Mothering and Labour in the Slaveholding Households of the Antebellum American South

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Abstract:

This article examines the organisation of mothering and slave-labour in the slaveholding households of the antebellum American south, focusing upon enslaved women's domestic labours, enslaved wet-nursing, and the roles of female slaveholders in the care of enslaved children. Utilising sources ranging from female slaveholders' correspondence to the Federal Writers' Project interviews with formerly enslaved African Americans in the 1930s, it seeks to locate white women within the systemic dual exploitation of enslaved women as productive and reproductive labours, whilst attending to the particularities of household-centred forms of labour and slaveholder intervention. Investigating the complex dynamics of mothering and labour in slaveholding households furthers our understanding of white women's roles as 'co-masters' and 'central partners in slavery's maintenance and management' [Glymph, 2008] whilst foregrounding the distinctive ways in which they shaped enslaved African American women's lives. Females slaveholders' interests and interventions were shaped and sometimes driven by their desires, experiences, and roles as mothers; and within the intimate worlds of slaveholding households, white and Black mothers' privileges and disadvantages were directly connected. This article uses these forms of labour, and particular forms of slaveholder intervention, to illuminate the variabilities and complexities in enslaved women's everyday experiences of mothering their children, which encompassed nurturing white children, relinquishing care-giving to slaveholders, intimate and confining forms of slave-labour, and multitudinous forms of mother-child separation. [220]

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In 1841, the Hillsborough, North Carolina slaveholder Laura Norwood approached the 'most undesirable event' of childbirth. That Spring, she was one of two expectant mothers in the household she shared with her husband Joseph. Eliza, a woman enslaved by the Norwoods, would also be confined 'just about the time' Laura thought she 'shall need her most'. These dilemmas of childbearing and labour would continue: in later years, another enslaved domestic-labourer, Adeline fell pregnant; then, Dinah. By 1844, Laura was faced with what she termed the 'appalling prospect' that the four enslaved women working in the household would have a total of six children under three-years-old. She thought 'it almost impossible to make them earn their victuals and clothes'. Laura found these enslaved women's pregnancies, childbirth, and childcare disruptive to her household routines: they worked for Laura and her family variously as nurses, housemaids, milkmaids, cooks and washerwomen. Both Laura's childbearing and that of the women she enslaved demanded the reorganisation of domestic labour in the household, including, at times, the introduction of new labourers.

Disruption was not the only issue at stake, however. Laura knew well her interests in enslaved women's reproduction, for slaveholders profited directly from their ownership of enslaved children. Meanwhile, Laura had also come to use Eliza as a wet-nurse. Thus, in 1845, she wrote quite differently about Eliza's childbearing: Eliza was 'quite smart', with 'plenty of milk for her child and mine'.[1] At other times, Laura and her family benefitted from these enslaved women's labours outside of the household: whether lent to family members, hired out, or occasionally sent to work in the fields. Laura weighed carefully the relative value of the different aspects of enslaved women's labour, and her attempt to realise those

[1] Laura [Norwood] to mother, 6 Apr. 1841, 20 May 1842, 27 Aug. 1845: Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (hereafter SHC), Lenoir Family Papers.

interests profoundly shaped their mothering. Across the south, households like the Norwoods' offer a distinctive lens into the complex and variable nature of enslaved women's dual exploitation as productive and reproductive labourers, the complex dynamics of their mothering, and the roles of female slaveholders.

The dual exploitation of enslaved Black women as productive and reproductive labourers was of course at the very core of the institution of Atlantic slavery. Whites' depictions of Black women as uniquely suited to hard physical labour and childbearing were foundational to developing the racial hierarchies that 'justified' slavery.[2] Atlantic slavery was both hereditary and matrilineal, and enslaved women's reproduction ensured slavery's perpetuation. At every turn, slaveholders organised slave-labour to maximise their material interests. Diana Paton shows in this volume, for example, how large plantations in the eighteenth-century Caribbean used collective childcare to maximise enslaved women's productive labour and to prepare enslaved children for their adult working lives. These kinds of collective childcare also appeared in the US south, and the 'natural increase' of the enslaved population only became more important to slaveholders after the end of the international slave-trade in the early nineteenth century. Other variations in the organisation of enslaved women's work reflected differences in regional economies, where the size and profitability of slaveholdings shaped enslaved women's opportunities to care for their children. [3] While slaveholders had clear interests in *both* enslaved women's productive and reproductive labour, there was also a remarkable level of divergence between enslavers who prioritised the bearing and raising of children, and those who fostered conditions in which

[2] Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia, 2004).
[3] Damian Alan Pargas, 'From the Cradle to the Fields: Slave Childcare and Childhood in the Antebellum South', *Slavery & Abolition*, xxxii (2011); Marie Jenkins Schwartz, '"At Noon, Oh How I Ran": Breastfeeding and Weaning on Plantation and Farm in Antebellum Virginia and Alabama', in Patricia Morton (ed.), *Discovering the Women in Slavery: Emancipating Perspectives on the American Past* (Athens, Ga., 1996).

enslaved women worked under such duress that they could hardly keep children alive. On one Mississippi plantation, a slaveholder who committed to 'breeding' ensured a birth-rate that doubled national averages. But on a Georgia plantation, a slaveholder determined on intensive rice cultivation forced enslaved infant mortality to reach a staggering 90 percent.[4]

The comparison starkly illustrates the extent to which slaveholders' interests and interventions shaped enslaved women's maternal lives. Certainly, enslaved women forged deeply meaningful roles and identities as mothers. Through motherhood, they cultivated profoundly important relationships with their children, co-parents, parents, and other women. They exercised a degree of control in bearing and raising their children. Motherhood might even have been a wellspring of resistance. But the overweening material interests of slaveholders, and their coercive power, meant that the pleasures and affections of motherhood were imbricated with exhaustion, frustration, anguish and ambivalence. The conditions of slavery shaped every aspect of bearing and raising children, including women's health, working conditions, family stability, and opportunities and resources for caring for their children on a day-to-day basis. In some ways, the division of enslaved women's labour resembled a 'double day', in which productive slave-labour was followed by family-centred labour. But that division was rarely clean-cut. Mothers hoed with babies on their backs, breastfed infants at intervals in their field-work, and weaved for their enslavers during precious night-time hours in slave-quarters.[5] Enslaved women's labours intersected in multitudinous ways, and ultimately the 'lines of division' that distinguished propertied

[4] William Dusinberre cited in Christopher Morris, 'The Articulation of Two Worlds: The Master-Slave Relationship Reconsidered', *Journal of American History*, lxxxv (1998), 982.
[5] See, on the organisation of mothering and slave-labour, Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York, 1985); Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York, 1985); Stephanie J. Shaw, 'Mothering Under Slavery in the Antebellum South', in Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang, Linda Rennie Forcey (eds.) *Mothering: Ideology, Experience & Agency* (New York, 1994); Emily West, Erin Shearer, 'Fertility Control, Shared Nurturing, and Dual Exploitation: the Lives of Enslaved Mothers in the Antebellum United States', *Women's History Review*, xxvii (2018).

whites' productive and reproductive labour did not hold for enslaved women whose childbearing was 'tethered to the making of human commodities and in service of the marketplace'.[6] These complexities and variabilities in enslaved women's dual exploitation are crucial in understanding both slaveholders' dynamic management of their financial interests in enslaved women and Black women's experiences of bearing and raising children under slavery, where the 'language of affect' has often obscured 'the everyday experience' of caring for a child.[7]

The slaveholding household is thus an especially important setting in which to examine enslaved women's slave-labour and their mothering. In the antebellum US South, around one quarter of enslaved people worked in and around slaveholding households during their lifetimes, and as Saidiya Hartman writes, 'the domestic space, as much as the field, defined [Black women's] experience of enslavement and the particular vulnerabilities of the captive body'.[8] Here, much of enslaved women's work can be characterized as what we now think of as social reproduction, including care-giving for slaveholders and their children, and other kinds of domestic labour. Enslaved household labourers' opportunities to care for their own children, meanwhile, were often quite different to those who primarily laboured in agriculture, and their proximity with their enslavers – especially white women – was much greater. Where it benefited them, female slaveholders, or 'mistresses', sometimes undertook the care of enslaved children, and they intervened in enslaved women's mothering by demanding services such as wet-nursing.

