse food, salt fish, and corn-bread, allowed to slaves

⁸ Philip Morgan has argued that the rise of the task system and the development of an internal slave economy went hand in hand. See Philip D. Morgan, “Work and Culture: The Task System and the World of Lowcountry Blacks, 1700 to 1880,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (1982): 563-599; for information on garden crops, see pp. 573-574. See also Morgan, “Task and Gang Systems,” 213; and Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, 186.

⁹ Jane Minge Friend Stephenson, “My Father and His Household, Before, During, and After the War,” April 22, 1897, Blanton Family Papers, VHS.

¹⁰ May 5, 1811, Rowena McClinton, ed., *The Moravian Springplace Mission to the Cherokees, Volume 1: 1805-1813* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 430.

. . . , she carefully distributed among her children.”¹¹ Another recalled the times that his mother hid her children in the woods when slave traders came to visit; forced to provide for her children in the wild, she collected berries, dug potatoes, and picked corn, and “sought for [water] in any hole or puddle formed by falling trees . . . ; it was often full of tadpoles and insects: she strained it, and gave it round to each of us in the hollow of her hand.”¹² Though feeding a family was often a daunting task, mothers sought out nourishment wherever they could, and this was a power over their family’s health and wellbeing that women carefully protected.

Though many enslaved women saw providing for their families as a daily grasp at survival, some of these mothers came from African families where providing for one’s children entailed both safeguarding and pleasing them.¹³ Women in coastal West African communities jealously guarded their infants, and children accompanied their mothers to the market, the field, and social visits. Guinean mothers would put their nursing infants in “a kind of leather box, in which the little one is sat,” and would tie the box tightly to their bodies.¹⁴ When James Gronniosaw wanted to leave his home and accompany a traveling merchant to see the marvels and cultural diversity of the Gold Coast, it was his mother who viewed this as a unique opportunity and “spoke to my father and grandfather and the rest of

¹¹ Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, a Black Man, Who Lived Forty Years in Maryland, South Carolina and Georgia as a Slave*, ed. Isaac Fisher (New York: John S. Taylor, 1837), 17-18.

¹² Moses Grandy, *Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy, Late a Slave in the United States of America* (London: Gilpin, 1843), 7-8.

¹³ Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, 235.

¹⁴ Jean Barbot, “A Description of the Coasts of North and South Guinea,” in *A Collection of Voyages and Travels*, vol. 5, ed. Awnsham Churchill and John Churchill (London: 1732), 272. See Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 66-67.

my relations” so that the boy could go.¹⁵ In central Africa, Boyrereau Brinch’s mother made sure that “every thing was done” for her son’s happiness and amusement, and, looking back on his childhood, Boyrereau believed that his parents’ “whole souls were extacy in . . . gratifying their darling boy.”¹⁶ Matrifocal societies, which were not uncommon in West Africa, provided a foundation of familiarity for women who often had no choice about the matrifocality of their homes under slavery.¹⁷

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The need to materially provide for their children led black mothers to a diverse array of part-time work and odd jobs, and the sense that they *were* providing for their children gave them purpose and even some measure of control in their lives. Though most enslaved women worked up to fourteen hours a day, six days a week, many found time to take on additional tasks, including spinning thread and harvesting extra produce to sell.¹⁸ One woman in North Carolina spun “until twelve or one o’clock at night” for a mistress who did not provide her with clothes; after work, then, she returned home and, “fixing her wheel in a place made in the floor to prevent its making a noise, she would spin for herself, in order that she might be

¹⁵ James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince*, ed. Walter Shirley (Bath: S. Hazzard, 1770), 5.

¹⁶ Boyrereau Brinch, *The Blind African Slave, or Memoirs of Boyrereau Brinch, Nick-named Jeffrey Brace*, ed. Benjamin F. Prentiss (St. Albans, VT: Harry Whitney, 1810), 68.

¹⁷ Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, 222-223, 227.

¹⁸ Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 15; Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 164-166, 268-272; Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 177-186; Betty Wood, *Women’s Work, Men’s Work: The Informal Slave Economies of Lowcountry Georgia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 31-52.

decently clad in the daytime.”¹⁹ Most Southern slave codes restricted informal slave economies to the grounds of the plantation, but enslaved men and women invariably found broader markets for their wares, and slaveowners had little control over these economic activities.²⁰ In cities like Richmond and Charleston, enslaved women hired themselves out, turning most of their wages in to their owners but keeping a percentage to help support their families. Some sold their own garden produce or manufactured goods in the same street markets where they shopped for their owner’s supplies.²¹

The jobs that mothers took, or were assigned, were wide-ranging; one woman’s business on a South Carolina plantation was “to drive away crows,” and in addition to tending the fields and “hoeing,” she kept a “brood of ducks” and spent much of her time sewing, either to provide eggs and clothes for her own family, or to use them as trade goods to earn a little cash.²² Another woman in South Carolina could advertise herself as a “compleat Washer and Ironer,” and according to her employer, both she and her daughter were “in all very smart.”²³ When John Page listed his slaves in his copy of Benjamin Banneker’s almanac, he distinguished between his ten slaves “in the crop” and the twelve “Tradesmen & H[ouse] S[ervants],” among which were the cook Rachael and the

¹⁹ “Narrative of James Curry,” *Liberator*, January 10, 1840, reprinted in *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*, ed. John Blassingame (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 128-129.

²⁰ In South Carolina, various eighteenth-century statutes attempted to curb independent slave production entirely, but by 1751, legislators recognized the futility of such laws and only limited the sale of slaves’ personal crops to their masters. Morgan, “Work and Culture,” 569-572; Wood, *Women’s Work, Men’s Work*, 53-79.

²¹ Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 156-161; Wood, *Women’s Work, Men’s Work*, 80-121.

²² Louisa Davis Minot to William Minot, May 14, 1838, Louis Davis Minot Papers, SCL.

²³ Sophia Dulles to Joseph Dulles, December 6, 1830, Ann Heatly Reid Lovell Estate and Family Papers, SCHS.

washerwoman Katy, skills which might have earned these women extra money on the side.²⁴ One woman in Virginia brought her daughter with her on a journey to sell chickens to their white neighbors; a little girl whose home they visited recorded happily that “mama bought 3 old hens of them and gave them to me.”²⁵ Selling poultry was a common way for enslaved woman to acquire additional income; in Raleigh, North Carolina, Sucky earned a dollar for her chickens, and Juno received three dollars for “Eggs and Chickens and one pound Flax.”²⁶ Miley was the “Poultry Woman” on the Coffin Point Plantation in South Carolina, while Old Diana and Old Jenny served as nurses. Of the thirty-four women at Coffin Point, only five of them worked in the house; the others worked in the cotton fields, some “moting,” hoeing, or planting, and others “Taken to mind Birds in Corn.”²⁷

Enslaved mothers who acquired positions within the household earned both special privileges, such as occasional food from the kitchen, and unwanted supervision. The paradoxical status of household slaves has been described by several scholars who have noted that housework exposed enslaved women to near-constant labor and the dangers inherent in toiling in a hot, combustible kitchen, or near a jealous or short-tempered mistress.²⁸ But this dual existence also had its consequences for their children. On the one

²⁴ John Page Commonplace Book, 1795-1796, VHS.

²⁵ January 16, 1772, Diary of Sally Fairfax, Fairfax Harrison Papers, WM. This brought Sally’s collection of fowls to “7 geese, 2 ganders, 2 turkey hens, 1 turkey Cock, 8 ducks, 2 drakes, 6 old hens, 13 pullets, [and] 3 Cocks.”

²⁶ May 14, 1812, June 8, 1812, Eliza Haywood Account Book, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

²⁷ Plantation Book, 1813 (vol. 2), kept by E. W. Rose for Ebenezer Coffin, Coffin Point Plantation Journals, SCHS.

²⁸ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 165; Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 27-28; Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Eugene Genovese contends

hand, mothers who worked in the big house could provide a certain protection for their children, and many of these children also received household jobs.²⁹ Louisa Picquet's mother served as a nurse and then a cook, and when Louisa was old enough, her mother trained her to be a nurse as well, and thus Louisa "always had plenty to do."³⁰ Elizabeth Keckley, the seamstress who served both Varina Davis and Mary Todd Lincoln, learned her trade at the side of her mother, who made clothes for both the white and black residents of her Virginia home. Elizabeth's mother not only taught her daughter a valuable skill, but she also received additional privileges as a result of her service; one year her owner purchased her distant husband, reuniting the family "to reward my mother."³¹ But bringing a child into the house could also mean exposing it to a slaveowner's whims. Letty brought her son to work with her when she served as a cook on a Virginia plantation, and one night, she lay the boy "on the bed, which was in a room adjoining the kitchen" and told him to rest, promising to return shortly. When he awoke, his mother had been sold.³²

that only five percent of slaves ever worked as trained house servants. Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 328, 340. See also John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 250-251; and Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, 197.

²⁹ Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 151-152. See also the Hemings family in Annette Gordon-Reed, *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008).

³⁰ Louisa Picquet, *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon: A Tale of Southern Slave Life*, ed. Hiram Mattison (New York: H. Mattison, 1861), 7.

³¹ Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley, *Behind the Scenes, Or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House* (New York: G. W. Carleton, 1868), 21-22.

³² Henry Watson, *Narrative of Henry Watson, a Fugitive Slave. Written by Himself* (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1848), 5-6.

Women who labored as cooks often served as an intimate connection between the tables of slaves and those of their masters.³³ Lucy worked in the 1820s and 1830s as a cook on a North Carolina farm, where she fed “twenty-five to thirty-five, taking the family and the slaves together.” Her work in the kitchen, however, did not free her from other duties. She milked the cows, cleaned the house, raised her master’s children, and did the washing and ironing for both “her master’s family, . . . and for her husband, seven children, and herself.” After toiling all day over pots of vegetables and pans of corn bread, Lucy would return home around 9:00 or 10:00 and would then “find one boy with his knee out, and another with his elbow out, a patch wanting here, and a stitch there, and she would sit down by her lightwood fire, and sew and sleep alternately, often till the light began to streak in the east.”³⁴

Many mothers worked as nurses for their families, other Africans and African Americans, and even whites, earning communal respect for their skill at tending children and maintaining public health.³⁵ Beck was a “very good nurse” on a South Carolina plantation in the 1820s, although her owner observed that “she is a lazy old devil, and will not do anything unless she is made.”³⁶ The tendency of some women to work the bare minimum for white employers was often a tactic to reserve energy for one’s own family; there was often a fine line between working hard and working just hard enough. The Ford family in Charleston hired Rynah as a wet nurse for “\$9 a month”; while we cannot know whether any of this

³³ Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 160-161.

³⁴ “Narrative of James Curry,” *Liberator*, January 10, 1840, in *Slave Testimony*, 132-133.

³⁵ Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 161-163.

³⁶ Joseph W. Allston to Robert F. W. Allston, July 6, 1823, in J. H. Easterby, ed., *The South Carolina Rice Plantation as Revealed in the Papers of Robert F. W. Allston* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 61.

money went to Rynah herself, it seems likely that Rynah's skills were able to provide some additional security for her children, if not in the form of cash, then as a result of her reputation and value within the white community.³⁷ In 1796, one white father paid \$12.50 to transport "Sue a Black Woman . . . Nurse" to his home, and the black women on one South Carolina plantation were in high demand as "excellent Nurses" to the white mothers who had difficulty with, or distaste for, breastfeeding.³⁸ When Esther Cox wrote to her daughter Mary, concerned about her hardened breasts, she added, "I hope Sue will have milk enough to spare from her own child to nourish yours also."³⁹ These women who were employed as nurses, whose milk was co-opted for white mouths, may have lost some nourishment for their own children, but they were also carving out spaces in the plantation hierarchy for themselves and their families; a valued, even beloved, black nurse could earn compensation, favors, and respect from a white family that could provide a more secure life for their children in the future.

Midwives also had the chance to earn money and travel, gaining a reputation in the community that could protect their families from sale.⁴⁰ In central North Carolina, Mary was known for "if not her Skill her great good luck" at delivering healthy children. She delivered

³⁷ April 1, 1815, Ford Family Papers, SCL.

³⁸ Jacob Read to Thomas Simons, June 11, 1796, Read Family Papers, SCL; Esther Cox to James Chesnut, May 24, 1800, Cox and Chesnut Family Papers, SCL.

³⁹ Esther Cox to Mary Cox Chesnut, July 23, 1805, Cox and Chesnut Family Papers, SCL.

⁴⁰ Jacqueline Jones notes that "older female slaves in particular often rivaled the preacher . . . in terms of the respect they commanded for their knowledge of medicine (especially midwifery)." Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 41. This medical knowledge was typically derived from African customs, which provided another way in which enslaved mothers kept their pasts alive. See Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 171-172. See also Thomas L. Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers: Education in the Slave Quarter Community, 1831-1865* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 226-228.

each of the children of her owner, Jane Williams, along with “31 little Black folks” who were also owned by Jane’s family. Jane attested that she “never lost one but Mothers and Children all do well,” and her talents made her desirable among a host of other women in the area. “I shou’d never keep her at home if I wou’d let her go to all that wanted her,” Jane admitted.⁴¹ Old Catey earned two dollars for attending Judy, another enslaved woman, in labor, and after delivering the child, she asked her owner “to send her the Munney she is in great want of it.”⁴² At least some of the time, then, nurses and midwives were able to keep their earnings. Granny Judy earned between seven and eight dollars for a month’s work of midwifery, nursing, and washing for a slaveholding woman near Raleigh.⁴³ The traveling midwives or “grannies” in eastern Virginia during the 1820s made between \$2.00 and \$3.50 for delivering the children of enslaved women on other plantations.⁴⁴ In northern Virginia, Granny Woody earned several dollars attending enslaved women on neighboring farms.⁴⁵ Alcy Shelton’s position as a community midwife gained her three “certificates of character” from local whites in 1829, who testified that she was “honest and good” and “may be safely trusted” as a medical practitioner; her skill and status as a midwife not only brought her to the attention of a broader audience but also helped her son secure his mother’s freedom.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, August 16, 1798, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

⁴² E. S. Crittenden to John D. McGill, July 25, 1829, Joseph Lyon Miller Papers, VHS.

⁴³ March 14, 1812, December 29, 1813, September 1, 1814, Eliza Haywood Account Book, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

⁴⁴ See April 9, 1825, May 23, 1825, May 2, 1825, April 9, 1825, Account Book, New Family Papers, VHS.

⁴⁵ December 21, 1802, October 10, 1803, Moore Fauntleroy Carter Account Book, VHS.

⁴⁶ William Hayden, *Narrative of William Hayden, Containing a Faithful Account of His Travels for a Number of Years, Whilst a Slave, in the South. Written by Himself* (Cincinnati: The Author, 1846), 147.

The talents that mothers developed while they were enslaved could provide a paying job if they gained their freedom, and the tasks they had performed for their owners could now put food in their children's bellies and clothes on their backs. The skilled work that black women had access to was limited, however, as men generally filled the ranks of carpenters and blacksmiths on busy plantations.⁴⁷ What skills women had were generally learned from their mothers. Free black women worked as washerwomen and maids, cooks and midwives, nurses and seamstresses.⁴⁸ Many women in urban areas earned a living by selling fruits, vegetables, livestock, and baked goods from roadside stalls and moveable carts. Few, however, amassed any significant property holdings.⁴⁹

Of the thirty-free free black women registered in Accomack County, Virginia, in 1804, all had jobs. Most were "spinners," but some worked as cooks, weavers, washers, cake sellers, and "granneys," or midwives. Eleven of these women had registered children, and many were raising them without the help of a father. Sinah Webb had eight children to care for, and Mary Griffin had ten, all girls; both women spun thread for their livelihood.⁵⁰ Many

⁴⁷ Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 18; Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 168.

⁴⁸ Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, 291-295; Dorothy Provine, "The Economic Position of the Free Blacks in the District of Columbia, 1800-1860," *Journal of Negro History* 58, no. 1 (1973): 61-72; Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters*, 218-221; John Hope Franklin, *The Free Negro in North Carolina, 1790-1860* (1974; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 143; Wilma King, *The Essence of Liberty: Free Black Women during the Slave Era* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 59-88; Timothy J. Lockley, "Spheres of Influence: Working White and Black Women in Antebellum Savannah," in *Neither Lady nor Slave: Working Women of the Old South*, eds. Susanna Delfino and Michele Gillespie (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 102-120.

⁴⁹ In rural Virginia in the 1820s, for instance, only a few dozen free black women owned real estate, out of a population of nearly seven thousand free black women. The number of property owners increased in the later part of the antebellum era, as freedwomen became further removed from slavery. Loren Schwening, "Property Owning Free African-American Women in the South, 1800-1870," *Journal of Women's History* 1, no. 3 (1990): 13-44.

⁵⁰ List of Free Negroes, 1804, Accomack County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

free black women continued to work on the same land that they had tended when they were enslaved, for few had the resources to buy their own property. In Amelia County, Virginia, Benjamin Crawley's estate was home to several families of free blacks, including Polly Hilton and her four children, Patty Johnson and her five children, and Clarisa and her son. Polly and Patty worked as "labourers," while Clarisa was a spinner. In 1801, Lucy was listed as a spinner, with her four children as dependents, but the following year, her eldest daughter joined her in the laboring ranks as a weaver. Sarah began as a single woman on Richard Vasser's land in 1801, weaving to earn money, but in 1802, she switched professions and became a cook, and in 1803, she was suddenly listed as having two children, with no mention of a father. Only Suky was living "on her own land," working as a farmer and raising her son Jonathan.⁵¹ In the coastal waters of the Chesapeake Bay, some families lived on land owned by whites, performing such jobs as "cropping," shoemaking, and oyster selling, while others were "not Stationary" and seemed to make a living by traveling on the water; one "runs a boat," another "Goes about weaving," and a third simply did "house business."⁵²

The positions of respect – or mere usefulness – that some black women acquired within white households led to their being able to provide for their children through the generosity, often posthumous, of their owners. The development of relationships with whites, then, could help women achieve brighter futures for their children. Lucy's owner wrote a will in which she freed Lucy and her two daughters, asked her executors to purchase Lucy's husband so the family might live together, and offered the four of them either "a permanent

⁵¹ Free Negro Lists (1801, 1802, 1803), Amelia County Circuit Court, Free Negro Registers, LOV.

⁵² Free Negro Lists, 1801, Powhatan County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

home” in Virginia, or “a residence” in Liberia, should they be interested in emigrating.⁵³

Betty’s owner also felt some affection or responsibility to his slave, and after his death, she gained her freedom, thirty acres of land, and the loan of her own daughter Betty “during her the said Betty the elder’s natural life.” How Betty the elder planned to ensure her daughter’s freedom after her own death is unclear, but one can imagine her carefully saving the money brought in by her field’s crops every year.⁵⁴

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When mothers could not materially provide for their children, they ensured that their children could provide for themselves. Most free black mothers in the South worked outside the home, and while they could control their own labor, they no longer had an immediate, plantation-based network of child support. As a result, finding a safe place for their children could be challenging, especially in urban areas where women had few kin.⁵⁵ The phenomenon of apprenticeships in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries among poor children, both black and white, reflects women’s desire to see their sons and daughters fed and clothed – when they themselves had the resources to do neither – but also the hope that an education in practical skills would lead to employment that would bring these children out of poverty altogether. An indenture could also protect an impoverished child from being hired out by the state or sold back into slavery; in Virginia, for example, Southampton County kept a list of several dozen free blacks in the 1820s who were sold to traders for not

⁵³ Will of Susanna Meade, July 3, 1820, copied in a letter from Ann Randolph Meade Page to Mary Lee Fitzhugh Custis, August 24, 1830, Mary Lee Fitzhugh Custis Papers, VHS.

⁵⁴ Will of Reuben Abney, September 14, 1805, Spragins Family Papers, VHS.

⁵⁵ King, *The Essence of Liberty*, 59-88.

paying the heavy taxes that were imposed on free people of color.⁵⁶ Indentures were typically required of any child born free but illegitimate, which saved the county from a financial burden but also served to give free black children an unfree status.⁵⁷ In North Carolina, the children of free black parents could be indentured without their consent from the 1730s until 1773, and children whose parents could not provide for them, or who were not engaged in “some honest industrious occupation,” were indentured by overseers of the poor throughout the antebellum years.⁵⁸

Systems of apprenticeship often served the interests of the state and individual employers by harnessing the labor of free blacks, but some free black mothers took advantage of the apprenticeship system and its various iterations to provide, albeit indirectly, for their children. In 1730, a free black woman named Betty struck a deal with John and Margaret Hair, perhaps her former owners, to take on her four-year-old daughter Patty as an indentured servant until her twenty-first birthday. This contract did not stipulate the transmission of any particular trade or education; Betty merely asked that the Hairs provide her daughter with “sufficient dyet, lodging, and apparell.”⁵⁹ This indenture supplied an impoverished mother’s most basic need: her child’s survival. Nearly a century later, Milly

⁵⁶ Free Negro Lists, Ordered for Sale for Non-Payment of Taxes, 1826-1828, Southampton County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

⁵⁷ In Virginia, a 1765 law outlined this requirement, and indentures lasted until the age of majority (usually eighteen for women and twenty-one for men). See June Guild, ed., *Black Laws of Virginia: A Summary of the Legislative Acts of Virginia Concerning Negroes from the Earliest Times to the Present* (Richmond: Whittet and Shepperson, 1936), 25-30. See also Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters*, 226-227.

⁵⁸ Franklin, *The Free Negro in North Carolina*, 122-130. For more on pauper apprenticeship, see John E. Murray and Ruth Wallis Herndon, “Markets for Children in Early America: A Political Economy of Pauper Apprenticeship,” *Journal of Economic History* 62, no. 2 (2002): 356-382.

⁵⁹ September 18, 1730, Indentures of Free Negroes, Norfolk County Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

Newby required the same guarantee, and bound out her nine-year-old son, born free to a free mother, in exchange for ten dollars, presumably hoping that his service would allow him food and shelter, while the extra ten dollars helped her make it from one month to the next.⁶⁰

Free black women, especially those who were newly manumitted, often could not independently provide for their children, and apprenticeships offered one of the only ways to produce children who were well-fed and prepared to shift for themselves through the acquisition of skills or connections. In the 1820s, Elizabeth Barbour, Patsey Banks, and Fanny Carey all hired out their sons as indentured servants in Virginia; in Fanny's case, she secured the promise of an annual payment from the doctor to whom she bound her son, for "she is poor and needs something more to support on than she can make by her own exertions, having several other children." Though the doctor refused to train him in his own scientific profession, he did promise to "raise him morally and learn him to work" – all, perhaps, for which a desperate mother could hope. When mothers could no longer care for their children and could not find them appropriate masters, the courts would take over, though this meant relinquishing their children to an uncertain fate. Two boys were taken and bound out by the Overseers of the Poor in Frederick County, Virginia, in 1819, for their mother was "not able to bring them up in honest Courses."⁶¹ Mothers' choices of whom to bind their children to were often limited. One free Virginian woman named Susan, "now a widow, and being indigent and needy," bound her son to a nearby slaveowner, perhaps not knowing whom else to turn to, while Sidney Rotter, a Maryland woman, bound her son to a

⁶⁰ February 8, 1827, Thomas Newby Apprentice Agreement, Southampton County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

⁶¹ February 1, 1820, November 2, 1824, January 24, 1825, n.d., 1819, Free Negro Indentures, Frederick County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

Delaware Quaker with the guarantee of “six month’s schooling, and at the age of twenty-one, two suits of clothing.” If Sidney thought a Quaker would treat her son better than a local planter, she was mistaken; her son called his new master “a demon in human shape,” and the boy was “half fed, half clothed, and worked late and early.”⁶²

Even women who were still under the thumb of a local slaveholder could make demands regarding their children’s future.⁶³ An African American woman named Nancy Venture Woods wrote John Haywood in 1825 and asked him to help her oldest son find an appropriate profession. Nancy’s exact relationship to John is unclear; though she called him “Master” and implied that her family’s well-being was in his hands, she lived over a hundred miles away and informed him about the health of her children as if he would not otherwise have known. Nancy probably served as the wet nurse for the Haywood family, and she may have even been a free woman who relied on the munificence of white friends to stay within the state and earn a living. Whatever her legal status, Nancy understood that John held power that could be harnessed to help her son. Nancy began by describing her own status in her family; she boasted seven children and six grandchildren and was proud to call herself a “great grand Mother.” She then explained her son Virgin’s particular needs, and suggested that “a tailor or shoemaker would suit him best in consequence of a hurt he has had in his ancle. . . . You will please write to Mr. Guion concerning the putting of Virgin to a trade and

⁶² William J. Anderson, *Life and Narrative of William J. Anderson, Twenty-four Years a Slave; Sold Eight Times! In Jail Sixty Times!! Whipped Three Hundred Times!!! or The Dark Deeds of American Slavery Revealed* (Chicago: Daily Tribune, 1857), 5; Levin Tilmon, *A Brief Miscellaneous Narrative of the More Early Part of the Life of L. Tilmon, Pastor of a Colored Methodist Congregational Church in the City of New York. Written by Himself* (Jersey City, NJ: W. W. & L. A. Pratt, 1853), 7.

⁶³ Brenda Stevenson observes that while free black men could more easily purchase family members, free black and enslaved women used relationships with white owners and patrons to secure their children’s future. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, 262-263.

he will see to the business.” After dictating this request, Nancy appended a plea to keep her other children at home “to assist me in supporting the small ones,” though she would prefer to keep them “as long as I live.” Acknowledging his power once again with clauses such as “if agreeable to you” and “as you think best,” Nancy signed off with prayers for his family and himself, “the best of Masters.” Nancy Woods may have cushioned her requests with flattery, but her boldness is clear, and the desire to provide for her family – both her oldest son’s professional aspirations and the safety of her younger children – drove her to reach out to a white, slaveholding man.⁶⁴ Such requests probably were more frequent than the written record suggests, for many of these messages and demands would have been discussed orally between people on the same plantation.

Measuring power in these circumstances requires a different understanding of power than that wielded by slaveowners; the power of these mothers lies in their awareness of their social limitations and the careful negotiations they made on behalf of their children in spite of these limitations. Sarah, a slave in Charleston, may have exerted such power over her owner; when Thomas Forrest drafted his will in 1806, he left everything he owned to a “certain Mulatto Boy named Frank” whom he had recently emancipated. Frank proved to be “the first and principal object of my Bounty and care,” and he received the promise of Thomas’s house, land, belongings, and even the profit from the sale of his other slaves. The money would be invested and would “be applied to the support maintenance and Education” of Frank, including a “good English Education” and an apprenticeship with one of Charleston’s tailors. Out of all his belongings, the only thing Thomas refused to sell was “the Wench Sarah,” stipulating instead that she should be hired out and her wages diverted to

⁶⁴ Nancy Venture Woods to John Haywood, February 5, 1825, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

support Frank. Though no genealogical information is provided, the likelihood that Sarah and Thomas were Frank's parents seems strong. If so, Thomas's overwhelming generosity to this boy may have been a response to Sarah's own demands. Whether Sarah pushed for her son's emancipation or Thomas freed the boy out of his own sense of paternal obligation, the decision emerged from Sarah bringing her pregnancy to her owner's attention, attributing the child to him, and, at the very least, maintaining a favored status on the plantation long enough to ensure her son would gain his freedom. Unfortunately, by the time Thomas died in 1825, something must have changed in his relationship with Frank and Sarah, for a short note on the document states that "this will was never . . . acted upon."⁶⁵ While this case hints at an extreme example of a mother's ability to ensure her child's material success, the frequency with which women sought vocational training for their children suggests that many expected the assistance of whites, especially those who were the fathers of their children.

The desires of slaveowners and the enslaved occasionally coincided, and when enslaved children were put out to learn trades, it can be difficult to discern whose initiative prompted the training.⁶⁶ Slaveowners, too, often wanted men and women trained in specialized skills, for such education not only increased a slave's value but could fill a labor gap on a farm or plantation. In 1819, Sary watched as her two daughters were "taught to sew, wash etc." and her son was "put to the carpenters trade" by her owner. These skills would come in handy were Sary's children to seek a little extra money doing local work or if they ever gained their freedom, but the mother may also have resented her owner being able to

⁶⁵ The executors may also have refused to carry out Thomas's wishes. October 11, 1806, Thomas Hunter Forrest Will, SCHS.

⁶⁶ As Leslie Owens observed, "A skill meant an opportunity to obtain preferred duties in later life." Leslie Howard Owens, *This Species of Property: Slave Life and Culture in the Old South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 207.

make these decisions and determine her children's course of action.⁶⁷ Jacob Ford seemed intent on educating the young slaves on his plantation, and his record of their advancements match the records of his own children's schooling. While his children learned grammar and geography to fit neatly into an elite class, though, Jacob trained his slaves to add to the economic value of his plantation. While Jacob's wife would have voiced her opinions about her children's education, slaveowners almost never consulted with enslaved mothers. The rights and privileges of white and black mothers were vastly different, but both Jacob's wife and the enslaved women on his plantation would have wanted their children to be equipped as best they could. In 1815, Jacob Ford "placed Paul with Sally Seymour to learn the art of Cooking." In 1827, Adel went "to School at Maria Michael's a free black woman . . . to learn to sew," the next year she went to "Mrs. Harrison in Beaufain St. to learn the art of mantua making," and in 1829, rounding out her education, she was placed in another home "to learn to sew & to read." Anfield learned the carpenter's trade, Ann learned to wash from an enslaved woman named Flora, and Willoughby learned "the art of a Pastry Cook." These young men and women were bringing in money for Jacob Ford; next to the descriptions of their growing skill sets, Jacob marked the wages brought in from hiring out his slaves, including both Willoughby and Anfield. But they were also gaining valuable, marketable skills. Flora, the expert in washing, must have perfected her profession enough to earn both money and a reputation in Charleston.⁶⁸ Similarly, Davison McDowell placed Robert "to learn to be a mill-wright," while "Sarah's son Joe went to . . . Darlington to learn to be a

⁶⁷ "An Agreement to Exchange Certain Slaves," February 27, 1819, in J. H. Easterby, ed., *The South Carolina Rice Plantation as Revealed in the Papers of Robert F. W. Allston* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 333.

⁶⁸ March 17, 1815, August 15, 1827, February 18, 1828, May 7, 1829, August 27, 1827, October 22, 1828, September 18, 1827, Ford Family Papers, SCL.

Blacksmith” for three years.⁶⁹ An enslaved person who lacked specific talents could be a liability for a slaveowner hard-pressed for additional income. The owner of a nail factory in Alexandria hired his slaves out when their labor was not required, and he reported happily that Harry was “hired,” and Davy was “making a coop for Mrs. Dykes,” but Lucy was “out jobbing for none will hire her.”⁷⁰ Though these skills would have been encouraged and cultivated by owners hungry for profit and efficiency, black mothers could salvage some pride in the talents their children developed and a pleasure in the thought that their children might one day provide for themselves.

The maternal drive to provide safety, health, education, and financial security to their children comes across most clearly in the few wills that free blacks left behind at their deaths. Mothers left property to their children, and both mothers and fathers used wills as an opportunity to finally provide other family members with freedom. Many men and women, upon gaining their freedom, promptly started trying to protect their spouses, parents, and children by purchasing and eventually emancipating them. The ability of African Americans to leave wills at all, however, was a contested and diminishing right, and even the right of blacks to purchase human property was limited. In Virginia, laws restricting the purchase of human property by free blacks entered the books in the late seventeenth century and were revised several times; by 1832, free blacks could own no one beyond their immediate family, and by 1858, blacks no longer could become slaveholders at all.

While it was still legally possible, then, a free black man with means would try to purchase his family and emancipate them upon his death, and surely wives and mothers

⁶⁹ July 31, 1826, January 20, 1830, Plantation Journal from Asylum Plantation, Davison McDowell Papers, SCL.

⁷⁰ William Stewart to Archibald McCall, July 28, 1801, William Stewart Jr. Letters, LOV.

reminded their husbands of the importance of such promises. We can read the success of a mother, then, when Eve Justice and her two children received their freedom after her husband died in 1812, for they had secured permission “by an Act of the General Assembly” for the family to remain in Virginia after his death.⁷¹ When Lewis Turner drafted his will in 1818, he had not yet obtained permission for his wife Aggai to remain in Virginia after his death, so he had to make two stipulations. If the Assembly permitted her to stay within the state, she would be freed and would inherit Lewis’s land, including the various plots he had purchased over the years from his neighbors, all his “stock of horses, hogs, sheep and cows,” their furniture, utensils, tools, crops, and any “meats & liquors that may be on hand” at his death, along with the services of an indentured “negro boy.” If she were not granted permission to remain on this land, however, Aggai would instead be willed to his free nephew with the directive that he “treat her well.” Aggai must have agreed to continue her life as a slave rather than gain freedom and leave the state, and the reason may be found in her seven children. These children were still enslaved and were not freed by Lewis’s will, and Aggai may very well have refused to leave them in exchange for her freedom.⁷² For some enslaved people, freedom was a goal that was always in conversation with other goals, including – for Aggai – overseeing her children’s lives.

Only a handful of wills written by free black women exist, but those that do reveal mothers who were relentlessly vigilant about their children’s futures. North Carolina resident Sally Fain left behind no biological children when she died, but she did provide for two

⁷¹ Will of Robin Justice, April 28, 1812, Deeds of Manumission (1812-1813), Accomack County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

⁷² It is unclear whether or not Lewis Turner owned his children, or whether they were enslaved by another master. June 5, 1818, Lewis Turner Will, VHS.

individuals with whom she had cultivated a maternal relationship. One boy – perhaps a nephew – lived with the widowed Sally, and she left him a “horse Saddle & bridle to be worth one Hundred dollars.” Most of her belongings, however, she left to a woman named Anny Norwood, “who I have raised.” This foster daughter received most of Sally’s land, along with her house, furniture, and crops. Sally placed this gift in trust with an executor so that it would “not in any way . . . be controlled by her husband,” but would provide income and security for Anny and her children, thus continuing the line of maternal provisions into the next generation.⁷³

Hagar Richardson also provided for her children beyond the grave, and while her extensive property was unusual for free black women at the time, her maternal impulses would have been shared by many.⁷⁴ In 1810, Hagar Richardson and her children were emancipated by Arnoldus Vanderhorst in Charleston and given a healthy amount of money in trust to provide for their support.⁷⁵ Hagar died a wealthy woman in 1820, and her children, by all accounts fathered by Arnoldus, received from their mother:

1 Set Chester Draws 1 wash hand Stand 1 Small work Table
2 matrasses 1 Bolster 1 pair Pillows 2 bed Quilts 2 Ditto Covers
18 Rusher Towels 6 small Table Cloths 9 Shifts 6 Gowns
2 Dimity Petticoats 1 large bed blanket 1 Small Ditto
4 pair Pillow Cases 1 bolster case 2 pair & 1 odd Sheet
6 Table Spoons 12 Tea Ditto 1 pair plated Snuffers & Stand.

Besides material goods, Peter and Eliza received housing, clothing, and education from their mother’s estate. Receipts abound for payments made on rent at a house on Water Street,

⁷³ Will of Sally Fain, August 16, 1841, April 18, 1854, Bullock and Hamilton Papers, SHC.

⁷⁴ For more on the overwhelming poverty endured by most free black mothers in the South, see King, *The Essence of Liberty*, 59-88.

⁷⁵ See Rita Reynolds, "Wealthy free women of color in Charleston, South Carolina during slavery" (January 1, 2007), *Electronic Doctoral Dissertations for UMass Amherst*, Paper AA13275800.

medical visits, and the salaries of various teachers, from Dr. Israel Munds to Mary Ann Warren to Hannah McKinzie. At the time of her death, the executors of Hagar's estate were paying taxes on \$3,000 in property. The details left behind in Hagar's accounts are compelling, for they offer brief images of a free black family's life. In 1821, Benjamin Smith painted Hagar's house in Water Street, including the front fence – "white two coats, and Red one coat." The estate also paid for "Cutting Hair" and "drawing 2 teeth," a "Common prayer book" along with a "Looking Glass & comb." In 1826, J. E. Holmes was paid forty dollars for writing up a marriage settlement for Eliza and George Miller, a free black man. The estate also paid for the maintenance of four slaves – Moses, Sue, Cinder, and Jack – that Hagar and her children owned; the year 1826 saw receipts for "making Coffin for the boy Jack," "paying the Clerk of the African Burial Ground for the interment of Jack," and "2 ½ yards long lawn for a shroud." In 1827, money was spent on a "midwife for Sue," a "coffin for Sue's child Daniel," and a "conveyance to Potters field." In this collection of payments, we find life and death hand in hand, the physical markers of a child's growth, spirituality and ceremony, and a newly painted red fence. We also see a mother who provided for her children in spite of their parentage, for she knew that it was their parentage that freed them, fed them, and educated them.⁷⁶

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The actions of wealthy free women such as Hagar Richardson paralleled the actions of women who were enslaved, destitute, or seemingly powerless. The thread that linked these women was their motherhood; most African and African American mothers worked to provide material goods, security, health, and employment to sons and daughters regardless of

⁷⁶ Hagar Richardson Estate Papers, Folders 1-4, SCHS.

their position or status. Mothers engaged in the act of providing so urgently because its currency was the future rather than the present. Many of these women had no way of improving the immediate lives of their children, try as they might to shield them from the master's blow or sneak them extra bread at night. The decisions that these mothers made – from hiring themselves out for a dollar at a time to binding their children to local tailors, millers, and blacksmiths – offered the promise of a better future, a future that held more money, more safety, perhaps even freedom or self-sufficiency. Making decisions based on future outcomes was, if nothing else, a way simply to ensure sanity, even if these decisions did not always work out. Most of these families lived under hellish conditions, and the thought that a child could exist in a brighter world kept many a mother from succumbing to despair.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BLACK TEACHERS

“What I shall now relate is, what was told me by my mother and grandmother.” So Moses Roper began his account of a life in slavery, the early years of which he could recall only because his mother insisted that her son understand what a life – his life – as a slave entailed.¹ In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, enslaved and free black mothers in the South worked tirelessly to educate their children despite overwhelming hardship, lack of opportunities, and legal restrictions. They taught their children about their ancestors, how to read and write, ways to earn a living, how to avoid the whip, and what slavery meant.² Through these various lessons, mothers shaped their children’s relationship to enslavement. Education, in whatever form it took, helped children to better understand their position in families and on plantations. Such knowledge offered immense power, for it enabled women and their children to cope with day-to-day oppression while simultaneously envisioning a future in which slavery had no part. For mothers who fought to teach their children basic

¹ Moses Roper, *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn; London: Darton, Harvey and Darton, 1838), 9-10.

