Staying Alive: Black Women's Resistance During Slavery

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Introduction

The history of slave resistance in the United States is a complicated topic of study, mostly because the definition of resistance is subjective. What one person views as an act of resistance may differ from another person's view. Since most slaves were not literate during the early stages of slavery scholarship, historians used documents from plantation owners; these documents were heavily biased and lacked the voices of those in bondage, making it difficult to understand a holistic perspective of slavery. With the publication of the Negro *Journal of Negro History*, we begin to hear from both sides and most importantly from the victims'. Stephanie Camp, an American feminist historian, wrote about black women's resistance in *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*. Camp expanded our understanding of how female slaves resisted their captivity in the 1800s. The existence of slave resistance scholarship helped shift American scholarship on slavery from nostalgia and benevolence – the "Sambo thesis" – to the "accommodation versus resistance debate."[1] Slaves rebelled with theft, foot dragging, short-term flight and feigning illness. Uprisings were the most dramatic and violent way that slaves resisted enslavement. However, there were more insidious ways in which slaves rebelled on plantations. Slaves stole from owners, they damaged machinery, and worked slowly, which affected property and profit. Stephanie Camp argues that the paternalist model does give us a good theory of plantation management, but it does not offer a complete perspective on plantation and black life. Women rarely participated directly in rebellion and made up a small percentage of those who ran away to the North, which is the most studied forms of resistance. Historians need study to enslaved women's resistance in a creative way. Resistance is mainly seen as a "public phenomenon (visible, organized, and workplace oriented)", suggesting that resistance was not significant in private places, and this limits our understanding of women's lives in the past. For women in bondage, the body and home were sites of domination and resistance, because of hard labor in the fields and sexual exploitation in the home: "the body and home were key sites of suffering, but also a resource in women's survival"[2]. Resistance is difficult to define, especially in unusual circumstances such as slavery; however, it is the key to survival. This paper aims to use Camp's thesis as a framework to continue exploring women's resistance. I will be exploring the ways in which women resisted

[1] Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South (University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 5.
[2] Ibid 4.

bondage though the creative and cultural mediums of sex, dance, and poetry. The first part of the paper will be a historiography of literature regarding slavery and the unique experiences of black women in bondage. The second part of the paper will analyze the difference forms of resistance, using a combination of primary and secondary sources.

Historiography

Ulrich B. Phillips, the first major historian of Southern slavery, attracted attention and controversy. *American Negro Slavery*, published in 1918, was the first major systematic analysis of slavery in the South. He made observations regarding the workings of plantation and the overseers however he focused primarily on the masters. Philips claimed that "enslaved African Americans had been content with their place under the institution (Stevenson 698).[3]" He described that normal Southern slave as having an "eagerness for society, music and merriment, a fondness for display whether of person, dress, vocabulary or emotion, a not flagrant sensuality, a receptiveness toward any religion whose exercises were exhilarating, a proneness to superstition, a courteous acceptance of subordination, an avidity for praise, a readiness for loyalty of a feudal sort, and last but not least, a healthy human repugnance toward overwork" (Phillips 287).[4] Phillip's work was critiqued on the basis of its exclusive use of slave owners' documents, as well as for his sympathetic portrayal of plantation owners.

Sidney Drewry, a white Southern historian, published *The Southampton Insurrection*, which retells the events of the Nat Turner slave rebellion that occurred in Southampton County, Virginia, during August of 1831. Turner, the leader of the rebellion, marched alongside about 70 rebels to different plantations and killed an estimated 55-60 white Southerners, while freeing the slaves they encountered. Drewry depicted the rebels as fools who were tricked by "a wild, fanatical preacher." Drewry supported the view that slaves were loyal to their owners.[5] These interpretations and viewpoints of slavery were very dangerous, because they perpetuated myths of black inferiority, incompetence, and moral laxity.[6] Both Philips and Drewy were apologists for an inhumane, brutal and exploitative system and narrated that enslaved people were content with their circumstances; their work stripped the slaves of their humanity. These viewpoints were the opinion of white males, who were the ones that maintained and protected slavery under the law.