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[6] Saidiya Hartman, 'The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors', *Souls*, xviii (2016), 168.

[7] Camillia Cowling *et al.*, 'Mothering Slaves: Comparative Perspectives on Motherhood, Childlessness, and the Care of Children in Atlantic Slave Societies', *Slavery & Abolition*, xxxviii (2017), 224.

[8] Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York, 2008), 2; Hartman, 'Belly of the World', 170.

This article examines the organisation of mothering and slave-labour in the slaveholding households of the antebellum American south, focusing upon enslaved women's domestic labours, enslaved wet-nursing, and the roles of female slaveholders in the care of enslaved children. Utilising sources ranging from female slaveholders' correspondence to the Federal Writers' Project interviews with formerly enslaved African Americans in the 1930s, it seeks to locate white women within the systemic dual exploitation of enslaved women as productive and reproductive labours, whilst attending to the particularities of household-centred forms of labour and slaveholder intervention.

Mistresses were responsible for much of the day-to-day management of enslaved household labourers. They placed emphasis on enslaved women as manual-labourers and mothers in conflicting, coalescing, and fluctuating ways; endeavouring to realise their variable personal, familial, and financial interests. Precisely how female slaveholders attempted to organise enslaved women's labour was shaped by a number of factors, including the needs and demands of slaveholdings more broadly, the different roles women worked in and their enslavers' relationships with them, and slaveholders' ability to procure and market slave-labourers. Perhaps most distinctively, female slaveholders' interests and interventions were shaped and sometimes driven by their desires, experiences, and roles as mothers. Within the intimate worlds of slaveholding households, white and Black mothers' privileges and disadvantages were directly connected.

Investigating the complex dynamics of mothering and labour in slaveholding households furthers our understanding of white women's roles as 'co-masters' and 'central partners in slavery's maintenance and management', whilst foregrounding the distinctive ways in which they shaped enslaved African Americans women's lives[9]. These forms of labour, and particular types of slaveholder intervention, illuminate more of the variabilities

[9] Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage,* 123, 31.

and complexities in enslaved women's everyday experiences of mothering their children, where, as Sasha Turner has noted, the 'complexities and vulnerabilities of enslaved mothers' lives' have been often overlooked when historians cast them mainly as resilient 'mother-worker-warrior[s]'.[10]

I.

Female slaveholders relied upon enslaved women to provide the domestic labour and physical care-giving necessary to raise white children. The wealthiest slaveholders had nurses dedicated solely to children's care. Such nurses might number among their slaveholders' 'key slaves', who, as skilled labourers, received certain privileges and were less vulnerable to sale than others. Having 'key slaves' confirmed slaveholders' self-image as benevolent, though enslaved people regarded these relationships quite differently.[11] More typically, enslaved women in slaveholding households navigated childcare among other duties, including agricultural labour on small-holdings. Those who worked in white households sometimes cultivated material benefits, but the accompanying close proximity to whites numbered among the reasons enslaved people did not usually seek out such labour.[12]

Nor were bonds generally formed between free mothers and the mothers they enslaved. While more inclined to make occasional feeling remarks for 'key slaves' than others, female slaveholders tended to characterise enslaved women as inadequate and inattentive mothers, if perhaps capable of the 'drudgery' of childcare for their enslavers.[13]

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[10] Sasha Turner, 'The Nameless and the Forgotten: Maternal Grief, Sacred Protection, and the Archive of Slavery', *Slavery & Abolition*, xxxviii (2017), 233–4.
[11] On key slaves, see Michael Tadman, 'The Persistent Myth of Paternalism: Historians and the Nature of Master-Slave Relations in the American South', *Sage Race Relations Abstracts*, xxiii (1998).
[12] Emily West, *Chains of Love: Slave Couples in Antebellum South Carolina* (Urbana, 2004), 84–5.
[13] R.J. Knight, 'Mistresses, Motherhood, and Maternal Exploitation in the Antebellum South', *Women's History Review*, xxvii (2018), 992.

Mistresses' attitudes to enslaved women's childbearing depended upon the particular configuration of their personal, familial, and financial interests. They could encourage childbearing, recognising slaveholders' long-term interests in enslaved women's children; yet, mistresses were also quick to complain about the disruptions that enslaved women's childbearing provoked. Using an enslaved girl, adolescent, or elderly woman as a care-giver could mitigate such disruption, and also reflected that enslaved women in their childbearing years were often more valuable to their slaveholders working in heavy agricultural labour. Other slaveholders attempted to limit childbearing to maximise enslaved household-labourers manual slave-labour. Few, though, avoided household-labourers childbearing altogether. While female slaveholders may have cast enslaved women's childbearing as one of the 'greatest trials in the domestic department', it was an 'unavoidable inconvenience' they had to manage.[14]

One strategy in managing this 'inconvenience' was placing household-labourers' children in communal childcare. Charlotte Evans was an enslaved household-labourer on a small farm in Tulip, Arkansas. In an interview with the Federal Writers' Project, her daughter Peggy described how there were separate nurses for 'the little colored children' and the 'white children'. Charlotte worked as 'a nurse for the white children', and so, as Peggy explained, her 'mother didn't have nothing to do with the colored children'.[15] Slaveholders prioritised enslaved women's care for white children through such childcare arrangements. However, many household-labourers were able to keep their children with them as they worked, especially before weaning, and when slaveholdings lacked alternative childcare provision. Such arrangements reflected both slaveholders' interests in mothers working and

[14] Lucy Muse Walton Fletcher, diary, undated: David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University (hereafter DU), Lucy Muse Walton Fletcher Papers.
[15] Peggy Sloan in Federal Writers' Project, *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, 17 vols. (Washington, 1941) (hereafter FWP), ii, Arkansas, part vi, 168.

caring for their children and how enslaved people 'constantly negotiated the terms of their bondage and certain concessions'.[16] Many children were thus cared for quite casually. As Mattie Hardman recollected: 'As my mother worked 'round the Big House quite a deal I would go up to the Big House with her and play with the white children'.[17]

Whether in close proximity to their own children, or not, tending children whilst satisfying a demanding mistress was fraught with complications. Some mistresses forced enslaved women to work during their recovery from childbirth; others inhibited opportunities for mothers to breastfeed their own children.[18] Ellen Turner was forced to keep her infant son 'confined in a box' because, as her daughter Mattie recalled in 1866: 'If permitted to creep around the floor her mistress thought it would take too much time to attend to him'. For three months, Ellen cared for her ailing child by night, 'and attended to her domestic affairs by day'. Mattie evoked the exhaustion entailed by mothering and slave-labour, as well as the profound emotional distress not being allowed to 'render [her son] due attention'. 'Even the morning he died', Mattie elaborated, her mother was 'compelled to attend her usual work'. She reported that the mistress's 'sad countenance' upon the child's death simply betrayed her 'fear of being exposed'.[19] In the close confines of slaveholding households, mistresses forced the prioritisation of slave-labour over the health and well-being of enslaved children.

