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Not Killing Me Softly: African American Women, Slave Revolts, and Historical Constructions of Racialized Gender

On March 28, 1812, a slave named Tom was interrogated about his involvement in the murder of his owner, John Smith, of Henry County, Virginia (Calendar, 123). During the course of this interrogation, Tom confessed to the murder and revealed that the act he committed was to be the incipient action of a wider revolt, timed to coincide with the confusion surrounding the impending war of 1812. He explained that his killing of Smith and the larger conspiracy was “instigated” by another slave of Smith’s, a woman named Celia. The justices then asked, “Have you any knowledge of other negroes other than the woman before mentioned who are disposed to rise in order to kill their masters?” Tom answered that he knew of a great many – thirty or forty – who planned to use stolen weapons to create an army of resistance. He reported that the “negroes in the neighborhood said that these British people was about to rise against this Country...” and Celia and the others planned their revolt to occur in time with these events.

¹ This article was years in the making. I was blessed to work with Prof. Donna Haraway for a year. The first semester I was a student in her seminar on Intersectionality and Feminist Theory. The following semester a small group of us continued working with her on applying what we learned during the first semester to a major piece of scholarship: dissertation chapters, MA theses and so on. The most important thing Donna taught me was that I, too, could create *theory*. It was one of the most empowering educational experiences in my life. Without it I would have been unable to create a theoretical construct which explained how technologies of power were always already racialized and gendered, which brings me to the next wise, wise woman on my journey, Prof. Angela Harris, who reminded me that the specific formulation I developed here, “racialized gender,” was my construct. I was certain that it was in general usage, or at least in the secondary sources I had read. She suggested that I investigate that further and after a careful review, I found like-minded people struggling with intersections of race and gender, but I did not find this specific construct. I found that I had made my own unique contribution to a line of thought developed and applied by Kimberlee Crenshaw, Angela Harris, Katlhleen Brown, Hazel Carby, Gloria Anzaldua, Adrienne Davis, Glenda Gilmore, and others. Angela Harris is another warrior woman professor who taught me not to pacify my own self while trying to break the structured silences around the agency of enslaved African American women. I also want to thank Professor Lynn Westerkamp, my advisor and chair of my dissertation committee who helped me think through this initial research project. She encouraged me to criticize the received wisdom of historians who claim that there were no women in slave revolts, She taught me the how to seek primary sources with the rigor of a trained historian. I was also blessed to work with Bettina Aptheker, who has worked for decades on restoring African American women to their place as pioneers of feminism in the United States, and she insisted that that this project would “change the field.” Finally I must thank my parents: my father, Harry Haywood, who embodied the concept of struggle from the bottom up, and my mother, Gwendolyn Midlo Hall who taught me that history is crucial. In my objective opinion, she is the best historian alive today. I dedicate this work to my grandmother, Harriet Thorpe born in 1860 as a slave on Squire Sweeney’s plantation in Howard County, Missouri. She worked as a domestic in White homes her whole life, and was active in the Black women’s Club movement until she died in 1926.

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There was perhaps another woman, Hannah, who helped plan this revolt. Hannah was to pay another slave, Jack, 200 pounds of hemp for killing her master, Mr. Hill. It is possible that she was one of the coordinators of the revolt, implementing decisions regarding who was to be killed when. It is also possible that she was just taking the opportunity of the uprising to ensure her master was killed without doing it herself.

Tom testified that after the killing he again met with Celia, who told him to take a horse and flee. He was concerned that if he did, everyone would know that he killed Smith, but she argued that he should go or they would suspect both of them. So Tom fled. In the course of his journey he met with “a negro woman of a Mr. Hall’s in Franklin,” and he told her that “the negroes were shortly to rise against the white people.” This un-named woman told Tom that “they could not rise too soon for her, as she had rather be in hell than where she was” (Ibid., 123).

The text of Tom’s “confession” is primarily a summary in the language of the justices of the peace who conducted it. The “transcript” of the confession was sent to the Governor, along with some “reflections,” in which the justices explained how they determined the veracity of Tom’s confession. They were convinced that he told the truth about the existence of the conspiracy. They claimed that “as far as we have been able to judge from the information of persons coming immediately from his neighborhood, who came to remove him to the county of Henry, he appears to be entirely correct as well with respect to the characters mentioned in his confession, as with respect to the time and manner alluded to....” (Ibid., 123).

In determining who actually led this uprising, we must consider what motivations may have been driving the actors involved. Tom could have been provoked to implicate others, like Celia, not only to make his own acts seem less severe in relation, but also in order to make his confession seem more valuable to the state. Then there is the opposite possibility, that Tom would downplay the extent of the conspiracy to protect un-named others. And of course there is the chronic issue that we only have the justices’ interpretations of what Tom said, and they certainly had their own concerns about slave revolt. Despite these problems, this story and others indicate that African American slave women were

strategically involved in violent slave revolt despite the historiographical consensus that claims slave women did not participate in this type of resistance.

What counts as a slave revolt in the historiography has been the focus of much debate over the years. Herbert Aptheker's seminal work, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, has been often criticized for offering too broad a definition ("merely" requiring a minimum number involved and contemporaneous documentation), thereby exaggerating the number and scope of revolts in the U.S. (Genovese, 22). Others define a full-fledged revolt as one in which it is the explicit aim of the slaves to overthrow the system of slavery, and revolts that fell short of this goal were viewed as pre- or proto-political (Genovese 1979; Hobssbawm 1959). For the purposes of my analysis, this type of debate is not directly relevant. What concerns me is the silencing of enslaved women in revolt, and thus examining which aspects of revolt, however defined, are seen by historians as an exclusively male activity. What seems most threatening are women involved in *coordinated, confrontational* acts of *violent* resistance. "Revolt seems to have become even more a specialized political and insurrectionary male responsibility," (Genovese 6). "If slave women did not figure prominently in the organization of collective resistance such as revolt, it was not because they lacked the will but because, as mothers of children and nurturers of their families, they engaged in less confrontational or nonviolent forms of resistance," (Gaspar and Hine 1996, ix). Feminist historians, faced with the widespread denial of women as actors in slave revolt, seek to reclaim "gender-specific" acts of resistance. These historians see certain individual violent acts, such as the destruction of property, suicide or infanticide as "female resistance," contributing, perhaps inadvertently, to the idea that coordinated acts of violence which aim to kill slaveholders are "male."²

For the purposes of this inquiry, I define a slave revolt as any violent, coordinated act of resistance that kills or attempts to kill slave owners or their agents. This definition is a methodological

² Poisoning one's owner has also been categorized as a "female" act of slave resistance, which, although it involves killing a slaveholder, it is not as directly confrontational as picking up a gun and shooting him or her. Also, poisoning can be connotative of a cowardly or underhanded act, and thus is often unconsciously gendered female by historians. For discussions of "women's resistance" to slavery, see generally Alice and Raymond Bauer, "Day to Day Resistance to Slavery," *Journal of Negro History* 37 (October 1842): 388-419; and Darlene Hine and Kate Wittenstein "Female Slave Resistance: The Economics of Sex." In *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*, ed. Filomina Chioma Steady (Cambridge: Schenkman Publishing, 1981) 289-99.

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move that allows me to deconstruct the pacification of enslaved women in revolt. My project is to show that women were in fact involved in slave revolt, and the silencing of these women's acts occur in the gendering of both primary sources and historians' subsequent interpretation of those sources. For the purposes of this analysis, I define "gender" as a historically contingent ideological construct which serves to place women and men in specific frameworks as part of an ongoing system of male dominance. By "racialized gender" I refer to the ongoing process by which race creates and defines gender and gender creates and defines race.³ If we interrogate this silence, viewing the primary sources and the historiography on slave revolt with an eye toward problematizing beliefs about African American women in revolt, women who were previously invisible start to reappear.

I start with Celia's Conspiracy to provide an illustration of this silence. In reviewing the work of Herbert Aptheker, Fox-Genovese states, "Aptheker, long before the emergence of women's history in its contemporary guise, insisted on recording the presence of women among slave rebels wherever he found it...I can find no place in *American Negro Slave Revolts* in which women should have been included and were not," (Fox-Genovese, 144). But Herbert Aptheker reviewed the same document I did and doesn't mention Celia or Hannah. Fox-Genovese claims that Aptheker's coverage of women participants is exhaustive and his willingness to credit women's contribution "cannot be questioned." She even states

³ The concept of racialized gender is central to the field of Critical Race Feminism, an intellectual movement that first emerged in the legal academy. Two ovarian articles, Kimberle Crenshaw's "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," 1989 *U. Chi. Legal F.* 139, 1989, and Angela P. Harris' "Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory," 42 *Stan. L. Rev.* 581(1990), set the stage for the project of analyzing how the intersection of race and gender impacts legal analysis and theory. A similar theoretical move began in the humanities in general, and in history specifically. See for example Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's article "African American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," in Darlene Clark Hine, Wilma King and Linda Reed, *We Specialize in the Wholly Impossible: A Reader in Black Women's History*, (Brooklyn, NY: Carson Publishing, 1995).

that Aptheker added women to the record where they were absent⁴ (Ibid., 144). But Aptheker discusses only Tom and the slave-conjurer named Goomer, even though he discusses Tom's actions as a slave conspiracy, placing it within the context of the political unrest surrounding the War of 1812 (Aptheker 1952, 252-253). The women are left out. Despite the fact that the primary documents indicate that Celia instigated these events, I have found no mention of her in any of the scholarship on slave revolts. I label the events of March, 1812, "Celia's Conspiracy" to make this point: we, as historians, review the documents and make assessments about who led revolts and who participated in revolts. We bring our own assumptions to the work, pre-figuring the field. And this field has been pre-figured to exclude the existence of women (Marshall 1995, 4).

A crucial methodology in this interrogation is to reveal how the erasure of women's agency occurs *in the relationship* between the primary sources and the subsequent interpretation of these sources. The predisposition to view women as unable or unwilling to engage in organized violent rebellion has a past, intimately tied in with the tradition of specific gender ideologies, and these ideologies impacted the creation of the primary sources themselves (Guha 1988, 47). In examining the relationship between sources and their subsequent interpretation, a view of history as a practice of inscription comes in to view; a back-and-forth process whereby views of subjectivity are shaped, and the political agency of the

⁴ She explains that he mentions women where the record is silent because of his belief in women as social actors, 114. In fact there are other cases where the slave women involved in revolt are not discussed in Aptheker's work. For example, in his discussion of the New York City slave conspiracy trials of 1741 he states: "Of the slaves arrested, thirteen were burned alive, eighteen were hanged (two in chains), and seventy banished." Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: International Publishers, 1952), 195. The gender remains unspecified, although the judicial records list several slave women convicted. See Daniel Horsmanden, *The New York Conspiracy*, Appendix: "A List of Negroes Committed on Account of the Conspiracy." ed. Thomas J. Davis (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), I am concerned that Fox-Genovese's statement that Aptheker added women to the record where they did not exist will become enshrined as fact in historiographies of slave revolts. See for example Kenneth Edward Marshall, "Rebels in Their Midst: A Theoretical Exploration of Gender, Geography and Consciousness as Related to the Resistance and Survival of Female Slaves in New Jersey," (Ph.D. dissertation, Michigan State University, 1995), 4. Marshall's unique and useful study of gender, geography and resistance presents this "fact" as an established critique of Aptheker's work.

