

1

The Breeding Ground The Degendering of Female Slaves

In the following chapter, I intend to lay the theoretical ground for my later readings of black women's fiction. In the course of my reading, I noticed that slavery was a recurring theme or reference in many texts, but even more interestingly, that slavery and motherhood often seemed related. The nexus of the slave mother appears to be a fruitful departure point for discussions of gender in that she forces one to question what it means to mother as well as what it means to be a mother. I argue that the historic instance of American slavery provides at least one example of maternity being experienced differently by two different groups of women, white women and female slaves. Their masters regarded female slaves as breeders, rather than mothers; however, female slaves continued to view themselves as mothers, but mothering took on different meanings. While analyzing American antebellum gender codes

and precolonial African gender codes, I assert that female slaves could fit neither society's definition of woman and thus developed different gender ideals.

Before addressing the specifics of slave mothering, I would like to briefly address the significance of mothering in reference to gender identity. Drucilla Cornell has noted the feminist desire to turn toward:

maternity as the maternal role, to the maternal body as the evocation of a subject not united in itself against the Other, and to reproductive capacity more generally to uncover the irreducibility of the feminine as a basis for a shared female identity and also for an expression of the potential within womanliness as it is lived, for a different and better way of being human.¹

This concern with the maternal in part represents the desire to identify something essential that all females share that can then be used as the basis for feminist discourse. While studies of motherhood and the mother figure might be enlightening on a variety of levels, I agree with Jane Gallup's speculation that the glorification of the mother is in part a response to the "pressure to cover over differences between feminists."² Certainly this is not the only purpose that feminist explorations of the maternal serve, but it does appear to be part of the tradition of feminist theory to create a monolithic femininity. Object relations psychoanalytic theory and Lacanian and Freudian psychoanalysis are now among the most influential approaches to the maternal. Feminists have utilized both methods in their analyses of maternity. Despite the feminist perspective of their work, however, they are susceptible to eliding the numerous differences among women in an attempt to identify the essence of female identity. The problem is not so much that maternity is used to find a common bond, but that mothering is conceived of as a static shared experience. This limited view of maternity is further problematized when the maternal relationship is used to identify an essential characteristic shared by all women. By assuming all women share the same relation to the maternal, these discourses omit those who are not mothers and assume that all mothers

are the same. One means of avoiding this harmful slippage is to take a historical approach in the analysis of motherhood, so that mothering may be placed within the context of the numerous events and issues that effect how and why one mothers or does not mother.

However, object relations theorist Nancy Chodorow appears to take the opposite approach in her text *The Reproduction of Mothering*, in which she assumes that all women have the same relation to the maternal as she analyzes women's mothering and the way mothering is reproduced. She argues that the reproduction of mothering is central to social organization and gender development and is implicated in the reproduction of male dominance. Chodorow's text has been quite influential in the field of feminist theory and has inspired numerous feminist studies of mother-daughter and woman-woman relationships in literature, film, and culture. Although many scholars have critiqued and superseded Chodorow's work, *The Reproduction of Mothering* is a seminal text and its flaws often reappear in the works that seek to critique it.

Central to Chodorow's argument is the different relationship between girls and boys and their mothers. She argues that since mothers and daughters share the same sex, girls are seen as an extension of the mother, while boys are seen as other.³ From this she concludes that females tend to form their identity in relation to others while males form their identity in opposition to others.⁴ Because of the sameness of daughters and mothers, daughters develop the capacity to mother and nurture. In other words, mothers reproduce their daughters as themselves. However, mothers' difference from their sons limits boys' ability to develop the sense of continuity and connectedness that daughters have.

Chodorow formulates this theory without addressing such factors of identity as race and class. Is the daughter's sense of continuity and connectedness affected by her place in society? Would a poor black girl feel the same level of connection as a rich white girl who has the advantages of race and class? Despite the fact that she acknowledges that "[t]he development of the self is relational,"⁵ she does not consider other aspects that might affect gender development. Chodorow acknowledges that "mothering does not exist in isolation,"⁶ but she continues to assume that all mothering is the same and results in the same kind of gender identity.

