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PERSPECTIVE

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THE BLOOD OF MOTHERS: WOMEN, MONEY, AND MARKETS IN YORUBA-ATLANTIC PERSPECTIVE

Andrew Apter

The question which I pursue in this essay concerns the impact of West African constructions of womanhood and female agency on the plantation societies of the Americas. The character of this influence is complex and variable, stronger in some areas than in others according to changing economic, demographic, and sociopolitical conditions on the ground, not to mention the different slave routes, ports of embarkation, and modes of collecting captives for the dreaded Middle Passage across the Atlantic. The criteria for assessing this impact are also complex, ranging from what historian Philip Curtin calls “the numbers game”—determining ethnic populations that were transshipped, in what gender proportions, and to which destinations—to mechanisms of cultural transmission and creolization, what for anthropologists Sydney Mintz and Richard Price is nothing less than the birth of African American culture.¹ To date, the emphasis on African baseline cultures has shifted from the specific “tribal origins” that anthropologist Melville Herskovits originally invoked in the 1930s and 1940s toward general processes of creolization and ethnogenesis originating in the slave ships and further developing within the new social frameworks of the plantation complex.² This change in focus from “roots” to “routes” is also marked by a more active understanding of African cultural influences, seen less as survivals and retentions resisting assimilation and more as cultural extensions and inventions, mediating the very processes of creolization and mobilizing resistance against the slaveholding class.³ I will not review these key positions within African Diaspora and Black Atlantic Studies, save only to highlight the growing focus on women and gender in plantation societies, and the West African constructions of womanhood that were variably reworked in the Americas. Since the 1985 landmark publication of Deborah Gray White’s *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*, women have moved from periphery to center in historical studies of Atlantic slavery—not merely “added” as part of the story, but changing our understanding of its core contradictions.⁴

My goal is to deepen this focus on gender by developing a West African model of womanhood and agency and applying it to social relations of production and reproduction across a range of plantation societies. In so doing, I hope to get “beneath” the European gender ideologies that inform so much of the relevant

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archive in order to approach an African American perspective on the gender dynamics of slave life and community—one that drew upon idioms of fertility and witchcraft and derived from the position of women in markets.⁵ There are several caveats to this approach that expose my argument to a number of criticisms, not least of which concerns the status of the model that I propose and its representativeness among African American communities in the Americas. But I offer it less as a definitive interpretation than as an extended hypothesis, a productive line of inquiry to pursue. Clearly, enslaved African women were generally “exported” from the continent in lesser numbers than men, from myriad locations, and found themselves in a broader array of New World dislocations as victims of labor exploitation, rape, and ruptured family relations.⁶ But it is precisely within the dialectics of social reproduction and transformation that the values of West African womanhood were abstracted and reshaped, mapping onto emerging relations of opposition and mediation, and to some extent informing them. In what ways and degrees are questions that can be pursued in particular case studies. My preliminary goal is to set the stage for such research, beginning with material from Yorubaland in Nigeria where markets are historically female domains.

THE BLOOD OF MOTHERS

The model of West African womanhood that took effect in the Americas is associated with the blood of mothers, a highly fetishized, indeed potent substance that accounts for the “secret” of women—that which gives them the ability to conceive and give birth. As I shall argue, the cultural semantics of the blood of mothers is at once concrete and abstract, a distilled essence of womanhood with positive and negative values, as it were; positive in the capacity to mix with male sperm and create new life; negative in the menses, understood as “bad blood” ejected by the womb because it cannot create new life, and feared by men precisely because it can neutralize their most powerful medicines through physical contact.⁷ Among Yoruba speaking peoples in southwest Nigeria, as well as in the Republic of Benin and even parts of Togo and Ghana, the blood of mothers is a key figure or trope that congeals, through its concentrated array of meanings, a number of sociocultural processes and domains that give it much more than “biological” significance. Focusing on the secrets and mysteries of childbirth, Yoruba ideas of fertility extend to the reproduction of social and political relations, managed by priestesses who invoke the orisha (deities) and, during annual festivals of “carrying water,” bring the orisha’s power into the town in ritual bottles and calabashes to revitalize the community.⁸

The critical moment of these annual orisha festivals, during *Ijó Ipònmí*, or the “Day of Carrying Water,” occurs when the possession priestesses (*olòtun*) “put

their water down,” delivering the charged containers of the orisha’s sacred water (*omi*) into the king’s palace and their associated town shrines. Should the “water” balanced on the devotee’s head fall or spill, havoc will ensue, requiring cleansing rituals to allay the witchcraft that will result. Enemies of the town are thought to use *jùjú* medicines to sabotage the safe passage of the priestesses by making them stumble and fall, causing the calabash to break apart, or, as in one popular account that I recorded, by seizing a container with an invisible power and suspending it in mid-air.⁹ Thus salt is sprinkled to “sweeten” the route and neutralize any bad medicines that might thwart the priestesses’ safe passage and delivery. Indeed, the entire collective drama is modeled on the delivery of childbirth. As the priestesses exit the bush shrine for the town, balancing the revitalizing powers of the orisha’s “water” on their heads, they receive the protective blessing, backed by a sacrifice, “May she carry it safely and put it down” (*E jé k’ó gbèè lọ s’ilẹ*). The same blessing is given to a pregnant woman seeking the protection of an orisha, that she carry the fetus safely and deliver it without mishap. Ritual reproduction of the community, like human reproduction, rests on the irreducible secret of womanhood—the hidden blood of mothers.

