

Slave Resistance

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Through the 400-year-old history of slavery few, if any, individuals *chose* to be enslaved. All slaves opposed slavery not all of them resisted it. Just as there were multiple forms of conflict and oppression so too were there multiple forms of opposition and resistance—cultural, ideological, economic, political, passive, violent, individual and collective. Patterns of resistance were, to a large extent shaped by peculiar circumstances. The urge to resist was almost certainly universal among the desperate captives stolen from their villages but their ability to carry through was severely limited by fatigue and physical disabilities suffered during the long disorienting march in coffles followed by months of incarceration in underground chambers in coastal slave prisons. Although they were assembled at one or two main ports, the human cargos on slave vessels encompassed a multiplicity of ethnicities and language and cultural communities. Assembled from trading networks that often reached well into the interior, the dazed and frightened captives confronted the problem of the unfamiliar shape and form of the European ship and the sheer scale and motion of the open sea. [See [D/CR/5/1-7](#) which includes an illustration and description of the Spanish schooner Josefa Maracayera captured off the coast of Africa in 1822].

Even so, as one trader put it, "it required the utmost Care and Management to keep them from mutinying." Despite ethnic and linguistic differences, despite being physically constrained by "long irons" and "short irons," some captives still managed to burrow or break through the walls of the trading forts or swim away from the coasting vessels where they were herded together for the Atlantic trade. Shipboard uprisings like the one staged by enslaved passengers aboard the Ferrers were common occurrences. Just ten days out from the Gold Coast, the revolt took the life of the ship's captain but 80 captives perished as well. [See "The log of Unity, 1769-1771" [D-EARLE-1-4](#) and "Africans taken in the Amistad : Congressional document, containing the correspondence, &c., in relation to the captured Africans" [Bd.Pam.326.4 Z99D v. 1 no. 5](#) both concerning shipboard uprisings]. Driven by an overpowering desire for home and family, some captives chose suicide, the ultimate form of resistance. [1] The struggle against the chains continued through emancipation, though with declining frequency as enslaved people resorted to other, more successful forms of self-liberation. One of the most common forms of resistance was flight.

Petit Marronage

The Southern colonial landscape was composed of cultivated fields mixed with savannas, deep swamps and dense forests that harbored animals and runaways, who routinely navigated the swamp systems and woodlands. Driven by fear and hunger or abuse, many resorted to *petit marronage*, temporary flight of individuals or small groups of friends. They took refuge in the liminal spaces between and beyond plantations until they were forced by hunger or fear of capture by the slave-catchers to return to the plantations. Male runaways outnumbered females by as much as three to one in South Carolina, which can be attributed to a number of factors including the lack of female mobility and maternity. By the end of the eighteenth century family formation was well advanced among the creolized populations of North America. Because husbands and wives often lived on different plantations women were directly responsible for maintaining familial integrity, which is reflected in the number of mothers who ran away with one or more children. Although they were in a minority women did form part of the maroon bands that emerged everywhere in the eighteenth century. [See [Runaway Slave Advertisements from 18th-century Virginia Newspapers](#), an on-line database hosted by the University of Virginia].

With the development of plantation agriculture and the growth of imperial rivalries over territories *marronage* entered a new phase. The intercolonial division of West Florida and Louisiana by the Treaty of Paris of 1783 and imperial rivalries that ensued encouraged escapees from Spanish Louisiana to flee to British West Florida and runaways from West Florida to seek refuge in New Orleans. Travelling in stolen boats some Gulf Coast runaways managed to make their way to Havana, Cuba. The proximity of Spanish Florida was a magnet for runaways from Georgia and South Carolina,

who settled in the frontier town of Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose, the oldest community of free blacks in the present United States. Mid-eighteenth century saw the formation of larger maroon communities in the swamplands of Georgia and South Carolina and the Louisiana wetlands. Except for the Dismal Swamp area bordering Virginia and North Carolina, the Chesapeake provided few spaces for the establishment of independent communities of runaways. [2]

Grand Maronnage

There were always roving bands of runaways hiding in the swamps but *grand marronage*, the formation of permanent, independent settlements, marks the growth of rebelliousness among slaves in the eighteenth century. Men, women, and sometimes children, established villages in plantation hinterlands and survived by raiding plantations for cattle and crops. Their camps often served as staging grounds for subversive activities. One village broken up by local troops consisted of twenty-one houses erected on a cleared site in a swamp bordering the Savannah River. The camp was surrounded by rice fields and protected on one side by a creek, on the other by a breastwork of logs and cane. In Louisiana the vast, almost impenetrable swamp sheltered runaways from the large creolized enslaved population of Bas du Fleuve near the mouth of the Mississippi River. One of the most successful bands was led by Juan Maló or Jean St. Maló, who established a stable agricultural community on a strip of high ground in the cypress swamps east of New Orleans.