However, Elizabeth Spelman argues that an “investigation of ethnicity and class and race within that social structure might make us consider the possibility that what one learns when one learns one’s gender identity is the gender identity appropriate to one’s ethnic, class, national, and racial identity.”⁷ What is considered feminine in America may not be feminine in another country. For example, in *The Woman Warrior* Maxine Hong Kingston notes the difference between Chinese feminine and American feminine as she attempts to negotiate a Chinese American concept of femininity.⁸ If concepts of femininity fluctuate from nation to nation, is it not possible to have variations within the same country? Spelman’s realization that gender identity might be affected by various societal factors leads her to question whether all women have the same gender. Her answer is “no: not if gender is a social construction and females become not simply women but particular kinds of women.”⁹ Clearly if gender is not biological, but constructed, then one’s gender construction cannot be isolated from other aspects of one’s personhood. Thus for Spelman there is not an essential woman.

Spelman’s position that there is not “an essential woman” underscores Judith Butler’s point in *Gender Trouble* that the “very subject of women is no longer understood in stable or abiding terms. . . . [T]here is very little agreement after all on what it is that constitutes, or ought to constitute, the category of women.”¹⁰ Butler argues that:

If one “is” a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive. . . . because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities.¹¹

In other words, gender is not the same as sex; females may share the same sex, but not necessarily the same gender. By making a distinction between sex and gender, one may address the multiplicity of women’s experiences. According to Butler, “the distinction between sex and gender serves the argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed: hence gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as

seemingly fixed as sex.”¹² It is this distinction between sex and gender, which seems to be missing in Chodorow’s theory. Her theory of identity formation is tied to the child’s sex, which then leads to a masculine or feminine gender. Spelman, on the other hand, tries to avoid essentializing women by focusing on gender as a construct.

This desire to avoid essentialism is seen as well in Julia Kristeva’s “Stabat Mater,” which begins by acknowledging Kristeva’s concern about essentialism. She recognizes that speaking of “women” risks eliding differences, but she wonders, “If it is not possible to say of a *woman* what she *is* . . . , would it perhaps be different concerning the *mother*, since that is the only function of the ‘other sex’ to which we can definitely attribute existence?”¹³ It is clear that Kristeva is attempting to tease out the complexities of these configurations; however, her formulations are still questionable. In her analysis of mothers, she assumes a shared experience of motherhood despite possible differences in race, class, or culture. Kristeva’s argument is based on her belief that Christian civilizations in particular absorb the feminine into the maternal, which is itself merely a fantasy that overwhelms the “real experience” of motherhood. While this may be true, her conception of a singular experience of motherhood is just as problematic. “Stabat Mater” explores the cult of the Virgin Mary and its relation to the maternity and femininity. It is her belief that the demise of religion and particularly the cult of the Virgin Mary have impoverished motherhood discourse. Thus, she proposes a new discourse, a “‘herethics’ encompassing both reproduction and death.”¹⁴ This “herethics,” however, is only available to women who reproduce. For Kristeva, “[w]omen’s reproductive capacity carries within it the potential to overcome, at least to some degree, the ‘effects’ of the castration that both genders suffer in their separation from the phallic mother.”¹⁵ I would argue, however, that if she has not created an essential woman, she has at least created an essential mother. If, however, as Spelman posited earlier, there is no essential woman, can there be an essential mother? Kristeva’s essential mother pertains to only a certain kind of mother.

Cornell points out that “Stabat Mater” emphasizes “a certain kind of woman’s participation in ‘herethics,’ ‘a woman who seeks to reproduce,’ and who, therefore seeks stability.”¹⁶ What do we do

then with the woman who does not seek to reproduce or reproduces against her wishes? Does reproduction necessarily signify stability? In the American slave economy, maternity was quite unstable as Harriet Jacob's slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* illustrates. Linda notes that "[t]he mother of slaves is very watchful. She knows there is no security for her children."¹⁷ Linda's story does not seem to fit Kristeva's vision of "herethics." Cornell notes that

although Kristeva constantly reminds us that she is aware of the cultural specificity of her own writing as a European woman . . . she also continues to locate the universal, in the sense of what women share, in their capacity to mother and in their maternal role.¹⁸

The fact that not all women are mothers or able to conceive suggests the limitation of a definition of womanhood that is linked to motherhood, but even among all mothers there is not a universal approach or attitude toward mothering. The maternal role is not fixed and static, but fluctuating and dynamic. This is particularly evident when one thinks about the maternal roles available to aunts, neighbors, and the like, who may not be mothers. Thus the search for the essential woman/mother is futile.