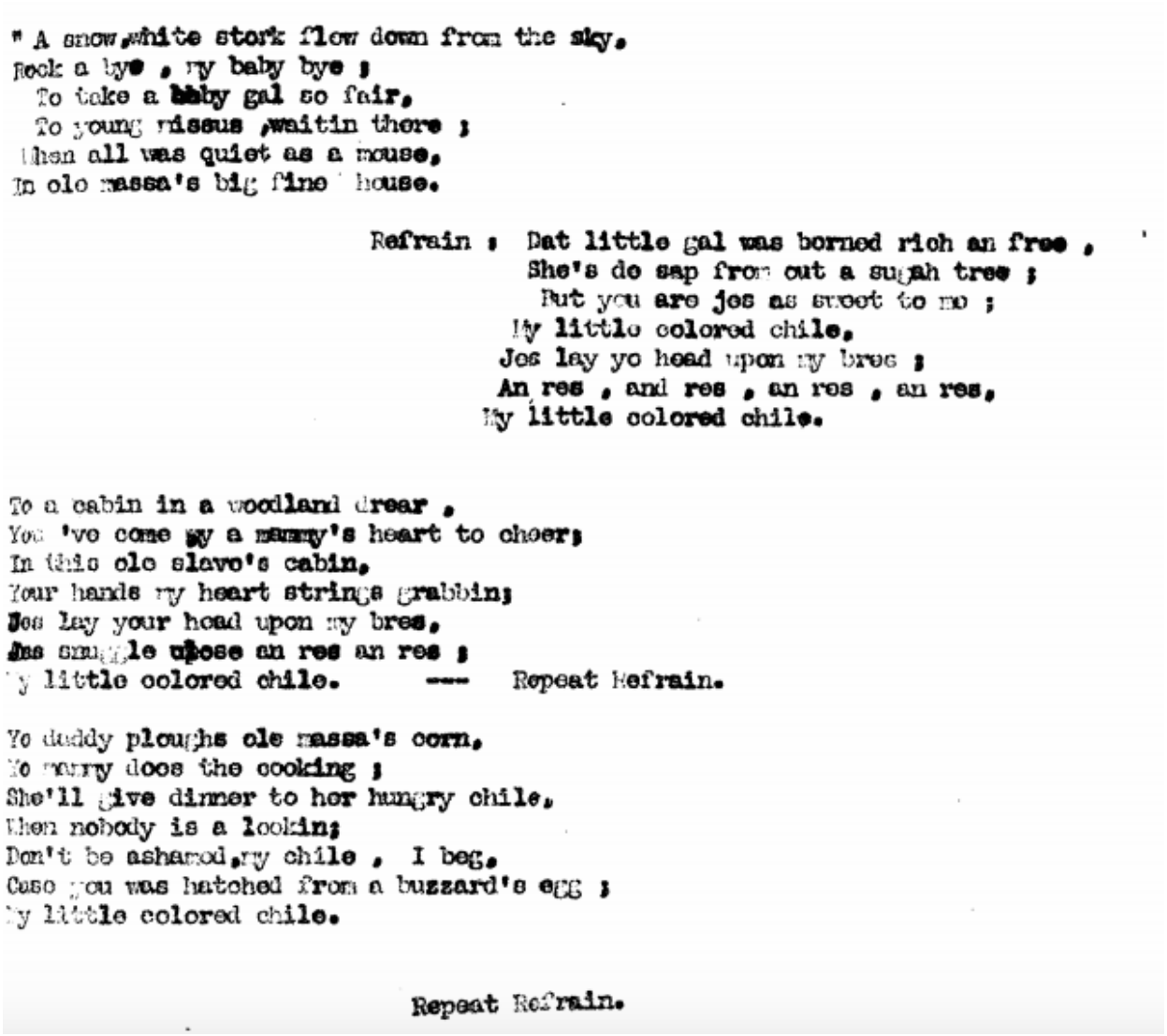
If slaveholders' interests in maintaining enslaved children meant that cases such as Ellen's were at the more extreme end of the spectrum, enslaved mothers faced shared challenges in carving out time to care for their children. One example occurred in a Greenville, North Carolina household in March 1856, where a pregnant enslaved woman was frequently found making infant clothes in her mistress's kitchen. Her mistress, Cora

[16] Leslie A. Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina* (Urbana, 1997), 37.
[17] Mattie Hardman, FWP, xiii, Oklahoma, 128.
[18] Hannah Jones, FWP, x, Missouri, 215; Fannie Clemons, FWP, ii, Arkansas, part ii, 28.
[19] Mattie J. Jackson, L.S. Thompson, *The Story of Mattie J. Jackson* (Lawrence, 1866), 9.

Singletary, complained that she got 'very little work' from the 'slow coach'. At the same time, Cora saw an opportunity in the woman's readiness to become a mother, and had the 'notion' to 'let her follow her "cousin's" example – by raising a fine parcel o' kinkey heads'.[20] In these ways, Cora weighed the different aspects of this enslaved woman's work - her household labour and her childbearing - against one another. Of course, these roles were not mutually exclusive, and even where enslaved women were designated primarily as child-bearers, most also performed other forms of work. Perhaps this was preferable to the enslaved woman, who may have been seeking removal from the kitchen. She may simply have been eager to prepare for the birth of her child. According to Cora, at least, the enslaved woman appeared 'better reconciled' when Cora told her to 'make herself easy' because 'she should have all the clothes that [Cora's daughter] had worn out . . . in plenty time'.[21] Domestic work rarely adhered to the same routines of field-labour, and while household-centered labour sometimes offered opportunities for material gain, engaging in work for one's children was difficult.

Childcare was a particularly confining and boundless form of domestic labour, and the nurturing of white children was emotionally complex. Only occasionally do we benefit from direct insight into the emotional texture of these experiences. In the 1930s, Katie Sutton, of Evansville, Indiana, recalled her childhood in the slave-quarters. Her mother, she remembered, 'was good to me but had to spend so much of her time humoring the little white chilluns that she scarcely ever had time to sing her own babies to sleep'. She related to her interviewer a lullaby sung by her mother:

[20] Sis Co [Cora Singletary] to Soph[ie Manly], 2 Mar. 1856: SHC, Manly Family Papers.
[21] *ibid.*



" A snow-white stork flew down from the sky,
Rock a bye , my baby bye ;
To take a baby gal so fair,
To young missus ,waitin there ;
When all was quiet as a mouse,
In ole massa's big fine house.

Refrain : Dat little gal was borned rich an free ,
She's do sap from out a sugah tree ;
But you are jes as sweet to me ;
My little colored chile,
Jes lay yo head upon my brec ;
An res , and res , an res , an res,
My little colored chile.