In the early 1900's Carter G. Woodson started the *Journal of Negro History* in order to collect scholarship regarding the history of African Americans. In 1935 John B. Cade published *Out of the Mouths of Ex-Slaves*, which contained autobiographical accounts of formerly enslaved African Americans who lived in Texas and Louisiana. Cade reviewed Phillip's literature, and stated that a major flaw of the *American Negro Slave* was "This failure to understand what the

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[3] Brenda E. Stevenson. "'Out of the Mouths of Ex-Slaves': Carter G. Woodson's *Journal of Negro History* 'Invents' the Study of Slavery.", 698.
[4] Ulrich B. Phillips, American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime (Baton Rouge, 1918), 287.
[5] Breen, Patrick H. The Land Shall Be Deluged in Blood: A New History of the Nat Turner Revolt. Oxford University Press, 2016, 3.
[6] Brenda E. Stevenson. "'Out of the Mouths of Ex-Slaves': Carter G. Woodson's *Journal of Negro History* 'Invents' the Study of Slavery." *The Journal of African American History*, vol. 100, no. 4, 2015, pp. 698–720. *JSTOR*, 700.

Negroes have thought and felt and done, in other words, the failure to fathom the Negro mind, constitute a defect of the work."[7] Cade interviewed ex-slaves who complained about the lack of food, clothing, and medical attention. They interviewees described "the constant separation of families, rape and sexual abuse, physical brutality, and overwork, a cruelty imposed not only by slaveholding men, but women as well"[8] . Enslaved people were neither happy-go-lucky nor loyal, and this narrative does not describe a benevolent institution; instead, it displays violent and oppressive circumstances. Cade undermined scholars like Drewry and Philips who believed that most slaveholders were kind, and most slaves were happy. Cade's careful work and methodology served as an inspiration to future scholars in the history of slavery. When Herbert Aptheker, an American Marxist and historian, reviewed Drewry's work several decades later, he argued that instead of viewing the rebels as "deluded wretches and monsters," they should be viewed as "human beings willing to resort to open struggle in order to get something precious to them--peace, prosperity, liberty, or in a word, a greater amount of happiness."[9] Aptheker argued that most slaves hated slavery and fought however they could to resist the oppressive institution.

Eugene Genovese**,** an American historian of slavery, coined the term "paternalism"**.** In *Roll Jordan Roll*: *The World the Slaves Made,* he defines paternalism as a negotiated space: it is the involuntary labor of the slaves as a legitimate return to their masters for protection and direction. Slaveholders saw themselves as benevolent paternalists rather than acquisitive capitalists; they believed they held the best interests of their slaves at heart. Slaves used this realization to make their situations better and build some security or safety. By accommodating these ideas, enslaved people controlled pace of work, received recognition for their marriages, and limited the power of slaveholders. [10] Breen states that Genovese believed "slaveholders understood themselves to be paternalistic people who were concerned with the well-being of their slaves", which is built upon Philip's work; however, it lacks the racism.[11] He argued that they did what they could to improve their lives or resist their enslavement, that a few slaves who had been involved in America's handful of slave revolts were unable to create "a revolutionary tradition", and that large scale political resistance was difficult.[12]

In *Closer to Freedom,* Camp outlined the temporal and spatial space of an enslaved person in the plantation south. She defined this as "Geographies of Containment", which are position or spaces within or space within antebellum Southern society that kept slaves inferior. These geographies of containment allowed "slaveholders power to define bonds people's proper

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[7] Review" of American Negro Slavery by Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, JNH 4, no. 1 (1919): 103

[8] Brenda E. Stevenson. "'Out of the Mouths of Ex-Slaves': Carter G. Woodson's *Journal of Negro History* 'Invents' the Study of Slavery." *The Journal of African American History*, vol. 100, no. 4, 2015, pp. 698–720. *JSTOR*, 699.

[9] Herbert Aptheker, *Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion: Together with the Full Text of the So-Called "Confessions" of Nat Turner Made in Prison in* 1831 (New York: Humanities Press, 1966), I, 5.

[10] Genovese, Eugene D. Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slave Made. 1st ed., Pantheon Books, 1974, 146-147, 658).

[11] Breen, Patrick H. The Land Shall Be Deluged in Blood: A New History of the Nat Turner Revolt. Oxford University Press, 2016, 4.

