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Narratives of the Black Mother in the U.S.: Exploring the Black Maternalist Framework in Black Activism

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Maternalist Framework in Black
Activism**



Honors Thesis

Anna Biesecker-Mast

Department: History

Advisor: Ashleigh Lawrence-Sanders, PhD

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Abstract

My historical research seeks to reveal how exactly White European notions of Blackness, womanhood, and motherhood (and the intersections of all three) were inscribed onto the lived experiences of enslaved women and mothers from the early Atlantic period through the antebellum era. What emerges from a critical analysis of archival omissions are Black women's voices and experiences—who demonstrate over and over that they resisted and are resisting. I will demonstrate how other people's rhetorical use of Black motherhood constructs and shapes the lived experience of these women and creates a tension between the 'ideal' Black mother and those that don't fit into the prescribed narrative. Furthermore, I will argue that looking at this history through a Black Maternalist framework reveals that motherhood characterized these women's resistance, and that these women fought to gain freedom through their radical acts of maternalism.

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Introduction

Historically, the archive has been a death sentence for Black women looking to see themselves in U.S. history. Their voices are not preserved—in fact, the ones that are predominantly work to distort and silence Black women, starting with the horrifying records of the transatlantic slave trade and the initial encounters European travelers had with African women during their travels to the coasts of Africa. The White archive has dominated historical narratives of the U.S. until relatively recent scholarship of historians and theorists like Deborah Gray White, Saidiya Hartman, Stephanie Camp, Daina Ramey Berry, Kali Nicole Gross, and more. These scholars have started the hard, yet crucial work, of historicizing the lived experiences of Black women in the U.S. since slavery. Drawing on the exemplary work of these thinkers, I find that a Black Maternalist framework helps reveal how exactly White European notions of Blackness, womanhood, and motherhood (and the intersections of all three) were inscribed onto the lived experiences of enslaved women and mothers from the early Atlantic period of the transatlantic slave trade up through the antebellum era of U.S. slavery. Initially, the archive reveals how European travelers/colonizers, enslavers, and others besides enslaved women themselves perceived and manipulated the image of the Black mother for various ends (to stabilize Whiteness, to recapture fugitive slaves, to promote abolitionist causes). However, what emerges from a critical analysis of the omissions and sparsity in the archives are Black women's voices and experiences—who demonstrate over and over that they resisted and are resisting. I will argue that looking at this history through the Black Maternalist framework—by centering enslaved motherhood and Black motherhood—reveals that Free African women, enslaved women, and free Black women resisted as mothers and did so through their acts of maternalism. Enslaved women's

remaking of motherhood characterized these women's resistance from the voyages across the Atlantic to the antebellum period. Along the way, my thesis will demonstrate how other people's rhetorical use of Black motherhood constructs the lived experience of these women and creates a tension between the "ideal" Black mother and those that don't fit into the narrative. Specifically, a dialectical relationship between Black women and these outside constructions emerges; while yes, others create these constraining/limiting ideals of Black motherhood to distort these women and take away their freedom, Black women and mothers simultaneously sought freedom and resisted this entrapment through their daily acts of remaking motherhood for themselves.

The Experiences of Enslaved African Women from the Black Atlantic to Early Colonies in the New World (16th, 17th, and 18th Centuries)

We find the rough beginning of this story in the dynamic and contingent scene of the early Atlantic. I say contingent because it is these early complex transatlantic (political and cultural) encounters that fundamentally shaped and shape the trajectory of modernity. At the heart of this development of modernity are constructions of race and gender. And given the contingency of history, it must be noted that, if responses to these encounters had been different, perhaps we would be living with a different modernity—maybe one with different or less harmful notions of race and gender difference.

Understanding how these conceptualizations came to be is crucial for my more specific historical analysis of Black motherhood, so I find helpful frameworks in Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*. Gilroy contributes an important narrative of modernity that complicates and resists the dominant one that aligns modern Western intellectual and cultural development with definitive nation-states. Gilroy importantly points out that this historical narrative only works to exclude and marginalize the African diaspora and Black culture and experience. Instead, Gilroy asserts a distinctly transnational understanding of how these encounters shaped modernity—which effectively *centers* the system and experience of slavery as fundamental for the stabilization of modernity. In other words, Gilroy argues that these transnational encounters helped create a complex and long history of African diasporic intellectual culture central for modernity.

Given the relevance of Gilroy's argument and how this resituation allows for a deeper study of how the prevalence of racism today is rooted in the development of modernity in the early Black Atlantic—I begin my analysis with the transnational nature

of the African diaspora, and what these encounters meant for early constructions of race and gender. All of this will lead into a more specific analysis of Black motherhood and its role in these earlier periods.

Early Encounters: A Dialectic (16th & 17th century)

To better understand how the constructs of race and gender come to intersect in the experience of Black women and mothers, it is important to delve into the travel accounts of first encounters, the African diaspora, and the transatlantic slave trade.

Because the most abundant sources available from the early modern period are travel accounts written by European men about Native American and African women, their narratives have become the dominant ones. This particular genre of literature was being created since the 1400s. However, these European-constructed images of indigenous women became more widely distributed and reproduced in England during the second half of the seventeenth century and eighteenth century. The recreation and imitation of these images in Europe ultimately develops into a racial and gendered discourse which establishes stable categories of Whiteness and Blackness. Even so, if the historian reads their accounts with a critical lens attentive to race and gender, it becomes clear how these accounts laid the foundation for emerging classifications of race, gender, and specifically motherhood. As Jennifer Morgan writes in her book, *Laboring Women*, “As travelers and men of letters thought through the thorny entanglements of skin color, complexion, features, and hair texture, they constructed weighty notions of civility, nationhood, citizenship, and manliness on the foundation of the amalgam of nature and culture.”¹

¹ Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 13.

White European travelers were crucial for constructing the imagination of Black womanhood in the context of the early Atlantic. As these travel accounts and discourses came to establish Black womanhood, they simultaneously stabilized Whiteness and White womanhood. As Morgan writes, “indigenous women bore an enormous symbolic burden as writers [...] used them to mark metaphorically the symbiotic boundaries of European national identities and White supremacy.”² There are several examples of these accounts—especially of ones that depict Black women, indigenous women, and their bodies/physiognomy in such a way that demonstrate contradictory notions of womanhood, the familiar and the unfamiliar—the monstrous and the beautiful. It’s hard to miss the portrayals of motherhood, which are often invoked to achieve some rhetorical end.

One example from the early 17th century appears in Pieter de Marees’s *A description and historicall declaration of the golden Kingdome of Guinea*” which was first published in 1602. He writes about his encounter with and experience of African women and mothers from the Gold Coast (Ghana):

Being with child, when their time of deliverance, and bringing forth of their child into the world cometh, when she is in labour, both men, women, maids, young men & children, run unto her, and she is most shameless manner is delivered before them all. [...] When the child is born, she goes to the water to wash & make clean herself, not once dreaming of a month’s lying in, nor of making caudles of ipocras, and other wines, as women here with us use to do: they use no nurses to help them when they lie in child-bed, neither week to lie dainty and soft; but they presently take a spoonful of oil, and a handful of manigette or grain, whereof they make a drink and drink it up. The next day after, they go abroad in the streets to do their business as other women do.³

² Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 15.

³ Pieter De Marees, “Description and historicall declaration of the Golden Kingdome,” in *Purchase His Pilgrimes* (London: William Stansby, 1625), 930.

In this passage, de Marees compares the mothers he finds on the coast of Guinea to European mothers. The first thing he notes, is that when these African women give birth—there seems to be no privacy since “both men, women, maids, young men & children” flock to her side. De Marees describes this delivery as “shameless,” implying that West African women that they were shamelessly naked in front of all these people. De Marees creates more distance between Europeans and Africans by characterizing African women as such. In characterizing African women as savage, he also characterizes the continent of Africa. He then goes on to compare how African women of that region seem to not rest afterward, but instead clean themselves up and go to work the next day, “not once dreaming of a month’s lying in ... as women here with us use to do.” In descriptions such as these, de Marees’ narrative characterizes African mothers as emotionally indifferent to their children and to the pain of childbirth. Of course, by creating the African woman as the antithesis of the White European woman—de Marees helps to stabilize Whiteness, White womanhood, and contribute to the justification of enslavement.

Later in his writing, de Marees creates another image of the African mother that becomes a staple in travel literature of this time for categorizing African motherhood as other. Specifically, he writes about West African women’s reproductive identity and breast feeding:

When it [the child] is two or three months old, the mother ties the child with a piece of cloth at her back, and so lets it hang there, as the high Dutch wives use to follow their husbands in the wars. When the child crieth to suck, the mother casteth one of her dugs backward over her shoulder, and so the child sucks it as it hangs.⁴

⁴ Pieter De Marees, “Description and historical declaration of the Golden Kingdome,” in *Purchase His Pilgrimes* (London: William Stansby, 1625), 930.

This image of an African mother breast feeding a child over her shoulder helps to further distance Black womanhood from White womanhood—both culturally and physically. The word choice in this passage is crucial for this binaristic construction. As Jennifer Morgan notes in *Laboring Women*, the word “dug” was typically used to reference both a woman’s breast and that of an animal which “connoted a brute animality.”⁵ Again, de Mares is helping to construct a rhetorical narrative about who African women were against White European women were—which has direct reflections on how White Europeans conceptualize Africa and Europe as global regions. Furthermore, these images have implications for future justifications of slavery.