To a cabin in a woodland drear ,
You 've come my a mammy's heart to cheer;
In this ole slave's cabin,
Your hands my heart strings grabbin;
Jes lay your head upon my bres,
An snuggle close an res an res ;
My little colored chile. --- Repeat Refrain.

Yo daddy ploughs ole massa's corn,
Yo mammy does the cooking ;
She'll give dinner to her hungry chile,
When nobody is a lookin;
Don't be ashamed,my chile , I beg,
Case you was hatched from a buzzard's egg ;
My little colored chile.

Repeat Refrain.

'A slave mammy's lullaby' (title supplied by interviewer).[22]

The lullaby suggests that even casual forms of separation were deeply affecting for enslaved mothers. In the voice of a mother addressing her child, the lyrics make clear that enslaved nurses were concerned their own children knew that intimacy with whites did not displace them in motherly affection or familial priority. Enslaved mothers were also deeply concerned to socialize their children, and had crucial roles in fostering children's self-worth. The song's narrator does not challenge the birth narrative that Black children came from buzzards' eggs,

[22] Katie Sutton, FWP, v, Indiana, 193-5.

and whites from storks'. Rather, the song contests its shameful connotations. The redress is especially notable because, as Katie explained, it was her mistresses who related this story to the enslaved children. The song indicates how some mothers clearly worried about the emotional implications of their absence on their mother-child relationship and – in this case – the ways in which female slaveholders specifically might manipulate this absence. Katie's mother's experience may not have been universally shared. However, the sentiments expressed here emphasise Sasha Turner's important points cautioning historians against overstating enslaved mothers' resilience.[23] Mothers were not unaffected by their removal from their children, even when they remained in the same household. Nor did the privileges mothers might eke from household-servitude necessarily outweigh its costs.

Separations between household-labourers and their children could extend across significant distances and long periods of time. Susan Dabney Smedes related how her mother, the mistress of a Mississippi plantation, attempted to move some enslaved people to the Smedes' other residency over the summer. The prospect provoked what she described as 'tears' and 'clamorous' responses from those selected, who related that 'It would be cruel to be torn from home and friends, perhaps husband and children, and not to see them for all that time'. Susan's mother 'regretfully' reconsidered who would travel.[24] The anecdote aimed to accentuate a mistress's benevolence and the Smedes' over-indulgence of the people they enslaved, but reveals as much about the impact of relatively short-term break-up of enslaved families. Such seasonal separations were not uncommon. Betty Guwn, an enslaved mother on a Kentucky tobacco plantation, described how she too was required to spend three months a year with her mistress at their other residency. '[O]f course', she explained, 'my husband stayed at home to see after the family, and took them to the fields when too young to work'.

[23] Turner, 'Nameless and the Forgotten'.
[24] Susan Dabney Smedes, *Memorials of a Southern Planter* (Baltimore, 1887), 116-7.

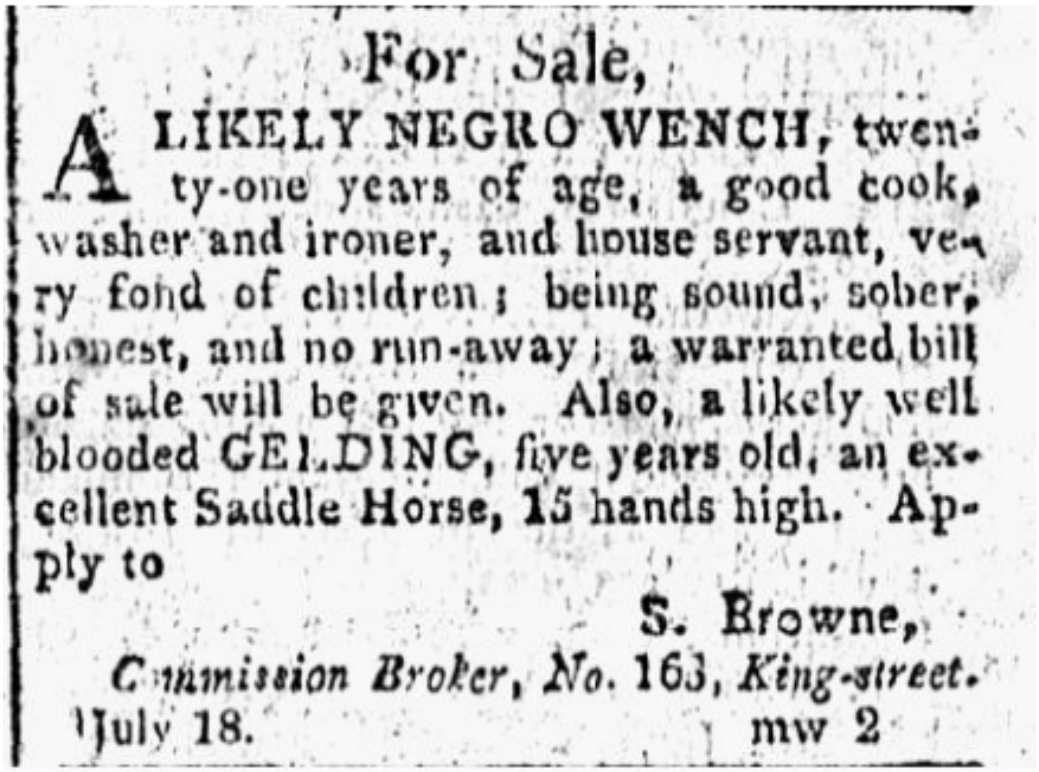
While Susan Dabney Smedes liked to think that 'dear to the colored heart was the thought of change and travel', and alleged that 'those who had overacted their part' were regretful of their decision, Betty Guwn described enslaved people's fear of being sold. They had 'heard awful tales of the slave auction block at New Orleans'. Besides, the separation alone was significant: 'Three months was a long time to be separated'.[25]

While many slaveholders demanded enslaved women care for whites' families in spite of their motherhood, others did so *because* they were mothers. In 1849, in Woodford County, Kentucky, the slaveholder Mira Alexander gave particular 'preference for the management of children' to an enslaved mother named Charlotte. Mira's 'preference' for Charlotte as a caregiver owed to her opinion that 'few mothers combine gentleness and firmness as she does'.[26] While constructions of enslaved women as poor mothers often served to justify white women's many interventions into their mothering, a slaveholder who deemed an enslaved mother proficient found this provided basis for appropriating her caring work. The child Charlotte was caring for - Priscilla - appears to be Mira's cousin's, and an enslaved girl was 'always ready to take [Charlotte's child] so she never had an excuse for being away from Priscilla a moment'.[27] The sources do not reveal how Charlotte experienced these circumstances. Perhaps Charlotte's close proximity to her child lessened some of its potentially distressing aspects. Perhaps, as formerly enslaved woman Harriet Jacobs described in her 1861 autobiography, she worked pained by the sounds of a wanting child 'crying that weary cry which makes a mother's heart bleed'.[28]

This caring work of course had value far beyond a slaveholder's own household. Mistresses often lent and traded enslaved labourers among family and friends. In 1848, Mira

[25] Betty Guwn, FWP, v, Indiana, 99.
[26] MM [Alexander] to Agatha [Logan], 24 Sept. 1849: SHC, Louis Marshall Papers.
[27] *Ibid.*
[28] [Harriet A. Jacobs], *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*, ed. L. Maria Child (Boston, 1861), 132.