² John Blassingame similarly described the slave mother’s lesson plan for her children: to “cushion the shock of bondage for them, help them to understand their situation, teach them values different from those their masters tried to instill in them, and give them a referent for self-esteem other than the master.” See John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 151.

skills, the process of education, halting and incomplete as it often was, allowed them to have some control over the way their sons and daughters dealt with their surrounding worlds.

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In an 1839 narrative, Peter Wheeler recalled his earliest years when his mother told him tales about his ancestors and how his African-born great-grandfather came to America in chains. “Mother used to set and trot me on her knee,” he wrote, “and tell me these ‘ere stories as soon as I could understand ‘em.”³ Peter’s mother was one among many who insisted on teaching children their family history, despite, or perhaps because of, its often shattered nature.⁴ Knowledge of one’s past, especially a past that stretched beyond slavery, enabled both mothers and children to control their identities and assert a history that positioned them as grandchildren, aunts, and cousins, rather than slaves. John Brown could recite his parents’ names, where they had come from, and that his grandfather had been “of the Eboe tribe.”⁵ James Curry learned about his origins from his kin and neighbors in North Carolina, who told him that “our forefathers and mothers were stolen from Africa, where they were free men and women.”⁶ In Virginia, Thomas Johnson’s mother told him that her father “came from Africa,

³ Peter Wheeler, *Chains and Freedom: Or, The Life and Adventures of Peter Wheeler, a Colored Man Yet Living. A Slave in Chains, a Sailor on the Deep, and a Sinner at the Cross*, ed. Charles E. Lester (New York: E. S. Arnold, 1839), 21.

⁴ Thomas L. Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers: Education in the Slave Quarter Community, 1831-1865* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 163-4; E. Franklin Frazier, “The Negro Slave Family,” *Journal of Negro History* 15, no. 2 (1930): 198-259, esp. 227-233.

⁵ John Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia: A Narrative of the Life, Sufferings, and Escape of John Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Now in England*, ed. Louis Alexis Chamerovzow (London: W. M. Watts, 1855), 1-2.

⁶ “Narrative of James Curry,” *Liberator*, January 10, 1840, reprinted in *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*, ed. John Blassingame (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 131.

and was of the Guinea tribe,” adding that in Africa, “they were once all free there.”⁷ Jane Henry taught her son to remember the communities in both Africa and Maryland that had nurtured him. When writing his autobiography, Thomas Henry wrote in meticulous detail about his mother, “who gave birth to twelve children, all slaves to my master,” and his African-born grandmother, Catherine Hill, who “was the mother of my mother, and gave birth to twenty children,” and who “died August, 1811, at the good and ripe old age of one hundred and nine years.”⁸ An interest in genealogy was not new to the experience of Africans in America. One man who spent his childhood in Africa remembered asking his mother where their people came from; “she answered me, from one another; and so carried me to many generations back.”⁹ Like white and Indian mothers, enslaved mothers relied upon oral traditions to pass along stories about ancestors, but most black women had a necessarily limited memory, ruptured by trauma and over four thousand miles of ocean separating them from generations of loved ones.

Family history was important as a form of sustainable memory, but it also reminded young children about the obstacles they faced. Many mothers chose to tell their sons and daughters about violent mistresses, abusive masters, and the perils of being born a slave with light-colored skin. The mother of Moses Roper told her young son of a jealous mistress who “went into my mother’s room with full intention to murder me with her knife and club.” The

⁷ Thomas L. Johnson, *Twenty-Eight Years a Slave or The Story of My Life in Three Continents* (Bournemouth: W. Mate and Sons, 1909), 1, 4.

⁸ Thomas W. Henry, *Autobiography of Thomas W. Henry of the A. M. E. Church* (Baltimore: The Author, 1872), 5.

⁹ James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince*, ed. Walter Shirley (Bath: S. Hazzard, 1770), 1.

slaveowner and husband of this enraged woman, Moses straightforwardly refers to as “my father.”¹⁰ Other enslaved men and women also learned about white fathers from their black mothers, who chose to speak honestly about a confusing and disturbing relationship rather than shrouding the father’s identity in vagueness or myth. “Mother’s master, Mr. Randolph, was my father,” Louisa Picquet wrote. “So mother told me.”¹¹ Henry Bibb learned of his slaveowning father’s identity when “my mother informed me.”¹² When Harriet Jacobs told her daughter about her white father, the girl responded that she had already guessed, and that “I am nothing to my father, and he is nothing to me. All my love is for you.”¹³ Not all mothers were so straightforward; Frederick Douglass only heard about his parentage through plantation rumors, but the limited time his mother, Harriet Bailey, was able to spend with him may have affected her decision to withhold that information.¹⁴ Living on a distant plantation and only able to sneak over at night, Harriet chose to build a relationship based solely on mother and child. While some women believed that full disclosure offered their children the best chance to grasp the realities of slavery, and perhaps overcome them, others protected what they viewed as a sacred relationship and chose to teach children about love by shielding them from stories about brutality.

¹⁰ Moses Roper, *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn; London: Darton, Harvey and Darton, 1838), 9-10.

¹¹ Louisa Picquet, *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon: A Tale of Southern Slave Life*, ed. Hiram Mattison (New York: H. Mattison, 1861), 6.

¹² Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York: The Author, 1849), 14.

¹³ Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Boston: Published for the Author, 1861), 283.

¹⁴ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself* (Boston: American Anti-slavery Society, 1845), 2.

While they ensured their children were well-versed in family history, mothers also oversaw their education in literacy and other practical skills. Educating children, especially in reading and writing, ensured mothers two kinds of power: resisting their owners, who had little use for slave education, and resisting the idea that a life in enslavement was nothing more than seasons of labor.¹⁵ Any effort at self-improvement or pursuing a better future for their children proved that mothers defined themselves not as slaves, but as humans. This attention to education among some black women in America was an inheritance from their mothers and grandmothers in Africa. Nicholas Said's mother in Bournou "was very strict with her children," and, as in many societies in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Africa, his father "left the rearing and training of his children exclusively to their mothers." As a result, Nicholas's mother tried to prevent the boy from going on so many hunts, and when he disobeyed, "flogging almost invariably accompanied my return."¹⁶ James Gronniosaw's mother, also from Bournou, taught him about "the sun, moon, and stars," while Olaudah Equiano claimed his mother took "particular pains to form my mind," training him in "the art of war, . . . shooting and throwing javelins."¹⁷ Mahommah Baquaqua learned to be "obedient

¹⁵ Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 7-29. See also Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers*, 131-138; and Janet Duitsman Cornelius, who argued that literacy "reinforced an image of self-worth" and went hand-in-hand with ideals of "freedom and self-determination." Cornelius, *"When I Can Read My Title Clear": Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 2.

¹⁶ Nicholas Said, *The Autobiography of Nicholas Said, a Native of Bournou, Eastern Soudan, Central Africa* (Memphis: Shotwell, 1873), 11-13.

¹⁷ James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince*, ed. Walter Shirley (Bath: S. Hazzard, 1770), 1; Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (London: The Author, 1789), 46-7. There is a healthy debate surrounding Equiano's origins, with Vincent Carretta arguing that he was in fact born and raised in South Carolina, and that his narrative draws from older reports of Africa and the Middle Passage. See

and polite” from his mother in Benin, and while she was the only one who could discipline him, “his love for his mother was exceedingly great.”¹⁸

In America, black mothers continued to convey to their children both manners and knowledge.¹⁹ Mothers taught both sons and daughters skills that lay outside the realm of the master’s control, from cooking family dinners to making soap and candles for home use, but literacy was one of the most prized goals, for it confounded expectations of slavery while empowering children to expand their limited spheres of knowledge.²⁰ Elizabeth Keckley’s parents encouraged her “to be a good girl, and to learn her book,” while William Hayden recalled of his mother that “she, it was, who taught my feeble steps to walk, . . . she it was, who taught my infant tongue to lisp the word, mother.” William’s mother also told him stories and would regale him with “some juvenile tale,” and while she could not read them from a children’s book like her mistress could, she used the same technique to amuse and

Carretta, *Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005).

¹⁸ Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua, *Biography of Mahommah G. Baquaqua, a Native Zoogoo, in the Interior of Africa (a Convert to Christianity): with a Description of that Part of the World, Including the Manners and Customs of the Inhabitants*, ed. Samuel Moore (Detroit: George E. Pomeroy, 1854), 18, 26.

¹⁹ Most laws preventing African Americans from learning to read or write in Southern states did not enter the books until the 1830s, though few slaveowners encouraged the practice; literacy education, therefore, was largely secretive. See Janet Cornelius, “‘We Slipped and Learned to Read’: Slave Accounts of the Literacy Process, 1830-1865,” *Phylon* 44, no. 3 (1983): 171-186. For a listing of all anti-literacy slave laws in the antebellum South, see Williams, *Self-Taught*, 203-213. W. E. B. Du Bois estimated that five percent of the South Carolina slave population in 1860 could read and write. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (1935; New York: The Free Press, 1998), 638; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 563.

²⁰ Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers*, 157-179.

instruct her child.²¹ Sally Williams taught her children “habits of industry and activity,” and when her son’s master offered to teach him to read, Sally bought “the necessary books.” She claimed that listening to her twelve-year-old son read from the Bible in the evenings – witnessing both his literacy and his spirituality – was “the highest pleasure she had ever known.”²² Thomas Johnson’s mother, whose entire education “consisted in a knowledge of the Alphabet, and how to count a hundred,” taught young Thomas the Lord’s Prayer and “paid a freeman fifty cents to teach me for one month.”²³ When Lucy, a cook in North Carolina, heard that her son “had a great desire to learn to read,” she “procured me a spelling-book.”²⁴ Harriet Bailey learned how to read as a young woman and when she had children of her own, she made sure that she passed on this passion for knowledge; her son, Frederick Douglass, was “happy to attribute any love of letters I may have” to the example of his mother. Because his mother was enslaved on a distant plantation and died when he was still fairly young, Frederick convinced his white mistress to teach him how to read. When her husband learned of the lessons, his rage so impressed on Frederick the incongruity of literate enslavement that Frederick thought, “‘Very well. . . . Knowledge unfits a child to be a slave.’ I instinctively assented to the proposition, and from that moment I understood the direct

²¹ Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley, *Behind the Scenes, Or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House* (New York: G. W. Carleton, 1868), 25; William Hayden, *Narrative of William Hayden, Containing a Faithful Account of His Travels for a Number of Years, Whilst a Slave, in the South. Written by Himself* (Cincinnati: The Author, 1846), 65-6, 125.

²² Sally Williams, *Aunt Sally: or, The Cross the Way of Freedom. A Narrative of the Slave-life and Purchase of the Mother of Rev. Isaac Williams, of Detroit, Michigan* (Cincinnati: Western Tract and Book Society, 1858), 27, 47, 81-82.

²³ Thomas L. Johnson, *Twenty-Eight Years a Slave or The Story of My Life in Three Continents* (Bournemouth: W. Mate and Sons, 1909), 3-5.

²⁴ “Narrative of James Curry,” *Liberator*, January 10, 1840, reprinted in *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*, ed. John Blassingame (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 130.

pathway from slavery to freedom.”²⁵ No enslaved mothers, however, had the tools or time to raise their children as they wished. George Horton recalled, “My mother discovered my anxiety for books, and strove to encourage my plan; but she, having left her husband behind, was so hard run to make a little shift for herself, that she could give me no assistance in that case.”²⁶ A mother and father in northern Virginia encouraged their children to “try to hear all you can, but don’t let them know it.” Following their advice, one of their sons eavesdropped when whites were reading aloud, and another bribed the white children on the plantation with apples so they would hear him read his lessons.²⁷ Though these parents may not have had the skills to teach their boys, encouragement was often a means to education. Many mothers had to turn to others to help educate their children; in 1719, Cuba, a free black woman in Lancaster County, Virginia, bound her son to Edward Carter and arranged for the child to learn a trade as well as “to be taught to read and write.”²⁸ The process of education was rarely formal, but it was constant and creative, as mothers sought to raise children who could survive in a uniquely unkind environment.

Along with literacy, children learned a variety of trades, and many free black women bound their children as apprentices to ensure that they would have a firm footing in society. In addition to teaching the children necessary skills, their temporary masters would feed and

²⁵ Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself*, revised ed. (Boston: De Wolfe, Fiske & Co., 1892), 39, 94-97.

²⁶ George Moses Horton, *The Poetical Works of George M. Horton, the Colored Bard of North Carolina, to Which Is Prefixed the Life of the Author. Written by Himself* (Hillsborough, NC: Heartt, 1845), iv.

²⁷ John Quincy Adams, *Narrative of the Life of John Quincy Adams, When in Slavery, and Now as a Freeman* (Harrisburg, PA: Sieg, 1872), 6-10.

²⁸ August 10, 1719, “Current Errors: Education,” *William and Mary College Quarterly* 8, no. 1 (1899): 82, quoted in Philip D. Morgan, “Black Education in Williamsburg-James City County, 1619-1984” (1985), p. 21, WM.

clothe them, taking a huge burden off the shoulders of women who were often impoverished. While apprenticeships helped women provide for their children, they also offered a means to a practical education. In North Carolina, from 1762 to 1838, masters were required by law to teach their apprentices, many of whom were free blacks, to read and write.²⁹ In 1744, Sarah Aleworth chose to bind her six-year-old son Joshua to a tradesman until the boy reached his twenty-first birthday.³⁰ When Charles was bound to a ship carpenter in 1800, he not only secured his food, lodging, medical care, and trade, but when he was released at the end of his indenture, he would take with him “a Hat, handkerchief, Coat, Jackett & Breiches, a pair of Stockings, Shoes, & Buckles, and three Shirts; all of new decent strong things. Also a Broad Ax, Adds, a Sett of Caulking Irons, & Tool Box.”³¹ James Lewis was bound to a carpenter “at the desire of his mother,” and when he was released from his apprenticeship, his first goal was to return home. In 1835, he carried a certificate with him that vouched for his character and informed anyone who stopped him that he “is a free man of Colour,” and that “he has an aged mother living in Alexandria, and wishes . . . to see her.”³² Some of these children may have become literate, but all of them left their apprenticeships with marketable skills, and when James Lewis returned to Alexandria to see his mother, she probably would have been proud to see her son relatively safe in the promise of a trade.

²⁹ John Hope Franklin, *The Free Negro in North Carolina, 1790-1860* (1974; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 165.

³⁰ November 24, 1744, Sarah Aleworth Binds Out Son Joshua, Accomack County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

³¹ August 1, 1800, Indenture of Servitude, Alexandria Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

³² May 13, 1835, Free Negro Certifications, Westmoreland County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

Many free black women bound their children at such a young age that it is difficult to gauge whether these apprenticeships were driven by a desire to teach their children a craft or a desperation to relieve extremely impoverished conditions. Like their Cherokee neighbors, who sent their children to mission schools for both education and basic sustenance, many black women discovered that the choice to bind their children out was hardly a choice at all. The younger these children were, the more apparent it becomes that motherhood sometimes required the sacrifice of being with one's children for the sake of mutual survival. Matilda Bradshaw put her five-year-old son William to learn farming, "by the consent of his mother." Nancy Ricks bound out her three-year-old daughter Susannah to acquire "the craft and occupation of domestic & female business." Mary Artice placed her daughters, aged three and two, with William Owens to learn how to be "Farmers." What could these toddlers possibly accomplish on a farm? It seems clear that young Beady and Amy were relinquished by their mother not with the lofty goal of providing them with a trade, but because she could not care for them, and she knew that in exchange for their labor for the next fifteen years, William Owens would feed and clothe them.³³

While some women bound out their children voluntarily, others had lost the control they had hoped to gain through freedom, and their children were bound by their county's Overseers of the Poor. Some of these children were orphans, but others had parents who simply could no longer care for them. One free black woman allowed her church wardens to apprentice her twelve-year-old son to a sawyer in 1750.³⁴ In 1809, the Overseers of the Poor

³³ October 1, 1834, Indenture of William H. Bradshaw; June 18, 1838, Indenture of Susannah Ricks; September 19, 1831, Indenture of Beady and Amy Artice, Apprentice Indentures, Colored Children, Southampton County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

³⁴ May 17, 1750, Indenture of Charles Anderson, Indentures of Free Negroes, Norfolk County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

in Rockingham County, Virginia, placed Presley, “a por boy being four years of age,” son of a free black woman named Melly, to learn “the art and mistry of a weavers traid.” Was Melly present in Presley’s life, and simply unable to provide for him or arrange an apprenticeship on her own terms? Or was she dead, delinquent, or imprisoned, and her name in the indenture served merely as a marker of the boy’s parentage? When Presley was twelve, he moved from the weaver’s employ to a neighboring miller, suggesting either that Presley was precocious enough to demand a new trade, his former master was no longer able to provide for him, or his mother Melly raised her voice and determined that her son would profit more from processing grains than cloth.³⁵ When six-year-old Patsey Ash was bound out to a seamstress, and four-year-old Lydia was apprenticed to learn “housewifery,” the Overseers of the Poor made no mention of their mothers.³⁶

Even when women had the resources to oversee their children’s schooling, occasionally children themselves protested or found their mothers’ attempts at education unsatisfactory, a circumstance which would have been especially discouraging to hands-on mothers. John Marrant’s mother, for instance, found herself constantly on the move after her husband died in 1759. After moving from New York to St. Augustine the next year, following either employment opportunities or other family members, she put her five-year-old son in school, where he learned “to read and spell.” When the boy was six, they moved to Georgia, where he continued his education for the next five years. When he was eleven, the

³⁵ July 10, 1809, Indenture of Presley, Overseers of the Poor, Indentures of Free Negroes, Rockingham County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

³⁶ September 1816, Indenture of Patsey Ash, Indentures of Free Negroes, Norfolk County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV; January 30, 1818, Indenture of Lydia, Overseers of the Poor, Indentures of Free Negroes, Rockingham County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

family transplanted to Charleston, where his mother decided his education in literacy was complete, and the boy was ready for an apprenticeship in some practical trade. But on an afternoon walk one day, John passed a school for music and dancing and was immediately taken; he ran home and informed his sister “that I had rather learn to play upon music than go to a trade.” The two concluded to write a letter to their mother, who was living outside of the city at the time, and when this concerned parent heard of her son’s fancy, she marched down to Charleston and “persuaded me much against it, but her persuasions were fruitless.” John’s demands to learn music outweighed his mother’s disapproval, and when she realized how passionate the boy was, she “agreed to it, and went with me to speak to the man, and to settle upon the best terms with him she could.” John’s mother paid twenty pounds for his education for the next eighteen months, during which he became an expert at the violin and French horn. After his term expired, however, John found himself adrift in Charleston with few marketable talents; he retired to his mother’s house in the country, where he fished and hunted and idled for several months until he returned to Charleston “to go to some trade.” John’s mother was exceptionally permissive of her son’s whims, but in the end, her maternal strategy was successful: John pursued his passion, discovered on his own that it was not sustainable, and then took the path his mother initially recommended. His mother may have lost twenty pounds in the bargain, but she gained a wiser son and avoided filial resentment.³⁷

At certain times and places across the South, enslaved and free black children like John Marrant had access to more formalized schooling, and mothers could enjoy resources beyond their own ingenuity. Free blacks in eighteenth-century North Carolina took advantage

³⁷ John Marrant, *A Narrative of the Lord’s Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black*, ed. Rev. Mr. Aldridge, 5th ed. (London: Gilbert and Plummer, 1785), 7-9.

of several schools established by local Quakers.³⁸ Williamsburg, Virginia, boasted a school for black children in the 1760s and early 1770s, which taught over one hundred enslaved children to read and write, along with a basic knowledge of Christianity. The pupils were generally between the ages of six and eight and hailed from large plantations, small local shops, and even the College of William and Mary.³⁹ When one slaveowner in Virginia died in the late eighteenth century, he freed his slaves and then established a fund for the College of William and Mary to establish a school for them on a tract of land, while those slaves under the age of eighteen were sent north to “receive an education suited to their capacities at the expense of the estate.” While some mothers may not have wanted to be separated from their children, others may have seen the opportunity implicit in their children’s removal to the North.⁴⁰ In 1817, a group of Moravian missionaries in Springplace, Georgia, began teaching the children of their enslaved women to read and write, and by 1818, the children’s parents and grandparents began to accompany them to the newly built schoolhouse. After an opening hymn and a prayer, the slaves would set to work, with “so many black people, old and young, including a fairly large number of children, standing and sitting there with their

³⁸ John Hope Franklin, *The Free Negro in North Carolina, 1790-1860* (1974; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 166-168; Carter Godwin Woodson, *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1919), 46.

³⁹ The school closed in 1774 when the primary instructor died, but in its years of operation, this elderly woman worked with her charges to teach them “the true Spelling of Names, make them mind their Stops & endeavour to bring them to pronounce & read distinctly.” Thad W. Tate, *The Negro in Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg* (Williamsburg: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1965), 134-152, quote on p. 143. See also Philip D. Morgan, “Black Education in Williamsburg-James City County, 1619-1984” (1985), p. 9, WM; and Edgar W. Knight, ed., *A Documentary History of Education in the South before 1860*, Vol. 1 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1949-1953), 159.

⁴⁰ Philip D. Morgan, “Black Education in Williamsburg-James City County, 1619-1984” (1985), p. 11-12, WM. See also William Munford, *Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court of Appeals of Virginia* (Richmond, 1821), VI, 163.

little books, also a couple of very old ones, trying, if only their eyesight had permitted it, to learn the ABC's!"⁴¹

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Beyond the book and pen, mothers taught their children practical methods to endure a life under slavery, for a mother's sense of control was generally predicated on her children's survival. Women instructed children in proper etiquette towards whites, especially the master and mistress, how to avoid punishment, and, in worst-case scenarios, how to escape.⁴² Most enslaved women who ran away were single, unattached by close family ties, but occasionally they were mothers. The infrequency of mothers who escaped serves as a reminder that the presence of children often prevented women from breaking the bonds of slavery. Instead, most women developed maternal roles such as provider and teacher to ensure that slavery, if inescapable, could somehow be manageable. Of the mothers that did run away, some attempted to take their children with them on the lam, but those who left their children behind in slavery have often been perceived by historians as uncaring or dilatory mothers. Another interpretation of their actions, however, is that by running away (sometimes successfully), these mothers left a model of survival for their children. Those sons and daughters would grow up with the awareness that slavery could be an impermanent condition, and this lesson, however indirect or seemingly cruel, could be enormously

⁴¹ March 13, 1816, November 23, 1817, November 29, 1817, April 2, 1818, *Springplace*, vol. 2, 108, 182, 183, 214.

⁴² For more on forms of slave resistance, particularly among women, see Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985), 76-84; and Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 166-195. See also Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974), 285-307; and John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 192-222.

valuable. When Frederick Douglass heard about his Aunt Jennie's successful escape, it was "the first fact that made me seriously think of escape for myself."⁴³ One South Carolina plantation had a difficult time keeping its female slaves in place; in December 1812, Cli escaped but was recaptured soon after. In December 1814, she ran away again, and was "recovered" six days later. In December 1828, Rachel, the mother of three teenaged children, managed to escape for two months before she was "re-taken" and "put in the Work House" for five months. Willoughby, who was apprenticing with a pastry cook, ran away for a week in early 1829, but was sold immediately after she was discovered on February 7, the same day (and perhaps in the same location) as Rachel. Diana, who was hired out to a free black woman in Charleston and who probably was Rachel's sixteen-year-old daughter, ran away on February 6, and returned the next day.⁴⁴ Were all three women camped out in the same deserted house or swamp? Why did Rachel's two sons not join them? Was this strictly a female enterprise? Somehow these women knew that December and January were the best months for escape, an awareness which seems to have been derived from other women's attempts; Willoughby and Diana seem to have learned from Rachel, who may have learned from Cli.⁴⁵

When children were sold away from their families, mothers sometimes taught them how to make the best of their lot or how to maneuver their way home again. In 1818, a young boy named Winton who was sold from his family in Raleigh to a Tennessee farmer, begged

⁴³ Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 56-57.

⁴⁴ December 15, 1812, December 10, 1814, December 5, 1828, January 31, 1829, February 6, 1829, February 7, 1829, Ford Family Papers, SCL.

⁴⁵ For more on truancy and absenteeism as more practical alternatives to escape for enslaved women, see Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 35-59.

his owner to sell him back, putting up such an eternal fuss that his new owner wrote his old one, informing him that Winton was so “desirus to git back to his parants and friends in that cuntry that I have at length resolved to let him go.” Winton was careful to get into his master’s good graces before making such a request, however; the owner noted that he was “a boy of sutch good qualities” and has been “so faithfull a slave since I have owned him that I think it My Duty to let him go to his Parents.” In closing, he included a note from Winton, who sent “his compliments to you Sr., to his parents to all his friends and is vary desirus that you may comply with his request.” Such a careful manipulation of his situation, from earning the goodwill of his owner to carefully but insisently expressing his unhappiness, was calculated to such good effect that it seems plausible that his parents, on their child’s impending departure, instructed the boy in how he might succeed in coming back to them.⁴⁶ Kitt took a more violent approach when he demanded that his new master sell him back to his old master in 1821; not only did he refuse to work, leading his master to conclude that “he cannot be managed without useing [sic] such Barbarity that I do not wish to make use of,” but he also made more palpable threats, swearing that “if I Don’t Give him up, he will Burn up some Part of my Property or kill one of my family at the Risque of his life.” Kitt’s methods were effective insofar as his new owner was desperate to get him off his hands, though there is no evidence that Kitt was returned to his family.⁴⁷

Mothers passed along gendered knowledge as well, and teaching daughters about sexual violence allowed mothers to turn a common history of sexual assault into a

⁴⁶ John Woods to John Haywood, February 17, 1818, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

⁴⁷ Samuel Burks to Charles Lambert, January 3, 1821, Bedford County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

conversation that could lead to moments of evasion and thus empowerment.⁴⁸ Bethany Veney did not record whether she spoke to her daughter about the possibility of sexual violence, but like almost all women, she was well aware of its pervasiveness. After the birth of her daughter, she recorded her despair, wishing that both she and the girl “could have died together there and then,” knowing “from her own experience” that the child would be subject to “the unbridled lust of the slave-owner.”⁴⁹ For Harriet Jacobs, the knowledge of sexual violence was unavoidable; she wrote that every young girl in slavery “will learn, before she is twelve years old, why it is that her mistress hates such and such a one among the slaves. Perhaps the child’s own mother is among those hated ones.” Though Harriet’s mother had died when the girl was six, Harriet was raised by a grandmother who believed that the best way to prevent sexual assaults was to instill in her grandchildren a sense that a life of purity and modesty could be a defense against white lust. Because of her grandmother’s strictness, though, Harriet initially was too ashamed to tell her about the harassment she faced in her master’s house. After becoming pregnant by another white man in town, Harriet finally confessed to her grandmother, who became so furious that she cried out, “Has it come to this? I had rather see you dead than to see you as you now are. You are a disgrace to your dead mother.” Though she soon forgave Harriet, this grandmother’s strong reaction to the girl’s fall from grace reveals how desperate women were to retain some sense of control over their daughters’ fates. Harriet’s pregnancy served as a reminder to her grandmother of what it really mean to be a slave. When she met with the white father, the grandmother asked “why

⁴⁸ Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: William Morrow Bantam Books, 1988), 43-45.

⁴⁹ Bethany Veney, *The Narrative of Bethany Veney, A Slave Woman* (Worcester: George H. Ellis, 1889), 26.

he could not have left her one ewe lamb.” Only after Harriet had a daughter of her own did she understand how vital this sense of control was; rather than witness “the doom that awaited my fair baby in slavery,” she decided to secure her family’s freedom.⁵⁰

Perhaps the most important thing mothers taught their children was the very brutality of slavery. Many women felt that the best way to provide their children with some sense of control over their own lives was to insist that they had all the facts of their situation. Teaching children about the realities of enslavement put power back in the hands of mothers.⁵¹ As soon as she thought her son was old enough, Thomas Johnson’s mother “explained to me the difference between the condition of the coloured and white people, and told me that if I would learn how to read and write, some day I might be able to get my freedom.” By connecting the facts of slavery with the promise of literacy, she prepared her son for the trials he would face but also provided him with a route to freedom.⁵² Near Fayetteville, North Carolina, Sally Williams’s mother told her that to avoid being separated from loved ones, she should “try to please young Mas’r an’ Missis, so’s to put off de evil day.” Lest Sally take some hope from this message, her mother continued, “But it’ll come, chile, it’ll come, an ye mus’ be spectin’ on’t.” When Sally grew up and had children of her own, she remembered her mother’s teachings. Her young son “had been accustomed to play with the master’s children, . . . but now that he was old enough to labor, he was kept in the field from dawn till dusk.” In this transition, the boy finally realized “who it is to be a slave,”

⁵⁰ Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 45-47, 87, 90, 137. For an examination of Harriet Jacobs’s understandings of virtue and purity, see Ann Taves, “Spiritual Purity and Sexual Shame: Religious Themes in the Writings of Harriet Jacobs,” *Church History* 56, no. 1 (1987): 59-72.

⁵¹ Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers*, 102-110.

⁵² Thomas L. Johnson, *Twenty-Eight Years a Slave or The Story of My Life in Three Continents* (Bournemouth: W. Mate and Sons, 1909), 3.

and Sally warned him that the only way to survive was to “try and do your duty by mas’r.”⁵³ Some families bemoaned their lot together; one ex-slave from North Carolina remembered that “my dear parents were conscious of the desperate and incurable woe of their position and destiny; and the lot of inevitable suffering in store for their beloved children. They talked about our coming misery, and they lifted up their voices and wept aloud.”⁵⁴ Other women blended the joy of family with the trials of enslavement, creating stories with the same inextricable emotions as motherhood itself. William Wells Brown recalled, “She had often taken me upon her knee, and told me how she had carried me upon her back to the field when I was an infant--how often she had been whipped for leaving her work to nurse me--and how happy I would appear when she would take me into her arms.”⁵⁵ Finally, one ex-slave remembered a mother who wrapped his own vulnerability in metaphors. “At an early age, my mother would take me on her knee,” he wrote, “and pointing to the forest trees adjacent, now being stripped of their thick foliage by autumnal winds, would say to me, ‘my son, as yonder leaves are stripped from off the trees of the forest, so are the children of slaves swept away from them by the hands of cruel tyrants.’” Several years later, when the boy was to be sold from his mother, she told him, reminding him of her early lesson, “You now see, my son, the fulfilment of what I told you a great while ago.”⁵⁶ There was no room for these mothers to

⁵³ Sally Williams, *Aunt Sally: or, The Cross the Way of Freedom. A Narrative of the Slave-life and Purchase of the Mother of Rev. Isaac Williams, of Detroit, Michigan* (Cincinnati: Western Tract and Book Society, 1858), 61, 21-22.

⁵⁴ Thomas H. Jones, *Experience and Personal Narrative of Uncle Tom Jones: Who Was for Forty Years a Slave* (Boston: H. B. Skinner, 1854), 7-8.

⁵⁵ William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself* (Boston: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1847), 31-2.

⁵⁶ Henry Box Brown, *Narrative of Henry Box Brown, Who Escaped from Slavery Enclosed in a Box 3 Feet Long and 2 Wide. Written from a Statement of Facts Made by Himself. With, Remarks Upon the Remedy for Slavery*, ed. Charles Stearns (Boston: Brown and Stearns. 1849), 15, 33-4.

romanticize or palliate the realities of slavery. When children could be taken from their mothers at any moment, the most useful education was one that instilled in children both a respect for family and a clear sense of the frailty of their togetherness.

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The process of education, haphazard as it often was, nevertheless offered enslaved and free black mothers a voice in their children's intellectual and emotional development. The lessons introduced on the grounds of a plantation or in the streets of Charleston or Richmond could be violent or incomplete, but their imperfect nature did not stop mothers from shaping, adjusting, and transmitting all the information they could. Women who could not read tried to procure books for their sons and daughters, and newly freed blacks with few skills to their name placed their children with local artisans to learn a profitable trade. Mothers also taught identity, and these were the lessons that stayed with children the longest. Ex-slaves wrote frequently about when they learned what it meant to be a slave, how their mothers frankly told them about the life they could expect and ways to avoid its cruelties, and then how their mothers did everything in their power to protect these vulnerable charges. These lessons about identity were unique to black maternal teachers; while elite white women raised their children to fit into a privileged class defined by the acquisition of Latin, botany, and dancing, and Cherokee and Catawba mothers taught their children to hold onto an Indian identity in the face of change, black mothers were crafting empowering identities for their children within a system designed to dehumanize the individual. Battling against a society that offered neither assistance nor hope, black women taught their children that their ancestors had been free, that literacy could pave the way to freedom once again, and that though slavery was brutal, it could not suppress the anticipation of a better future.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

BLACK SPIRITUAL GUIDES

For decades, scholars from Melville Herskovits to Sylvia Frey have debated the relationship between slavery and religion, approaching this conversation from a number of angles.¹ Why did enslaved Africans and African Americans in the nineteenth century convert in such large numbers to the faith of their owners, a religion that was used to justify their very enslavement?² Why did so many white masters, on the other hand, permit or even encourage their slaves to learn about a spiritual tradition that offered inspiration for the meek and contained parables pitting noble slaves against tyrannical Pharaohs?³ To what extent did

¹ Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958); E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964); Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 129-163; Sylvia R. Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

² See, for example, Jon F. Sensbach, *A Separate Canaan: The Making of an Afro-Moravian World in North Carolina, 1763-1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

³ Riggins R. Earl Jr., *Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs: God, Self, and Community in the Slave Mind* (1993; Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003). See also John B. Boles, ed., *Masters and Slaves in the House of the Lord: Race and Religion in the American South, 1740-1870* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988); and Thomas L. Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers: Education in the Slave Quarter Community, 1831-1865* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 43-58. John Wood Sweet also refers to this "paradox" of colonization in which a proselytizing justification intersected with a desire to enslave the unconverted. Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 105.

slaves continue to incorporate elements of traditional African religions?⁴ Few, however, have investigated the roles of black mothers in supporting or circumventing Christian conversions. Given their role in both African societies and American communities as conduits to the spiritual world, it makes sense that mothers would have significant control over how they raised the next generation of African Americans as spiritual beings, choosing what religious traditions their families would adopt and how they would relate to the invisible, supernatural, or spiritual worlds around them.

To address these issues, it is important to understand the deep connections between women and spirituality in many traditional African societies. Most children understood that their mothers were a primary source of spiritual wisdom, whether through communication with ancestral spirits or knowledge about Jesus Christ or Muhammad.⁵ In West Africa, for instance, women in Dahomey jointly controlled spiritual matters with men, and “queen mothers” were often responsible for importing new *vodun*, or minor gods, to supplement their town’s needs. When Christianity was adopted by a Dahomean king in the late

⁴ Jason R. Young, *Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in the Kongo and the Lowcountry South in the Era of Slavery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007); Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 3-92; Dwight N. Hopkins, “Slave Theology in the ‘Invisible Institution,’” in *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in the Slave Narrative*, eds. Dwight N. Hopkins and George C. L. Cummings, second ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 1-32; Will Coleman, *Tribal Talk: Black Theology, Hermeneutics, and African/American Ways of “Telling the Story”* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000).