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“subaltern” is constrained.⁵ I label the discourse which effects this constriction the “prose of passivity”: a discursive construct which elides enslaved women’s agency and precludes the possibility of seeing their participation in armed revolt. It is the methodology through which the pacification of the enslaved woman takes place. It is a structured silence, created by the prose of passivity.

Using this methodology, I interrogate the silence surrounding women’s participation in slave revolt, reveal the investments in this silencing, and restore the actions of women in revolt to the historical record. In Part One I review the historiography of slave resistance and revolt, and show how historical understandings of gender roles during slavery as well as subsequent beliefs concerning gender that are a direct legacy of slavery have shaped the discussion of slave resistance. The concept of gender “dysfunction” has framed the debate and caused revisionist historiography to deconstruct the “passive (male) negro” by creating a “passive negress.” In Part Two, I read sources against the grain in order to recuperate women’s leadership of and participation in slave revolts during the Middle Passage. I analyze quantitative and qualitative data to show the centrality of the acts of women captives, and discuss how contemporaneous understandings of racialized gender rendered women’s acts almost illegible to those who perpetrated the slave trade. In Part Three I focus on two revolts in early colonial New York to contrast the visibility of those women in the primary sources with their invisibility during the Middle Passage. In both the 1708 and 1712 revolts women’s participation was well-documented. I suggest a framework for understanding this difference in order to provide guidance for future research. Finally I discuss specific methodological problems which render these women’s actions in New York inaccessible to historians today. I conclude this article with a meditation on historical silences and relations of power,

⁵ In “The Prose of Counter-Insurgency,” Ranajit Guha uses a similar methodology to deconstruct the historiography of peasant rebellion in India in order to track the origin of the view of peasant rebels as some sort of force of nature, lacking any political agency. He explains that in order to effect this deconstruction, we have to look closely at the primary sources upon which historians base their research: “how did the historiography come to acquire this particular blind spot and never find a cure? For an answer one could start by having a close look at its constituting elements and examine those cuts, seams and stitches— those cobbling marks— which tell us about the material it is made of and the manner of its absorption into the fabric of writing.” Ranajit Guha, “The Prose of Counter-Insurgency,” in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, eds. Ranajit Guha and Chakravorty Spivak (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 47. His analysis has had a strong impact on my methodology, although gender is not a category of analysis in his work.

and the role historiography plays in constructing ongoing technologies of racialized gender.

PART ONE: FROM PASSIVE NEGRO TO PASSIVE NEGRESS: ENGENDERING THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF SLAVE REBELLION

In order to track the elision of enslaved women's participation in revolt, we need to begin with an exploration of the historiography of slave resistance. This historiography has been shaped by an ongoing debate designed to refute the alleged passivity of the enslaved man and the emasculating matriarchal enslaved woman that has infected the study of North American slavery. In response to the critique that African American gender roles were (and therefore are) pathological, historians have employed the tropes of "masculinity" and "femininity" as defined by the dominant culture in such a way as to pre-figure revolt as "masculine."

Although the discussion of enslaved men's passivity is in some ways as old as the institution of American slavery itself, the issue in its modern guise began with the work of Stanley Elkins. His arguments concerning the personality of the American slave were first laid out in his book *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, and much of the debate concerning slave resistance in the United States responds to what has come to be known as the "Elkins thesis." Elkins contends that the stereotype of the black "Sambo," i.e. the passive childlike slave, who maintained a complete dependence on his white master, was in fact real (Elkins 1959). Although he rejects the earlier contention of the Phillip's school that this docility and irresponsibility was caused by race-based characteristics, he maintains that the nature of slavery in the American South was such that it produced this personality in the slave. According to Elkins, Africans brought to the new world were unable to retain any of their own culture or basis for a separate belief system because they were immediately thrown into a situation where these systems had no context. Slaves could only look to their masters for standards of conduct. "All lines of authority descended from the master, and alternative social bases that might have supported alternative standards were systematically suppressed," (Elkins 1970, 80).

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Although Elkins believes that this lack of any “alternative social bases” impeded slave resistance by creating passivity, his thesis specifically centers on the concept of “manhood.” Manhood was denied to male slaves, which was a cause in the creation of Sambo. They had no rights as husbands or fathers, and no authority over their wives and children. The logic of the system of planter domination, however, did not deny “womanhood” to women in the same way. Thus, “whatever real authority existed within the slave community tended to be exercised by women rather than men.”⁶ Much of the subsequent literature is structured to refute Elkins’ contentions. Historians, who do not believe that “Sambo” was real, point to the existence and cohesion of a slave community, highlight the role that African culture(s) continued to play in African American society, and assert the masculinity of the black male slave. This masculinity is demonstrated by documenting black male authority over slave women and children within the slave community and by showing evidence of slave men’s organized resistance to slavery. All of this has worked together to write slave women’s resistance, especially women in revolt, out of the literature. For example, in *The Slave Community*, John Blassingame rejects the existence of Sambo by examining African cultural survivals, slave culture, family life, and plantation social structure, thereby offering a very different type of “slave personality” than does Elkins, shaped within the context of a vibrant and complex slave community. He rejects an analytical framework which looks at power and culture only through the eyes of the planter, because it produces the distorted view of “an all-powerful, monolithic institution which strips the slave of any meaningful and distinctive culture, family life, religion, or manhood,” (Blassingame 1972, vii). There are no women slaves in his work. There are slave men, and then their wives and children (Ibid. 89).⁷ Blassingame also seems to believe that resistance is a male preserve. When examining why there were fewer slave revolts in the United States, as compared to Latin America, he claims that. “[o]f overriding importance in the apparent greater inclination of Latin American

⁶ Elkins doesn’t explain why slave women didn’t use this “authority” to resist slavery. If the purpose of his theory is designed to explain why resistance was hampered, and his explanation turns on the passivity of males, he offers no explanation why women didn’t resist. The implication here is that resistance must be some trait inherent to manhood.

⁷ For example, when discussing “the most brutal aspect of slavery”, Blassingame says: “Nothing demonstrated his powerlessness as much as the slave’s inability to prevent the forceable sale of his wife and children.” Ibid., 89.

slaves to rebel was the constant importation of Africans and a slave population composed of from 60 per cent to 70 percent males,” (Ibid., 125) Similarly, Herbert Gutman’s project in *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* is to show the existence of “alternative social bases” which Elkins claims did not exist. Gutman responds to Elkins by arguing that a slave culture existed separately from planter culture, and by stressing the role of slave men within the family as protectors and providers (Gutman, 1976). Women are virtually ignored.⁸

When women are not entirely overlooked in the historiography of slave revolt, they are shown as not assertive, or not “emasculating.” For example, as Eugene Genovese explains in response to Elkins, “The women’s attitude...toward their own femininity belies the conventional wisdom according to which the women unwittingly helped ruin their men by asserting themselves in the home, protecting their children, and assuming other normally masculine responsibilities.” And, “female deference represented an effort by the women to support their men...” (Genovese, 1976, 500, emphasis added). In *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, Genovese responds to the aspect of Elkins’ thesis that slave passivity was caused by the emasculation of the (male) slave, by providing an alternative explanation for why resistance was suppressed in the North American South. Genovese rejects “Sambo,” and offers a different explanation– the hegemony of paternalism combined with internalized racism, which “transformed elements of personal dependency into a sense of collective weakness,” (Genovese 1976, 149). Although Genovese and Elkins differ concerning the origins of slave passivity, they both contend that it in fact existed.

By the 1980s, scholars in women’s history and African American history began to look more closely at the experience of enslaved women. This scholarship was useful in the study of slave women and resistance because it provided some basis for examining the impact of gender on the constitution of women as social actors in their own right, which forms the basis for their ability to participate in any form of resistance. But the issues of Elkins’ emasculation and Genovese’s hegemony which underlay the

⁸ For a more extensive gender-based critique of Gutman’s work, see Debora Grey White 1985, 20-21).

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earlier historiography on slave resistance affected that work, having a detrimental impact on historians' ability to perceive the existence and nature of women's participation in revolt.

In her book *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese examines the economy of the plantation household, women's life cycles, and women's experiences within the slave community (Fox-Genovese, 1988). She asserts that a fundamental difference between black and white women in all of these areas relates to the nature of slaveholder domination: for White women this domination was coterminous with their roles as wives, daughters and mothers; for Black women this domination superseded their roles as wives, daughters and mothers. Although this is an important distinction to make when trying to understand the lived experience of enslaved women, Fox-Genovese ends up conflating a certain set of gender roles with an unspecified, ahistorical and "universal" construction of gender. She concludes that in the face of White domination slave women became "un-gendered." She argues that intrinsic to the nature of slaveholder domination was "naked power," i.e. where the "trappings of gender" were "stripped away" for black women (Fox-Genovese 1988, 30).

This assertion brings about some unfortunate conclusions about Black women's lives under slavery and about the nature of domination and resistance. There is no such thing as "naked power." At its most fundamental level, power in slave society was constituted through the use of gender, as well as through race. This is not just an abstract philosophical issue: Fox-Genovese's lack of an understanding of how power is articulated through gender renders certain key mechanisms of domination invisible to her. It shapes her analysis of the nature of slave women's resistance, because within this framework, the ultimate resistance for black people is a "re-assertion" of "gender roles." This has a profound impact on how she views enslaved women's participation in armed revolt, which in her formulation becomes destructive to Black liberation. Asserting that over time, as the slave community strengthened, women participated less and less in violent revolt, she claims that "the political division of labor by gender that came to characterize Afro-American resistance to slavery testifies to a growing commitment not merely to escaping from or defying their enslavement as individuals, but to replacing the prevailing social system

with a more just one,” (Ibid., 387).⁹ This “more just” social system appears to be one in which “White middle class gender roles” are firmly established, something that is still lacking in the Black community to its deficit. Race and class oppression still continue to “expose Afro-American women to indignities against which their men (can) not always protect them...” (Ibid., 396). Thus we hear the echoes of Elkins’ emasculation thesis.