Alexander offered her cousin an enslaved nurse named Lucy Ann. Mira assured her of Lucy's willingness, her 'excellent properties', and that she 'would be good to the children'. Mira spelled out that she did not want Lucy 'put out' among strangers; if she did not 'answer… expectations' Lucy could simply be returned.[29] Such arrangements were usually monetised or involved trading enslaved labourers. As Stephanie Jones-Rogers has shown, female slaveholders' 'market transactions unfolded outside of formal marketplaces. . . fusing household spaces and markets together'.[30] Mira also hired out numerous enslaved women and children. Her own children were grown, and she was a widow, which shaped the nature of her interests in enslaved women's labour. Mistresses sought not only to benefit personally from enslaved women's work, but to profit from it, and their interests often centred upon monetary gain.



For Sale,

A LIKELY NEGRO WENCH, twenty-one years of age, a good cook, washer and ironer, and house servant, very fond of children; being sound, sober, honest, and no run-away; a warranted bill of sale will be given. Also, a likely well blooded GELDING, five years old, an excellent Saddle Horse, 15 hands high. Apply to

S. Browne,
Commission Broker, No. 163, King-street.
July 18. mw 2

[29] MM [Alexander] to Agatha [Logan], 8 Jan. 1848: SHC, Louis Marshall Papers.
[30] Stephanie Jones-Rogers, '"[S]he Could . . . Spare One Ample Breast for the Profit of her Owner": White Mothers and Enslaved Wet Nurses', Slavery & Abolition, xxxviii (2017), 349.

City Gazette, Charleston, South Carolina, 20 July 1803

Such advertisements in southern newspapers underscore that an enslaved woman's apparent 'fondness' for children was a valuable personality trait and a marketable skill. Slaveholding women's reliance upon slave-labour in raising their children commodified care-work, and the birth of a child itself was often cause to hire or purchase enslaved women or girls. Motherhood shaped slaveholders' priorities and decision-making in different ways, too. In Salisbury, North Carolina, Mary Ferrand Henderson's desire to sell a 'very bad negro' as punishment for 'misconduct' was complicated by the fact that the enslaved woman was 'a good nurse & the baby loves her'.[31] A woman valued but disliked could be bound closely to a mistress determined to 'improve' or spite her.

Motherhood, that is, had many orientations to the marketplace. For enslaved women, slaveholders sometimes prized childlessness, and their ability to labour uninhibited by children.[32] More generally, though, their capacity to bear children augmented their value to their enslavers. Sometimes enslaved women worked these interests to their own advantage. Laura Norwood, with whom this essay began, was convinced that Dinah, an enslaved woman she particularly disliked, got married in an attempt 'to strengthen the ties to home' in 1840. She characterized Dinah's claim to be pregnant as another 'excuse' to shirk work. Laura's determination that the 'trouble and vexation' Dinah caused was not worth 'twice her value' was not shared by her husband, who was reluctant to sell Dinah 'because the price' of enslaved people was 'so very low'. Financial constraints, husbands' opinions, and the vagaries of local formal and informal markets were among the many factors that could both

[31] Mary Ferrand Henderson, diary, 6 Oct. 1858: SHC, John S. Henderson Papers.
[32] See, for example, Wendy Warren, '"Thrown Upon the World": Valuing Infants in the Eighteenth-century North American Slave Market', *Slavery & Abolition*, xxxix (2018); Daina Ramey Berry, *The Price for their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved, from the Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation* (Boston, 2017), 20-1; Jones-Rogers, '"[S]he Could. . .'.

influence or override the preferences of a mistress. In conjunction with these factors, if Dinah was indeed manoeuvring to remain at the Norwoods, she prevailed over Laura. In 1845, Dinah was still 'creeping about' in the household.[33]

White women's various interests in enslaved women's domestic labours – and their attempts to realise these – created shifting ground for enslaved mothers to navigate as they endeavoured to care for their own children. Tensions between slave-labour and family-centered activities were of course not unique to those who laboured in slaveholding households. But the highly confining and intimate nature of household-labour brought distinct challenges for Black women to create spaces in which to materially and emotionally nurture their own children. That their slave-labour often centred around the nurturing of white children made their dual exploitation as productive and reproductive labourers especially complex.

II.

Wet-nursing white women's children was perhaps the most intimate, confining and emotionally fraught of all forms of enslaved labour in the slaveholding household. As such, it deserves analysis on its own terms. Historians once dismissed enslaved wet-nursing as a figment of white southerners' fiction of interracial affection, and as unlikely given white mistresses' attachment to their children. In an important sample, though, Sally McMillen found that 20 percent of slaveholders used wet-nurses. If her findings can be generalized for

[33] Laura [Norwood] to mother, 11 Feb. 1840, 24 May 1843, 27 Aug. 1845: SHC, Lenoir Family Papers.

slaveholders in 1850, around seventy thousand enslaved women may have been labouring as wet-nurses in the last years before the Civil War.[34]

Wet-nursing took place for reasons ranging from convenience and appearance to the illness or death of a slaveholding mother. It was particularly a common recourse of those who believed that their breastmilk was inadequate. In North Carolina, Mary Ferrand Henderson used an enslaved woman named Sally to nourish her child when in 1855 she found herself 'very weak' and with 'little milk'. Sally nursed the child 'during the day and until bed time'. While Mary hoped to 'soon be able to do it myself', she was now able to leave her child for activities like horse-riding, visiting friends, and going to the store.[35] Oppositional constructions of white women's frailty and Black women's robustness shaped the practice; as Janet Golden has noted, 'the line between wanting and needing a wet-nurse often blurred'.[36] The outcome was identical for Sally, who seems to have been of use only as long as she was producing milk. As Mary and her family's interests in Sally's labour changed, so too did the circumstances in which Sally mothered. Several months later, Mary vowed to punish Sally for a 'jawing', and within a couple of years, she and her child were part of a list of 'idle servants' that Mary's husband 'will dispose of'.[37]

While some enslaved women worked only temporarily as wet-nurses, others performed this labour throughout their childbearing years. In Montgomery County, Tennessee, for instance, Moses Slaughter's mother raised ten of her own children and wet-nursed her enslavers' in tandem. Moses characterized his mother as a diligent care-giver,

[34] Sally G. McMillen, 'Mothers' Sacred Duty: Breast-Feeding Patterns Among Middle and Upper Class Women in the Antebellum South', *Journal of Southern History*, 51, 3 (1985); Emily West, R.J. Knight, 'Mother's Milk: Slavery, Wet-nursing, and Black and White Women in the Antebellum South', *Journal of Southern History*, lxxxiii (2017), 44.
[35] Henderson, diary, 30 Sept.– 4 Oct. 1855: SHC, John S. Henderson Papers.
[36] Janet Golden, *A Social History of Wet Nursing in America: From Breast to Bottle* (Cambridge, 1996), 45.
[37] Henderson, diary, 1 Jan. 1858: SHC, John S. Henderson Papers.

whose work allowed her enslavers to enjoy a wider social world: they 'went about in society until they had no time to take care of their children'.[38] For Moses's mother, her labour was not only intimate and surely laborious, it also required that she sleep in the slaveholding household to attend the white children. Some enslaved wet-nurses may have been able to use their positions to obtain 'compensation and favours', and a 'more secure life for [their] children'.[39] However, most of wet-nursing's alleged benefits were inseparable from whites' interests: accommodation within or proximate to the slaveholding household was convenient for regular breastfeeding, and improved diet or lightened workload meant better milk. Breastfeeding rarely resulted in security or privileges, even for long-term wet-nurses like Moses's mother. Her enslavers gave Moses to their daughter as a wedding present, and this mother saw her son become the property of the child she had once nursed.