There is more to this basic ritual correspondence between human and social reproduction than meets the eye, as the expansive meanings of fertility throughout West Africa suggest. How does the blood of motherhood, with its positive and negative values, relate to the broader social processes that it mediates and embodies? We can fill in the picture by sketching the position of Yoruba women in three related domains: those of the family, or domestic domain; the lineage system, or politico-juridical domain; and the market, that historic sphere of economic exchange organized and controlled by women.

Household and Family

Like many family forms throughout West Africa, Yoruba households were (and in many areas remain) traditionally polygynous, with one man marrying several wives if he was a successful farmer, craftsman, military leader, chief, or entrepreneur; and with each wife sharing domestic responsibilities while giving birth to as many children as possible. Each wife characteristically has had her own room within the larger compound, where she would sleep, store her trading supplies, and retreat from domestic squabbles. In principle, the wives are ranked by seniority of marriage into the husband’s compound, with the first wife, “*Ìyá ilé*,” presiding over her junior co-wives, but jealousies and rivalries result in alternative patterns. Status among co-wives by seniority is offset by the number of their children, how successful they are, and perceptions of favoritism from their husband. So important are the co-wives’ identities as mothers that they refer to each other using teknonyms, as in *Ìyá Bímpé* (mother of Bimpe) or *Ìyá ibeji* (mother of twins). A wife who remains childless is not fully incorporated into the family, since she is not contributing to its

reproduction and expansion, and might be sent back to her parents. She is to be pitied, but also resented and despised—a woman not fully realized as a mother, indeed with no proper household name. Likely seen as a victim of witchcraft, she is also destined to become something of a witch herself, taking revenge on her rivals.¹⁰

Witchcraft accusations within the domestic group are directed primarily between co-wives and focused on their children. If a wife loses a child to disease, or fails to conceive, divination usually reveals a jealous co-wife as the cause, one who used her witchcraft to sabotage her rival. As a matter of course, co-wives may share the same cooking hearth, but they never prepare food for each other’s children to avoid accusations of poisoning. For the work of the witch is the *inverse* of fertility. The witch causes death, impotence, and infertility by consuming the fetus as it develops in the womb, transforming herself into a night bird and sucking the life-force from within—as in the very term *àjé*, a contraction of *iyá jẹ?* or “mother eats.” She kills the living children of her co-wives by draining their blood in nocturnal feasts with her coven. A witch can even cause male impotence by stealing a man’s penis and using it to have sex with another woman. Moreover, witchcraft is not an aberration that can be eliminated, but is a potentiality within all women—an immanent if latent negative appetite opposed to, yet embedded within, the life-producing forces of their mysterious blood.¹¹

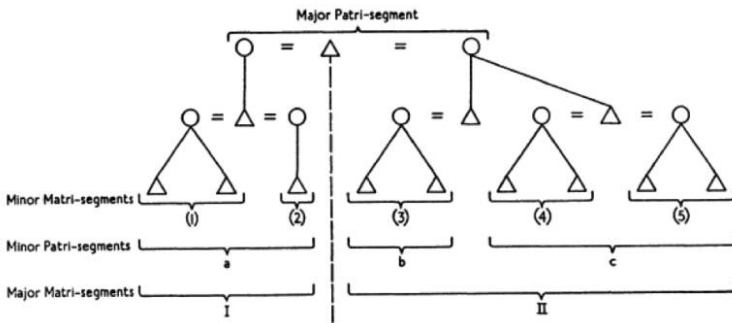


Diagram 1. Polygyny and Matrisegmentation.
From Schwab, “Kinship and Lineage,” 367.

Lineage Dynamics

The negative, life-consuming idiom of Yoruba witchcraft assumes broader significance within the lineage, manifesting divisive processes of segmentation, fission, and optation.¹² Patriarchal and patrilineal in principle, the Yoruba lineage (*idilé*) consists of groups of households beneath a recognized male elder—often a chief or title-holder—with collective rights and resources, including access to farming land and political titles. As strictly exogamous units, the daughters marry

out into other lineages, and the wives marry in from other lineages, reproducing, as mothers, the lineages of their husbands. Indeed, the bridewealth paid to the bride's family has nothing to do with "buying" the wife herself, as is sometimes mistakenly suggested, but establishes lineage rights in her offspring. If a Yoruba mother divorces her husband and wishes to regain custody of her children, her family must return the original bridewealth. It is not, however, through divorce that women destabilize the lineage system, but through the very logic of lineage segmentation, which occurs between half-brothers—sons of the same father but of different mothers. Developing from the structure of polygynous households, the children of one mother (*omọ iyá*) differentiate themselves from each other, partly because each mother remains financially responsible for her offspring, but also because each group of full siblings inherits the father's estate in equivalent portions, per stirpes (diagram 1).¹³ And because such sibling groups compete against each other for influence and control over lineage resources and affairs, they form intergenerational segments defined through brothers of the same father but of different mothers.¹⁴ Women as mothers thus become the nodal points through which lineage segmentation occurs, establishing latent lines of cleavage between groups of full siblings and their descendants through their very position as outsiders who reproduce the lineage itself. Moreover, such latent lines of division are activated by competition for impartible resources, most notably civil and even royal political titles that devolve patrilineally, precipitating full-fledged fission when a segment breaks away from the lineage and establishes its autonomy through a separate ancestor. Yoruba local histories are full of accounts of brothers who fought over access to a title, or over the division of meat at a funeral, thereby breaking the lineage into two.¹⁵ Inevitably, they are half-brothers with the same father and different mothers since they represent entire lineage segments at their point of structural division (diagram 2).