For almost a year the enterprising men and women survived by cutting and squaring timber, which they floated down canals to a white sawmill operator; they entrusted their produce and the willow baskets and sifters they made to supportive plantation slaves in exchange for provisions purchased in New Orleans. Pressed by terrified whites, Francisco Bouligny, the acting military governor of Louisiana, led a detachment in pirogues through the waist-deep water of the swamp. St. Maló was wounded and captured along with other members of his band. Maló was hanged on the Plaza de Armas, later Jackson Square. Other members of his band were branded, whipped and forced to carry a twelve-pound shackle for three months. [3]

The vast majority of all forms of resistance occurred along what Robin D. G. Kelley calls the “margins of struggle.” Unorganized, clandestine, evasive, “illegal,” these forms of creative resistance were far more commonplace than is commonly recognized. [4] One of the most obscure and least understood strategies of resistance was self-protective silence, described by Kathleen Brown as a “strategy to distance themselves from the degradations of slavery.” Brown’s analysis of Robert Roberts’ *House Servant’s Directory* offers a useful conceptual framework for what Brown calls the “domestic cartography” of the household, the intimate space shared by whites with their free and enslaved domestic workers. Robert Roberts, who worked as a butler in the household of Massachusetts Governor Christopher Gore, was born in South Carolina; whether he was enslaved or free, Roberts grew up in close proximity to slavery and probably learned the dynamics of domestic power relations either by direct participation in or observation of slavery before moving to New England early in the nineteenth century, where he eventually found employment as a butler on Gore’s country estate.[5]

Roberts’ *House Servant’s Directory* is one of the first published works on racial etiquette. It describes rituals of behavior that were intended to shield black domestic workers from white violence by assuming manners and attitudes that were at least partly defensive in nature. Brown cautioned servants to go about their tasks as silently as possible, wearing slippers instead of shoes so as to be as unobtrusive as possible. Roberts’ ideal of the disciplined black body and his silence about his own racial identity and connection with slavery was not “an effacement of his own black male body,” but rather a strategy generally used by black Americans “to distance themselves from the degradations of slavery”, and, in Roberts’ case, to stake a claim to professional status as a free laborer. [6]

Roberts’ strategy of bodily silence exemplified patterns that can be found in Southern plantation households, where generations of enslaved women concealed themselves as a defense mechanism against sexual molestation and physical violence. “Who can blame slaves for being cunning,” Harriet Jacobs asked. “It is the only weapon of the weak and oppressed against the strength of their tyrants.” Jacobs was referring to the pervasive stereotype of black female sexuality and institutionalized rape, the threat of which influenced the development of what Darlene Clark Hines calls “a culture of dissemblance among black women” . . . “to protect the sanctity of inner aspects of their lives.” An instrument of survival in a hostile world, “self-imposed invisibility” made it possible for black women to endure the violence endemic to slavery. But it was more than that. It was a crucial

part of the process of “historical reclamation” through the collective creation of alternative self-images, one of which, the “super moral woman,” actively engaged in building the institutional infrastructure of modern black life. [7]

At the opposite end of the spectrum of cultural resistance were the efforts of enslaved people to “re-present” the body through dress that exaggerated a sense of difference. In the increasingly global consumer culture of the late eighteenth century clothes became signifiers of identity and status. Although the old sumptuary laws were disappearing, colonial assemblies still sought to prescribe materials and styles suitable for their clothing. South Carolina’s Negro Act of 1740, for example, stipulated that cheap imported fabrics such as osnabrigs and Scottish plaids should be fashioned into the loose, ill-fitting trousers and gowns that immediately identified their wearers as socially inferior. [8] The protest of a group of Charleston citizens in 1808 that expensive slave dress was “not consistent with their conditions” and renders them “insolent to the whites,” suggests that opposition to that kind of cultural marking had made clothing a symbolic sphere of resistance. [9]