[12] Genovese, Eugene D. Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slave Made. 1st ed., Pantheon Books, 1974, 587-598).

location."[13] If the slaves stepped out of these spaces, they were punished, sometimes severely. Enslavement in the South culturally alienated black people because it reduced human beings to property. They could be sold at any moment; they were not financially compensated and were subjected to the will of another person and items like shackles, chains, passes, slave patrols, hounds, lashes, and auction blocks. In the nineteenth century lawmakers and slaveholders laid out restrictions of slave movement. Virginia was the first colony to pass laws that governed slaves' behavior. In 1680, "An Act for Preventing Negroes Insurrections" was passed. The law prohibited enslaved people from owning weapons, and leaving their place of work without a pass. The law stated: "It shall not be lawfull for any negroe or other slave to carry or arme himselfe with any club, staffe, gunn, sword or any other weapon of defence or offence, nor to goe or depart from of his masters ground without a certificate from his master, mistris or overseer, and such permission not to be granted but upon particular and necessary occasions."[14] Things like passes, tickets, curfews and roll call limited their mobility. Charles Ball called this "principles of restraint": slaves were not allowed to leave the plantation that they belonged to—not for a "single mile" or a "single hour"—and if they did not abide by these rules they were "taken up and flogged."[15] The plantation system was penal: when rules were broken they were punished, sometimes severely. Slave holders did not allow their slaves to leave the plantation without a pass. The passes explained to the reader the "spatial and temporal parameters" of the pass holder. The planters aimed to control those in bondage even in the nighttime. They were forbidden to leave the plantation in the evenings; some were not allowed to even leave their cabins. William Ethelbert Ervin wrote in 1846 "At nine o'clock every night the Horne must be blown which is the signal for each to retire to his or her house and there to remain until morning."[16] Overseers enforced these rules and made sure that everyone was present, and if not they were treated violently. This is because planters viewed themselves as paternalistic people who cared for the wellbeing of their slaves, they desired affection and loyalty from their slaves. This caused planters to control "nutrition, dress, hygiene, bodily function, pleasure, and family relations."[17] Due to the capitalistic nature of slavery, planters were incentivized to preserve and increase their investments, meaning rape was used as a means to produce capital. In 1807, The Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves, a federal law, prohibited the importation of slaves from the coasts of Africa to the United States. [18] This law affected the institution because the supply was cut off, and slaveholders had to maintain slavery on their own. These laws strengthen the geographies of containment of enslaved people because slaveholders had to replenish the slave populations on their own.

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[13] Camp, Stephanie M. H. Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South. Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2004, 17.
[14] Camp, Stephanie M. H. Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South. Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2004, 18.
[15] Ibid, 13.
[16] Ibid, 24.
[17] Ibid, 18.
[18] United States Statutes at Large: Containing the Laws and Concurrent Resolutions ... and Reorganization Plan, Amendment to the Constitution, and Proclamations." *Avalon Project - Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy*, Yale Law School, avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century /sl004.asp.

Geography of containment looked different for males and female slaves. Tasks that required travel were often reserved for men. When mail needed to be delivered, those tasks were allocated to men; they were also able to hire themselves out on their own time. At times, men could visit girlfriends and wives on neighboring plantations. These passes were valid from Saturday afternoon to Sunday evenings/Monday early mornings. However, it is important to note that this was a privilege that not everyone experienced. Men were not always allowed these luxuries because planters wanted "perfect order" from their slaves.[19] Men and women stopped working in the fields at sunset, however women had a second shift of labor, which was household work. They were obligated to work in the fields, and had to come home to more tasks that needed to be fulfilled. Bondmen also had tasks to be completed at night they hunted, fished, and contributed to the production of craftwork; together women and men worked to take care of their homes. The women's second shift of labor was greater: they would cook supper, clean the cabin, produce household goods like soap, candles, and wash and mend their families' clothing along with bed linens, bonnets and produced textiles for plantation use. Enslaved women were expected to exert the same amount of energy during their second shifts of labor: a Georgia woman who failed to complete her tasks was severely punished by her manager. She was stripped naked, tied to a post, instructed to wrap her arms around the post, and was beaten severely with 70 stripes. The shifts of work increased time-based control, which enslaved women had throughout the South and made it difficult for them to escape.[20]