Another example of such travel literature appears in Nicolas Villaut’s later 17th century accounts of traveling to the coasts of Africa, namely the Gulf of Guinea. In his section “Of their Marriages, and the Education of their Children,” he writes his impressions of African mothers he encounters on his travels in 1666/1667:

The Mother carries it [her child] at her back upon a piece of wood with the leggs un|der her armpits, tying its two hands about her neck, where it hangs all day, and never comes off, but when she goes to bed; and this is the reason why the Children of their Nobles, or better sort, have seldome camous noses, because their Wives do not labour, nor carry their Infants about them, as the others do, whose Children sleeping many times whilst the Mother is walking or at work, knock their noses against their Shoulders, and so in time they become flat: if they cry out for the teat, they throw their breasts over their shoulders, and let them suck.⁶

Here, Villaut conveys that the bad behavior of “the Mother” have direct consequences for how the children will look. Specifically, he says that the children will develop “flat noses” from knocking their faces against their mother’s back—since that is the way she

⁵ Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 33.

⁶ Nicholas Villault. *A Relation of the Coasts of Africk...* (London: 1666 and 1667; Early English Books Online Text Creation Partnership, 2011), 149-150.

carries them. According to Villaut's account, the Mother carries her children like this because she is simultaneously performing labor. He juxtaposes the mother from Africa with "Noble" parents: "this is the reason why the Children of their Nobles, or better sort, have seldome camous noses, because their Wives do not labour, not carry their Infants about them." This direct comparison works to further define boundaries of White supremacy and European national identities—which are intimately wrapped up in juxtaposed depictions of womanhood and motherhood. What's more, Villaut contributes to the burgeoning collections of travel literature that claim biological justifications for enslavement—such as "the Mother" who he describes as laboring much more than a "Noble" wife/woman. Villaut also utilizes the same image of African women breastfeeding their children over their shoulder, like de Marees. In sum, this excerpt from Villaut's account reveals how White European travelers were constantly defining Whiteness against depictions of African womanhood and motherhood—while simultaneously constructing legitimizations of enslavement.

These early encounters were crucial for developing constructions of race and gender—although, of course, the connection between race and slavery wasn't fully solidified until a little later with the passing of colonial laws in the 17th and 18th century. However, while these travel accounts are some of the more definitive pieces of evidence historians must work with from this time period, it is also true that men and women of African descent were simultaneously moving through the Atlantic freely, establishing traditions of resistance and sustaining themselves economically.

Perhaps the most important detail to understand about these early encounters was that they were dialectical—in other words, it wasn't just White European men arriving on coasts and constructing notions of race and gender. There were also Africans, including

African women, traveling in the 16th and early 17th centuries who were doing constructive work as well. As Michael Gomez discusses in his book *Reversing Sail*, there were free Africans traversing the Atlantic in the sixteenth century while enslaved Africans were being traded. Gomez gives the example of Juan González de León, a free man of African descent, who worked as an interpreter in a Spanish town in the late 15th and early 16th centuries.⁷

More than this, there is clear evidence that at least some women of African descent were also moving freely around the early Atlantic. For example, Isabel de Olvera was one such woman who traveled to New Spain with Juan de Oñate's expedition. Before the expedition departed, Olvera petitioned the mayor of Querétaro, Mexico in 1600 for promised protection of her rights as a Black woman. She stated in the petition that she had ample reason to fear that she "may be annoyed by some individual since I am a mulatto."⁸ Her petition was rooted in the fear that she would be vulnerable to violence during the expedition. This petition not only proves the presence of Black women in the early stages of New World expedition (specifically with the Spanish conquest/invasion), but also highlights the fact that there were Black women who were demanding justice as they faced threats of rape and other violence on these journeys. All of this is to say that while White Europeans were colonizing and Africans were being kidnapped, held in captivity, and traded—men and women of African descent were simultaneously traveling across the Atlantic as free people and, like Olvera, demanding justice and establishing traditions of resistance.

⁷ Michael Gomez, *Reversing Sail* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 63.

⁸ Daina Ramey Berry and Kali Nicole Gross, *A Black Women's History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020), 9.

All of this points to a longer history of Black women taking the initiative to protect their rights and the true contingency of this historical moment. In other words, there was ample room for things to be different. However, the story we have come to know is that of the Atlantic slave trade and the White European-driven forced migration of Africans from coastal regions of Africa to the Americas—specifically to South America, the Caribbean and West Indies, and some to North America. It is in and through this setting of the Black Atlantic that formed and stabilized categories of race and racial slavery—and racialized notion of womanhood, motherhood, and beauty. Unfortunately, the histories of women like Olvera and of enslaved African women in the early Atlantic are difficult to find due to the systemic omission of their perspectives and experiences from these early archival records. For example, Olvera’s story is only preserved through the record of her petition and Juan de Oñate’s account of his expedition. However, the existence of this evidence, while limited, suggests that there were more stories like Olvera in the early modern period. In sum, I argue it is still possible to uncover the stories of these women and African women’s experience of motherhood through a critical analysis of these accounts. Specifically, by analyzing primary sources with the imaginative eye that historians like Saidiya Hartman exemplify and approaching the sources with an awareness of the violence done to the archive, the historian can illuminate the lived experience of African and Black women in the early Atlantic.

Voyages and the Middle Passage

While there were Black explorers, including Black women, moving around the Atlantic and the New World, the early 16th century was largely characterized by the inhumane movement and displacement of Africans from Africa in the transatlantic slave

trade. During this time, Africans were kidnapped, traded, and inhumanely piled into ships on the coast of Africa to travel across the Atlantic into the New World. European nations including France, Britain, Spain, Sweden, Denmark, Holland, and Portugal were all a part of the massive trading expedition that required the kidnapping of Africans from their home regions and villages. Once captive Africans reached the coast (although an average 10 to 15 percent didn't make it), they might have had to wait months before the ship would depart.⁹ Of course, that was all before the long voyage across the Atlantic. Michael Gomez who wrote a history of the African Diaspora, *Reversing Sail*, stipulates that “a Middle Passage of only two or three month's duration was not the experience of many; rather, the total amount of time from the initial capture to embarkation could last the better part of a year.”¹⁰

If the goal is to chart gender difference, specifically the experience of enslaved women and mothers, throughout the Middle Passage, the historian must turn to sources like ship transport records, ledgers, bills of lading (shipment receipts), and other accounting documents and instruments by which traders monitored their investments. In doing so, historians can glean something of enslaved women's experience. Unfortunately, archival omissions permeate these records as well and, as a result, many current historical works about enslaved women are not truly about them, their thoughts, or daily life. Rather, they are about the violence committed against them, and the commodification process that rendered these women powerless. These types of documents rob enslaved women of their personhood, agency, and reduce them to numerical figures. As Saidiya

⁹ Michael Gomez, *Reversing Sail* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 73.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 74.

Hartman puts it, “the archive is, in this case, a death sentence.”¹¹ If these sources are read with an intent focus on the omissions and the experience of those enslaved in mind, something deeper about this historical moment of the transatlantic slave trade and capitalism is revealed. Documents like trading records from the Atlantic slave trade (while not ideal pieces of evidence) function as mirrors—where we as historians can see the human experience of migration and captivity reflected in the voyage records created by slave traders.¹² This kind of historical work requires an imaginative approach to source analysis.

However, if we look critically and intently at these omissions and approach the archival records we do have with an imaginative eye, historians can start to fill in these gaps with historical writing—a writing method that Hartman calls “critical fabulation.”¹³ One example of such an archival omission appears in a large portion of transatlantic ship records that omit sex ratios of the captives on board. The Slave Voyages database houses a significant representation of slave-trading voyages from 1514 to 1866—specifically, the documents detail a total of 36,000 voyages/slaving expeditions. From the first period of the slave trade (1514 to 1770), the database includes data from 4,358 slave-trading voyages. However, as the Slave Voyages “Methodology” section admits, there is only a small number of voyages that account for ratios of men, women, boys, and girls.¹⁴ Less than 8% (336) of those records from the earlier period include anything about the sex

¹¹ Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 2.

¹² Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 5.

¹³ Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 11. (In my “Methods” section of the larger thesis, I discuss Hartman’s writing method and how I envision critical fabulation informing my historical analysis.)

¹⁴ David Eltis, “Methodology: Age and Gender Ratios,” *Slave Voyages*, (2018), <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/about#methodology/age-and-gender-ratios/16/en/>.

ratios of the captives.¹⁵ That low percentage is a jarring lack of quantitative documentation in a capitalist system that is so reliant on detailed numeric record keeping. The striking omission of sex ratios begs the question: what productive purpose did this omission serve for the ship captains? I would argue that the refusal of the ship captains to record gender ratios reveals something about their need to suppress kinship and family ties among the captives aboard—and, in fact, helps point to the ubiquitous presence of enslaved African women in the Middle Passage and a story of enslaved Africans commonly maintaining kinship ties despite this suppression.

The European captors were undoubtedly aware of the presence of enslaved women and girls on their ships, which is proven by the fact that they often raped enslaved women aboard and wrote about them in their travel accounts. It follows, then, that the ship's captain and crew would be cognizant of these women's connection to birth, motherhood, and children—even though the transatlantic slave trade worked to tear family ties and kinship apart and marked family and kin as outside of the market space.¹⁶ The idea that enslaved African women on these ships were still mothering, regardless of biological kinship, shows that these women were resisting the kinlessness narrative through motherhood as early as these slave trade voyages.