While the demands of labor called for crude clothing, in their free time and on Sundays and holidays enslaved men and women created their own distinctive identity fashioned out of items stolen from or donated by white owners. The remarkable assemblages of styles and fabrics and rich palettes of colors did not resemble anyone else’s. In their symbolic refusal to look like or be like the dominant culture enslaved people signaled their opposition to an identity imposed through the public marking of clothing and a cultural invocation of an African homeland. [10]

Gendered Resistance

By the eighteenth century the specialization of skills in settled areas like Virginia and South Carolina led to more gendered forms of resistance. As more and more Africans arrived in the Americas, slave-owners sent African women and girls to work in the fields—a racialized inversion of eighteenth century gender norms—but denied them access to skilled work. While there were few female artisans the shift to export economies created new demand for domestic workers. Both men and women were employed as domestics but even among domestic workers there was a gendered division of labor. Female domestics were usually assigned household tasks, such as cooking, washing, midwifery and health care while men had more public roles as valets, tailors and coachmen. As re-producers, women had primary responsibility for childcare, which bound them more closely to the plantation and limited their ability to gain the knowledge necessary for flight or for participation in slave revolts. Their role as primary caregivers gave some women unique opportunities to redress their grievances by exploiting their knowledge about medicine both to heal and to harm.

Like beauty culture, the healing arts are a good subject for exploring the interplay of race and gender and power relations. The gendered division of labor delegated specialized labor roles to enslaved men and created for them opportunities for particular forms of resistance. The fact that enslaved women had primary responsibility for health work, especially tasks related to childbearing, childcare, and sick care, gave them opportunities to assert some measure of independence over their own bodies and those of their families and friends in the slave quarters. Female nurses and midwives were responsible for the daily work of healing. Their knowledge and use of curative and preventive remedies passed down from African elders brought them into conflict with planters and white male physicians, who challenged their roles as family healers on grounds of professionalism.

Embedded in issues of health were opposing definitions of slave health. Planters and white doctors viewed slave health in terms of “soundness” determined by market value or potential for productive and re-productive labor. Feigning or concealing illness was seen as a challenge to plantation discipline and was sometimes punished medically through, for example, the use of emetic and purgatives. Although they relied on female healers the independent knowledge of older slave women was also seen as threatening to white medical authority. In contrast, African healers assumed the connection between the soul and the body and between healing and faith—a view that modern science has recently come to cautiously embrace. The healing powers and the spiritual authority connected to it invested enslaved women with broad authority and community leadership. [11]

Conjure, or as it is variously known, hoodoo, voodoo, or divination, overlapped with healing work, especially as a form of resistance. A magico-religious system, its functions included both healing and harming. As spiritual therapy, conjure practices were used to arbitrate personal conflicts within the

slave community and to determine guilt or innocence of persons accused of various transgressions. Malevolent conjure—which some scholars believe emerged as a response to the violence and oppression of slavery—was also deployed defensively. Although conjurers were both male and female, harming practices came to be particularly associated with women, much as witchcraft was in Europe and the northern colonies. Some slaveholders dismissed conjuration as “superstition” but the rising incidence of household poisoning, one of the earliest forms of resistance, in the eighteenth century and its association with insurrection created waves of paranoia in all slave societies. [See “Bertie County Slave Records, 1744-1815” [CR 010.928.6](#) which includes legal papers concerning the trial of a female slave accused of attempted poisoning]. The Negro Act of 1740 in South Carolina, which restricted the sale of poisonous medicines to enslaved people and made poisoning a capital crime is similar to a series of ordinances governing the preparation, distribution, and sale of drugs in the French Antilles during the same period. [12]

The tendency to dwell on the violent actions, like poisoning or rebellions, all of which failed with the single exception of the revolution in St. Domingue in 1791-94, obscures the various means through which thousands of enslaved people secured their own freedom and that of family members. [See “Bertie County Slave Records, 1744-1815” [CR 010.928.6](#) which includes papers concerning a female slave named Jenny who had petitioned court for her freedom]. A survey of the 400-year history of Atlantic slavery makes it abundantly clear that the great majority of all free black people gained their freedom through one form or other of manumission. Nearly all studies of New World slave societies report the preponderance of women among manumitted slaves and the growing importance of black females as manumitters beginning in the late eighteenth century when increasing numbers of enslaved men and women lived in communities shaped by strong family ties. [13] In their role as caregivers responsible for the maintenance of family bonds, enslaved women developed a long historical memory of family lineage that enabled them to exploit the legal options open to the enslaved.