⁵ Enslaved Muslim families struggled to hold onto daily religious routines in America, but the majority were also literate in Arabic, which confounded slaveowners while providing a subversive means of both communication and education for slaves. As in many other spiritual communities, enslaved Muslim women became primary conduits for religious knowledge and tradition. Sylviane A. Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); and Allan D. Austin, ed., *African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 99, 120. For more on the practice of Islam in Africa, see Charlotte A. Quinn and Frederick Quinn, *Pride, Faith, and Fear: Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 17-23.

eighteenth century, it was introduced and regulated by royal women.⁶ Among the Yoruba, women helped translate the essence of the gods into concise epithets, chants, and poems.⁷ In Kongo, many women were mediators between the spirit world and the human world; when Christianity was introduced in the late fifteenth century, some women rejected it, objecting to the limited roles it provided for them, while others simply created expanded roles for themselves within the new system.⁸ Women also occasionally controlled healing rituals in which medicine and religion were inextricable.⁹ Women did not abandon this role upon reaching America, and most continued to shape their families' religious character under slavery. Moreover, many mothers viewed both religion and morality as realms of engagement that they could influence. A mother could not reassure a child that he would not be sold to traders, but she could direct his rationalization of these injustices: she could tell him the story of Moses. This sense of control, however fleeting or painstakingly justified, was crucial to surviving in a world where even faith itself was suspect. Black women daily felt the paradoxes of Christian slavery, and teaching their children to be "good" served two purposes: protecting their children's bodies and souls under a specific system of brutality,

⁶ *Fa*, a spiritual system devised by the Yoruba, was unusual in its predominantly male leadership, and when it was adopted by certain kingdoms in Dahomey, women lost important spiritual status. Edna G. Bay, "Belief, Legitimacy and the *Kpojito*: An Institutional History of the 'Queen Mother' in Precolonial Dahomey," *Journal of African History* 36, no. 1 (1995): 1-27.

⁷ Karin Barber, "Oriki, Women, and the Proliferation and Merging of *Orisa*," *Africa* 60, no. 3 (1990): 313-337.

⁸ John K. Thornton, "Elite Women in the Kingdom of Kongo: Historical Perspectives on Women's Political Power," *Journal of African History* 47, no. 3 (2006): 437-460.

⁹ See, for instance, women healers among the Tuareg. Susan J. Rasmussen, "Only Women Know Trees: Medicine Women and the Role of Herbal Healing in Tuareg Culture," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 54, no. 2 (1998): 147-171. The connection between medicine and religion would continue within enslaved communities in America. Sharla Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 36-59.

and ensuring that their own maternal values and senses of morality were being upheld within a system of punishment and reward that transcended plantation slavery.

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One of the most challenging facets of childrearing for enslaved mothers was the issue of a moral or religious education. How does one teach a child to tell the truth, to be meek and patient, or to believe in God on the grounds of a Southern plantation? Many enslaved mothers valued obedience in their children, for instance, but found it difficult to explain the difference between obedience to parents and obedience to masters. On the one hand, docility could help a child avoid the master's wrath, but mothers were also careful to distinguish their own right to their children's respect. In spite of the hypocrisy around them, enslaved mothers consistently sought to instill in their children their own senses of right and wrong, trying to teach them the difference between being a good slave and a good person.¹⁰ While slavery affected how women approached their children's moral educations, they could base their methods on those they learned from their mothers and grandmothers, who often dominated spiritual matters in Africa.¹¹ Olaudah Equiano's mother in Benin taught her son about a family's duty to the dead; she took the boy with her when she visited her mother's tomb, "made her libations, and spent most of the night in cries and lamentations," so that Olaudah, while "extremely terrified" of these rites, learned that his ancestors still deserved respect.

¹⁰ For more on the ethics of the enslaved, including the development of a liberation ethics and a Christian work ethic under slavery, see Cheryl J. Sanders, "Liberation Ethics in the Ex-Slave Interviews," in *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in the Slave Narrative*, eds. Dwight N. Hopkins and George C. L. Cummings, second ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 73-96; and Joan M. Martin, *More than Chains and Toil: A Christian Work Ethic of Enslaved Women* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000).

¹¹ Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 64-65.

When his mother separated herself from the community during the spiritually fraught time of her menstrual cycle, the young Olaudah could not bear to avoid her touch, so the two of them stayed together in a separate house until the cycle ended, when they were both “purified.”¹²

At least one author recalled – or constructed – a childhood in which his incipient belief in God challenged his mother’s spirituality. James Gronniosaw insisted that he knew as a young child that some higher spirit ordered the world and asked his mother about the origins of this “GREAT MAN of POWER,” but his mother calmly responded that the heavens were filled with stars and planets and nothing more. James continued to press her, demanding, “Who made the First Man? And who made the first Cow, and the first Lyon, and where does the fly come from, as no one can make him?” His mother had no convincing response, and after James was captured and sold to America, he was purchased by a minister who finally gave him the answers that he had been expecting. After learning of the Bible, James’s first reaction was not to spread the word to heathens around the world, but to return home and inform his initial spiritual guide. “If I had wings like an Eagle,” he mused, “I would fly to tell my dear mother that God is greater than the sun, moon, and stars.”¹³ While his conversion to Christianity undoubtedly affected the light in which he cast his childhood, the centrality of James’s mother as a spiritual figure – if a rejected one – reflects the consistency of mothers’ religious guidance.¹⁴

¹² Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself*, 2 vols. (London: The Author, 1789), 28, 32.

¹³ James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince*, ed. Walter Shirley (Bath: S. Hazzard, 1770), 1, 3-4, 12-13.

¹⁴ Though Mahommah Baquaqua’s mother appeared to be of no religion at all, Mahommah still took the time to describe her lack of spirituality in his autobiography, detailing how she did “not like to worship God much.” Mahommah grew up in Muslim society in Benin and converted to Christianity after arriving in the Americas. Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua, *Biography of Mahommah G. Baquaqua*,

Before mothers could pass religious doctrines on to their children, they had to have embraced these teachings themselves, and to many enslaved children, it was a mystery where their mothers got their sense of spirituality. One ex-slave from Maryland claimed that one of his few recollections from childhood was “being much impressed with . . . the deep piety and devotional feeling and habits of my mother.” Though struck by his mother’s devotion, he seemed baffled by its origins; “I do not know how, or where she acquired her knowledge of God, or her acquaintance with the Lord’s prayer,” he wrote. “I remember seeing her often on her knees, endeavoring to arrange her thoughts in prayers appropriate to her situation, but which amounted to little more than constant ejaculation.”¹⁵ What words did this mother utter? “Mercy”? Or did she use African phrases with which her own mother or grandmother prayed? Francis Frederick’s mother, on the other hand, “had no notion of what religion is” (perhaps an exaggeration on Francis’s part), but his grandmother raised him with knowledge of Christianity and was “anxious to acquire religious knowledge and to attend prayer-meetings as often as she possibly could.” Francis remembered that “when she had been whipped, she would speak calmly of ‘her home far away beyond the clouds, where there would be no more whipping, and she would be at rest.’”¹⁶

a Native Zoogoo, in the Interior of Africa (a Convert to Christianity): with a Description of that Part of the World, Including the Manners and Customs of the Inhabitants, ed. Samuel Moore (Detroit: George E. Pomeroy, 1854), 26. For more on Mahommah’s religious experiences, see Robin Law, “Individualizing the Atlantic Slave Trade: The Biography of Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua of Djougou (1854),” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 12 (2002): 113-140.

¹⁵ Josiah Henson, *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada, As Narrated by Himself*, ed. Samuel A. Eliot (Boston: A. D. Phelps, 1849), 2-3.

¹⁶ Francis Fedric, *Slave Life in Virginia and Kentucky; or, Fifty Years of Slavery in the Southern States of America*, ed. Rev. Charles Lee (London: Wertheim, Macintosh, and Hunt, 1863), 5; Francis Frederick, *Autobiography of Rev. Francis Frederick, of Virginia* (Baltimore: J. W. Woods, 1869), 7.

Mothers found a variety of reasons to embrace Christianity; for some, it offered wisdom and guidance regarding their current plight, and for others, it was simply the dominant form of spirituality in a new land.¹⁷ Women who came to America from Africa already claimed a wide variety of spiritual practices derived from traditional West African religions, Islam, and Christianity.¹⁸ But those who were introduced to Christianity in America, whether by masters, missionaries, or fellow slaves, understood the new religion through the lens of their own enslavement. Some itinerant preachers warned them that they and their children would burn in hell unconverted, while some slaveowners tried to stamp out any signs of blossoming faith among enslaved populations. Many scholars have argued that no sustained conversion among African Americans took place until the 1830s. Certainly some enslaved women converted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, though their constructions of Christianity often included elements of various African religions.¹⁹ Rates of

¹⁷ John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 89-98; Jean Friedman, *The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1830-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985). For an excellent examination of how and why black women came to Methodism in the early Republic – including the voice it gave them, the positive outlook on their futures, and the comfort of child baptism – see Cynthia Lynn Lyerly, “Religion, Gender, and Identity: Black Methodist Women in a Slave Society, 1770-1810,” in *Discovering the Women in Slavery: Emancipating Perspectives on the American Past*, ed. Patricia Morton (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 202-226. Robin Horton has argued that certain key social changes or crises, including the shattering of local communities that Africans transported to the Americas underwent, could provoke a loss of faith in the world of everyday spirits and spur conversions from “traditional” religions to “world” religions. Robin Horton, “African Conversion,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 41, no. 2 (1971): 85-108.

¹⁸ The Portuguese were especially interested in cultivating Christian Africans, so a syncretic form of Christianity was most common in central Africa, especially in Kongo and Angola. See John K. Thornton, “On the Trail of Voodoo: African Christianity in Africa and the Americas,” *The Americas* 44, no. 3 (1988): 261-278.

¹⁹ For more on all the obstacles facing the spread of Christianity among the nineteenth-century enslaved, see William Courtland Johnson, “‘A Delusive Clothing’: Christian Conversion in the Antebellum Slave Community,” *Journal of Negro History* 82, no. 3 (1997): 295-311; and Marcus W. Jernegan, “Slavery and Conversion in the American Colonies,” *American Historical Review* 21, no. 3

conversion fluctuated throughout the colonial period, with bursts of new converts in the 1740s during the Great Awakening and in the late eighteenth century as the spread of evangelism offered a real sense of belonging for those historically excluded from church leadership, including African Americans and women. Methodists and Baptists particularly appealed to blacks, and their numbers swelled dramatically in the 1780s and 1790s. In 1786, the Methodist church claimed 1,890 black members, and a mere four years later, that number had risen to 11,682. Conversions were more successful in the Chesapeake than the Lowcountry, where a black majority and a highly dispersed rural population made conditions difficult for traveling preachers.²⁰

Enslaved women came to Christianity because it offered new ways to interpret their lives but also because it provided some familiar comfort. When Patience, an African-born woman, first attended a Christian service at Springplace Mission in 1811, she may have been inspired by the Moravian missionaries' kindness to her; lame, poor, and friendless, Patience received bread at the hands of the missionaries when she only earned abuse from her fellow

(1916): 504-527. See also Milton R. Sernett, *Black Religion and American Evangelicalism: White Protestants, Plantation Missions, and the Flowering of Negro Christianity, 1787-1865* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1975); Eugene Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 187-188; Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 18; Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 95-210. For more on the difficulty of Anglicans in converting black populations in early eighteenth-century South Carolina, see Wood, *Black Majority*, 133-142. Annette Laing has argued that the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts actually had more success than most historians have previously acknowledged, though her arguments for a more widespread African inclusivism are primarily speculative. See Laing, "'Heathens and Infidels'? African Christianization and Anglicanism in the South Carolina Low Country, 1700-1750," *Religion and American Culture* 12, no. 2 (2002): 197-228.

²⁰ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 128-150; Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 420. See also Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 47-52. White slaveholders did not join evangelical churches in large numbers until churches renounced their antislavery stance. Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 243-283.

slaves. Something about the service must have compelled her to return, whether it was songs that offered faith to God in a recognizable medium or the food and drink the missionaries gave her each time she came. The Moravians were impressed that Patience “crawled here on her knees and listened very attentively, even though she does not understand English very well.”²¹ Another enslaved woman who took advantage of the Moravian services seemed most enthralled by their physical ceremony; Grace had been warned by her fellow slaves that the nearby church was useless, for “we were just *Dutch People* whom one could not understand.” But Grace persisted, and “when she saw that we also *folded our hands*, she immediately had such a good feeling in her heart that she planned to go to our services, even if she did not understand a single word.”²² The act of bringing the hands together in prayer may have been an action that Grace recognized from her own relationship with the spiritual world. Spirituality could transcend language, and women desperate for some familiar element of faith may have taken comfort in the small physical actions, from singing to the clasping of hands, that marked Christianity.²³

Some mothers saw spirituality as the sole connection between themselves and their distant – or dead – children, and as such, religious beliefs could become a crucial means of surviving the intervening years before death brought some release from their suffering. In many West African religions, death was a transition between roles within the community, for the spirits of the dead continued to oversee village affairs and to help or harm surviving

²¹ June 16, 1811, June 28, 1812, Rowena McClinton, ed., *The Moravian Springplace Mission to the Cherokees, Volume 1: 1805-1813* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 437, 492.

²² April 10, 1808, *Springplace*, vol. 1, 259.

²³ For more on the relationship between Moravians and African Americans in North Carolina, see Sensbach, *A Separate Canaan*.

relatives. As a result, funerals became elaborate events that signaled the passage of the individual to the world of ancestors.²⁴ This sense that the dead were not absent but accessible could dovetail with the Christian belief in a communal afterlife. In 1832, free black Sidney Rotter wrote a letter to her son, who lived one hundred miles away, and while she admitted that “I sometimes think that I never shall see you again,” she comforted herself by imagining that “I shall meet you in heaven.” As insurance, she prayed every night that her son would “hold faithful, till you reach heaven.”²⁵ Lilly, a freed slave in Virginia, wrote her ailing former mistress, “I hope you will soon be well but if not I trust you are prepared for heaven. I am in hopes we shall meet in heaven.” Lilly had developed a close relationship with this woman as a result of mutual caretaking during bouts of illness, and her statement that “you are the person I love next to God” suggests that Lilly might not have had her own children or other relatives with whom to envision a heavenly reunion.²⁶ When Mila’s child died in 1818, she attended a nearby Moravian service and spoke with the missionaries there, who seemed to offer some solace, for “she thanked us” before she left.²⁷ Sarah Boon, an enslaved woman in North Carolina, also believed that shared Christian practices would lead to an eternal life in heaven with her then-distant son, and to ensure he reached that hallowed ground, she expressed her hope that he “attends preaching regularly.”²⁸

²⁴ Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 640-645; Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 13, 83-85.

²⁵ Levin Tilmon, *A Brief Miscellaneous Narrative of the More Early Part of the Life of L. Tilmon, Pastor of a Colored Methodist Congregational Church in the City of New York. Written by Himself* (Jersey City, NJ: W. W. & L. A. Pratt, 1853), 25-26.

²⁶ Lilly to Mary Lee Fitzhugh Custis, n.d., Mary Lee Fitzhugh Custis Papers, VHS.

²⁷ October 21, 1818, *Springplace*, vol. 2, 246.

²⁸ Sarah Boon to James Boon, November 27, 1849, James Boon Papers, NCSA.

Christianity could comfort mothers suffering from the death or absence of a child, but it also occasionally interfered with other understandings of death and the afterlife. Enslaved men and women on the Vann plantation in northeast Georgia marked the death of loved ones with ceremonies that often involved alcohol. When missionaries attended the funeral of an eight-year-old boy at the request of his parents, they discovered that many of the thirty-six guests “had drunk too much brandy.”²⁹ The use of alcohol in funeral rites was common to many transplanted Africans and African Americans, and may reflect a common tradition in parts of Africa.³⁰ A few years earlier, a disagreement had arisen among the slaves regarding the proper burial location of another young boy; he was initially interred near the slave quarters (perhaps by those who came from a tradition of keeping the dead close), but one woman made quite a fuss in trying to get him moved away from the houses, close to where another child was buried. She asked one of the missionaries to deliver a funeral sermon, but he was initially repelled, since the woman was “considerably drunk.” He learned that she “had attended a frolic whereby whiskey was provided,” and later heard that the burial “ended with arguments and heavy fighting because all those present were drunk.”³¹ This incident highlights both the different spiritual traditions of Europeans and Africans and the fractures within a single black population; Africans who arrived in America imported a myriad range of religious practices, and when a community needed to coalesce for a single purpose – the burial of a child, for instance – very different understandings of appropriate behavior often emerged.

²⁹ February 25, 1812, *Springplace*, vol. 1, 476.

³⁰ Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 641.

³¹ February 4, 1810, *Springplace*, vol. 1, 346.

Enslaved mothers did not always find themselves rearing their children in spiritual vacuums; in addition to interested friends and relatives, some plantations in the South boasted black preachers, and certain cities even offered all-black meetings.³² In the 1770s, Williamsburg boasted two different informal congregations of black Baptists, and by 1781, the town offered one of the first official black churches in the country; it soon served five hundred members, both enslaved and free.³³ In 1810, several little white boys living in Raleigh played hooky from their weekly sermon and ran off to a nearby meeting house; they “excused themselves for doing so by saying they were led to prefer going to that place, because they might hear a black Preacher.”³⁴ Meanwhile, many large plantations boasted enslaved populations that were quite religiously active, and mothers could take their children to both secret gatherings and more formal prayer meetings. Those without access to or interest in preachers could turn to local African and African American conjurers, whose practices did not always preclude Christian teachings as well. Conjure brought the practical uses of African-based spirits to the needs of a plantation, causing mischief to those who deserved it and aiding those in need.³⁵

When black ministers were not available, white masters and mistresses sometimes stepped in to supplement their slaves’ religious education. Near Petersburg, Virginia, one

³² Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 69-74, 285-303. For more on black preachers in North Carolina, see John Hope Franklin, *The Free Negro in North Carolina, 1790-1860* (1974; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 177-182.

³³ Philip D. Morgan, “Black Education in Williamsburg-James City County, 1619-1984” (1985), p. 35, WM. See also Thad W. Tate, *The Negro in Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg* (Published for the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation; Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1965), 88.

³⁴ John Haywood to Eliza Haywood, September 17, 1810, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

³⁵ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 212-243, 275-288; Fett, *Working Cures*, 84-108; Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 612-625.

slaveowning woman would collect the children of the plantation – both white and black – and teach them “Bible verses, hymns, Watt’s catechism, the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the ten Commandments.” This eager mistress was surely not the only supplier of spiritual wisdom for black children, however; at least one enslaved woman on the plantation spent time praying in the farm’s peach orchard. Her prayers may not have been strictly Christian in nature, for “while on her knees, the dead would jump on her back and try to pull her up.”³⁶ The black children on this plantation likely absorbed a blend of European and African spiritualities, earning respect for both Watt and his hymns and the pervasive presence of the ancestors. Of the four thousand blacks in South Carolina’s All Saints Parish in the 1820s, one quarter were baptized in the Episcopal Church, and 150 of those were regular communicants. As only four white preachers tended the large All Saints flock, on one plantation, “a Negro who can read teaches the children to repeat the catechism” and led the service on summer Sundays.³⁷ It seems likely that most black mothers raised their children in a world with various spiritual options, and while boys and girls could look to white mistresses, white ministers, and black preachers for religious information, maternal wisdom was generally the most immediately available and thus the most potent.

But the paradoxes of being a Christian slave often thwarted mothers’ best-laid plans. The black women working on plantations near the Springplace Mission in northeast Georgia had the opportunity to attend Sunday schools offered specifically for African Americans by the Moravian missionaries. Sunday, however, was often the only day offered to enslaved women “for their own work,” and many found more pressing needs than attending church.

³⁶ Jane Minge Friend Stephenson, “My Father and His Household, Before, During, and After the War,” April 22, 1897, Blanton Family Papers, VHS.

³⁷ John Tucker to T. D. Grimke, n.d. (1823?), John Hyrne Tucker Papers, SCHS.

While some made time for the mission's Sunday school, most remained at home, tending gardens, cleaning clothes, selling goods, and caring for their children. Exercising control over children often meant that mothers had to choose between their many roles; for some of the enslaved women at Springplace, materially providing for and educating their sons and daughters may have been more pressing than taking them to church.³⁸

When women did join external religious bodies, they found themselves suddenly accountable for Christian sins, which could threaten their sense of maternal control. By taking the power of distinguishing right from wrong out of the hands of mothers, many churches found themselves alienating their black membership. The Broad Run Baptist Church in Fauquier County, Virginia, began baptizing enslaved and free blacks in 1764, but nearly half were excommunicated within a decade of joining the church, primarily for “adultery.” Though men made up the majority of Broad Run's early congregation, by the turn of the century, women were dominating the African American rolls; in 1797, sixteen of the eighteen new black communicants were women. Grace and Winne were excommunicated for adultery, Abigail for “Slandering and false accuseing her master,” and Lisha for “a number of crimes cheafly owing to her bad temper.” Fifteen years after Lisha's expulsion, however, she returned to the church, giving “evidence of repentance,” and was welcomed back. In 1826, Sally Johns entered the church records as a free black woman, but by 1828, she was cited for “bad conduct,” and an inquisition ensued, with Sally denying all charges. The key witness

³⁸ April 12, 1818, Rowena McClinton, ed., *The Moravian Springplace Mission to the Cherokees, Volume 2: 1814-1821* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 215. For more on the collision between Christian respect for the Sabbath and enslaved individuals' need to tend to their own lives, see Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1974), 138-139; and Betty Wood, *Women's Work, Men's Work: The Informal Slave Economies of Lowcountry Georgia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 27-30.

against her was a woman named Polly (probably also black, since no last name was recorded), while her primary champion was “a coloured member” named Robin. The squabbling between the two parties lasted nearly three months, but Polly’s testimony held, and both Robin and Sally were cited. Crimes of adultery, slander, and bad temper among black church members suggest that the leadership did not fully understand the conditions in which their communicants lived.³⁹

The frequency of citations and excommunications of black women in the Broad Run records suggest that many women continued to adhere to their own senses of morality, but also that many joined the church without full knowledge of what Christianity would entail. Perhaps they were seeking a spiritual community or had heard about Christianity’s radical message from fellow slaves; perhaps they were compelled by owners who wanted them to learn a form of docility. Whatever brought them to Broad Run’s doors, they encountered a belief system that did not always connect with their daily experiences. How many of the women accused of adultery were simply victims of the slave trade, women whose husbands had been sold away from them? How many came from societies that did not view premarital sex as sinful? Even more intriguing, why did some of these women fight to earn back the church’s respect? The actions of women like Sally Johns suggest that Broad Run filled some kind of spiritual niche in their lives, and that, while often alien, it provided at least some measure of comfort. In 1817, the church claimed 29 white members and 50 blacks. In a most basic sense, this may have been one of the few places in the community where enslaved and free black men and women could come together.

³⁹ Broad Run Baptist Church, Fauquier County, Records, VHS.

The congregation at Chappawamsic Baptist Church in Stafford County, Virginia, witnessed a similar divide between white definitions of Christianity, which demanded women's chastity and meekness, and black definitions, which saw no incongruity in combining spirituality with women's control of their families. Sipio and Lucy, for instance, were censured when the church learned of "Sipio being the suppos'd father by adultery or fornication, of ~~the~~ some of the Children of the sd. Lucy." They do not mention where Lucy acquired her other children (indeed, it seems that they did not initially realize she had others), but the charge of fornication must have been difficult for women like Lucy to grasp, given that so many slaves were prohibited from marrying and that so many slave families were loudly mocked by the frequency of sale. More disturbing to the church, perhaps, was the behavior of Mary Cole, who "Has for some time liv'd in Cohabitation with a White man (In an Adultery) and Continues to do so after being admonished."⁴⁰ The church carefully noted the adultery (as if they might overlook the sin were the interracial couple married), and only excommunicated Mary *after* she had previously been admonished, facts which suggest some leniency in a church whose biracial congregation may have necessitated a certain degree of flexibility. For Lucy and Mary Cole, the issue seemed not to be whether or not they were good Christians, but whether they were able to control their own physical relationships and thus determine the nature of their families.

Black mothers used all available tools to introduce their children to the workings of faith, whether this meant privately instructing their children in the lore of their ancestors or stamping them with Christianity through rituals like baptism and communion. Free black women in Charleston frequently baptized their children, particularly if they were the product

⁴⁰ Chappawamsic Baptist Church, Stafford County, Records, VHS.

of unions with white men. In the summer of 1782, the son of Lucia Drayton, “a free mulattoe woman,” was baptized, along with the children of Ann Gwinett and “Ann a Free Woman.”⁴¹ These women may have been influenced by the white fathers to have their children brought into the church, but it seems likely that many would have made this choice on their own, either to tie their children to religion or to provide a legal record of their births, and thus their free status. Part of determining children’s fates involved binding them to those people or institutions that would somehow protect them, either physically or emotionally, and for Lucia Drayton, both Christianity and a white father seemed to offer the hope of safety for her son.

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When it came to passing on their own senses of spirituality, black mothers were accustomed to taking control of their children’s religious education, continuing in the tradition of the women in their own families. In the 1780s, Virginian slave Alcy Shelton taught her son “to place confidence in the Supreme power of God” and how best to worship an “all Righteous God.”⁴² Forty years later, Lucy, an enslaved woman in North Carolina, taught her son the basic facts as she saw them: “to know my Maker, and that we should all die, and if we were good, we should be happy.” Both women understood God to be a key figure in their children’s salvation and saw themselves as religious interpreters, guiding their children toward a moral ideal that they themselves had a hand in shaping. While Lucy did not leave a record of what she considered “good” behavior, her son would have had a very clear sense of his mother’s moral code. Along with the salvation of his soul, the happiness that Lucy promised may have combined a self-contained contentment (a child happy with himself

⁴¹ July 5, 1782, August 28, 1782, List of Baptisms and Marriages, Edward Jenkins Journal, SCHS.

⁴² William Hayden, *Narrative of William Hayden, Containing a Faithful Account of His Travels for a Number of Years, Whilst a Slave, in the South. Written by Himself* (Cincinnati: The Author, 1846), 61, 66.

and his role in the family) with a guarantee for his bodily protection (a child whose “goodness” saved him from the master’s whip).⁴³

Children who grew up in the twisted moral landscape of a plantation often acquired ideas of religion and worship that were antithetical to their mothers’ beliefs, but mothers fought to overwrite what they saw as mistaken understandings with their own moral sensibilities. Many mothers, for example, were careful to distinguish their own sense of Christianity from the pro-slavery religion of their masters; part of their job as spiritual guides was making sure their children understood the difference.⁴⁴ One mother living outside of Richmond in the 1820s seemed to have her hands full with independently-minded children. Her daughter, feeling moved to convert to Christianity, shaved her head in the belief that a purging of hair would prompt the conversion. The dismayed mother informed her that the only sure route to conversion was to pray to “God who dwelt in heaven.” Her son, upon hearing this advice, seemed surprised to hear her place God in such a remote location; confused, he asked “if old master was not God.” Turning from her daughter to her son, the mother quickly replied “that he was not,” and immediately set about instructing her son “a little in reference to the God of heaven.”⁴⁵ It could be difficult to teach children about a supreme power who was loving and merciful in the context of a tyrannical and seemingly

⁴³ “Narrative of James Curry,” *Liberator*, January 10, 1840, reprinted in *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*, ed. John Blassingame (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 130.

⁴⁴ Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers*, 80-90.

⁴⁵ Henry Box Brown, *Narrative of Henry Box Brown, Who Escaped from Slavery Enclosed in a Box 3 Feet Long and 2 Wide. Written from a Statement of Facts Made by Himself. With, Remarks Upon the Remedy for Slavery*, ed. Charles Stearns (Boston: Brown and Stearns, 1849), 17-18.

omnipotent slaveowner, but mothers tried their best to distinguish between the brutality of the present and the promise of the hereafter.

For many mothers, religion provided a means to free the soul of a child in bondage, and frequent discussions of God helped to remind children of a better future. Religion was as much a tool as literacy for mothers seeking to raise strong and good children who could survive, both intellectually and spiritually, a life of enslavement. One ex-slave averred that he “had never heard a sermon, nor any discourse or conversation whatever, upon religious topics, except what had been impressed upon me by my mother.”⁴⁶ The image of God that enslaved mothers conveyed promised both protection and hope. Sojourner Truth’s mother referred to God as “the only being who could protect them in their perilous condition,” and the mother of another young woman informed her that she had “nobody in the wide world to look to but God.”⁴⁷ Those words “fell upon” the girl’s “heart with pondrous weight,” but for others, the presence of God was a beacon in the dark. Elizabeth Keckley received a letter from her distant father that warned her “not to thinke that because I am bound so fare that gods not abble to open the way.”⁴⁸ But religion alone could not always ease a life spent in slavery. One woman watched her daughter laboring in agony during the birth of “a child nearly white.” When her mistress expressed joy at seeing the daughter suffer, the mother replied, “The baby is dead, thank God; and I hope my poor child will soon be in heaven,

⁴⁶ Josiah Henson, *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada, As Narrated by Himself*, ed. Samuel A. Eliot (Boston: A. D. Phelps, 1849), 11.

⁴⁷ Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 18; Elizabeth, *Memoir of Old Elizabeth, a Coloured Woman* (Philadelphia: Collins, 1863), 3-4.

⁴⁸ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 27.

too.” For this woman, heaven was not an eventual promised land, but an urgent and immediate place of refuge for the raped, the abused, the tormented.⁴⁹

The hours black mothers spent in teaching their children about God or the devil were often invisible to white observers. Helen MacLeod believed that installing a “Sabbath School” on her plantation in the 1820s would make up for the lack of religious instruction within black families; convinced that the “poor unfortunate children of the lower classes of society” were bereft of spiritual guidance, she hoped well-run Sunday schools would protect those “who had been reared in vice and infamy, having no good principles instilled into their youthful mind.”⁵⁰ Many black children, however, painted a different picture of their upbringing and the role of their mothers in teaching them the difference between right and wrong. The blindness of whites to this instruction does not call such activity into question; rather, it illuminates the familial privacy that black women struggled every day to construct, however flimsily.

Some enslaved men and women remembered being especially marked for religious greatness as children, and in these memories, whether faithful, idealistic, or wholly constructed, mothers played a role in encouraging their nascent spiritualism. In the days leading up to his execution for inciting a slave rebellion, Nat Turner traced his urgent spiritual duty to an incident as a young child, when he recounted a story that occurred before he was born. His mother was the witness to this marvel, and after pressing him to confirm his inexplicable knowledge, she gathered friends and family members, who determined that the boy “surely would be a prophet.” Both his mother and father encouraged him by telling

⁴⁹ Harriet Ann Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself*, ed. Lydia Maria Child (Boston: The Author, 1861), 24.

⁵⁰ Helen MacLeod to Donald MacLeod, September 4, 1826, MacLeod Family Papers, VHS.

young Nat he “was intended for some great purpose.”⁵¹ In telling this story more than twenty years later, Nat knew that this “great purpose” was the Virginia uprising that would kill more than fifty whites. Though he may have fashioned the childhood episode to support his more recent history, his placement of his mother as a primary character in this story emphasizes that mothers were often central in the religious memories and identities of their children. When boys and girls learned about God, mother was there, and when they instigated their own spiritual educations, her influence somehow managed to mark the experience.

When mothers did not lead the way in spiritual matters, newly converted Christian children fought for their mothers’ inclusion in the fold, seeing their nonbelief as jarring and perhaps even unmaternal. Mary Ann Markham, for instance, was a slave who fled her Virginia home “because her Master and Mistress would not allow her to attend the preaching of the Gospel.” According to Mary Ann, her mistress locked her up one Sunday to prevent her from attending service, and in desperation, she “threw herself out of a small Window on the second Storey and escaped into the Woods.” After boarding a ship bound for England and finding a home with a more permissive mistress, Mary Ann wrote her mother Judith with the help of a minister and pleaded with her to start attending church. Judith appears not to have been “a Godly woman,” and the minister-scribe urged her to “go to your Master and Mistress and fall down on your knees . . . and pray to them for Christ’s sake to let a poor negro woman go to hear about Jesus Christ.” Mary Ann (and the minister) urgently desired to ensure her mother’s salvation, in order that the two might be reunited “in blessedness in the World

⁵¹ Nat Turner, *The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Va. as Fully and Voluntarily Made to Thomas R. Gray, in the Prison Where He Was Confined, and Acknowledged by Him to Be Such When Read before the Court of Southampton*, ed. Thomas R. Gray (Baltimore: T. R. Gray, 1831), 7.

beyond the grave.”⁵² Judith, however, may have had her own spiritual regimen; if so, she would have been more concerned that Mary Ann’s beliefs were leading the young woman to a different afterlife than the one Judith envisioned for herself, one which she may have spent many hours describing to her children. Similarly, when newly converted John Marrant returned to his mother’s South Carolina home after hearing George Whitefield preach, he was appalled to find that “they sat down to eat without asking the Lord’s blessing.” Bursting into tears, John explained his dismay at this ungrateful behavior, and his mother then “bid me, with much surprise, to ask a blessing.” After this initial display of tolerance, however, John’s mother eventually grew tired of his proselytizing, and the young man felt compelled to leave his home once more.⁵³ Sometimes women felt a strong enough sense of spirituality that they were not willing to compromise with errant children. Though Mary Ann and John found themselves in households where their own spirituality clashed with that of their mothers, both earnestly sought their mothers’ conversions, and these women remained central figures, though problematic ones, in their children’s religious autobiographies.

When black mothers chose not to engage in Christian communities, they often did so with the wariness and spiritual satisfaction of Native American mothers. Most of these women already claimed a set of religious beliefs, and when they avoided conversion, they were signaling that they had no need for what Christianity provided, whether that was physical protection or the hope of immortality.⁵⁴ Susa, who worked as a nurse on a Virginia

⁵² Rev. Charles Thompson to Judith, April 20, 1831, Temple Family Papers, VHS.

⁵³ John Marrant, *A Narrative of the Lord’s Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black*, ed. Rev. Mr. Aldridge, 5th ed. (London: Gilbert and Plummer, 1785), 14.

⁵⁴ Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers*, 118-130.

plantation in the early nineteenth century, resisted the desires of her white owners, who, claiming they could have “loved her no better had she been white as the driven snow,” daily expressed “their desire for her salvation.” Despite these “ardent” attentions, Susa “persisted in her obstinate unbelief.” Such obstinacy suggests an already firm understanding of the world that required no additional spiritual supports.⁵⁵ The enslaved population on the Vann plantation in northeast Georgia reveals the diversity of responses to the presence of Christianity and the impact non-conversions had on the community. One enslaved boy was presented to the Moravian missionaries by his grandfather, who sought the child’s baptism, but the Moravians refused to grant it because the boy’s mother was not Christian. This line of reasoning may have owed much to the Moravians’ experience with local matrilineal Cherokees, who placed control over children in the mothers’ hands. The Moravians had come to understand that a mother would have the greatest influence in the raising of her child, and since a heathen mother “could not promise that the child would receive a Christian upbringing,” they dismissed the request for the boy’s baptism.⁵⁶ The mother in question may not have cared whether her son was baptized, but it seems more probable that she had already engaged her family in a spiritual belief system and that Christianity would have seemed superfluous.

In the mid-eighteenth century, many enslaved women, especially in lowcountry South Carolina, clung to spiritual patterns they had developed before their arrival in America, and due to barriers both linguistic and ideological, many refused conversion. Instead, they subscribed to a variety of West African religions, most of which relied on a network of

⁵⁵ Nancy Johns Turner Hall, “The Imaginationist or Recollections of an old lady, a native of one of the Southern States, now a resident of the State of Ohio in the Year 1844,” p. 118, VHS.

⁵⁶ July 6, 1817, *Springplace*, vol. 2, 167.

spirits, ancestors, minor gods, and high gods to oversee life's daily exigencies. Families in Dahomey turned to *vodun*, while the Yoruba offered tributes to the *orisa*.⁵⁷ The diversity of African religions should not be underestimated, but some common elements nonetheless occurred. Mothers and grandmothers often served as the link to an African religious past, and many chose to teach about a world inhabited by spirits, both mischievous and benevolent.⁵⁸ Some older black women on plantations became the repositories of knowledge about spiritual matters from ancestors to herbs, continuing their roles as spiritual mentors in many African societies, while ceremonies from funeral rites to dancing to drumming circles were often regulated by women.⁵⁹

Some mothers who avoided conversion themselves sought it for their children, however, and here we see further similarities to maternal choices made by Cherokees and Catawbas. An enslaved mother who pushed her child into the hands of the missionaries may have recognized the material benefits such a relationship could render, but she also may have seen the promise of eternal life as a comforting future for her children. When Minda brought

⁵⁷ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 5-16; Edna G. Bay, "Belief, Legitimacy and the *Kpojito*: An Institutional History of the 'Queen Mother' in Precolonial Dahomey," *Journal of African History* 36, no. 1 (1995): 1-27; Karin Barber, "How Man Makes God in West Africa: Yoruba Attitudes Towards the *Orisa*," *Africa* 51, no. 3 (1981): 724-745.

