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Book Author(s): Jennifer L. Morgan

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Introduction

Slaveowners in the early English colonies depended upon and exploited African women. They required women's physical labors in order to reap the profits of the colonies and they required women's symbolic value in order to make sense of racial slavery. Women were enslaved in large numbers, they performed critical hard labor, and they served an essential ideological function. Slaveowners appropriated their reproductive lives by claiming children as property, by rewriting centuries-old European laws of descent, and by defining a biologically driven perpetual racial slavery through the real and imaginary reproductive potential of women whose "blackness" was produced by and produced their enslavability.

African women were to be found throughout the early Atlantic world, as forced and free laborers, as wives of traders and settlers, and as traders and travelers in their own right. A narrowly proscriptive religious doctrine and an ultimate turn toward settler societies based on family migration on the part of the English (late starters in the scramble for New World possessions) tend to hide or obscure the extent to which black women figured in colonial settlements. Loudly voiced colonial complaints about too few (white) women on the one hand and the desirability of (black) male laborers on the other illustrate the problems of primary sources whose authors were concerned with social and political issues and were uninterested in revealing the lives on which so much depended. But ultimately the archive will give voice to not only the presence of these women but also the ways in which their lives explicate some of the connections and mobility that have come to drive historical studies of the early Atlantic. This book explores the ways in which enslaved women lived their lives in the crux of slaveowners' vision of themselves as successful white men and thus shouldered burdens connected to but distinct from those borne by enslaved men.

This book examines colonies in both the English West Indies and on the North American mainland. The connections between the two are myriad. Ties of family and commerce supported by a vibrant maritime presence meant that the exchange of goods and information brought settlers and

merchants in Jamaica and, say, Philadelphia into close proximity.¹ These exchanges facilitated shared ideologies of race and racial slavery among those who were becoming slaveowners and thus provided the basis for a common set of experiences on the part of the enslaved. The tension between the unifying reality of racial slavery and the wide-ranging, divergent, and complicated experiences of labor that fell under the rubric of “slavery” has been a central force driving scholarship on forced labor in the Americas for more than forty years. Historians studying men and women caught in the crosscurrents of English colonial ambitions, have often understood geography as paramount. Ira Berlin and Philip Morgan are not alone in demanding that historians pay careful attention to the nuances of time and space when exploring the history of American slavery.² Distinctive labor regimes, shaped in crucial ways by the particularities of different crops and the always-waning frontier, defined the lives of enslaved Africans in ways that do not always progress singularly and steadily toward racism. Power is negotiated; mutual respect, affection, and even intimacy across cultures was possible and, in the context of a shared environment, transformed “blacks” and “whites” into trading partners, shipmates, servants, allies, and lovers. Such relationships belied fixed racial categories even as those racial identities came firmly and irrevocably into being. It is precisely the sense of “what could have been” that has shaped some of the most important studies of early American slave societies.³ In other words, as scholarship about colonial encounters has revealed the contradictory expectations, situational ethics, and slowly evolving legal parameters of racial identity and racial slavery, it has become more than clear that those encounters embodied a wide range of possible outcomes and were shaped by the particularities of an evolving colonial landscape. This sense of possibility, however, must always be balanced by its existence inside a rubric in which “Negro” equals “Slave,” with all the false simplicity that such a formulation engenders. One of the projects of this book is to look at women’s lives across time and space, to grapple with the ways in which ideologies of race and gender under English colonialism contributed to a set of common experiences for enslaved women that interrupt the specificities of place. In many ways, this book is concerned with a question about the body under slavery: Does the significance of reproductive potential, embedded as it is in women’s lived experience, transcend the significance of New World commodities and territories?

Enslavement on the basis of racial heredity forced a social and juridical identity upon men and women of African descent that also defined the

