

Ar'n't I a Woman?

Female Slaves in the Plantation South

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Revised Edition

W · W · NORTON & COMPANY

New York

London

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Printed in the United States of America.

The text of this book is composed in Baskerville.
Book design by Jacques Chazaud

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

White, Deborah Gray.
Ar'n't I a woman?

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Women slaves—Southern States. 2. Plantation
life—Southern States—History. 3. Slavery—Southern
States—Condition of slaves. I. Title.

E443.W58 1985 975'.00496073 85.4842

ISBN 0-393-31481-2

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.
500 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10110
W. W. Norton & Company Ltd.
10 Coptic Street, London WC1A 1PU
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0

The Female Slave Network

... the very symbolic and social conceptions that appear to set women apart and to circumscribe their activities may be used by women as a basis for female solidarity and worth.¹

SLAVE WOMEN HAVE often been characterized as self-reliant and self-sufficient because, lacking black male protection, they had to develop their own means of resistance and survival. Yet, not every black woman was a Sojourner Truth or a Harriet Tubman. Strength had to be cultivated. It came no more naturally to them than to anyone, slave or free, male or female, black or white. If they seemed exceptionally strong it was partly because they often functioned in groups and derived strength from numbers.

Much of the work slaves did and the regimen they followed served to stratify slave society along sex lines. Consequently, slave women had ample opportunity to develop a consciousness grounded in their identity as females. While close contact sometimes gave rise to strife, adult female cooperation and interdependence was a fact of female slave life. The self-reliance and self-sufficiency of slave women, therefore,

must not only be viewed in the context of what the individual slave woman did for herself, but what slave women as a group were able to do for one another.

It is easy to overlook the separate world of female slaves because from colonial times through the Civil War black women often worked with black men at tasks considered by most white Americans to be either too difficult or inappropriate for females. All women worked hard but when white women consistently did field labor it was considered temporary, irregular, or extraordinary, putting them on a par with slaves. Swedish actress Frederika Bremer, visiting the antebellum South, noted that usually only men and black women do field work. Commenting on what another foreign woman sarcastically claimed to be a noble admission of female equality, Bremer observed pointedly that "black [women] are not considered to belong to the weaker sex."²

Bremer's comment reflects what former slaves and fugitive male slaves regarded as the defeminization of black women. Bonded women cut down trees to clear lands for cultivation. They hauled logs by leather straps attached to their shoulders. They plowed using mule and ox teams and hoed, sometimes with the heaviest implements available. They dug ditches, spread manure fertilizer, and piled coarse fodder with their bare hands. They built and cleaned Southern roads, helped construct Southern railroads, and of course, they picked cotton. In short, what fugitive slave Williamson Pease said regretfully of slave women was borne out in fact: "Women who do outdoor work are used as bad as men."³ Almost a century later Green Wilbanks was less remorseful than Pease but in his remembrances of his Grandma Rose, he implied that the work had a kind of neutering effect. Grandma Rose was a woman who could do any kind of job a man could do, a woman who "was some worker, a regular man-woman."⁴

However, it is hardly likely that slave women, especially those on large plantations with sizable female populations, lost

their female identity. Harvesting season on staple crop plantations may have found men and women gathering the crop in sex-integrated gangs, but at other times women often worked in exclusively or predominantly female gangs.⁵ Thus women were put in one another's company for most of the day. This meant that those with whom they ate meals, sang work songs, and commiserated during the work day were people with the same kind of responsibilities and problems. If anything, slave women developed their own female culture, that is, a way of doing things and a way of assigning value that flowed from the perspective that they had on Southern plantation life. Rather than being diminished, their sense of womanhood was probably enhanced, and their bonds to one another made stronger.