⁵⁸ Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 171-173; Sylvia R. Frey, "Shaking the Dry Bones: The Dialectic of Conversion," in *Black and White: Cultural Interaction in the Antebellum South*, ed. Ted Ownby (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), 23-28. Frey describes the "core of traditional cosmology" among African slaves as "the belief in a supreme being and a multiplicity of lesser spirits and an afterworld inhabited by revered ancestors" (24).

⁵⁹ Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 40; Frey, "Shaking the Dry Bones," 24; Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 33-47. Among the Ashanti, according to Meyer Fortes, "grandparents are felt to be living links with the past." Meyer Fortes, "Kinship and Marriage Among the Ashanti," in *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage*, eds. A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and Daryll Forde (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), 267.

her dying son to the mission to have him baptized, the missionaries knew enough about maternal behavior to be skeptical. Wanting to ensure that this sudden piety was in good faith, they told Minda they would not perform the baptism if she too did not convert, for “her desire to consecrate her sick child to his Creator . . . was a sign that she must believe after all that human souls belong to Him,” and it would be “hypocritical if she withheld her own person from Him.” After listening to their warnings “with downcast eyes,” she finally agreed to “take her own salvation seriously,” and the requested baptism then took place. Minda also promised the missionaries that upon returning home, she would “tell her husband, David, what we had discussed with her.” Minda’s proactive approach to her son’s salvation and the secondary role of her husband reveals that she was the primary decision-maker in her household when it came to spiritual matters. By implicitly bartering with the missionaries and accepting the terms that she believed would best ensure her child’s future happiness, Minda demonstrated her confidence in her own maternal power.⁶⁰

Pleasant, the first African American that the Moravians themselves purchased, also chose to baptize her month-old son, perhaps with the sense that a baptized child would receive the best treatment at the hands of missionaries.⁶¹ Baptism alone did not lead to “Christian” behavior by either mother or son, however, and the Moravians’ frustration with their actions hints at the various motives a mother might have for baptizing her child other than an unwavering faith in Jesus Christ. In 1806, a year after her son Michael’s baptism, the

⁶⁰ May 16, 1809, *Springplace*, vol. 1, 315-316.

⁶¹ October 20, 1805, *Springplace*, vol. 1, 70. Despite his baptism, the missionaries saw the infant in light of the labors he could perform; one missionary hoped that they could “raise him for useful service, such as plowing and the like.” Letters from Christian Lewis Benzien to members of the Unity Elders Conference, 1805, *Records of the Moravians in North Carolina*, Vol. VI, 1793-1808, ed. Adelaide L. Fries (Raleigh: North Carolina Historical Commission, 1943), 2827.

missionaries observed that “Pleasant’s foul mouth is more active than her hands.”⁶² In 1814, on Michael’s ninth birthday, the Moravians sat the boy down to talk with him “very seriously and thoroughly about his bad conduct up to now.” Complaining about his “disobedience and laziness,” the missionaries were most disturbed by Michael’s “dead heart,” which did not contain “even the least trace of love for the Savior, . . . but great inclination to heathen things.”⁶³ The conduct of Pleasant and her son suggests that despite his baptism, which did indeed earn him the protective oversight of the Moravians, the pair did not strictly adhere to Christian teachings at home and that likely some other values superseded the Moravians’ religion. The missionaries’ next complaint about Pleasant, which came in 1817, hinted at what those values were. Taking her aside, they told her they had observed with dismay “how the great impulse to accept invitations from the Negroes in our neighborhood had often prevented her from attending our church service.”⁶⁴ In this reprimand, it becomes clear that Pleasant found more joy, satisfaction, and possibly even spiritual succor in the company of her friends and neighbors than within the walls of a white church. Though in the Moravians’ eyes, the abandonment of the rites of Christianity implied the betrayal of faith, Pleasant’s behavior suggests that Christianity could be a means to an end, and that the road to spirituality often lay elsewhere.

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Like Olaudah Equiano, whose mother in Africa “would never suffer me to tell a lie,” African American slaves often learned their first lessons in basic morality from their

⁶² John Gambold to Christian Lewis Benzien, June 28, 1806, Moravian Archives in Salem, quoted in McClinton, *Springplace*, vol. 1, p. 609, n. 14.

⁶³ September 29, 1814, *Springplace*, vol. 2, 37.

⁶⁴ November 9, 1817, *Springplace*, vol. 2, 185.

mothers.⁶⁵ Morality, of course, took many forms, and while some Christian mothers tried to adhere to biblical teachings about theft and deceit, other women were well aware of the value of subverting these beliefs in order to protect their children's bodies and senses of self-worth. James Curry's mother "never made a public profession of religion, but she always tried to do right, and taught her children to know right from wrong." James took his mother's lessons very seriously, and when his master requisitioned one of the young man's pigs, James's anger was tempered by his mother's morality: "I resolved that I would take the worth of it from him; but my mother had taught me not to steal, and I never could bring my mind to fulfil [sic] my resolution."⁶⁶ This mother's injunction may not have been against stealing *qua* stealing, but rather against any behavior that would increase the likelihood of physical danger for her children. One enslaved woman in Virginia took a very different lesson from Aunt Ann, who was "a sort of mother in the coloured Israel of the town." Caught by her mistress after stealing some jewelry, this woman replied, "Law, mam, don't say I's wicked; ole Aunt Ann says it allers right for us poor coloured people to 'popiate whatever of de wite folk's blessins de Lord puts in our way."⁶⁷ One former slave remembered a mother who "used to tell me not to steal, and not to lie, and to behave myself properly in other respects."⁶⁸ Another expressed gratitude for the guidance of his mother, who "gin me a good deal of good advice"

⁶⁵ Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself*, 2 vols. (London: The Author, 1789), 54.

⁶⁶ "Narrative of James Curry," *Liberator*, January 10, 1840, reprinted in *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*, ed. John Blassingame (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 130, 137.

⁶⁷ Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveller's Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States* (New York: Mason Brothers, 1861), 105-106.

⁶⁸ Brown, *Narrative of Henry Box Brown*, 16.

before he was sold away from her.⁶⁹ This advice, whatever its specifics, must have stood these children in good stead, for they managed to survive the institution of slavery, gain their freedom, and live to write about their experiences.

The values that black mothers taught their children emerged from their own senses of right and wrong, derived from both African and American pasts, but many also incorporated the moral teachings of Christianity. The acceptance of Christianity as a guide to goodness and decency sometimes led to an acceptance of the morality of white masters, mistresses, and neighbors, two sets of morality which were not always in perfect agreement, and mothers often had to make childrearing decisions based on very different kinds of advice. In 1846, a free black pastor named John Meachum addressed black mothers in an attempt to obtain for them an aura of respectability.⁷⁰ This trait, however, was based primarily on contemporary white notions of decency, and the maternal instincts he encouraged were derived from European ideas about gender. Meachum stressed the importance of raising young girls to be “decent and modest”; he complained that “mothers too often let girls go their own way.” In contrast to many West African societies that did not stigmatize premarital sex, Meachum urged black mothers to raise girls whose “modesty” (we can also read here “chastity”) would earn them respect in a society run by whites.⁷¹ In setting out a model for discipline, Meachum

⁶⁹ Peter Wheeler, *Chains and Freedom: Or, The Life and Adventures of Peter Wheeler, a Colored Man Yet Living. A Slave in Chains, a Sailor on the Deep, and a Sinner at the Cross*, ed. Charles E. Lester (New York: E. S. Arnold, 1839), 41.

⁷⁰ For more on African American women’s pursuit of “respectability,” see Stephanie Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and To Do: Black Professional Women Workers During the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); and Elsa Barkley Brown, “Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom,” *Public Culture* 7 (1994): 107-46.

⁷¹ While some societies demanded evidence of virginity upon marriage, including the Fon, many more had no special strictures against premarital sex. See Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 161-

resisted corporal punishment, an emphasis which may show how prevalent such punishment was among black mothers, and instead commended those mothers who showed both patience and forbearance with their children. Interestingly, Meachum's advice sounds like a detailed guide to Cherokee or Catawba maternal discipline; he told mothers not to "scold and fret at the children, but counsel them," and develop morality through instruction and example rather than punishment. Likewise, he chastised mothers who "go so far as to strike them over the head, or knock them to the ground because they are mad." Meachum tried to lead black mothers to a moral stance which borrowed much from white gender codes and, probably unwittingly, from Native American philosophies.⁷² Though we have no record of his audience's reaction, we can imagine many black mothers torn between wanting to help their children survive in a white-dominated world and adhering to their own understanding of appropriate childrearing. Other authors were not so quick to accuse black women of improper parenting; ex-slave James Pennington, also a free black pastor, swore that "there are no mothers who rear, and educate in the natural graces, finer daughters than the Ethiopian women," despite the fact that these women often "have the least chance to give scope to their maternal affections."⁷³

And just as some black men commended black women for their childrearing, many African Americans pinpointed the hypocrisy of Christianity as practiced by the whites they

163; Denise Paulme, ed., *Women of Tropical Africa* (London: Routledge and Paul, 1963), 1-16; and Venetria K. Patton, *Women in Chains: The Legacy of Slavery in Black Women's Fiction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 1-28.

⁷² John B. Meachum, *An Address to All the Colored Citizens of the United States* (Philadelphia: The Author, 1846), 20-21.

⁷³ James W. C. Pennington, *The Fugitive Blacksmith; or, Events in the History of James W. C. Pennington, Pastor of a Presbyterian Church, New York, Formerly a Slave in the State of Maryland, United States* (London: Charles Gilpin, 1849), v.

knew. When Bethany Veney's mistress caught the young girl stealing apples, she asked her what she was doing, and, "without waiting for reply," warned her that

some time all this world that we saw would be burned up, that the moon would be turned into blood, the stars would fall out of the sky, and everything would melt away with a great heat, and that everybody, *every little child* that had told a lie, would be cast into a lake of fire and brimstone, and would burn there for ever and ever, and, what was more, though they should burn for ever and ever, they would never be burned up.

Bethany promptly took this information to her mother, who agreed with her mistress's interpretation of Christian doctrine but added a key codicil, "that those who told the truth and were good would always have everything they should want." Bethany's mother transformed a white woman's lesson about damnation and unworthiness into a message of hope, turning the owner's interpretation of Christianity on its end and reasserting her own power as a spiritual guide.⁷⁴ Henry Box Brown, who as a boy believed his master was God – since surely his master was the ultimate authority, the dispenser of (in)justice – gradually realized that there was little agreement between the teachings of Christianity and the whites who called themselves Christians. "I do not believe in the religion of the Southern churches," he declared, "nor do I perceive any great difference between them, and those at the North, which uphold them."⁷⁵

When the whip and the rod were yielded so freely by whites, discipline could be one of the most difficult things to teach a child in slavery, but mothers fought to instill in their children a sense a duty to their parents (rather than, or in addition to, their masters). Many former slaves recalled parents, both in Africa and America, who supplemented their moral

⁷⁴ Bethany Veney, *The Narrative of Bethany Veney, A Slave Woman* (Worcester: George H. Ellis, 1889), 7-8.

⁷⁵ Brown, *Narrative of Henry Box Brown*, 19.

education with whipping. Dalia, a mother in Africa, beat her son whenever he returned from a forbidden hunt; his “wild and roving disposition” often put him in danger of being captured by slave raiders, and Dalia’s strictness with her son was intended to prevent a much greater evil.⁷⁶ In America, the prevalence of corporal punishment within slave societies meant that physical abuse became naturalized for both black and white mothers.⁷⁷ When a young Francis Frederick hurt one of his sisters while playing in Virginia, he received a “very severe whipping,” which was the “first ‘striking impression,’ upon my back, that I had done wrong.”⁷⁸ Similarly, in Sojourner Truth’s third-person narrative, she reported that “in obedience to her mother’s instructions, she had educated herself to such a sense of honesty, that, when she had become a mother, she would sometimes whip her child when it cried to her for bread, rather than give it a piece secretly, lest it should learn to take what was not its own.”⁷⁹ To a mother who could control so little about her children’s fate, the urgency of shaping “good” sons and daughters – whether for earthly survival or to ensure God’s grace – often necessitated harsh discipline. And when so many fathers were absent and slaveowners had little interest in shaping children’s morals beyond their own immediate needs, slaves and ex-slaves viewed motherhood as the domain of complex and often situational moralities. One

⁷⁶ Nicholas Said, *The Autobiography of Nicholas Said, a Native of Bornou, Eastern Soudan, Central Africa* (Memphis: Shotwell, 1873), 11-13.

⁷⁷ Nell Irvin Painter, “Soul Murder and Slavery: Toward a Fully Loaded Cost Accounting,” in *U.S. History as Women’s History: New Feminist Essays*, eds. Linda K. Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, Kathryn Kish Sklar (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 125-146.

⁷⁸ Francis Frederick, *Autobiography of Rev. Francis Frederick, of Virginia* (Baltimore: J. W. Woods, 1869), 6, 14-15.

⁷⁹ Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern Slave, Emancipated from Bodily Servitude by the State of New York, in 1828*, ed. Olive Gilbert (Boston: The Author, 1850), 34.

writer recalled a lonely childhood when “I had no kind and loving mother to teach me lessons of truth, purity, and wisdom.”⁸⁰

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Whether or not black mothers in America used specific tools from an African past may be less important than the fact that these mothers continued to embrace a comprehensive maternal role that was based on traditional realms of power and control. The goals of motherhood, if not the details, were in fact retained across the Atlantic. At the most basic level, motherhood gave women the authority to talk about spiritual matters. Black mothers, both enslaved and free, took charge of their children’s religious and moral upbringing in a society whose combination of inequality, hypocrisy, and brutality separated their experiences from those of their African ancestors and their Southern neighbors. Though white and Indian women also devised their own systems of morality within certain social constraints, their children did not daily encounter alternate “masters.” Even those Cherokee women who relinquished their sons and daughters to mission schools could still call those children home in times of sickness or ceremony. Like Southeastern Indian women, however, and even like the plantation mistresses who daily separated them from their children, black women used a combination of traditional strategies and adapted techniques to raise their children to be both good and godly. They emphasized women’s right to spiritual knowledge; they cultivated traits in their children that would lead them to respect their elders as well as avoid the master’s whip; and they used Christianity as both a message of salvation and a means to an end, a pragmatic guarantee for their children’s souls and a glimpse of a more just world.

⁸⁰ Lewis Charlton, *Sketch of the Life of Mr. Lewis Charlton, and Reminiscences of Slavery*, ed. Edward Everett Brown (Portland, ME: Daily Press, 1870?), 4.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

BLACK PROTECTORS

Survival under the conditions of slavery often required a fierce maternal protection. As masters and mistresses threatened enslaved children both physically and psychologically, black mothers marshaled their limited resources to defend them. Protecting children from illness, the whip, and separation afforded mothers some control over their lives, and even when their protection failed, the constant struggle to safeguard their children gave mothers a sense of purpose; in moments of familial defense, they were redirecting their labor away from the master's fields and toward the preservation of their own family. To speak of enslaved women as protectors may seem counterintuitive; slaveowners, after all, could determine on a whim to sell children hundreds of miles away. But even those children who suffered that fate did not remember their mothers as powerless, for they understood that even when mothers were helpless, they were still one's chief protectors. When Thomas Johnson was sold as a young boy, he recalled that "my poor mother, to whom I looked for protection, could do nothing." Though his mother could not prevent him from being sold, she had nonetheless raised him to be "very happy," and by staving off some of the day-to-day brutalities, she had produced a son who believed that mothers were "our only protectors."¹ It can be difficult to push aside the seemingly ever-present shroud of helplessness to uncover

¹ Thomas L. Johnson, *Twenty-Eight Years a Slave or The Story of My Life in Three Continents* (Bournemouth: W. Mate and Sons, 1909), 2-3.

the protective powers underneath, but this is what mothers and children in slavery did every day. By striving to protect their children, women were protecting their identities as mothers rather than as slaves.

The authors of slave narratives memorialized their mothers as both physical and emotional guardians. Southern court records also show that black mothers were determined to ensure their children's safety and, when possible, secure them their freedom. Enslaved and free black mothers acquired their sense of protectiveness, like most of their other maternal impulses, from their own mothers and grandmothers. In Africa, most women saw children as their special charge, for their childbearing accorded them a fairly powerful social status.² One mother in Bournou agreed to let her son be taken and educated by a merchant, but she insisted on accompanying him on his journey, coming with him "upon a camel more than three hundred miles."³ Olaudah Equiano watched his mother engage in battle when his village in Benin was attacked. Looking down at the skirmish from the top of a tree, he saw that "my mother was there, and armed with a broad sword."⁴ Not all African towns encouraged their women to wield swords, however, and the behavior of Venture Smith's mother, who hid her children in "the tall thick reeds not far off," may have been more

² Niara Sudarkasa observed that African mothers "wielded considerable authority, power, and influence," and that "in the same society where a wife knelt before her husband, sons prostrated before their mothers" (35). Niara Sudarkasa, "Interpreting the African Heritage in African American Family Organization," in *Black Families*, ed. Harriette Pipes McAdoo, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007), 29-47. See also Niara Sudarkasa, "Female Employment and Family Organization in West Africa," in *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*, ed. Filomina Chioma Steady (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman, 1981), 49-64.

³ James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince*, ed. Walter Shirley (Bath: S. Hazzard, 1770), 5.

⁴ Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (London: The Author, 1789), 25.

customary.⁵ This tradition of protection, whether bold or cautious, continued in the lives of enslaved and free black mothers in the American South, and without a mother, children were even more vulnerable. After Louisa Simms died in Maryland in the 1820s, her son lived for several years under the oversight of his grandmothers, uncles, and aunts, but when a slave sale drove him to run away, he realized he had “no home, no protector, no mother.”⁶

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Not all threats to children emerged solely from their status as slaves. Black women, like white and Indian women, first had to contend with their environments; raising children in the South meant that mothers cultivated vigilance against signs of disease and threats from the elements. As a result of poor nutrition and inadequate health care, enslaved children fell in large numbers to such ailments as tetanus, tuberculosis, worms, and whooping cough, many of which claimed more black than white victims.⁷ Protecting children from illness often required negotiations with slaveowners, though, many of whom had their own ideas about proper medical care.⁸ One maternal tactic was to rely solely on that medicine that could

⁵ Venture Smith, *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa: But Resident above Sixty Years in the United States of America. Related by Himself* (New London, CT: C. Holt at The Bee-office, 1798), 10.

⁶ William Parker, "The Freedman's Story," In Two Parts, *The Atlantic*, February 1866: 152-66; March 1866: 276-95, quote on p. 155.

⁷ Kenneth F. Kiple and Virginia Himmelsteib King, *Another Dimension to the Black Diaspora: Diet, Disease, and Racism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 74-80; and Todd L. Savitt, "Slave Health and Southern Distinctiveness," in *Disease and Distinctiveness in the American South*, eds. Todd L. Savitt and James Harvey Young (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), 120-153.

⁸ Todd Savitt observes that slaves in antebellum Virginia were unable “to call for professional medical aid when they deemed it necessary; often unable to apply their own remedies to sick loved ones without disobeying the master’s orders; and, in a sense, unable to have the final say in their own homes over the care of their own illnesses and death.” Todd L. Savitt, *Medicine and Slavery: The Diseases and Health Care of Blacks in Antebellum Virginia* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press,

be trusted, and as a result, most black women on plantations used the skills of other slaves to help nurse their children back to health. While this was sometimes enslaved women's only choice, it often seemed like their best one. Most large enslaved communities boasted at least a few individuals who were trained in either the healing arts of conjuring or the benefits of local plants. Medicine among the enslaved, as among slaveholders, was often a hotchpotch affair, constantly evolving in response to experiments, rumors, and suggestions. Black healers employed familiar herbs from Africa as well as plants native to the South, and some enslaved women traded cures with their white mistresses.⁹ Blacks living on the plantations near the Chickahominy River in mid-eighteenth-century Virginia relied on the "native cures" of an African man, whose medicine must have been somewhat familiar to first- and second-generation Africans in America.¹⁰ Pleasant, an enslaved woman on the Moravians' Springplace Mission, provided natural remedies to both whites and Indians; when Mrs. Hall asked the missionaries for some goldenrod to help "her husband's hurting eyes," they sent Pleasant, who knew how to identify wildflowers and herbs, to help her find some. When three Cherokee pupils "had eaten too much of the flower tops of honeysuckle or peonies," Pleasant brewed them a "bitter tea," after which they were "completely fit and well."¹¹ An

1978), 2. See also Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 33-66.

⁹ Sharla M. Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 60-83 and 111-141.

¹⁰ Philip D. Morgan, "Black Education in Williamsburg-James City County, 1619-1984" (1985), p. 5, WM; he references Michael Sherman's advertisement for a runaway slave in the *Virginia Gazette* (Parks), November 14-21, 1745.

¹¹ July 8, 1806, Rowena McClinton, ed., *The Moravian Springplace Mission to the Cherokees, Volume 1: 1805-1813* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 113; and May 19, 1821, Rowena McClinton, ed., *The Moravian Springplace Mission to the Cherokees, Volume 2: 1814-1821* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 416.

enslaved woman in South Carolina had garnered so much European medical knowledge that she was trusted to “weigh out medicines and let blood, which she has done for many years.”¹² Medicine and healing were controlled by women in certain West African societies, so that adopting this role in America often fit with traditional understandings of women’s duties.¹³

When traditional medicines failed, some women asked for outside help and brought the illnesses of their children to the attention of their owners or employers. In 1831, Cloey, a free black woman, asked the white family she worked for and lived with to call a doctor for her ailing son; Cloey may have been desperate for outside assistance, since the note stipulated: “Please to come immediately for the child is very sick.”¹⁴ Most plantations offered rudimentary medical care to enslaved families, if only to guarantee their productive labor.¹⁵ Nelly’s son saw Dr. Taliaferro in 1828, Betsey’s child received a visit from Dr. Byrd in 1833, and Dr. Thomas Clopton charged eighteen dollars for “Visit & med. for little negroes” in 1838.¹⁶ Many woman knew exactly what kind of medical treatment they wanted, and some would accept nothing less. An enslaved woman was about to give birth in 1799, and her owner sent for a midwife. Whether that midwife never arrived, or whether she did not meet the approval of the woman in labor, the enslaved woman took it upon herself to hire a

¹² Colcock and Gibbons, *South Carolina Weekly Gazette*, December 12, 1783.

¹³ See, for instance, the medicinal practices among the Tuareg, who believed that the ability to heal emerged from mothers only. Susan J. Rasmussen, “Only Women Know Trees: Medicine Women and the Role of Herbal Healing in Tuareg Culture,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 54, no. 2 (1998): 147-171.

¹⁴ Otis Williams to John Peter Mettauer, August 14, 1831, John Peter Mettauer Papers, VHS.

¹⁵ Todd L. Savitt, “Black Health on the Plantation: Masters, Slaves, and Physicians,” in *Science and Medicine in the Old South*, ed. by Ronald L. Numbers and Todd L. Savitt (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1989), 327-355.

¹⁶ June 28, 1828, January 1, 1833, Account Book, New Family Papers, VHS; March 16, 1838, receipt from Henry Cooke to Thomas C. Clopton, Joseph Lyon Miller Papers, VHS.

different woman – “Mrs. Witten, a Midwife by Profession” – without consulting her owner, who was at home during the childbirth. Later, when Lydia Witten demanded her wages from the slaveowner, he refused to comply, having not hired her himself, and the court agreed that “the act of a Servant shall not bind the Master.”¹⁷

In addition to the perils of disease and childbirth, mothers found themselves protecting their children from such common nuisances as aggressive dogs. One mother decided to pay a friend a visit one night, and insisted that her son accompany her. According to the son, this friend “had two of the worst dogs of any one in the whole neighbourhood,” so after hearing of her plans, he “rolled myself up in bed both head and heels and snowered a way for life pretending that I was asleep.” The mother had no patience for such evasions and, dragging the boy out of bed, they both set off together. Nearing the neighbor’s house, “mother began to show as if she was not altogether satisfied in her own mind so she happened to find a large hoe lying by the way side which she took in her hand.” Though the boy had complained of her rough treatment, it was clear that she had no intention of letting any dogs harm her son. When they reached the house, she told the boy to stand outside the gate while she knocked. Even this defense proved worthless; “no sooner did I hear their bark but off I went running and hollowing,” and the dogs stampeded past the hoe-brandishing mother to chase her son a quarter-mile down the road, where, indeed, he was bitten.¹⁸ This episode was not structured by slavery, and while enslaved mothers may have spent most of their time protecting their children from the many abuses of slaveowners, they also

¹⁷ Lydia Witten vs. John Cassel [?], January 26, 1799, Joseph Blyth Papers, SCHS.

¹⁸ Fields [Cook?], “Observations” [1847], printed as “Fields’ Observations: The Slave Narrative of a Nineteenth-Century Virginian,” ed. Mary J. Bratton, *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 88 (1980): 79-93, quotations from pp. 84-85.

strategized about avoiding the simple dangers of everyday life; in this, they were not so different from their white or Indian neighbors.

Mildred Jackson protected her son not only from illness and neighborhood dogs, but also from hasty marriages. Many enslaved women passed judgment on their children's romantic hopes; they had not relinquished that parental right when they had lost their legal freedom, and interference provided a small opportunity to control their families' futures.¹⁹ When Henry announced his engagement, Mildred declared he "was too young" and that marriage would bring him nothing but "trouble and difficulty." The mother of his prospective bride also had concerns; she had her eye on another man for her child, "a slave who belonged to a very rich man living near by, and who was well known to be the son of his master." Such a status meant that there would be a chance that "his master or father might . . . set him free before he died," which would pave the road to her daughter's own freedom.²⁰ This mother did not want such far-reaching goals to be thwarted by an infatuation; what was love compared to liberty? For these mothers, protection meant very different things; the groom's mother wanted her son to be free from the complications and frustrations that marriage inevitably brought, while the mother of the bride understood her ultimate goal to be her daughter's freedom, not simply her comfort. Sally Williams's mother, meanwhile, wanted to protect her daughter from the heartbreaking separation in which marriages usually ended. When Sally informed her mother of her marriage after the fact, the mother responded with tears:

¹⁹ Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Born in Bondage: Growing Up Enslaved in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 177-205.

²⁰ Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York: The Author, 1849), 39.

What have ye done? De Lord knows I'd rather have seen ye in yer grave than married. S'pose ye thought ye'd be better off, but chile, yer mistaken. Mebbe Abram Williams is a good man, an'll be kind to ye; but de kinder he is, an de more ye loves him, de worse ye'll feel by an' by. Don't I know? . . . Oh, Sally, getting' married's de beginnin' o' sorrow.

This mother had been separated from her own husband soon after their marriage, and her pain was in imagining her daughter suffering the same fate.²¹ Though these mothers developed their own goals for their children and expressed very different motives, all three embraced their role as maternal protector and attempted to save their children from a range of fates.

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The most pressing threats to a child's safety came from human quarters, and black mothers defended their children against fellow slaves, white masters, white mistresses, other children, and occasionally Native Americans. Reene, an enslaved woman on the Vann plantation in northeast Georgia, rushed out of a Sunday service after "other Negro women had told her that her mistress, Nancy Vann, wanted to have her son Sam killed by the Indians."²² The logistics of this threat are unclear, but Reene's sense of danger nonetheless propelled her out of church to find her son. In North Carolina, Lizza demanded that she be sold to another slaveowner along with her children; the reason is not mentioned, but the impetus seemed to be protection. Old Harry, another slave on the plantation, was "violently against the measure." Harry may have been a father or husband who was mistreating his family, either through physical abuse or by keeping them away from distant loved ones, since

²¹ Sally Williams, *Aunt Sally: or, The Cross the Way of Freedom. A Narrative of the Slave-life and Purchase of the Mother of Rev. Isaac Williams, of Detroit, Michigan* (Cincinnati: Western Tract and Book Society, 1858), 59.

²² September 25, 1814, *Springplace*, vol. 2, 36.

the more he protested, the more Lizza pleaded to get away. Her owners observed that “nothing else would do for her.” Lizza’s desperation to escape is evident, and she “begged and threatened to be useless in case she was not sold” and finally succeeded.²³

Mothers tended their children in the aftermath of white violence, and they threatened violence to whites when their children were at risk. Greensbury Washington Offley’s mother, recently freed, fought to remove her children from bondage, but two slaveowning brothers were intent on buying the children at auction. Greensbury’s father, also free, was determined to purchase his children’s freedom, but the former masters decided to outbid him in order to secure the children’s labor. Greensbury’s mother responded that “they might buy them and welcome, but you had better throw your money in the fire, for if you buy one of my children I will cut all three of their throats while they are asleep, and your money will do you no good.” The masters, frightened, allowed the father to buy his family but asked the two parents to work for them, earning money so that their children would lead a more comfortable life. The mother replied that “she had two hands, and she could work and take care of her own children without their help.” Though Greensbury assured the reader that “mother had no intention of doing as she said,” his mother’s vociferous defense of the right to her own children managed to cow two slaveowning men. Whether or not she could have brought herself to harm her children, her calculated threats achieved their goal, and her family was free to lead its own life.²⁴

²³ John Haywood to Thomas B. Haywood, September 17, 1818, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

²⁴ Greensbury Washington Offley, *A Narrative of the Life and Labors of the Rev. G. W. Offley, a Colored Man, Local Preacher and Missionary; Who Lived Twenty-Seven Years at the South and Twenty-Three at the North; Who Never Went to School a Day in His Life, and Only Commenced to Learn His Letters When Nineteen Years and Eight Months Old; the Emancipation of His Mother and Her Three Children; How He Learned to Read While Living in a Slave State, and Supported Himself*

Women's protective faculties were not solely focused on their existing children. In 1793, when an overseer accused Daphne and Nelly of leaving open a field gate, one "used some impertinent language," and the overseer began to beat her, continuing to hit her even after she had fallen. These women, whether pushed to the edge by long hours of hard labor or simply unwilling to put up with unwarranted physical abuse, "beat him on the ground with their fists and switches with great fury a considerable time" and left him for dead.²⁵ Both women were sentenced to death, although since Nelly was "quick and big with child," her hanging was postponed until after her delivery. Though Daphne may have been simply defending herself, Nelly also may have been thinking of her unborn child's future when she lashed out at the abusive overseer.

Physical protection could only go so far, though, and many women found themselves struggling to protect children from the inevitable violence of slaveowners. When Moses Roper's enraged mistress burst into his slave cabin with a knife and a club, the boy's grandmother leapt to his rescue, wrestling the weapons away and saving the child's life.²⁶ Within a few weeks, though, the boy and his mother were sold from the plantation. Another young boy was kept in an unheated room throughout the winter by a perverse mistress, and one night, when his mother came to fetch him, "she found her child with both feet frozen; . . . she doctored my feet, having placed a poultice upon them, and when next morning she

from the Time He Was Nine Years Old Until He Was Twenty-One (Hartford, CT: The Author, 1859), 4-5.

²⁵ Sherwin McRae, ed., *Calendar of Virginia State Papers and Other Manuscripts*, vol. 6 (Richmond: A. R. Micou, 1886), 461-464, cited in Philip D. Morgan, "Black Education in Williamsburg-James City County, 1619-1984" (1985), p. 6, WM.

²⁶ Moses Roper, *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn; London: Darton, Harvey and Darton, 1838), 9-10.

removed the poultice my toes came off with it as though they had been cut with a sharp, keen knife.”²⁷ Enslaved mothers had few rights over their children’s bodies, and many witnessed more than the loss of their children’s toes.

One of the greatest dangers to enslaved children occurred in the first few months of their lives; when mothers could not rely on other women to take care of their infants while they labored, they brought their children into the fields with them, a necessity which often proved perilous. The fields were hot, the sun could be unrelenting, and in between the rows of crops lived snakes and stinging insects. Some mothers would “place [her child] at the side where she could see it as she came to the end of the row; moving it along as she moved from row to row.”²⁸ In Virginia, Nancy asked her older son to care for her younger son, but the boy later recalled that he would “lay him in the shade, under a tree, sometimes, and go to play, or curl myself up under a hedge, and take a sleep.” The infant “would wake me by his screaming, when I would find him covered with ants, or musquitos, or blistered from the heat of the sun.”²⁹ All parts of the South had their perils; in Louisiana, a region “abounding with mosquitoes, galinippers and other insects,” Henry Bibb observed mothers leave their children “on the damp ground alone from morning till night, exposed to the scorching rays of the sun, liable to be bitten by poisonous rattle snakes, . . . or to be devoured by large alligators.”³⁰ In

²⁷ Lewis Charlton, *Sketch of the Life of Mr. Lewis Charlton, and Reminiscences of Slavery*, ed. Edward Everett Brown (Portland, ME: Daily Press, 1870?), 1-2.

²⁸ John Thompson, *The Life of John Thompson, a Fugitive Slave; Containing His History of 25 Years in Bondage, and His Providential Escape. Written by Himself* (Worcester, MA: J. Thompson, 1856), 17.

²⁹ John Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia: A Narrative of the Life, Sufferings, and Escape of John Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Now in England*, ed. Louis Alexis Chamerovzow (London: W. M. Watts, 1855), 3-4.

³⁰ Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York: The Author, 1849), 116.

North Carolina, one man saw “a large snake . . . coiled round the neck and face of a child, when its mother went to suckle it at dinner time.”³¹ The only other choice for these women, though, was to carry their infants on their backs, turning backbreaking labor into work that was nearly impossible. Sally Williams carried her sons into the rice fields with her, the eldest “securely fastened to her back, with his baby brother tucked in her dress in front, because she would not leave them to be neglected in her cabin, nor lay them down, where snakes might crawl over them.” Sally had heard that on a nearby plantation, another woman had left her child by the fences surrounding the field while she worked, and when she went to claim him, he had been “strangled by a snake, and was found quite dead.”³² When Charles Ball noticed one woman who “had contrived a sort of rude knapsack” to carry her child in, he asked her “why she did not do as the other women did, and leave her child at the end of the row in the shade.” The woman may have been African-born, for she spoke in a language different from the other women, and her insistence on carrying her child may have been the resistance of a recent immigrant, for she seemed horrified at the other women’s seeming negligence. “I cannot leave my child in the weeds amongst the snakes,” she replied. “What would be my feelings if I should leave it there, and a scorpion were to bite it? Besides, my child cries so piteously, when I leave it alone in the field, that I cannot bear to hear it.”³³ This woman was desperate both to protect her child and to preserve her sanity. While motherhood provided

³¹ Moses Grandy, *Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy, Late a Slave in the United States of America* (London: Gilpin, 1843), 27.

³² Sally Williams, *Aunt Sally: or, The Cross the Way of Freedom. A Narrative of the Slave-life and Purchase of the Mother of Rev. Isaac Williams, of Detroit, Michigan* (Cincinnati: Western Tract and Book Society, 1858), 10, 63-64.

³³ Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, a Black Man, Who Lived Forty Years in Maryland, South Carolina and Georgia as a Slave*, ed. Isaac Fisher (New York: John S. Taylor, 1837), 150-151.

women with a way to express power and control in their lives, women also had to take care of themselves. Though mothers could not ensure their children's perfect safety, they could take what measures were in their power to protect them, even if this meant strapping their children onto their backs while they worked.

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Black mothers fought hard to keep their families together, for sometimes the best protection for a child was simply having a parent around. In 1745, on a central Virginia plantation, a slaveowner inherited a woman named Beck and her children. After conversation with either Beck herself or those who knew her attachments, he learned that she would be forced to leave behind a husband when she came to his property. Seeing himself as a "Humane compassionate Gentleman," the slaveowner asked Beck's original owners if he could hire the man out at an annual rate. This way, the family could be together and the slaveowner would not be seen as "the Instrument of the Concern, or rather Inhumanity, that will naturally arise at their being separated." It seems likely that Beck herself may have worked for this outcome, either by speaking directly with her new owner or by publicly acknowledging her married status. Though many African Americans in slavery lost spouses before they could even protest, Beck had a better opportunity of expressing her familial relationships and, in the end, reuniting her family.³⁴ Joe and Lucy certainly made their wishes known when they begged their respective owners to reunite their family in 1814. Lucy's owner agreed to the plan and offered either to sell "the wench with her youngest child" to Joe's owner or to send another man in exchange for Joe, though he admitted that "I have none left that is as valuable as yours having accommodated the most valuable of mine in

³⁴ Letter, Francis Willis to Charles Carter, January 3, 1745, VHS.

selling them to the masters of their Choice near their wives.” This state of affairs certainly reveals the owner’s own sensitivity, but it also suggests that black men and women knew how to fight for their families.³⁵ Women who had gained their freedom could also use their own economic resources to reunite their families. Amelia Green bought her daughter Princess from her former master in 1796.³⁶ In 1804, Mourning Ivins purchased Nat, her husband and the father of her eight children, and petitioned a North Carolina court to allow her to give him his freedom. She asked his former owner to attest to his character, and he confirmed that Nat was “an Extrodanary Shue maker and verry Endusstrus” and that “I Entended to Set him free at my deth but his having a free Wife and Children I Solde him to her for but trifling.” Having established Nat as a trustworthy slave, Mourning contributed her own testimonial, asserting that Nat was an equally good husband and father. After reminding the court that she had “by her sole care and industry accumulated money enough to purchase her said husband,” she allowed that “by his industry & attention he has enabled your memorialist to support her children free from want,” and that Nat “has ever conducted himself towards her as a faithful and affectionate husband.”³⁷ Nat owed his freedom to an extremely resourceful and tenacious woman who pursued the vision of a free family. In 1825, Phoebe Spencer purchased her grandson Thomas’s freedom for \$180; Phoebe was probably a free black woman attempting to keep the shards of her family together, but she may have

³⁵ B. L. Lawton to Thomas Polhill, February 26, 1814, Thomas Polhill Papers, SCL.