It is this search for the essential woman in the mother figure that Hortense Spillers explodes in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," when one considers racial difference and American femininities. Spillers' essay critiques the notion of a shared womanhood or motherhood based merely on shared biology. Her exploration of slavery in America suggests that although female slaves gave birth, they did not share the same relation to the maternal as the plantation mistress. Spillers' analysis of the maternal is connected to an analysis of gender. Although she tends to conflate the terms "sex" and "gender," Spillers' argument turns on her belief that the biological function of giving birth cannot be used to determine a socially constructed gender. She critiques Anglo-American feminism's account of gender transmission as not applicable to female slaves. Spillers uses the history of slavery to suggest that slaves and their African-American descendants had a different kind of gender than their white mistresses and their descendants.

Spillers proposes that African slaves in America were robbed of their gender. She is in agreement with Angela Davis, who argues, "The slave system defined Black people as chattel. Since women, no less than men, were viewed as profitable labor-units, they might as well have been genderless as far as the slaveholders were concerned."¹⁹ This point is echoed in Spillers' account of the slave ship's cargo in which slaves are viewed and accounted for as quantities, not as male and female subjects.²⁰ Slaves were not seen as men and women, but as merchandise.

Although female slaves might be valued as breeders, "[w]here work was concerned, strength and productivity under the threat of the whip outweighed considerations of sex."²¹ Even though there were variations regarding the division of labor between male and female slaves, it was not uncommon for female slaves to perform the same work as men. As Dorothy Sterling notes, "[w]oman's work was scarcely distinguishable from man's."²² Her collection of oral history, letters, diaries, autobiographies, and newspaper accounts include anecdotes about the work of female slaves:

I had to do everythin' dey was to do on de outside. Work in de field, chop wood, hoe corn, till sometime I feels like my back surely break. . . . I have done every thing on a farm what a man done 'cept cut wheat. I split rails like man. I used a iron wedge drove into the wood with a maul.²³

Clearly Sterling's informants recognize sex differences by acknowledging that they worked like men, but sex distinction does not impact labor expectations. According to Moses Grandy, a former slave, a pregnant woman was still expected to work and was often beaten if she did not perform well:

A woman who gives offense in the field, and is large in a family way, is compelled to lie down over a hole made to receive her corpulency, and is flogged with the whip or beat with a paddle, which has holes in it; at every stroke comes a blister. One of my sisters was so severely punished in this way, that labor was brought on, and the child was born in the field. This very overseer, Mr. Brooks, killed in this manner a girl named Mary.²⁴

Grandy's account is substantiated by one of Sterling's informants: "When women was with child they'd dig a hole in the groun' and put their stomach in the hole, and then beat'em. They'd allus whop us."²⁵ In *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to Present*, Jacqueline Jones comments that the uniformity of this process for whipping the pregnant slave suggests that the practice was not uncommon.²⁶ This hole serves as an interesting symbol in that it both names and seeks to efface the difference of female maternity. This concession to the female's corpulency is a sex or biological concession, while the beating signifies the refusal of gender concessions. These anecdotes illustrate that female slaves did not necessarily receive preferential treatment due to either their femininity or their maternity.

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese notes that

the law of slavery had no cause to differentiate between women and men. Its gender blindness, which acknowledged women only as the transmitters of the condition of slavery—and which did not recognize the rape of slave women as a crime—stolidly proclaimed that, in all formal respects, a slave was a slave was a slave.²⁷

According to the ideology of the period, all slaves were merely slaves, not men and women, however, the acknowledgment of females as the transmitters of slavery creates a difference. This difference, though, is not a gender difference, but a sex difference based on the female's ability to give birth. When convenient, sex difference was recognized, but not gender difference. The degendering of slaves is a concept that goes back at least as far as Aristotle's *Politics*, according to Spelman: "Aristotle does not allow for the possibility of slaves who are women, but only for slaves who are female—for he draws a distinction between woman and slave in such a way that 'woman' can only mean free woman, not slave woman."²⁸