Since slave owners and managers seemingly made little of the slave woman's lesser strength, one wonders why they separated men and women at all. Gender must have provided a natural and easy way to divide the labor force. Despite their limited sensitivity regarding female slave labor, and the double standard they used when evaluating the uses of white and black female labor, slave owners did reluctantly acquiesce to female physiology. For instance, depending on their stage of pregnancy, pregnant women were considered half or quarter hands. Healthy, nonpregnant women were considered three-quarter hands. Three-quarter hands were not necessarily exempt from some of the herculean tasks performed by men who were full hands, but usually, when work assignments were being parceled out men were given the more physically demanding work unless there was a shortage of male hands to do the very heavy work or a rush to get that work completed. A case in point was the most common differentiation: men plowed and women hoed.⁶

Like a lot of field labor, nonfield labor was structured so that women could identify with one another. In the Sea Islands slave women sorted cotton lint according to color and fineness

and removed the cotton seeds the gin had crushed into the cotton and lint. Fence building often found men splitting rails in one area and women doing the actual construction in another. Men usually shelled corn, threshed peas, and cut potatoes for planting and platted shucks. Grinding corn into meal or hominy was woman's work; as were spinning, weaving, sewing, and washing.⁷

Female slave domestic work sealed the bonds of womanhood that were forged in the fields and other work places. Usually women spun thread, wove cloth, sewed, and quilted apart from men. Sylvia King grew up on a Texas plantation where women sewed together in the "spinnin' and weavin' cabins."⁸ On Captain Kinsler's South Carolina plantation, as on countless others, "old women and women bearin' chillun not yet born did cardin' wid hand-cards." Some would spin, others would weave, but all would eventually learn from some skilled woman "how to make clothes for the family . . . knit coarse socks and stockings." Saturday afternoon was usually reserved for doing laundry, although sometimes women did it at night after coming from the fields.⁹

It is not at all clear what role slave women had in shaping their domestic work, or how they felt about it; what is clear is that they sometimes worked long after their return from the fields, and long after the men had retired. Frances Willingham of Georgia remembered that when slaves came in at night "woman's cleant up deir houses atter dey et, and den washed and got up early next mornin' to put de clothes out to dry." In contrast, men would "set 'round talkin' to other mens and den go to bed."¹⁰ Women also sometimes sat up sewing. "When the work in the fields was finished women were required to come home and spin one cut a night," reported another Georgian. "Those who were not successful in completing this work were punished the next morning."¹¹ Women had to spin, weave, and sew in the evenings partly because slave owners bought few ready-made clothes, and when they

did, the white family and single slave men were the most likely recipients. On one South Carolina plantation each male slave received a fall allotment of one cotton shirt, one pair of woolen pants, and one woolen jacket. In the spring each man got one shirt and two pairs of cotton pants. Slave women, on the other hand, received six yards of woolen cloth and three yards of cotton shirting in the fall. In the spring they got six yards of cotton drillings and three yards of shirting. In both the spring and the fall women got one needle and a half dozen buttons.¹²

Perhaps a saving grace to this "double duty" was that women got a chance to interact with each other. On a Sedalia County, Missouri, plantation women looked forward to doing laundry on Saturday afternoons because, as Mary Frances Webb explained, they "would get to talk and spend the day together."¹³ Quiltings, referred to by former slaves as female "frolics" and "parties," were especially convivial. South Carolinian Sallie Paul explained that "when dey would get together den, dey would be glad to get together."¹⁴

Women also spent a lot of their nonworking hours with each other. Anna Peek recalled that when slaves were allowed to relax they gathered around a pinewood fire in Aunt Anna's cabin to tell stories. At that time "the old women with pipes in their mouths would sit and gossip for hours."¹⁵ Missourian Alice Sewell told of women occasionally slipping away to hold their own prayer meetings. They cemented their mutual bonds at the end of every meeting when they walked around shaking hands singing "fare you well my sisters, I am going home."¹⁶ Impromptu female religious services were a part of Minkie Walker's mother's life, too. Her mother, Walker testified, would stop and talk with other women after Sunday services on a Missouri plantation. "First thing I would know dey would be jumpin' up and dancin' around and patten' their hands until all de grass was wore slick."¹⁷

Residential arrangements further reinforced the bonds

forged during work, social, and religious activities. The women of the slave quarters lived within a stone's throw of one another. Living at such close quarters could sometimes be unsettling since rumors, with or without foundation, spread faster in the confined environment. Yet, close living allowed for informal palavers during which females could share their joys, concerns, gossip, and heartbreak.