However, the accounts of voyages written by slave ship captains refuse to see the reality of these kinship ties—a choice Jennifer Morgan productively names “willful blindness.”¹⁷ One captain's account from the *James* voyage, which sailed in 1675, recounts two instances of enslaved mothers dying on the ship in a record table titled “An

¹⁵ Jennifer L. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 45.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

Acc'tt of the Martallity of Slaves aboard the Shipp 'James.'" On March 5, 1675, the captain, Peter Blake, recorded that one woman died that day, explaining that she "Miscarryed and the Child dead within her and Rotten and dyed 2 days after delivery."¹⁸ In the same table on April 26, 1675, the captain recorded the cause of another enslaved woman's death. Specifically, he detailed the perceived madness of an enslaved mother and her child: "Being very fond of her Child, Carrying her up and downe, wore her to nothing by which means fell into a feavour and dyed."¹⁹ This account includes no indication or validation of the mother's grief and conveys no empathetic feelings from the captain. Rather, this captain describes only the enslaved mother's apparent insanity—painting her as this peculiar lost cause, who died driving herself mad. While apathetic and inhumane, the captain's construal of enslaved mothers does reveal that these women were mothering, grieving their children and living the perverted and devastating consequences of reproduction on the Middle Passage and in captivity.

Other captain accounts mention women in captivity on these ships and portray their sexuality and reproduction—however none of them are named. Instead, the captains refer to them by numbers. For instance, John Newton writes about enslaved women on his ship in 1754. He reports:

Buryed a girl slave (no 92). In the afternoon while we were off the deck, William Cooney seduced a woman slave down into the room and lay with her brutelike in view of the whole quarter deck, for which I put him in irons. I hope this has been the first affair of the kind on board and I am determind to keep them quiet if possible. If anything happens to the woman I shall impute it to him, for she was big with child. Her number is 83...²⁰

¹⁸ Peter Blake, "Voyage of the James, 1675–76," in *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America: Vol. 1, 1441-1700*, ed. Elizabeth Donnan (Washington: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1930), 207.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 207.

²⁰ "Extracts from John Newton's Journal," Monday June 24, 1754.

<https://www.learningforjustice.org/classroom-resources/texts/hard-history/the-journal-of-a-slave-trader>

In this excerpt, Newton only distinguished each woman he talks about by their number “83” or “92”—effectively robbing enslaved women of their individual identities, humanity, and personhood. Furthermore, Newton reports that a crew member, William Cooney, “seduced” this woman slave and “lay with her brutelike in view of the whole quarter deck.” One can imagine the brutal humiliation and indignity the woman experienced being raped in front of others on the ship. She was also likely quite pregnant already—as the captain describes her as “big with child.” In this account, however, the captain only conveys annoyance that his crew member made so much racket with this display, saying “I hope this has been the first affair of the kind on board and I am determined to keep them quiet if possible.”

Early Colonies: Resistance and Colonial Law

The system of slavery in Colonial America was dynamic and changed significantly throughout its earlier establishment in the New World—and depended on its geographical location in the Americas. Slavery became thoroughly codified and racialized through the earlier laws passed in the Americas that sought to increasingly regulate and limit these slave populations in response to their resistance efforts. These slave laws were so intent on “control” because of the irreconcilable contradictions that emerge with trying to maintain the system of slavery. To succeed in this maintenance and increase profit, the slave population had to keep growing—however, a thriving slave population was also exactly how slaveowners became anxious about being outnumbered by them and their capacity for organized revolts. As such, this necessity for control arose out of African women’s reproductive power.

One early legislative document that helped to codify slavery and enslaved women's motherhood was the Barbados legislative report of 1692. Not only does this document demonstrate how slaveowners responded to slave revolts in Barbados, but it also reveals how they rhetorically manipulated enslaved women's bodies as a mode of social control. The 1692 legislative report was written in response to a slave revolt planned by Afro-Barbadian creoles. The revolt largely relied on Black militiamen as informants who were trusted by slaveowners. However, when they rebelled, slaveowners were startled into suspicion and distrust—and provoked the writing of the 1692 legislative report. Specifically, slaveowners/legislators wrote to the crown that the creoles were non-threatening because they were incompetent and ineffective rebels. In this report, the White slaveowners and legislators made the distinctly rhetorical move of connecting their “incompetence” with their birth land and mothers. In other words, they appropriated creole women's bodies for social control.²¹

The rebelling creoles were likely fortified by the encouragement and inspiration of their mothers who believed in a future where her children would not be bound by the shackles of slavery. So, when the island's legislators reported to the crown that the creoles were no longer a threat because they were creole-born (as opposed to born in Africa)—the legislators appropriated enslaved mother's bodies as rhetorical tools of social control. In effect, this language labeled creole mothers and children as “safe” and non-threatening to the regime of slavery in Barbados. Here appears the same theme of slaveowners ascribing their own conceptualization and value of enslaved family ties, which has real effects on the lived experiences of the creole people enslaved in Barbados.

²¹ Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 186.

What's important to note, is that this was done through the appropriation of Black mother's reproductive bodies. The value of their motherhood was called into question and used as a tool/weapon against the rebelling enslaved population in 17th century Barbados.

The rhetorical manipulation and outlining of Black motherhood is more evident in late 17th and early 18th century colonial laws that were passed to further control the movement of slaves. For example, in 1662, the Virginia Assembly passed a law that defined slave status of a child by that of their mother—also known as the doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem*. In Volume 2, Act XII, the law reads:

Whereas some doubts have arisen whether children got by any Englishman upon a negro woman should be slave or free, *Be it therefore enacted and declared by this present grad assembly*, that all children borne in this country shalbe held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother, *And* that if any Christian shall commit fornication with a negro man or woman, hee or shee soe offending shall pay double the fines imposed by the former act.²²

Virginia's law around hereditary slavery effectively bonded the growth of slavery to Black women's bodies—especially to Black mothers' bodies: “that all children borne in this country shalbe held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother.” This law is so binding because it was ultimately adopted by all colonies by the turn of the eighteenth century.²³ Through the passage of this law, slavery becomes definitively hereditary and tied the maintenance of slavery to Black women's reproductive power. However, its passage also suggests that there was a need to write it. The beginning of the law indicates that previously there were “some doubts” about “whether children got by

²² *The statutes at large; being a collection of all the laws of Virginia, from the first session of the legislature, in the year 1619.* Vol II Act XII, 170.

²³ Berry and Gross, *A Black Women's History*, 33-34.

any Englishman upon a negro woman should be slave or free.” Interestingly, one of the court cases that raised such questions was surrounding a Black woman named Elizabeth Keyes. Her story is further proof that definition of Black motherhood did not just come from White slaveowners and Middle Passage ship captains—rather, it’s clear that Black women themselves were outlining motherhood and fighting for their rights and freedom at the same time.

On July 21, 1656, Elizabeth Keyes filed a petition for her and her infant son’s freedom. As the daughter of a White Englishman and enslaved Black woman, Keyes argued in court that she had the grounds to claim her and her son’s liberty. Keyes won her lawsuit and effectively granted her and her son free status. Elizabeth Keyes’ success conjured up questions among slaveowners and colonial legislators about how to determine slave status and who could petition for freedom. In other words, Keyes’ defiance and assertion of her rights and freedom were so problematic for colonial slaveowners that a law had to be passed ensuring that any enslaved women in the future would not be able to argue for her own or her children’s freedom. Resistance to slavery and access to freedom was gendered since enslaved women inhabited that necessary yet dangerous reproductive role, however it’s quite evident that enslaved women *did* resist, and successfully.

Often, these laws were passed out of some kind of “necessity”—in reaction to enslaved people gaining more social mobility than was comfortable or to slaves resisting the system, whether that was by running away, organizing a revolt, or submitting a petition. Another example appears when White artisans and other working whites in Carolina, around the 1730s, developed an anxiety about slaves inhabiting more roles as skilled workers, which they saw as “threatening their livelihoods.” While enslaved men

were increasingly able to become carpenters, blacksmiths, coopers, and sawyers, some enslaved women worked as marketers and sellers of good which allowed them movement outside of their plantation.²⁴ Enslaved women, like Elizabeth Keyes, were also notably using the court system as litigants to assert their power and sue for payment and freedom. One such woman was Phillis, “a free negroe woman,” who filed a suit against Samuel Fox—a slaveowner who refused to pay her the wages he promised her (2.8 pounds sterling for her work tending to an infant). The court ruled in her favor—and so Phillis is an example of a Black woman who used the legal system to secure justice. At the same time that Phillis was suing for her freedom, White traders were petitioning for the legislative assembly to prohibit slaves’ social mobility as skilled workers or “Negroes in Trade”. That enslaved women were working as litigants and using the courts to restore power to themselves and challenge maltreatment, actually contributed significantly to the anxiety these White traders felt about slaves entering into skill labor positions.²⁵ In this case, legislation was induced by growing alarm amongst White workers in seeing slaves achieve some social mobility—and it seems their anxieties were put over the edge once they saw enslaved women successfully using the courts and becoming marketers.

An in-depth look at these legal documents, law codes, and legislative reports helps to reveal all the ways in which women like Elizabeth Keyes and Phillis used the tools at their disposal to actively challenge their slave status, and that of their children in Keyes’ case. The story of enslaved women in the early colonies is not a singular narrative of slave owners and colonial legislators exerting more and more social control on their reproductive power, motherhood, and movements. Rather, at the same time, enslaved

²⁴ Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 176-177.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 176-177.

Black women were actively resisting the confines of early colonial slavery and marked notions of motherhood for themselves.

Despite the limitations of the archival records available from the transatlantic slave trade and the early colonies, it is possible to put together a historical narrative of African and Black women—enslaved or not. African women like Isabel de Olvera were likely moving freely around the early Atlantic and establishing traditions of resistance as they petitioned for their rights. Enslaved women were doing the same in the early North American colonies, like Elizabeth Keyes and Phillis. Furthermore, Elizabeth is proof that Black women were fighting for the rights of their children as well, before the Virginia Assembly law that declared slavery hereditary and tied to enslaved women's reproductive bodies.