Spelman acknowledges the presence of female slaves by differentiating between sex and gender. However, Spillers inadvertently equates the two by using sex terms (female and male) to discuss gender issues. For example, in describing the slaves as cargo, she

states that the slaves are neither male nor female, but quantities. By using the terms “female” and “male,” rather than “woman” and “man,” Spillers suggests that the slaves were not sexed when they were actually seen as degendered, not unsexed. The fact that gender, not sex, is the central issue is apparent when Spillers recounts the “Brookes Plan,” which recommends that five females be counted as four males in terms of the amount of space allotted for them in the cargo hold. She states that some would consider this a gender rule, but she does not because gender is established in the domestic realm and she does not consider the cargo hold a domestic space. Spillers assumes that gendering necessarily takes place within the domestic realm, but this need not be true. The gendering process is a social construction that is affected by one’s particular environment, but not limited specifically to the domestic sphere. I would, however, agree that her example is not a gender rule, but for a different reason. The determination of space is based on sex differences, not gender differences. Captain Perry and James Jones made their recommendations about space allotment based on their assumption that females require less space than males. Spillers’ argument is based on the view that gendering is a process, yet this process need not ignore the anatomical differences of slave bodies. In other words, the gendering process does not necessarily exclude the possibility of a sexed body. It seems that conceding that the slaves were sexed, but not seen as gendered would strengthen Spillers’ argument. After all, slaves were considered livestock and animals are said to be sexed, but not gendered.

Like Spillers, Davis conflates sex and gender. Her argument turns on the fact that slave women were alternately gendered or degendered depending on what suited the owner: “[W]hen 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.”²⁹ I would argue that sex differences account both for slave women being raped and valued for reproduction. It is not that sometimes they had gender and sometimes they did not—in the eyes of the slaveowners, female slaves were always females; they just were not women. According to bell hooks, slaveholders justified working female slaves as hard as males by claiming that

they “were not ‘real’ women but were masculinized sub-human creatures.”³⁰ This may sound like the masculinization of female slaves, as opposed to degendering, but if one looks at their masculinization alongside the feminization of male slaves, the two processes suggest not merely a different gendering, but a degendering of the entire slave population. It is not that slaveholders treated female slaves like men and male slaves like women, rather they treated all slaves as degendered beings. Gender is an aspect of personhood; but since the slaves were not regarded as people, they could not have gender. By not acknowledging the slaves as gendered, slaveholders could more easily think of slaves as chattel, rather than as fellow humans.

Spillers illustrates the degendering of the slaves through the metaphor of “flesh” and “body.” The slave trade “marked a theft of the body—a willful and violent . . . severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire. Under these conditions, we lose at least gender difference in the outcome.”³¹ If one reads “flesh” as “sex” and “body” as “gender,” then the slave trade turned bodies into degendered but still sexed “flesh.” Spillers makes the distinction between “flesh” and “body” the central distinction between the captive slave and the free person. The slave is relegated to mere “flesh,” while the free subject maintains a “body.” The “flesh,” a precursor of the body, represents the presocial. While the raw “flesh” has mass, it is not yet a coherent body, which must also be gendered.

Spillers makes the distinction between “flesh” and “body” vividly come to life as she describes the brutal wounding of slaves. However, the lacerations from the whip are not merely scars, but text. This concept of the scars as text is also seen in Kaja Silverman’s discussion of *Histoire d’O*. In her analysis of this Sadean text, Silverman notes the way in which the female body is structured by its wounding: “That body is charted, zoned and made to bear meaning, a meaning which is always subsequently apprehended both by the female subject and her ‘commentators’ as an internal condition or essence.”³² In other words, the treatment of the female’s exterior leads to the constitution of her interior. Silverman limits her discussion to female bodies because they do not have the same access as men to an active discourse.³³ I would like to extend Silverman’s

discussion of the body to include female and male slave bodies, since both were excluded from active discourse.

Silverman describes the way O's body is formed by the whippings and penetrations. In effect O's body is unmade—she is degendered and then regendered through the wounding of her body. I would argue that the American slave's body was constituted in a similar fashion. Silverman notes that “the whip-lashes which criss-cross her [O's] body construct her as an object to be maltreated.”³⁴ The lash marks on the slave body similarly marked the person as a slave. For example, in Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose*, Dessa is inscribed with whip marks across her hips and branded with an “R” on the thigh. The fact that she is marked as slave in the same area that marks her as woman appears to be a means of depriving Dessa of her femininity.³⁵ Dessa's shame regarding her scar affects her inner being. As illustrated by her encounters with Harker, Dessa feel less desirable and less feminine as a result of her scarring. The lash not only influenced how she saw herself, but also how others saw her, since the lash inscribed slaves in a manner that could later be read by others. Thus Dessa's scars identified her as a slave. It is interesting to note that it was common practice at abolition meetings to have escaped slaves reveal their bare backs so that the audience might read the text of slavery.