Different imperial systems had different forms of manumission but uterine descent was recognized in Atlantic slave systems under French, Spanish, and Dutch law. Ironically in British North America it was a suit brought by a female slave that established the legal precedent for the matrilineal kinship system at the same time that it provided enslaved women the means to challenge the system. One of the earliest examples of black women using legal routes to escape bondage involved a young mulatto woman, Elizabeth Key. The daughter of an enslaved woman and an Englishman, Key brought suit for her freedom before the Northumberland County Court in Virginia in 1656. Acting on Key’s behalf, her lawyer appealed her case on three grounds: that her father’s status as a free man made her free; that she was baptized and therefore entitled to freedom; and that the contract for her sale bound her for only nine years. After lengthy legal proceedings Key’s petition was denied. The case had, however, awakened planters’ concerns over protection of property rights and costly litigation. As a result, the General Assembly passed a law in December 1662 that made the status of the child conditional on the status of the mother. [14]

The 1662 law laid the legal foundation for matrilineal descent and represents a radical break with the European patriarchal tradition. It did more than that. Under English law—which regarded slaves as chattel subject to sale, mortgage, and collateral in credit transactions— manumission was the only form of litigation open to slaves. As guardians of familial genealogy, enslaved women were keenly aware of their own legal status and of the fact that manumission during childbearing years meant not only a mother’s individual freedom but freedom for her living children and children yet unborn. Access to formal law was limited in the British colonies but a high percentage of all slave complaints in the British Caribbean islands were made by enslaved women. In Trinidad, for example, women were twice as likely as men to appear before magistrates as complainants; women account for almost half the cases brought before Jamaican courts between 1835 and 1846. [15] By the early nineteenth century, in places like Petersburg, Virginia, half of Petersburg’s black emancipators were female. [16] In contrast to English law, under the Spanish code slaves enjoyed a legal personality and certain rights and responsibilities including *coartation*, the right of self-purchase. Enslaved women in Florida, Louisiana and Texas used the law to achieve freedom for themselves and their children. The continuous contact between mother and children meant that family history and genealogy were stored in the archives of the female mind. The long historical memory of the way slavery operated enabled enslaved women to use the legal channels to obtain freedom for themselves and family members. The story of Rosalie Vincent offers an extraordinary glimpse into the inventive ways that enslaved

women used the legal system not only to free their children but to guarantee the freedom of generations unborn and even to remove the stain of slavery.

Born in Senegambia around 1767, enslaved in St. Domingue as a young girl, Rosalie became the matriarch of a distinguished Louisiana family. Her story has been tracked through official records by Rebecca Scott and Jean Hébrard. A rich process that demonstrates Rosalie's keen understanding of the importance of written documents in a slave society, Rosalie's route to free status began in 1793 in an official document that identifies her as "Rosalie nation Poulard," a reference to her ethnic origins and slave status. Toward the end of 1795 when she was twenty-eight years old, Rosalie appears again, this time in a manumission document signed by her owner, a free woman of color named Marthe Guillaume. Some time during the turbulent years of the Haitian Revolution, Rosalie became the close companion of Michel Vincent, a white man, and bore him at least one child, a girl. The birth certificate identifies the infant as Elizabeth, "ditte Dieudonné," the "natural daughter" of Michel Vincent and Marie François, probably Rosalie's baptismal name, and identifies Rosalie as "Negresse libre." Although the French National Convention's abolition of slavery in the French colonies (1795) definitively freed Rosalie, the intricate web of wars involving France, Spain and England made her free status precarious. To avoid the risk of re-enslavement, and perhaps in anticipation of their departure for Cuba, where slavery remained legally established, Michel falsely identified Rosalie and her progeny as his slaves and through an act of manumission declared them free. Shortly thereafter, the family departed for Cuba. Because Spain had not accepted the general emancipation decree, Rosalie's free status was once again in jeopardy. With manumission document in hand, she appeared before French authorities in Santiago to request validation of her freedom papers. The French official accorded her the courtesy title of "citoyenne," a vital symbolic step in the former slave's transition to membership in free society.