And what are these gender roles that have such liberatory value for black people? Her analysis of rape and slavery is telling:

[F]ew [slaveholders] considered a slave woman’s sexuality as being under the protection of a particular man. Those whose personal morality did not restrain them believed that they had a right to enjoy that sexuality without anyone’s by-your-leave. To argue that their very sexual advances implicitly recognized slave women’s womanhood misses the point. Their advances above all reflected their appreciation of a sexuality *freed from the constraints of social and gender conventions*, freed from the bonds in which sexuality is normally embedded and through which it is normally experienced. Sexual advances by slaveholders ... subjected slave women to a sense of atomization. As a slave woman and her master confronted each other, the trappings of gender slipped away. The woman faced him alone. She looked on naked power (Ibid, 374, emphasis added).

From this argument it becomes clear that the gender “conventions” to which Fox-Genovese refers are those in which women are “protected” from rape by a man who is responsible for her safety. However, this discourse was part of White planter ideology, and we can’t assume that it translated across race or class. In fact, the protection of women’s “virtue” by men is a specifically European construction of gender. It is not part of the West African constellation of gendered norms.¹⁰ Without trying to downplay the horror of members of the slave community being unable to protect *each other* from abuse, it is somewhat shocking that a women’s historian would see the discourse of men protecting “female virtue” as liberating for women.

Further, Fox-Genovese doesn’t see the rape of enslaved women itself as gendered. Her belief in an un-gendered “naked power” reveals how her analysis is decontextualized. She sees slaveholder

⁹ There is no evidence to support Fox-Genovese’s assertion that revolt became a more masculine preserve over time.

¹⁰ For a comparison of European and West African gender roles see Claire Robertson, “Africa into the Americas?” in *More Than Chattel*, eds. David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p.10. See also Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson, *A Shining Thread of Hope: The History of Black Women in America*, (New York: Broadway Books, 1998, pp. 16- 19

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domination “atomizing” slave women. The enslaved woman becomes a tabula rasa for the slaveholder’s aggression. Fox-Genovese thus operates within the framework of the hegemony of planter ideology first formulated in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, and sees the slave community’s “retention” of “gender roles” as a process of negotiation in the face of this hegemony. “Both in their acceptance of and resistance to white norms, the slaves established distinct limits to the power of slaveholders, which always fell short of the total power that the latter desired,” (Fox-Genovese 298). Thus, in her analysis, the existence of “gender roles” within the slave community itself becomes evidence of this negotiation because as explained above, “total power” (i.e. “naked power”) strips away gender.¹¹

Fortunately some of the most recent work on enslaved women has managed to escape the constraints these theoretical frameworks have imposed. For example, Stephanie Camp’s *Closer to Freedom* discusses everyday resistance and offers refreshing interventions by incorporating ideas about gender and the geography of resistance. Jennifer Morgan’s *Laboring Women* places enslaved women at the center of her analysis, thereby reframing the historical analysis of slavery. She shows how crucial women’s labor and reproduction was to the structure of the entire institution (Morgan, 2004). Edward Baptist’s work demonstrates the centrality of rape in the commodification of the domestic slave trade. (Baptist, 2001).¹² These examples highlight how

¹¹ Hortense Spillers argues that enslaved women became “un-gendered,” during the Middle Passage. When discussing the measurements of the infamous slave ship, *The Brookes*, which identifies the amount of space allocated for each person by age and Spillers states: “It has been pointed out to me that these measurements do reveal the application of the gender rule to the material conditions of passage, but I would suggest that “gendering” takes place within the confines of the domestic, an essential metaphor that then spreads its tentacles for male and female subject over a wider ground of human and social.” (Spillers, 70) However relations of power are in part formed by gender, and are in fact intrinsic to the definition of gender. For a detailed discussion of gender as a primary method of signifying relations of power, inside or outside “the domestic,” see Joan Scott, 44.

¹² The historiography on women and resistance in the Caribbean is more extensive. See for example Hilary Beckles *Natural Rebels: a Social History of Enslaved Women in Barbados* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989); Barbara Bush’s *Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650-1838* has sections discussing resistance. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990). Also see Bernard Moitt 1996, Marrietta Morrissey 1988.

the recent scholarship on gender has begun break free of the historiographical constraints discussed above, and is re-shaping the study of American slavery as a whole.¹³

Despite this progress, Genovese's thesis of slavery as paternalistic hegemony is still central in the current literature on slave resistance and revolt, and studies of revolt still are written explicitly or implicitly in response to Elkins' thesis. Numerous books and articles have been written on slave revolt in the last four decades, and the theoretical concepts revealed in the brief historiography above continue to frame the work.¹⁴ Discussions of revolt reveal a profound investment in "uncovering" evidence of enslaved women's passivity. Why? What are these historians writing against? The myth of the Black Matriarch and the alleged pathology of African American gender relations. As Angela Davis explained in 1971, "the matriarchal black woman has been repeatedly invoked as one of the fatal by-products of slavery," (Davis, 4). Daniel Patrick Moynihan's infamous 1965 report on the dysfunction of the negro family was not the cause of this formulation, but rather a symptom of it, re-inscribing a pre-existing myth with the mantle of government policy. Historians' involvement in the discourse surrounding African American women's creation of the alleged pathology of black culture is at least as old as the official origin of the discipline of history. In his 1889 book, *The Plantation Negro As Freeman*, published five years after the foundation of the American Historical Association, historian Phillip Bruce wrote that it was women who "really molded the institution of marriage among plantation negroes ... to them its present degradation is chiefly ascribable," (Bruce 1889, 84-85).

¹³ Jennifer Morgan pointed out in *Laboring Women* that there were only four full-length studies of enslaved women at the time her book was written. (Morgan, 2004, 6) Interestingly, she did not include Fox-Genovese's *Within the Plantation Household* in that number. It is fair not to include that work as one "primarily about slave women" because it was more about how women slave owners viewed slave women. She did overlook Beckles' work. Since Morgan's book was published in 2004, Stephanie Camp's book was published. There are now six full-length monographs on enslaved women: Deborah Grey White's *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985), Hilary Beckles' *Natural Rebels: a Social History of Enslaved Women in Barbados*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989; Barbara Bush's *Slave women in Caribbean Society*, Bernard Moitt's *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles*, and Stephanie Camp's *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*. (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

¹⁴ A random example might suffice here. In Douglas Egerton's work on Gabriel's Rebellion, he states in his introduction that in Virginia "the harsh patriarchal ethos was already giving way to the gentler ideal of paternalism." Here he applies without question Genovese's theory of the rise of paternalism in the ante-bellum period. (Egerton, 4). For an excellent critique of the "paternalism thesis," see CITE ARTICLE.

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The historiographical construction of the pathological Black matriarch was taken up by sociologists who studied the origin of the so-called “culture of poverty.” In *Killing the Black Body*, Dorothy Roberts discusses the work of E. Franklin Frazier who in 1939 “reiterated the thesis that dominant Black women, by perpetuating the slave legacy of unwed motherhood, were the cause of family instability.” She explains that sociologists such as Frazier “saw Black people’s redemption in their adoption of white family patterns. These sociologists held Black families up against a white middle-class model and declared that they were defective,” (Roberts, 16).

Moynihan wrote *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* as the director of the Office of Policy and Planning within the context of President Johnson’s “war on poverty.” Moynihan claimed that “at the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family,” evidenced by the rates of divorce, illegitimacy and the high rate of “female-headed households,” (United States Department of Labor 1965, 5). He explains that the conditions for this deterioration began in slavery, citing both Elkins and Frazier to support his contention that “Negro women” have been “accustomed to playing the dominant role in family and marriage relations” since slavery (Ibid., 17). Moynihan concludes in his chapter entitled “The Tangle of Pathology,” by claiming that “in essence, the Negro Community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male....” (Ibid, 29).

The concept of the Black matriarch and the emasculated Black man is *still* current in the scholarship. In *Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries*, Orlando Patterson’s analysis of the legacy of slavery on African American gender relations, he writes: “Racist oppression took many forms and damaged Afro-American men and women in numerous ways, but the single greatest focus of ethnic domination was the relentless effort to emasculate the Afro-American male in every conceivable way and at every turn.” (Patterson 1998, xiii).

Thus when Eugene Genovese argued that Black women didn’t “undermine their men” by assuming “masculine roles,” he was writing against the mythology outlined in the Moynihan report. But in the process Genovese and the vast majority of historians of North American slave resistance since Elkins

have been caught in a Manichean binary of masculine/active versus feminine/passive, constructing a passivity for women in order to shore up men's masculinity. The historiography of slave revolt is engaged in an ongoing project of *pacification* of enslaved women— a pacification seen as necessary in the face of danger, to counteract the threat of Black women. This construction of Black women's gender didn't begin with Moynihan, and the conception of the dangerous Black female continues to this day, shaping the way historians interpret their sources. Wahneema Lubiano describes the construction of the dangerous Black female as follows: "She is the agent of destruction, the creator of the pathological, black, urban, poor family from which all ills flow; a monster creating crack dealers, addicts, muggers, and rapists— men who become those things because of being immersed in *her* culture of poverty," (Lubiano 1992, 339). And of course a family where a woman leads does not merit the designation of a "family" at all, but instead becomes the dangerous and pathological "female-headed household." This trope invokes the image of a hydra, or perhaps a Medusa who as a monster, gives birth to monsters.¹⁵

Further, the process of pacifying the dangerous Black woman is achieved by applying the ideology of White gender norms. Herbert Gutman's primary thesis is that enslaved families were cohesive, revealed by the patriarchal authority of enslaved men, evidenced by their protection of slave women and children, the naming of their offspring, and the durability of slave marriage. Genovese tracks Black female "deference" to their men, and Fox-Genovese argues that demarcating revolt as a masculine enterprise is liberatory for African Americans because it restores their "gender." Most historians of slave revolts continue to apply a specific construction of gender in their studies of slavery without questioning it. As Hazel Carby pointed out in 1987, it is "not an exaggeration to state that the formations of stereotypes of [the] black female ... has been reproduced unquestioningly in contemporary historiography even where other aspects of the institution of slavery have been under radical revision," (Carby 1987, 22).

This continues to be true twenty years later. Despite the new scholarship centering women's experience in the study of slavery, the specific assumption that women did not lead or meaningfully

¹⁵ For a thorough critique of the epistemological and methodological underpinnings of a black culture of poverty, See Robin D. Kelley's timely intervention in *Yo' mama's disfunkional! Fighting the Culture Wars in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997).

participate in slave revolts remains unchallenged in North American historiography. There is not enough evidence to conclude that women didn't participate in slave revolts, but we still find a near general assumption that slave revolts were planned and conducted by men alone. Historians assume that African-American women did not participate in revolt. In this way the "passive negro" is deconstructed by constructing the "passive negress."

