University of Dayton

eCommons

Joyce Durham Essay Contest in Women's and Gender Studies

Women's and Gender Studies Program

2022

At the Same Time African Women and Mothers Resisted: Dialectical Constructions of Race and Gender in the Black Atlantic and Early Colonies of the New World

Anna L. Biesecker-Mast
University of Dayton

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/wgs_essay

Part of the Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons, United States History Commons, and the Women's History Commons

eCommons Citation

Biesecker-Mast, Anna L., "At the Same Time African Women and Mothers Resisted: Dialectical Constructions of Race and Gender in the Black Atlantic and Early Colonies of the New World" (2022). *Joyce Durham Essay Contest in Women's and Gender Studies*. 23.
https://ecommons.udayton.edu/wgs_essay/23

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Women's and Gender Studies Program at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Joyce Durham Essay Contest in Women's and Gender Studies by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact mschlangen1@udayton.edu, ecommons@udayton.edu.

At the Same Time African Women and Mothers Resisted: Dialectical Constructions of Race and Gender in the Black Atlantic and Early Colonies of the New World

By Anna Biesecker-Mast

First Place
2022 Joyce Durham Essay Contest in Women's and Gender Studies
University of Dayton

At the Same Time African Women and Mothers Resisted:

Dialectical Constructions of Race and Gender in the Black Atlantic

and Early Colonies of the New World

By Anna Biesecker-Mast

This essay is Chapter 1 of the author's thesis, "Narratives of the Black Mother in the U.S.: Exploring the Black Maternalist Framework in Black Activism."

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]

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,

[1] Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women,* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 13.
[2] Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women,* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 15.

> 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]

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 of 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

---

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

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]

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 Marees 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

[4] Pieter De Marees, "Description and historicall declaration of the Golden Kingdome," in *Purchase His Pilgrimes* (London: William Stansby, 1625), 930.
[5] Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women,* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 33.

> 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 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.

---

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

However, while these travel accounts are some of the more definitive pieces of evidence historians have to 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 Léon, 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

[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.

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.

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 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.

---

[9] Michael Gomez, *Reversing Sail* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 73.
[10] Ibid., 74.

Unfortunately, archival omissions permeate these records as well and, as a result, most of the stories currently out there 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 Hartman puts it, "the archive is, in this case, a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhea, a few lines about a whore's life, an asterisk in the grand narrative of history."[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. Stephanie Smallwood writes, "In this less visible transcript both traders and those traded appear as actors on the transatlantic stage. Distinct from the public transcript that produced the winners' version of the story (how many units of merchandise sold, how many pounds sterling earned, how much profit, how much loss), the more hidden internal transcript tells a fuller story—the human story of the Atlantic slave trade."[12] In other words, for Smallwood, these documents (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. 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

[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.

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 date 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 rations of men, women, boys, and girls.[14] Jennifer Morgan has computed in her book *Reckoning with Slavery* that less than 8% (336) of those records from the earlier period include anything about the sex 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

---

[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," *SlaveVoyages,* (2018), https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/about#methodology/age-and-gender-ratios/16/en/.
[15] Jennifer L. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 45.

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. As Morgan writes, "although the slave trade would rest on the claim that Africans produced no kin, some of the earliest captives were tasked with protecting children—children whose very presence proved Africans' kinlessness a lie."[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 Acc'tt of the Martallity of Slaves aboord 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

---

[16] Jennifer L. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 46.
[17] Ibid., 49.
[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.

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 determined 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]

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—

---

[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

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. In *Laboring Women*, Jennifer Morgan describes the piece of legislation and its implications, "But slaveowners took a great risk as they attempted to reduce the symbolic, as well as the real, threat of the enslaved. By mobilizing black mothers into their rhetorical arsenal of control, slaveowners created a precarious mental barrier between themselves and an undifferentiated violent black populace."[21]

As Morgan articulates so well, 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. What's important to note, is that this was done through the appropriation of Black mother's reproductive bodies. The

---

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

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 clearly 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 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

[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] Daina Ramey Berry and Kali Nicole Gross, *A Black Women's History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020), 33-34.

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. Enslaved Black women came to resist slavery in a multitude of ways—as Jennifer Morgan puts it in her book *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*, "both inside and outside their identities as mothers."[24] 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

[24] Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women,* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 167.

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.[25] 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. Jennifer L. Morgan writes, "their petition grew out of a moment in which the visibility of black men's access to the trades—and its destabilizing consequences for working whites—was highlighted by the anomaly of a black woman's successful use of the courts against one of their own."[26] In this case legislation was induced by growing alarm amongst White workers in seeing slaves achieve some social mobility—and it seems

---

[25] Ibid.,176-177.
[26] Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women,* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 176-177.

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

Conclusion

What I'm looking to demonstrate here is that 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.

Bibliography

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

Blake, Peter. "Voyage of the James, 1675–76." In *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America*: *Vol. 1, 1441-1700*, edited by Elizabeth Donnan, 199-209. Washington: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1930.

De Marees, Pieter. "Description and historicall declaration of the Golden Kingdome," in *Purchase His Pilgrimes.* London: William Stansby, 1625.

Eltis, David. "Methodology: Age and Gender Ratios." *SlaveVoyages.* (2018). https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/about#methodology/age-and-gender-ratios/16/en/.

"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.

Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.

Gomez, Michael. *Reversing Sail: A History of the African Diaspora*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008), 1-14.

Hartman, Saidiya. *Wayward Lives and Beautiful Experiments*.

Morgan, Jennifer L. *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.

Morgan, Jennifer L. *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021.

Smallwood, Stephanie. *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007.

The Slave Voyages Project, online database https://www.slavevoyages.org/.

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, https://archive.org/details/statutesatlargeb02virg/page/170/mode/2up.

Villault, Nicholas. *A Relation of the Coasts of Africk…* London: 1666 and 1667; Early English Books Online Text Creation Partnership, 2011. https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo2/A64941.0001.001/1:3.16?rgn=div2;view=fulltext;q1=Africa+--++Description+and+travel.