³⁶ Amelia Green, 1796, New Hanover County, Slave Collection, NCSA.

³⁷ Memorials of Mourning Ivins and William West, August 23, 1806, Nathaniel Macon Papers, NCSA.

been white, since Thomas was described as “mulatto.” Whatever Phoebe’s status, she somehow earned enough money to rescue her kin from slavery.³⁸

When necessary and possible, mothers even took to the courts to defend their families, and numerous suits against slaveowners emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Several states allowed slaves to sue for their freedom when there was strong evidence indicating that they were being held illegally. In 1814, Esther and her four children sued a white man for illegally detaining them, suggesting that they had gained a freedom which was not being acknowledged.³⁹ In 1799, Liddy and her children, along with several other slaves, sued their owner for their freedom after he moved them across state lines without formally registering them. Where did Liddy and the others discover this ingenious loophole? The group was found with several documents from “an abolition society, in Alexandria, . . . which directed them in what manner to proceed.” Their plea of “Trespass, Assault Battery & false imprisonment” would echo through numerous other cases throughout the South, and the determination of women like Liddy – who could either read well enough to understand legal pamphlets or who sought out others who could assist her – underscores the importance of rescuing a family, regardless of time, cost, or potential danger.⁴⁰

³⁸ Certificate of Manumission for Thomas, May 26, 1825, Allmand Family Papers, VHS. Not all enslaved families wanted to be reunited; in settling a series of slave sales, one slaveowner asked if two enslaved men would prefer to “go with their wives,” but he was relieved to discover that “I think neither of them are willing to go.” Thomas Brown to Richard T. Brown, November 4, 1827, Thomas Brown Letter, VHS.

³⁹ Miscellaneous Records, May 30, 1814, Southampton County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

⁴⁰ Suit against Henry Travers, 1799, Suits for Freedom, Northumberland County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

When families were sold together from one owner to the next, some of these transactions were a matter of course, but others may reveal a mother who made active pleas to remain with her children. In 1814, twenty-five-year-old Henny was sold with her four children, ranging in age from nine to two, to Walter Jones, and one can imagine the young mother bargaining with her owner to keep the family together.⁴¹ Perhaps Walter Jones was simply a slaveowner who preferred to keep families together, for reasons of either conscience or morale. A few years earlier, he had purchased three children from Edward Dulin. Several days after the sale, he made a note that “the family of slave to which these three children belonged, to wit, their father & mother, John & his wife, & their other children Parcher & Jim” were still “in the hands of E. Dulin.” Joining forces with another planter, Walter “bought the whole family,” though it is unclear whether they were then divided between their two owners or kept together.⁴² It is impossible to know why families were sold as a unit in individual cases, but the evidence of failed pleas by mothers to keep their children close, which is so ubiquitous in slave narratives, suggests that mothers were also making themselves heard when families were kept together. One mother and child in Maryland were put up for auction in the 1790s; after the mother was sold, the child was put on the block, and the frantic mother

pushed through the crowd, while the bidding for me was going on, to the spot where [her new owner] was standing. She fell at his feet, and clung to his knees, entreating him in tones that a mother only could command, to buy her baby as well as herself, and spare to her one of her little ones at least.

⁴¹ August 15, 1814, Bill of Sale from Richard Bland Lee to Walter Jones, Peyton Family Papers, VHS.

⁴² February 1, 1811, Bill of Sale from Edward Dulin to Walter Jones, Peyton Family Papers, VHS.

After her owner refused, the child was taken away by another man, and “overmastered by such scenes and experiences,” the boy became so sick that, despairing of his survival, the master agreed to sell him to his mother’s owner “at such a trifling rate that it could not be refused.” Once the mother had her child back under her wing, she nursed him back to health and he “grew up to be an uncommonly vigorous . . . man.”⁴³

Black women who bore the children of their masters experienced a new range of both threats and opportunities. Many earned the scorn and abuse of mistresses and masters alike, while others manipulated the father’s sense of paternity or simple guilt to acquire favors – or even freedom – for their children.⁴⁴ Caty Smith’s one-year-old daughter Catherine was freed by John R. Lee in 1805, and Betty Kinney’s two children gained their freedom from Samuel Overton in 1806, cases that hint at white paternity.⁴⁵ Before William Remley died, he drew up a deed of trust to guarantee the safety of his enslaved children. Acknowledging that the laws of the state prevented his six daughters from remaining within the state if they were manumitted, William instead appointed four local men as guardians for the children and demanded that they protect the girls’ rights. William wanted the girls to have “exclusive

⁴³ Josiah Henson, *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada, As Narrated by Himself*, ed. Samuel A. Eliot (Boston: A. D. Phelps, 1849), 4-5.

⁴⁴ Emily Blanck, “The Legal Emancipations of Leander and Caesar: Manumission and the Law in Revolutionary South Carolina and Massachusetts,” *Slavery and Abolition* 28, no. 2 (2007): 235-254. Some enslaved women and their children earned places in masters’ wills as a result of sexual relationships, whether forced or consensual, and thus circumvented laws regulating manumission and the transfer of property. See Adrienne D. Davis, “The Private Law of Race and Sex: An Antebellum Perspective,” *Stanford Law Review* 51, no. 2 (1999): 221-288. For case studies of “successful” interracial couples, see Joshua D. Rothman, “‘Notorious in the Neighborhood’: An Interracial Family in Early National and Antebellum Virginia,” *Journal of Southern History* 67, no. 1 (2001): 73-114; and Cynthia Kennedy-Haflett, “‘Moral Marriage’: A Mixed-Race Relationship in Nineteenth-Century Charleston, South Carolina,” *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 97, no. 3 (1996): 206-226.

⁴⁵ Deeds of Manumission and Emancipation, January 4, 1805, Westmoreland County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV; Deed of Emancipation, April 5, 1806, Samuel Overton Papers, LOV.

benefits of their labor, . . . to go wheresoever they may please, to use and employ their time as to them may be most agreeable, and in fine to enjoy all the priviledges of free persons.” If anyone attempted to take the girls’ wages, mistreat them, or sell them into slavery, William gave the guardians the power to send them into a free state. The fact that William had not sent them into a free state to begin with implies that the mother, who would have been left behind, had requested that the children stay as close as possible while still living as free.⁴⁶

Few women fought harder for their children than Washington resident Mary Bell. After being manumitted by a dying master in 1835, along with her six children, Mary confronted an angry widow who refused to free the family. She took the wife to court in 1847, but the jury dismissed her claims. Desperate and denied by the legal system, Mary and her children boarded *The Pearl*, a schooner requisitioned by a group of African Americans to sail to freedom in Pennsylvania. The attempted escape – which ended when a storm drove the vessel to port – made national headlines, but Mary and her children found themselves in jail, on the blocks, and then sold once again. At least one of her children was sent south and disappeared into the massive plantations surrounding New Orleans. Finally, Mary’s husband, a blacksmith who had been laboring for years to earn enough to purchase his family’s freedom, bought them out of slavery. Mary’s many routes, from securing manumission from a master and battling his widow in court to stealing away on a ship and finally relying on her husband’s earnings, exemplify not only the options available to black women but the passion that led a mother to try anything she possibly could.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ William Remley Deed of Trust, June 6, 1831, SCHS.

⁴⁷ Letter from Philip Richard Fendall, January 19, 1849, Robins Family Papers, VHS. For more on Mary’s story, see the National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 21, Manumission and Emancipation Records, Vol. 2, pp. 404-405; and Josephine F. Pacheco, *The Pearl: A Failed Slave Escape on the Potomac* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 47-52, 66-67, 113.

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Free black women faced different challenges to their powers of protection and found themselves shouldering new burdens, chief among which was ensuring that their children would be free, and that their freedom would be formally recorded such that it could never be contested. Mothers knew how whites sometimes subverted the legal truth for their own ends; hundreds of manumitted slaves had experienced such treachery when they found themselves continuing to labor for their master or his relatives, unable to exercise their freedom. With this knowledge, mothers were particularly careful to watch over the evolving free status of their young ones, whether it meant marching them down to the courthouse or getting an owner's promise in writing. Many places in the South established free negro registries in the eighteenth century in order to identify all local blacks and to better pinpoint fugitive slaves.⁴⁸ While local governments often required the registration of free blacks, inscribing one's freedom in the legal record was not always simple. In eighteenth-century South Carolina, registering a deed of manumission entailed a small fee and a trip to Charleston, details which may have been impossible for some of the newly emancipated.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 266-267; June Guild, ed., *Black Laws of Virginia: A Summary of the Legislative Acts of Virginia Concerning Negroes from the Earliest Times to the Present* (Richmond: Whittet and Shepperson, 1936), 95; Blanck, "The Legal Emancipations of Leander and Caesar," 240-242; Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 93-95. In North Carolina, free blacks in several urban areas were required to wear patches on their clothing that said "FREE." See John Hope Franklin, *The Free Negro in North Carolina, 1790-1860* (1974; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 59-60. For more on the ways in which free black women protected their children, especially through apprenticeships, see Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 227-236.

⁴⁹ Robert Olwell, "Becoming Free: Manumission and the Genesis of a Free Black Community in South Carolina, 1740-1790," *Slavery and Abolition* 17, no. 1 (1996): 1-19.

While registries for free blacks served the purposes of local white authorities, they also provided a measure of security to black mothers who wanted their status and their children's status in writing. In all Southern states, children were judged free or slave according to the status of their mothers, a law which was developed over time by white lawmakers who sought to protect the economic interest of slaveowners.⁵⁰ Mothers had the power to define their children's status, and for those free black women who could guarantee their children's freedom, this was a precious power indeed. In Rockbridge County, Virginia, the clerk's record of free blacks shows the insistence of free black mothers in passing their status to their sons and daughters. In the autumn of 1818, Nancy Barrister marched her children down to the courthouse to put in writing that both were "born free in this county." Nancy Ampey, "a free mulatto woman," took her sons to the courthouse in 1831, and Rachel Matthews, "born free" with a "bright mulatto complexion" and "straight hair," registered herself and her eight children, ranging in age from nine months to twenty years old, in 1830. Celia Bell brought her son Horace to register as a "free boy of color" when he was seventeen, and on his twenty-first birthday, four years older and six inches taller, he was brought back to be "Reentered, now a free man." These registrations were sometimes the extent of a free woman's ability to protect her children, but these women understood that these details – even the care it took to re-enter Horace as a "free man" – could be the words that one day saved them from capture or sale.⁵¹

⁵⁰ See, for example, the 1662 act in Virginia which declared that children "shall be bond or free according to the condition of the mother." Guild, *Black Laws of Virginia*, 23-24. For a discussion of the implications of these early slave laws, including those that mandated heritable bondage, see Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 107-136.

⁵¹ Andrew Reid Record Book, 1803-1828, WM.

County courts all over the South recorded the same maternal drive, and the Free Negro Registers of Virginia, in particular, provide a detailed account of women protecting their children's legal status. In Amelia County, Martha Farley had been registered by her free mother, and she brought her own seven children to stand before the clerk on the same day to have their freedom recorded.⁵² In Bedford County, Milly Shavers visited the court to get a renewal of her register as a free black woman, and while she was there, she registered her two daughters, Mary Frances Cordelia and Rebecca.⁵³ In 1754, Susanna Jones approached the Lancaster County court with a petition to demand her "freedom dues." In investigating the validity of her claim, the court sent a request to the man in charge of the county's records to see if she or her children had ever been bound out. The writer did not include any information about the children, since he assured his correspondent that Susanna "will give you an Accot. of" them.⁵⁴ Not only did Susanna seem to be fairly voluble about her children, but she went to great lengths to ensure their freedom. White women who bore children with black fathers also needed to protect their freedom: Jincey Pendleton, "a free white woman" registered her three "mulatto" children in 1830.⁵⁵

Some mothers leaned on their relationships with friends and neighbors to prove their children's freeborn status. When Elsea Ligon registered her son, she brought along testimony from a former employer who remembered when the boy was born and could guarantee "that

⁵² Free Negro Registrations, n.d., Amelia County Circuit Court, Free Negro Registers, LOV.

⁵³ Registrations and Certificates, n.d., Bedford County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

⁵⁴ Miscellaneous Papers, July 11, 1754, Lancaster County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

⁵⁵ Free Negro Registrations, 1830, Amelia County Circuit Court, Free Negro Registers, LOV.

this is the same child that was born at my house.”⁵⁶ William Napier’s claim was supported by two white men who knew him “to be the son of a woman known to me as Amy Napper.”⁵⁷ In 1832, Mary Leap appeared before the Rockingham County clerk and “made oath that Necy Lewis is the Child of Milly Lewis a free woman of colour and that Darbey Lewis is the child of Delilah Lewis Decd. a free woman of colour.”⁵⁸ A Mr. Holmes gave a statement in 1818, assuring the court he knew Phobe Norman “as a free woman” and that her daughter Becky “has been born since Colo. Briscoe set Phobe & husband free.” Since Phobe was “desirous of Becky’s freedom being recorded,” Mr. Holmes had agreed to attest to its legitimacy.⁵⁹ The network of mothers pervades the court registrations, and their names and relationships with children and other mothers emerge in these court documents as they do in few other official records. In 1822, a white person, whose signature is too inscrutable to determine sex, testified, “The bearer Thomas Mahaner a dark man, is a free one, his mother having served her time with my mother.”⁶⁰ A white man, perhaps, and a dark man; a white mother and a black mother. Their relationships with one another can only be guessed at, but the importance of their interactions is undeniable, for they led to Thomas Mahaner earning his free papers.

⁵⁶ Free Negro Registrations, June 23, 1829, Amelia County Circuit Court, Free Negro Registers, LOV.

⁵⁷ Registrations and Certificates, July 26, 1828, Bedford County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

⁵⁸ Affidavits and Certificates, November 24, 1832, Rockingham County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

⁵⁹ Free Negro Registrations, Certificates and Affidavits, August 17, 1818, Frederick County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

⁶⁰ Free Negro Certifications, November 9, 1822, Westmoreland County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

Neighbors could testify to character as well as birth; Jane Steele lived with Sue Bisick and her son Samuel throughout his growing-up years, and informed the Goochland County court in 1779 that “he was bred up to Plantering, and Farming business; and I never knew, nor heard of any thing concerning him, but that he was a peaceable, honest, good man.” Jacob Sampson, another visitor to the same court in 1820, was described in several depositions as an “industrious, orderly & honest man, . . . equald. by few men of colour in point of Varacity [sic],” with an “unimpeached and exemplary character.” Not only did Jacob’s mother protect his freedom and raise him to be a moral man, but she also may have helped him learn to read and write; a decade later, when Jacob returned to the court to purchase his own children’s freedom, he signed the statement with his own hand.⁶¹

When white men ignored the free status of a woman’s children – and the records of whites “illegally detaining” blacks are manifold – mothers turned again to the courts. When one white man used a court order to “illegally detain” the children of Winifred Newsum, who were born free to free parents, Winifred demanded a writ of habeas corpus to retrieve her two daughters. She referenced the “pretended order” that led to her children being taken away, and insisted that she earned enough money that her children could “maintain themselves and have never at any time been chargeable to the parish.” Knowing the basics of the laws pertaining to free blacks, Winifred noted that “under such circumstances they could not lawfully be taken from her.” The court agreed, and required the white man to bring the two girls to court.⁶² In 1827, Lucy’s infant son was held by two white men who threatened to sell

⁶¹ Affidavits and Certificates Related to Free Status, September 1779, May 13, 1820, February 15, 1831, Goochland County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

⁶² Petitions for Writs of Habeas Corpus, October 1828, Southampton County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

him out of the state. Terrified, Lucy rushed to the county court with a sheaf of documents proving the illegality of any such action. She proved that her mother had been emancipated by her owner's will; she brought a copy of her own free papers, issued a year earlier; she brought the testimony of her former owner's son, who verified that Lucy had been "amansipated . . . together with her increase." With these validations in hand, she begged the court to "arrest the proceedings" of the men who somehow had control of her boy.⁶³ These women actively engaged in the legal system to protect their children's legal status and physical safety.

Networks of friends and relatives did not always succeed in protecting children from sale. Nancy Cartwright was a free black woman from northern Virginia who moved to New York, possibly as a condition of her emancipation, leaving behind a large extended family. In 1850, her daughter Emily wrote a panic-stricken letter, informing her that she had been sold and was awaiting shipment to the deep South, along with "aunt Sally and all her children, and aunt Hagar and all her children, and grandmother is almost crazy." "Mother! my dear mother! do not forsake me," Emily begged. Nancy leaned on a local abolitionist to intercede, and he pleaded with the slave trader to sell the family to Nancy instead, citing her maternal reputation as a reason to accede to the request; surely the trader would not want to act "against the wishes of such a mother as Nancy is." This gambit only resulted in exorbitant prices that the mother could not afford, and Emily was taken deeper into the South, where she died before ever reaching a slave market.⁶⁴

⁶³ Judgments Pertaining to Free Negroes and Slaves, October 10, 1827, May 8, 1826, March 30, 1827, Powhatan County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

⁶⁴ "Letter of Nancy Cartwright," *Monthly Illustrations of American Slavery*, May 1, 1850, reprinted in *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*, ed. John Blasingame (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 87.

When all other means failed, and when mothers felt that protecting their children under slavery was no longer physically possible, some ran away.⁶⁵ Most women who were tied down with children chose not to escape, since children made flight difficult and many women preferred to remain with their sons and daughters rather than run away on their own. Some women left their children behind, determined to gain their own freedom at any cost, and some became intentionally temporary truants, but a few enslaved mothers masterminded family escapes. A slave patrol in 1754 “did Ketch . . . a Negroe woman slave and Childe.” When they asked her what her business was, her reply was fearless: “she was a runaway she said.”⁶⁶ In 1767, Dinah and her two grown sons, Jupiter and Robin, fled from a plantation near Williamsburg carrying several stolen coats. Dinah appears out of the mist of eighteenth-century print as a formidable woman; six feet tall and “very large,” she brandished a “remarkable stump of a thumb,” which an infection had left visibly mangled. Her sons were no less compelling. Robin matched his mother in height and build, and a “film over one of his eyes” lent him an eerie air. Jupiter, the older one at thirty-five, was “knock kneed” and “flat footed,” but his sonorous voice had earned him acclaim as “a great Newlight preacher.” His interpretation of the Bible had veered from respect for the meek, however; he was accused of “stirring up the Negroes to an insurrection,” which earned him “a severe whipping,” the scars of which still marked his back when he fled with his mother. The description of this imposing crew suggests that Dinah was a fierce mother who educated her sons, instilled in them a Christian spirit, encouraged them to boldness, and, when their backs

⁶⁵ Betty Wood, “Some Aspects of Female Resistance to Chattel Slavery in Low Country Georgia, 1763-1815,” *The Historical Journal* 30, no. 3 (1987): 603-622.

⁶⁶ Slave Patrol Records, September 29, 1754, Southampton County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

were beaten one too many times, absconded with them to freedom.⁶⁷ In 1773, it took the pregnant Judith less than a day to escape from her new master, who suspected that she carried her one-year-old daughter with her to her former home, where perhaps the remainder of her family was.⁶⁸ Sally Williams planned the successful escape of her two sons and a husband who was based at another plantation a few miles away, rounding them up, feeding them, and finding a safe house in a nearby town.⁶⁹ In the fall of 1826, Nelly escaped from a Virginia plantation with her two daughters, Harriet and Juno. They left on a Sunday, and their claims that they “were going to visit an acquaintance” meant that no one remarked their absence till the following day. Not only did Nelly time her journey well; she also ensured that her daughters would be warm on the road, for she “had conveyed off their stock of Cloathes.” Their escape was successful, for in 1835, their owner finally gave up the search and requested compensation from the courts for the money he spent in searching for them, a total of twenty-four dollars.⁷⁰

Though running away could provide enormous freedoms if successful, mothers were also aware of the dangers involved. A group of slaves from the same plantation in Virginia stole aboard a small boat in an attempt to row themselves to freedom but were spotted within hours; the pursuers forced the boat to pull ashore, where all the slaves escaped except for “a

⁶⁷ George Noble, Runaway Slave Advertisement, *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon), October 1, 1767.

⁶⁸ John Mclean, Runaway Slave Advertisement, *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon), May 8, 1773.

⁶⁹ Sally Williams, *Aunt Sally: or, The Cross the Way of Freedom. A Narrative of the Slave-life and Purchase of the Mother of Rev. Isaac Williams, of Detroit, Michigan* (Cincinnati: Western Tract and Book Society, 1858), 67-70.

⁷⁰ Runaway Slave Matters, Letter from Notley C. Williams, October 12, 1835, Frederick County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

woman & child,” who were probably too slow to secure their freedom.⁷¹ When John Thompson was invited to escape by a group of enslaved men, he “consulted his mother, whose fears for my success were so great, that she had persuaded me not to go.”⁷² James Curry felt a similar sense of duty to his mother, and though “the longing for liberty . . . had been the prevailing desire of my heart” since childhood, “my attachment to my relations, to my mother in particular, had determined me to remain.”⁷³ This emotion would have been shared by many mothers who understood how familial attachments could limit one’s options.

When children had been sold away from their parents and chose to escape on their own, they frequently made their way back to their mothers’ homes, seeing them as safe harbors. Runaway slave advertisements provide a common theme of slaves making for their mothers’ homes the moment they escaped their bonds, as though their first choice of a protector was the women who had been protecting them all their lives. When a girl living near Williamsburg, Virginia, ran away in 1774, it took no special insight on the part of her pursuers to assume that she “very likely may be harboured” by her mother.⁷⁴ Similarly, three men ran away from their owner in 1767 and were “supposed to be lurking about . . . Chesterfield, where one of them has a mother,” and when Harry, a delicate young man who “cannot bear to go barefoot,” ran away several years later, his owner guessed that since he

⁷¹ Letter to Dr. Richard Eppes, n.d., Eppes Family Papers, VHS.

⁷² John Thompson, *The Life of John Thompson, a Fugitive Slave; Containing His History of 25 Years in Bondage, and His Providential Escape. Written by Himself* (Worcester, MA: J. Thompson, 1856), 75.

⁷³ “Narrative of James Curry,” *Liberator*, January 10, 1840, reprinted in *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*, ed. John Blassingame (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 140.

⁷⁴ John Carter, Runaway Slave Advertisement, *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon), February 3, 1774.

was born in Fairfax County, “it is probable he will make there to his Mother.”⁷⁵ Whether mothers ran away themselves or offered a safe home for runaway children, their attempts to protect their families underwrote many of their choices.

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From arming themselves with a hoe to defend their children against local dogs to stealing them away in the dark of night, bound for freedom, enslaved and free black mothers employed a host of tactics to try to provide their children with some sense of security. Even when women submitted to indignities, hard labor, and sexual abuse, they often had the safety of their children in mind. Mothers involved a wide array of people in the task of protection, depending on older children to tend their infants in the field and neighbors, both black and white, to testify to their family’s free status. Whatever means mothers had in their power, they used to protect the safety of their sons and daughters, whether that safety was threatened by snakes, mosquitoes, white men, negligent courts, or improper fiancés. Protecting their children provided mothers, however fleetingly, with a feeling of control and a sense of worth, for they did not live to pick cotton or winnow rice; they lived to cultivate a sense of purpose, and much of this purpose came from raising their children.

⁷⁵ Richard Starke, Runaway Slave Advertisement, *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon), February 26, 1767; Theodorick Bland, Runaway Slave Advertisement, *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon), July 14, 1774.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

BLACK AUNTS

Black mothers, enslaved and free, did not exist in isolation from their surrounding communities. They could not simply construct separate, “nuclear” families, even if they wanted to, for if it took a village to raise a child, it took an entire plantation population to raise a child in slavery.¹ They also had no desire to cut themselves off from other women and other family members. Like both white and Indian mothers, black women embraced and relied upon a community of supporters, a network primarily composed of other women, both friends and relatives, that offered both practical assistance and a clear justification for the work that black mothers were doing. In a broader sense, all these women were aunts: friends, if not relatives, who channeled their own maternal skills to aid other women and their

¹ Brenda Stevenson suggests that, in addition to most enslaved women not having a “nuclear structure or ‘core’ in their families,” a nuclear family may not have even been “the slave’s sociocultural ideal.” Instead, women raised their children within “a malleable extended family.” See Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 160, 251; Leslie Howard Owens, *This Species of Property: Slave Life and Culture in the Old South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 210-211. Cheryll Ann Cody also detects the difference between the slaveholder ideal of a nuclear family and the extended kin networks that were a reality of slave life. Cheryll Ann Cody, “Naming, Kinship, and Estate Dispersal: Notes on Slave Family Life on a South Carolina Plantation, 1786 to 1833,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (1982): 192-211. Thomas Webber argued that “what made a family were those individuals important to the child in terms of his nurture, protection, and education. Concern for the welfare of the dependent was added to, or could even become a substitute for, blood-relationships.” Thomas L. Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers: Education in the Slave Quarter Community, 1831-1865* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 158. I would argue, however, that this extended sense of family also applied to both white and Indian mothers in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. For a rejection of the nuclear family model for whites in the antebellum South, see Joan E. Cashin, “The Structure of Antebellum Planter Families: ‘The Ties that Bound us Was Strong,’” *Journal of Southern History* 56, no. 1 (1990): 55-70.

children. The term “aunt” was often used by whites to refer to older enslaved women, conveying both respect and condescension, but it was also a category within slave communities used to acknowledge the inclusiveness of family and the importance of non-mothers.²

When John Brown recited the contents of his slave cabin as a child, his enumerations of family bring to life a house that was cramped, uncomfortable, but filled with the voices of children and a sense of familial support. In one room of the Virginia cabin lived John Brown, his mother Nancy, his twin siblings Silas and Lucy, his half-brothers Curtis and Cain, and his half-sister Irene. In the cabin’s other room lived “my mother’s niece, Annikie, and her children.” The older children cared for the younger ones, and the cabin served as a self-sustaining community. When John and his mother were sold away from the plantation and their network of family, John “really thought my mother would have died of grief at being obliged to leave . . . her relations behind.”³ The significance of the familial network did not wane after women found themselves emancipated; in 1801, Bettey Moss shared a house on the coast of Virginia with her extended free black family, including her husband John, sister Salley, and mother-in-law Ann.⁴

² Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985), 130-133, 173; Stephanie Shaw argues that “when women taught children to address other Black people not related to them by blood as ‘aunt,’ ‘uncle,’ and ‘granny,’ they taught children that ‘family’ had a basis not only in kinship but in community as well.” Shaw, “Mothering Under Slavery in the Antebellum South,” in *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency*, eds. Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang, and Linda Rennie Forcey (New York: Routledge, 1994), 253.

³ John Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia: A Narrative of the Life, Sufferings, and Escape of John Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Now in England*, ed. Louis Alexis Chamerovzow (London: W. M. Watts, 1855), 1-4, 8.

⁴ Free Negro Lists, 1801, Powhatan County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

These networks of female support were not naturally occurring, but were carefully constructed by mothers who, understanding that childrearing was not a solitary occupation, reached out to friends and kin in order to ease their burdens and surround themselves with peers who validated their sense of maternal purpose and self-worth. “Aunts,” meanwhile, used these networks to create maternal identities not out of blood ties but out of feelings of responsibility, oversight, and even love. By creating expansive definitions of motherhood, enslaved and free black women combined their maternal power as individuals to counteract the daily oppressions and limitations imposed on black women rearing children in the South.

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While there were certainly women who did not feel bound in maternal solidarity with their female friends and neighbors, many female communities provided help to women in need. Olaudah Equiano, in recounting a story about the seriousness with which adultery was taken in his African home of Benin, revealed what may have been a silent understanding among women of his town. A woman who had been convicted of adultery was assigned punishment by her husband, who chose to execute her. Before putting her to death, however, the town learned that she was still breastfeeding, and they sought a woman who would take over nursing duties. “No woman being prevailed on to perform the part of a nurse,” however, the mother “was spared on account of the child.”⁵ It seems likely there would have been other women in the village capable of nursing an infant; their collective refusal, which Equiano brushes over, not being the point of his story, speaks to some form of community-wide maternal protection. Most West African societies centered around extended family groups rather than nuclear units, as women shared childrearing duties in addition to

⁵ Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (London: The Author, 1789), 7-8.

agricultural tasks. The role of the “othermother” embraced women who nurtured a community’s children – whether they were connected through kin or simple proximity – and thereby earned a position of respect. These African communities, their definitions and boundaries shaped by mothers, transferred a similar sense of female collectivity to many women who were sold to America.⁶

On most large plantations, infants and children grew up in the care of other women while their mothers labored in the field, a situation which restricted women’s power over their own children but fostered a network of dependence that, in the best of circumstances, could offer children additional mother figures.⁷ Many slaveowners and managers placed one or more elderly women as overseers for a plantation’s growing brood of children; by creating

⁶ In most African societies, the extended family was the basic unit of social organization, and children grew up under the care of mothers, aunts, and grandmothers. See Herbert J. Foster, “African Patterns in the Afro-American Family,” *Journal of Black Studies* 14, no. 2 (1983): 201-232; Eleanor Smith, “African American Women and the Extended Family,” *Western Journal of Black Studies* 13, no. 4 (1989): 179-184; Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Vintage, 1976), 211-212; Niara Sudarkasa, “‘The Status of Women’ in Indigenous African Societies,” *Feminist Studies* 12, no. 1 (1986): 91-103; and Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 553. For more on “othermothers” in West Africa, see Stanlie James, “Mothering: A Possible Black Feminist Link to Social Transformation?,” in *Theorizing Black Feminisms: The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women*, eds. Stanlie James and Abena Busia (New York: Routledge, 1993), 44-54. Grandmothers continued to play a central role in children’s lives after emancipation, and black children living in families with grandmothers in the twentieth century far outnumbered white children in similar situations; see Jillian Jimenez, “The History of Grandmothers in the African American Community,” *The Social Service Review* 76, no. 4 (2002): 523-551.

⁷ Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 48-74; Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 13-15; Marie Jenkins Schwartz, “‘At Noon, Oh How I Ran’: Breastfeeding and Weaning on Plantation and Farm in Antebellum Virginia and Alabama,” in *Discovering the Women in Slavery: Emancipating Perspectives on the American Past*, ed. Patricia Morton (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 241-259. In an admittedly celebratory defense of Southern slavery from 1860, Mary Howard Schoolcraft described the “old, black, medical crone” who oversaw the youngest enslaved children on large plantations; her job was “to keep up large fires, to feed, watch over, and report any sickness or accident to her young charges, while their mothers are absent in the fields.” Schoolcraft, *The Black Gauntlet: A Tale of Plantation Life in South Carolina* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1860), 38.

a concentrated system of childcare, owners could maximize the labor of their workers, placing the sturdier new mothers in the field while stationing the weaker and older women as nurses. On the Moody plantation in North Carolina, “Old Nancy” was assigned to “Attend to Children,” while other older women, including “Cherry age 70 years & worthless” and “Sarah age 52 & worthless,” may have helped.⁸ James Henry Hammond’s system of management was fairly common in large plantations across the South: children were brought to a “separate apartment under the charge of a trusty nurse” at dawn, and left under her watch until the day’s work was done. Women who were still breastfeeding would feed their infants before sunrise, bring them to the “children’s house,” and return a few times during the day to nurse.⁹ The same rules sometimes applied to house servants; William Green grew up on a plantation where “those females who work about the house and have children, must leave them down to the quarters. The mother can go once or twice a day to nurse them.”¹⁰ While one implicit goal of such a system was to diminish the bonds of affection between mother and child, and while this separation certainly could be physically painful for many breastfeeding women, an unintended result was that more individuals were brought into the orbit of those caring for any given child. As a child grew up, several women on a plantation could point to her and say, “I helped raise that one.”

Ex-slaves often remembered the older women who tended them in these plantation nurseries, though their portraits are never as detailed as those of mothers. On the Whitehall

⁸ List of Field Hands, n.d., and List of Negro Women, n.d., Moody Family Papers, LOV.

⁹ James Henry Hammond, *Plantation Manual of James Henry Hammond, Typed from the Original Manuscript* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Library, 1933), 4, 7-9, from the SCL.

¹⁰ William Green, *Narrative of Events in the Life of William Green, (Formerly a Slave.) Written by Himself* (Springfield, MA: L. M. Guernsey, 1853), 9.

plantation near Petersburg, Virginia, an older woman “with a halt in her step” cared for the children “while the mothers were in the fields,” and “the older children acted as nurses for the babies.”¹¹ Frederick Douglass’s grandmother “was put to raise the children of the younger women,” and by living with her in his early years, he was often “out of the way of the bloody scenes that often occurred on the plantation.”¹² Aunt Katy “had charge of all the children” on a plantation near Fayetteville, North Carolina; each morning, mothers would drop off their children, some as young as a few weeks old, and pick them up from Katy at night, “when the tasks were done.”¹³ Milcah Berry’s son was “nursed by an old female slave whom they called Aunt Comfort” between the ages of one and six. He grew up “rolling in the dirt like a pig, and little better cared for,” and he infrequently saw his mother, “having all my food from the old woman, my nurse.” His relationship with this woman, while perhaps not entirely healthy, still served as an attachment, a connection between a child and a mother figure. Several years later, he may have grasped the importance of such attachments when he saw how easily they could be broken; “at this time two sisters and a brother of mine were sold by Mr. Ensor,” he recalled, and “also a cousin, a girl nearly white, and a daughter of my Aunt Comfort.” He thought his mother and Aunt Comfort “would never see through their grief.”¹⁴

¹¹ Jane Minge Friend Stephenson, “My Father and His Household, Before, During, and After the War,” April 22, 1897, Blanton Family Papers, VHS.

¹² Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself* (Boston: American Anti-slavery Society, 1845), 8.

¹³ Sally Williams, *Aunt Sally: or, The Cross the Way of Freedom. A Narrative of the Slave-life and Purchase of the Mother of Rev. Isaac Williams, of Detroit, Michigan* (Cincinnati: Western Tract and Book Society, 1858), 26.

¹⁴ James Watkins, *Narrative of the Life of James Watkins, formerly a “Chattel” in Maryland, U. S. Containing an Account of His Escape from Slavery, Together with an Appeal on Behalf of Three*

Older women who oversaw enslaved children did not always cultivate a maternal relationship with them, but instead reserved their powers of protection and provision for their own sons and daughters. In eastern Maryland, another Aunt Katy served as both cook and caretaker; while the first role earned her special privileges, including the ability to sneak food for her children, the second role was a burden for a woman who only wanted to ensure that her own children survived slavery. In some respects, Aunt Katy was the consummate provider: as a “first-rate cook,” she had perfected a skill that gave her “a strong hold upon old master,” who allowed her to keep her children in the kitchen. Her master also entrusted her with the division of food, and taking advantage of this power, she deprived the other boys and girls in her care in order to give her children extra portions. Frederick Douglass, who was raised in her nursery for several years, was often half-starved and occasionally beaten. When his mother Harriet learned of Aunt Katy’s abuses, she promptly removed Frederick from her care and, with “fiery indignation,” “read Aunt Katy a lecture which was never forgotten.”¹⁵ The clash of Harriet and Katy emerged from their competing definitions of motherhood; Harriet wanted to protect her son at all costs, but also assumed that another woman assigned as caretaker would look out for her child, while Katy, focused solely on her children’s welfare, had no desire to be a generous or loving aunt. Their conflict is a reminder that, while many women relied on networks of support, a sense of community among mothers was never universal.

Millions of Such “Pieces of Property,” Still Held Under the Standard of the Eagle (Bolton, Eng.: Kenyon and Abbatt, 1852), 7-8, 11.

¹⁵ Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself* (Boston: De Wolfe, Fiske & Co., 1892), 34-36.

A sense of necessity, rather than community, often led mothers to lean on other women, for non-mothers helped administer to the physical needs of the children under their aegis. Amy Green was an enslaved woman on the Whitehall plantation who served as a doctor to many of her fellow slaves. According to a white woman who grew up under her reign, Amy was a “skilled nurse,” and with her “poultices of horse radish, and plantin [sic] leaves, and her various cuppings and plasters, the ailments of 100 negroes were well taken in hand.” For her services to other women’s children, Amy Green was known as “Aunt Amy,” a name that recognizes her status as an honorary, if auxiliary, family member.¹⁶ William Parker grew up within a particularly cruel and unsupervised childcare system in Maryland, where older children often took advantage of the younger or weaker ones, but despite this seeming abandonment, he received daily visits from his grandmother, a cook, and when she “came to look after me, she always brought me a morsel privately.”¹⁷ At other times, aunts, cousins, and grandmothers simply provided an extra body with which to defend an enslaved child. North Carolinian Moses Roper and his mother were saved from being stabbed by a plantation mistress by his grandmother, who “caught the knife and saved my life.”¹⁸ These women supplemented mothers’ powers of protection by lending their own expertise in the interest of a child’s survival.