What emerges from primary sources while charting the vibrant lives of African and Black women in the early modern period is a pattern of rhetorical constructions of enslaved women's motherhood. Not only do these repeated rhetorical representations of Black motherhood stabilize European notions of gender and Whiteness, but they also shape the lived experience of these women and creates a tension between the "ideal" Black mother and those that don't fit into the narrative. In charting both these rhetorical idealization of motherhood by others and the moments that Black women resist social control (especially as mothers) in the early period, I demonstrate the dialectical nature of this historical moment. At the same time that European ship captains, traveler, and colonizers were classifying African womanhood and motherhood, African and Black women were resisting, petitioning for their rights and the rights of their children. In other words, I've found it is important that the historian sees simultaneous oppression and resistance that characterizes Black women's lives in the early modern period.

Revolutionary America (1775-1783)

The dialectical relationship between outside constraints on enslaved women and the simultaneous ways they resist continues into the Revolutionary Era of U.S. history. This particular era provided a unique opportunity for enslaved people to subvert the system of slavery for a few reasons. Specifically, the conflict/war between the American colonies and Britain produced documented promises of freedom to enslaved peoples in exchange for loyalty. For example, one of the most significant turning points was the issuance of Lord Dunmore's Proclamation in November of 1775 as well as the Philipsburg Proclamation in 1779—both of which promised freedom to enslaved people who made it to British lines and joined the Loyalist cause.²⁶ Not only was there an opportunity for freedom within reach at British lines, but the Revolutionary era and war itself engendered independence and freedom ideologies that enslaved people took on and created space for them to resist and even escape their enslavers. In her book *Running from Bondage*, Karen Cook Bell makes the poignant argument that more enslaved women were running away during the American Revolution and that in fact “the war bolstered the independent of fugitive Black women, gave them increased access to their families with whom they fled, and greater autonomy in their day-to-day lives once they reached safe havens.”²⁷ In other words, enslaved women took advantage of the space made by the confusion and upheaval that comes with war time—and exhibited true agency in the ways that they strategized and planned their truancy and escape. In the following pages I will examine how these women were compelled to run away as mothers, sometimes with their children, and what

²⁶ Karen Cook Bell, *Running from Bondage* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 80-82.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

their conditions/experience was like as enslaved mothers running away.²⁸ How did enslaved women pull off extremely difficult escapes during Revolutionary war period?

One way to get a window into the lives of these women is by looking at runaway slave advertisements published in local newspapers from the Revolutionary era—some of which can be found in the collection compiled by Lathan A. Windley, *Runaway Slave Advertisements: A Documentary History from the 1730s to 1790*. While these sources do not necessarily show us the inner lives of enslaved women at the time, they do help to reveal the power and strategy of Black women's resistance in fleeing enslavement during this time. Looking at some of these advertisements, three key aspects stand out: 1) the logistical difficulty of running away as a mother with children 2) the elaborate strategy and planning required to pull off such an escape and 3) how enslavers describe enslaved women in these advertisements so as to better their odds of recapture. Windley's collection of advertisements provides a helpful sample of some such documents. For instance, one enslaver named John Rose, posted a runaway slave advertisement in the *Savannah Royal Georgia Gazette* on October 12, 1780. During the Revolutionary era, it was common for enslaved women to flee to cities like Philadelphia, New York, and Savannah which they considered to be safe havens. As port cities occupied by British troops, these locations offered fugitives a better chance to escape the colony if they could secure boats and find refuge.²⁹ This particular advertisement describes two fugitive women and a girl who ran away from a plantation in South Carolina, potentially headed to Savannah:

Five Guineas Reward. Ran away from the subscriber, Three Fellows, two Wenches with Children, and a Girl, viz. [...] Phebe, a small slim wench, of a yellowish

²⁸ Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 37.

²⁹ Karen Cook Bell, *Running from Bondage*, 88-89, 105.

complexion, has her country marks on each of her temples, has five children with her, one of them at the breast. Juno, a lusty wench, has thick lips, and large eyes which commonly have an appearance of soreness, has two children with her.³⁰

John Rose describes two enslaved women who ran away from his property—who appear to be mothers in one way or another. The first, Phebe, had five children with her in tow, “one of them at the breast.” It would have been remarkably difficult to rally five children, at least one of them still being breast fed, let alone to do so in a discrete manner. It’s easy then to imagine why running away as an enslaved woman, in particular a mother, because of these logistical nightmares. The second, Juno, is described as a “lusty wench” with “thick lips, and large eyes” who carried two children with her. It’s clear from the description of Juno that the enslaver or ad-writer went into as much “physical” detail as they possibly could and considered “lusty wench” to be part of that important detail. The enslaver creates a distinct image of Juno that is certainly not objective—but rather breathes life into the sexualized myth of enslaved women’s seductive nature. The ad paints Juno as a brute-like woman, undeserving of the human right to freedom. In spite of this distorted figuration, the ad nevertheless shows that these enslaved mothers were running away together with their children in tow. Regardless of whether these women stayed together, it would have been challenging to manage this escape given the number of children and their various needs.

Fugitive women also ran away with the hope of passing as a free Black woman. We see examples of this in runaway slave advertisements as well. For instance, one appears in the *Virginia Gazette* in February 1774, describing Rachel—a runaway:

Run away, about the first of November, a Negro Woman, named RACHEL, well made, about 22 Years of Age, four Feet eight or nine Inches high, had on when

³⁰ Lathan A. Windley, *Runaway Slave Advertisements: A Documentary History from the 1730s to 1790: Georgia*, 81.

she went away Osnabrug and blue Halfthick Petticoats, a blue and white flowered Linen Waistcoat, and a Felt Hat; she has been brought up in the House, combs her Hair long, endeavouring to impose herself on the Publick for a free Woman, and is apt to change her Name.³¹

The advertisement includes a description of her nice and sophisticated “Osnabrug and blue Halfthick petticoats, a blue a white flowered Linen waistcoat, and a Felt Hat”—all of which would certainly signify free status in the public sphere. By adorning more expensive-looking and refined clothing, Rachel would more convincingly appear to be free. Beyond just her choice of clothes, the ad-writer notes that Rachel intentionally “combs her Hair long” and “is apt to change her Name” as ways to convince the public eye that she is free. While these details were originally included to make Rachel’s chances of escape less likely or sustainable, simultaneously the details can be read to better understand the complexities of Rachel’s escape plan and the level of strategy that must have gone into her executing the plan successfully.

A similar case of a fugitive women attempting to pass as free appears in the *Georgia Gazette* in December of 1775. However, this advertisement details a previously enslaved woman running away with her daughter. Here, the advertisement description suggests that the runaway mother, Jenny, strategized thoroughly before escaping with her daughter:

Run away from the subscriber, living at the Spring near Savannah, a negroe wench, named JENNY, formerly belonged to Mr. Andrew Hewat, used to sell milk and work about the town, where she is well known, talks very good English, is short and well set, can dress herself well if she thinks proper, took with her her daughter about four years old, and a small box or chest in which she had her cloaths. As there is reason to think she is encouraged to stay out, any one giving proper information of her being harboured by a white person shall receive a

³¹ Lathan A. Windley, *Runaway Slave Advertisements: A Documentary History from the 1730s to 1790: Virginia*, 144.

sufficient reward, and twenty shillings, besides reasonable charges, will be paid to whoever delivers her to Richard Donovan Murray.³²

Quite obviously, the point or purpose of the enslaver putting this ad in the paper was to describe Jenny's distinguishing features to better his odds of recapturing her into enslavement. However, if we read this advertisement with a critical eye interested in imagining Jenny's perspective as an enslaved mother, we get more than a glimpse of her motivations and the degree of planning that went into her escape. In this advertisement, Jenny is a fugitive and a mother described as being proficient at speaking English and has the ability to "dress herself well" with the chest of clothes she took with her. First off, the fact that she could speak English well and dress herself well indicates/suggests that she was likely trying to pass as a free Black woman. The ad also clearly mentions that she was fleeing with her four-year-old daughter, which would have been logistically very difficult to pull off. Finally, the advertisement points to a "small box or chest" that Jenny was carrying her clothes in. Having extra sets of clothes was a sign of pre-meditated escape planning and an indicator that the escape may be more successful.³³

One of the biggest obstacles runaways faced was that of material deprivation such as food and clothing shortage/limitations. As Stephanie Camp articulates, "The clothing in which bondpeople ran away was generally in poor condition to begin with, and the additional wear and tear of life in the woods showed itself easily. Moreover, almost no one had extra clothing to donate, as they might, with sacrifice, spare a bit of food."³⁴ In other words, taking along changes of clothes that could be pulled off as "proper" was a strategic survival move and would've required prior planning. Again, this evidence

³² Lathan A. Windley, *Runaway Slave Advertisements: A Documentary History from the 1730s to 1790: Georgia*, 72.

³³ Karen Cook Bell, *Running from Bondage*, 93-94.

³⁴ Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 55.

suggests that Jenny could more successfully pass a free woman. One wonders, how did Jenny manage to acquire such a case of clothes? Did she spend time making these clothes beforehand, accumulating a sufficient wardrobe over time? Or did she steal more sophisticated clothes right before her intended time of escape? And did she do the same for her daughter? Were there ways in which the uncertain future of her daughter in slavery propelled Jenny to perform such a radical and unlikely act of resistance?

