

Black Women, Mothering, and Protest in 19th Century American Society

by

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Abstract

Nineteenth century American society provides a clear example of the way in which oppression, bondage, and capitalism interacted to redefine, shape, and determine the lives of black Americans. There have been numerous accounts defining the context of slavery for blacks and how black women operated in slave society (Frazier; Gutman; White; and Jones). These accounts often represent motherhood as one of many roles for slave women, not as the defining content for the lives of these women. Motherhood, however, represented a unique position for black women, as these women were also laborers, breeders, and concubines in 19th century American society. Black women's response to these multiple and often conflicting roles was to create a new meaning of black womanhood, one which placed motherhood at the center of black women's existence. Using black women's autobiographies, speeches, and other writings published in and around the 19th century, this article attempts to highlight the complex nature of black motherhood in nineteenth century American society. Hence, this paper is organized around the themes of black women's roles in 19th century American society; black women's response to motherhood; the importance of motherhood for black family life; and finds that black women's motherhood challenged hegemonic constructions of race, gender, and class in 19th century American society.

Antebellum Society and the Construction of Black Motherhood

By definition, motherhood suggests a unique relationship between the mother and child, one which is seen as the basic requirement for child development. Mothers nurse their children, provide love, affection, and guidance, and shape primary development. In 19th century American society, motherhood was seen as a necessary act of procreation that ensured the lineage of a particular family. Motherhood for white women was viewed as the moral role for women. The era between 1820 and 1860, the “cult of true womanhood,” was the era in which womanhood was represented as pious, pure, submissive, and domestic (Welter). Women were encouraged to embrace these traits and take their rightful place in the home.

This new way of thinking about women’s roles represented a change in American society from a family-based social system to a market-based social system that ultimately undermined the rights and position of white women in society (Farrell). Before industrialization, women were a vital part of the family economy and their labor inside and outside of the home was respected. After industrialization, women’s labor in the household was defined as inferior to wage labor and women’s position in society was thus diminished (Farrell). The cult of domesticity represented societal attitudes concerning women’s roles and their proper place in society. Motherhood and caring for the home was seen as the rightful place of a true woman. Motherhood for white women was viewed in this context, with black women giving birth to property and white women producing heirs and leaders.

The representation of true womanhood as defined by the cult of domesticity excluded black women and placed them in a peculiar position as slaves, not “true” women. In an antebellum novel, this position was thus described: “The idea of modesty and virtue in a Louisiana colored girl might well be ridiculed; as a general thing she has neither” (Carby 26). This idea that black women were not “true” women further established the societal inferiority of black women, placing them in a unique relationship with the slave economy. Womanhood and the experience of motherhood for black women were completely connected to the social system and could not be perceived in the same way as motherhood for white women. In fact, Hazel Carby argues that “two very different but interdependent codes of sexuality operated in the antebellum South, producing opposite definitions of motherhood and womanhood for white and black women which coalesce in the figures of the slave and the mistress” (20). Unlike white women, who could identify motherhood with privilege and social status, motherhood for slave women was connected and rooted in a social system of bondage.

The forced motherhood experienced by black women defined their existence and influenced their survival. One woman interviewed in the Federal Writer's Project comments on this phenomenon: "You know, there was an overseer who used to tie mother up in the barn with a rope around her arms up over her head, while she stood on a block. Soon as they got her tied, this block was moved and her feet dangled, you know, couldn't touch the floor. This old man, now, would start beating her naked until the blood ran down her back to her heels...I asked mother what she done for them to beat and do her so. She said, 'Nothing other than refuse to be wife to this man'"(Hine and Thompson 79).

Slavery as a system of social stratification in American society defined the social relations of American society. The social hierarchy of American society created a system of apartheid that placed white men at the top and slaves and minorities at the bottom of the social system. In American society, African slaves were at the very bottom and were considered property without legal rights. This caste system of racial inequality, which relegated Africans to inferior positions, was implemented and reinforced by institutional discrimination and became a central way of life in the antebellum South. In order to really understand the context of motherhood for black women, it is important to understand the roles and expectations of slave women.