The organization of female slave work and social activities not only tended to separate women and men, but it also generated female cooperation and interdependence. It has already been noted that the pregnant female slave could usually depend on the company of her peers during delivery and convalescence.¹⁸ The midwife or "doctor woman" who delivered the baby was often a member of that peer group. One Virginia physician estimated that nine tenths of all deliveries among the black population in his state were conducted by midwives, most of whom were also black. Another Virginia physician set the number at five sixths.¹⁹

Slave women and their children could depend on midwives and "doctor women" to treat a variety of ailments. Menstrual cramps, for example, were sometimes treated with a tea made from the bark of the gum tree, and at least one woman treated colic by giving the fretting infant a syrup made from a boiled rat's vein.²⁰ Midwives and "doctor women" administered various other herb teas to ease the pains of many ailing slaves. Any number of broths, made from the leaves and barks of trees, from the branches and twigs of bushes, from turpentine, catnip, or tobacco were used to treat whooping cough, diarrhea, toothaches, colds, fevers, headaches, and backaches.²¹

Male slave herb "doctors" and professionally trained white doctors did play a limited role in female slave medical care but more often than not it was elderly and middle-aged black women who tended to the slave population.²² William Howard Russell noted this phenomenon during his stay on a plan-

tation outside of New Orleans where the cabin that served as a hospital for slaves was supervised by an old woman.²³ While visiting an estate in Mississippi Frederick Olmsted overheard an elderly slave woman request medicines for a sick woman in her charge.²⁴ According to a Georgia ex-slave, "one had to be mighty sick to have the services of a doctor." On his master's plantation "old women were . . . responsible for the care of the sick."²⁵ This was also the case on Rebecca Hooks' former Florida residence. "The doctor," she noted, "was not nearly as popular as the 'granny' or midwife, who brewed medicines for every ailment."²⁶

Female cooperation in the realm of medical care helped foster bonding that led to collaboration in the area of resistance. Frances Kemble could attest to the concerted efforts of the black women on her husband's Sea Island plantations. More than once she was visited by groups of women imploring her to get her husband to extend the lying-in period for child-bearing women. On one occasion the women had apparently prepared beforehand the approach they would take with the foreign-born and sympathetic Kemble, for their chosen spokeswoman took care to play on Kemble's own maternal sentiments, and pointedly argued that slave women deserved at least some of the care and tenderness that Kemble's own pregnancy had elicited.²⁷

Usually, however, slave women could not be so outspoken about their needs, and covert cooperative resistance prevailed. Slaveowners suspected that midwives conspired with their female patients to induce abortions, and on Charles Colcock Jones' Georgia plantation such seems to have been the case. A woman named Lucy gave birth in secret and then denied that she had ever been pregnant. Although the midwife attended her, she too claimed not to have delivered a child, as did Lucy's mother. Jones had a physician examine Lucy, and the doctor confirmed what Jones had suspected, that Lucy had indeed given birth. Twelve days later, the decomposing

body of a full-term infant was found, and Lucy, her mother, and the midwife were all hauled off to court. Another woman, a nurse, managed to avoid prosecution but not suspicion. Whether Lucy was guilty of murder and whether the others were accessories will never be known because the court could not shatter their collective defense that the child had been stillborn.²⁸

The inability of slave owners to penetrate the private world of female slaves is probably what kept them from learning of many abortions. The secrets kept by a midwife named Mollie became too much for her to bear. When she embraced Christianity it was the first thing for which she asked forgiveness. As she recalled: "I was carried to the gates of hell and the devil pulled out a book showing me the things which I had committed and that they were all true. My life as a midwife was shown to me and I have certainly felt sorry for all the things I did, after I was converted."²⁹

Health care is not the only example of how the organization of slave work and slave responsibilities led to female cooperation and bonding; slave women were also dependent on each other for child care. During his investigation of the domestic slave trade Eliza Andrews queried a slave trader as to how slave women could be expected to do a full day's work and raise their children, too. The trader dismissed the question as if it challenged the natural order of things: "Oh yes, they'll do a smart chance of work and raise the children besides."³⁰ Such expectations reveal that slave traders and slave owners either were not conscious of the time and energy child raising consumed or knew what efforts had to be expended and just did not care. In hindsight their demands, whether based on ignorance or callousness, seem unreasonable. Slave women had an intensive work day before child care was added. Few could satisfy the demands made by the master on the one hand and their children on the other. Fatigue was a hard enemy to conquer. Some women, like Booker T. Washington's mother,

set aside time to spend with their children every evening, but others, like the parents of Laugan Shiphard, found their offspring asleep when they returned from the fields.³¹