Spillers uses the slave mother to illustrate the disjunction between biology and gender, between the flesh of female slaves and the bodies of white gendered females. According to Spillers, the degendering of the female slave affected her relation to motherhood and thus her relation to gender. She argues that mothering within slavery lacks the benefits accrued by patriarchalized femininity. In fact, under this system patriarchalized femininity is the only female gender.³⁶ Patriarchal law has a different meaning within the slave economy because the Father's name designates property, not gender.³⁷ This change in the Father's law is possible because slavery eliminated the African American male's ability to replicate the Father's law as established in dominant society.³⁸ Spillers notes that children followed the condition of the mother, thereby displacing the usual role for the father assumed by psychoanalytic theory.

This displacement of the male slave was just one means of degendering him. As Davis notes, “if Black women were hardly

'women' in the accepted sense, the slave system also discouraged male supremacy in Black men."³⁹ The demands of slavery required that male and female slaves be equally submissive to the will of the master. The slave economy placed the slaves in a peculiar situation in which they were supposed to be like, but not quite like, their masters. Familial bonds and gender relations were disregarded, yet slaves were expected to somewhat replicate the values and traditions of their masters. In *The Peculiar Institution*, Kenneth Stampp observes that slaves were usually encouraged to live as families and to follow white moral values, but "slavery inevitably made much of the white caste's family pattern meaningless and unintelligible—and in some ways impossible—for the average bondsman."⁴⁰ The impossibility of this replication is built into the slave economy. How are slaves to create families in an environment in which their children do not belong to them and are seen merely as an increase to the master's wealth?

Mothering in the slave community is disrupted so that the child does not belong to the mother, but is owned by the slave master who may or may not be related to it. This is part of the larger kinlessness of slavery, in which family members were often separated without regard to familial ties. Spillers asserts that kinlessness is mandated by slavery because kinship would undermine property relations by allowing children to belong to their mother and father, rather than their owner.⁴¹ In other words, kinship would allow the father's name to establish gender rather than property. Thus kinship must be disrupted to maintain property values. The offspring would lack value if they could belong to slaves rather than their master. Spillers, in fact, separates the concept of "mothering" from birthing. Birth within an enslaved community may not be read as the reproduction of mothering because the female slave is denied parental rights. Thus Spillers argues that birthing is not necessarily mothering, nor is birthing somehow connected to femininity. Davis also distinguishes between motherhood and birthing: "Ideological exaltation of motherhood—as popular as it was during the nineteenth century—did not extend to slaves. In fact, in the eyes of slaveholders, slave women were not mothers at all. . . . They were 'breeders'—animals."⁴² Female slaves were not recognized as women and mothers; they were merely sexed property. Davis and Spillers

appear to challenge feminists such as Chodorow who essentialize the mothering process.

Female slaves were quite aware of their status as property and the way in which this status affected their ability to mother. This is profoundly depicted in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Sethe attempts to kill her children rather than see them taken back into slavery. Cornell notes that in Morrison's retelling of the Medea myth, "the 'meaning,' the deep significance of killing one's children, is problematized, by the slave 'reality' in which the mother is allowed to bear the children but not to 'raise' them."⁴³ *Beloved* depicts the female slave's very different relation to motherhood. Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins has stated that: "Racial domination and economic exploitation profoundly shape the mothering context."⁴⁴ This fact is particularly evident within the slave economy as "even one's own body is not one's property, the white masters can rob Sethe of everything, including her mother's milk. Her maternal labor is supposed to be theirs, not hers or her children's. . . ."⁴⁵ In fact, by trying to kill her children, Sethe is asserting her right to her children. In the face of her impotence as a mother, Sethe believes killing her children is the only way that she can protect them. While one might argue that fiction cannot serve as evidence of the female slave's perspective, Morrison's novel is based on the actual event of Margaret Garner's act of infanticide. On January 26, 1856, after a failed escape attempt, Garner slit the throat of her three-year-old girl and wounded her other three children to prevent their master from remanding them to slavery.⁴⁶ Morrison's depiction of Sethe's sentiments are also substantiated by Jacobs' slave narrative. The desire to protect one's child from slavery is seen in Linda Brent's narration of her repeated desire to free her children: "I knew the doom that awaited my fair baby in slavery, and I determined to save her from it, or perish in the attempt" (416). Although Linda does not kill her children, she often wishes for their death that they might be spared the horrors of slavery. Thus female as well as male slaves had no parental rights; they were breeders, not parents.