Due to the plantation penal system, when women stepped out of these bounds they were physically punished; however, for women the violence inflicted upon them was sometimes infused with sexual overtones and hints of sadism. In the autobiography of Solomon Northup, he recalled a story about a woman who left the plantation to visit a friend. This woman was a mistress of the owner; he suspected that she had a lover on the other plantation and his sexual rage manifested into brutality. Patsy a slave on the plantation was stripped naked, laid down on her face completely naked and beaten severely. Solomon remarked that "Nowhere on that day on the face of the whole earth, I venture to say, was there such a demoniac exhibition witnessed as then ensued…She was terribly lacerated-I may say, without exaggeration, literally flayed."[21] "When women broke the rules, and moved out of bounds they risk and receive punishment that one more physically painful and heartbreaking someone sexually degrading."[22] Being punished was a traumatic experience, but adding sexual overtones makes it even more humiliating and brutal. These are examples of how the body was dominated by plantation owners, and how being victims of sexual violence manifested in a public manner.

Deborah, Gray-White's groundbreaking book, *Ar'nt I A Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South,* made black women visible in slavery scholarship; this book highlighted the burdens that black women were forced to carry, due to the brutal nature of slavery and sexual exploitation. From the very beginning, during the middle passage men and women were differentiated. On the middle passage women were not in the holds of slave ships: they were in the quarter desk. This made the women and girls easily accessible to the sexual desires of crew

[19] Camp, Stephanie M. H. Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South. Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2004, 30.
[20] Camp, Stephanie M. H. Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South. Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2004, 28, 31, 81-82.
[21] Ibid, 33.
[22] Ibid, 33.

members. This set the stage for exploitation; her sex life, marital status, workload, and diet was controlled by the slaveholder. Gray-White talks about the jezebel who "was of a person governed almost entirely by her libido."[23] The jezebel was the complete opposite of the Victorian white woman, meaning that she was not a pious person. This stereotype can be traced back to European views on African women from initial contact, and the belief that their polygamous relationships, tribal dances, and lack of clothing made them lustful and had abnormal sexual desire.[24]

Jennifer Morgan addresses the dangerous ideals regarding African women's bodies and sexuality in *Laboring Women.* By the time the English arrived in the West Indies, ideas and information about black and brown women had already formulated. European writers viewed black women as culturally inferior, and translated this into racial difference. Their bodies became entangled with savage behavior, and images of the women's bodies were viewed as barbaric. Morgan found that African women's "unwomanly behavior evoked an immutable distance between Europe and Africa on which the development of racial slavery depended."[25] The dehumanization of the African woman through her body and morality was tied to her race to justify the brutality of her bondage. Stripping African women of their humanity made it easy to overwork them, and use them as a means of reproduction. In June 1647, Richard Ligon travelled on the ship Achilles to settle as a planter in Barbados; he stopped in Cape Verde to trade, and it was there that he saw black women for the first time. In *True and Exact History of Barbadoes* he wrote that their breast "hang down below their Navels, so that when they stoop at their common work of weeding, they hang almost to the ground, that at a distance you would think they had six legs."[26] West African women's bodies were victims of the "colonizing venture" and because Europeans first contact with West Africa happened in a moment in which they were determined to make use of valuable resources; therefore, their bodies were less likely to be objects of lust or beauty.[27] They wrote regularly on the topic of African women's physiognomy and reproductive experiences. These viewpoints made African women indispensable because it "showed the gendered ways of putting African savagery to productive use." African women's bodies were turned into commodities from the very beginning and this justified the hard labor and set the stage for sexual exploitation.[28]

Elite slave-holding southerners were convinced that slave women were "lewd and lascivious" and that "they invited sexual overtures from white men", that any evidence of their resistance from sexual invitations was feigning. Due to these beliefs, public spectacles were made of black women, "the slave woman's body, however, commanded no such respect. Just as with reproduction, that which was private and personal became public and familiar."[29] During slave auctions women were exposed and examined for fertility, in moments when potential

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[23] White, Deborah Gray. Ar'nt I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South. Norton, 1987, 29.
[24] Ibid, 30.

