

Gender and Slavery mini lecture transcript

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Time: approx. 7 minutes

Content notes: Racism, sexism, violence, human trafficking, sexual assault / violence, rape

Introduction

Enslaved people across the nineteenth century South lived a life of hard labour, violence, and daily exploitation. Enslavers forced men, women, and children to carry out back-breaking labour in the sweltering heat, from sun-up to sun-down. They planted and harvested, looked after animals, constructed buildings, laboured as blacksmiths and carpenters. But what was life like for enslaved *women* in particular, and how did their gender dictate their experience? My name is Dr Aisha Djelid from the University of Reading, and in this lecture we're going to explore enslaved women's experiences of slavery by looking at the types of work their enslavers forced them to do, and how they attempted to resist this, and then finally look at the life of Harriet Jacobs as a case study for enslaved women in the South. For a note on language throughout this lecture, I will be using the term "enslaved" rather than "slave", and "enslaver" rather than owner or master. This is because these terms imply that their enslavement was something that happened *to* them, and that another human being was behind this. It's important for us not to use dehumanising and objectifying language as it perpetuates the very same racist language that enslavers used in the nineteenth century.

Work

Although most enslaved women laboured side-by-side with men in the hot fields, harvesting and cultivating crops such as cotton, tobacco, and rice, their enslavers also relegated them to traditional gender-separated domestic tasks. This included cooking, cleaning, sewing, wet-nursing, washing, midwifery, and nursing. They laboured all day for their enslavers before having to do it all again for their own families. This domestic labour usually happened in the plantation house, otherwise known as the 'Big House.' Being in the Big House not only separated them socially from the rest of their community, but it also meant that they were in close proximity to the slaveholding family, and therefore under their constant watchful eye. This meant easy access for slaveholding men to sexually abuse the enslaved women and girls that laboured there. As the formerly enslaved woman Harriet Jacobs wrote in her 1861 autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: "slavery is terrible for men; but it is far

more terrible for women.” Here, Jacobs is alluding to the climate of sexual violence and what activist Angela Davis refers to as the “terror” that enslavers perpetuated in the south.

Resistance

Although enslaved women were perfectly capable of and did resist in the same way as men, such as by breaking tools, feigning illness, working slowly, using violence by fighting back against overseers or enslavers, or using their position as cooks to slip poison into food, they also resisted in ways particular to their gender. As women experienced sexual assault from their enslavers, they also made attempts to *resist* this sexual assault in various ways, some more effective than others. As many of these women became pregnant from their enslavers’ rape, some resisted by choosing to be childless. As historian Liese Perrin has shown, women often resisted by using natural contraceptives such as chewing the cotton root, prolonged breastfeeding, or went further and performed abortions by ingesting toxic substances.

But it’s important not to generalise, as on the flip side many women found comfort in their children, and historian Andrea Livesey found that mothers still loved their children, even those conceived in violence and rape. In fact, many women found comfort and a sense of freedom by building families and community networks with other enslaved people. They also found other ways to take control of their bodies and use them for pleasure, rather than violence, exploitation, and work. Sometimes, they snuck off to attend illicit off-plantation parties, dressed themselves in colourful materials and styled their hair to their liking. At these parties, they could socialise with others, show off their dance skills, drink alcohol, and perhaps try their hand at courting. Formerly enslaved people spoke frequently about how they defended these spaces from patrollers, usually white men employed to capture anyone they found away from their enslavers with the aid of bloodhounds. Enslaved people set up trip wires to alert them of anyone snooping around their parties, and when compromised, threw handfuls of pepper in the patrollers faces as a painful distraction to make their escape back to their quarters. For example, James Morgan told an interviewer in the 1930s that if patrollers found his father somewhere he shouldn’t be, like on another plantation’s quarters, he would “be getting up a shovelful of ashes. When the door would be opened and they would be rushing in, he would scatter the ashes in their faces and rush out. If he could’nt find any ashes, he would always have a handful of pepper with him, and he would throw that in their faces and beat it. He would fool dogs that way too.”¹

¹ Arkansas Part 5, p.143.

Enslaved people often absented themselves from the hard labour of their plantations or farms. Sometimes this was just a temporary measure acting as reprieve, or sometimes if they'd resisted in another way they would escape to the woods or swamps for a few days to avoid their enslavers retaliation. Others, however, did escape more permanently.

Harriet Jacobs

Harriet Jacobs, mentioned earlier, was one such enslaved woman to escape permanently. Jacobs was enslaved in North Carolina by a man named James Norcom and his wife, Mary Horniblow. Jacobs wrote in her narrative of her experience with her sexually abusive enslaver: “But I now entered on my fifteenth year—a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl. My master began to whisper foul words in my ear. Young as I was, I could not remain ignorant of their import. I tried to treat them with indifference or contempt.” But Norcom found every opportunity to sexually harass Jacobs, and she described his moods as wavering between stormy and terrific, to assuming a gentleness that he “thought must surely subdue.” Jacobs tried appealing to his wife, Mary, but she flew into a jealous rage, and blamed Jacobs for her husband’s actions. After Jacobs had two children with a white lawyer named Samuel Sawyer, Norcom decided to put Jacob’s children to work in an attempt to control her. And so, she decided to run away, hiding in a crawl space in her free grandmother’s attic in the hopes that her children would be sold to their father. There she remained in the cramped space for seven years before eventually making her escape to Philadelphia. Jacobs went on to be a supporter of women’s suffrage, attending Seneca Falls in New York in 1848, the first ever convention on women’s rights, and ended up publishing her anti-slavery narrative in 1861, detailing her life under slavery and contributing to the abolitionist movement.

Conclusion

Today we’ve considered a couple of ways that enslaved women resisted their enslavement, and although it’s important that we don’t romanticise this resistance – they were risking life and limb to do this, and often suffered cruel punishments – it is also important that we don’t reduce enslaved people to passive victims of their enslavement. Every day, enslaved women carried out small and large actions that effected their ability to survive the institution of slavery in small and big ways. Whether that was stealing themselves away at night to attend parties or prayer meetings away from the watchful eyes of their enslaver, whether it was breaking tools, slowing up work, pretending to be sick or pregnant, enslaved people attempted to take control

of their lives and carve out small areas of freedom within this violent institution where they could.

Activity

Now that we've gone through the ways in which enslaved women resisted, jot down on a piece of paper some ways you think enslaved women might have resisted, and then organise them along a spectrum of most violent to least violent. How effective do you think these were against slavery? How easy or difficult do you think it was to resist, and why?