When black mothers could no longer care for their children, the cultivation of a network of invested non-mothers meant that children could be solicitously cared for in the

¹⁶ Jane Minge Friend Stephenson, “My Father and His Household, Before, During, and After the War,” April 22, 1897, Blanton Family Papers, VHS.

¹⁷ William Parker, “The Freedman's Story,” In Two Parts, *The Atlantic*, February 1866: 152-66; March 1866: 276-95, quote on p. 153.

¹⁸ Moses Roper, *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn; London: Darton, Harvey and Darton, 1838), 9-10.

absence of their mothers. When other women were not available to assist, husbands, brothers, or uncles could step in to help. When Richard Johnson was orphaned by the death of his free mother, his uncle found him an apprenticeship with a plasterer in Baltimore.¹⁹ While this was probably simply a way to make sure the boy was fed and clothed in exchange for his labor, the presence of the uncle ensured that Richard would be placed at a useful profession, rather than being bound out indiscriminately by the courts who oversaw the city's orphaned poor. When Henry Watson's mother was secretly sold while he was sleeping, his grief and confusion brought on a serious illness, during which he was assiduously tended by an "old slave-woman," who, "by way of consolation, gave me as much information as she could about my mother's being taken away." Henry, writing as an ex-slave about his childhood, claimed to feel entirely "forsaken and alone" by this turn of events, a response that may have been shaped by the focus on mother-child relationships in abolitionist narratives. Even without a mother, however, his welfare was being protected by the aunts that his mother left behind.²⁰

James Pennington experienced a similar sensation when his parents left him in order to work in the fields all day. He explained that an enslaved child is "thrown into the world without a social circle to flee to for hope, shelter, comfort, or instruction." "The social circle," he continued, "is of the utmost importance to the tender child; but of this, the slave child . . . is robbed." Many people who were enslaved undoubtedly felt this sense of isolation at some point during their lives, and the bare facts of slavery required that deep emotional

¹⁹ Indenture of Richard Johnson to James Armitage, April 18, 1817, Petitions, Affidavits, and Certificates, Lancaster County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

²⁰ Henry Watson, *Narrative of Henry Watson, a Fugitive Slave. Written by Himself* (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1848), 5-6.

connections be severed time and again. But James did somehow survive, despite the virtual absence of his mother; he was raised, fed, and nurtured to adulthood. The people who brought him to this point were probably those aunts, grandmothers, and unrelated old women and young girls whose job it was to rear the plantation's children. It was upon these women, this precise "social circle," that James's mother had to rely, not by choice, but by necessity. Somehow, these women succeeded: James lived, he eventually escaped, and he survived to write an abolitionist narrative about his experiences.²¹

When black mothers died, or sometimes even when they did not, a few white mistresses sought to adopt the maternal mantle and take over the care of the black children they owned. These women offered another layer of aunts in a mother's circuit; often well-meaning but almost always intrusive or insensitive, some of these women really did protect and provide for the children of black mothers. Alcy Shelton's son was sold from her when he was just five, but after living with a new white family for several years, his master died, and his mistress, seeking relief from her loss, said to the boy, "William, if you be a good boy, and cry no more, I will be to you a mother." She put one hand on his head and "supplicated God that he would enable her to fulfil her promise, and thanked him that he had placed some object in her way, to fill the vacuum occasioned by the death of her husband." Whatever her motives, this woman's protection of William would have come as some relief to Alcy, who had to depend on other women's whims now that her son was no longer under her control.

²¹ James W. C. Pennington, *The Fugitive Blacksmith; or, Events in the History of James W. C. Pennington, Pastor of a Presbyterian Church, New York, Formerly a Slave in the State of Maryland, United States* (London: Charles Gilpin, 1849), 2.

When William was older, he learned that his mother had been “much distressed on my account, thinking that when I was taken away, I was too young to be raised.”²²

Harriet Jacobs also experienced the unexpected affection of a white mistress, and when Harriet’s mother died, her mistress “promised that her children should never suffer for any thing; and during her lifetime she kept her word.” The maternal instincts of this mistress may be a result of the strong connection she felt to Harriet’s mother; the two “were both nourished at my grandmother’s breast” and “played together as children.” Whether from love, guilt, or a combination of both, this white woman understood that she shared some portion of maternal duty with Harriet’s mother, and from that instinct of commonality that every so often united such disparate women, she treated Harriet with perfect kindness. The girl felt that, indeed, “she had been almost like a mother to me.”²³ Aunts may have come from strange quarters, and some may have interfered with mothers’ own visions of childrearing, but few mothers who understood the daily challenges of raising children would have refused earnest aid.

The mere presence of white families in shouting distance from black families led to the development of relationships between different kinds of women that, while heavily imbalanced and corrupted with dynamics of power, occasionally led to legitimately affectionate feelings.²⁴ In Fayetteville, North Carolina, Sally Williams, an enslaved woman

²² William Hayden, *Narrative of William Hayden, Containing a Faithful Account of His Travels for a Number of Years, Whilst a Slave, in the South. Written by Himself* (Cincinnati: The Author, 1846), 22, 39.

²³ Harriet Ann Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself*, ed. Lydia Maria Child (Boston: The Author, 1861), 14-15.

²⁴ See, for example, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

who had gained some economic freedom through her cake shop, was threatened with sale but was defended by a “poor white woman with whom she had often shared her simple meal.” This woman told a gathering crowd, “There ain’t a better woman in Fayetteville, white or black. Didn’t she help me take care of Jimmy all through the fever last fall, and bring me a cup of coffee and a bit of bread whenever he was too sick for me to go to my day’s work?”²⁵ By helping another woman in need perform her maternal duties, Sally had gained a friend. Sometimes white women too could become part of a black mother’s network of support. From earliest youth, some black children and white children played together; in the 1760s, this behavior seemed highly inappropriate to Maria Taylor Byrd, who was appalled to find her granddaughter being raised with “Negro children her Play Fellows.”²⁶ Such interactions were more unavoidable than sanctioned, but they created an uneasy alliance between some individuals that somehow survived the inhumanities of slavery. When slaveowner Eliza Haywood wrote to her mother, she included a postscript that reflected her ties to both the black and white women from her former home. “Remember me [to] Aunt Jones and all the Family,” she wrote, “and tell all your Negroes howdy for me and tell old Mary howdy for me and when you write pray let me know how she is and tell her all her Children are well.”²⁷ One reason such a bond existed is that, upon her marriage, Eliza had forcibly removed all of Mary’s children. Eliza was also nursed by Mary as a child and may have seen her as some sort of maternal figure within her own family. Mary, meanwhile, may not have felt any

²⁵ Sally Williams, *Aunt Sally: or, The Cross the Way of Freedom. A Narrative of the Slave-life and Purchase of the Mother of Rev. Isaac Williams, of Detroit, Michigan* (Cincinnati: Western Tract and Book Society, 1858), 103.

²⁶ Maria Taylor Byrd to William Byrd III, January 1760 (?), Byrd Family Papers, 1757-1860, VHS.

²⁷ Eliza Haywood to Jane Williams, January 21, 1808, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

particular attachment to Eliza, but she had to hope that this white woman was treating her children well. Such “aunts” existed for both black and white women.

Some white men recognized the role of black aunts in their own lives, and the associated emotion very occasionally worked in a mother’s favor. When one Maryland slaveowner was prepared to take a young boy with him to New Orleans, the boy’s mother “went with a bursting heart to my young master, and begged him not to take her poor child away.” The slaveowner “relented a little, having some little regard for her, she having nursed him when a child.” As a result of this childhood claim on him, the owner agreed to the favor of selling the boy to a neighboring plantation rather than removing him over a thousand miles.²⁸ Though nursing white children often took time away from their own children, black mothers could sometimes use this role as leverage to advance their own interests. James Walker, the son of slaveowners, told a former slave that “Dolly, the mother of your wife, was my nurse, took the tenderest care of me when I was an orphan child.” He confessed that “the attachment which this has produced on my part, and on the part of my wife and children to her and her children and their children, . . . is altogether different from what is ordinarily termed slavery.”²⁹ Even without explicit intent, these connections formed everywhere that women cared for children, whether or not they were their own. Certainly, not all white men who were nursed by black women developed the same “attachments” that James Walker

²⁸ William Green, *Narrative of Events in the Life of William Green, (Formerly a Slave.) Written by Himself* (Springfield, MA: L. M. Guernsey, 1853), 3-4.

²⁹ Edmond Kelley, *A Family Redeemed from Bondage; Being Rev. Edmond Kelley, (the Author,) His Wife, and Four Children* (New Bedford: The Author, 1851), 9.

expressed, but such relationships drew invisible lines between families that existed whether they were acknowledged or simply taken for granted.³⁰

Just as whites sometimes expressed affection for the black women who nursed them, so too did some black women grow attached to their white charges. One elderly woman on a plantation on John's Island, South Carolina, nursed all her mistress's children, and said that "she loves them like her own."³¹ Elizabeth Keckley undertook the care of a newborn infant when she was just four years old, and though such forced relationships seem inhumane, Elizabeth loved her new duties. Not only was this white baby – also named Elizabeth – her "earliest and fondest pet," but her new position "transferred me from the rude cabin to the household of my master." Her tasks seemed simple enough: to gently rock the cradle and "keep the flies out of its face," and she engaged in them with gusto. Not all maternal hopefuls are quite ready for the job, though; black Elizabeth rocked white Elizabeth right out of her cradle, and when her mistress came in, she was trying to scoop the baby up with a shovel from the fireplace. This story of brief emotional connection between a mother-figure and a

³⁰ For many white Southerners, black motherhood was commercial rather than intimate, and by the late nineteenth century, idealized images of the black mother reassigned both her body and her affection to white children. For more on the iconography of the "mammy," see Jessie W. Parkhurst, "The Role of the Black Mammy in the Plantation Household," *Journal of Negro History* 23, no. 3 (1938): 349-369; Patricia Hill Collins, "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images," in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 69-96; Micki McElya, *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); and Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008). Collins notes that the "mammy" image could provide the safest route to affection or intimacy for many whites, for it is "the clearest example of the split between sexuality and motherhood present in Eurocentric masculinist thought" (84).

³¹ Louisa Davis Minot to William Minot, May 14, 1838, Louisa Davis Minot Papers, SCL.

child ended as many did: the girl was “taken out and lashed,” while the baby “grew into a self-willed girl, and in after years was the cause of much trouble to me.”³²

Though some whites and blacks acknowledged their engagement and dependence on one another, many slaveowners had little respect for the ties that created extended networks of support on a plantation, both black and white. When Elizabeth Keckley’s mother was almost put to work outside of the family, Elizabeth violently protested, since “she had been raised in the family, had watched the growth of each child from infancy to maturity, . . . and she was wound round about them as the vine winds itself about the rugged oak.”³³ Frederick Douglass’s grandmother, who had cared for him and most other enslaved children when she served as a nurse, was bereft of all her charges by the time she was too old to work.

Douglass’s description of her isolation shows how much she was dependent on the presence of children – her own or others – to extract joy from life. “The hearth is desolate,” Douglass wrote. “The children, the unconscious children, who once sang and danced in her presence, are gone.” His grandmother, alone, became a piteous figure, a glaring example of the cruelty of human separation:

Instead of the voices of her children, she hears by day the moans of the dove, and by night the screams of the hideous owl. . . . My poor old grandmother, the devoted mother of twelve children, is left all alone, in yonder little hut, before a few dim embers. She stands--she sits--she staggers--she falls--she groans--she dies--and there are none of her children or grandchildren present, to wipe from her wrinkled brow the cold sweat of death, or to place beneath the sod her fallen remains. Will not a righteous God visit for these things?³⁴

³² Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley, *Behind the Scenes, Or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House* (New York: G. W. Carleton, 1868), 19-21.

³³ Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley, *Behind the Scenes, Or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House* (New York: G. W. Carleton, 1868), 44-5.

³⁴ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself* (Boston: American Anti-slavery Society, 1845), 49.

Though many men and women who were sold away from their loved ones attempted to hold onto some thread of contact, most simply lost touch altogether, and women like this grandmother receded into the shadows, unpitied by owners who did not recognize that familial ties among slaves were as vital as those among their masters.

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Mothers were careful to teach their children about the role of community in their lives, for as difficult as it was to maintain ties in slavery, mothers had to make sure their sons and daughters would be fighting to keep loved ones close, just as they had done.³⁵ When Sojourner Truth's mother told the little girl about the role of God in protecting slaves, she also mentioned the importance of "the chain of family affection." Rather than limiting this to the children gathered around her knee at the fireplace, she emphasized a much longer chain, one which would "connect the widely scattered members of her precious flock" and which she wanted to "strengthen and brighten." This mother envisioned a community that extended well beyond those physically present – perhaps including the parents and siblings and cousins and friends that had been long since sold away – and she told her children about the powers of this far-flung network in the same breath as she taught the powers of God. Her message stuck; Sojourner Truth "treasured up and held sacred" her mother's words well into

³⁵ Emily West has estimated, for instance, that thirty-four percent of marriages between enslaved men and women in antebellum South Carolina were cross-plantation unions. Despite distance, both partners generally worked tirelessly to maintain those emotional bonds. Emily West, "The Debate on the Strength of Slave Families: South Carolina and the Importance of Cross-Plantation Marriages," *Journal of American Studies* 33, no. 2 (1999): 221-241; and Emily West, "'He come sometimes widout de pass': Rethinking Cross-Plantation Marriages and Enslaved Families in Antebellum South Carolina," in *Family Values in the Old South*, eds. Craig Thompson Friend and Anya Jabour (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010), 42-61. Betty Wood estimated that nearly half of the enslaved mothers in the late eighteenth-century Georgia Lowcountry lived without their husbands. Betty Wood, "Some Aspects of Female Resistance to Chattel Slavery in Low Country Georgia, 1763-1815," *The Historical Journal* 30, no. 3 (1987): 603-622.

her adulthood.³⁶ Enslaved women in the South offered similar lessons about the power of distant kin, and some of these aunts and cousins provided tangible assistance to children in need. When Sally Williams escaped, she took her children to the house of “Aunt Marthy,” who worked as a washerwoman several miles away but whom Sally knew would “let me an’ de chil’n stay with her.” When Sally arrived at Marthy’s house a few hours after midnight, the old woman took her in “with open arms, without manifesting much surprise at her appearance” and let the young family stay with her for several months. Her son, who had been part of this midnight escape, was later sold to Alabama on his own, where he remembered his mother’s reliance on family. He located Mary Ann Williams, a distant cousin living in Mobile, and asked if she could help him find his lost mother. After several months of searching and letter-writing, Mary Ann finally discovered where Sally had been sold and engineered the reunion of mother and son.³⁷

Other enslaved women memorialized their networks through meticulous genealogy, which was passed down to their children so that they would always remember an aunt’s name or an uncle’s birth date, even when they were no longer present. Lucretia “Cretia” Stewart began her note taking in a massive Bible given to her by a white mistress in 1856, though the details themselves may be in her mistress’s hand. The records begin in 1807 with Cretia’s own birth (“daughter of Lucy”) and pick up again in 1826 with that of her first child. Cretia’s thirteen children – one named after her mother and another after her husband – were born between 1826 and 1847, but taking pen to paper in 1856, or dictating to her mistress,

³⁶ Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern Slave, Emancipated from Bodily Servitude by the State of New York, in 1828*, ed. Olive Gilbert (Boston: The Author, 1850), 18.

³⁷ Sally Williams, *Aunt Sally: or, The Cross the Way of Freedom. A Narrative of the Slave-life and Purchase of the Mother of Rev. Isaac Williams, of Detroit, Michigan* (Cincinnati: Western Tract and Book Society, 1858), 70-72, 14-15.

she remembered all their birthdays, having stored up those precious dates in her memory or perhaps copied them from a more informal record she had kept on her own. She marked her children's marriages and her grandchildren's deaths through the 1860s, and by the 1870s, another hand took over. In cramped penciling, this new (and newly freed) writer recorded the deaths of Cretia's children and the births of her grandchildren; one can only surmise that Cretia passed the Bible, with its knowledge, to one of her sons or daughters, who took on the task of recording the next generation of momentous events. Of her children's five marriages, three of them resulted in grandchildren named Cretia, demonstrating that familial memories were passed down not just in writing, but also through the act of naming. As birth notices continued through the 1890s, the Stewarts were joined by the Chisholms, the Campbells, and the Powells, and a single family spun out to include a host of other relatives, an ever-broadening web of potential support. A third hand took over by the 1940s, when the last recorded Cretia passed away: "Mrs. Lucretia Stewart Died January 12, 1941, 4:20 pm 29 King St. Charleston SC."³⁸

Even after they left the security – if such a word can be used – of their mothers' homes, black men and women continued to seek reconnections with relatives and friends, and the yearnings for a past community speak to the strength of those early bonds that mothers cultivated. Samuel Tayler grew up on a plantation near Charleston, but after being sold to Mobile in the 1830s, he found a way to send a letter home. He wrote his mistress, perhaps the only person he knew who could read and certainly the only person who could reunite him with his loved ones, and confessed, "My mind is always [sic] dwelling on home, relations, and friends which I would give the world to see." He suggested that his mistress

³⁸ Lucretia Stewart's Bible, Peter Manigault Collection, SCHS.

buy him back, assuring her “how happy I would be to serve you and your heirs.” His real motivation, of course, was proximity to a community now lost to him. Even if she refused to purchase him, Samuel begged to hear “how all my relations are” and asked her to “remember me also to Sarah, my ma-ma, and Charlotte, my old fellow servant, and Amy Tayler,” who was perhaps his wife.³⁹ By naming these three women, Samuel illustrated a fact common to many boys and girls growing up in the South: while mothers were often their most beloved relations, they were successfully brought to adulthood by a host of women (and men) who supplemented the maternal role and ensured that mothers never had to work entirely alone.

The correspondence between Matilda Turner and Jane Gurley reveals a complex web of affectionate, though often severed, bonds that could exist between black and white mothers. Matilda, a former slave of Jane’s, wrote two letters to her former mistress in North Carolina in the 1830s. The first informed Jane of Matilda’s situation in life – “all the family are living at Doctor Jones yet except Ant Lysun and James they are highered out in brownsville.” Already we catch a glimpse of a family that is larger than a mother and her children. There is an aunt and another relative who have moved with them to Tennessee but find themselves separated once again. It becomes apparent that some of this family was also left behind; Matilda asked Jane to “please to give my love to Sister family and her too children,” and to “please to give my love to my farther.” She also requested that Jane “please doo wright as soon as you get this,” and part of the reason for Matilda’s insistence may have been that Jane was her only conduit of family news. In her second letter, Matilda confessed, “I have been long anxiously waighting to heer whether my father was living and how my

³⁹ Samuel Tayler to Elizabeth Frances Blyth, September 2, 1838, in *The South Carolina Rice Plantation as Revealed in the Papers of Robert F. W. Allston*, ed. J. H. Easterby (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 339.

Sister and Childran was.” While she waited for this information, she updated Jane on her ever-widening family circle. One of the women living with her had recently married and given birth, while another had four children and continued to do well. “Aunt Maray is dead,” however, but “Drue and Charlatt is still wall . . . and uncle Simon is allsow wall,” along with his owner, John Sevier. Matilda herself had “gott a fine sun” and named him William, “after your little sun.” In conclusion, Matilda wrote, “I and all the balance of our people is all wall and gives their bast love to you.” The myriad connections between whites and blacks in this story hint at a set of relationships that extended beyond master and slave. There is an implicit understanding that family, in all its messy expansiveness, is important no matter what the race, and that women maintain a significant role in greasing the wheels of communication. Even Mrs. Sevier, the wife of Uncle Simon’s owner, used the opportunity of Matilda’s letter to send Jane, another white woman, her love.⁴⁰ Black women could not raise their children alone; like white women, but for different reasons, black mothers used a network of supporters to keep their sanity and to use the love of their community to raise the healthiest children possible.

Maintaining a sense of family across great distance was a challenge for many black mothers, but they seized every opportunity. One enslaved father in Virginia gained permission to visit his daughter in another town, and his owner recorded matter-of-factly that “his wife petitions to accompany him.”⁴¹ Sometimes white “aunts” visited their former slaves. Ferdinand came to Washington, D.C., in 1825 to visit his relatives, but he contracted a fever that ended in his death a few months later. During his illness, the family that used to

⁴⁰ Matilda Turner to Jane Gurley, September 8, 1830, September 9, 1836, Jane Gurley Papers, SHC.

⁴¹ Frances Tucker Coalter to John Coalter, September 12, 1810, Brown, Coalter, Tucker Papers, WM.

own him “did all we could to afford him comfort in his last moments” and “visited him frequently.” According to the white woman who had grown up beside him, “all his conversation was about our family, . . . and his last wish and desire was to see ‘old Mistress’ so he called Mother.” It is difficult to imagine the pleasantries that must have passed between this paternalistic white family and the “relatives” that Ferdinand had initially come to Washington to see. Their identities and personalities are not detailed by the white observer, but it seems that her interest in Ferdinand was genuine; her family attended his funeral, which was paid for by her father, and her grief at his passing seems sincere. Her family clearly claimed some part of Ferdinand’s heart, even though we know less about the “relatives” who likely claimed more.⁴²

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The “aunts” described here, from grandmothers and female friends to white mistresses and even black children, all played a role in creating a broad maternal community on which black mothers, enslaved and free, relied. Not all of these relationships were wholly stable or universally benevolent, but the presence of other women on plantations, in households, and within cities ensured that African and African American mothers could retain a sense of maternal purpose even when their most basic maternal duties were denied them. If a woman was not allowed to watch over her one-year-old child, she knew that Grandmother or Aunt Comfort would. When she died, the child would be watched by cousin Annikie or perhaps the white mistress. These relationships exceeded the bounds of black families; when white children were orphaned, they would be nursed by black women, and when white babies’ cradles needed rocking, they could look to the hands of black girls.

⁴² Helen MacLeod to Donald MacLeod, September 4, 1826, MacLeod Family Papers, VHS.

Motherhood was necessarily broadly defined for black women, as it was for both white and Indian women in varying ways, but the broadness of that identity took nothing away from the power of the role and the sense of accomplishment that came when a vulnerable child became a healthy adult.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

BLACK SUFFERERS

The challenge in dividing black women's maternal identities into separate and distinct roles for the purposes of illustration and investigation is that the role of sufferer tinged nearly every action in which they engaged. To define a separate category of "sufferer," then, seems arbitrary. But it is imperative to disengage this role from the others; too often, black women in slavery have been viewed by historians, when they are considered at all, as nothing more than victims, beaten down by an ugly system.¹ It is impossible, however, for individuals to weigh their oppression every hour of every day. At some point, there must be room for resistance, for joy, for family. This chapter digs into the heart of the violence against black mothers, their pain and their loss. In the end, their suffering reveals, rather than obscures, their struggles for power.

¹ Some of the best works to reject this trend include Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985), Sharla M. Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), and Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). Suzanne Lebsack has sought to analyze the relationship between free black women's seeming power (economic independence, heading up households) and obvious oppression, and concluded that "for free black women, the high rate of gainful employment and the high incidence of female-headed households were symptoms of oppression. Neither was chosen from a position of strength; both were products of a shortage of men and of chronic economic deprivation." I agree that these choices were not made from "a position of strength," but the fact that choices were being made at all speaks to women's need to feel a sense of control over their own lives. Lebsack, "Free Black Women and the Question of Matriarchy: Petersburg, Virginia, 1784-1820," *Feminist Studies* 8, no. 2 (1982): 271-292, quote on p. 287.

Black women in the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century South found themselves caught in a world of brutality.² Like white women, they were sexually assaulted, and like black men, they performed forced labor and endured beatings. But as mothers, both enslaved and free black women encountered a unique array of violent situations, for with children came a new species of vulnerability. Black mothers found themselves fighting for both their own and their children's health and happiness within a slaveowning culture that devalued the black family and sold children from their mothers as easily as livestock. Within this world of suffering, black mothers learned to distinguish degrees of violence. Stretching over every aspect of most black mothers' lives was the umbrella of enslavement, an term that encompassed the daily and institutionalized violence of abuse, torture, psychological damage, and rape. This was violence on one of the largest scales imaginable, a violence that infiltrated bodies and souls for generations. Mothers processed the breadth of this oppression by breaking it down into its component parts and by discerning a sliding scale of abuses, for, like all mothers in the South, they needed to make educated decisions about how best to protect their families. When a woman petitioned for a job in the master's house, she knew that such a position would make her more vulnerable to beatings from her mistress and sexual abuse, but she was also aware that being close to the kitchen would provide opportunities for sneaking food. Staying in the field would allow her more personal independence, but she would most likely be separated from her children. These were the degrees of violence mothers had to negotiate. But violence was not limited to the hands of whites; it invaded black women's homes, as some mothers beat their children to teach them

² Mark Schantz has traced the ways in which slavery was equated with metaphorical death in the antebellum black imagination. See Mark S. Schantz, *Awaiting the Heavenly Country: The Civil War and America's Culture of Death* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 126-162.

how to avoid the whip of the master, and others killed their children to save them from enslavement. Certain abuses could become protective measures in the hands of women who were charged with the task of raising children in one of the most violent landscapes in American history. Acts of violence structured and sometimes defined their lives, but rather than submitting, rather than abandoning volition, these women took advantage of their limited range of choice. More than any other population, black mothers learned systems of violence so intricately that they were able to develop complex and nuanced distinctions between the different evils they confronted, which in turn offered them some hint of control in their lives and the lives of their children.

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The first level of violence that mothers encountered was watching their young children sicken and die, tragedies which women could alleviate but rarely avoid. Like all women in the early South, black mothers witnessed high infant mortality rates, and the death of children could be devastating. Due to limited access to medical care, poor food supplies, and lack of oversight, black children fell victim to the infections, accidents, and general violence of the early South at high rates; over half of the children conceived in nineteenth-century slavery perished before they grew old enough to labor for their masters.³ The

³ William Postell's assessment that slave health was comparable to their owners' health in the antebellum South has largely been overturned. William Dosité Postell, *The Health of Slaves on Southern Plantations* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951). See Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 110-111; Leslie Howard Owens, *This Species of Property: Slave Life and Culture in the Old South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 40-41; Richard H. Steckel, "A Dreadful Childhood: The Excess Mortality of American Slaves," *Social Science History* 10, no. 4 (1986): 427-465. Steckel observes the infant mortality rate among slaves to be 30-35%, while the average weight of newborn enslaved children hovered around five pounds. See Richard H. Steckel, "Birth Weights and Infant Mortality among American Slaves," *Explorations in Economic History* 23, no. 2 (1986): 174. By 1850, enslaved women suffered a child mortality rate twice that of white women. See Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 35-36; Jack Ericson Eblen, "New Estimates of the Vital Rates of the United States Black Population During the Nineteenth Century," *Demography* 11, no. 2

frequency of infant death led many whites to accuse enslaved mothers of smothering, or accidentally suffocating their children while sleeping with them at night. While this assessment fed into the trope of the careless black mother, the rate of smothering was actually a reflection of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), a condition common in malnourished and overworked populations.⁴ Of the thirteen births recorded among enslaved women on the Ford plantation in South Carolina between 1809 and 1823, four of those children died within three years of their birth.⁵ Of the 139 children that were born into slavery between 1787 and 1825 on Isaac Hite's Virginia plantation, sixty-nine died or were sold away from their mothers.⁶ Such losses were difficult for both mothers and communities to cope with. Children died from dropsy, from dysentery, from malnutrition.⁷ In 1830, an outbreak of dysentery hit a South Carolina plantation, wreaking havoc among slave families; Tenah lost her daughter Lucy on January 31, her daughter Daphne in February, and passed away herself on February 27. We do not know whether she left other children behind, whose

(1974): 301-319. Poor nutrition available to plantation slaves did not help child mortality rates; for a litany of possible ailments, from lockjaw to worms, see Kenneth F. Kiple and Virginia H. Kiple, "Slave Child Mortality: Some Nutritional Answers to a Perennial Puzzle," *Journal of Social History* 10, no. 3 (1977): 284-309.

⁴ Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974), 126; Todd L. Savitt, "Smothering and Overlaying of Virginia Slave Children: A Suggested Explanation," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 49, no. 3 (1975): 400-404; Michael P. Johnson, "Smothered Slave Infants: Were Slave Mothers at Fault?," *Journal of Southern History* 47, no. 4 (1981): 493-520. For more on white Southerner's haste to blame black mothers, see V. Lynn Kennedy, *Born Southern: Childbirth, Motherhood, and Social Networks in the Old South* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 29-30.

⁵ Ford Family Papers, SCL.

⁶ "List of my negroes & their ages," Isaac Hite Commonplace Book, VHS.

⁷ November 19, 1812, Ford Family Papers, SCL; John Haywood to Eliza Haywood, January 6, 1817, Haywood Family Papers, SHC; January 29, 1830, Davison McDowell Plantation Journal (1815-1833), Davison McDowell Papers, SCL.

care would need to be absorbed by the remaining slaves on the plantation.⁸ When children perished, slaveowners typically marked them as economic losses rather than emotional ones. David Yates calmly informed his mother in a postscript that “black Emma had a child a few days ago but it is dead.”⁹ John Haywood of Raleigh relayed a spate of slave deaths to his son and heir in 1827:

We have been quite unfortunate with our black People in course of the last six or eight Months, having lost one man, one woman, one Girl, a Child of two or three years of age, and an Infant. And having down at this time a large Girl of 7 or 8 years of age, and a smaller one of 12 or 18 months, both very like to die and both of whom I fear will die; after all the doctoring and attention bestowed on them, not to mention the supplies of Sugars, Coffee, Molasses, Flour &c. &c. which have been and still are daily or weekly furnished them.

John’s primary concern was the loss of costly laborers and the valuable supplies used to sustain them. He added that “the white family generally are in health.”¹⁰ What this account ignores, of course, are the mothers who lost those infants and toddlers, and the holes such ravaging left in the slave quarters.

Many enslaved mothers who lost children endured suffering that was compounded by slaveowners’ almost complete disregard for the emotions of maternity. In 1838, a white woman in Virginia gave birth to a “very feeble” infant and could not successfully nurse the child. Her husband, a doctor, asked a neighbor if he could borrow an enslaved woman who had recently given birth to come serve as a wet nurse. The neighbor responded with regret, “I am very sorry that my woman is not able to go over, her infant was only a week old today and died about 12 o’clock.” While the neighbor deemed this woman physically unable to

⁸ January 29, February 12, February 16, February 27, 1830, Davison McDowell Plantation Journal (1815-1833), Davison McDowell Papers, SCL.

⁹ David Yates to Elizabeth A. Yates, July 20, 1824, Yates Family Correspondence, SCHS.

¹⁰ John Haywood to Fabius Haywood, March 27, 1827, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

travel, given the recent birth, he nonetheless offered her services, provided the white child could be sent over to his house to be nursed. Otherwise, “she shall go over as soon as she gets out and stay as long as you wish.”¹¹ What must this woman have felt, to have her own child perish and a white child pressed on her breast within a matter of hours? This is one of countless moments in which white and black definitions of black motherhood collided, leaving white mothers’ needs met, and black mothers’ emotions denied.

For some women, the loss of a child elicited a pain that was tinged with something almost like relief, for many enslaved mothers endured a near-constant tension between love for their children and the agony of raising them in slavery. When children died and left a mother’s power, they also relieved her of an underlying sense of powerlessness. Lydia told a fellow slave that “she was rejoiced that her child was dead, and out of a world in which slavery and wretchedness must have been its only portion.” Now, she said, she was simply “ready to follow my child, and the sooner I go, the better for me.”¹² Harriet Jacobs noted “what mockery it is for a slave mother to try to pray back her dying child to life!” “Death,” as she sometimes believed, “is better than slavery.”¹³ Though most mothers did earnestly attempt to pray their ailing children back to life, many women nonetheless felt the irony of wishing a child alive and enslaved. One historian has identified childrearing under slavery as a “nearly unbearable burden,” and for those women who believed that raising children was

¹¹ John Peter Mettauer to Thomas Vernon, Thomas Vernon to John Peter Mettauer, August 20, 1838, John Peter Mettauer Papers, VHS.

¹² Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, a Black Man, Who Lived Forty Years in Maryland, South Carolina and Georgia as a Slave*, ed. Isaac Fisher (New York: John S. Taylor, 1837), 265.

¹³ Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, ed. Lydia Maria Child (Boston: Published for the Author, 1861), 96.

indeed unbearable, the death of a child, whether accidental or intentional, could occasionally lift that weight.¹⁴

Children were also vulnerable to the violence of masters and mistresses, despite mothers' best efforts to teach them to avoid provoking a white person's wrath. On one plantation in Maryland, as on many others, enslaved women had to leave their children under the care of another while they worked in the fields, and if the children found themselves hungry and approached the great house for a "crust of bread," the mistress would "take her cowhide and lay it well upon the poor little innocents for coming up to the house."¹⁵ While Malinda Bibb worked in the fields, her young daughter "was left at the house to creep under the feet of an unmerciful old mistress," who beat the child whenever she cried for her mother. One afternoon, the girl returned home with her face "bruised black with the whole print of Mrs. Gatewood's hand," a bruise that lasted for eight days. Malinda's husband bemoaned the plight of enslaved parents: "Who can imagine what could be the feelings of a father and mother, when looking upon their infant child whipped and tortured with impunity, and they placed in a situation where they could afford it no protection."¹⁶ John Thompson's mother wept nightly as she tended her son's wounds, but "her tears must be dried and her sobs hushed, . . . and she, unrefreshed, must shake off her dull slumbers, and repair, at break of day, to the field, leaving her little ones to a similar, or perhaps, worse fate on the coming

¹⁴ Christopher Morris, "Within the Slave Cabin: Violence in Mississippi Slave Families," in *Over the Threshold: Intimate Violence in Early America*, eds. Christine Daniels and Michael V. Kennedy (New York: Routledge, 1999), 276.

¹⁵ William Green, *Narrative of Events in the Life of William Green, (Formerly a Slave.) Written by Himself* (Springfield, MA: L. M. Guernsey, 1853), 9.

¹⁶ Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York: The Author, 1849), 42-3.

day.”¹⁷ Lewis Charlton’s mother was forced to relinquish her infant son to her mistress, who kept the boy “from four o’clock in the morning to nine o’clock in the evening, without anything to eat or drink, or any fire to keep me warm.” One winter night, the child kicked off his thin covering and, exposed for several hours, developed frostbite on his feet. His mother wrapped them in a poultice when she returned, but “when next morning she removed the poultice my toes came off with it as though they had been cut off with a sharp, keen knife.”¹⁸ Mothers could offer medicine and their own embracing arms to soothe their abused children, but they could almost never prevent violence from being inflicted.

Children who survived their infancy became vulnerable to sale, and many mothers saw this level of violence as an opening for vocal resistance, if only through weeping and protestations. When fever felled a child, mothers could only point to the heavens for blame, but when living men and women attempted to take away their children, mothers found a tangible foe against whom to direct their rage. Few Southern slaveowners had compunctions about separating husbands from wives and parents from children, and the resulting network of shattered families shaped maternal identities.¹⁹ Where white women brought distant kin closer through correspondence, involving faraway friends and relatives in their intellectual

¹⁷ John Thompson, *The Life of John Thompson, a Fugitive Slave; Containing His History of 25 Years in Bondage, and His Providential Escape. Written by Himself* (Worcester, MA: J. Thompson, 1856), 21.

¹⁸ Lewis Charlton, *Sketch of the Life of Mr. Lewis Charlton, and Reminiscences of Slavery*. Ed. Edward Everett Brown (Portland, ME: Daily Press, 1870?), 1-2.

¹⁹ Though the separation of husbands and wives was common, there has been some debate about the extent of this practice, using the longevity of recorded slave marriages as one kind of measure. Herbert Gutman uses data mostly from the 1860s to argue that many slave couples in the Upper South were in the midst of fairly lengthy marriages at the point of emancipation, though he also records the frequency of forcible separations among registered slaves in the Lower South. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 9-18, 146-155;. Deborah Gray White notes, however, that not all of these marriages were voluntary or represent enslaved people’s sense of their own families. See White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*, 148-151.

lives and childrearing decisions, black women watched their family spin uncontrollably away. After watching his mother break down in tears when he was sold from her side, William Grimes later observed, “There is nothing in slavery, perhaps, more painful, than the unavoidable separation of parents and children. It is not uncommon to hear mothers say, that they have half a dozen children, but the Lord only knows where they are.”²⁰ Without their children as proofs of their maternity, how could black women see themselves as mothers? William Hayden remembered being separated from his mother at age five, and from then on, “no mother’s smiles were decreed to welcome me—no maternal words to soothe my pains, . . . naught but the clanking chains of slavery.”²¹ Although many women were separated from their children, they kept their maternity alive by never forgetting their lost children, pursuing them when and if they gained their freedom, and by investing in the remaining women and children in their community.