In addition to lineage segmentation and fission, women as mothers could further destabilize the patrilineage through complementary filiation and lineage optation.¹⁶ In exceptional cases, a man could make claims on his mother's patrilineage to gain access to land or political title, including the kingship itself. Leading to lineage optation, when a son "opted" out of his own patrilineage and into that of his mother, this socially sanctioned transfer of allegiances amounted to a form of lineage "cannibalism." Fanning these flames were the winds of mercantile profit. Since mothers, as traders, provided for their children, successful market women could become far wealthier and more influential than their husbands, precipitating the divisive dynamics of lineage segmentation and fission, undermining male authority in the household, and luring sons away from their patrilineages with promises of maternal inheritance. Thus the blood of mothers and lineage reproduction had its polluted, negative dimension, the inverse of fertility, undermining the lin-

age through fission and optation. To appreciate the economic dimensions of such dangerous transfusions and transmutations, we can turn to the role of women in markets, where wives and mothers doubled as traders and merchants.

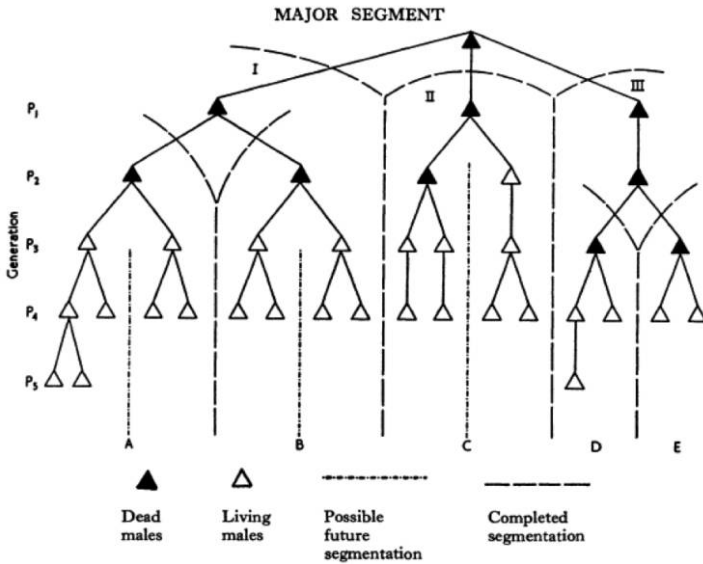


Diagram 2. Lineage Segmentation and Fission.
From Schwab, “Kinship and Lineage,” 361.

Money and Markets

Like many women throughout the interlocking network of periodic markets and their “ring cycles” extending from Senegambia to the eastern Cameroons, Yoruba women historically have controlled town and village markets by organizing into (*omo iyá*) associations, pooling credit, and selling agricultural produce—beginning with that of their husbands, who normally provided them with their initial trading capital.¹⁷ Occupying stalls at the center of kingdoms and subordinate towns, market women dominate the quintessential space of the public sphere, that center where the roads dividing chiefly jurisdictions converged, where town criers and king’s messengers made important announcements, and where the townspeople could also mobilize against local and government figures, often led by the market women themselves.¹⁸ In Yoruba markets, women—to invoke historian Natalie Zemon Davis—“were on top.”¹⁹

In institutional terms, the market women were represented by a female chief, the *ìyálòde* (mother of the outside, the public), who was to some degree masculinized by her economic and political power, marked by the coral beads of chieftaincy and man’s hat that in some kingdoms entitled her to a seat on the king’s coun-

cil. Moreover, given the association of authority with seniority so characteristic of Yoruba social relations, the more powerful and prosperous market women were older, spending more time trading and less time tending to household duties after their children had grown, married, or moved away. The senior market women were thus typically postmenopausal, a status at once prestigious and respected, but also feared and resented as their witchcraft was more powerful. For the blood of these female elders was no longer fertile, and no longer flowed. Their barren wombs were seen to trap the menstrual blood that is both polluted and powerful, turning them into vessels of concentrated *àṣẹ*, the vital force of ritual potency and effective verbal command. An illustrative praise-name for these aged mothers is “the one with the vagina that turns upside down without pouring blood.”²⁰