[25] Morgan, Jennifer Lyle. Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004, 38.
[26] Ibid, 3.
[27] Ibid, 15.
[28] Ibid, 15.
[29] White, Deborah Gray. Ar'nt I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South. Norton, 1987, 32.

buyers were wary about the reproductive abilities of the enslaved woman, the person would be taken to a private room where she would have examined thoroughly by a physician, even though they probably were not able to assess fertility. Enslaved women were not clothed properly on plantations, but not because the planters did not want to clothe them properly: it was often because of the type of labor that was expected of the women. When they worked in the rice plantations/fields their dresses were "reefed up", this exposed their legs and thighs, in order to keep them out the dirt and mud. Those that worked in the home, had their skirts pulled up in order to wash floors.[30] "The very sight of semi-clad black women nurtured white male notions of their promiscuity."[31] Gray-White argues that "the conditions under which women were sold, and were punished also fostered an atmosphere conducive to such thoughts."[32] White men fostered environments in which black women could be held responsible for their abuse, which meant that they found excuses to engage in sexual contact with the women in bondage. These differences in geographies of containment shaped resistance opportunities.

Resistance

According to Camp the enslaved women had three bodies. The first body was a site of domination: it was a body acted upon by slaveholders. Views on African and black women's bodies (previously cited in the historiography) rationalized enslavement and sexual violence against enslaved women. It caused slaveholders to strictly control the black body, in order to maintain the institution of slavery. The second body was the experience of the process of this control that slaveholders and planters had over people. "It was the body as a vehicle of feelings of terror, humiliation and pain." The second body was "associated with poverty, suffering and shame." The uncertainty of sale, sexual/nonsexual violence, disease and labor put to slaves were a source of "frequent anxiety and misery."[33] The third body, however, was a source of pleasure, pride, and self-expression. This was the body that disregarded curfew and pass laws, in order to escape to parties, where they could drink, eat, and dress up. This body was claimed, this body was theirs to enjoy: the third body was a site of pleasure and resistance.[34]

Sex as Resistance

According to Gray-White, it is important to note that not all white-black relationships were exploitive, even though they began that way. An example of this is in the story of an enslaved woman named Cynthia, an acquaintance of William Willis Brown, who is narrating the story. When she was bought by a slave trader she was given two options: if she accepted his proposal, he would take her to St. Louis with him and establish her as his housekeeper on his farm, but if she rejected his offer he would sell her as a field hand on the worst plantation on the Mississippi River. She accepted this offer and became the slave trader's mistress and

[30] Ibid, 32.
[31] ibid, 33.
[32] ibid, 31.

[33] Camp, Stephanie M. H. Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South. Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2004, 67.
[34] Ibid 68.

housekeeper. In other instances, women were more eager than Cynthia. Solomon Northup a kidnapped slave explained a story about a time when he was imprisoned in a slave pen. He was with a woman who "entertained an extravagantly high opinion of her own attractions." He said that she stated that she expected to be bought by a "wealthy gentleman of good taste." The thoughts of silks and stains and jewelry appealed to these women. And indeed, the travelers did see mulatto and quadroon slave mistresses with wealthy merchants strolling in the streets.[35] Some women were concubines to their white lovers and sometimes were able to obtain freedom for themselves and their children. These are instances when black women used their bodies as a medium of resistance. When they willingly engaged in sexual activities with slaveholders they sometimes were able to expect something in return. Unfortunately, when they participated in those activities the jezebel stereotype was strengthened, meaning that the promiscuity and sexual nature of black women was further affirmed in the minds of white slaveholders. However, using sex as a form of resistance is important, because traditionally resistance is seen a public and organized, but the body is a key source of women's survival. It was hard for women to organize or run away, it was humiliating for their private life to be put on display without their consent, and it was degrading for enslaved women's bodies to be used as machines for reproduction. Engaging in sexual resistance helped black women have control or autonomy in their situations. In some instances, they were able to use their bodies to gain favors, and in some cases **freedom**. They transformed their bodies, from a site of domination into a site of freedom for themselves.