The role of the wet-nurse also usually entailed the labour of breastfeeding in addition to other forms of work. In Mississippi, one enslaved mother had seven children, and also breastfed 'some' of her mistress's children, 'totin' em around if she was busy, because she had a heap of bus'ness'. Her son, Ned Chaney, recalled how his mother was referred to as a 'mammy', but this title compounded the roles of wet-nurse, nurse, and other forms of domestic labour, including working in the 'loom room' 'ever[y] day of her life'.[40] The coercion of this intimate labour could be profoundly distressing as well as exhausting. One male slaveholder, for instance, forced a woman named Mary to feed his children before her own. Mary 'couldn't answer him a word', but was often seen crying ''til the tears met under her chin'.[41] The trade-off between one's enslavers' and one's own children was captured in

[38] Moses Slaughter in George P. Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, Supplement, Series 1, 12 vols. (Westport, 1979), v, Indiana and Ohio, 193–4.
[39] Katy Simpson Smith, *We Have Raised All of You*: *Motherhood in the South, 1750-1835* (Baton Rouge, 2013), 187.
[40] Ned Chaney, *American Slave*, vii, Mississippi, part i, 370–3.
[41] William McWhorter, FWP, iv, Georgia, part iii, 96–97.

abolitionist Sojourner Truth's 1858 speech, that described how 'her breasts had suckled many a white babe, to the exclusion of her own offspring'.[42] Even where enslaved women's labour was its most 'motherly', it was still often disassociated from their own children.

Enslaved women required to feed their enslavers' children were also traded or lent to other whites for the same purpose. When Laura Norwood no longer wanted Eliza as wet-nurse in December 1843, she offered her as a house-servant and nurse to another family member. Laura praised herself as getting 'along very well without Eliza so far'. After the birth of another child less than one month later, though, Laura's feelings changed, the consequence of which fell upon Eliza, who returned to Laura's household up to *three times-a-day* to take care of Laura's baby.[43] It is not clear where Eliza's own children were, who cared for them, or how many children she was nursing. Of course, it is also unclear how Eliza felt about these multiple responsibilities too. Female enslavers traded back and forth in enslaved women's labour as their individual priorities shifted.

Trade in wet-nurses went far beyond familial networks. Wet-nurses could be procured from informal and formal marketplaces for slave-labour. Here, as the research of Stephanie Jones-Rogers has demonstrated, white women 'transformed bondwomen's ability to suckle into a . . . skilled form of labor', and an enslaved woman's childlessness proved a distinct selling point.[44] The terms of commodification reflected slaveholders' view of enslaved children as disruptive dependents and their attempt to ensure the prioritisation of their children.

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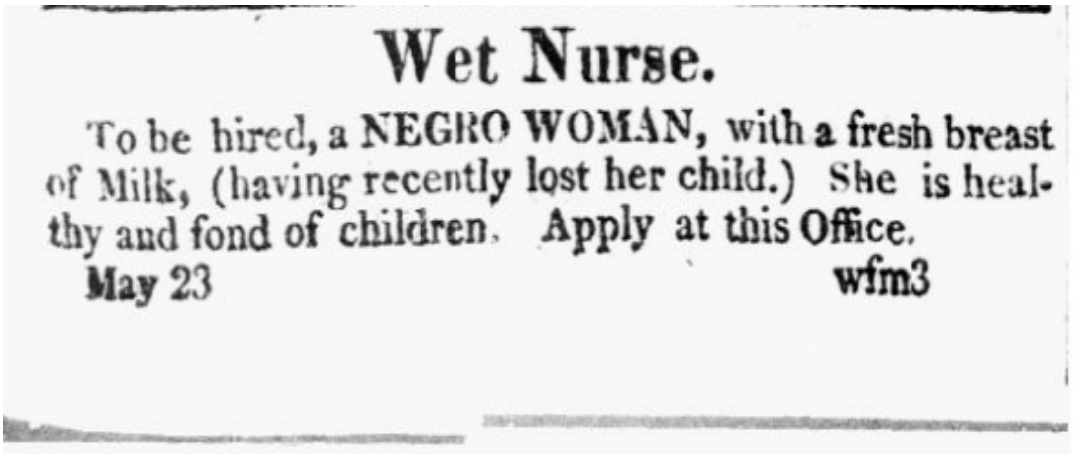
[42] Sojourner Truth, Olive Gilbert, Frances W. Titus, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth; a Bondswoman of Olden Time. . .* (Boston, 1875), 139; see also Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol* (New York, 1997), 138–42.
[43] Laura [Norwood] to mother, 6 Dec. 1843, Sally [Lenoir] to mother, 3 Jan. 1844: SHC, Lenoir Family Papers.
[44] Jones-Rogers, '"[S]he Could', 338, 346.



Wet Nurse.

To be hired, a NEGRO WOMAN, with a fresh breast of Milk, (having recently lost her child.) She is healthy and fond of children. Apply at this Office.

May 23 wfm3

City Gazette, Charleston, South Carolina, 24 May 1821

Such advertisements also emphasise that familiarity was not prerequisite to the exploitation of the most intimate forms of labour. Slaveholders wrung benefits from all aspects of motherhood. If pregnancy did not yield a valuable baby, it could yield a valuable body.

While some enslaved mothers navigated the tensions between breastfeeding white infants, other forms of slave-labour, and caring for their own children; in other wet-nursing arrangements, enslaved mothers were separated from their children, or forced to nourish a child while bereaved of their own. Slaveholders' intentions for profit through loss was not singular and whites were also able to commodify enslaved African Americans' dead bodies, as Daina Ramey Berry has shown. Bereaved enslaved wet-nurses lived and laboured with the 'ghost value' of their infants.[45] Each newspaper advertisement that offered a woman, 'having recently lost her child', for removal to new slaveholders away from home, family, and friends suggests untold emotional trials. Meanwhile, white women found in such bereaved enslaved mothers a convenient solution to the problems of household-labour. The Georgian plantation mistress Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, for example, mentioned in 1858 how using an 'inexperienced' bereaved mother to feed her child meant that 'Patsey' - another, presumably

[45] Berry, *Price for their Pound of Flesh*, ch. 6.

more experienced, enslaved woman - had 'much more time to sew'.[46] Her comment emphasises both the casualness with which female slaveholders calculated their interests in different elements of enslaved women's labour, and the callousness of white women who lacked any curiosity or care in the effects of their decisions upon enslaved women. Their own roles, responsibilities, and desires as mothers prompted them to initiate distinctive interventions into enslaved mothers' lives.

III.