parameters of slavery in the American colonies. Moreover, the crucial matter of heredity and the permanent mark of racial inferiority situated enslaved women's reproductive identity at the heart of the matter in ways not always explicated by slaveowners and their visible archives. Women's lives under slavery in the Americas always included the possibilities of their wombs. Whether laboring among sugar cane, coffee bushes, or rice swamps, the cost-benefit calculations of colonial slaveowners included the speculative value of a reproducing labor force. We know that the demographic realities of high infant mortality and low fertility meant that for many Caribbean slaveowners that value remained entirely speculative or was eventually abandoned in favor of replacing those they worked to death with newly purchased laborers. And indeed, the absence of natural increase across the Caribbean and much of the eighteenth-century American South has meant that scholars of slavery have tended to omit the consequences of women's reproductive capacity from their equations. But women's work and women's bodies are inseparable from the landscape of colonial slavery. The same attention to demography that removes women's reproductive lives from the picture indicates that women were enslaved in large numbers throughout slave societies in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Recent economic and demographic histories of the trans-Atlantic slave trade correct the assumption that African men greatly outnumbered African women in the trade. Particularly in the period prior to the eighteenth century, women and men arrived in near-balanced numbers to many parts of the Americas, and as slave traders shifted toward the import of children in the waning years of the trade, adult men ultimately constituted a minority of all those transported.⁴ Taking these numbers of women into account forces reproduction into view and raises questions about the possibilities of comparative studies of slavery across time and space.

By situating this study of slavery and reproduction in both the Caribbean and the American South, I intend to suggest that women's reproductive identity—and by that I mean both the experience of childbirth and, perhaps more important, the web of expectations about childbirth held both by black women and men and those who enslaved them—itself provides the comparative frame rather than the crop being cultivated or the size of the household in which one labored. I do not mean to suggest that such things as work or slaveholdings are inconsequential. However, I do argue that the underlying realities of reproductive lives shape the encounter with work, community, and culture. In the context of a coercive labor sys-

tem predicated upon a fictive biological marker conveyed by the mother, how could it be otherwise?

This, then, is a study of African women enslaved in the early English colonies, of the impact of slavery on women's lives and the impact of women on the development of slavery. Women's labor was at the heart of monoculture export economies in both the Caribbean and the American South, and their reproductive lives were at the heart of the entire venture of racial slavery. For women of African descent, life in the Americas unfolded in ways that implicated their bodily integrity and simultaneously provided material and ideological support to European slaveowners. English slave-owning settlers purchased women to work their fields, and they did so in significant numbers. During the early decades of most colonies in the Caribbean and the American mainland, African women and men were enslaved in relatively equal proportions. While domestic work may have characterized the lives of women in the port cities, rural slaveowners put the vast majority of enslaved women to work clearing, sowing, and reaping their fields. A clear sense of the proportional presence of enslaved women in early English slave societies requires a reassessment of women's role in these developing economies, an understanding of the degree to which women carved out the wealth that supported the English empire, and a careful appreciation of the social and cultural realities that informed both women's and men's experience of enslavement.

As I have constructed the parameters for this study, I have of necessity drawn on a wide range of disciplines. My debts to scholars of African American history, women's history, and colonial American history are obvious, as is the extent to which I have benefited from the work of feminist theory and cultural studies. Grateful acknowledgment of these debts also raises a source of frustration that itself has fueled the work of this project. Surprising gaps in these literatures generate equally startling omissions. In the 1970s interdisciplinary anthologies on African-American women's lives were published that ranged chronologically from slavery through the twentieth century. Angela Davis's 1971 work on women in slave communities inaugurated a wide range of scholarship on African American women organized around the nexus of family, sexuality, and resistance.⁵ Studies generated around the larger questions of slave community and family as a whole, such as those of John Blassingame and Herbert Gutman propelled scholars such as Deborah Gray White to explore women's lives under slavery. And indeed, in the 1980s, historical work on black women's lives moved from margin to center. With the publication of White's work on the American

South and Hilary Beckles's work on enslaved women in Barbados, Barbara Bush's study of gender in the British West Indies, Marietta Morrissey's sociological work on the same topic, and a surge of work coming from scholars in other disciplines such as Hazel Carby, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Deborah McDowell, and Hortense Spillers, studies on women in slavery seemed destined to move, as the field does, in the direction of the particular—toward increasingly specific and less literary monographs in which the lives of these women moved irrevocably out of obscurity and stereotype. But by the end of the 1980s, Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham could still lament that “black woman's voice[s] go largely unheard” in African American history, a lament that continues to resonate into the new millennium.⁶ Among historical monographs concerned primarily with enslaved women, there are currently only four full-length studies: Deborah Gray White's *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, Marietta Morrissey's *Slave Women in the New World: Gender Stratification in the New World*, Barbara Bush's *Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650–1838*, and, most recently, Bernard Moitt's *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles, 1635–1848*.⁷ Studies that treat gender and race in the context of emerging American colonies are more widespread, but are primarily offered in either women's history or colonial history and thus do not center the problem of slavery. While initially constricted by a framework that focused primarily on the lives of white women, the fields of early American history, African American history and women's history now inform one another as they always should have and intersect in studies such as Kathleen Brown's 1996 *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs*, a work that has set the stage for early American histories that follow.⁸ As historians have become increasingly committed to the ideas of intersectionality and the construction of social/racial identities—a commitment that flows equally from the literary turn and the work of racial theorists and feminist scholars—early Americanists have used the colonial and early modern period to explore the process through which colonial subjects come into being. Kirsten Fischer's study of sex and race in colonial North Carolina exemplifies work that takes colonial identity formation seriously and explores the complicated ways in which social and juridical categories were called into being in early America.⁹