What's important to recognize is that the very details the enslaver gives/offers to better his chances at recapturing Jenny into enslavement are the details that reveal the sophistication level of Jenny's planned escape. Looking at these details that the ad-writer used to make Jenny more distinguishable for her recapture— gives us a window into her life and agency as a freedom seeker. Here, the dialectical nature of this history is evident. By using a Black maternalist framework/lens, runaway slave advertisements both demonstrate how enslavers perceived enslaved women and, at the same time, how the agency of enslaved women is revealed in this historical moment.

There are other examples in runaway slave advertisements that describe the escape of fugitive families. We find one such advertisement published in the *Savannah Royal Georgia Gazette* on January 4, 1781, regarding a group of runaways from a plantation in South Carolina, many of whom are related through one mother, Old Rose:

Old Rose, a short black Ebo wench, about 56 years old; Celia, a short wench, (daughter to the above Old Rose) about 36 years old; Elsey, thick and chubbed, (a grand daughter of said Rose) about six years old; Cato, an elderly fellow, of a yellow complexion, and husband of the above Celia, but perhaps changed; Kate a middle sized wench, with her country marks about her face, speaks bad English, of the Angola country; Scipio, a middle sized well set fellow, 36 years old; Dick, a middle sized well set fellow, and son to Old Rose, he is above 22 years old; Town Sue, a short wench with a cast in one eye, speaks very good English, is smart and sensible, and about 35 years old; Will, a smart waiting boy, tall, long

visaged, with two large fore teeth, which are continually shewn by his mouth being seldom shut, had on a green coat trimmed with lively lace, which was his waiting dress; Country Sue, a middle sized wench, but rather inclined to tall, a sister to Celia, and daughter of Old Rose, 32 years old.³⁵

During the Revolutionary era, fugitive women ran away with their families.³⁶ If an enslaved mother running away with her four-year-old daughter was difficult to arrange, then organizing a whole family-escape would've been a logistical nightmare.

Interestingly, runaway slave advertisements posted in Virginia between 1730s and 1790 describe 329 acts of group or collective escape, a “group” being defined as a three-person minimum. There were many noteworthy cases in that data set of fugitive women running away with their husbands and children.³⁷ While this advertisement is not necessarily about a group running away in Virginia, it is a remarkable account of ten previously enslaved people fleeing as a group, led by one mother “Old Rose.” Rose was the mother of Celia, Dick, and Country Sue and grandmother to Elsey (who is only six years old). Celia’s husband, Cato, also went and then three others: Kate, Scipio, and Town Sue. According to her calculations, from the Georgia advertisement posted between 1763 and 1790, 1,242 enslaved persons attempted to escape. Out of that number, 229 were women and 64 were children.³⁸ Perhaps this group was successful in its escape because of the conditions of the Revolutionary War and maybe it was only possible because Rose was so committed to keep her family together even with all the risks involved. The ad posting in the *Gazette* suggests that the enslaver believes the group to be in Savannah—which was an ideal city to run away to. Savannah was a port town and by that time, it was

³⁵ Lathan A. Windley, *Runaway Slave Advertisements: A Documentary History from the 1730s to 1790: Georgia*, 81-82.

³⁶ Karen Cook Bell, *Running from Bondage*, 80.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 91.

occupied by the British so they might have a chance of securing their freedom by joining British army lines under the General Henry Clinton proclamation.³⁹

Of course, running away was not the only way that enslaved women and mothers resisted during the Revolutionary era. One alternative example appears in the *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon), February 3, 1774, wherein the mother is described to have somehow communicated with her daughter so that she could find her mother at a different plantation. The advertisement reads:

Run away, a Negro Girl named JUDITH, about fourteen Years old; she has a Mother at Mr. Hornsey's Plantation in James City and very likely may be harboured by her.⁴⁰

In this case, the advertisement describes Judith, a fourteen-year-old girl, who ran away from her enslaver and likely fled to her mother in James City where she “very likely may be harboured by her.” In knowing that Judith ran away, likely into her mother’s arms, it can also be known that Judith’s mother must have played a significant role in her escape plan. In other words, the mother carries out her resistance by somehow communicating her location to her daughter and then later hiding Judith at a plantation in James City. But how did Judith know to run away to James City and find her mother? How did Judith’s mother communicate with her? And how did her mother plan to successfully hide Judith at her own place of enslavement in James City? Considering these questions helps reveal the degree of planning that must have gone into Judith escaping from her own place of enslavement and then later finding her mother as a safe haven.

³⁹ Karen Cook Bell, *Running from Bondage*, 88-89.

⁴⁰ Lathan A. Windley, *Runaway Slave Advertisements: A Documentary History from the 1730s to 1790: Virginia and North Carolina*, 143-144.

These runaway slave advertisements, while less than ideal sources from the archive, have the capacity to demonstrate and uncover the elaborate planning and strategy that must have gone into these women's escape attempts. The original purpose of the runaway slave advertisement was to describe fugitives with the greatest detail and provide the best background knowledge so as to increase the enslaver's chances of recapturing the runaway. It is this very rhetorical purpose that, if read with a Black maternalist framework in mind and an intention for critical fabulation, can actually reveal all of the complex ways enslaved women and mothers were strategizing to gain their freedom and the freedom of their children. As such, the reading becomes a distinctly dialectical understanding of enslaved women's condition and experience during the revolutionary war period. On one hand, it's clear by reading these ads that enslavers were objectifying fugitive women and only writing about them in this way to take away their freedom again. On the other hand, the same primary source document shows just how keen and strategic enslaved women and mothers had to be to pull off such a difficult escape—one likely motivated by their inability to see a future for their children in slavery and hope for their eventual freedom.

Another way enslaved women and mothers resisted during the revolutionary war period was by filing petitions for their rights and the rights of their children—something of a continuation from petitions like Elizabeth Keyes' back in the early Atlantic period.⁴¹ One such example is that of Belinda Sutton who petitioned for her own freedom and the freedom of her daughter in 1783, filing the petition with the Massachusetts General Court. Once Sutton got word that her enslaver had died in England after fleeing the U.S.

⁴¹ Berry and Gross, *A Black Women's History of the United States*, 41.

during the American Revolution, she was prompt to claim the rights granted to her in his will—which stated that she could have her freedom and a pension when he died. Winning the case, Sutton claimed her freedom and received the pension that helped her provide for her two children. Cases like Sutton’s indicate that enslaved women and mothers were fighting for their rights and acutely aware of how to advocate for them, during the revolutionary war period.

When the war ended, and the United States declared its independence in the summer of 1776. The very next year, Northern states began the gradual process of abolishing slavery—and, in fact, many enslaved people were integral for these developments as they submitted petitions and freedom suits, arguing for their freedom. These petitions continued the legacy of legal battles for rights that began with Black women like Elizabeth Key and then later, Belinda Sutton. Much of their language and ideas of freedom were actually derived from and inspired by the rhetoric of the Revolutionary war. By 1804, gradual emancipation was fully underway in all Northern states—the first being Vermont in 1777 when they abolished “adult slavery”, followed by Pennsylvania in 1780, and so on until New Jersey was the last one in 1804.⁴² These pieces of emancipation legislation were “gradual” because they all included significant limitations on who could be emancipated. Specifically, there were often age and gender qualifiers for who was able to claim freedom—the laws were so arbitrary but worked to harness child labor for a significant part of their lives still.

⁴² Berry and Gross, *A Black Women’s History of the United States*, 66-67.

Antebellum Era (1820-1865)

While freedom was being gained slowly in the North, slavery was bolstered in the South and West as developments like the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, ideology of Manifest Destiny, removal of Native Americans in the 1830s, and the invention of the cotton gin in the late 18th c created prime conditions for the growth of slavery.

*She is a mother, pale with fear/ Her boy clings to her side/ And in her kirtle vainly tries/ His trembling form to hide./ He is not hers, although she bore/ For his a mother's pains;/ He is not hers, although her blood/ Is coursing through his veins!/
He is not hers, for cruel hands/ May rudely tear apart/ The only wreath of household love/ That binds her breaking heart.*

- "The Slave Mother," Frances E. W. Harper

Family Structure and Separation on the Auction Block

After the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in 1808 and gradual emancipation in the North, the domestic slave market in the U.S. grew and slavery expanded in the South. As a result, family structures were more often disrupted, torn apart, so it was more difficult to keep a marriage or family together on the same plantation due to the uptick in domestic auctions and slave trade among plantations in the South. However, despite the intervention and control of enslavers, Black families were still able to maintain deep familial connections and meaningful bonds of wedlock. As Berry and Gross put it, "Black family life in nineteenth-century America was fraught because of slavery. Those fortunate enough to establish families used these relations as a form of survival and support. On plantations and small farms, enslaved people courted one another, fell in love, married, albeit in ceremonies not legally sanctioned by the state, and started families together ... Their marriages were complex, and their family lives often disrupted

by enslavers and the law, ‘but despite all that African Americans suffered, they created meaningful bonds of wedlock.’”⁴³

There are several examples of these kinds of stories of Black enslaved families and marriages that endured and were broken up in the system of the domestic slave trade in the South. Many accounts of Black women’s experience of this can be found in the WAP narratives. One such story is told by Susie Johnson, an ex-slave getting interviewed in 1936. The interviewer describes her story as such:

When asked about negro marriage customs of slavery days, Susie stated that her mother said that ‘she and Jim (Susie’ daddy) when they got in love and wanted to marry, jest held each others hands and jumped over the boroom and they was married.’ ... Susie remembers one day when she and her mother were picking cotton when all of a sudden her mother began to sing ‘Glory to the Dying Land’ and sang so much that ‘atter a while she got so happy she couldn’t be still and she danced all over Masta’s cotton patch and tromped down so much cotton I jest knowed Masta was gwina whup her. Den I laffed at her so hard ‘Old Miss whupped me wid dat strop! Law Law!’⁴⁴

Keeping families together was extremely difficult as enslaved people subject to sale on the whim of the enslaver. However, at the same time, families did form deep and significant kinship ties. In fact, they were key cites of resistance. The fact that people like Susie Johnson’s parents were able to find happiness in their love and union in marriage despite the oppressive conditions they were living in, is an example of that resistance. While love in marriage and the maintenance of family ties did occur among the enslaved in the antebellum period, families were also being habitually torn apart on the auction block. Beyond recounting her mother’s happy and love-filled marriage, Johnson remembers a day when mother began to sing in the cotton fields and was “so happy she

⁴³ Berry and Gross, *A Black Women’s History of the United States*, 74.