The profound association of female blood with motherhood and market women forms a pair of contrastive values. The good blood of procreative fertility and childbirth and its inverse, the infertile blood of menstruation and witchcraft, are present in all women in varying proportions, but shift toward the negative pole as women pass menopause, gain economic and political autonomy, and accumulate greater wealth through extended market activities. Wealthy market women can undermine male authority in the home, precipitating rivalry between co-wives, lineage fission and optation, while increasing their spatial mobility and autonomy by attending markets in neighboring towns following their calibrated cycles of market days. In this capacity their witchcraft is accentuated. Given the periodic cycle of Yoruba markets, which occur every “five” days in every town, and coincide with the monthly meetings of the *ẹgbẹ* associations, their timing mirrors the periodicity of menstruation, as if extending women’s reproductive cycles into the economic cycles of social reproduction through exchange.²¹ The work of the market woman is thus necessary but dangerous. Like the mother who converts blood and sperm into new life, the ultimate blessing, the female trader converts money and commodities into new wealth through exchange, producing a surplus that benefits the community at large by adding to the vitality of the market itself. During the major town festivals of the orisha, prayers for agricultural productivity, fertile women, and prosperous markets accompany sacrifices to shrines and altars in the marketplace. An active market animates a kingdom, a weak or enervated market represents a kingdom in decline. But if a healthy market circulates value (money, commodities) throughout the social body, it can also be blocked and sabotaged by the market woman in her capacity as a witch. Successful women traders—sometimes called “Cash Madams” after the huge wads of cash that they store in their bras and wrappers as well as the conspicuous wealth they have accumulated over the years—may be publicly praised, but privately they are often suspected of

witchcraft.²² Although their very bodies celebrate corporeal largesse, they are secretly maligned for blocking the flow of money and blood. Successful female traders are resented as hoarders, often accused of hiding scarce commodities to inflate prices and protect themselves against loss. They are believed to violate the rules of the *egbé* association by putting personal profit before collective trust. These same women are also said to be afflicted with abnormal pregnancies. The Cash Madam's large belly is sometimes rumored to contain a blocked fetus that grows for years. It is only when such a witch is ritually detected and cleansed that her hypertrophic issue (much like Rabelais's Gargantua) is violently expelled.

What I am suggesting is that the bivalent blood of mothers in Yorubaland—and throughout West Africa where market women prevail—is socioculturally and historically associated with their contradictory roles as wives and mothers on the one hand, and as traders and merchants on the other, framed in the antithetical idioms of fertility and witchcraft. As wives and mothers, they reproduce their husband's patrilineage, but in this very capacity they compete with their co-wives, generating division and witchcraft accusations within the domestic domain, as well as segmentation, fission, and even optation within the lineage system at large. As market women, they sell their husband's produce for gain, but the profits they accumulate can undermine male authority, individually within the household through economic influence and the prospects of inheritance, as well as collectively, in the market place, where *egbé* associations consolidate their corporate influence and power. It is surely no coincidence that the same term *egbé* refers to the coven of witches that meets in the market, at the base of the Iroko tree, during nocturnal feasts that drain the blood of their victims—the children of co-wives, or their fetuses within. Nor is it surprising that their witchcraft power itself devolves matrilineally from mothers to daughters, an essence that can be allayed but never eliminated from female blood and its generational lines. Moreover, as vessels of transmission women double as agents of conversion—if their wombs combine male “water” with female blood to create new life for the patrilineage, their trays and calabashes convert commodities into money. Measuring exchange values that circulate throughout the social body, they convert money into “blood” as the flow of socially reproductive value.²³ In their fertile capacities, women as mothers and traders control human and social reproduction. As witches, they subvert fertility by sabotaging, even cannibalizing, procreative vitality and by blocking the flow of money and commodities—hoarding, hiding, and accumulating profit by taking it out of circulation. The purest expression of illicit wealth is found in Yoruba idioms of money-making magic, which converts the blood of kidnapped children into brand-new naira bills. Such “soaked” or “hot” money is typically unproductive

and infertile: gained without labor, it is spent without gain.²⁴ A market woman will guard against such nefarious transmutations of value precisely because they represent the negative limits of her witchcraft potentialities—the conversion of vital force into bad blood, of exchange value into unproductive surplus. If “actual” witches are feared and despised for their cannibalistic appetites and destructive agency, as potential witches Yoruba women are honored and respected, for within their blood lies the “secret” of their power and value.²⁵

NEW WORLD TRANSFORMATIONS

What does this exploratory glimpse into the blood of mothers in Yorubaland have to do with enslaved women in the Americas? By what possible stretch of the diasporic imagination can we relate Yoruba constructions of motherhood and womanhood to the radically different historical conditions of plantation societies?

First, there were general demographic trends that support such an attenuated cultural connection. From the 1650s to 1750s—as the Atlantic plantation complex coalesced—concentrations of African captives from the Bights of Benin and Biafra represented a 500-mile belt of culturally and economically linked societies surrounding a Yoruba “core,” where households were polygynous, descent was patrilineal, and women dominated a network of periodic markets. Moreover, an uncharacteristically high proportion of these captives (about 40 percent) were women, contrasting with higher male ratios of the Upper Guinea and West Central African trade, and with prevailing higher numbers of male captives during the following one hundred years.²⁶ To be sure, Senegalese and Congolese forced emigrants were also important during this high period of the Atlantic trade, as the wide distribution of “Foulah,” “Mandingo,” and “Congo” ethnonyms in the Americas implies, but their cultural configurations of gender and procreation appear less explicit, sustained by a lower ratio of females and—as with the Afro-Caribbean religions of Vodou, Santería, and Candomblé—largely assimilated to Fon-Yoruba models instead. Second, transcending the question of Yoruba influence as such is the broader significance of those underlying regional models or “grammars” that, following Mintz and Price, structured interaction and communication among captives from various ethnicities in Africa who were thrown together in the holds of the ships and regrouped in the Americas. Crucial to this approach to creolization are two fundamental axes of “refabrication” in the making of African American culture: the horizontal axis between enslaved Africans whose ethnic differences were unconsciously bridged by underlying values and cognitive orientations; and the vertical domination of Europeans over Africans, framing the complex dialectics of resistance, accommodation, and co-determination that their encounter entailed.²⁷ It is thus within such a sociohistorical matrix that the blood of mothers

was remapped, extending beyond the confines of a specific ethnic culture to embrace the broader underlying cognitive orientations that it shared with other West Africans, as well as the European ideologies of race, gender, blood, and procreation, which it both resisted and accommodated.