Slave women had to have help if they were to survive the dual responsibilities of laborer and mother. Sometimes, especially on small farms or new plantations where there was no extra hand to superintend children, bondwomen took their offspring to the field with them and attended to them during scheduled breaks. Usually, however, infants and older children were left in the charge of an elderly female or females whose sole job was to baby-sit during working hours. These women did not assume the full maternal burden but they did spend as much or more time with a slave child than did the biological mother.

And they took their charge seriously. Said Robert Shepherd of the Georgia slave woman who looked after him: "Aunt Viney . . . had a big old horn what she blowed when it was time for us to eat, and us knowed better dan to git so fur off us couldn't hear dat horn, for Aunt Viney would sho' tear us up."³² Josephine Bristow spent more time with Mary Novlin, the nursery keeper on Ferdinand Gibson's South Carolina plantation, than she spent with her mother and father who came in from the fields after she was asleep: "De old lady, she looked after every blessed thing for us all day long en cooked for us right along wid de mindin'."³³ In their complementary role as nurse, nursery superintendents ministered to the hurts and illnesses of infants and children.³⁴ It was not at all uncommon for the children's weekly rations to be given to the "grannies" rather than to the children's parents.³⁵ Neither the slaveowner nor slave society expected the biological mother of a child to fulfill all of that child's needs. Given the circumstances, the responsibilities of motherhood had to be shared, and this required close female cooperation.

Close female cooperation in this sphere helped slaves hurdle one of the most difficult of predicaments—who would

provide maternal care for a child whose mother was either sold or deceased? Fathers sometimes served as both mother and father, but when slaves, as opposed to the master, determined child care it was usually a woman who became a child's surrogate mother. Most of the time that woman was a relative, usually an aunt or a sister, but in the absence of female relatives, nonkin women assumed the responsibility.³⁶ Sometimes, as in the case of Georgian Mollie Malone, the nursery superintendent became the child's substitute mother.³⁷ Sometimes, friends did. When her mother was killed by another Texas slave, Julia Malone, then just a small child, was raised by the woman with whom her mother shared a cabin.³⁸ On Southern plantations, the female community made sure that no child was truly motherless.

Because black women of a given plantation spent so much time together they inevitably developed some appreciation of one another's skills and talents. This intimacy enabled them to establish the criteria with which to rank and order themselves. The existence of certain "female jobs" that carried prestige created a yardstick by which bondwomen could measure their achievements. Some of these jobs allowed for growth and self-satisfaction, fringe benefits that were usually out of reach for the field laborer. A seamstress's work, for example, gave opportunities for self-expression and creativity. On very large plantations the seamstress usually did not do field work, and the particularly good seamstress, or "mantua maker," as she was known to contemporaries, might be hired out to others and even allowed to keep a portion of the money she earned.³⁹

Other specialized jobs bestowed similar benefits upon the female slave. One of the spoils of the cook's office was privacy, since kitchens were usually located away from the slave owner's residence. In addition, cooks seldom worried about having enough to eat. In 1861, when Mary Chesnut asked her cook if the Civil War was making food scarce, the cook's

indignant reply was: "I lack everything, what is cornmeal and bacon, milk and molasses? Would that be all you wanted? Ain't I bin living and eating exactly as you does all these years? When I cook for you didn't I have some of all?"⁴⁰ For reasons not too difficult to guess, midwives and female folk doctors commanded the respect of their peers, too. Midwives, in particular, often practiced their art away from their immediate plantation. This not only made them more mobile than most bondwomen, but they played an important role as couriers, carrying messages from one plantation to the next.