⁴⁴ *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 2, Garey-Jones*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/mesn.042/?sp=346>, 344.

couldn't be still and she danced all over Masta's cotton patch." Johnson remembers laughing so hard that her enslaver punished her: "den I laffed at her so hard 'Old Miss whupped me wid dat strop." While yes enslaved families were ripped apart on hiring day, Johnson asserts she had this maternal figure in her life who brought her laughter and joy.

Harriet Jacobs offers a powerful account of "Hiring Day" on New Year's Day, the day enslaved families, mothers, fathers, and children waited anxiously to know if they would be sold and separated from loved ones. Her writings about motherhood in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* are powerful indications of what enslaved girls and women were going through in the antebellum period, and how notions of motherhood shaped their experience. It's important to note that Jacobs' memoir wasn't fully recognized as a factual account until the 1970s when Jean Fagan Yellin's research proved Jacobs' legitimacy as a narrator. The scholarly recognition of her memoir account is a crucial turning point for Black women narrating their own experiences of motherhood.

Early in her book, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs shares her earlier memories of the auction block, how enslaved families were so brutally separated, and the agony of enslaved mothers as their children were taken from them. According to Jacobs, New Year's Eve brings with it "peculiar sorrows" for the enslaved mother who "sits on her cold cabin floor, watching the children who may be torn from her the next morning; and often does she wish that she and they might die before the dawns."⁴⁵ This image on its own is such sorrowful and hopeless account of what an enslaved mother endures the night before hiring day, waiting anxiously to know if her children will be taken from her. For Jacobs, an enslaved mother goes through this peculiar sorrow because "she has a

⁴⁵ Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Penguin Group, 2000), 13.

mother's instincts and is capable of feelings mother's agonies." The agonies are so real that the mother, in Jacobs' description, admits to hoping for death before hiring day comes—a sentiment Jacobs also admits to later in the book. In the same passage, Jacobs offers the story of one enslaved mother wrought with grief after her children were taken from her:

One of these sale days, I saw a mother lead seven children to the auction-block. She knew that *some* of them would be taken from her; but they took *all*. The children were sold to a slave-trader, and their mother was brought by a man in her own town. Before night her children were all far away. She begged the trader to tell her where he intended to take them; this he refused to do. ... I met that mother in the street, and her wild, haggard face lives to-day in my mind.⁴⁶

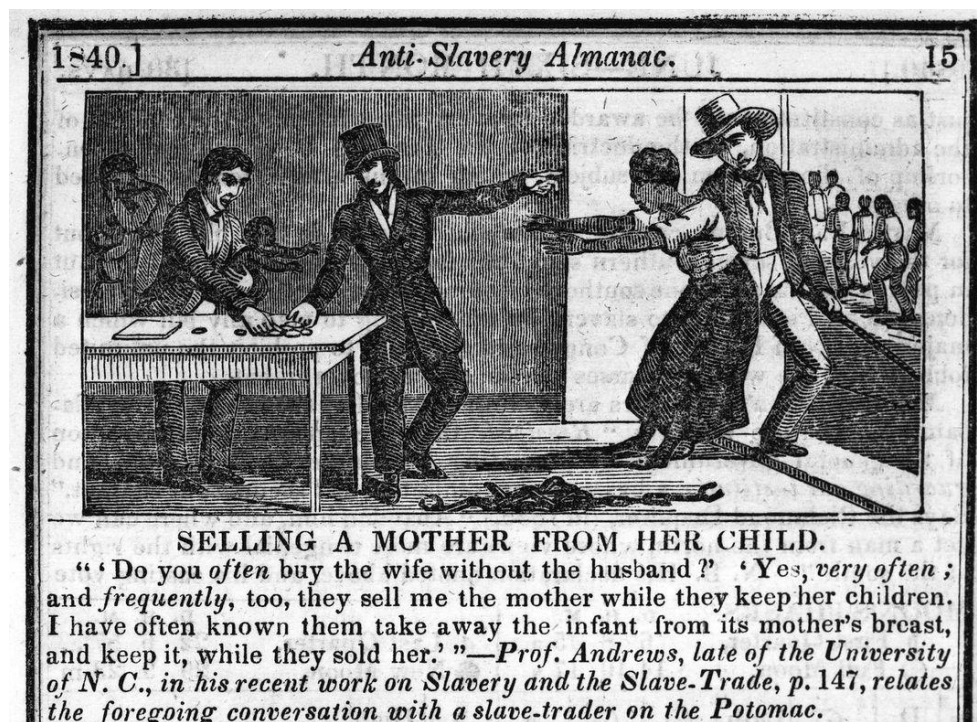
Jacobs' articulation/description of an enslaved mother's sorrow on the auction block is gripping, especially in the way Jacobs views her "mother's instincts" which this woman is capable of despite her being enslaved in "the system that has brutalized her from childhood." According to Jacobs' account, the mother's agony was so deep and severe that she "begged the trader to tell her where he intended to take" her children, which he refused to do. Perhaps if she had known where her children were to be sent, she would have the opportunity to try and get to them or reunite with them in some way.

Print Culture in the Antebellum Period

It's clear, from WPA testimonies like Jenny Johnson's and Harriet Jacobs' account, that the disruption of family structures in the antebellum period had very real consequences—but that, at the same time, meaningful bonds of kinship, wedlock, and bonds between mother and child were maintained and fought for. This very gripping and heart wrenching image that Jacobs describes of enslaved mothers being torn from their

⁴⁶ Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 13.

children at the auction block was also used by abolitionists to persuade readers/viewers of the anti-slavery cause. One such example can be found in the Library of Congress Rare Books and Special Collections, an 1840 anti-slavery almanac which would've been published more widely with the spreading/increased print culture.⁴⁷ As shown, abolitionists were using the tragic scene of an enslaved mother being ripped from her child on hiring day in order to compel readers for their cause.



The antebellum period was marked by a proliferation of print culture more widely available for the common person—namely, the mass production of antislavery/abolitionist prints and texts.⁴⁸ I will discuss two key aspects of the emergence

⁴⁷ Printed Ephemera Collection Dlc. *Illustrations of the American Anti-Slavery Almanac for 1840*, Photograph, (New York, 1840), <https://www.loc.gov/itm/2007680126/>.

⁴⁸ Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 99-100.

of abolitionist literature during the antebellum era. For one, the anti-slavery literature itself framed and used images of Black women and mothers to advance their campaign—which had implications for the lived experiences of Black women. Stephanie Camp describes the three major icons used by English abolitionists in the 18th century to convey their message/propaganda: “the wildly popular cameo of a kneeling slave beseeching the reader, ‘Am I Not a Man and a Brother?’; the image of a cross section of a slave trading ship showing the ‘tight packing’ of African human cargo; and the representation of violence, including whippings, auctions, runaway hunts, and the separation of families.”⁴⁹ Nineteenth century abolitionists used similar images, but amplified the emotional power by incorporating accounts and visuals that revealed the injustices of slavery more jarringly.⁵⁰ As such, images of Black mothers being separated from their children on the auction block were central to these printed pieces of propaganda. The rhetoric of these images was so powerful and had such reverberations that laws were even passed in some states to prohibit/prevent the spread of the literature. For instance, Virginia passed a law in 1835 which banned writings and speech aimed at criticizing the right to hold slave property.⁵¹

While abolitionists were creating these portrayals, Black women were using that same literature to imagine themselves into the national abolitionist movement. By the early 1830s, abolitionist publications were reaching influence in the South by way of the Postal Campaign—reaching the hands of enslaved women. One such woman was California, an enslaved mother living in the 1840s, who used anti-slavery propaganda to reimagine her

⁴⁹ Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 101.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 103.

enslavement and then pass that same vision/sentiment onto her children. On a plantation in Mississippi, California was married to a man named Isaac and had several children. When the enslaver family, the Youngs, declared their intention to leave Mississippi for Virginia, California pushed to remain with her family's enslavers rather than to be sold on the hiring market because she knew that if they were put on the market, her family had a good chance of getting separated. California was successful in her endeavor and her family remained with the Youngs in the move to Virginia. In a letter, George Young writes, "California especially has an idea that she is free. Goes & comes & does as she pleases, infuses a good deal of these feelings & notion in her childrens heads, has Amalgamation prints stuck up in her cabin. Which I constantly fear will be observed by the Patrol & unpleasant difficulties ensue. & the example of all this is against my own slaves."⁵² The term "amalgamation prints" that Young uses in this letter was a proslavery representation of the abolitionist literature being disseminated at the time, specifically representing them as race-mixers. What's more of note, however, is Young's anxiety about California reading these prints and his worry about her spreading these ideas of liberty to her children. Clearly, Young was able to sense that California was having her own thoughts of freedom and knew on some level that she had a right to it, which shows influence from the literature and how her role as a mother allowed her to apply these thoughts of liberty to her own family.