Let us begin with this latter correspondence between African and European conceptions of womanhood and sexuality, as it relates to African women. We have seen from the Yoruba model of womanhood and its complementary principles of fertility and witchcraft that female power and agency are both reproductive and transformative, giving birth and taking life according to distinctive qualities and dispositions of blood—good blood (procreative) vs. bad (menses), circulating vs. blocked, generative vs. extractive or consumptive. These positive and negative valuations of womanhood, informing regional West African idioms more broadly, resonated with similar contrastive sets deployed within hegemonic European discourses of primitive barbarity and illicit desire. In her exploration of “porno-tropical” travel writing from the late 16th through the 18th century, historian Jennifer Morgan identifies a dominant icon of African womanhood and fertility—the image, often portrayed in engravings, of African mothers with pendulous breasts, emphasizing a hypertrophic physiology of lactation and labor in what became a naturalized charter of female enslavement.²⁸ In one widely circulating elaboration of this theme, African women working the fields simultaneously suckled children on their backs by throwing their elongated breasts over their shoulders, embodying the conflicting demands of production and reproduction in figurations of the sexual grotesque. In his popular *Description* (1732) of the Guinea Coast, the slave trader and explorer John Barbot thus wrote of “the poor babes, so carr’d about at their mothers’ backs . . . and how freely they suck the breasts, which are always full of milk, over their mothers’ shoulders, and sleep soundly in that odd posture.”²⁹

Opposing this image of mammarian motherhood was a complementary discourse of “lust and depravity” in which “hot constitution’d Ladies” with firm and shapely breasts tested European men’s reserve and resolve (figure 1).³⁰ Whether abhorred as nymphomaniacs or admired as seductive beauties, these figures of African womanhood emphasized desire and sexuality over fertility and reproduction, many drawn without children as temptresses and concubines. William Smith, who mapped the Gold Coast in 1727 for the Royal African Company, quotes the resident British factor Charles Wheeler, who received a concubine from a local king:

Her lovely Breasts, whose Softness to the Touch nothing can exceed, were quite bare, and so was her Body to her [waist] . . . and though she was black, that was amply recompenc’d by the Softness of her Skin, the beautiful Proportion and exact Symmetry of each Part of her Body, and the natural, pleasant and inartificial Method of her Behaviour. She was not forward, nor yet coy, when I pressed her lovely Breasts, she gently stroak’d my Hand and smiling met my Salute with equal Ardour and Fervancy.³¹

In addition to the community of Afro-European “creoles” that developed around the European-built forts and “castles” on the West African coast, and the “marriages” of convenience arranged between European factors and local chiefs, this passage reflects a contrastive register to the “over-the shoulder breast-feeding mother,” one which valorizes firm breasts and perfect bodies over the “uberous dugges” of the nursing mother-laborer.³²

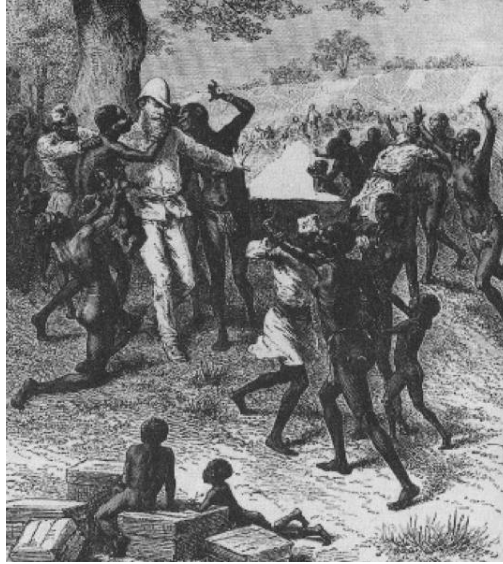


Figure 1. Henry Stanley Resisting Temptation.

From J. W. Bruel, *Heroes of the Dark Continent* (Richmond, VA, 1890).

Reprinted in Brantlinger, “Victorians and Africans,” 215.