The roles of African men and women slaves centered on the slave economy and the labor of black women was not separated from black men. Another slave interviewed for the Federal Writer's Project elaborates: "Master had four overseers on the place, and they drove us from sun up 'till sunset. Some of the women plowed barefooted most of the time, and had to carry that row and keep up with men, and then do their cooking at night"(Hine and Thompson 78). One scholar notes: "It is estimated that in the Cotton Belt slave women spent approximately thirteen hours a day in the fieldwork, engaged in such diverse and traditionally masculine tasks as plowing fields, dropping seeds, hoeing, picking, ginning, sorting and molting cotton"(Hine and Thompson 283). The labor of black women was a crucial part of the slave economy and is critical in understanding the multiple roles of black women. One woman interviewed in the Federal Writer's Project said of her work: "These same old eyes seen powerful lots of tribulations in my time, and when I shut them now I can see lots of children, just like my grandchildren, toting hoes bigger than they is, and they poor little black hands and legs bleeding where they scratched by the brambly weeds, and where they got whippings 'cause they didn't get all the work the overseer set out for them. I was one of them slave girls my own self, and I never seen nothing but work and tribulation till I was a grown woman, just about...It was the fourth day of June 1865 I begins to live"(Hine and Thompson 66). Again, the labor of black women encompassed multiple and complicated roles.

These multiple roles and expectations of black women—mothers, field hands, breeders, nannies, servants, wives and concubines— help us to understand the complexity of their lives. The nature of slavery demanded that women fully participate in work, including farming, cleaning, cooking, and all of the other domestic tasks, and reproduction was a necessary part of life for a slave woman. Motherhood was connected to the success of the institution of slavery, and this created a very unique and dynamic relationship between black women and their children. On one hand, black women nurtured their children and operated in the roles of wife and mother. At the same time, they were faced with the reality that their children could be sold or violated. Black women were not in a position to physically protect their children from slavery.

Black women were important not only for their labor, but for their reproductive ability, a vital part of the slave economy; they were solely responsible for supplying the slave work force and, in many ways, these women were the most vulnerable and valuable group. Black women were a commodity as breeders, laborers, and concubines, but their motherhood was not separated from their slave status. One narrative from the Federal Writers Project describes of how a North Carolina slave woman, the mother of fifteen children, used to carry her youngest with her to the field each day and “when it get hungry, she just slip it around in front and feed it and go right on picking or hoeing...,”symbolizing in one deft motion the equal significance of the productive and reproductive functions to her owner (Jones 198). Motherhood for black women was bittersweet; the joy of motherhood combined with the reality of breeding property for the slave society.

Motherhood for enslaved women thus translated into an all-inclusive role that incorporated the roles of black men and white women in antebellum society. “True” black women were nonexistent, as they were expected to complete the same tasks as men, operate in a continual state of reproduction, replenish the slave economy, and operate as wet nurses and domestic servants for white women. Motherhood for black women was truly extraordinary; it embodied an identity which suggested in many ways that black women “specialize in the wholly impossible” (Amott and Matthaiei). Gender for black women was only important in the context of motherhood and this created a separate and unique identity for black women.

Motherhood and Survival

Motherhood for black women was survival. Black women had children, set up households, nursed and cared for their children, and formed communities. As mothers, black women loved their children and cared for them in spite of the multiple tasks they performed. The bond between mother and child was strong, and slave women often took extreme measures to care for their children. A slave confirms this: "I remember well my mother often hid us all in the woods, to prevent master selling us. When we wanted water, she sought for it in any hole or puddle, formed by falling trees or otherwise.

After a time, the master would send word to her to come in, promising he would not sell us. But at length, persons came, who agreed to give the prices he set on us...My mother, frantic with grief, resisted taking her child away; she was beaten and held down. She fainted, and when she came to herself, her boy was gone. She made much outcry, for which the master tied her up to a peach tree in the yard, and flogged her" (Finkelman 237). Slave women were very protective of their children despite the harsh reality of slavery.

Black women were often forced to become mothers and wives, and this represented a key aspect of their survival. Hilliard Yellerday, an ex-slave, commented on this point: "When a girl became a woman, she was required to go to a man and become a mother. There was generally a form of marriage. The master read a paper to them telling them they were man and wife...Master would sometimes go and get a large, hale, hearty Negro man from some other plantation to go to his Negro woman. He would ask the master to let this man come over to his place to go to his slave girls. A slave girl was expected to have children as soon as she became a woman. Some of them had children at the age of twelve and thirteen-years-old. Negro men six feet tall went to some of these children" (Hine and Thompson 80).

Motherhood and Protest

Black women often responded to slavery by engaging in various forms of protest: participating in revolts, committing arson, running away, poisoning owners, and refusing to accept sexual exploitation, abortion and infanticide.(Hine and Thompson,1998). The following excerpts are from 19th century newspapers that described various methods of protest exercised by black women.