The distinction between parenting and breeding is clearly a valid one. Spillers has already argued that female slaves did not have gender, and thus could not possibly be mothers. The only mothers, according to Spillers, are the white plantation mistresses, who are

also the only females with gender. This highlights the difference between sex and gender. As sexed females, slaves may give birth, but only gendered women may mother. Female slaves did not have the option to mother because they were not gendered in the eyes of the slaveholding class. That the female slaves were sexed, however, is evidenced by the fact that female slaves were valued at least in part for their breeding capacity.⁴⁷

Although slaveholders resented the accusation of slave breeding, Frederick Law Olmsted reported, “a slave woman is commonly esteemed least for her laboring qualities, most for those qualities which give value to a broodmare.”⁴⁸ The value placed on slaves’ breeding capacity was in direct proportion to the value of potential offspring: “Every child born to a slave woman became the master’s property, and usually the child’s ultimate capital value far exceeded the cost of raising him.”⁴⁹ As breeders, female slaves added to their owner’s property because their children followed the condition of the mother. Spillers, however, opens up this legacy by asking whether this refers merely to enslavement or if the mother might not mark the child in some other way.⁵⁰

With this question, Spillers is suggesting that slave mothers pass on more than the condition of slavery—they also continue a maternal line of descent that is in opposition to the American tradition of patrilineage. What makes this situation threatening is that it does not follow the patriarchal norm. According to Abel, Spillers imagines a maternal line of descent that despite the denial of parental rights is not completely destroyed.⁵¹ Although female slaves were breeders, not mothers, they passed on part of themselves; they determined identity by determining the child’s “condition.” This determination of the child’s condition fosters a relationship between African-American males and their mothers that is not replicated in white families, according to Spillers.⁵² This maternal contact not only survives the conditions of slavery, but also is in fact a result of enslavement.

This maternal contact becomes a source of strength for Spillers. The female slave’s position in slavery created a great difference between her and other females in that her motherhood was at once denied and allowed to create a female line of descent. Spillers argues that this paradoxical position creates a different relation to

gender for African-American females, which can be radically empowering. Spillers suggests that since black females have been termed matriarchs, they should actually become matriarchs by reclaiming a maternal genealogy. Abel notes that this would open up the possibility of a new social subject, one determined by neither the phallus/castration dichotomy of Lacanian feminism nor the domestic conventions believed to produce Anglo-American femininity.⁵³ According to Spillers, African-American women have been gendered differently because of a history of slavery and degendering, but they should not become like Anglo-American women; rather, they should embrace their different gender as a strength. Elsewhere, Spillers comments on the power of these types of feminist revisions to “at once define a new position of attack and lay claim to a site of ancestral imperative.”⁵⁴

Although Spillers makes an excellent case regarding the degendering of slaves, she does not emphasize that such degendering is from the viewpoint of the slaveowners. The slaves probably considered themselves gendered. For example, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* illustrates the disjunction between the female slave's interpretation of her womanhood and the slaveowner's. Throughout the text, Linda appeals to the white woman reader and the feminine values and sense of motherhood that she shares with them. Linda observes that the slave mother “may be an ignorant creature, degraded by the system that has brutalized her from childhood; but she has a mother's instincts, and is capable of feeling a mother's agonies” (350). These are not the words of a female who sees herself and other slaves as mere degendered breeders. Jacobs purposely makes use of elements of sentimental fiction, which is regarded as a feminine genre, and identifies a female audience as part of her attempt to engender herself in their eyes. She realizes that she does not fit within their construct of femininity, yet she seeks to include herself within the feminine realm. This suggests that Jacobs realized she was not seen as a woman, but did see herself as one. Jacobs and other slaves surely experienced great confusion when they were removed from their homeland and reconfigured as mere “flesh,” as opposed to gendered bodies.

In order to better appreciate the confusion experienced by slaves entering the United States, it is necessary to look at their homelands.

