

“But women suffered in different ways as well, for they were victims of sexual abuse and other barbarous mistreatment that could only be inflicted on women. Expediency governed the slaveholders’ posture toward female slaves: when it was profitable to exploit them as if they were men, they were regarded, in effect, as genderless, but when they could be exploited, punished and repressed in ways suited only for women, they were locked into their exclusively female roles.” (Davis, 6)

Davis, here, explores the ways in which the Black female slave is stripped of her gender and the “privileges” of delicacy and femininity associated with upper-class white women, and yet is simultaneously hyper-vulnerable to gender-based violence and exploitation. In addition to the “terroristic use of rape in order to put Black women in their place” (24), Davis describes the exploitation of the reproductive abilities of these women as placing them in a heightened circumstance of oppression. Davis also develops the concept of the revolutionary resistance of Black women in enslavement, and the ways in which the gendered conditions of their enslavement position these women as primed for resistance. When considering Davis’s work in the context of the field and the time period, the revolutionary nature of the piece is clear; she gives direct consideration to the positionality of Black women in the context of enslavement as workers, community members and family members, directly challenging both negative narratives surrounding Black women and Black matriarchy, as well as the general absence of the Black enslaved woman in historical literature and conversation. However, I also wonder how this topic can be considered outside of a purely reproductive or gender-based lens. After all, as Davis writes, “...in the eyes of slaveholders, slave women were not mothers at all, they were simply instruments guaranteeing the growth of the slave labor force.” (7) Here, my thinking and questioning is informed by the work of Patrice Douglass in *Engendering Blackness*, as she asks “If, as Davis presupposes, gender is annulled for the female slave for her to ‘function as a slave,’ then how does the category of slave, irrespective of gender, expose the outer limits of notions that rest on sex and gender as always already clarifying forms of differentiation?.. What is occluded when we rest analyses on the gendering of female slaves as the content of their violations and, in turn, their resistance?” (Douglass, 4-5) In keeping with Douglass, I feel that it may be valuable to dissociate sexual violence from “inalterable femaleness” (Davis, 24), and to consider how the structure of slavery inherently renders the enslaved body sexually violable.