This study is heavily indebted to works that model the exploration of identity and identity formation, and in this regard I have moved outside the boundaries of colonial American history. My hope is that this book will contribute to a larger process in which the very groundings of historical

inquiry are reassessed in the light of race and racism's role in developing Western models of critical thinking. As Hazel Carby noted in 1982, we need to rethink, if not dismantle the very category of reproduction when we apply it to the labor of black women.¹⁰ The connections between commodification, production, and reproduction are nowhere as clear, nor as unexplored, as in African American history. It is a source of creative frustration to me that so few scholars of reproduction have explored them. Elaborately theorized studies of the body, of reproduction, or of childbirth are notable for the persistence with which they mobilize the category of "woman" unmodified by race. In other words, all the women are still white.

The earliest slave ships to the Americas unloaded both women and men. Planter demands for labor fell equally upon the shoulders of women and men. Once in the Americas, women and men together faced questions of their spiritual, cultural, and physical survival and reproduction. At its most utilitarian level, African women's presence among the enslaved—the presence or absence of enough women to make natural increase possible—affected the rate at which slaveowners needed African imports to maintain the enslaved population. The very different cultural outcomes in the Caribbean and the American mainland reflect the centrality of women, reproduction, and racial slavery in the creation of cultural landscapes. To note and to complicate our understanding of sex ratios and birth rates under various American slave societies might seem a relatively simple endeavor. But the simplicity is deceptive because these numbers fundamentally shaped the experience of enslavement and carried with them complexities of identity, family formation, political culture, and emotional wholeness. Ultimately, to write about slave societies with a fictive neutrality that conceals a universal enslaved male, runs the risk of missing the very essence of what constituted the experience of enslavement for both men and women. The demographic relationship between the number of women and the number of men enslaved shaped every level of a slave society, and culture and creolization are profoundly shaped by demography. For slaveowners anxious to either locate evidence of placability among "island-born" slaves or identify dangerous sites of cultural and social miscegenation, creolization (or its absence) became a central, albeit malleable, category. For the enslaved, the possibility of intimacy at the heart of creolization challenged the narrow and contradictory racialized categories to which early modern slaveowners confined them. For historians, the entire endeavor of comparative slavery rests firmly upon the apparatus of creolization as a means of interrogating cultural change and challenging static or monolithic understandings of

“the” institution of slavery. That is why we need to understand women’s experiences.

Nonetheless, placing women’s lives at the center of social-historical studies of slavery only partly explicates gender in early American slave societies. Gender functioned as a set of power relationships through which early slaveowning settlers and those they enslaved defined, understood, and adjusted the confines of racial slavery. The interplay between slaveowners’ conceptualization of African women’s bodies and the development of racial slavery illuminates the evolving relationship between slaveowners’ expectations and the realities of enslavement for black women in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Ideas about black sexuality and misconceptions about black female sexual behavior formed the cornerstone of Europeans’ and Euro-Americans’ general attitudes toward slavery.¹¹ Arguably, the sexual stereotypes levied against African-American women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were so powerful because of the depth and utility of their roots. Before they came into contact with enslaved women either in West Africa or on American plantations, slaveowners’ images and beliefs about race and savagery were indelibly marked on the women’s bodies. Tracing the emergence of such ideology through to its more pragmatic application in the economic transactions and deathbed fantasies of colonial slaveowners allows us to reconsider the importance of both gendered ideologies of race and the (until recently underestimated) numbers of African women enslaved in the Americas. Images of black women’s reproductive potential, as well as images of their voracious sexuality, were crucial to slaveowners faced with female laborers. The act of forcing black women to work in fields both required and resulted in work and sex becoming intrinsic to one another. This book argues that as slaveowners contemplated women’s reproductive potential with greed and opportunism, they utilized both outrageous images and callously indifferent strategies to ultimately inscribe enslaved women as racially and culturally different while creating an economic and moral environment in which the appropriation of a woman’s children as well as her childbearing potential became rational and, indeed, natural.