" \$30 REWARD, Ran away from subscriber, on Difficult Run, near Geo W. Hunter's Mill, Fairfax County Va., on Sunday, a Negro woman, having with her a CHILD SIX MONTHS OF AGE, NEARLY WHITE (*Provincial Freedom*1856).

SUICIDE BY DROWNING AND SLAVE TRADING- A negro woman belonging to Dmpsey Weaver, Esq., jumped into the river, night before last, with a child in each arm, and all three were drowned. Owing to her misconduct, her master threatened to sell her, and she determined not to be sold. It is said that her husband had promised to end his existence in the same way at the same time, but he did not do so (*Frederick Douglass' Paper* 1853).

Horrible Poisoning Affair

Augusta, Sept. 19—On Sunday last, in Pike County, Alabama, thirty-seven were poisoned six of whom are dead by a negro cook, who mixed arsenic with the food of the family. She was instigated to do this horrid act by Comista, a Hungarian.....The negro woman was burnt; and Comista will meet the same fate on Monday next (*The National Era* 1857).

These newspaper excerpts provide a snapshot of the ways black women attempted to rebel against a system that intimidated them. Resistance took many forms, ranging from covert to overt acts, the latter of which included learning to read and teaching their offspring to have dignity and pride. Black women displayed an amazing amount of courage when they initiated resistance to slave society. Even infanticide, which represented one of the most extreme forms of resistance, is a prime example of black women's unwillingness to participate in increasing the slave work force. Abortion, a more widely documented tactic, was also employed by black women as a protest tactic. Herbert Gutman offers evidence suggesting that abortion was a practice used by black women: "He discusses a time in a planter and between four to six women 'of breeding age' for twenty-five years and only two children had been born on the place to full term. It was later discovered that the slaves had concocted a medicine with which they were able to terminate their unwanted pregnancies and the older female slaves had been instrumental in all the abortion on this place."

By all accounts, these acts of protest represent another aspect of motherhood that cannot be ignored: black women loved their children, which helps to explain why abortion or infanticide was even considered in the context of motherhood. The extreme system of exploitation shaped how black women experienced motherhood. While black women were courageous in resisting slavery, these acts could not supplant the impact of being born into bondage and forced to reproduce and supply the slave workforce. Nevertheless, black women also chose to resist oppression by teaching their children values and promoting education in the hope that one day, their children would live in a slave-free society.

Motherhood and Black Family Life

The nature of motherhood for black women is pertinent to understanding black family life. There is a lot of debate concerning black family life during the era of slavery. Some assert that children largely grew up in mother-only households, while others suggest the importance of fathers in the lives of their children.

However, there is a sufficient amount of evidence to suggest that black men were more likely to be sold and the stability of black families was connected to the life cycles of their owners (Hine, King, and Reed). Motherhood was the most consistent part of the life of a slave child, though it may have been temporary, and the values, lessons, and tradition passed on by mothers shaped black family life. Since the condition of black people's lives in America did not allow them to be passive or submissive, black women "had to develop strength rather than glory and fragility, and had to be active and assertive rather than passive and submissive"(Landry 89).

Again, slaves often challenged the white notion of womanhood, which rested on purity and developed a "broader definition of womanhood which incorporated resourcefulness and independence"(Landry 58). While all black women did not run away, many initiated the precedence for the role of black women as active agents in their own emancipation in terms of both race and gender. The pre-Civil War role of black women as commodities within American society and as wives and mothers within families, which created plural and often contradictory roles, produced black women who were willing to challenge the dominant definition of black womanhood. This often covert yet culturally cohesive action helped to create a more meaningful reality for African Americans women's experiences, and a more expansive definition of what it meant to be a black woman, with the context of motherhood defining this reality.

Black women struggled for freedom in a society that viewed women as slaves. In surviving, many endured slavery, learned the cultural ethos, and recognized the value in changing their lives in preparation for better futures. This article considered black women's response to their multiple and often conflicting roles and suggested their response was to create a new meaning for black womanhood, one which made motherhood the center of black women's lives. Thus, black women negotiated motherhood in early 19th century society by surviving, by caring for their children, and by engaging in various forms of protest. Black women challenged common views as they transitioned through their life stages of 1) survival, 2) protest, 3) revolution, and 4) freedom, and created a new definition of black womanhood. This new definition allowed black women to reject the system of American domination, the idea of the inferiority of African Americans, and the traditional idea of womanhood; retain a sense of self-worth; and exercise self-efficacy.

This new notion of black womanhood led to oppositional consciousness formation and eventually fostered social change. The 19th century was a crucial time for African Americans because it marked a change in the social order, and black women played a critical role in bringing about this change.

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