Dance as resistance

Dance helps to link African Americans to their African past, because it is very central to African culture. Key events of the life cycle are celebrated through dance such as fattening house dances, fertility dances, and rite-of-passage dances. "Dance serves as a mediating force between people and the world of the gods."[36] Dance is a part of the philosophy, customs, and sense of place, removing it from their lives would severely alter African culture. Most traditional dances have been connected to or are performed during religious ceremonies. Most of these events were open to the public, officials such as chiefs, elders, and priests were able to dance, and those who were not proficient had several months of instruction before taking the position. This meant that dance competency was extremely important in traditional West African society. With the beginning of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade came struggle between slave holders and captives. Being captured brought psychological and cultural transformation. European and American slave holder strived to destroy independent cultural expression, because they understood that having control over the slave ensured subordination. They sought to appropriate dance and use it as a form of domination. Slaves were able to retain elements of their culture in the new hostile environment.[37]

Slaveholders feared slave rebellions, especially when the need for labor intensified; in South Carolina the demand for slaves was amplified. Numerous slave insurrections caused the passing of laws to prevent rebellions. The Stono Rebellion occurred on September 9th, 1739, in the colony of South Carolina. It was the largest slave uprising in the British mainland colonies,

[35] Ibid, 35.
[36] Hazzard-Gordon, Katrina. Jookin': The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African-American Culture. Temple Univ. Press, 1990, 3.
[37] Ibid, 5.

with 42-47 whites and 44 blacks killed. There were reports that slaves had weapons, and after killing a number of white people they marched with "drums, beating and colors flying." After 12 miles of marching they began to sing and dance, rejoicing. It was at this moment when the militia stationed themselves around them to prevent the success of the rebellion. In 1740, South Carolina legislation passed the Negro Act of 1740 that prevented slaves from visiting plantations, using drums, horns, or instruments to signal rebellion, from having gatherings of large numbers of people. Dancing affairs provided opportunities to exchange information and plan rebellions, especially when there were more slaves than white people. According to Hazzard-Gordon "The high pitch of emotions at these dances could serve as a pre-text for touching off a previously planned revolt."[38]

During the Middle Passage, traditional dancing was forbidden on the ships; however, there was dancing that occurred. After meals, the slaves were required to jump in their irons for exercise, as it was believed necessary for their health. "Dancing the slaves" was an activity on the slave ships, as evidenced by advertisements for musicians to be employed on slave ships. Crew members walked on the decks with whips and forced slaves to jump in their irons. A sailor recalled that he was hired to "dance" the men and others were employed to "dance" women. On ships without a musician, the music was provided by "a slave thumping on a broken drum, an upturned kettle, or an African banjo". When they danced, some slaves sang, and sang about their experiences. There was a captain who complained about the sorrow of the slaves, he remarked "The songs they sang of sorrow and sadness-simple ditties of their own wretched estate." Slaves choose to sing somber songs; it is not known whether or not the songs were traditional or new.[39] There were instances when the dancing was enjoyed by slaves: a board one ship, an officer recalled that "Our blacks were a good-natured lot and jumped to the lash so promptly that there was not much occasion for scoring their naked flanks. We had tambourines aboard, which some of the younger darkies fought for regularly, and every evening we enjoyed the novelty of African war songs and ring dances, fore and aft, with the satisfaction of knowing that these pleasant exercises were keeping our stock in good condition and, of course, enhancing our prospects of making a profitable voyage."[40]

Dancing also served to deconstruct the imposing presence of white people. Slaves were not able to openly criticize white people, so it had to be insidious. Dance was a tool for self-assertion, ridicule, and criticism. Slaves performed dances where white people were derided. Slaveholders did not understand these performances, and wrote them off as foolishness. A former slave recalled "It was generally on Sunday when there was little work . . . that the slaves both young and old would dress up in hand-me-down finery to do a high-kicking, prancing walk-around. They did a takeoff on the high manners of the white folks in the "big house", "but their masters, who gathered around to watch the fun missed the point."[41]

Slaves were able to hold secret dance parties: "deep in the woods away from slaveholders' eyes they held secret parties where they danced, performed music, drank alcohol, and courted."[42] These parties were spaces that were not in complete control of the slave holders.

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[38] Ibid, 34.
[39] Ibid, 8.
[40] Ibid, 9.
41 Ibid, 46.
42 Camp, Stephanie M. H. Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South. Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2004, 60.