I begin, in Chapter 1, by exploring the interplay between European writers’ notions of African women’s sexual identities and the development of racist ideology. The willingness to exploit African women’s labor became intimately tied to ideas about reproduction. For European travelers, both those who settled in the Americas and those who did not, the enslavement of African laborers required a sense of moral and social distance over

those they would enslave. They acquired that distance in part through manipulating symbolic representations of African women's sexuality. In so doing, European men gradually brought African women into focus—women whose pain-free reproduction (at least to European men) indicated that they did not descend from Eve and who illustrated their proclivity for hard work through their ability to simultaneously till the soil and birth a child. Such imaginary women suggested an immutable difference between Africans and Europeans, a difference ultimately codified as race. As slavery took root in North American and Caribbean colonies, the interplay between inherited beliefs about gender, race, and civility coalesced to shape slaveowners' implicit expectations that their wealth and, indeed, that of entire colonial empires, derived from the reproductive potential of African women.

The interdependence of the developing languages of gender and race provides the antecedents for the development of a trans-Atlantic slave trade. Women's value and centrality as agricultural producers and as markers of wealth in West and West Central Africa had an important impact on the numbers of women made available to the trans-Atlantic slave trade.¹² There are also important shifts in the demography of the trade over time such that women's proportional presence is greater in the seventeenth-century trade than it would be later. Chapter 2 is an exploration of these factors and an attempt to integrate demographic and social-historical evidence of West African societies in order to suggest the worlds that enslaved African women might have left behind. The experience of the Middle Passage and the cultural legacy of birth, social space, and work that West African women brought with them across the Atlantic are difficult matters to identify firmly. Since before the sixteenth century, European travelers recorded their observations of familial and cultural institutions of the West African coast. I use this rich, albeit problematic, travel literature to discuss reproduction and childbearing in some West African societies. I do so with caution; early modern European writers on Africa and Africans already were part of a polemic literature about race, culture, and European superiority. Nonetheless, to abandon early written references on African cultures would be short sighted. These commentaries provide valuable glimpses of reproductive rituals, the context of male/female social space, and the parameters of women's labor. In combination with a discussion of the demography of women in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, I use the travel literature to suggest the points of social and cultural commonality and difference that women from areas of the West African coast would contend with in the Americas.

As they worked to overcome linguistic and cultural differences, women enslaved in the Americas would find their points of connection to one another highlighted both by their biology and by the intrusions of slaveowners into their reproductive lives. Chapter 3 explores slaveowners' appropriation of enslaved women's reproductive lives and argues that speculation about women's childbearing capacity was a natural outgrowth of slaveownership. Women enslaved in early American colonies would find that familiarity did not breed autonomy, not even in the first generations of settlement and slaveownership, a "frontier" period characterized by close, often intimate, proximity between slaveowner and enslaved and a mutual dependency buttressed by racial fluidity.¹³ Faced with the elusive nature of economic success, even small-scale slaveowners appropriated enslaved women's reproductive legacies to augment their own. Enslaved women and their reproductive capacities and potentials thus become part of the equation of slaveownership quite early in the settlement process, despite the fact that the experience of childbirth, for both black and white women, was delineated by excessive mortality rates. In the face of a devastating disease environment, taxing work regimes, and inadequate diets, enslaved men and women maintained only a tenuous hold upon their own lives. Inadequate nutrition combined with overwork to endanger women's fertility and thus accord reproduction—both biological and cultural—new meaning in the New World. Birth rates in early English American slave societies were low, and the proportion of children who survived their childhood was even lower. But high mortality rates and decreased fertility rates did not remove childbirth from the equation for either slaveowners or enslaved women in early American slave societies. If anything, the rarity of surviving infant births may have further highlighted the pragmatic and symbolic value of African women's reproductive potential.