PART TWO: THE ATTACK OF THE INVISIBLE WOMAN:

WOMEN IN SLAVE SHIP REVOLTS

The theoretical framework underlying the historiography of slave resistance itself inscribes a passivity for enslaved women in order to re-emasculate the male slave. What discourses and material conditions influenced contemporaneous views of African American women's political agency? How did these views shape the creation of the primary sources upon which historians rely when uncovering the story of revolt? It is enlightening to start by looking at Europeans' first interaction with enslaved women, which often occurred as they loaded captives on to ships and began the voyage across the Atlantic.¹⁶

In 1986 David Eltis, Stephen Behrendt, David Richardson and Herbert Klein published the *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-Rom, (TASD)*, which compiles statistics on over 27,000 slave trade voyages that occurred between 1527 and 1866. In his article, "Shipboard Revolts, African Authority and the Atlantic Slave Trade," David Richardson analyzes the patterns of slave ship revolts in order to understand their occurrence and their frequency. He concludes that revolts occurred on one in ten slave ship voyages (Richardson, 72). Why would a revolt occur on one ship and not another? Historians of the Atlantic slave trade have offered various hypotheses, including crew to captive ratio, distance of the ship from the African coast, and laxity in a given ship's discipline. According to Richardson, however, reviewing the available

¹⁶ My research has been focused primarily on the British Slave Trade.

data shows little pattern: “As far as the enslaved Africans were concerned, conditions that offered an opportunity to escape from captivity seem to have been seized on wherever and whenever they presented themselves” (Ibid). However, when employing a quantitative analysis of data comparing ships that experience revolt with ships that did not, the compilers of the T ASD uncovered a surprising result: the more women on board a slave ship, the more likely a revolt would occur (Richardson, 76).

Why? How is this possible? The authors of the T ASD state: “The lower proportion of males on vessels undergoing revolts is counterintuitive ...Women are rarely mentioned as leading violent resistance, either on board ship, or in the New World, where the documentation of resistance is rather more extensive.” (Behrendt, et. al. 2001, 460)¹⁷

It was the policy and practice of slave traders to leave women unchained during the middle passage. That it this was standard policy in the English slave trade is borne out in the annual *Report of the Lords of the Privy Council*. These reports were voluminous, and based on the testimony of many witnesses. In the 1789 Report, the Lords explained that during the middle passage: “The Slave, if a Man, is put in Irons on the Main Deck; if a Boy, he is put on the Main Deck loose; if a Woman or Girl, they are placed (without Irons) on the Quarter Deck,” (PC cite____, Donnan vol II, 595).

My review of the records of the slave ship revolts in Trans Atlantic Slave Trade Database, along with other miscellaneous documentation related to slave ships, show that slave women used their relative mobility to access weapons to plan and initiate revolt. When we place the quantitative evidence about ship board revolt beside the stories told about it by the men involved in the slave trade, we can see how the prose of passivity shaped contemporaneous views of enslaved women’s agency, and we find a revealing example of how this discourse about enslaved women’s agency interfered with the underlying

¹⁷. In his discussion of women aboard slavers, Richardson concedes that **Error! Main Document Only.** “[t]he role of women in supporting or encouraging revolts has perhaps not been fully appreciated”. (Richardson, 2001, 72).

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purpose of the documents generated by slave traders and government regulators of the slave trade, which was to acquire accurate information for the purposes of setting policy and preventing costly revolts.¹⁸ Despite the need to prevent revolts, these documents also show the failure of these men to see what was literally in front of their faces: African women captives, unshackled, repeatedly planning and implementing revolt. Why would the men engaged in the slave trade continue a practice that made no economic sense? Because the owners, captains and crews of slave ships were often incapable of seeing women in this role.

The fact that women played a central role in certain slave ship revolts cannot be disputed. In September of 1797 there was a revolt on the *Thomas* when “two or three of the female slaves having discovered that the armorer had incautiously left the arms chest open ...conveyed all the arms which they could find through the bulkheads to the male slaves, about two hundred of whom immediately ran up the forecuttles and put to death all the crew who came their way,” (Brooke 1853, 236-7). The women on the *Thomas* used the fact that they had more access to various areas of the ship to start a revolt.

The actions of these women on the *Thomas* can be construed as leadership of violent rebellion: they chose the time, initiated the events and supplied the means. Whether the women themselves used any of the weapons they had acquired to kill crew members, we may never know. These women were not described as committing actual acts of violence against the crew. It is in the realm of possibility that the women on the *Thomas* merely handed weapons to the men, and then stood by as the crew was killed. It is also possible that these women did participate in this aspect of the revolt, and this participation was not acknowledged.

There is, however some direct evidence of women engaging in violent acts of rebellion on board slavers. On July 13, 1729, there was an insurrection on the slave ship *L'Annibal*. As one white survivor explained:

A flock of our *negresses* burst into the main bedroom and punched M. Bart, sublieutenant of the ship. Being suddenly awakened, he believed that it was the *negres* [that is, men, not women] who had come to murder him. He jumped out of his window into the sea [and then climbed back on deck]. This

¹⁸ Documents I reviewed included: captain's logs, ship surgeon's journals, British Naval records, memoirs of people involved in the trade, travel writing, court records, sessional papers of the House of Commons, reports made to the House of Lords and to the Privy Council, insurance records, and published collections of primary sources.

tumult caused great alarm. We ran to arms and fired several rifle shots. Seeing that they were trying to come on the deck in a crowd, and believing it was the *negres*, the gunfire had alarmed the entire port (Hall 1992, 91).

It appears from this description that it was women who began the attack, and it was a crowd of women who tried to break through to the deck of the ship. The reaction of the crew member sheds light on how women's participation in violent acts was viewed. M. Bart assumed it must be men who attacked him. Only men attack. And only if it was in fact men who tried to break through to the deck was Bart's alarm to the port justified. It sounds as though the chronicler was embarrassed for Bart and was attempting to justify his overreaction. Given this set of gender-based expectations about revolt, it is not that surprising that women's involvement would tend to be overlooked. For example William Snelgrave described a voyage he took in 1704 on the *Eagle*. He explained that the crew was quite worried that the slaves would "mutiny" because there were four hundred slaves on board, and only ten crew men healthy enough to work. Given this situation, the crew "examined the Mens [sic] Irons, both Morning and Evening...." A revolt occurred nonetheless (Donnan, 1930, vol. II 355).

Not every slaver displayed this level of denial. One ship owner instructed his captain as follows; "For your safety as well as mine...You'll have the needful guard over your Slaves, and put not too much Confidence in the Women nor Children lest they happen to be Instrumental to your being surprised which may be fatal," (Greene 1944, 346-354). Similarly, when Dr John Bell, the ship's surgeon on the *Thames*, recounted the events of an insurrection in December of 1776, he explained the only reason why the women slaves didn't join in the attack was because the men, who in this case planned the revolt, acted so quickly that there wasn't time to let them know about it. If they had been notified, Bell told the ship's owner, "Your property here at this time would have been but small," (Greene 353).

Robert Norris, a Slave ship captain on *The Unity*, documented *four revolts on one voyage*, and in at least three of them, women played a prominent part. ("The Log of *the Unity*, 1769-1771").¹⁹ Norris' log book is exceptional in that he describes women's acts in revolt so clearly. Captain Norris left Liverpool on the slaver called *The Unity* on July 24, 1769. The ship arrived on the coast of Africa on October 30th.

¹⁹ Marcus Rediker found Norris' log in an archive in Liverpool, and sent me a copy for this project.

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The Unity spent several months on Africa's coast, finding enough slaves for a "full cargo." It wasn't until May 20th, 1770, six months later, that Norris noted in his log that there finally were enough slaves on board to justify leaving for the British West Indies, a total of 424. The Unity left the coast of Africa on May 30th, and seven days later, on June 6th there was a revolt: "The slaves made an Insurrection, which was quelled with ye loss [of] two Women." It seems clear here that women were involved in this revolt, or they wouldn't have been killed. Then on June 23, Captain Norris reported that "the Slaves attempted an insurrection; ... Employed securing ye men in Chains, and gave ye Women concerned 24 lashes each." The Women remained unchained. Three days later there is another attempted revolt: "The Slaves this Day Proposed making an insurrection, and a few of them got off their Handcuffs, but were shackled in Time." The very next day, on June 27, Norris writes: "the Slaves attempted to force up ye Gratings in the Night, with a design to murder ye whites or drown themselves but were prevented by ye watch in ye morning. They confessed their intention and ye women as well as ye men were determin'd if disappointed of cutting off ye whites, to jump over board but in case of being prevented by their Irons were resolved as their last attempt to burn the ship. Their obstinacy put me under ye Necessity of shooting ye Ringleader."²⁰

On July 11, Norris wrote: A Woman No. 4 of Captain Monypenny's Purchase Died Mad. They had frequently attempted to drown themselves, since their Views were disappointed in ye Insurrection."²¹ The women remain unchained.

Thus, despite the fact that slave women participated in, instigated, supplied, and even led revolts on slave ships, captains and crew continued a policy whereby enslaved women remained unchained for the majority of the middle passage. This failure to chain women and keep them below decks can be partially explained by the persistent refusal of the European slave traders to take the threat of women in rebellion seriously. However, there was another reason why women were kept on deck unchained: the crew aboard slave ships wanted to maintain access to women on board.

²⁰ "Cutting off," refers to driving the ship close enough to the coast of Africa to escape alive. It often was accomplished with the help of people on shore.

²¹ The captives were identified by number, and by the name of their owner. Often the captives on a slave ship would have several owners, and the captives made up what was referred to as a "super-cargo."

In his journal, Captain James Barbot explained in detail how he ran his ship:

Towards the evening [the women slaves] diverted themselves on the deck, as they thought fit, some conversing together, others dancing, singing and sporting after their manner, which pleased them highly, and often made us pastime ...many of them young sprightly maidens, full of jollity and good-humour, afforded us abundance of recreation; as did several little fine boys, which we mostly kept to attend us about the ship (Donnan 1930, 463).

Deborah Gray White explains that the experiences of men and women were different under slavery, and this difference began with the middle passage. “Women did not travel the middle passage in the holds of slave ships but took the dreaded journey on the quarter deck.” And as a result:

[Women] were more easily accessible to the criminal whims and sexual desires of seamen, and few attempts were made to keep the crew members of slave ships from molesting African women. As one slaver reported, officers were permitted to indulge their passions at pleasure and were “sometimes guilty of such brutal excesses as disgrace human nature,” (White 1985, 63).

It is hard not to be struck by Barbot’s understanding that African women captives were lively and spritely during the middle passage, as though they were enjoying their journey. This highlights another layer in the discourse of pacification of enslaved people in general, and enslaved women in particular. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman reveals the connection between the imputed enjoyment of the slave with the construction of the master as dominant, which was crucial to the economy of slavery:

The constitution of blackness as an abject and degraded condition and the fascination with the other’s enjoyment went hand in hand ...blacks were envisioned fundamentally as vehicles for white enjoyment, in all of its sundry and unspeakable expressions; this was as much the consequence of the chattel status of the captive as it was of the excess enjoyment imputed to the other, for those forced to dance on the decks of slave ships crossing the Middle Passage, step it up lively on the auction block, and amuse the master and his friends were seen as the purveyors of pleasure (Hartman, 23)

The process of imputing enjoyment to the slave was constitutive of both White and Black subjectivity in the economy of chattel slavery. Blacks were only fit for slavery and less than human in part because they were viewed as less sensate, or less disturbable. They were jolly and “sprightly” in the enjoyment of their captivity. Hartman reminds us to pay attention to the legal definition of the term “enjoy”: “to have, possess, and use with satisfaction; to occupy or have the benefit of.” And as “the exercise of a right ...