Nineteenth-century slave narratives, typically written for abolitionist purposes, frequently highlighted the anguish of those initial separations and the authors’ resulting joy if they returned to the South to locate their mothers. The frequency of this tale – the separation, the successful escape to the North, and the dangerous flight back into a slave state to rescue, or at least catch a glimpse of, the bereft mother – speaks both to the commonness of such a scenario and to the symbolic power of the enslaved mother, and mother more generally, in the popular (Northern) consciousness. For these writers and their audiences, no image could be more poignant than that of a beloved mother kept under the abuses of slavery and an

²⁰ William Grimes, *Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave, Written by Himself* (New York: The Author, 1825), 8, 16.

²¹ William Hayden, *Narrative of William Hayden, Containing a Faithful Account of His Travels for a Number of Years, Whilst a Slave, in the South. Written by Himself* (Cincinnati: The Author, 1846), 20.

impotent son, unable to save her. Harriet Jacobs, for instance, directed her bleak vignettes at white mothers, asking them to imagine the enslaved mother's predicament. The slave mother, she wrote, is subject to "peculiar sorrows." On New Year's Day, when other families are celebrating,

she sits on her cold cabin floor, watching the children who may all be torn from her the next morning; and often does she wish that she and they might die before the day dawns. She may be an ignorant creature, degraded by the system that has brutalized her from childhood; but she has a mother's instincts, and is capable of feeling a mother's agonies.²²

Harriet Jacobs not only expressed the real maternal agony she suffered under slavery; she also tapped into larger cultural assumptions about appropriate mothering and the duties of women to their children, a carefully gendered system whose disruption under slavery provided grist for abolitionist mills.²³

²² Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself*, ed. Lydia Maria Child (Boston: The Author, 1861), 26.

²³ Much analysis, both historical and literary, has been directed at the genre of the slave narrative. While most scholars recognize its highly constructed and self-conscious nature, many still find that some truths – or at least refractions of truths – can be mined from their pages. My heavy use of slave narratives and their depictions of mothers relies on the nearly guaranteed maternal mention in this genre and the ways in which this frequent trope mirrored the actual familial arrangements of most enslaved men and women. In other words, so many ex-slaves told of their mothers not only because motherhood was a sacred symbol in Victorian America, but because the childhood experiences of enslaved peoples revolved so centrally around their mothers. While descriptions of mothers may have been embellished by amanuenses seeking to promote visions of Christian domesticity, the presence of influential maternal bodies is hardly anomalous. Because of this historical basis, I tend to use slave narratives as a fairly reliable source, within obvious parameters. See U.B. Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1929); Gilbert Osofsky, *Puttin' on ole Massa: The Slave Narratives of Henry Bibb, William Wells Brown and Solomon Northup* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969); John Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), xvii-lxv; Stephen Butterfield, *Black Autobiography in America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1974); Robert Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979); John Sekora and Darwin Turner, *The Art of Slave Narrative: Original Essays in Criticism and Theory* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982); Sterling Bland, Jr., *Voices of the Fugitives: Runaway Slave Stories and their Stories of Self-Creation* (Westport: Praeger, 2000); John Ernest, *Liberation Historiography: African American Writers and the Challenge of History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 155-217; Jermaine O. Archer, *Antebellum Slave Narratives: Cultural and Political Expressions of Africa* (New York: Routledge, 2009); and

Mothers who lost children through forcible separations had their sense of maternal control mocked by slaveowners and traders, but though this caused tremendous suffering, it did not diminish women's daily fight for their families' best interests. Familial separation did not begin in the Americas; most of the men and women who crossed the Middle Passage had been torn from parents, children, and extended family.²⁴ When three-year-old John Joseph was captured by an enemy tribe in West Africa, he recalled being "savagely dragged . . . from the arms of a dear distracted mother," a phenomenon that would become painfully familiar to black women and children in the South.²⁵ One mother in North Carolina watched as a slave trader entered her home and took her son from her side, who was clutching his mother's skirts in panic. The child looked up at her, "begging her to protect me," and all the woman could do was cry out "in broken words, 'I can't save you, Tommy; master has sold you, you must go.'" As the boy was dragged out, the mother followed the slave driver, "imploing a moment's delay and weeping aloud, to the road, where he turned around, and striking at her with his heavy cowhide, fiercely ordered her to stop bawling, and go back into the house."²⁶ Moses Grandy wrote that during the sale of his little brother, "my mother,

DoVeanna S. Fulton Minor and Reginald H. Pitts, *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts: Three African American Women's Oral Slave Narratives* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 1-38.

²⁴ For a discussion of social death and the Middle Passage, see Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 57-61. See also Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

²⁵ John Joseph, *The Life and Sufferings of John Joseph, a Native of Ashantee, in West Africa Who Was Stolen from His Parents at the Age of 3 Years, and Sold to Mr. Johnston, a Cotton Planter in New Orleans, South America* (Wellington, New Zealand: J. Greedy, 1848), 4. For more on the process of slave raids and the connections between slavery and warfare in Africa, see John K. Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, 1998), 98-109 and 305-317.

²⁶ Thomas H. Jones, *Experience and Personal Narrative of Uncle Tom Jones: Who Was for Forty Years a Slave* (Boston: H. B. Skinner, 1854), 8-9.

frantic with grief, resisted their taking her child away: she was beaten and held down; she fainted; and when she came to herself, her boy was gone. She made much outcry, for which the master tied her up to a peach tree in the yard, and flogged her.”²⁷ In 1785, Charles Ball’s mother pleaded with the trader, “Oh, master, do not take me from my child!” The man snatched away young Charles, dealt his mother several blows with a whip, and rode away. “As we advanced,” Ball wrote, “the cries of my poor parent became more and more indistinct—at length they died away in the distance, and I never again heard the voice of my poor mother.”²⁸ As common as sales were, mothers still fought them, clutching at children, screaming at traders, and running after wagons loaded down with boys and girls.

Frederick Douglass observed that slaveowners often separated mothers and children, if not through sale then through distance, placing the children under the care of another slave when mothers were hired out to distant plantations. He could not understand the purpose of this cruelty, “unless it be to hinder the development of the child’s affection toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child,” for, he added, “this is the inevitable result.” From the slaveowner’s perspective, this tactic was designed to maximize profits, and the effect of inhibiting mothers’ direct power over their children was simply an added benefit. Frederick’s own mother was hired out when he was still very young, and he saw her but “four or five times in my life.” She traveled after the sun had set, traversing the twelve miles between the plantations on foot to sit by the boy’s side. The child did not remember “ever seeing my mother by the light of day. She was with me in

²⁷ Grandy, Moses, *Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy, Late a Slave in the United States of America* (London: Gilpin, 1843), 7-8.

²⁸ Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, a Black Man, Who Lived Forty Years in Maryland, South Carolina and Georgia as a Slave*, ed. Isaac Fisher (New York: John S. Taylor, 1837), 17-18.

the night. She would lie down with me, and get me to sleep, but long before I waked she was gone.” This mother, defying separation by sheer determination, died when Frederick was seven, and the nighttime visits ceased.²⁹

Children found it equally difficult to be separated from their mothers. When John Brown was sold from his mother Nancy, he “was so stupified with grief and fright, that I could not shed a tear, though my heart was bursting.” His mother ran after him and the slave trader, “stretching out her hands after me,” and John watched helplessly as she “begged and prayed to be allowed to kiss me for the last time.”³⁰ Henry Box Brown, sold from his mother as a thirteen-year-old in 1828, summed up many children’s feelings when he described, “I missed her smiling look when her eye rested upon my form; and when I returned from my daily toil, weary and dejected, no fond mother’s arms were extended to meet me, no one appeared to sympathize with me, and I felt I was indeed alone in the world.”³¹

Every time a mother or child was sold on the blocks, an enormous emotional severance took place, while the notion that a mother had some control over her child’s fate was repeatedly undermined. At one slave sale, two young pregnant women were touted by their trader as being “the best breeding-wenches in all Maryland”; the twenty-two-year-old woman had already borne seven children, while the nineteen-year-old had four, and the trader attested that “he had himself seen the children at the time he bought their mothers.”³²

²⁹ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself* (Boston: American Anti-slavery Society, 1845), 2-3.

³⁰ John Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia: A Narrative of the Life, Sufferings, and Escape of John Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Now in England*, ed. Louis Alexis Chamerovzow (London: W. M. Watts, 1855), 15.

³¹ Henry Box Brown, *Narrative of Henry Box Brown, Who Escaped from Slavery Enclosed in a Box 3 Feet Long and 2 Wide. Written from a Statement of Facts Made by Himself. With, Remarks Upon the Remedy for Slavery*, ed. Charles Stearns (Boston: Brown and Stearns. 1849), 37.

³² Ball, *Slavery in the United States*, 72.

While these two women stood to lose the children they had begun bearing when they were at least fifteen, they may also have been leaving behind their own mothers, who may have ached to see their daughters become mothers so soon. Motherhood was certainly a profitable trait in the slave trade, but a woman's maternal marketability often made her more vulnerable to separation from her children, those very beings that made her a mother.³³

The power of enslaved mothers becomes clear when we trace the impressions they left on their children, for even when children were separated from their mothers at a young age, the maternal image was rarely erased. Scenes of escaped or sold children reuniting with mothers became a trope of slave narratives, and their literary power speaks to the seeming naturalness of such impulses.³⁴ For white readers, a child desperately seeking its mother made perfect sense, and these stories reinvested enslaved families with a humanity that seemed founded in such instincts. Henry Watson "resolved . . . to bear with all patiently, till I became large enough to run away, and search for my mother."³⁵ George White's mother saw her son sold from her "at the age of one year and a half." When the boy was nineteen, he was he moved by "such a sense of filial affection" that he sought out his enslaved mother. His master permitted him one day of leave to make the visit, and George struggled to describe the emotional tremors of "our joyful interview of mingling anguish." He begged the reader to

³³ See Morgan, *Laboring Women*, especially pp. 69-106.

³⁴ For more on familial separations, escapes, and reunions, see Thomas L. Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers: Education in the Slave Quarter Community, 1831-1865* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 111-117.

³⁵ Henry Watson, *Narrative of Henry Watson, a Fugitive Slave. Written by Himself* (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1848), 5-6.

imagine “the first meeting, of a parent lost, and a child unknown.”³⁶ When Milcah Berry saw her son again, she begged to know every detail of his life since he had been away, and “the night glided swiftly away, whilst we related to each other what we had passed through the four or five years we had been separated.”³⁷ After two years spent among the Cherokees, John Marrant returned to his South Carolina home in disguise and asked his mother about her children; she replied that “her daughters were in good health, of her two sons, one was well, and with her, but the other--.” The mother, overcome, “burst into a flood of tears, and retired.”³⁸ Moses Roper also chose to tease his mother when he returned to her home after ten years of separation; he asked “if she knew me,” and then “if she had any sons,” before finally revealing his identity. When his mother at last saw her son in this stranger, “in an instant we were clasped in each other’s arms, amidst the ardent interchange of caresses and tears of joy.” Though some children were able to find their mothers once more, few were able to rescue them from enslavement. Moses Roper spoke for many enslaved men and women when he swore that “nothing would contribute so much to my entire happiness . . . as to be able to purchase the freedom of so beloved a parent.”³⁹

³⁶ George White, *A Brief Account of the Life, Experience, Travels, and Gospel Labours of George White, an African: Written by Himself, and Revised by a Friend* (New York: John C. Totten, 1810), 5-6.

³⁷ James Watkins, *Narrative of the Life of James Watkins, formerly a “Chattel” in Maryland, U. S. Containing an Account of His Escape from Slavery, Together with an Appeal on Behalf of Three Millions of Such “Pieces of Property,” Still Held Under the Standard of the Eagle* (Bolton, Eng.: Kenyon and Abbatt, 1852), 29-30.

³⁸ John Marrant, *A Narrative of the Lord’s Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black*, ed. Rev. Mr. Aldridge, 5th ed. (London: Gilbert and Plummer, 1785), 32.

³⁹ Moses Roper, *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn; London: Darton, Harvey and Darton, 1838), 33-35, 87-88.

Virginian William Hayden was sold from his mother Alcy Shelton, a midwife, at age five, but Alcy refused to give up her child so easily; she commissioned a traveling preacher to search for the boy, since she was “much distressed on my account, thinking that when I was taken away, I was too young to be raised.” After William was sold to Kentucky and later New Orleans, he finally made his way back to Virginia with the one goal of seeing Alcy. For this son, no man’s feeling was “more strong and binding, even unto death, than the feeling of love for his mother.” The bond between mother and son was made all the more precious because it was tenuous, and a child’s love for parents “can be but poorly appreciated . . . until he is torn rudely from their protecting arms, and consigned to waste his youth and manhood in exile from their presence.” Like John Marrant and Moses Roper, William Hayden tested his mother upon his return before announcing his identity. He asked Alcy if she had a son, and she replied that “he had been taken from her . . . when he was but an infant, and carried to the South, from which she had never looked for his return. . . . That her heart throbbed to behold him again, and bathe his cheeks with a mother’s tears of joy.” William’s immediate impulse was similar to other authors, mostly male, who recorded their agony at seeing their mothers enslaved: he “longed to announce to her the end of her sufferings, and to tell her, that I, her son, would soon be instrumental in soothing her former anxieties and troubles.” Surrounded by a free society in which men were portrayed as the protectors, enslaved black men who gained their freedom often tried to take on that role, hoping to adequately show their filial love. When he revealed himself at last as her son, Alcy stood in shock “with her eyes rivetted upon me, as if in the last stare of expiring nature, and wildly exclaiming, ‘IT IS! IT IS!’ she flew to my arms, and bathed my cheeks with the tears of heart-felt joy,” before

falling into a faint.⁴⁰ Most enslaved mothers never recovered the children that were torn from them, so on the rare occasions when a son or daughter stood once more before a mother, years or decades later, her wonder was often overwhelming. When Mildred Jackson's son, obscured by "false whiskers," rapped on his mother's window after years of absence, it took Mildred a moment to recognize his voice; when she did, she "sprang to the door, clasping my hand, exclaiming, 'Oh! is this my son.'"⁴¹

The frequency of separation between enslaved mothers and children reveals an underlying indifference, or even calculation, among slaveholders, many of whom consistently denied the validity of slave relationships and viewed enslaved families as useful for breeding but otherwise meaningless. When slaveowners did feel remorse at the ache they caused in the slave quarters, they often learned to overcome the sensation. One owner realized, "I have been too much myself a slave to the feeling which induces me to keep a worthless servant on account of the reluctance we feel to pain them by a sale." Such guilt he viewed as "wrong," declaring that "I am resolved to act otherwise." Overturning the language of slavery to reassert his mastery, this owner rejected sympathy as a "slavish" feeling, explicitly acknowledged the pain felt by separated families, and yet determined that he would not recognize such emotion. Acting on his new resolution, he informed his correspondent that "I have no hesitation in advising you that it will be wise in you to sell Betsy Barks & her children. They are useless to you and she is daily depreciating her health

⁴⁰ William Hayden, *Narrative of William Hayden*, 29, 56, 61-2, 63-6.

⁴¹ Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York: The Author, 1849), 57-8.

& value.”⁴² Betsy Barks and hundreds of her enslaved sisters fell victim to this type of willful apathy.

Some mothers lost their children to well-meaning masters and mistresses who assumed that being raised, or at least overseen, by a white family would be in any child’s best interests. Matilda Jackson’s son was moved from her side to the “great house” when he was “eight or nine years,” presumably to train as a domestic laborer.⁴³ In 1790, Dinah watched her infant son Peter taken from her by a Quaker mistress who had just lost her own child. The white woman nursed Peter for almost a year, and when Dinah finally asked, “Mistress, have you got through with my baby?,” the woman replied, “No Dinah, I mean to bring him up myself.” From then on, Peter “lived in master’s family almost jist like his own children,” while Dinah “stood by, and see it all, and felt distressedly.” In recounting these early years, Peter remembered not only his mother’s early love, but her impotence. “What could *she* do?” Peter asked. “She was a *black woman*.”⁴⁴

Slaveowners’ wills were a primary instrument of familial dissolution. In 1816, a group of slaves in New Kent County, Virginia, were scattered among William Geddy’s friends and relatives. Silvey and Davy were sold together; Lucy “and her increase” were passed on to Geddy’s daughter, except for Lucy’s son Aron, who was bequeathed to another branch of the family. Charles was for some reason emancipated, while his wife and children were sold at a public auction; Alles and her children were given to Geddy’s daughter with the

⁴² W.M.H.H.L. to Eliza Eagles Haywood, n.d., Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

⁴³ William Green, *Narrative of Events in the Life of William Green, (Formerly a Slave.) Written by Himself* (Springfield, MA: L. M. Guernsey, 1853), 4.

⁴⁴ Peter Wheeler, *Chains and Freedom: Or, The Life and Adventures of Peter Wheeler, a Colored Man Yet Living. A Slave in Chains, a Sailor on the Deep, and a Sinner at the Cross*, ed. Charles E. Lester (New York: E. S. Arnold, 1839), 22, 40.

understanding that upon her death, they would be “equally divided between her children”; and a set of twin girls was split down the middle, one going to Geddy’s wife, the other to his son-in-law.⁴⁵ What havoc did this wreak among these slaves? How long had they been living together under Geddy’s roof? Had they become as closely linked as Geddy and his wife, sons-in-law, daughters?

Even wills that dictated emancipation upon the owner’s death did not bring unmixed joy to enslaved mothers, for many slaveowners chose to free black children only upon their reaching the age of majority. When Richard Cocke “freed” his slaves in 1817, the eleven adult women were immediately emancipated, while their twenty-nine children were scattered to Cocke’s acquaintances. Judy’s five sons were sold to four different masters, to be freed in 1823, 1825, 1829, 1831, and 1833. Two of the youngest children were actually sold to free blacks: Milly’s daughter Suky was sold to Jack Smith, perhaps the father of the girl or one of Milly’s relatives, while Little Suky’s son Preston went to Sam Brad.⁴⁶ These newly freed mothers must have had to work doubly hard to watch over their children when they were so dispersed, though they might have had more mobility to do so. In 1783, George Bell freed the adult slaves on his estate but kept ten-year-old Roger and seven-year-old Ama until they were twenty-one and eighteen, respectively.⁴⁷ John Clark freed Phillis, but kept her toddler children until “they shall arrive at a Lawful Age.”⁴⁸ These freed mothers faced a host of

⁴⁵ William Geddy Will, 1816, VHS.

⁴⁶ Richard Cocke Emancipations, October 27, 1817, Goochland County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

⁴⁷ George Bell, Deed of Manumission, January 13, 1783, Louisa County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

⁴⁸ John Clark, Deed of Manumission, February 5, 1798, Louisa County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

difficulties, from finding housing near their children to the more complex job of ensuring that their children would be protected by the remaining slaves. Mothers would need to rely on networks of friends and cousins that were established within and across plantation lines to ensure that their children were safe.

These sparse records, which include little more than dates and names, raise more questions than they answer, and a single separation evokes a host of emotionally charged scenarios. In May 1825, Caty, a slave in Virginia, gave birth; in January 1826, she was sold “at public auction for bad conduct,” fetching her owner three hundred dollars. Did Caty’s child die in those intervening months, making it easier for her owner to sell the mother? Or, if the infant survived, who cared for the eight-month-old after Caty left? Most intriguingly, what sort of “bad conduct” did Caty engage in that warranted her sale? Did she refuse to work? Did she steal food for her child? Is it possible that her owner suspected her of killing her own infant? Certainly, her owner had little respect for the bonds between mother and child. Nelly, one of Caty’s fellow slaves, gave birth to one child in 1824 and twins in 1825, and by 1829, Nelly’s toddler children were being hired out separately from their mother. It is difficult to imagine four- and five-year-olds doing any kind of useful work, but they brought in money to the estate through some kind of regular labor – housekeeping, odd jobs, or even childcare.⁴⁹

When enslaved children were sold or gifted independently of other family members, we can see the vague outlines of a mother bereft and left behind. In 1808, a young Robert Carter Page, bursting with filial love, presented his mother with a six-year-old boy named

⁴⁹ Account Book, New Family Papers, VHS. For more on early childhood labor under slavery, see Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 21-41.

Daniel Baudin, “in consideration of the natural love and affection which I have and bear unto my beloved Mother.”⁵⁰ Where was Daniel’s mother? Why did the separation of one mother and child symbolize the love between another mother and child? When Charles Carter wanted to be neighborly to Maria Armistead twenty years earlier, he offered to send her “two or three young Negroe Girls,” who “may be useful to your dear little Girls.” He closed by ensuring his “best wishes for yourself and family.”⁵¹ William Hobson, “In Consideration of the Love & Affection I bear to my Daughter,” left the young woman six slaves and “their increase” in 1738.⁵² The bizarre phenomenon of elite white families cementing their familial relationships on the shattered bonds of black families is a recurrent theme in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century letters and wills. This method reveals more firmly than ever that families were not merely centers of love and affection, but locuses of power. The continuation of elite white mastery over land, property, lower-class whites, and blacks was predicated on other families, other locuses of power, being more frail, more easily disrupted, more subject to another family’s sway. As a result, the very fact of familial relationships in the slave quarters was a threat to planter-class stability. The “marriages” that slaveowners encouraged were aimed at producing additional laborers, not lasting bonds of affection. By breaking the ties that bound mother and child, slaveowners attempted to obviate their humanity, making it easier to rule, easier to stomach slavery, and easier to solidify their own relationships with relatives and friends. By presenting his neighbor with a brace of slave girls, Charles Carter was defining their personal relationship (he as paternalistic benefactor, she as grateful

⁵⁰ Deed, Robert Carter Page to Mary Page, May 5, 1808, Louise Anderson Patten Papers, VHS.

⁵¹ Charles Carter to Maria Armistead, March 17, 1788, Armistead-Cocke Papers, WM.

⁵² June 1, 1738, William Hobson Deed, VHS.

recipient) while reifying their collective class power (they as definers of the Southern community, the enslaved girls as outliers of that community).

Separation could also creep up unexpectedly; in 1810, George was sent to New Bern, North Carolina, ostensibly on a matter of business for his master. He carried a letter with him that informed his hosts along the way that he was in fact “sold to Mr. Gaston.” The letter warned that George “does not know his business & I wish him not to know it.” Unaware of his sale, George had no reason to make any final farewells to his family back in Chatham County, and here again, we can imagine a mother left behind, crying out at the deception.⁵³ Grace was sold along with her three children from Virginia, but had no more warning than George; she told a group of missionaries in Georgia that “her departure happened so quickly that she had to leave behind on the loom a piece of cotton cloth from which she wanted to make clothing for her children, as well as eighteen dollars that someone owed her.” During her journey south, “some blankets were also stolen from her, so that she arrived poor as a church mouse.”⁵⁴ Stripped of her small property, at least Grace’s family remained intact. In North Carolina, Little Joe’s mother obediently sent her son one day to the big house when he was requested, and the child “was placed in the scales, and was sold, like the hogs, at so much per pound.” Only when Little Joe was put in a wagon bound for town did his mother discover this treachery, but the slaveowner assured her that the boy was merely going on a trip and would return “in the morning. Morning came, but Little Joe did not return to his

⁵³ William Duffy to John Haywood, January 14, 1810, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

⁵⁴ April 3, 1808, *The Moravian Springplace Mission to the Cherokees, Volume I: 1805-1813*, ed. Rowena McClinton (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 257.

mother. Morning after morning passed, and the mother went down to the grave without ever seeing her child again.”⁵⁵

When free black Easter Holloway found herself nabbed by a speculator and carried from her home on the Virginia shore to Jackson, Mississippi, she miraculously managed to locate a man in Jackson who knew the clerk of court in her home county. She instructed him to write the clerk and declare, “you kno [sic] her and all of her relations to be free and you had Issued Free Papers to her.” As further evidence for Easter’s identity, the writer mentioned her kin: “her mother lives near Smithfield and has a well known Oysterman for her husband by the name of Aberdean.” The status and whereabouts of Easter’s parents were offered as evidence on par with her free papers; presumably, if the clerk remembered the mother in Smithfield and the oysterman father, he would recall that Easter was indeed a free woman, born of free parents. While black families were broken as quickly as they formed in the early South, every now and then the relationship between parents and children was not only recognized by white arbiters, but was offered as proof for some higher justice. In this case, the names of Easter’s parents may very well have earned back her freedom.⁵⁶

Henry Watson’s mother also lost her child unexpectedly. As a cook on a plantation, she and her young son shared a room adjacent to the kitchen. One evening, she placed her son on their bed and told him to go to sleep and she would return momentarily. After she left the boy, she was called to the big house, where she “was knocked down, tied, and thrown into the buggy” of a slave trader, and “carried away.” When Henry woke the next morning,

⁵⁵ Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes, Or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House* (New York: G. W. Carleton, 1868), 28-9.

⁵⁶ Affidavit, W. B. Woodley to Nathaniel Young, April 4, 1835, Isle of Wight County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

I asked for my mother, but no one spoke. I went out into the kitchen, where she used to work. . . . I returned to the house, and implored my mistress, with tears in my eyes, to tell me where my mother had gone. She refused, though a mother herself, to give me any satisfaction whatever. Every exertion was made on my part to find her, or hear some tidings of her; but all my efforts were unsuccessful; and from that day have never seen or heard from her.

Henry's mother was not only violently dispatched with, but the suddenness of her departure speaks to her owner's understanding that a mother, no matter what color, would not willingly or quietly leave her child, and that to prevent a scene, such a separation must be carried out by conspiracy.⁵⁷

Occasionally, families broke because children themselves sought release. When Francis Frederick decided to run away from a Virginia plantation, he realized that his actions would break his mother's heart and worse: "I knew she would be flogged, old as she was, if I succeeded in getting off. I thought of the torture she would suffer, and the distress she would feel when she found that I had left her forever. At length I banished these thoughts, and walked rapidly away." Milcah Berry's son also chose to flee, leaving behind a mother who "entreated me with tears in her eyes to remain in slavery, as it would break her heart to part with me," and when he started on his journey, there she was, "following me weeping and pleading." James Pennington understood the effects his escape would have on his family: "Will they not be suspected? Will not the whole family be sold off as a disaffected family, as is generally the case when one of its members flies?"⁵⁸ Other runaway children did not think

⁵⁷ Henry Watson, *Narrative of Henry Watson, a Fugitive Slave. Written by Himself*. (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1848), 5-6.

⁵⁸ Francis Frederick, *Autobiography of Rev. Francis Frederick, of Virginia* (Baltimore: J. W. Woods, 1869), 32-33; James Watkins, *Narrative of the Life of James Watkins, formerly a "Chattel" in Maryland, U. S. Containing an Account of His Escape from Slavery, Together with an Appeal on Behalf of Three Millions of Such "Pieces of Property," Still Held Under the Standard of the Eagle* (Bolton, Eng.: Kenyon and Abbatt, 1852), 21; James W. C. Pennington, *The Fugitive Blacksmith; or,*

so highly of their mothers; young Robert and Mary were “in the habit of running away” from their “drunkard” mother and sought to hire themselves out and make independent lives for themselves. Their alcoholic mother, who, though enslaved, was accustomed to hiring out both herself and her children, may have mourned the loss of both their company and their earning power, but she drove them away with “cruelty toward them” either thoughtlessly or to simplify her own life.⁵⁹ Though Sidney Rotter, a free black woman in Maryland, chose to bind her young son as an apprentice to a farmer in Delaware, she was distressed that the literate boy never wrote her any letters. Eighteen years elapsed without any communication from her child, but she finally received a letter in 1832; in her response, she admitted to being “very glad to find that you have not forgotten me.” She begged him to come for a visit (there is no evidence that he did), adding with a thrust, “However you can act your pleasure.” Sidney, bereft of her son for so many years, had come to think “that I never shall see you again.” She concluded her letter by asking him to “write to me soon. Don’t let this be the last. . . . You must write me, if you are married.”⁶⁰

In their slave narratives, both Henry Watson and Thomas James, recalling their childhoods in accounts written forty years apart, quoted from the popular ballad “The Bereaved Slave Mother” to help explain their own experiences:

Oh! deep was the anguish of the Slave Mother’s heart,
When call’d from her darling forever to part;

Events in the History of James W. C. Pennington, Pastor of a Presbyterian Church, New York, Formerly a Slave in the State of Maryland, United States (London: Charles Gilpin, 1849), 12-13.

⁵⁹ William Manning, Order to Sell Slaves, March 18, 1837, Norfolk County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

⁶⁰ Levin Tilmon, *A Brief Miscellaneous Narrative of the More Early Part of the Life of L. Tilmon, Pastor of a Colored Methodist Congregational Church in the City of New York. Written by Himself* (Jersey City, NJ: W. W. & L. A. Pratt, 1853), 25-6.

So grieved that lone Mother, that heart broken Mother,
In sorrow and woe. . . .

The child was borne off to a far distant clime.
While the Mother was left in anguish to pine;
But reason departed, and she sunk broken hearted,
In sorrow and woe.⁶¹

The separation of mothers and children under slavery may have become a literary trope, self-consciously directed at white cultural assumptions about “natural” familial togetherness, but separation was also very real. Its frequency did not blunt its trauma, and every break between mother and child reveals a broad swath of emotional possibility, from squabbling and abuse to devastation and heartbreak.

*

While many maternal woes derived from assaults upon their children, from death to sale, black mothers’ physical bodies were also subject to suffering, and the process of laboring under slavery, both in the fields and the birthing room, took its toll on many women’s health and ability to exercise power over their families. Some women fell victim to the common ailments of life in the early South. Plantation owners kept records of slave illnesses, and woven in the daily toil of plantation life, we see the threads of disease and physical suffering. On one South Carolina farm in 1823, there was “hard sickness among the negroes” and “the women lies up a great Deal.” Charlotte, Cretia, and Flora all suffered with illness during the year, including “a little feve [sic] & pain in the hed.”⁶² On another

⁶¹ Henry Watson, *The Narrative of Henry Watson*, 45-6; Thomas James, *Life of Rev. Thomas James, by Himself* (Rochester, NY: Post Express, 1886), 21. See Jesse Hutchinson Jr., “The Bereaved Slave Mother,” in *The Pioneer: or, Leaves from an Editor’s Portfolio*, ed. Henry Clapp Jr. (Lynn, MA: J. B. Tolman, 1846), 68.

⁶² Charlotte Ann Allston to Robert F. W. Allston, June 8, 1823; Daniel P. Avant to Robert F. W. Allston, August 9, 1823; Daniel P. Avant to Robert F. W. Allston, August 16, 1823, in J. H. Easterby,

plantation in 1830, Tenah watched her two daughters sicken and perish from dysentery, and a few days later, succumbed herself to the disease.⁶³ At Coffin Point Plantation on South Carolina's Sea Islands, the manager kept meticulous records of "Time Lost by Sickness" for each of the slaves. From February through May 1813, the manager lost 198 working days from his slaves; 125 of these sick days were taken by women. While some illnesses may have struck women harder, most of the discrepancy in these numbers can be explained by ailments related to motherhood: menstrual difficulties, prolapsed or infected uteruses, pregnancy, and childbirth.⁶⁴

Like the white women they shared the land with, many black women died as a result of the traumas of childbirth. On the Ford plantation, Bep gave birth to a girl in December 1821, and in February 1822, Bep passed away. Eight days later, her daughter died. Perhaps there was no one else on the plantation who could nurse the girl, or perhaps both mother and daughter fell victim to a passing virus. On the same plantation in 1833, Nanny died while

ed., *The South Carolina Rice Plantation as Revealed in the Papers of Robert F. W. Allston* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 60, 247, 248.

⁶³ February 27, 1830, Davison McDowell Plantation Journal (1815-1833), Davison McDowell Papers, SCL.

⁶⁴ Most of the sick days in 1813 were taken in February, March, August, and October, with very few in November and December; unfortunately, it is not clear how these sick days correlated with births on the plantation. E. W. Rose, 1813 Plantation Book, Coffin Point Plantation Journals, SCHS. For an in-depth examination of how enslaved women's pregnancies coincided with the cycles of plantation labor, see Cheryll Ann Cody, "Cycles of Work and of Childbearing: Seasonality in Women's Lives on Low Country Plantations," in *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*, eds. David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 61-74. Most women in her study gave birth during the late summer months, which means that most women conceived during the winter months, when demands for their physical labor were lowest. On a certain Virginia plantation, however, with presumably different work cycles, most enslaved women gave birth in spring, having conceived the previous summer. See Joan R. Gundersen, "The Double Bonds of Race and Sex: Black and White Women in a Colonial Virginia Parish," *Journal of Southern History* 52, no. 3 (1986): 351-372, esp. pp. 363-365. For more on enslaved women's maternal health, see Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Born in Bondage: Growing Up Enslaved in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 19-47, and Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

giving birth.⁶⁵ In 1830, Willoughby died five days after giving birth, and her master attributed the death to a folk remedy the mother had employed for heart trouble; he recorded that Willoughby's fate "proceeded from her having eat a quantity of shot before her confinement for what she called a fluttering in the heart." A fellow slave may have recommended consuming buckshot, or some other lead product, to Willoughby for her complaint, but this woman may also have been attempting a last-minute abortion, terrified or unwilling to become a mother.⁶⁶

Registers of manumitted slaves record not only their subjects' age, height, and complexion, but also any distinguishing physical scars, which offer a potential window onto the violence encountered by women under slavery. While many of these markers may have been acquired through accidents in the home or the field, places that were often filled with physical dangers for the enslaved, one must assume that at least some came from intentional violence, whether from masters, mistresses, or other slaves. In Rockbridge County, Virginia, in the 1820s, the county clerk described recently freed black women as having a wide variety of scars from abuse, illness, and accident. Mary had a "scar on the back of her left hand three fourths of an inch long," while Maria had "a scar on her forehead nearly on the middle of it." Hannah Allen displayed "a knot on her right wrist occasioned by a dislocation of the joint," and Mintey had "two scars on the right side of her neck occasioned by sore throat." Sally had "a scar on the left side of the under jaw occasioned by beating." Perhaps the most perplexing description is of Betsey Moore, born free of a free black mother, who "had all the fingers of

⁶⁵ December 6, 1821, February 3, 1822, February 11, 1822, March 16, 1833, Ford Family Papers, SCL.

⁶⁶ July 22, 1830, Davison McDowell Plantation Journal (1815-1833), Davison McDowell Papers, SCL.

her right hand cut off when a child.” The passive voice of the clerk’s record obscures the cause of this bloody event. Was her mother Nancy somehow responsible, or did her heart stop in terror when her young daughter came running into the house, bloodied and screaming from an accident?⁶⁷

Most of the violence that black women encountered, however, was intentional, and the fact of their motherhood did nothing to blunt it. Children sometimes listened or watched on in horror as their mothers were beaten or abused. When Elizabeth was ten minutes late to the field one morning, she received a brutal whipping from the overseer and began shouting “Oh! pray--Oh! pray--Oh! pray.” Her son heard her cries from the cabin they shared, and he stood at the door, listening to her pain. “Though the field was some distance from the house,” he remembered, “I could hear every crack of the whip, and every groan and cry of my poor mother.” As he stood there, “the cold chills ran over me, and I wept aloud.”⁶⁸ On a North Carolina plantation, women were not allowed to nurse their children periodically during the day, and when they were whipped for working slowly, “blood and milk flew mingled from their breasts.” Pregnant women would be placed on the ground, their bellies in a hole, and whipped on the back, which, far from protecting the child, occasionally induced labor.⁶⁹ While motherhood often earned white and Indian women a respect among both community members and strangers, black mothers enjoyed no similar respite from abuse.

⁶⁷ July 10, 1821, February 22, 1822, October 4, 1824, October 1, 1829, Andrew Reid Record Book (1803-1828), WM.

⁶⁸ William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself* (Boston: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1847), 15-16.

⁶⁹ Moses Grandy, *Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy, Late a Slave in the United States of America* (London: Gilpin, 1843), 28.