It is important to note that slave masters tried to limit occurrences of these parties. Charlie Crump recounted that "we ain't 'llowed ter go nowhar at night". They were not allowed to participate in these illegal parties; however, they found ways to do it. One planter complained about that nighttime activities of the slaves stating that "night is their day". They would risk punishment; however, all black people would "gang up an 'have fun." The patroller did not know that there "wus a number of little paths what run through de woods dat nobody ain't watched case dey ain't knowed dat de paths wus dar."[43]

In order to prepare for the parties, they obtained the goods they needed by stealing from their slave masters, which they justified by explaining that the goods "belongs to massa, and so do we and we only use one part of his property to benefit another." They hid themselves in "valleys, swamps, and other by-places" in order to cook in secret. They prepared food into the early hours of the morning, and they destroyed anything that left a trace. At the start of the party around 10pm a fiddler, began "some favorite tune" and people danced until midnight when it was time to eat. The food was delicious and "well cooked". Most of the time, slaves only received one meal during the day; however, at the party there was plenty of food for everyone.[44]

Musicians performed for their friends and neighbors, playing fiddles, banjos and tambourines. They also improvised melody-making instruments from reeds and handsaws, and made percussions from spoons, bones, pans, and buckets in order to play "Turkey in the Straw" and popular dance tunes. When there were no musicians present, they sang and danced to the lyrics. According to Dosia Harris "one went somepin lak dis:"

> Oh! Miss Liza, Miss Liza Jane?
> Axed Miss Liza to marry me
> Guess what she said?
> She wouldn't marry me,
> If de last Nigger was dead.[45]

Dance tunes also contained political meaning; an example is a song about a rejected lover, and the person who was the object of affection was titled "Miss". Miss is a sign of respect that white people denied enslaved people. These songs were sung that plantation events under the supervision of the slaveholders. However, not all songs could be sung in the presence of the slaveholders. Mollie Williams, a bondwoman from Mississippi, sung a song that was about resistance the lyrics read:

> Run tell Coleman,
> Run tell everybody
> Dat de niggers is arisin'![46]

Competition arose at these parties, which encouraged camaraderie among participants. In order to win a dance competition, one had to "execute dance moves while maintaining an

[43] Ibid, 69.
[44] Ibid, 70.
[45] Ibid, 74.
[46] Ibid, 75.

outward demeanor of "control and coolness."[47] Nancy Williams competed with Jennie (another slave) to see who could perform the dance the best. In order to make the challenge harder they danced with a glass of water of their head. The person who won was the one who maintained "her cool" and made the dance look simple. These dances gave women the ability to show their strength. This gave women the opportunity proves their physical power. Dance competitions sometimes provided women with some relief from black gender hierarches.[48]

These are the ways in which dance became a medium of resistance for enslaved black woman. Dance helped reaffirm control over their body, on the Middle Passage slaveholders strived to use the body and dance as a form of domination. "Dancing the slaves" was used to ensure the quality of the product that would be sold when they finally reached their destination. They were able to resist this by singing war and somber songs, alongside performing ring dances on ships where they aimed to erase their culture. On the plantations, they used dance gatherings to plan insurrections, have secret dance parties, and to mock slaveholders. Being able to have fun and enjoy their bodies is a reclamation of their body and humanity.

Poetry as resistance

Analyzing poetry as resistance is difficult due to the fact that most enslaved black people were not literate, but as documented through this paper black women found ways around this. Phillis Wheatley was born in Senegal/Gambia around 1753, and was brought to Boston, Massachusetts, on a slave ship in 1761 and purchased by John Wheatley. The Wheatleys taught Phillis how to read and write; she received lessons in theology, English, Latin, and Greek. Wheatley was a world-renowned poet: her first volume of poetry was called *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, published in 1773. She gained recognition and fame after she was published, in order to validate her authorship, the volume included preface where 17 Boston men vouched that she was the author of those poems.[49]

On Being Brought from Africa to America 1768

'Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a *Saviour* too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their colour is a diabolic die."
Remember, *Christians*, *Negros*, black as *Cain*,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

[47] Hazzard-Gordon, Katrina. Jookin': The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African-American Culture. Temple Univ. Press, 1990, 20.

[48] Camp, Stephanie M. H. Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South. Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2004, 76.

[49] Neale, Sondra O. "Phillis Wheatley." Poetry Foundation, Poetry Foundation, www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/phillis-wheatley.