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privilege or incorporeal hereditament; comfort, consolation, contentment, ease, happiness, pleasure and satisfaction,” (*Black’s Law* 1983, 276).²²

This analysis of the primary sources on slave ship revolt reveals some of the methods employed to pacify the enslaved African American woman. The processes used to pacify the enslaved woman are quite active. Taking a close look at the 1721 revolt aboard the *Robert* can shed light on the intersection of several discursive practices which enact this pacification.

Atkins, a British naval officer, recounts the story of a “woman-slave” during this revolt, revealing how she is “seen” as a body without agency, without subjectivity:

We met there the *Robert* of Bristol, Captain Harding...he gave us the following melancholy Story ...Tomba...had combined with three or four of the stoutest of his Country-men to kill the Ship’s Company, and attempt their Escapes, while they had a Shore to fly to, and had near effected it by means of a Woman-Slave, who being more at large, was to watch the proper Opportunity. She brought him word one night that there were no more than five white Men upon the Deck, and they asleep, bringing him a Hammer at the same time (all the Weapons that she could find) to execute the treachery. He encouraged the Accomplices what he could, with the Prospect of Liberty, but could now at the Push, engage only one more and the Woman to follow him upon the deck .

After describing the details of the crew killed and how the slaves were finally subdued, Atkins concludes his statement:

The Reader may be curious to know their Punishment: Why, Captain Harding weighing the Stoutness and Worth of the two slaves, did, as in other Countries they do by Rogues of Dignity, whip and scarify them only; while three other, Abettors, but not Actors, nor of Strength for it, he sentenced to cruel Deaths ... The Woman he hoisted up by the Thumbs, whipp’d, and slashed her with Knives, before the other Slaves till she died (Donnan volume II, 266).

This revolt on the *Robert* has been used in the literature to illustrate the role women sometimes played in ship board rebellion. Unfortunately, even historians who present this source in the spirit of uncovering Black women’s agency don’t question if the un-named “Woman-slave” was more than a facilitator of male action. Even those of us with the best intentions can have our inquiry stalled by the discursive conditions which produce both the primary sources and subsequent historical interpretations of those sources. We can, however, interrogate the source more carefully to see if we can uncover some assumptions about the un-named woman’s more passive role. For one thing, it is not clear from this

²² “Incorporeal hereditament,” is a description of a type of property that could be inherited. It included slaves, under the sub-set of “chattels.”

account where the specific information came from. How did Captain Harding determine that it was Tomba who was the leader, rather than one of the other men, or the “Woman-slave?” Perhaps the information came from a confession from one of the slaves involved, or from another slave on board, although there is no discussion of any such interrogation. It is clear from another part of the document that Atkins had heard of Tomba’s involvement in an on-land disturbance at some earlier point, so he might have had a reputation for being rebellious, and they assumed he had instigated this revolt.

In any case, it is clear from the tone of the document that the nameless woman would never be viewed as an instigator, much less a leader, no matter what the actual facts were. It is Tomba, with his “Stout Countrymen” who “affect” the revolt “by means of a woman-slave.” The woman doesn’t have any agency at all in this construction— she becomes merely a “means,” like a hammer is a “means” for breaking chains. She is actively pacified. The woman-slave was not viewed as a participant in the revolt: “[Tomba] encouraged the accomplices what he could ... but could at the push engage only one more and the woman to follow him upon the deck.” Here the nameless woman-slave is not even an accomplice, despite the fact that she supplied the weapons, and decided when to attack. She is certainly not viewed as a “Rogue of Dignity,” meriting a “mere” whipping, and instead is tortured to death.

Why are Atkins and the slavers incapable of seeing the woman-slave aboard *The Robert* as anything else than a means to an act? What are the mechanisms that pacify the woman-slave? Certainly societal expectations about who is even capable of a political act shape that society’s ability to see and record those acts. Who is designated as a political actor in a given society is largely a function of discourse. In her book *The Slumbering Volcano*, Maggie Sale explains that the same enlightenment philosophy which defined the politics and political theory of the so-called democratic revolutions in Europe and the United States viewed slaves and all women as lacking political rights or agency. “Freedom” and the political power that by definition “naturally” came with it was in fact defined by its opposite-- the powerlessness and lack of freedom of women and slaves (Sale 1997, 13).

The politics of inclusion— who is included in the formulation of the “political”-- is defined by the politics of exclusion; who is left out of this formulation. In *Two Treatises on Government*, John Locke

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entered the debate on the nature of political power by arguing against the then current belief that the Monarch had a natural and divine right to rule, analogous to the power of the patriarch over his family or the master over his slave. Locke instead defined 'Political Power' as the power of "the Magistrate over a Subject, as opposed to that of 'a Father over his Children, a Master over his Servant, a Husband over his Wife, and a Lord over his Slave,'" (Locke 1960, 2).

In severing the connection between political power and the *pater familias* Locke relegated women and slaves (and therefore especially women slaves) outside the realm of the political. Sale, among others, has argued that this liberal political philosophy which serves as the foundation for American government allowed for the existence of slavery alongside freedom without contradiction. Sale tracks the application of this political philosophy in stories of slave ship revolts in order to "look for the production or foreclosure of subject-positions from which to claim the trope of revolutionary struggle," (Sale 1993, 7). She argues that this is why the fight of Euro-American settlers against the British empire was called "revolution," whereas the slaves' fight against the institution of slavery was called "rebellion," (Ibid, 13). Revolution is change within the field of political, whereas rebellion is a type of misbehavior in the face of "valid" authority.

Thus when white men fight back they are political revolutionaries, but when slaves and women fight back they are rogues, or rebellious children. And what of women slaves? In Locke's formulation, enslaved women are doubly, if not geometrically, foreclosed from a subject-position which can "claim the trope of revolutionary struggle." They cannot even be seen as rebelling. Thus a descending hierarchy emerges among slaves. Slave men are generally not viewed as political actors, although as we saw on the *Robert*, certain men such as Tomba could occasionally rise to the level of a "Rogue of Dignity," earning some grudging respect. The un-named "woman-slave" however, is pacified; she has no authorship of her own acts. Her acts of resistance are deconstructed into a *means* by which male slaves act. On the *Robert* slave men could be recognized as rebelling, but because of the further remove of enslaved women from the realm of political, the woman-slave's ability to act is practically incomprehensible.

It is crucial to note, however that her (non)actions seemed to strike Captain Harding as particularly transgressive. It is hard not to be struck by the detailed description of this "woman-slave's" punishment.

Her violation of the rule which requires her passivity is turned into a spectacle by violating her body. The “woman-slave” had to be hung alive by her hands and then slashed into pieces until she no longer existed. On the *Robert* the prose of passivity is physically inscribed on the woman-slave’s body. It becomes what Lubiano describes, (though in a different context), as a “cover story”: “Cover stories cover or mask what they make invisible with an alternative presence; a presence that re-directs our attention, that covers or makes absent what has to remain unseen if the *seen* is to function as the *scene* for a different drama,” (Lubiano 1992, 324). Here, the act of the “woman-slave’s” pacification becomes a scene, and her *acts* of revolt are dropped from the record. And even in current historiography, she becomes, at best, an assistant.

Those responsible for the creation of documents relating to the slave trade--- ship surgeons and ship captains, Naval officers, surveyors, insurers, ship owners and so on---seemed incapable of seeing women in revolt on board slave ships. The ability for the crew to have easy access to women’s bodies during the Middle Passage seemed to outweigh other concerns, such as safety, and ultimately, profit. On the other hand, it is quite possible that utilizing mass rape as a form of control was more important for the purposes of maintaining an overall system of domination than the added safety provided by keeping women chained below decks. The role rape plays in maintaining systems of intense domination is an issue that, on the whole, is under-researched and under-theorized. Revealing the ways in which rape on slave ships was utilized as a weapon of control with at least as much effectiveness as shackles and the Cat o’ Nine Tails is a project that would shed light on the lived experience of captives during the middle passage. Perhaps it would make historians think twice before making statements like “Female slaves were treated better than the men, not being chained...” (Thomas, 1997, 416.) It would also help to understand and combat mechanisms of domination today. After

all, mass rape occurs now as well, and after the genocide in Bosnia and Ruanda, it has been classified as a war crime and a crime against humanity.²³

It is likely, therefore, that maintaining constant access to women captives was, in itself a form of control. If we add this to the fact that gender-based assumptions about what women were capable of rendered their actions invisible, then perhaps the “business practice” of keeping women unchained makes more sense. In any case, when reviewing the primary sources describing the Middle Passage, it is clear that they must be read against the grain in order to uncover women’s acts of revolt. The problem of recovering women’s agency is then further exacerbated by the often unconscious investments historians have in creating the “passive negress.” The final result is an erasure of women’s central role in slave ship revolt.

PART THREE: SLAVE REVOLTS IN EARLY NEW YORK

If we compare the production and interpretation of primary sources during the slave trade with the production and interpretation of primary sources in early colonial New York, we uncover how crucial it is to be vigilant about understanding the historical context in which the production of historical sources takes place. Here, I juxtapose the sources cobbled together to present a history of women’s lives and struggles during the Middle Passage with the sources on two early slave revolts in New York in order to show how different contemporaneous investments impact the historical production of knowledge. Those who created the sources historians use to reconstruct the past-- the newspaper editors, the colonial legislative bodies, the court recorders, the government administrators, and so on-- on the whole discuss women’s participation in the major revolts in New York quite openly. Documentation of women in revolt was exceptional during the Middle Passage. In contrast, in Colonial New York, it was the rule. Ironically, as will be shown below, this fact has not affected the way the history of revolt in New York has been written. Women remain invisible in the historical interpretation of these sources.

²³ See for example Chapter 14, “Massive Human Rights Tragedies: Prosecutions and Truth Commission,” in *International Human Rights in Context: Law, Politics, Morals* Second Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000). This issue is beyond the scope of this article. I address the issue of rape as a form of control during the middle passage more extensively in a forthcoming project.