Apart from the seamstress, cook, and midwife, a few women were distinguished as work gang leaders. On most farms and plantations where there were overseers, managers, foremen, and drivers, these positions were held by men, either black or white. Occasionally, however, a woman was given a measure of authority over slave work, or a particular aspect of it. For instance, Louis Hughes noted that each plantation had a "forewoman who . . . had charge of the female slaves and also the boys and girls from twelve to sixteen years of age, and all the old people that were feeble."⁴¹ Similarly, a Mississippi slave reported that on his master's Osceola plantation there was a "colored woman as foreman."⁴²

Becoming a cook or seamstress or midwife sometimes involved more than just having the favor bestowed on one by the master or mistress. Skills were sometimes passed down from one generation to the next within a slave family. If a slave girl's mother was a cook, and the girl assisted her mother, then the daughter would, more than likely, assume her mother's role when the latter either was sold, grew too old, or died. Similarly, many midwives learned their skill from a female relative. The tightly guarded recipes for tonics and brews used by these "healers" were often transmitted to a younger generation by an elderly female relative. There were exceptions, of course. Clara Walker, for instance, was "apprenticed" at age thirteen by her master to a doctor who taught her how to

deliver babies. According to Walker, once she learned the art, the doctor sat back and let her do his work for him.⁴³

Like occupation, age also distinguished women. In fact, the female slave community could claim, as did Frederick Douglass in remarks about the slave community at large, that "there is not to be found, among any people, a more rigid enforcement of the law of respect to elders, than they maintain."⁴⁴ Absolute age was important in the slave community, but for women, age also corresponded to the number of children one had and one's stage in the childbearing cycle. Women called "Aunt" or "Granny" were either middle-aged or elderly but odds were that they also had had children, and in the case of a "Granny" might be past childbearing. By virtue of their greater experience, wisdom and number of children, old women commanded the respect of the young.

Clearly, a pecking order existed among bondwomen—one which they themselves helped to create. Either because of their age or occupation, association with the master class or personal achievements, certain women were recognized by other women and men as important people, even as leaders. Laura Towne met an aged woman who commanded such respect that other slaves bowed to her and lowered their voices in her presence. The old woman, Maum Katie, was, according to Towne, a "spiritual mother" and a woman of "tremendous influence over her spiritual children."⁴⁵ Sometimes two or three factors combined to distinguish a particular woman. Aunt Charlotte was the aged cook in John M. Booth's Georgia household. When Aunt Charlotte spoke, said Booth, "other colored people hastened to obey her."⁴⁶ Frederick Douglass's grandmother wielded influence because of her age and the skills she possessed. She made the best fishnets in Tuckahoe, Maryland, and she knew better than anyone else how to preserve sweet potato seedlings and how to plant them successfully. She had what Douglass called "high reputation," and accordingly "she was remembered by others."⁴⁷

Older slave women sometimes used their position of authority to keep younger slave women in check. When Elizabeth Botume went to the Sea Islands after the Civil War she had as a house servant a young woman named Amy who performed her tasks slowly and sullenly until an older woman named Aunt Mary arrived from Beaufort. During slavery Amy and Aunt Mary had both worked in the house but Amy had learned to listen and obey Aunt Mary. After Aunt Mary arrived the once obstreperous Amy became "quiet, orderly, helpful and painstaking."⁴⁸

The leadership of some women, however, had a disruptive effect on plantation operations. Bennet H. Barrow repeatedly lamented the fact that Big Lucy, one of his oldest slaves, had more control over his female hands than he did: "Anica, Center, Cook Jane, the better you treat them the worse they are. Big Lucy the Leader, corrupts every young negro in her power."⁴⁹ A self-proclaimed prophetess named Sinda was responsible for the cessation of all slave work on Butler Island in Georgia. According to a notation made by Frances Kemble in 1839, Sinda's prediction that the world would come to an end on a certain day caused the slaves to lay down their hoes and plows in the belief that their final emancipation was imminent. So sure were Sinda's fellow slaves of her prediction that even the lash failed to get them into the fields. When the appointed day of judgment passed uneventfully Sinda was whipped mercilessly. Yet, for a time she had commanded more authority than master and overseer alike.⁵⁰

Bonded women did not have to go to the lengths Sinda did in order to make a difference in one another's lives. The supportive atmosphere of the female community was buffer enough against the depersonalizing regime of plantation work and the general dehumanizing nature of slavery. When we consider how much more confined to the plantation women were than men, that many women had husbands who visited only once or twice a week, and that on average slave women