Antebellum Figurations and Idealizations of Black Women

Beyond those created in antislavery prints, some of the most powerful and enduring images of enslaved women came together/gained life in the antebellum era: the Jezebel

⁵² Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 97-98.

and Mammy figures. These figurations, like the ones from the early Atlantic period, coalesce into powerful myths that support and uphold gendered notions of White supremacy. It's not surprising that these images and myths have deep roots in the early European travel account depictions of African women from the Atlantic period. As I mentioned earlier, these early distortions of African life and culture, especially among African women, had serious implications for the construction of gender and race categories for later—and the Jezebel figure is one such implication. The Jezebel image builds off the gross misinterpretation of African cultural traditions found in these travel accounts—as she is made out to be the complete mirror/counter image of the ideal White Victorian woman. Jezebel was an enslaved woman who was completely driven by her lust and devoid of any pious motivations/instincts. She did not value modesty or domesticity, but rather was most excited by more sensual matters.⁵³ This lewd depiction of enslaved women has its origins in the kind of European travel literature I examined in the first section of my thesis—literature that illustrates African women as semi-nude, constantly laboring, and breastfeeding her children while working. These depictions were far from objective in that they created notions of African womanhood against European ideals of White womanhood. Semi-nudity was misconstrued and distorted as promiscuity. These images were only more validated and solidified by the conditions that enslaved women were forced to live and work only empowered/breathed life into the Jezebel image. For instance, on the auction block, enslaved women's bodies were often put on public display so that buyers could better gauge their investments. Enslaved women's bodies were also exposed while enslavers enforced whipping punishments on the

⁵³ Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 29.

plantation.⁵⁴ In other words, enslaved women were ensnared by these highly gendered and racialized figurations of them that had roots all the way back to their ancestors in Africa—and the institution of slavery they were so oppressed under only fed into these myths.

However, as tensions between proslavery Southerners and Northern abolitionists intensified, and justifications for the maintenance of slavery in the South became more vulnerable to abolitionist—the Jezebel image became less conducive to the “positive good” and “benevolent treatment of slaves” narrative/justification. Specifically, Northern abolitionists began to suggest that *White* womanhood in the South could not possibly maintain their virtue and chastity if they were surrounded by lewd enslaved women. To counter this assertion and project a more positive image of Black women, Southerners began to sketch out a new myth: the Mammy figure.⁵⁵ The Mammy figure was entirely constructed and born out of an anxiety around the “threatened” virtue of White Southern women. This new figure imagined the enslaved woman to be a content and competent domestic slave. Mammy was so well treated that she viewed and loved her owner’s family and their children as “her family” and “her children.” Furthermore, Mammy was asexual—a complete flip from the Jezebel image. Both images of the enslaved woman worked in tandem to trap her, as Southerners would use different idealizations depending on the context.⁵⁶ In sum, the idealizations and imaginations constructed by White Southerners (and Northerners) worked to trap enslaved women between an oversexualized character and one completely devoted to virtuous domesticity and

⁵⁴ Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*, 32-33.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁵⁶ Deborah Gray White more thoroughly discusses the Jezebel and Mammy figure in *Ar’n’t I a Woman* (pp. 27-61).

mothering her enslaver's family. The realities of enslavement only breathed life into these myths—and as such enslaved women and mothers were forced to make decisions in the confines of these powerful narratives. However, it's clear that despite this ensuring myths, enslaved women were simultaneously remaking motherhood for themselves.

Mothers Protecting Their Children: A Mode of Resistance

Enslaved mother's resistance was strongly motivated by the impulse to protect her children. A key figure for understanding such Black motherhood in the antebellum period is Harriet Jacobs in her memoir *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. One aspect of motherhood that really comes through in Jacob's account is her true ambivalence about being a mother and being torn by what she wants/hopes for her children as they grow up in the institution of slavery. Her ambivalence was so great that Jacobs sometimes wondered if they would be better off dead. Here are two separate instances (and there are more) where she clearly admits thoughts along the lines of infanticide:

When I lay down beside my child, **I felt how much easier it would be to see her die than to see her master beat her about**, as I daily saw him beat other little ones. **The spirit of the mothers was so crushed by the lash**, that they stood by, without courage to remonstrate. How much more must I suffer, before I should be 'broke in' to that degree? ... As I held her in my warm, I thought how well it would be for her if she never waked up; and I uttered my thought aloud.⁵⁷ (emphasis mine)

Jacobs' memoir is brutally honest as she reveals some of her deepest thoughts about her own children. Her feeling about them is so strong—she cannot bear to know they are subject to Dr. Flint's power and violence on the plantation. As someone who has endured his abuse, Jacobs knows that death may very well be preferable to growing up in slavery. In the excerpt, she makes a comment about watching other mothers whose spirit "was so

⁵⁷ Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 96.

crushed by the lash, that they stood by, without courage to remonstrate” and she hopes to never have her spirit be crushed that far. The fact is, there is a significant history of enslaved mothers turning to infanticide to spare their children from the degradation and suffering of slavery. When viewing infanticide with a contemporary lens/perspective, it’s likely difficult or uncomfortable to imagine infanticide as an act of love—however, one must consider the context. Looking at Harriet Jacobs’ as an example, it’s clear that Jacobs struggled as a mother because she could not envision a future for her children in slavery, especially when she was witnessing the violence and suffering children were already subject to on Flint’s plantation. Other enslaved mothers were completely overburdened by childrearing and couldn’t take care of more offspring, while others committed infanticide to prevent their enslavers from profiting more from their reproduction. In sum, some enslaved women viewed the death of their children as the only way for them to be free.⁵⁸

While Harriet Jacobs never attempted to kill her own children, other enslaved mothers in a similar position to her did. One such case was Margaret Garner, who decided to run away from the plantation on which she had been enslaved. She initially escaped with her family including her husband Simon and her four children (Tom, Sam, Mary, and Cilla), making it all the way across the frozen Ohio River and to a safe house in Cincinnati, Ohio which was a free state at the time.⁵⁹ However, slave catchers caught up with their runaway group and threatened the re-enslavement of Garner’s entire family. As the group of White slave catchers tried to force their way into the house, Margaret

⁵⁸ Berry and Gross, *A Black Women’s History of the United States*, 60-61.

⁵⁹ Mark Reinhardt, “Who Speaks for Margaret Garner? Slavery, Silence, and the Politics of Ventriloquism,” *Critical Inquiry* 29, no. 1 (Autumn 2002): 81-119.

Garner made a decision to start slitting the throats of her four children, but only succeeded in killing one.⁶⁰ In a poem Frances E. W. Harper wrote about Garner, “The Slave Mother, a Tale of the Ohio,” she describes the thoughts of freedom Garner may have had: “Then, said the mournful mother,/ If Ohio cannot save,/ I will do a deed for freedom,/ Shalt find each child a grave./ I will save my previous children/ From their darkly threatened doom,/ I will hew their path to freedom/ Through the portals of the tomb.”⁶¹ Garner’s story was so powerful that various forms of newspaper reports and editorials picked it up—ranging from radical Black and White abolitionists who wrote compelling anti-slavery literature to pro-slavery editorialists in the South who used the story to demonize enslaved women like Garner and combat abolitionist efforts.⁶² These demonizing portrayals were in the minority, most of the literature making Garner out to be this heroine in her act of motherhood. For example Frederick Douglass, a famous Black abolitionist, once said in an anti-slavery speech, “every mother who, like Margaret Garner, plunges a knife into the bosom of her infant to save it from the hell of our Christian slavery, should be held and honored as a benefactress.”⁶³ In abolitionist-driven depictions like Douglass’ Garner’s story works both as an emotional appeal to a national audience that values honorable acts of motherhood and a glaring indication of how corrupt slavery must be for a mother to commit such an act of infanticide. Her story is

⁶⁰ Rebecca Carroll, “Overlooked: Margaret Garner,” *New York Times*, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/obituaries/margaret-garner-overlooked.html>.

⁶¹ Maryemma Graham, ed., *Complete Poems of Frances E. W. Harper* (Oxford University Press, 1988).

⁶² Mark Reinhardt, “Who Speaks for Margaret Garner? Slavery, Silence, and the Politics of Ventriloquism.” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 29, no. 1 (Autumn 2002): 92-93.

⁶³ Frederick Douglass, “The Significance of Emancipation in the West Indies,” *Speeches, Debates, and Interviews*, in *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, ed. Blassingame, 4, no. 3 (New Haven, 1985): 204.

both tragic and heroic—playing into the grip that images of motherhood have over Americans.

These notions of motherhood and enslaved women’s motherhood were clearly not just powerful rhetorical images used in debates over slavery—ideals of motherhood also had a powerful hold on the lives of enslaved mothers, like Margaret Garner and Harriet Jacobs. There are instances of Jacobs defining Black motherhood in conversations she had with her grandmother, who was a powerful motherly figure in her own life. Jacobs recounts one such conversation she had with her about the possibility of running away:

‘Ah, my child,’ said she, ‘don’t trust too much to him. Stand by your own children, and suffer with them till death. **Nobody respects a mother who forsakes her children**; and if you leave them, you will never have a happy moment. If you go, you will make me miserable the short time I have to live. You would be taken and brought back, and your sufferings would be dreadful. Remember poor Benjamin. Do give it up, Linda. Try to bear a little longer.’⁶⁴ (emphasis mine)

In this instance, Jacobs’ grandmother tries to convince her not to run away by herself and uses her ideas of motherhood to convince Jacobs. This is another moment when Jacobs wrestles with her position as a mother and her responsibility for her two children. As she plans her potential escape, she knows it would be unfeasible to bring her children at their age—so her only option would be to leave them behind. The grandmother plays a significant role in this tension Jacobs experiences because she pushes the point that a mother should not “forsake her children” and that “if you leave them, you will never have a happy moment.” There were notions of motherhood prevalent in the antebellum South that were at play here in their conversation.⁶⁵ This is just one example of a moment where

⁶⁴ Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 102.