Why would people in colonial New York be able to acknowledge enslaved women's actions, while those engaged in the slave trade in the same time period and under the same government's dominion were unable to? Each location had its own concerns which impacted women's visibility and thus allowed or disallowed seeing women as participants in violent collective action. There are fundamental differences between a slave ship and a small settler community. The project of those engaged in the slave trade was to try to control a nameless faceless mass of human cargo in order to export it and maximize profit. Early colonial formations, on the other hand, such as the settler colony of New York City, were organic communities, where everyone knew everyone else, and lived in close quarters with each other. Slaves often lived in the same house as their owners. There was much more fluidity in this urban context. Despite the fact that New York City was 20 percent slave at the time, the mechanisms of slave control were much, much less rigid than those required on board a slave ship, where a crew to captive ratio could easily be 50:1.

New York was taken by the British from the Dutch in 1664. It was a port city located at the mouth of the fertile Hudson valley and absolutely crucial for England's plans to consolidate its hold on North America. At the time of the English takeover, there were four times the number of slaves in New York as there were in the Virginia colony, (Nash, 14). Among those of African descent, there were many who were born in various parts of West Africa, seasoned slaves born in the West Indies, and many who were born in New York who were fluent in both Dutch and English (Foote, 21).

There was a huge increase in demand for slaves in the last quarter of the 17th century. As Europeans from many countries travelled to New York and settled there, the market for slaves increased. As one historian explains, slaves were "a commodity which the colony's proprietor, a patron of [England's] Royal Africa Company, was quite willing to supply. In contrast with the Dutch West India Company, which used slavery to implement colonial policy, the Royal Africa

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Company used New York to foster slavery. By the end of the seventeenth century, trading in human lives had become a staple of the province=s economy.” (Archdeacon,43).²⁴

The slaves of New York, like slaves in most urban environments, worked as domestics, farmers, blacksmiths, coopers, jewelers, and bakers. They worked in all of the skilled trades, trained by their masters who then had an unpaid apprentice for life. And, as in most port cities, slaves were dockworkers and ship-builders. Unlike in field work on farms and plantations, there was a significant division of labor by gender. Women worked in food production and distribution, as marketers and hawkers. They worked were domestics, which, in this time period involved very heavy labor. Newspaper advertisements in colonial New York were replete with notices to buy and sell women slaves experienced with cows and dairy production. Women would carry water from the city’s wells to the houses of their owners. In New York, Male and female slaves would stand at the “Meal Market,” 3 blocks from what is now the stock exchange, and be “rented out” to colonists who needed extra help. (DeFoe, Cite) The city grew rich from ship-building, slave trading, and from supplying English colonies in the Caribbean with much needed foodstuffs. ²⁵ Unlike life on the Middle Passage, slaves in New York had community and mobility. And like the captives on the Middle Passage, they used every opportunity to resist their enslavement.

On April 7th, 1712 the *Boston Weekly Newsletter*, the only paper extant in England’s thirteen mainland colonies, described a series of events referred to by historians as the New York Slave Revolt of 1712. On the first of January a number of slaves met and “tying themselves to secrecy by Sucking ye blood of each Others hand,” planned a revolt that would take place early in April (*Boston Weekly Newsletter*, April 7-12

²⁴ For a significantly different explanation for the role of slavery in New York, see Thelma Foote, Cite date who argues that slavery in New York was incidental to West Indian slavery.

²⁵ There are few historical monographs that focus on slavery in New York, and of those, there is very little discussion of women’s lives. The most recent works are Leslie M. Harris, 2004. *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863*. (Chicago, University of Chicago Press; and Thelma Foote Cite

1712). New York's Colonial Governor Robert Hunter wrote a letter to the Lords of Trade explaining that twenty five or thirty of these slaves set fire to a building, and when Whites approached to put out the fire, the slaves killed nine of the men and wounded five or six others (Hunter 1712).²⁶ Soldiers from a nearby fort captured most of the rebels within 24 hours.

Hunter explained that they must have engaged in this “bloody conspiracy” to revenge themselves for “some hard usage, they apprehended to have received from their masters (for I can find no other cause). . . .” It seems that the Governor was incapable of conceptualizing why slaves would want to gain freedom, or why they would rather die than be slaves. In fact the term “revolt” isn't used in any contemporaneous New York source. This is an important reminder that the idea of a slave not accepting her status in society was practically unthinkable to those in power. Everyone had their place in society. As Gary Nash explains, the political belief shared by the majority of New Yorkers was that “all men, by God's design, were created unequal.” (Nash, 7)

Women participated in this revolt, and one can find discussion of their actions in the primary sources upon close examination. The Governor's letter states, “[W]e found all that put the design in execution, six of these having first laid violent hands upon themselves, the rest were forthwith brought to their tryal[sic]. . . .” He describes the disposition of the slaves as follows: “[In court] twenty seven were condemned whereof twenty one were executed, one being a woman with child, her execution by that means suspended, some were burnt others hanged, one broke on the wheel, and one hung a live [sic] in chains in the town. . . .” (Ibid.).

²⁶ Governor Hunter, *Letter to the Lords of Trade*, June 23rd, 1712, Public Records Office CO5 1091, 332. Hunter described those shot not as men, but as “Christians.” The word “White” was not yet in use. When colonists of European descent were referred to in opposition the slaves, the term “Christian” was often used, as well as “her (or his) majesty's subjects.”

This information concerning the pregnant slave is crucial, because without it, we might never know if there had been any women at all among the captured rebels. Sources rarely specify the gender of captured rebels; thus it is important not to assume that the pregnant slave was not the only woman captured—merely the only pregnant one. This highlights the issue of how different assumptions about women as fighters will lead to different interpretations of the material. If we assume that it is unusual for women to participate in armed revolt, we will probably read this source to mean that of the twenty-one condemned slaves, one was a woman. If on the other hand, we assume that women’s participation in revolt is normal, we will assume that of the twenty-one condemned slaves, one of the women was pregnant.

It was this latter assumption that led me to go to New York and review the court records. It turns out that probably three, but at least one of the six who committed suicide before capture were women, and there were four women slaves indicted and tried in this case²⁷. Amba and Lilly were acquitted, Sarah and Abigail were convicted. It is not clear from the sources which of the two convicted women were pregnant, nor is it clear if the pregnant woman was ultimately executed. I reviewed all the correspondence between Governor Hunter and the Lords of Trade and the Privy Council. The Governor tried to secure a pardon for her. In a letter dated September 10th, 1713, a year and a half after the revolt, Governor Hunter wrote to the Lords of Trade: “...there is likewise a negro woman who was indeed privy to the conspiracy but pleading her belly, was reprieved, she is since delivered, but in woeful condition ever since, and I think has suffer’d[sic] more than death by her long imprisonment, if their Lords think fit to include her, I should be pleased, for there has been much blood shed already on that account, I’m afraid too much, and the people are now easy.” (Hunter 1713). My research in London and New York indicates that the pardon was never granted. Several of the

²⁷ Reverend John Sharpe, leader of New York’s Anglican church describes his interview of slaves involved in the revolt in a letter. The slaves he interviewed stated that the conspirators in their flight shot themselves. One shot first his wife and then himself. John Sharpe, Letter to the Secretary of the Society for The Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, June 23, 1712. New York Genealogical & Biographical Record, Vols 21-2. 1890-1891, pp. 162-3.

male slaves convicted, however did receive an outright pardon from the Queen (Anne Privy Council 1712, 32).²⁸

Of the historical works which discuss this revolt, I've found only one which mentions that women were involved, and that in passing (Lapore, p.53).²⁹ The only book as yet to be published on New York City's African Burial Ground, excavated in 1991, is *Breaking Ground, Breaking Silence*, explicitly states that *all* of the slaves who participated in the 1712 revolt were men. The authors draw exclusively on secondary sources, all of which make the same assumption (Hansen and McGowan 1998, 50). I find this a profound and infuriating disservice to the memory of the courage of Amba, Lilly, Sarah, and Abigail.

The act of another enslaved woman insurrectionist impacted the legal process by which the slaves of 1712 were punished. In February of 1708, just outside of Newtown (now in the Borough of Queens) a woman and a man slave of the prominent Hallet family killed their owner, his pregnant wife and their five children. The man, "Indian Sam," was hung and the woman, referred to only as "the Negro fiend," was burned at the stake. (Cornbury, 1708).

These different forms of execution were based on an old English treason statute (35 Edward 3, Stat. 5, c. 2, 1352). The statute classified the act of killing the monarch High Treason and then created a lesser offense, *Petit* Treason, that applied when a woman killed her husband, or a servant killed his or her

²⁸ Two were men who had been captured on a Spanish vessel and enslaved. They had insisted all along that they were citizens of Spain, despite their "swarthinness." They were not freed from slavery, but they avoided execution. Another man, called Mars, was a valuable slave who belonged to a man who was hated by New York's Attorney General. He was determined to have Mars executed, and tried him three times. After the third acquittal, Governor Hunter stepped in and requested a reprieve. See *Acts of the Privy Council Anne* volume VI, p. 666. After spending a great deal of time reading Hunter's correspondence, it appeared he was an extraordinarily fair-minded and empathetic individual.

²⁹ There are many books which fail to mention that women were involved in the 1712 revolt. See, for example, T.J. Davis, *A Rumor of Revolt: The Great Negro Plot in Colonial New York*. (Amherst: Univ of Massachusetts Press, 1990). Edgar J. McManus, *A History of Negro Slavery in New York*, (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1966), Joyce Goodfriend, *Before the Melting Pot: Society and Culture in Colonial New York City, 1664-1730*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000). Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Movements in America*. (New York: Routledge, 1997). Other books refer to the pregnant slave obtaining a reprieve, but do not talk about the other women involved. See, for example, Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, (New York: International Publishers, 1952). Graham Russell Hodges, *Root and Branch: African Americans in New York and East Jersey 1613-1663*, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina University Press, 1999). Edwin Burrows & Mike Wallace, *Gotham: a History of New York to 1898*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.)

master. (Harding 1966, 78-9). The crime of treason carried a mandatory sentence of burning at the stake, whereas the crime of murder was punished by hanging. Over time, the common law interpreted the statute in such a way that only women were charged with *Petit* Treason for the killing of their husbands or masters. Further, men guilty of a capital offense were not burned at the stake unless they were convicted of heresy (ibid).

The English common law tradition of charging a man who killed his wife with murder, and a woman who kills her husband with treason, analogous to killing one's monarch and thus a crime against the state, is one of the clearer indications of a patriarchal power arrangement. Here both slaves killed their owner. Nevertheless, the un-named woman slave's act was a "rebellion" against both the institution of slavery and the institution of patriarchy and therefore required a harsher penalty. This type of disparate punishment of slaves based on gender also occurred, as we saw, on *The Robert*. Also, the contemporaneous discussion of this revolt appeared to direct the most enmity at this enslaved woman, the "Negro fiend," again suggesting that women's actions in revolt were seen as more transgressive.³⁰

The *Boston Weekly Newsletter* provides us with details concerning the scope of the revolt that might otherwise have been lost to history:³¹

New York; Feb. 10. The Indian Man and Negro Woman ... who committed the horrible murder at Newtown on Long Island were on Monday the 2nd Executed at Jamaica [Queens] for the same, and put to all the torment possible for a terror to others, of ever attempting the like wickedness; several other families were designed for the like slaughter, had they succeeded in this without discovery; On Saturday last two Negro men were also executed at Jamaica as accessories to this barbarous Murder, and several others are in custody; Our chief Justices, Judges and Attorney General are indefatigable in the discovery of this Negro Plot & bloody Murder, and are sitting at Jamaica in prosecution thereof (*Boston Weekly Newsletter*, 1708).