In navigating the dual burdens of reproductive and productive labour, some enslaved mothers faced additional complexities in that their care for their children was taken over by their enslavers directly. The richest evidence appears in the recollections of formerly enslaved children, who described several different forms of mistresses' involvement in childcare. Mistresses participated in casual forms of childcare during the working-day. The extent of this practice varied, but slaveholding women were especially likely to assume caring responsibilities on smaller slaveholdings, and seasonally, when the demands of field-labour peaked. Millie Evans recalled how the mistress on her North Carolina plantation fed young enslaved children, sang to them, and put them down for naps. Millie hence felt that her mistress 'raised' her even though she still 'stayed with my ma every night'.[47] Through their roles in care-giving, mistresses encouraged the impression that, as Lizzie Barnett described, slaveholding and enslaved mothers 'raised dey chillum together'.[48] Lizzie had been enslaved on a plantation near Nashville, Tennessee. Despite the sibling-like relationship she described with her slaveholders' children, Lizzie recognised the many differences between them, and that her attachment to her mistress had developed because of her mother's slave-labour:

[46] Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, diary, 26 Dec. 1858: DU, Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas Papers.
[47] Millie Evans, FWP, ii, Arkansas, part ii, 240–1.
[48] Lizzie Barnett, FWP, ii, Arkansas, part i, 113.

'Why wouldn't I love [mistress] whan I sucked titty from her breast when my mammy was working in the field?'. [49] Millie Evans also highlighted that her mistress looked after the children because 'ma had to work hard'. Affections that enslaved children held for their mistress did not obscure the reality of their mothers' forced labour elsewhere.

Mistresses' roles in the care of enslaved children reinforced the primacy of hard manual labour over maternal labour in the lives of enslaved mothers, and at the same time, protected the lives of enslaved children. Slaveholders' interventions in care-giving could even extend to breastfeeding, as Lizzie described. As the formerly enslaved woman Mariah Calloway put it clearly, a mistress's 'sharp eye on the children' owed to the fact that 'a slave's life was very valuable to their owners'.[50] In their supervisory roles, mistresses also ensured that enslaved children learned and performed a variety of chores and jobs. Small hands were helpful, but more importantly, such children could be introduced to work, praise, and punishment.[51] While these activities added to white women's characterization of enslaved women's childbearing as *their* inconvenience, they also confirmed mistresses' commitment to fostering valuable adult slave-labourers. As in their management of enslaved women's labours in the slaveholding household and their mothering, mistresses aimed to benefit their families' slaveholding enterprises in both the shorter and longer-term.

Aside from assuming roles in enslaved children's care during their parents' working hours, slaveholding women also permanently shaped enslaved families' lives by removing children entirely to be 'raised' in the white household. In addition to receiving enslaved children as gifts and inheritance, mistresses actively selected children to live and work in their homes. On occasion, mistresses also 'raised' orphaned children in their households,

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[49] *ibid.*
[50] Mariah Calloway, FWP, iv, Georgia, part i, 174.
[51] See, on children's work, Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Born in Bondage: Growing up Enslaved in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000); Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington, 1995).

especially when a suitable enslaved care-giver was not available. Polly Colbert and her siblings moved into their slaveholders' household on the Red River, Oklahoma and Polly suggested her mistress had 'a sight of satisfaction' from caring for Polly's family because her own children had died. Meanwhile, George Greene came to the conclusion that his Alabama mistress's affection for him reflected that 'when a person raised a child from a month old she can't help from loving it'.[52] George, however, like almost all of the children 'raised' by their enslavers, remained enslaved. By the age of eight, he had worked as a waiter and was learning to plough. Mistresses made affectionate remarks about the children they knew, but displays tended to be rare and deeply limited. Children themselves generally retained a stronger identification with their own kin.[53] Even those who recalled relatively warm relations with their mistress did not overlook that they were, as Dianah Watson described, her 'n----r slave'.[54] Despite the economic rationale of these relationships, female slaveholders' caring work allowed them to perceive or construe themselves as benevolent slaveholders and mother-like figures. This is not to say mistresses were gentle in their attempts to realise their interests in enslaved children, but that care co-existed with their use of violence as a tool of coercion and control.[55]

Children raised within slaveholding households were highly vulnerable to abuse at the hands of their enslavers, and separation of children from parents was often deeply painful. Genia Woodberry, who was enslaved in South Carolina, recalled that she 'Hadder stay right dere to de big house aw de time' under the close supervision of her mistress. She described how singing her white charge to sleep 'make me hu't lak in me bosom to be wid my ole mammy back up dere in de quarter'. 'I wuz jes uh child den', she explained, 'en yuh know it

[52] Polly Colbert, FWP, xiii, Oklahoma, 34; George Greene, FWP, ii, Arkansas, part iii, 108.
[53] Schwartz, *Born in Bondage,* 104.
[54] Dianah Watson, FWP, xvi, Texas, part iv, 144 [term omitted by author].
[55] See, on female slaveholders' violence, Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*.

uh child happiness to be raise up wid dey mammy'.[56] Like adult nurses, some enslaved children clearly found that coerced caring work amplified the pain of separation from one's own kin. Enslaved parents also keenly felt these separations. Lindsay explained 'Dat jest nearly broke my old mammy's and pappy's heart, to have me took away off from them'. She recounted a sense of her parents' powerlessness as 'they couldn't say nothing and I had to go along with Miss Mary back to Texas'.[57] Mistresses use of children as household labourers, and often 'nurses' to white children specifically, emphasises how closely and in how many different ways slaveholding and enslaved women's advantages and trials as mothers were tied. Historian Katy Simpson Smith suggests that while 'intrusive or insensitive' to their mothers' wishes, mistresses ultimately protected and provided for enslaved children.[58] But enslaved parents rarely saw whites' interventions in this way.

Tensions between slaveholders and enslaved parents sometimes surfaced quite visibly. Sarah Debro, who had been enslaved in Orange County, North Carolina, remembered the details of her mother's duress. When slaveholder Polly White Cain saw 'a child down in de quarters dat she wanted to be raise be hand', she took them to be 'trained' in the house. Sarah was among them. She recalled the emotional and material advantages incumbent on her role as house-maid: she 'loved Mis' Polly an' loved stayin' at de big house'. But Sarah Debro's mother felt very differently. 'De day [Polly] took me', Sarah explained, 'my mammy cried kaze she knew I would never be 'lowed to live at de cabin wid her no more'. During the Civil War, Sarah's mother found the opportunity to take her back. Sarah recalled her mother's words to their former mistress: 'You took her away from me and' didn' pay no

[56] Genia Woodberry, FWP, xiv, South Carolina, part iv, 220.
[57] Mary Lindsay, FWP, xiii, Oklahoma, 180.
[58] Smith, *We Have Raised All of You,* 235.

mind to my cryin', so now I'se takin' her back home. We's free now, Mis' Polly, we ain't gwine be slaves no more to nobody'.[59]

Sarah Debro's account portrays a mother who made parental autonomy and family unity central to the very meaning of freedom. But newfound freedom was not the only issue at stake. Displaced bonds, confusing attachments, and removals to and from care-givers could have damaging long-term effects on relationships. Sarah did not want to leave with her mother. She protested and clutched at her mistress's skirt as she was dragged away. Her mother was frustrated: she beat Sarah and sent her to bed. The family's living conditions were hard: Sarah recalled that she was 'never hungry til we waz free'. [60] These were surely among the most painful experiences for enslaved mothers, and number among slavery's 'invisible scars'.[61] No matter how mistresses construed their relationships with enslaved children, nor children's experiences in the household, slaveholding women took these children from their families primarily in an attempt to raise skilled and receptive slave-labourers. Historian Wilma Dunaway has cautioned that 'we should be careful not to anesthetize our research to the long-term impacts of separations upon enslaved women'.[62] To fully appreciate these long-term impacts entails investigating separation in all its many forms: encompassing the sale or hire of family members, but also separations during working days, seasonally, and through the absorption of children into slaveholders' households. Some mothers saw, in unbearable proximity, their children raised by their enslavers.