The socioeconomic and political meanings of reproduction and transformation throughout the plantation societies of the Americas were framed within racialized relations of production and exchange—of boundaries systematically upheld and transgressed—that will be examined in due course. At this point we can simply note how the antinomies of black womanhood were stereotyped into familiar figures of loyalty and lust. Nowhere is the opposition more clearly expressed than in antebellum contrasts between Mammy and Jezebel in the American South.³³ Evoking the image of the black “mammarian mother,” Mammy represented the loyal domestic servant who served as the lynchpin of the “Big House,” running the household, attending to her mistress, and manifesting in her bigness and blackness a surrogated form of social lactation. Indeed, mammy as mammary was, in effect, a “surrogate mistress and mother” who was so devoted to her young white charges that she could double as their wet-nurse (figure 2).³⁴ Against this image of black maternalism, the

figure of Jezebel posed a sexualized threat, attending not to her mistress's children, but rather male desires and needs. Such "[N]egro wenches" were purchased to work as courtesans and prostitutes in the elite-sponsored "Fancy Trade," but within the confines of the plantation and its domestic interiors, they were reputed to exchange sexual favors with the master and his sons for gifts and special treatment. Although in reality they were ravished and raped, such women were constructed as agents of seduction, evoking the image of the African temptress and her natural promiscuity.³⁵ As historian Deborah Gray White portrays the mythic contrast:

On the one hand there was the woman obsessed with matters of the flesh, on the other was the asexual woman. One was carnal, the other maternal. One was at heart a slut, the other was deeply religious. One was Jezebel, the other a Mammy.³⁶

To appreciate the socioeconomic dynamics of reproduction (fertility) and transformation (witchcraft) that this social construction conveyed, and the blood-based cultural idioms with which they resonated, we can turn to the dominant social domains where enslaved women occupied central roles.



Figure 2. Domestic Sainthood and Social Lactation.

Left, Hattie McDaniel as "Mammy" in "Gone with the Wind," www.nndb.com.
Right, African wet-nurse in Brazil, from Gilberto Freyre, Estêvão Pinto, and Ivan Wash Rodrigues, *Casa Grande e Senzala em Quadrinhos* (Recife, Brazil, 2000).

Household and Family

The scholarship on the family patterns among enslaved Africans and African Americans in the New World reveals a broad range of trends and types correlated with the plantation systems in which they were embedded. I do not have space in

this more analytical exercise to adequately navigate this complex terrain, but I will highlight key tensions within family forms that correspond to the values of fertility and witchcraft in Yoruba domestic groups. First, it is obvious that the normative models of West African family organization were severely undermined in the Americas by conditions imposed by the slaveholding class: not just the destruction of families through exploitation and sale, but also through direct interventions into domestic life—arranging unions and marriages, lending or renting out enslaved workers to other plantations, drawing some into the Big House or sending them back into the fields, the violation of enslaved girls and women, not to mention the decimation of aging slaves through overwork, punishment, malnourishment, and neglect. Nor was the plantation itself a stable environment—it responded to changing fortunes and market conditions as owners sold enslaved men, women, and children to cover debts and losses, and was subject to its own dynamics of generational succession when children inherited and divided estates. Nonetheless, African American families did manage to develop and precariously endure, bolstered by the development of provision grounds, serving as havens of protection and survival, and sometimes producing extended compounds connected by polygynous unions. More than any other social domain, the slaves' households served as repositories of African values for women, not in simplistic terms of passive preservation, but as self-conscious spaces of opposition to the Big House and its European codes of domesticity.³⁷

If the Yoruba-based model of household witchcraft derived from tensions generated by polygyny, leading—as we saw—to the divisive dynamics of lineage segmentation, fission, and optation, New World families among the enslaved Africans were rarely granted the freedom to expand along these lines, but displaced and diverted the blood of mothers both “inward” and “outward.” To be sure, multigenerational families, polygynous tendencies, and principles approaching patrilineal succession did develop in variable degrees. Stevenson observes that “Virginia’s slaves were part of a variety of marriage, family, and household types, nuclear and extended family structures; monogamous, polygamous, and serial marriages; single and multiple generational households of various combinations of kin, friends, and sometimes strangers,” with variations corresponding to small and large holdings.³⁸

Historian Barbara Bush, drawing on Barry Higman, notes that in Jamaica, Trinidad, and Barbados, “extended or polygynous households were often based on a series of contiguous units built around a yard and enclosed by a fence. The individual units were occupied by mothers and children in the case of polygynous households and by nuclear units in the case of extended family households, an arrangement which is common in West African societies.”³⁹ This passage could apply to a Yoruba compound, with its separate rooms and units for each co-wife and her children arranged around the husband (or other senior males) within a sin-

gle walled domicile (figure 3). And notwithstanding the imposition of matrilineal descent through official European legal codes, according to which a slave's status devolved through his or her mother, patrilineal trends asserted themselves when collective property was at stake.⁴⁰ In 18th-century Jamaica, "rights to provision grounds and houses were passed on by slave fathers to their families," with priority accorded to the eldest son.⁴¹ But despite this evidence of incipient patrilineal group incorporation, slave households tended toward matrifocal and nucleated forms, with shallow generations, conjugal pairs, or "single" mothers with "away" husbands living on distant properties or plantations.⁴² It is therefore not surprising that White highlights witchcraft conflicts between some bonded women competing over men in the antebellum South, not as institutionalized co-wives as such, but in what could be seen as proto-polygynous formations.⁴³ With family fission resulting from forced sales and relocations, however, the blood-based antimonies of witchcraft and fertility were concentrated onto the mother-child bond itself, wherein procreation and protection vied with abortion and infanticide.