The speaker begins the poem by declaring that her presence in America was an act of mercy by God, because she was brought out of a Pagan land, which is Africa. This displays that she appreciates virtues of a Christian country. The speaker has learned about God and is saved, and has gained redemption that they hadn't thought about. This can be inferred through the use of the words "benighted", defined as 'taken over by moral and intellectual darkness, ignorance', and "redemption" defined as "being saved from sin and evil." The next four lines of the poem are an exploration of the knowledge the speaker has gained as a result of Christianity. In line 5, the mood/tone of the poem shifts. The speaker makes the claim that black people are viewed and treated no better than animals--a sable, which is a small animal with black hair. In the next line, she quotes "Their colour is a diabolic die", talking about the hypocrisy of this phrase. White Christians calling black Christians "a diabolic dye" is implying that black people are black because they are evil. In line 7 the speaker is reminding God-fearing Christians that all people are created equal in God's eyes, and are capable of joining the angelic train.

It is safe to say that white men attempted to dominate Wheatley's poetry, especially considering that she needed the affirmation of white men in order to even be published. However, Wheatley found ways to assert her humanity within her poetry. This is because in her poem she states black people are not evil, and that **her** God would never turn anyone away because of skin color. She is not praising slavery; rather she is praising them for being brought to Christianity, and is calling out those Christians who use religion to discriminate, enslave, and disenfranchise black people. At this time period, black people were not human in the eyes of white colonists. The act of writing poetry could only be the act of a human. In order to write poetry one had to experience emotions, her publication was a testimony to emotions and pain that they supposedly did not have as outlined in Jennifer Morgan's *Laboring Women*. It is also important to note that she is writing this poem in traditional European format, which one could assume once again is complacency, but as Camp states, black women's resistance should not always be seen as a public phenomenon. Although the poem is a public thing, the format can be seen as the cloak to deride/critique or deconstruct the white presence, in the same way it was used for dance. Phillis Wheatley's literacy was a privilege that not many women and black people had at this time period. However, given the opportunity there were probably a lot of poems within black women that were not allowed to fully manifest due to black women being illiterate.

Conclusion

Black people in the United States have always found a way to create agency for themselves: one just has to understand how to look for it. In slavery scholarship, white men erased the voices of black people, and rewrote the history of a brutal and exploitative system in an apologist manner. When Carter G. Woodson published the Journal of Negro History, in order to compile slavery scholarship, the voices of the formerly enslaved were rightly uplifted. It was not until the 1980's, however, that we are able to get scholarship that narrated the unique experiences of enslaved black women. Deborah Gray-White's Ar'nt I A Woman? built her work upon the idea that black women not only had to deal with being black, but also being a woman, and how gender differentiated their experiences in bondage. Followed by Jennifer Morgan's Laboring Women whose extensive research displayed the dangerous ideals regarding the bodies of African women and their sexuality, the commodification of their bodies, and how it became the justification for their enslavement and sexual exploitation. Followed by Stephanie Camp who outlined the ways

in which black people were enslaved, the geographies of containment in the penal plantation systems that forced people to stay within those bounds, or else face punishments. Black women were contained in different ways than men, which shaped resistance opportunities; this is where Camp stresses that resistance needed to be analyzed in another context. Because the body and home were key sites of suffering and domination, our understanding of resistance can be more broad and inclusive. Black women utilized their third body, to experience pleasure, pride and self-expression. They reclaimed their bodies and humanity and this is a form of resistance. Black women used sex as resistance to gain favors, and in some cases freedom. Women were also able to use dance as resistance: as outlined in Katrina Hazzard-Gordon's work dance was a medium or a conduit for reconnection to African culture, after the Stono Rebellion the rebels danced and sang and rejoiced. In the Middle Passage, dance was turned into a tool of domination; however, there were instances in where they were able to sing songs from their culture and perform war dances. On the plantations, they used dancing to ridicule whites and to deconstruct their imposing presence insidiously, under the guise of fun. They held secret dances parties in the woods where they would drink, eat, dance, sing and dress up. Competitions arose at that these parties, and provided a woman the opportunity to display their strength, control and dancing abilities. Finally, poetry was used as an act of resistance, Phyllis Wheatley's poetry asserted her humanity, displayed her emotions, that she supposedly did not have because according to white men black women did not feel pain, and used European format to express her views on slavery and Christianity, and to deconstruct their imposing presence. These acts arguably kept black women alive, and more importantly provided some type of joy in a lifetime full of pain, misfortune and uncertainty.

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