Even with her freedom papers countersigned by a French officer, Rosalie's freedom was still not secure, especially after Michel's death, and in 1809 she apparently returned to Haiti while her freeborn daughter Elizabeth Dieudonné joined the 1809 emigration to New Orleans. In New Orleans Elizabeth married Jacques Tinchant, the son of a Domingois woman of color. In 1835 the couple appeared before a notary. Armed with Elizabeth's birth certificate, possibly carried to New Orleans by the redoubtable Rosalie, they claimed Elizabeth's right to adopt the surname of her "natural" father, Michel Vincent. With the stroke of a pen the slave status of her mother was expunged from official records; Elizabeth and her off-spring had completed the transition to full membership in free society. [17]

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Endnotes:

[1] Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* [Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 2007]: quote p. 104, see also 33-34, 41-42, 56-57, 102-03, 162 and passim.

[2] Jane Landers, "Gracia Real de Santa Teresa Mose: A Free Black Town in Spanish Colonial Florida," *American Historical Review*, 95 [1990]: 9-30

[3] Sylvia R. Frey, *Water from the Rock Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991]: 226-27; Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* [Baton Rouge & London: Louisiana State University Press, 1992]: 212-37.

[4] Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* [New York, The Free Press, 1994, 1996]: 4.

[5] Kathleen Brown, "Body Work in the Antebellum United States," in *Haunted by Empire Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler [Durham, N.C. & London: Duke University Press, 2006]: 219, 233, 234.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Nellie Y. McKay [New York: W.W. Norton]: 82; Darlene Clark Hines, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," in *The Gender/Sexuality Reader: Culture, History, Political Economy*, Roger N. Lancaster and Michaela Di Leonardo, eds. [New York: Routledge, 1997]: 434-438.

[8] *A Digest of the Laws of the United States and the State of South-Carolina Now in Force Relative to the Militia, with an Appendix containing the Patrol Laws* [Charleston: A.E. Miller, Printer and Publisher, 1829]: 152.

[9] Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household Black and White Women of the Old South* [Chapel Hill, North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press, 1988]:307-08.

[10] Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 4, 50-51, 64, 165-66, 204-06; Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin' African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* [Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1998]: 6-18.

[11] Sharla M. Fett, *Working Cures Healing, Health and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* [Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2002]: 189-90, 198-99.

[12] Yvonne Chireau, "The Uses of the Supernatural: Toward a History of Black Women's Magical Practices," in *A Mighty Baptism Race, Gender, and the Creation of American Protestantism*, eds. Susan Jester and Lisa MacFarlane [Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1996]: 171-88; Sharla Fett, *Working Cures Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* [Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002]: 162-67; Bernard Moitt, *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles, 1635-1848* [Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001]: 141.

[13] Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* [New York & London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1985]: 95.

[14] Warren M. Billings, "The Cases of Fernando and Elizabeth Key: A Note on the Status of Blacks in Seventeenth-Century Virginia," *William and Mary Quarterly* XXX [1873]:467-74.

[15] Mindie Lazarus-Black, "Slaves, Masters, and Magistrates: Law and the Politics of Resistance in the British Caribbean, 1736-1834," in *Contested States Law, Hegemony, and Resistance*, Mindie Lazarus-Black and Susan F. Hirsch, eds. [New York & London: Routledge, 1994]: 252-76.

[16] Lebsock. *Free Women of Petersburg*, p. 95.

[17] The preceding paragraphs are based entirely on Rebecca Scott & Jean M. Hébrard, "Servitude, liberté et citoyenneté dans le monde atlantique des XVIIe et XIXe siècles,: Rosalie de nation Poulard," in *Revue de las Société Haitienne D'Histoire et de Geographie*, No. 234 [2008]: 1-52. See also Rebecca J. Scott and Jean Michel Hébrard, "Rosalie of the Poulard Nation: Freedom, Law, and Dignity in the Era of the Haitian Revolution," in John D. Garrigus and Christopher Morris, eds. *Assumed Identities: The Meanings of Race in the Atlantic World* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2010).