Chapter 4 is a discussion of the ways in which enslaved women experienced the explicit and implicit claims upon their wombs. Through a discussion of the material realities of reproduction (the frequency of births on small and large plantations, for example) and the dangers of familial disruption for those women and men whose children survived infancy only to be identified as tokens of affection bestowed by slaveowners upon their kin, I probe the consequences of reproduction for women enslaved in societies newly dependent upon slave labor. This is not a study of "motherhood" with all its attendant emotional and psychological touchstones. Any discussion of women's lives must tread carefully through the maze of cultural

meaning ascribed to childbirth. The “natural” reproductive function of the female body lends itself to ahistorical readings of reproductive experience. Moreover, the connections that have been made between race and gender have shaped cultural assumptions about black women’s reproductive lives that are equally ahistorical and profoundly racist.¹⁴ My intention in this chapter is to suggest the many ways in which childbirth itself is situational and demands historicity. Historical evidence, for example, of the ways in which adults in areas affected by high rates of infant mortality delay connection with children until they reach an age at which survival is more probable should provide a corrective to the impulse to assign transparent tragedy to childbirth under slavery.¹⁵ Childbirth under slavery must be couched in both the historical parameters of the slave trade, the physical and emotional violence of racial slavery, and an interrogation of the multiple meanings of women’s reproductive lives.

The ways in which reproduction became a kind of symbolic work for enslaved women should not obscure the physical toil slaveowners subjected them to. Enslaved women worked, and they labored without illusions about the likelihood of being able, as some enslaved men did, to use their skills to ascend out of fieldwork. In the world of skilled labor, African women were incredibly rare. The narrow confines of domestic labor admitted a tiny percentage of African women to the homes of slaveowners, which with its physical and psychological closeness to the slaveowning family offered little in the way of mobility and autonomy—perquisites of many skilled occupations that were open to enslaved men. Chapter 5 establishes women’s ubiquitous presence in the fields and explores the ways in which the restrictions of fieldwork shaped enslaved women’s daily lives.

Throughout this study, I explore the ways in which slavery changes the meaning of reproduction for the enslaved and the ways in which reproduction changes the experience of enslavement. A child born under slavery became part of the slaveowners’ profit margin, and women’s voluntary or involuntary complicity in their own commodification and that of their children might be seen as the ultimate sign of resignation and accommodation. But even as that child literally enriched the slaveowner with its birth, she could be an assertion of humanity and autonomy on the part of her parent. The meanings of childbirth for the women and men who parented children, watched infants die, or raised children born of parents who were dead or had been sold away are not historically transparent. Given my focus throughout the text on the question of autonomy as it related to parenting and reproduction, a final chapter on resistance is called for. The notion that

enslaved women withheld reproductive capacities—engaging in a “gynecological revolt”—to damage the wealth and power of the slaveowner has gained currency among historians of the Caribbean, and the idea of reproduction as resistance needs further discussion.¹⁶ To treat resistance as a factor integral to any aspect of the institution of slavery, as many current historians of slavery have done, is to demand a focus on the personhood of the enslaved and to resist the dehumanizing legacy of enslavement. In the context of a study that argues for the integral role of reproduction to the institution of slavery, a distinct chapter on resistance allows me to interrogate the ways in which women’s reproductive potential shaped the form and the meaning of their opposition to slavery.

Initially I conceived this book as a way to revise what I saw as a fairly significant obfuscation in the historiography of slave societies—namely, that “slave” equaled “man.” I wanted to explore the consequences of the presence of women in early slave societies and the ways in which their experience of enslavement differed from that of men. While I was originally loath to confine an examination of female laborers to their reproductive identities, the sources drew me into a subject matter that I found more complex and meaningful than I had previously supposed. I do not intend to argue that the experience of enslaved women should be approached only through their biological capacity to reproduce. However, the expectations and experience of reproduction significantly influenced both the violence done to enslaved African women in the Americas and their ability to survive it. In my effort to depict the broad sweep of reproduction over time and space I mean to evoke the contradictory consequences of childbirth under slavery, the ways in which slaveowners both relied upon and ignored the physiological realities of women’s bodies, the slaveowners’ desire to obfuscate and exploit African women’s sexual identity and the humanity they so obviously shared, and the simultaneity of violation and creativity manifested in creolization for enslaved women and men. In the process, I argue that the entire framework of slavery as an institution rested upon these contradictory assumptions and that centering the lives of enslaved women in the colonial period is not simply an exercise of inclusion but is rather a foundational methodology in writing the history of early America.