It was this revolt that inspired the New York Legislature to enact the most severe slave code then in existence in the colony for the prevention of slave conspiracy:

³⁰ A study of women in revolt in these two locations doesn't provide enough information to signify a pattern. However, the issue of gender disparity in punishment for revolt might provide an important analytical tool for future research.

³¹ Many of the documents relating to the British New York colonial period were destroyed during the American Revolution. Many more documents were lost in 1911 due to a fire at the state archive in Albany. I have been unable to find the records for the court of Oyer and Terminer for year 1708, and I have been unable to find any other source that records the name of the "Negro fiend."

Be it Enacted by the Governor Council and Assembly ... that all and every Negro Indian or other Slave or Slaves within this Colony who at any time after the Execrable and Barberous[sic] Murder committed on the Person and family of William Hallet Junr late of New Town in Queens County ... have has or shall Murder or otherwise Kill unless by Misadventure ... or Conspire or attempt the Death of his her or their Master or Mistress or any other of her Majesties Liege People not being Negroes, Mullatos or Slaves within this Colony and shall thereof be lawfully convicted before three or more of her Majesties Justices of the Peace ... he she or they so offending shall Suffer the paines[sic] of Death in such manner and with such circumstances as the aggravation and Enormity of their Crime in the Judgment of the Justices aforesaid of those Courts shall merit and Require. (Northrup 1900, 266).

The procedure laid out in this statute was the one the courts used in the prosecution and execution of the slaves involved in the 1712 revolt, so the British common law precedent that provided for gender-based punishment was no longer obligatory and the authority to design an appropriate punishment fell to the individual judges according to this statute. It also hastened the trend already occurring since the English had taken over the colony from the Dutch; that of enacting increasingly severe slave codes. In addition to the legislation concerning conspiracy, other laws were passed restricting the congregation and movement of slaves, restricting manumission of slaves, and forbidding free Blacks from owning property.³² In this way African American women were not only central players in New York slave revolts, their actions and government responses to those actions shaped the development of slave society in New York. Further, examining the primary sources regarding the events in New York reveals that those charged with preventing and punishing revolt were quite capable of seeing African American slave women as actors, unlike many later historians. The statutes passed were all gender-inclusive. Women were named, prosecuted, and executed.

As introduced in the beginning of this article, what constitutes a full-fledged “revolt,” rather than “mere” resistance is a methodological move that deeply impacts the historical analysis of slavery. For example, those who subscribe either explicitly or implicitly to the Marxian framework would discount the events in Newtown as “proto-political,” and therefore undeserving of the designation “revolt.” (Genovese 1979; Hobssbawm, 1959). I explained that for the purposes of my analysis, I define revolt as *coordinated, confrontational* acts of *violent* resistance, because this is what tends to be viewed by historians as an

³² Cite Statutory citations.

exclusively male activity. The killing of the Hallet family by Indian Sam and the “Negro Fiend,” along with at least two unnamed others was certainly violent, coordinated and confrontational. But it is also important to problematize the concept of *coordinated* acts, because our ideas of concerted action are implicitly gendered, resulting in the elision enslaved women’s acts of revolt. Despite historiographical constructs of women’s resistance as non-violent, it seems that it is not the idea of women using violent means to defend themselves that is the most challenging. After all, it is not plausible to argue that slave women were not capable of, or not inclined toward violent acts of resistance. Legal records are replete with examples of women killing their owners and overseers. Some used the more subtle methods of poison. Some burned their owners and their property. Others just picked up the nearest implement and attacked, perhaps in the throes of violent anger and desperation.

Helen Caterall collected all the judicial cases relating to slavery that were heard by the United States high courts in her multi-volume work *Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the Negro*.³³ I chose one state at random, Maryland, and culled those cases concerning slave violence against owners and overseers heard before that state’s Supreme Court in the colonial period. Of the 35 cases of violent resistance between the years of 1660 and 1780, ten concerned women defendants.³⁴ It is important to note that it was rare for this type of case to get to a state’s Supreme Court. Only a few ever did, so this is merely a tiny sample. But of this sample, almost one third of the cases included women committing violent acts of resistance. Historians may need to look long and hard at the sources to recover women’s involvement in slave revolt, but we don’t have to look that hard to find women committing violent acts of resistance. Seeing only the latter, some argue that women did not participate in organized, planned acts of revolt: “If we are to believe our sources, black women’s resistance to slavery was much more likely to be individual than collective.”³⁵

³³ Helen Caterall, *Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the Negro* (New York: Octagon Books, 1968.).

³⁴ Caterall. The following are the Maryland cases of murder, assault, arson and poisoning involving women defendants. *Re: Negro Bess*, 28 Md. Arch. 137, May 1738; *Re: Negroes*, 28 Md. Arch. 137, April 1742; *Re: Negro Tangio*, 28 Md. Arch. 504, April 1751; *Re Negro Anthony*, 31 Md. Arch. 69, June 1755; *Re Negro Bett Pone*, 31 Md. Arch. 438, March 1761; *Re: Negro Samuel*, 32 Md. Arch. 15, July 1761; *Re: Negro Toe*, 23 Md. Arch. 91, April 1764; *Re: Negro Beck*, 32 Md. Arch. 125, March 1766; *Re: Negro Jack*, 32 Md. Arch. 126, March 1766.(The woman involved in this murder case was not convicted).

³⁵ Fox-Genovese, 153.

But this distinction between “individual” and “collective” acts requires further interrogation. In the Maryland cases, the defendants were usually convicted in groups. These “individual acts” were in fact not individual. Even in the cases of one woman murdering her owner, or setting fire to his house, it would be useful to question whether the distinction between individual and collective acts has any meaning within the context of a slave community. I would think that there would almost always be a number of accessories, both before and after the fact. It seems likely that in any “individual” act, there are also others in the slave community supporting this act, allowing it to happen, or attempting to cover it up.

And the individual versus collective distinction becomes gendered in the historiography of slave revolt. “Individual” acts are not honored in the way that “collective” ones are, and women’s acts are defined as individual. Thus a gendered spectrum of resistance emerges, with a low end and a high end, which effects an historiographical pacification of women in revolt --an action that by definition is collective. The discussion of the “outer limits” of women’s resistance, these allegedly individual acts, ends where the discussion of men’s violent resistance begins. From my reading of the sources, I see no basis for the statement that women’s resistance is more “individual.” In any collective action, there are always people working in the background– men and women both– who are neither accused by the government, nor celebrated by historians. The gendering of concerted action serves to make a woman’s act of resistance individual *because* she is a woman. If we apply this understanding to the events in Newtown, we can label it a revolt without hesitation. However, despite the fact that the revolt in Newtown was the first in colonial New York, and despite the fact that it led directly to the statutory framework of slave control, it is rarely discussed. When it is discussed, it is characterized as an individual act of resistance.³⁶

³⁶ Even in (the few) books dedicated to slavery in New York, this revolt is not mentioned. The 1708 statute was most strikingly omitted from Edgar McManus’ classic study *A History of Negro Slavery in New York*, the first full-length work on the subject. McManus used legal sources almost exclusively, and did not discuss this event. Darlene Clarke Hine and Kathleen Thompson mentions it in their synthesis of African American women’s history: “In 1708, at least one black woman was involved in a slave revolt in Newtown, Long Island, in which seven whites were killed.” Hine and Thompson, 28). Russell Hodges spends a page on the events of 1708, but does not discuss the statute. I wrote about the revolt in *The Encyclopedia of Slave Resistance and Rebellions* under the heading “The Long Island Slave Uprising of 1708,” (Greenwood Press, Junius Rodriguez, ed. 2007.)

An article written about the Slave Revolt of 1712 that focuses on the role African cultural legacies played there raises another problem of gendering sources in a way that pre-figures revolt as male. In “Some Hard Usage”: The New York Slave Revolt of 1712,” Thelma Foote focuses on the Akan culture in order to shed light on aspects of this revolt. (Foote, 1996) Akan speakers, from the Gold Coast (present day Ghana) were often referred to by slave holders as “Cormantee.” They had a reputation for being hard workers, and also for being “rebellious.” Foote explains that the Society for the Propagation of Gospel in Foreign Parts, the missionary arm of the Anglican Church, was on the defensive after the 1712 revolt, as certain residents believed that proselytizing among the slaves led them to revolt. The Reverend John Sharpe, the chaplain for the garrison posted at the English fort, explained that of the participants only two were “Christianized.” He claimed that many of those in revolts were “Negro slaves here of ye nations of Cormantee and Paw Paws.”(Ibid, 149) Taking her queue from this source, Foote provides the reader with a description of Akan martial practices.³⁷

The discussion of the legacy of Africa and its impact on slave resistance is a much debated topic and one that has thus far, unfortunately, contributed to the pacification of enslaved women. The study of African cultural legacies and the role they may play in the formation of slave subjectivity in general and in providing resources for resistance in particular rages in the current historiography of slavery. Historians of African America have been engaged in the debate over acculturation versus resistance since the 1960s. Many argue that there is strong evidence for the existence of and retention of African cultures, and offer this evidence to refute Elkins’ contention that slaves were stripped of their culture in their forced migration to the United States, and thus lacked an independent basis with which to resist. Other scholars

³⁷See John Sharpe, Letter to the Secretary of the Society for The Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, June 23, 1712. New York Geneological & Biographical Record, Vols 21-2. 1890-1891, pp. 162-3. Foote does not mention the women involved in the revolt. Here book on Blacks in Colonial Manhattan also does not discuss the women in the 1712 revolt.

continue to argue that the retention of African cultures was impossible in the context of the middle passage and in the subsequent brutality of the institution of slavery.³⁸

I am not entering this debate here. I am interested in the way the debate is engaged, and how the debate itself masks the agency of African American women. My purpose here is to examine the ways the concept of African legacies have been wielded in the scholarship on slave revolts as a mechanism of pacification – a constituent element of the prose of passivity which render women’s participation in slave revolt illegible.

There were in fact women warriors and soldiers in Africa, yet we repeatedly see in the literature the assumption that African women had no martial tradition. How this assumption impacts the analysis of enslaved women’s participation in revolt can be subtle, or it can be blatantly clear as it is in Douglas Egerton’s work on Gabriel’s Rebellion. He states; “[i]n forming his inner circle, Gabriel chose no women . . . [w]omen of African descent inhabited a separate, domestic sphere in the New World just as they had in the old,” (Egerton 1993, 53). I find it necessary to recount some specific examples of African women’s martial traditions, not because I am engaging in a romantic or simplistic argument about the availability of cultural resources and revolt, but rather to refute arguments like Egerton’s. And, perhaps not surprisingly, there is almost no historical work on the subject.