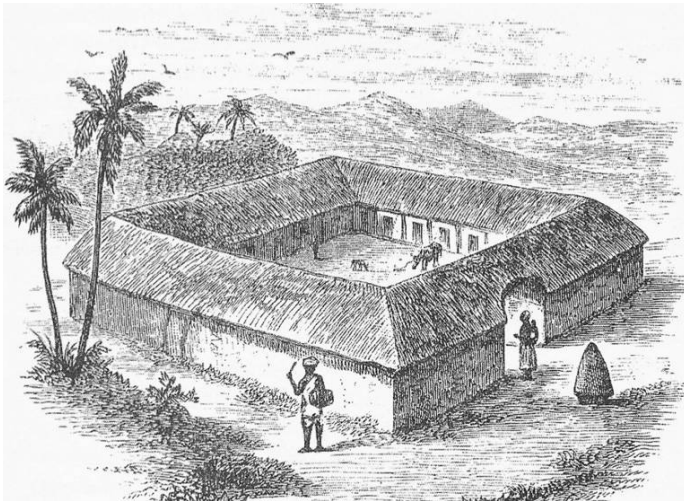


Figure 3. 19th-Century Yoruba Compound in West Africa.

From *The Gleaner Pictorial Album*, vol. I (London, 1888), 13. Reprinted in Marjorie Keniston McIntosh, *Yoruba Women, Work and Social Change* (Bloomington, IA, 2009), 83.

Motherhood for enslaved women was ambivalent and fraught, embodying the contradictions of production and reproduction—between “labor units” and “breeding units”—within the womb’s generative powers.⁴⁴ Consistently low fertility rates among enslaved women in the Americas have been attributed to a variety of socioeconomic factors, ranging from malnutrition, unsanitary conditions,

traumatic stress, and the physiology of exhausted bodies to systematic abortion and infanticide that were nothing less than a “gynecological revolt” against slavery itself.⁴⁵ Planters were explicitly preoccupied with low fertility and high child mortality, favoring “breeding wenches” over barren women through widely distributed rewards and sanctions. Historian Bernard Moitt notes that in Jamaica and Barbados as well as in the French Antilles, female slaves were given money and cloth for each successful delivery, with work exemptions accruing for every additional child. Barbara Bush reports that Jamaican rewards included larger rooms and houses for slave mothers and infants. White describes how, in Georgia and South Carolina, pregnant slaves and nursing women were given lighter workloads on “trash gangs,” receiving additional clothing and an extra week of rations for each birth.⁴⁶ But if successful childbirth brought material rewards, failed reproduction exacted its costs, including forced sale, whippings, and even the iron collar.⁴⁷ Planters blamed pregnant slaves and midwives for miscarriages, stillbirths, and infant deaths either indirectly due to the bad “blood” of their imputed promiscuity, or directly, as willful killers. The Jamaican plantocrat Edward Long believed that “most black women [were] subject to obstructions of the menstrea (monthly periods),” leading to “incurable” sterility.⁴⁸ Indeed, “menstrual maladies” were a common affliction in the plantation South, including “amenorrhea (lack of menstrual flow), abnormal bleeding between cycles (sometimes caused by benign or malignant tumors), and abnormal discharges (resulting from such conditions as gonorrhoea, tumors, and prolapsed uterus),” in addition to complications with pregnancy such as “convulsions, retention of the placenta, ectopic pregnancy, breech presentation, premature labor, and uterine rigidity.”⁴⁹ Infant disease such as neonatal tetanus (*tetanus nascentium*) was also widespread, known as “lockjaw,” “low-jaw,” and “mal à mâchoir” because in paralyzing the infant’s larynx, it prevented the newborn from feeding at the breast.⁵⁰ This blocked flow of mother’s milk resonates with blood-draining idioms of West African witchcraft, particularly since the disease was attributed to the midwives’ mistreatment of the umbilicus, that irreducible channel between mother and fetus that must be properly severed for a safe delivery.

But if bad blood and low fertility were connected morally and medically in the minds of the planters, it was widespread evidence of secret abortions that most directly implicated mothers and midwives as fetus-destroying “witches.” Planters were convinced, not always without reason, that enslaved women aborted with the assistance of midwives, whose roles as herbalists and even *hospitalières* provided them access to a range of abortifacients. Tennessee physician John H. Morgan identified “the herbs of tansy and rue, the roots and seed of the cotton plant, pennyroyal, cedar berries, and camphor, either in gum or spirits,” whereas one Dr. Thomas Dancer in Barbados recorded “Cerasee, Barbados Pride, Wild Passion Flower,

Water Germander and Wild Tansey,” as indigenous plants inducing labor in women.⁵¹ Although distributions of abortion by African ethnicity are impossible to determine with any precision, it is significant that in Saint Domingue, with its historically “Congolese” or Central African imports, it was “les femmes Aradas” from the Dahomean slave trade who were particularly associated with abortion and were punished with iron collars the same as recidivist maroons.⁵² Moitt describes similar associative afflictions on the Flauriau Plantation in Saint Domingue, where one enslaved midwife named Arada—as if personifying her “nation”—was forced to wear a rope collar with seventy knots, “each knot representing a child she had allegedly killed.”⁵³