⁶⁵ Stephanie Camp elaborates more on the pressures for enslaved mothers to remain with their children in *Closer to Freedom*, p. 37.

contested ideas of Black motherhood had real implications for the enslaved mother—in the way that Harriet Jacobs’ decision to either remain with her children in slavery or run away to secure her freedom is heavily influenced by community expectations of motherhood and the expectations of her own mother’s family and were another pressure that limited the number of women who could escape to the North,” *Closer to Freedom*, 37.r. Ultimately, she decides to stay for her children. It’s clear in her memoir writing that Jacobs was wrestling with these expectations of motherhood when making her decision.

Later in her story, Jacobs faces another difficult situation when she learns that her children are to be sent to work for Dr. Flint who treated her so badly. Due to that realization, Jacobs concludes that she must make it look like she ran away so as to deter this movement of her children, she writes, “But now that I was certain my children were to be put in their power, in order to give them a stronger hold on me, I resolved to leave them that night. I remembered the grief this step would bring upon my dear old grandmother, and nothing less than the freedom of my children would have induced me to disregard her advice.”⁶⁶ It was the knowledge that her children could very well endure the same power abuse under Dr. Flint as she that pushed Jacobs to go into hiding, and make it look like she ran away.

In sum, Jacobs’ memoir *Incidents in the Life* is a window into some of Jacobs’ most vulnerable moments as a mother, moments that reveal how she was simultaneously wrestling with outside notions and expectations of motherhood and also establishing what motherhood means to her in the violent and precarious context of growing up and rearing children in slavery. Specifically, Jacobs’ motherhood is ambivalent, shaped

⁶⁶ Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 106.

generationally by her own mother, and motivated by a deep need to carve out a future of freedom for her children.

Geographies of Containment

Another key characteristic of the antebellum period is slaveholders tightening their grip on their control of enslaved people's movement. These principles of restraint, or "geographies of containment" as Stephanie Camp puts it, sought to surveil and limit the private space of enslaved people on their plantation. Like in the early colonial and revolutionary era, truancy was one of the main/common ways that enslaved people were able to resist White slaveholders' exertion of social control.

Overseers on the Ealey plantation were very cruel and whipped slaves unmercifully. Another incident related by Mr. Pye was as follows: **'My mother resented being whipped and would run away to the woods and often remained as long as twelve months at a time. When the strain of staying away from her family became too great, she would return home.** No sooner would she arrive than the old overseer would tie her to a peach tree and whip her again. The whipping was done by a 'Nigger Driver,' who followed the overseer around with a bull whip, especially for this purpose.⁶⁷ (emphasis mine)

Here, a former enslaved man, Charlie Pye describes his memories of his mother running away for some time, unable to tolerate being whipped. Temporary truancy was a common way that enslaved people resisted the growing geographies of containment on the plantation. As Pye describes, the conditions of her departure and absence ultimately brought her back to the plantation—namely, "the strain of staying away from her family." Pye's mother's experience is an example of enslaved women being tied to the Southern plantation in ways that men were not quite bound. For enslaved women, there was a

⁶⁷ *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 3, Kendricks-Styles, 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. <https://www.lov.gov/item/mesn043/>, 187.*

sense of duty tied to being a mother, which only further complicated and tethered their attachments to their place of enslavement in the South.⁶⁸

Conclusion

In combing through primary sources available at the time of each studied period, this thesis has only scraped the surface of the vibrant legacy of Black motherhood in the Americas and the United States, shining through the dehumanizing dominant narrative created by White European imagination. Upon analyzing the primary sources available, it's clear that Europeans were fundamental in constructing an imagination of Black womanhood and motherhood that only served to uphold Whiteness—an imagination that had and has real consequences for the lived experiences of Black women in the U.S. This is evident in the travel accounts from the early Atlantic period, when Pieter de Marees made direct rhetorical comparisons between the African mothers he observed on the coast of Guinea to European mothers and describes a West African mother breastfeeding—another image drawn against that of the ideal European mother. A similar White construction of Black motherhood happens later in the Antebellum period with the imagination of the Jezebel and Mammy figures. In these and other examples, these constructions of African and Black motherhood stabilize European notions of gender and Whiteness, and ultimately slavery and White supremacy. These constructions endure and ultimately shape the lived experience of these women and create a tension between the “ideal” Black mother and those who don't fit into the narrative. This is not even to mention the way that laws fortifying and defining slavery rested on defining the

⁶⁸ Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 37.

matrilineage of enslaved mothers—which in turn was and has become inscribed on Black mothers and their children.

At the same time, the primary sources prove/reveal that African and Black women were simultaneously defining what it meant to be a mother during the impossible realities of slavery whether that was during early colonial slavery, the Revolutionary war era, or the antebellum period. This reading of the sources becomes clear with a Black maternalist framework and method of critical fabulation. Enslaved women and mothers resisted by way of truancy, submitting legal petitions, infanticide, and so much more. In doing so, they contested enslavers' efforts of social control and these constructed White imaginaries of the Black mother that were created to uphold European Whiteness and then later the institution of slavery in the United States. The images are stark—even looking at the image painted by John Rose in his description of Juno as a “lusty wench” in a Savannah runaway advertisement and then seeing what we can imagine about Jenny from the *Georgia Gazette* ad, an enslaved woman who strategized her escape with her daughter. In these texts, we get a White narrative of how Black women and mothers who were actively seeking freedom—which indicates how enslavers were contributing to this imaginary and gives us a glimpse into the lives and experiences of Black women and mothers at the time.

By thinking in Saidiya Hartman's terms historians are better equipped to string together these less-than-ideal sources to create a more accurate/full narrative of enslaved and fugitive women's lived experience. Saidiya Hartman puts it best: “the archive is, in this case, a death sentence.”⁶⁹ Part of Hartman's proposed solution is the idea of “critical

⁶⁹ Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 2.

fabulation,” or a historical approach to these archival records that uses an imaginative and critical eye to start filling in these archival gaps and omissions. The readings of primary sources in this thesis use this very method to get a better window into Black women’s experience in the U.S. and to potentially resolve some of these tensions between outside rhetorical constructions of Black motherhood and the actual lived experience of Black mothers in the United States. A Black maternalist lens has made it clear that enslaved Black women and mothers were actively resisting the confines of U.S. slavery and marked notions of motherhood and freedom for themselves. In Harriet Jacobs’ account of what it meant to be an enslaved mother in the antebellum period, we find a heart-wrenching testimonial of motherhood and her thoughts of her children’s death. She confesses, “I felt how much easier it would be to see her die than to see her master beat her about, as I daily saw him beat other little ones.”⁷⁰ Mothers like Jacobs and others created a distinct legacy of resistance and paved the way for radical freedom efforts in the future.

It's not difficult to see the implications of these early European constructions of race and gender throughout U.S. history—implications that still affect Black women’s lives today. Black motherhood is carrying the same weight and power in contemporary Black activism and social movements. For instance, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has featured and relied on the voices of Black mothers, “the Mothers of the Movement” as they are called, to fortify their cause. The Mothers of the Movement are Black mothers who have lost their children unjustly and prematurely to police brutality and gun violence in the United States. Their tragic, heart-wrenching testimonies are in the

⁷⁰ Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 96.

news, publicized by the BLM movement, and were even featured at the Democratic National Convention (DNC) in 2016. At the DNC, Lucia McBath, the mother of 17-year-old Jordan Davis who was shot and killed in Jacksonville, Florida, said on stage, “You don’t story being a parent when your child dies. I am still Jordan Davis’ mother. His life ended the day he was shot and killed for playing loud music. But my job as his mother didn’t. ... Hillary Clinton isn’t afraid to say black lives matter. She isn’t afraid to sit at a table with grieving mothers and bear the full force of our anguish. ... Not only did she listen to our problems, she invited us to become part of the solution.”⁷¹

On April 7, 2022, Hon. Ketanji Brown Jackson was confirmed to the Supreme Court. In her court hearings, she talks about how difficult it has been to balance her duties as a mother with her deep commitment to her work as a judge. She addresses her daughters, “Girls, I know it has not been easy as I have tried to navigate the challenges of juggling my career and motherhood. And I fully admit that I did not always get the balance right. But I hope that you have seen that with hard work, determination, and love, it can be done. I am so looking forward to seeing what each of your chooses to do with your amazing lives in this incredible country. I love you so much.”⁷² These are just a few examples of how Black mothers are using their voices and powerful rhetorical position as mothers to leverage a better future and rights for themselves and their children—not unlike Keye’s petition efforts in the 17th c. In other words, there is a rich and vibrant

⁷¹ Jaweed Kaleem, “‘Black lives matter!’ Chants Erupt as Mothers of the Movement Take the Stage at the DNC,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 26, 2016, <https://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-dnc-mothers-of-the-movement-20160726-snap-story.html>.

⁷² Katie Kindelan, “Ketanji Brown Jackson Highlights Challenge of Being a Working Mom in Supreme Court Confirmation Hearings,” *ABC News*, March 23, 2022, <https://abcnews.go.com/GMA/News/ketanji-brown-jackson-highlights-challenge-working-mom-supreme/story?id=83623396>.

history of Black mothers' resistance in the U.S. despite oppressive conditions around them, but it takes a Black maternalist lens to find them in the archives.

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