Motherhood not only failed to protect black women; it was also sometimes the motivation behind certain kinds of violence. Enslaved women were never free from the threat of sexual abuse, and in a society in which infants equaled monetary gain, black motherhood became a central goal for slaveowners, whether by fair means or foul. As a result, black women were assaulted and raped, often by whites and occasionally by blacks. Their wombs were a target.⁷⁰ Some relationships are difficult to judge; was the young woman who captured the attention of John Randolph in 1832 a clever manipulator of the wealthy, eccentric landowner or a victim of his advances? Did she pursue the relationship, seeking patronage en route to freedom, or was she sought out, harassed, trapped beneath the white man's thumb? Whatever the case, the liaison would have been deeply unequal, and it is hard to imagine the woman describing her situation with the playful ease of her partner: "I am under the powerful influence of the Prince of Darkness," Randolph wrote to a friend, "who tempts me with a beautiful mulattress . . . and a bottle of ice champagne."⁷¹ What about Catherine Smith, the enslaved woman who intercepted a regiment of Virginia troops in 1761 and was carried off by a soldier, away from her owner? Was she jumping from the frying pan into the fire? Did she willingly choose a potential route to freedom, or was she coerced into leaving home? Or was she simply a young woman desperate for some excitement? It is

⁷⁰ Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 1-11; Kirsten Fischer, *Suspect Relations: Sex, Race, and Resistance in Colonial North Carolina* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 161-169; H el ene Lecaudey, "Behind the Mask: Ex-Slave Women and Interracial Sexual Relations," in *Discovering the Women in Slavery: Emancipating Perspectives on the American Past*, ed. Patricia Morton (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 260-277. Sexual abuse emerged in relationships between masters and enslaved women, but also between enslaved women and the men with whom they were forced to either marry or have sex. See Thelma Jennings, "'Us Colored Women Had to Go through a Plenty': Sexual Exploitation of African-American Slave Women," *Journal of Women's History* 1, no. 3 (1990): 45-74. For more on the prevalence of and legal restrictions surrounding interracial sex, see Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 398-412.

⁷¹ John Randolph to Henry A. Watkins, April 11, 1832, John Randolph Note, VHS.

almost possible to picture Catherine, “a low squat thick wench, sandy complexion, much pitted with the small pox & remarkable full breasted,” seeing a company of marching men from the field where she worked. Intrigued, she must have come to meet them, for Thomas Latten “picked her up on the road.” Was she stolen property, or was she, as Thomas cheekily called her, a “young recruit”?⁷²

The relationship between an enslaved girl in Wilmington and a visiting Frenchman in 1806 appears slightly more clear. After “carrying on an intrigue with the Girl for Several Months,” apparently with the knowledge of her owners, the foreigner made off with the young woman. As an outsider, both to her immediate household and the slave society in which she lived, the girl’s beau may have appeared almost as a savior, perhaps wooing her with promises of freedom. For a period of several months, she spent nights with him, having to be fetched by her owner each morning and brought back home “to her House work.” Finally, fed up with his wayward slave, the owner incarcerated her on an anchored ship in the harbor, and when a fire in town drew the crew away, the Frenchman absconded with the girl. Captured and bound together, the couple were driven in a cart through town, “a Vast concourse of People assembled round them, Hooting & hissing.”⁷³ This woman, if we interpret her case with careful optimism, seems to have temporarily escaped the pattern of white sexual abuse by boldly choosing her own partner, a man who claimed no immediate power over her body, but instead was a new, perhaps even innocent, arrival in the slave South.

⁷² Deposition of George Harris, April 7, 1761, Frederick County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

⁷³ Jane Williams to Eliza Haywood, April 21, 1806, Haywood Family Papers, SHC.

While a few enslaved women could take advantage of visiting Frenchmen or passing soldiers, seeking freedom and perhaps tempering the power dynamic between white men and black women, most women who engaged in sexual relationships with white men did so under duress. Over the course of four years, Elizabeth Keckley was hounded by a white man who eventually succeeded in assaulting and impregnating her. Elizabeth's subsequent motherhood was a constant challenge to her as she juggled the knowledge of her son's violent conception and her undeniable affection for him. "He came into the world through no will of mine, and yet, God only knows how I loved him," she wrote, further absolving herself by adding that "if my poor boy ever suffered any humiliating pangs on account of birth, he could not blame his mother, for God knows that she did not wish to give him life." Elizabeth called upon God as a witness to her trials, implicitly claiming a purity that remained untainted by her earlier rape. Writing her life's story well after these events, the mother's strong avowal of her innocence may have been achieved only after years of internal torment, or perhaps after sharing her story with other enslaved women who had experienced similar traumas. For many mothers, bringing a child into enslavement, whether through love or violence, elicited a host of complex emotions: devotion, shame, fierce protection, guilt. While she admitted to suffering "deep mortification," Elizabeth Keckley may have been more decisive than many mothers when she determined that her son, in the end, "could not blame his mother."⁷⁴

Perhaps the most famous case of sexual harassment is that of Harriet Jacobs, an enslaved woman in eastern North Carolina who, from a young age, fought off the advances of her owner, Dr. James Norcom, and who finally chose to pursue a relationship with another white man, Samuel Sawyer, solely to protect herself and her future children. Harriet's choice

⁷⁴ Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley, *Behind the Scenes, Or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House* (New York: G. W. Carleton, 1868), 47, 38-9.

reveals how vulnerable enslaved women were but also how determined they were to claim some control over their own lives; the young woman had wrestled with some of the major dilemmas of slavery and determined that it was “less degrading to give one’s self, than to submit to compulsion.” Though Harriet did not yet have children, her decision to pursue a relationship with Sawyer was driven by maternal instincts. She knew that a sexual encounter would produce children, whether by force or choice, and she “shuddered to think of being the mother of children that should be owned by my old tyrant.” The process of choosing a father for her children led her to Sawyer, for “of a man who was not my master I could ask to have my children well supported.” Harriet “also felt quite sure that they would be made free,” and so believing, she “made a headlong plunge.”⁷⁵

The violence that owners, drivers, and partners inflicted on black women, from physical abuse to sexual assault, elicited a range of responses. On the Coalter farm in Virginia, Celia suffered from abuse at the hands of her husband Sam and turned to her mistress Frances for assistance, informing her that Sam had “beat her the day before and that her life was a burthen to her under such treatment as she daily experienced from him.” Frances, uncertain what to advise, asked for help with Celia’s plight and watched as “my Mother said much to her on the subject, and she appears now quite resigned to the expectation of parting with him.”⁷⁶ Why did this white mother reach across the racial divide to counsel a young abused woman? While not all black women could expect sympathy or counsel from their white mistresses, Celia may have benefited from another woman’s

⁷⁵ Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, ed. Lydia Maria Child (Boston: Published for the Author, 1861), 84-6.

⁷⁶ It is unclear who Frances was referring to as her “Mother,” since both her mother and mother-in-law had passed away in the 1780s. Frances Bland Tucker Coalter to John Coalter, October 4, 1809, Brown, Tucker, Coalter Papers (I), WM.

maternalism; Frances's mother may have reached out to the abused woman because she could imagine her response if her own daughter were being thus mistreated. Certain kinds of suffering were not restricted to the slave quarters, and spousal abuse was one of the few bridges across which white and black women could share some understanding.

Patience, who arrived in Charleston from Africa and later found a home on a Cherokee plantation in Georgia, lost both her feet to frostbite in her first few years in America but found sympathetic ears among a nearby group of Moravian missionaries. When the Moravians saw her approaching their settlement, "crawling on her knees across the field with her two little friendly children at her side," they wept to think of her suffering, and counseled her with Biblical passages. After Patience fed each of her children "a small piece of molded wheat bread," she began to tell the missionaries about her struggles on the plantation. "Stuttering" in broken English, she told them how the other slaves refused to give her food or milk for her children, and the moved Moravians sent her home with "as much milk and bread as she and the young ones could carry." Patience continued to suffer on the Vann plantation under a cruel overseer, who beat all the slaves with little cause, and "has even horribly beaten dejected Patience, who has no feet and is expecting her confinement very soon."⁷⁷ While Patience was routinely abused on a plantation run by elite Cherokees, she also found spiritual guidance from a community of whites, reinforcing the fact that brutality across racial lines was not inevitable; not all whites were foes, and not all non-whites were allies. Though Patience had lost her feet and her food, had suffered from the cruelties of whites, blacks, and Indians, as a mother she continued to reach out toward any promising human connection, searching for anyone who could ease her family's pain.

⁷⁷ November 25, 1810, June 7, 1811, May 11, 1813, *Springplace*, vol. 1, 393, 435, 537.

Patience's story proves that black women understood that their world of systemic violence was layered and occasionally unpredictable, and women thus searched for relief in unexpected places.

Violence did not flow solely from a white male plantation owner to his black slave; black women were subject to the violence of both urban whites and other blacks, and commonalities of gender rarely prevented enslaved women from suffering at the hands of other women.⁷⁸ In 1820, a slave named Sukey was murdered by her owners, the village blacksmith and his wife; the couple "did inflict upon the head & other parts of the body . . . divers mortal wounds and bruises," and left the woman dead, face-down in a spring. There is no explanation in the coroner's report of the motives behind this murder. Sukey may have been pregnant with the blacksmith's child, or she may have angered the couple in some other way.⁷⁹ White women who presided over extensive plantations lashed out against slaves as a way to exercise power and assert their status as well as to address personal grudges, but Sukey's relationship with her mistress was probably more intimate. As the slave of a town blacksmith, Sukey likely had few other African American companions within the household, and she probably lived in much closer proximity to her owners. Her murder then seems to be less about a brute assertion of white power and more about a very personalized anger.

Though we have no record of the murderers' reasons, Sukey's death reminds us of the variety

⁷⁸ For more on violence between black and white women, and among black women, see Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and Renee K. Harrison, *Enslaved Women and the Art of Resistance in Antebellum America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 85-112.

⁷⁹ December 21, 1820, Coroner Inquests, Powhatan County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

of relationships enslaved women forged with their owners, and thus the variety of ways violence could enter their lives.

Black mothers also faced violence from within black communities, which had their own set of methods and motivations. On the Vann plantation in Georgia, a slave named Old Grace often found herself in the middle of feuds in the slave quarters; in 1811, she was “threatened with being poisoned because she had poisoned a child who was recently in her care,” and two years later, Grace berated another enslaved woman for provoking their mistress to beat Grace’s daughter. While we do not know the details of these cases, the friction between enslaved women on a single plantation is evident, and it should not be surprising that violence became a tool for black women as much as for their owners.

Violence in the South was unavoidable. For Grace, violence was also regularly linked to motherhood; she was first accused of harming a child and then later accused another woman of harming her own child. For these women, motherhood was not an excuse to adopt a higher moral tone, as it was for many of their white mistresses; it was an urgent justification for protecting one’s children at any cost. Verbally abusing another enslaved woman for threatening one’s child fell into the spectrum of necessary violence that black mothers measured daily.⁸⁰

Black mothers used violence to defend their families, but for those women who took their own lives as a result of depression, a sense of defeat, or any number of other reasons, violence could also offer a way out of slavery. In 1810, Virginian slave Lewcy, “seduced and instigated by the Devil,” committed suicide. Other than the court’s declaration of her impious seduction, which was often standard for cases of suicide, there is no reason recorded. One

⁸⁰ July 10, 1809, May 5, 1811, August 25, 1813, *Springplace*, vol. 1, 320, 430, 554.

can imagine, though, the host of motives for a slave suicide, including an inability to cope with labor, abuse, psychological torment, despair, or even raising a family.⁸¹ Women may have learned of suicide, from how to do it to how to secure enough time alone, from friends or relatives who succeeded at taking their own lives. When Quaccoo “Hang’d himself” in Virginia in 1731, he left behind several enslaved women who were “all in Health,” though at least one of those women might have been a mother or sister, and surely all were troubled by the death.⁸² In 1802, Charles wrapped a grapevine around his neck and hung himself from a dogwood tree in central Virginia.⁸³ In 1810, an enslaved man on the Springplace plantation slit his throat but did not die from his injuries for three months; three years later, a woman on the same plantation learned from his mistakes and, using a knife on her throat, successfully killed herself.⁸⁴ In the 1820s, Agnes “went to the spring in the morning for a pail of water, and on looking up into the willow tree which shaded the bubbling crystal stream, she discovered the lifeless form of her brother suspended beneath one of the strong branches.” Her brother had been given a pair of ploughlines from his master, who warned him not to lose them or else risk severe punishment; when the lines were stolen from him, he “hung himself rather than meet the displeasure of his master.” While grieving for her brother, Agnes “impressed . . . strongly” the story of his despair on her young daughter, whether as a dire warning or as veiled instructions for a last resort. For Agnes, motherhood required a harsh

⁸¹ October 5, 1810, Coroner Inquest, Powhatan County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

⁸² William Mayo, Letter to John Perratt, August 27, 1731, VHS.

⁸³ Inquisition of Murder, 1802, Nottoway County Records, VHS.

⁸⁴ November 24 and 25, 1810; January 20, 1811; November 15, 1813, *Springplace*, vol. 1, 393, 409, 570.

realism that meant that discussions of suicide became a necessary part of childrearing.⁸⁵ Perhaps a similar story had been told to the enslaved woman in the 1830s who was given some difficult washing to complete in a nearby brook and, unable to complete the work, “got some cords, tied them round her neck, climbed up a tree, swung off, and hung herself.” This woman left behind a three-month-old child “without anybody to take care of her” except the same mistress who had assigned the washing.⁸⁶ Though mothers often watched powerlessly as their children suffered at the hands of white owners, they were willing to use violence against whites, blacks, and even themselves in an attempt to salvage a sense of control.

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Black mothers did not just experience violence at the hands of slaveowners or even fellow slaves; it was also used by mothers against their own children, sometimes as a means of protection but occasionally as simply a redirection of abuse. Some black mothers whipped, struck, or killed their children, and the decision to do so was often directed by the landscapes of violence in which they lived. Many women beat their children to prevent the master from doing so; if a child broke a piece of china in the big house, a brief maternal whipping was far preferable to the master’s wrath. Other women used violence in the home because there was violence all around them.⁸⁷ Masters beat slaves, men struck women, and elite white mothers often employed corporal punishment in the home. Violence was woven into Southern

⁸⁵ Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes, Or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House* (New York: G. W. Carleton, 1868), 30.

⁸⁶ Moses Roper, *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn; London: Darton, Harvey and Darton, 1838), 60.

⁸⁷ See Nell Irvin Painter, “Soul Murder and Slavery: Toward a Fully Loaded Cost Accounting,” in *U.S. History as Women’s History: New Feminist Essays*, eds. Linda K. Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, Kathryn Kish Sklar (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 125-146.

society.⁸⁸ In extreme cases, black mothers killed their children, and here too, the motives were myriad. Some did so out of anger, exhaustion, or mental instability. Many intentional abortions and infanticides, however, were probably the result of the enslaved mother's perpetual dilemma: how does one knowingly welcome a child into a world that will torture it? Killing an infant, therefore, could be seen as the natural extension of a fierce maternal protectiveness.

In addition to controlling their fertility through various means of contraception, enslaved women used various herbs and folk remedies to achieve abortions, including chewing the root of the cotton plant, consuming dogwood tea, or using other abortifacients.⁸⁹ Sibby lost her unborn child in the summer of 1830, and her master believed that she "did so on purpose." He put the miscarriage under his meticulous list of "Crimes and Misdemeanors," determining that he would "Stop her Christmas & lock her up." When December 25 rolled around, the other slaves on the plantation earned rations of beef and whiskey, while Sibby received none.⁹⁰ We cannot know what evidence the owner had for his conclusion, and while Sibby's loss may have been entirely accidental, particularly given pregnant women's continued physical labor, an intentional miscarriage would not have been uncommon.

⁸⁸ For more on the gendered violence of women, particularly white plantation mistresses, see Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 18-31. For examples of the violence that defined the early modern Atlantic, see John Smolenski, ed., *New World Orders: Violence, Sanction, and Authority in the Colonial Americas* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

⁸⁹ Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave*, 96-100. For a study of enslaved women's contraceptive methods, especially the consumption of cotton roots, see Liese M. Perrin, "Resisting Reproduction: Reconsidering Slave Contraception in the Old South," *Journal of American Studies* 35, no. 2 (2001): 255-274.

⁹⁰ July 16 and December 25, 1830, Davison McDowell Plantation Journal (1815-1833), Davison McDowell Papers, SCL.

Infanticide was a means by which black mothers could exercise significant power over their fates and those of their children. In 1812, Fanny gave birth to a child in the woods of Campbell County in central Virginia and attempted to leave it amongst the trees. The infant was discovered, however, and brought to the attention of Fanny's owner, who promised that "nothing may be wanting to the preservation of this exposed child that my estate can furnish." Fighting to keep this child alive was naturally in the owner's interests; a baby was the embodiment of profit, and Fanny's desperate attempt to circumvent the cycle of enslavement was quickly deemed "abominable conduct" by her owner.⁹¹ While this white man blamed Fanny for attempting to cheat him of an asset, he may also have been responding as a paternalistic Southern Christian, who believed that murder was rarely justified, women were naturally domestic and nonviolent creatures, and infanticide was an outrage.

Hannah, an enslaved woman in central North Carolina, slit her infant son's throat with a cane knife in 1835 and then attempted to slit her own, but only the child succeeded in dying. When asked if she killed her son, Hannah responded dully, "They say I did." When asked if she used the same knife on both her son and herself, she replied that "her throat was not cut."⁹² Hannah's evasive answers to these questions offer a window into the trauma of attempting to send oneself and one's child into a better world and only half succeeding. Hannah may not have been entirely sane or rational when choosing her course of action, but it was at heart a defensive decision. She was protecting her child, not punishing him, for she

⁹¹ David Ross to Robert P[], April 30, 1812, David Ross Letterbook (1812-1813), VHS. See also Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 69-106.

⁹² Testimony of Thomas B. Barnett, *State vs. Hannah*, 1836, Criminal Actions Concerning Slaves and Free Persons of Color, Granville County, NCSA.

too wanted to escape the world in which she lived. Many enslaved mothers who could not bring themselves to physically remove their children from slavery confessed to understanding such an urge. More than one woman wondered if her child would be better off dead than alive and enslaved.⁹³ One mother looked down at her child and sighed, “Poor thing, I wish we were both in the grave, where all sorrow is forgotten.”⁹⁴ Harriet Jacobs called her son “the ever-present witness of my shame,” and when she slept beside her daughter, she “felt how much easier it would be to see her die than to see her master beat her about.”⁹⁵ Is infanticide always an unmitigated evil, then, or can it be an expression of a woman’s last grasp at some semblance of control, some remnant of humanity in a dehumanizing system?

Though some mothers wished their children in the grave as a result of a protective love, other women had more conflicted relationships with their sons and daughters. Just because a mother and her children suffered under the same systemic oppression did not mean that they avoided friction or discord, and mothers endured plenty of suffering that had nothing to do with their race or enslaved status. Pleasant, enslaved by a Moravian community in northwest Georgia, endured near-constant trouble from her son Michael. In 1819, after a fight with his mother, the teenager decided to run away. He sought shelter in a nearby white household, claiming that he had been freed the previous year and thus “was allowed to go wherever he wanted.” Several days passed before the Moravians sent a Cherokee man to find

⁹³ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 30; Roper, *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper*, 60.

⁹⁴ Ball, *Slavery in the United States*, 150-1.

⁹⁵ Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Nellie Y. McKay and Frances Smith Foster (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2001; 1861), 63, 71.

the unruly boy, and, locating him at work in a white farmer's fields thirty miles from home, the messenger brought Michael back to the settlement. The baffled Moravians decided that the only course was to separate the feuding mother and son and offered to sell Michael to a neighboring planter. The planter agreed to the proposition, and when the Moravians informed Michael and Pleasant, "the former jumped for joy and hurried to get his things together." Pleasant, however, "raved and fumed so horribly that even her son ran out of the house and hid himself from her." Michael yelled back at his mother, "It is all your fault! I do not want to stay here any longer on your account." After the boy left, Pleasant seems to have broken down, remaining in bed and refusing to perform daily chores.⁹⁶

While the Moravians deemed Pleasant's behavior "extreme," it makes sense for a mother who not only lost her son, but also his love, obedience, and respect. Enslaved mothers, then, were not immune to uncaring children, and this abandonment must have felt particularly cruel, even if her relationship with Michael was far from idyllic. After a month of working for the planter, Michael was sold to the Waties, a family of wealthy Cherokee slaveholders, an arrangement the boy was "joyful about" because of his friendship with the young Watie boys. Pleasant, though, heard the news and "cried, cursed, and raged," perhaps because this was further evidence that the child never intended to come home. She sought the counsel of a female neighbor, another slaveowning Cherokee, who relayed that "her son no longer wants to return to her at all." The Indian woman added, "If you love your child and Watie brings him along for a visit once, then persuade him to be obedient, faithful, and diligent. Then he will once again have love and respect for you." But for Pleasant, "all of her words were in vain." Her son had chosen a life of labor among a distant family rather than

⁹⁶ May 5-12, 1819, *The Moravian Springplace Mission to the Cherokees, Volume II: 1814-1821*, ed. Rowena McClinton (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 283-287.

the fairly protected existence his mother offered him within a religious settlement. Though mother and son butted heads while living together, Pleasant was distressed to be cast aside and perhaps angry at her child's filial insolence.⁹⁷ The fact that Michael's unruliness was a matter debated by enslaved blacks, white missionaries, and Cherokee slaveholders illustrates that not all relationships in the South were strictly hierarchical or predetermined; in this instance, a multi-racial community put their heads together to deal with the very practical (and timeless) issue of an unmanageable teenager. Pleasant's troubles were the troubles to which any Southern mother would be vulnerable.

It is important to remember that not all black mothers were suffering angels; Pleasant clearly exasperated her son, and other mothers were even more intolerable to their children. Tenor was classified as a "common drunkard" by her owner, and her apparent cruelty compelled her son and daughter to run away from home. Living independently from each other did not seem to improve matters; the boy, only eight or nine years old, ended up in jail, while the girl was hired out to a man who kept her "in Irons" because of her tendency to flee.⁹⁸ Relationships within enslaved families were subject to all the vicissitudes suffered by other Southern families, and friction between mothers and children was no exception.

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Black women became mothers through both choice and coercion, but motherhood under slavery was always tinged with suffering. With this suffering came some unexpected power, however; though enslaved women could control very little about their motherhood, they seized those choices that offered themselves and negotiated between degrees of

⁹⁷ June 20, 1819, *Springplace*, vol. 2, 299-300.

⁹⁸ William Manning, Order to Sell Slaves, March 18, 1837, Norfolk County Circuit Court, Free Negro and Slave Records, LOV.

violence. When a child was sold away from them, they chose to protest, and sometimes they succeeded. Perhaps even more importantly, the impressions they made on their young children led to a generation of young men and women searching for the mothers they had lost and fondly remembering the embraces of the mothers they had kept. When they were refused bread or kindness from fellow slaves, they sought it elsewhere, and when they were beaten, they sometimes fought back. When faced with repeated threats of sexual assaults, they took matters into their own hands, flirting with passing soldiers or choosing one white man over another. And when the burden of slavery grew too heavy, a small group of mothers preferred to kill themselves or their children. These are not free choices, but choices made under exceptionally constrained conditions, and every day, mothers found themselves weighing two evils to find the lesser. The suffering of black mothers under slavery was extreme and multifaceted, but few allowed the pain to define their lives. Even in the darkest hours, some women – sometimes – could still exercise some control over their motherhood.

CONCLUSION

Writing a book about motherhood is like writing a book about love, or death, or war. Its individual forms and implications are almost too numerous to make a work on the subject coherent. Women got involved in the project of motherhood for a variety of reasons, and each woman forged a unique relationship with her children and formed her own definition of success. From the Cherokee woman removing her child from school to attend a Green Corn Ceremony, to the white woman cooing a nursery rhyme to her child before bed, to the black woman marching her child down to the county clerk's office to register his freedom, women in the South defined their motherhood in ways that were culturally distinct but which nonetheless shared certain key ingredients.

Both individual mothers and groups of woman, delineated by region, class, or ethnicity, constructed their motherhood in response to specific and distinctive needs. Beyond divisions of race and class, women constructed maternal identities in response to varying factors within their own communities. A Cherokee mother married to an elite man, for instance, may have seen her maternal authority more constricted in the early nineteenth century than that of her poorer neighbors, and the nature of her nation's history meant that while she and a Catawba mother shared similar matrilineal rights, their responses to change differed. Urban white women had very different access to books, schools, medical care, and familial support than rural women, and even within families, the presence or absence of a husband, parents, or siblings shaped how a woman raised her children. An enslaved woman

on a lowcountry South Carolina rice plantation had more limited access to her child than an enslaved woman on a small upcountry Virginia farm, though the Virginia mother may have felt her child was more vulnerable to the master's whims. These women had different relationships with both whites and fellow slaves, different opportunities for both labor and freedom, and even different access to healing plants and abortifacients. Though a study of motherhood with thousands of chapters – one for each individual's experience of motherhood – may be more faithful to these women's varying lives, the primary differences in approaches to maternal power can be roughly delineated along cultural lines. Indian, white, and black women across the South crafted different definitions of both motherhood and power in order to understand and strengthen their role in both their families and communities.

Because of their different understandings of motherhood, social and political changes affected groups of women differently in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, creating tensions between women and their worlds. Among Cherokees and Catawbas, mothers seemed to lose power and influence after the American Revolution as their nations tried to refashion themselves in the image of Euro-Americans in an attempt to hold onto their lives and lands. The official curtailment of women's power changed mothers' methods, not their motivations, and while maternal power became harder to exercise, women's ingenuity and persistence led to new ways to achieve basic maternal goals. Among white women, mothers gained a new respect after the Revolution as the fledgling nation tried to assign responsibility for raising virtuous citizens and saw mothers as ideal moral guardians. But the new role of the "republican mother" changed perceptions, not practices, and while maternal power became easier to exercise, mothers continued to shape their own maternal standards. Among African and African American women, mothers gained more influence in their

families as the violence of plantation slavery meant that fathers were increasingly either distant or absent, but mothers lost power as the entrenchment of slavery in the eighteenth century led to the clear and unabashed commodification of their reproductive labor. These shifts changed modes of oppression, though, not maternal goals, and maternal power became both easier and harder to exercise as mothers had almost complete responsibility for their children in the slave quarters, but nonetheless had to fight to make even the simplest choices in their children's lives. Indian mothers had to hold onto their matrilineal influence in the face of a growing patriarchy; white mothers had to carve out a realm of influence within an existing patriarchy; and black mothers had to remember societies in which they had some control in order to survive in societies in which they have virtually none.

But despite all of the differences among Southern mothers, most of these women understood motherhood to be a central and defining element of their lives. For most of these women, motherhood was a positive identity, a valued role, and a source of authority, an impetus to fight for choice and control in their own lives and the lives of their children. Even though both motherhood and power carried innumerable meanings for Southern women, women believed that (their definition of) motherhood offered the primary avenue to (their definition of) power, a striking foundational similarity across lines of race and class.

The implications of a cross-cultural, contextualized history of early Southern mothers that positions motherhood as a source of authority and self-worth are manifold. The thread of power running through the domestic landscape reveals a self-generated value to women's lives in early America that transcended simplistic and arbitrary divisions between public and private spheres. Focusing on motherhood in slavery uncovers a crucial and understudied site of both oppression and purpose in the daily lives of the enslaved, forcing us to reevaluate the

degree to which Africans and African Americans in the South fought to make choices about the tenor of their own lives. Reestablishing Native Americans as central players in the history of the South recalls a multicultural landscape where women and nations were constantly jostling with neighbors and strangers, intent on fashioning their own identities in spite of, and often in opposition to, the world of difference that surrounded them. A cross-cultural history of motherhood is also a reminder that families are created in specific historical and cultural contexts and that motherhood was an identity that was constructed and defined by women; mothers, then, must be studied on their own terms and not simply as secondary characters in the drama of childhood. Through the eyes of mothers struggling to mold good children and respectable communities, each with her own definition of “good” and “respectable,” the South becomes a diverse region with no clear fate, no single trajectory. And for early American historians, who circle around the impact of the Revolution like moths, the continuities that a study of motherhood demands can remind us of how immediate and practical daily life usually is, and that even the grandest political statements could not always inspire a woman trying to soothe her teething infant.

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This is a historical study, but this is not a historical subject. Motherhood is a prerequisite for all human societies. While my purpose as a historian is to prove that even such a universal role must always be contextualized – while my stance is essentially *anti-universalist* – I am nonetheless aware that there are moments in this book that will provide a shock of familiarity to twenty-first-century readers. And because part of my argument is that motherhood is an institution that has traditionally been subject to more continuity than change, I do not shy away from such moments of familiarity. Perhaps it will soothe

contemporary mothers to see how many early American women viewed motherhood as a source of worth rather than oppression, and that raising children was fraught with so much *doubt*. Cherokee mothers took their children to mission schools and then took them out again. White mothers thought their children were going to become immoral gamblers at any moment and were fully ready to blame themselves. Black mothers were torn between loving their children and wishing they were in a better place. No mother has ever had the right answer, the secret guide to raising perfect children while maintaining personal happiness. Contemporary women may also be relieved to see that motherhood is an identity defined in countless ways by individual women, female communities, and social expectations, and that as a result, no two women experience motherhood in the same way. The differences in how women approach their maternal roles and the business of childrearing contribute to human diversity, to different value systems, kin connections, religions, frustrations, aspirations. Finally, the continuities that become apparent here suggest that the conclusions of this study may not be limited to the decades between the 1750s and the 1830s. Despite motherhood's historical specificity, there are enough inheritances from one generation to the next to provoke similar investigations into other historical eras. There are more sources of advice today – from parenting manuals to talk shows – than ever before, but most women still turn to their own mothers and other female relatives and friends when their baby has trouble nursing or their teenager starts breaking curfew.

In a journal in 1960, the feminist poet Adrienne Rich recorded, “My children cause me the most exquisite suffering of which I have any experience.”¹ The combination of agony

¹ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976; New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), 21. Feminist theorists have launched into debates about motherhood with enthusiasm; for an introduction to theories of how the role of mother is constructed, transmitted, and adopted, see Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley: University of California

and ecstasy Rich describes would have been familiar to many of the women within these pages. Despite its variations, motherhood has almost always been a struggle between power and powerlessness, between doing right by your child and doing right by yourself. These dilemmas have taken on additional political weight in the late twentieth century, but they have existed in more subtle forms for centuries. Eighteenth-century women may have been less concerned about “self-realization,” but most would have agreed that “mother” was not their sole identity. So too has the concern for concrete expressions of power become more urgent in recent decades. In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich catalogues the angst of a generation of feminist mothers while she attempts to discover where women’s experience of motherhood stops and where motherhood as an institution, with all its imposed limits, begins.² The tension between the experience and the institution is at the heart of the search for maternal power. When Rich looks at motherhood through an institutional lens, she sees the myriad ways in which patriarchy has built up childbirth as a “natural” domestic prison for women, and feminists who believe the institution overshadows the experience have come to see motherhood as a “powerless responsibility.”³ The dominance of discussions of

Press, 1978); Nancy Chodorow, *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Sarah Ruddick, “Maternal Thinking,” *Feminist Studies* 6, no. 2 (1980): 342-367; and Joyce Treblicot, ed., *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman & Allanheld, 1984). For rich texts on the motherhood of women of color, see Patricia Hill Collins, “Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood,” in *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency*, eds. Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang, and Linda Rennie Forcey (New York: Routledge, 1994), 45-65; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Andrea O’Reilly, *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004); and virtually any of Toni Morrison’s novels, including *Sula* (New York: New American Library, 1973), *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1987), and *A Mercy* (New York: Knopf, 2008).

² Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 13, 42.

³ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 52.

motherhood as a socially controlled institution has led me to focus instead on motherhood as an individual or communal experience, though I am constantly aware of how much that “experience” is mediated by language and social conventions. Only by moving beyond prescriptions and discourse, though, can we hope to recover some workable definition of maternal power.

Despite the fact that for most women in history, “actual childbirth has involved no choice whatever,” Rich argues that the maternal body is “a field of contradictions: a space invested with power, and an acute vulnerability.”⁴ What does Rich mean by power? She carefully describes a “patriarchal power” which “insists on a dichotomy: for one person to have power, others – or another – must be powerless.” Using this definition, mothers have power by virtue of their direct involvement in the survival of their children; they determine when and whether to nurse and protect an infant, and by so doing, have a hand in its life or death. Rich argues that while “the one aspect in which most women have felt their own power in the patriarchal sense . . . has been motherhood, . . . the womb – the ultimate source of this power – has historically been turned against us and itself made into a source of powerlessness.”⁵ Here, then, is the crux. Women have inherent power via their maternalism, power which is experiential rather than institutional, but the structures of patriarchy have converted that power into powerlessness, which is expressed through language ranging from the violence of rape to the insidious assumption that motherhood should be a woman’s end goal.

⁴ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 156, 102.

⁵ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 67-68.

But Rich does not pursue her definition of power further; if “power *over*” is essentially patriarchal, what would a feminized definition of power look like? I would argue that feminized power is essentially a power within the self. It is both the decision and capability to make choices on one’s own terms and for the benefit of both self and loved ones. Maternal power is a combination of both patriarchal power, as women controlled their children’s health and safety, and feminized power, as women chose to teach their children about familial love in spite of slavery or chose to send their children to academies and mission schools, sacrificing an immediate control over a child’s body for a long-term investment in a child’s future. The power of choice and decision that resides within the self has not been historically recognized because it does not seek to subjugate, but to ameliorate. Rich argues that “the search for a tradition of female power . . . springs from an intense need for validation,” and believes that “a critical exploration backward in time can be profoundly radicalizing.”⁶ Rich reaches back to ancient and half-mythic matriarchies, though, for this radical past. By reformulating what we mean by “power,” we need not dig so deep in our own history.

There is much that is controversial here. I do not seek to reclaim the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as any sort of golden age for women. I do not want to essentialize a protective, nurturing “female” and a forceful, dominating “male.” I do not intend to romanticize motherhood; some women used their maternal power to physically abuse their children with no discernable motive other than malice, and some women felt the task of childrearing to be a blistering yoke. I do not want to suggest that motherhood was an empowering identity that was invulnerable to suffering or abuse, that mothers were mothers

⁶ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 85-86.

first and individual women second, or that women who were not mothers had no recourse to power. I focus here on mothers because motherhood has been an easy way to frame women's persistent oppression: it was a socially assigned role, it excluded women from political action, it tied women down in cycles of reproductive labor. These things are largely *true*, but they are not the entire truth. Examining motherhood through the lens of power rather than the lens of oppression is dicey, since it necessarily highlights certain experiences over others for the sake of argument, but it has the potential to reframe our historical understanding of women's lives, which is work that must be doggedly pursued. In *Of Woman Born*, Rich includes a quotation from Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*, a South African story from 1883 often cited as one of the first feminist novels. When a male friend casually states that "some women have power," the female protagonist responds:

Power! Did you ever hear of men being asked whether other souls should have power or not? It is born in them. You may dam up the fountain of water, and make it a stagnant marsh, or you may let it run free and do its work; but *you* cannot say whether or not it shall be there; *it is there*.⁷

This simple definition of power – *it is there* – fundamentally affects the study of women's history. By locating and illustrating the power implicit in motherhood, I hope to move the conversation from whether or not women had power to something more complex: what power meant, what forms it took, how it was practiced, when it was manipulated or contested, how it structured women's lives.

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I write this in the spring of 2011. In December, I read *Room* by Emma Donoghue, a finalist for the prestigious Man Booker Prize. This novel told the story of a woman and her

⁷ Olive Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm* (New York: Lovell, Gestefeld and Company, 1883), 155, quoted in Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 69.

five-year-old son living in an eleven foot by eleven foot shed, where they are imprisoned by a man who kidnapped the woman as a teenager and keeps her as a perpetual object of rape. The young boy was born in the room and has never been outside. Though the narrator is the boy, whose language turns the shed into a place of wonder, Donoghue's theme is the love of the mother, whose protective urgency leads to increasingly desperate decisions. The mother decides that she would rather risk the boy's life than see him live out his days in that prison, or worse, become another victim of rape. Her desperation is painted in its most extreme form, but it mirrors the emotions and decisions of mothers two hundred years earlier, who faced the same dilemma of choosing between degrees of violence.⁸

In January, Amy Chua published an article in the *Wall Street Journal* about the superiority of Chinese parenting that chronicled her strict childrearing regimen, including denying her children food until they perfected a piano piece and calling them "garbage" when they failed to meet her expectations. This article, and Chua's memoir, set off a firestorm of commentary in American news outlets and around dinner tables. How does one make judgments about alternative parenting techniques? How can one express outrage without being culturally chauvinistic? Chua was careful to note that Chinese parents "would give up anything for their children. It's just an entirely different parenting model." Does the presence of love and the pursuit of a child's best interests override what might seem like psychologically damaging childrearing tactics? With Chua's article, many Americans got a crash course in the multiple definitions of "motherhood" and "power."⁹

⁸ Emma Donoghue, *Room* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2010).

⁹ See Amy Chua, "Why Chinese Mothers Are Superior," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 8, 2011, and Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011).

In February, my mother forwarded me an email from an old friend of hers who was trying to help her son through the process of choosing a college. This woman wanted her son to choose a school for its academics, but as a talented soccer player, he was only looking at colleges with the best teams. She wrote, “Do we ever stop worrying?” I responded by saying she should read my book when it comes out; the answer is an emphatic no. My mother wrote back, “Luckily the joys outweigh the worries, at least in my case.” While it varies dramatically from mother to mother, the balance between joy and worry (between power and powerlessness) is so common that it is almost universal, at least since mothers began to view children as individual packets of potential, subjects of intense devotion, reflections of maternal skill, and markers of communal success.¹⁰

¹⁰ Elise Lawton Smith, email message to author, February 15, 2011.

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