American slaves were brought from various areas of Africa, but scholars such as Sterling Stuckey, Philip Curtin, and James H. Rawley agree that the majority of the slaves came from the central and western regions of Africa: Congo-Angola, Nigeria, Dahomey, Togo, the Gold Coast, and Sierra Leone.⁵⁵ With such divergent backgrounds, it is difficult to reconstruct a common heritage, but some similarities can be found. For example, Kamene Okonjo notes that several West African traditional societies had “dual-sex” political systems in which “each sex manages its own affairs, and women’s interests are represented at all levels.”⁵⁶ According to Okonjo, “the dual nature of the system aimed at harmonious and effective division of labor by which both sexes would receive adequate attention to their needs.”⁵⁷ Thus a division of labor based on sex difference does not necessarily lead to a hierarchical arrangement with one gender becoming the dominant one.

The division of labor was also practiced in antebellum America, but with different connotations—white plantation women were confined to the private sphere, while white men dominated the public arena. However in West Africa, according to Niara Sudarkasa, “‘the public domain’ was not conceptualized as *the world of men*,” as both sexes played important roles in the public domain.⁵⁸ Sudarkasa also stipulates that she is unaware of an indigenous African society in which men and women’s labor was valued or rewarded differently.⁵⁹ This point is substantiated by Annie Lebeuf, who states that although separate tasks are assigned to men and women, the separation stresses the complementary nature of the tasks, nor does the division imply superiority of one over the other.⁶⁰ Gender relations have changed in Africa since colonization, but the observations made by these historians illustrate the experience of many Africans prior to their enslavement.

The fact that the division of labor in several West African societies was not hierarchical in nature may be attributed to a general de-emphasis of gender. Sudarkasa points to the existence of woman to woman marriage in Africa as an example of an emphasis on seniority and social standing, rather than an emphasis on gender.⁶¹ Sudarkasa notes that the absence of gender in the pronouns of many African languages and the interchangeability of first names among men and women may be related to this de-emphasis of

gender. She observes that many cultural traditions such as dress and adornment, religious ceremonies, and intragender socialization patterns suggest that Africans privilege seniority and other signs of status while de-emphasizing gender.⁶² She also argues that the presence of woman to woman marriage “signifies most of all that gender is not the sole basis for recruitment to the ‘husband’ role in Africa; hence, the authority that attaches to that role is not gender-specific.”⁶³ If one complicates Sudarkasa’s argument by distinguishing between sex and gender, one might argue that woman to woman marriage merely implies the insignificance of sex, not gender. A husband may be male or female, but still retains certain gendered qualities; however, Sudarkasa’s emphasis on seniority and status suggests that these issues take the place of gender in these societies. Thus the husband role is not based on gender, but status, which is equally available to males and females. The work of Okonjo and Sudarkasa suggests that West African societies did have specific sex roles—different things were expected of males and females—but these sex roles did not carry the same connotations as they did in antebellum America.

It is clear from the research of these scholars that gender was manifested differently in Africa; however, the significance of this difference continues to be debated. While the work of Sudarkasa, Okonjo, and Lebeuf suggests that there was perhaps a more egalitarian relationship between the sexes because they were both involved in the public domain, other scholars argue that this difference does not translate to egalitarian relations. In her discussion of dual sex systems, Christie Farnham argues that separate is not equal; the systems were complementary, not parallel. She states, “That this work was organized and regulated by the women themselves does not erase the subordinate character of the enterprise.”⁶⁴ Farnham’s study of slave families traces family structures within African societies and despite the variations, she asserts that traditional African women were often able to be self-reliant due to separate property and income, decision-making power, as well as the power of women’s organizations and allies in natal villages. However, she warns against confusing self-reliance with equality.⁶⁵ Although Farnham’s warning has merit, her view seems clouded by her investment in proving that female slaves were not matriarchs.

She asserts that the female slave's work in the home and the field or the private and public spheres should not be seen as equality. Farnham describes their agricultural labor as "double duty, not power parity" because the public sphere did not provide access to wealth or power.⁶⁶ I am in agreement with her assessment of the over worked female slave and the inaccuracy of labeling them matriarchs, however, I believe she goes too far in her dismissal of the authority of African women prior to their removal to America.