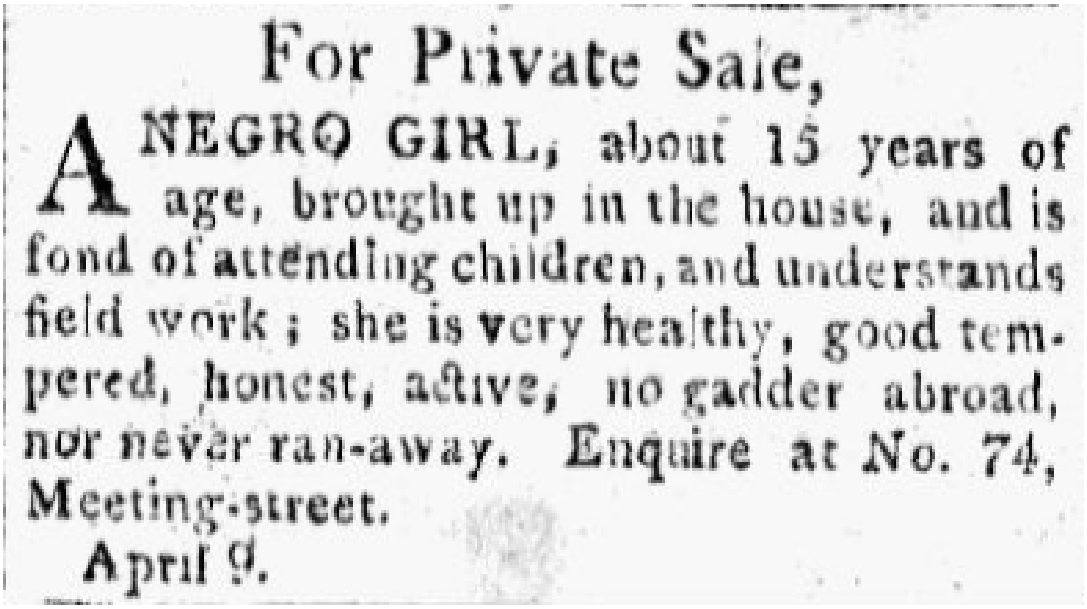
Families whose members remained relatively proximate often found ways to maintain their relationships. Hannah Fambro explained how, after she was given to her newly married mistress in Macon, Georgia, she would sneak out of the house and run one mile to her

[59] Sarah Debro, FWP, xi, North Carolina, part i, 248–52.
[60] *ibid.*
[61] Turner, 'Nameless and the Forgotten', 234.
[62] Wilma Dunaway, *The African American Family in Slavery and Emancipation* (Cambridge, 2003), 81.

mother's home. She said she would 'stay all night an' sleep wid my mammy', adding that she 'run back again befo' daylight so I don' get whipt'.[63] Other children devised different strategies. In South Carolina, Sally Stevenson's mistress took her away 'when she wuz jes uh little small girl'. With designs to 'raise' Sally as a 'house girl', her mistress 'never wouldn't 'low [Sally] to go in the colored settlement no more'. Sally married at thirteen-years-old to 'ge' outer de big house'. Children were not allowed in the slaveholders' household, and Sally and her family lived in a room attached to the kitchen. Despite having secured a space for herself and her family, Sally still had to 'stay 'bout ole missus aw de day', performing various forms of work like washing, ironing, and sewing, whilst looking after her children.[64] Taken from her mother for household-servitude, and then forced to navigate the tensions between slave-labour and caring for her own children, Sally's experiences illuminate the cyclical nature of slaveholders' interventions into mother-child relationships. Indeed, Sally's own daughter went on to work as a nurse for the white children.

Mistresses recognised the value of this child labour in their own households. That greater numbers of enslaved children working in a household than did so in adulthood, ensured the chance to pick and choose the most promising 'servants' for themselves.[65] An enslaved child's 'raising' in the household, and the forms of labour they undertook there, were also readily commodified:

[63] Hannah Fambro, *American Slave*, v, Indiana and Ohio, 333.
[64] Jessie Sparrow, FWP, xiv, South Carolina, part iv, 121–6.
[65] Schwartz, *Born in Bondage*, 118.



For Private Sale,

A NEGRO GIRL, about 15 years of age, brought up in the house, and is fond of attending children, and understands field work; she is very healthy, good tempered, honest, active, no gadder abroad, nor never ran-away. Enquire at No. 74, Meeting-street.

April 9.

City Gazette, Charleston, South Carolina, 13 Apr. 1803

Enslavers traded in children as well as teens. In Tennessee, as Millie Simpkins described, 'De young slaves wuz hired out ter nuss de white chilluns'. She was hired-out by her mistress from seven-years-old, working first as a nurse, and later in hotels and in taverns.[66] Other children were sold. In Williamsburg, Missouri, Marilda Pethy and her mother worked in their enslavers' household. Her mother was a cook, but as Marilda explained, 'Mother done everything'. Marilda cared for their enslavers' children, among other household tasks. While her mistress kept Marilda from being sold, 'Old Miss sold de other four children and sent 'em south'.[67] The growth of the enslaved population and established trading routes provided slave-owners with opportunities to sell and to profit, and female slaveholders shared in weighing 'the relative advantages of working slaves at home and of selling some slaves for ready cash.[68] Hiring children, rather than selling them, could be effective for slaveholders seeking to profit from the work of the youngest enslaved people, but mindful that they would

[66] Millie Simpkins, FWP, xv, Tennessee, 67.
[67] Marilda Pethy, FWP, x, Missouri, 278–9.
[68] Michael Tadman, 'The Interregional Slave Trade in the History and Myth-Making of the U.S. South', in Walter Johnson (ed.), *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas* (New Haven, 2008), 129–30.

become much more valuable in later-life. However, this commodification of children's domestic-labour presented yet another way through which enslaved mothers were separated from their children. Whilst the resilience of mother-child relationships is clear, white women spearheaded incredibly painful and often devastating forms of family separation.

Focusing closer attention on the dynamics of caring work in slaveholding households thus illuminates the multitudinous interests female slaveholders pursued in enslaved women's work, their bodies, and their babies. These interests were shaped, and sometimes driven, by their own desires and roles as mothers; and the many resulting interventions shaped the lives of countless enslaved families. Examining mistresses' interventions and the household's particular forms and organisations of enslaved women's work emphasises both the many ways slaveholding and enslaved mothers' privileges and disadvantages were linked, and enslaved women's complex and variable experiences of mothering. Some enslaved mothers fed, washed, and worked for their children long after they left their day's labour; others struggled to claim time to care for their own children because they were caring for their enslavers'. Some mothers' house-service meant they could be close to their children; others were confined to nights, seasons, lifetimes apart from their families. 'Apart' could be painfully close, and while some mothers lost their children through the market, others were 'raised' by their mistress. While some female slaveholders took roles in the social reproduction of the enslaved, enslaved women simultaneously reproduced the slave-labour force, and, in caring for and nourishing white children, they were coerced into reproducing the slaveholding class itself.