Queen Nzinga, one of the most famous warrior-queens in pre-colonial African history, made Matamba, an eastern Mbundu state in what would later be called Angola by its colonizers, a central contender among conflicting European and central African powers (Thornton 1991, 25). She established herself as the most powerful ruler in the Angola interior by the 1640s (Miller 1976, 203-209). What is important for our purposes, however, is not her status as an exception to the rule about women’s political and military power, but the fact that Nzinga herself fought on the battlefield, fielded all-women battalions,

³⁸ There is very exciting work being done which shows that African captives were not dispersed widely throughout North America but were in fact clumped together in groups. This new scholarship will finally allow historians to pinpoint with precision where groups of slaves from the same culture or nation were located, and then show the impact of those cultural legacies on the formation of American culture. See for example Hall, Gwendolyn. *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005). Gomez, Michael *Changing Our Country Marks: the Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum south*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

and by manipulating gender conventions in her society, established a precedent for the existence of Angolan warrior-queens. In the 104 years after Nzinga's death, queens ruled the Ndongo-Matamba kingdom for over 80 of them (Thornton 1991, 40). These events are relevant within the framework of Diaspora studies, because many slaves came to the Americas from this society. Also, research on Angolan martial traditions has been applied to an analysis of U.S. slave revolts, although this work actively assumes only Angolan men fought. (Thornton, John 1991b).

The Igbo also had a developed female martial tradition, and large numbers of Igbo women were enslaved in the United States and in the Caribbean (Gomez 1998, 114). Drawing on Equiano's famous slave narrative, Michael Gomez explains:

It was Equiano's experience that women regularly defended the village: "even our women are warriors, and march boldly out to fight along with the men." Equiano in fact witnessed a battle between his village and another, in which "there were many women as well as men on both sides; among others my mother was there, armed with a broad sword." This fierceness of spirit was displayed in the disproportionate number of Igbo female runaways in America.... (Ibid., 127).³⁹

Perhaps the best documented African women's martial tradition is that of the women's army in the West African kingdom of Dahomey (Bay 1997, 340-367). Many slaves in the New World came from among the Fon of Dahomey, with the largest concentrations located in Haiti, Brazil and Cuba, and significant percentages in the lower Mississippi Valley. The widespread influence of Vodoun ("voodoo"), a Fon religion, testifies to the impact of Fon culture in the Americas (Gomez 1998, 54-56). Dahomey was essentially a military kingdom, and the Dahomey kings relied extensively on their standing army of women soldiers who came to be known as "Amazons" by European observers. Among the Dahomey however they were called Akhosi. According the Reverend Sharpe, some of the slaves involved in the New York City Revolt of 1712 were "Paw Paws," an English term for a group that is ethnically and linguistically related to the Fon.

³⁹ There is some doubt concerning Equiano's place of birth. Some have suggested that he was actually born in the Carolinas and fabricated the story of his capture in Africa in service to the movement to end the slave trade. If this is true, we cannot rely on Equiano to substantiate Ibo women's martial tradition, although it has been discussed elsewhere. See for example Emecheta, Buchi. *The Joys of Motherhood*. (New York: George Braziller, 1987). One of the most knowledgeable contemporary Equiano scholars, Vincent Carretta, believes we will never know if Equiano's story of African birth is true. See "Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vasa? New Light on an Eighteenth-Century Question of Identity." *Slavery and Abolition*, 20, no. 3 (December, 1999).

The only standing army the Dahomean kings maintained was comprised of the Akhosi and dependant kinsman. The size of the women's battalion apparently changed over time. At least two thousand Akhosi fought in the 1728 battle for Whydah (Burton 1966, 256). By the reign of Gelele (1858-89) there were as many as 8,000 members. These women soldiers were part of the structure of the royal court, which included other powerful women. Despite claims by some scholars that the Akhosi served as some sort of mere "ornamental function," various observers saw them engaged in battle, and found them to be very well armed and well trained (Burton 1990, 102-104).⁴⁰

I hope that this sampling from the history of African women warriors will challenge our understanding of what is knowable and what is known. I am certainly not arguing that the above examples represent the full extent of various African martial traditions. The extent of the African female martial traditions is currently unknown, because most historians operate within an epistemological framework where the information is not knowable. The concept of women warriors are, as Antonia Frazer explains in her book *The Warrior Queens*, "thrillingly traumatic," (Fraser 1988, 13). How African women warriors have been mythologized and thereby interpolated into less threatening paradigms is beyond the scope of this article. The small piece upon which I focus here is the way in which many historians wield the legacy of Africa in an ongoing project to create a "re-emasculated" African American man-- proud, strong and grounded in his "African culture," -- in the incessant banal drama about Black people, gender, and dysfunction in the United States. The fact that the documents about African women's martial tradition have not been taken up in historical research is not a coincidence. This gap in the research is shaped by the contours of a specific construction of gender formed by the prose of passivity. It is unreasonable for historians to engage in analyses of the connections between African cultural legacies and slave revolt, and

⁴⁰ Documentation concerning the size, training and deployment of the Akhosi exists in European travelogues and military and diplomatic documents. There is also a scholarly work that discusses the Akhosi; Edna Bay's *Wives of the Leopard: Gender, Politics and Culture in the Kingdom of Dahomey* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998). See also Bay's "Servitude and Worldly Success in the Palace of Dahomey," in *Women and Slavery in Africa*, ed. Claire C. Robertson and Martin Klein (Portsmouth: Heinemann Press, 1997), 340-367. There is another, sensationalized work written by a non-historian, Stanley B. Alpern, called *Amazons of Black Sparta: The Women Warriors of Dahomee*. (New York: NYU Press, 1988).

then wield these analyses to preclude the existence of women who fought, unless and until they have carefully researched the cultures in question and have found no women's martial tradition.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have compared the production and interpretation of primary sources during the slave trade with the production and interpretation of primary sources in early colonial New York, in order to show that the pacification of women in revolt can not be blamed on contemporaneous ideologies of racialized gender alone. If only sources created incident to the slave trade were reviewed, it would be possible to argue that historians merely relied too heavily on their sources, failing only to question them closely, as we are taught in our methodological training. However, by placing these two sets of sources, both British, both eighteenth century, but one set created by slave traders while the other set were created in a settler port town in the beginning stages of colonization, allows for the revelation of the current investments in silencing women in revolt. In one setting—the nameless, faceless and anonymous process of transporting “cargo” across the Atlantic—gender-based ideas about who are political actors impact the sources and make it hard to see women in revolt. In the other-- an early colonial settlement where everyone knows every one else and the colonists lived in close proximity to their slaves, often sharing homes with them—those who created the sources we rely on saw Sarah, and Abigail, and even, to some extent, “the negro fiend” as real actors no matter what they might have believed in the abstract about what women should be capable of. Here, women's erasure by historians today is only comprehensible by understanding the forces that shape the historiography of slave resistance—the creation of the “passive negress” in order to shore up the “active negro.”

Even without this historiographical imperative it seems particularly difficult for many scholars to push pass their own preconceived ideas about women's inclination or capacity in violent, confrontational, coordinated acts of resistance. We, by being in the present and always envisioning ourselves as “standing

at the end of history,” believe that our vision in the present is more discerning. (Riva Siegel, 1997)⁴¹ But it is here, in the present, that the erasure of women’s agency is being enacted. The fact is that the history of women in revolt has yet to be written, so conclusions based on the assumption that women did not “figure prominently” in revolt are premature at best. Without a more thorough and incisive analysis we will continue to assess this subject using stereotypes and assumptions rather than research and evidence, and our understanding of slave revolt will continue to suffer as a result. Interrogating the silence that surrounds women’s involvement in slave revolt throws open the field which has been pre-figured to exclude them. Countering the pacification of African American women in slavery requires a thorough review of existing sources, and a careful search for new ones.

It is my desire to trouble some of the complacency that exists in the scholarship concerning African American women’s leadership of and participation in slave revolts. This is a complex project which requires problematizing both the primary sources and the historiographical literature. Recovering the ways enslaved women were involved in slave revolt also requires an epistemological struggle against the various mechanisms of pacification I have outlined above.

Why is all this pacification necessary? What is so dangerous about the African American woman slave? I hope I have demonstrated here that the enslaved woman was *not* passive. Those who are passive do not require such rigorous discourses of pacification. The methods used to pacify the enslaved woman, such as the construction of the passive negress in historiography, the contemporaneous discourses on political subjectivity, the gendering of individual versus concerted action, and the denial of an African women’s martial heritage are not necessary for those who are already passive. There are enough weapons in this arsenal to conquer the Furies. This is a process of abjection, of active expulsion. An exorcism.

⁴¹ For more discussion of this problem,, see Walter Benjamin, “The Angel of History,” in *Illuminations* Cite _____. Siegel provides an excellent example of how our belief that we stand “at the end of history,” clouds our ability to understand how our own beliefs may be merely the latest justificatory rhetoric that preserves social stratification . “Why Equal Protection No Longer Protects: The Evolving Forms of Status Enforcing State Action,” 49 *Stan. Law Rev.* 1111, 1997.

The mechanisms of pacification and the historical inscription of it through the prose of passivity is a discursive construction of silence. It is a speaking of silence, which as Michel Foucault points out, is not a contradiction:

Silence itself– the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers– is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within overall strategies. There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say....” (Foucault 1990, 27).

This silence is a constitutive element of the historical narrative of slave revolt, where women’s agency marks the blank spaces necessary for the words of the prose of passivity to be coherent. These silences work alongside the discourses of resistance, and inscribe the myth of women’s passivity. I am not arguing that a silence exists and a passivity can be constructed upon it. It is more complicated than that because the silence is created. Silence here operates like the spaces between words– they are necessary in order for a sentence to make sense. Here the sentence is pacification. You are pacified. You are passive. Silence.

But we can interrogate this silence as well. Anyone who studies African American women’s history in the face of harsh regimes of state control must become adept at learning that the spaces between words have things to say. In fact I make an argument from silence here. We can look at the discursive practices which shape our conceptions of African American women in revolt, which delimit what can and cannot be said about it. It is a view into negative space, an attempt to shed light on how we as historians participate in the ongoing construction of enslaved women as passive– how we continue to produce and reproduce a “social technology” of gender (de Lauretis 1987, 2). Thus, not only is the historiography of slavery and slave revolts implicated in the construction of African American women slaves as passive, not only do we pass on the legacy of this discourse, we are implicated in its current and continuous construction, and this impacts how African American women are viewed to this day.

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