Scholars continue to debate the degree of this authority, but it is clear that gender relations were different in precolonial Africa. Claire Robertson argues against any matriarchal society equivalent to a patriarchal society, but she does allow for the validity of matrifocal African societies. Matrifocality describes a society in which females "*in their role as mothers* are the focus of familial relationships." This, however, does not mean that fathers are absent, but that mothers are the focus. In matrifocal societies, the mother-child bond is the most important relationship.⁶⁷ However, Robertson insists that while many precolonial West African societies were partially matrifocal in that women actively provided for the family's maintenance, men normally made decisions. But in spite of this concession to men's tendency to make decisions, Robertson also alleges that there are African societies in which women had and have more autonomy and political power than European women have ever had and thus it is possible to suggest that African cultural forms may have encouraged more authoritative roles for women but this did not translate to African-American matriarchs.⁶⁸ The controversy about African-American matriarchs will be discussed at greater length later in this chapter, but I would like to draw attention to the way in which this debate colors the study of gender in precolonial Africa. This is a murky area in which consensus may never be reached and the pendulum swings between romanticizing African women's power and the imposition of Western gender traditions upon African societies. My intention is to place myself somewhere in between these polarities. My research suggests that African societies maintained different gender relations that allowed African women more access to power. Perhaps they were still dominated in some respects by men; however, when African women were brought to America and exercised traditional

African gender relations, their actions carried a different meaning on American soil.

Upon their arrival in North America, an attempt was made to strip slaves of their cultural traditions and sex roles. As mentioned earlier, female slaves often worked alongside males. In "African Women in the Atlantic Slave Trade," Herbert S. Klein notes that several studies confirm that planters showed little to no sexual preferences in regards to labor use: "Women in most American plantations were, in fact, overrepresented in all the brute force fieldhand labor occupations, and in mature plantation areas they tended to be the majority of actual fieldgang plantation workers."⁶⁹ Although fieldwork may have fit with African traditions, Fox-Genovese notes that it departed from Euro-American views of women's gender roles.⁷⁰ Historian, Jacqueline Jones, observes that although frontier women probably cleared, plowed, and harvested land, white upper- and middle-class women confined themselves to the house. White female indentured servants might be sent to work the fields on occasion, but this was not their ordinary duty. Regardless of class, white women were not regular field workers.⁷¹ According to the dominant culture's perspective, female slaves often performed men's work.⁷² The demands of slavery influenced the slaveowners' decision to relax their strict view of gender roles. Thus, unlike white women, female slaves were not limited by gender roles because it was more economical to disregard gender difference and work female slaves as hard as the males.

Davis suggests that American industrialization led to a division between the home and the public economy and thereby more firmly established female inferiority; however, the "economical arrangements of slavery contradicted the hierarchical sexual roles incorporated in the new ideology."⁷³ This contradiction was then accounted for through the myth that female slaves were not really women, but "masculinized sub-human creatures."⁷⁴ This myth, however, only accounts for part of the situation. By masculinizing the female slaves, slaveowners account for their ability to cope with what were considered to be male roles, but this did not account for the female slave's ability to perform "feminine" tasks, such as cooking, house-keeping, and child rearing. The ability to perform these tasks allowed female slaves to live up to the expectation that women be

domestic. However, slavery would not have survived if female slaves were seen as women, not chattel. Therefore, female slaves were excluded from womanhood based on their lack of "purity." Female slaves were described as promiscuous, whether their masters forced them into the role of concubine or they freely chose to enter into premarital sexual relations.

The supposed promiscuity of female slaves went against the societal definition of true womanhood, which was based on a woman's chastity. According to Judith Van Allen, "The ideal of Victorian womanhood . . . was of a sensitive, morally superior being who was the hearthside guardian of Christian virtues and sentiments absent in the outside world."⁷⁶ However, this ideal of womanhood was not available to female slaves, who were constantly reminded that they were not true women. True womanhood, as defined by Barbara Welter, consisted of the four cardinal virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. The loss of purity was associated with madness or death, since "purity was as essential as piety to a young woman, its absence as unnatural and unfeminine."⁷⁶ Obviously a womanhood based on purity or chastity would not be available to the vast majority of female slaves, who were frequently raped and otherwise immodestly treated. In *Sex and Racism in America*, Calvin Hernton argues that:

When any group of women has to submit to such atrocities, when they are denied the smallest privacy of body, when they have to stand in public before men and women naked on an auction block and be fingered in the most intimate places, it is absurd to ask them to esteem themselves as restrained ladies and conduct their sexual activities along the lines of female refinement.⁷⁷

Thus, the institution of slavery necessarily eradicated the possibility of female slaves fitting the definition of true womanhood.

The portrayal of female slaves as promiscuous may be attributed to two different developments. The stereotype of promiscuous slaves helped to substantiate slavery because it could be argued that the slaves were heathen, who should be enslaved. The promiscuity may also be accounted for based on cultural differences. Denise Paulme