There is no question that many innocent midwives were falsely accused of abortion and infanticide, reflecting the fears and anxieties of planters unable to reproduce their workforce from within; but there is also ample evidence that enslaved women conspired to subvert their reproductive potential, thereby empowering themselves as “witches” against the unyielding demands of the master class. Two disparate images suggest how abortion and infanticide assumed witchcraft proportions for whites and Africans alike. In one, Deborah Gray White quotes an enslaved Christian convert seeking redemption in the plantation South: “I was carried to the gates of hell and the devil pulled out a book showing me the things which I had committed and that they were all true. My life as a midwife was shown to me and I have certainly felt sorry for all the things I did, after I was converted.”⁵⁴ In the other, historian Gabriel Debien cites Moreau de Saint-Méry’s observation that by the end of the 18th century in Saint Domingue, punishment for abortion shifted from the iron collar to a form of social ostracism, in which, for any woman deemed guilty, “on lui imposait un billet de bois sur le dos pour la punir et l’humilier par ce simulacra d’un enfant.”⁵⁵ If the first image doubles as a kind of witchcraft confession in which the guilt-ridden midwife seeks divine forgiveness and cleansing, the second unwittingly reveals a Yoruba response to children lost in childbirth, when bereft mothers carry *ibeji* dolls to placate the dead child’s jealousy of the living and prevent any mystical retaliation. The “sticks of wood” that Moreau de Saint-Méry saw as signs of public humiliation may well have doubled as ritual paraphernalia to protect slave mothers and complicit midwives from the avenging spirits of the aborted and killed.⁵⁶

Plantation Dynamics

We have seen how the domestic dynamics of witchcraft were channeled “inward” within slave families, focusing on the mother-child bond as a form of “gynecological revolt.” But if the slave family was fractured and truncated through the forced management, sale, and separation of kin, its “witchcraft” was not so easily contained, but also channeled “outward,” mapping onto the broader divisions within the plantation system at large. Methodologically, we can replace

the Yoruba lineage with the patriarchal plantation as the dominant New World corporate group, identifying gendered patterns of segmentation and fission within racialized idioms of production and stratification. Again, we must emphasize that the schematic simplification of complex variations into a number of key patterns and contradictions is only oriented toward systemic trends underlying a broader range of plantation societies and slaveholding estates.

Let us return to the dynamics of witchcraft between Yoruba co-wives within a polygynous household. Recall how patterns of lineage segmentation took root between brothers of different mothers vying for resources and political influence, splitting over time into distinct branches and separating entirely through lineage fission. In each stage of this process, women occupied the nodal points of differentiation, generating womb-linked matri-segments within the patrilineage at large. Although such differentiating trends were cut short within the coercive confines of slave households and families, they emerged within the Big House, where a kind of de facto polygyny developed between the master and his servant-concubines.⁵⁷ The Big House was by no means the exclusive site of interracial sexual relations, since white indentured workers also engaged in “servant breeding,” much to the management’s disapproval.⁵⁸ But in the Big House, white male access to African and African American women remained an implicit seigneurial right and something of an open secret in matters of “colored” progeny. From a Yoruba perspective, we might reconsider the plantation household as polygynous, the white wife—if there was one—as first wife (*iyálé*) ruling over her African American co-wives (*iyàwó*). Even if empirically this structure was more immanent than manifest, it gave the blood of enslaved mothers a broader range of subversive potentials with respect to domestic reproduction and the devolution of the estate. Within the more intimate confines of the master’s house, the loyal “mammy” who upheld boundaries met the coquettish “Jezebel” who crossed them, sleeping with the master—whether forced or by design—and ultimately bearing children.⁵⁹ The question of whose children, with what rights, was of course crucial. While some slaveholders disavowed their mixed-race children, treating them like any other slave, others accorded them preferential treatment, or even legal recognition. Barbara Bush wrote of 18th-century Jamaica that, “wealthier white men often bequeathed their estates to black or coloured ‘wives’ and their offspring or made provisions for their manumission in their wills. Despite the harsh, unequal, and callous nature of slave society, close, loving bonds between black and white did exist and the degree of money and property left by whites to mulattoes was a cause for concern and controversy in plantocratic circles.”⁶⁰

Control over interracial marriage and inheritance would be imposed by the courts as the caste and class structures of plantation societies consolidated throughout the broader Atlantic system, reflecting rising fears of “degeneration” and the loss of white supremacy. But even the most draconian laws were never

uniformly enforced. Black lovers and concubines threatened to subvert the system from within, mingling the bloodlines of masters and slaves into lighter progeny with claims on the estate and possible emancipation. Thus the blood of enslaved mothers was not only lightened, or “cleansed” in the language of racial caste, but was converted into money and honor through pathways of upward mobility.⁶¹

If generational succession and devolution of the estate could follow interracial lines within the Big House, it precipitated a very different pattern of family fission among enslaved workers’ households. When the master died and his widow and children inherited the plantation, slaveholding properties were regularly divided and sold, often separating slave families in the process. Here the “blood” of mothers was structurally salient because some owners sold husbands and fathers before rupturing the bonds between mothers and children, recapitulating a pattern from the slave markets—where mothers and children were more often sold together—that reinforced matrifocal family patterns. Reasons for favoring the mother-child bond were hardly altruistic, but followed from observations that mothers who lost their children through sale became demoralized, listless, and less productive as workers. They were also more prone to flight or marronage. And within the maternal sibling unit, females were favored over males, possibly as better caretakers for their aging parents. Analyzing the dispersal of the Gaillard estate in South Carolina, historian Cheryll Ann Cody found that “daughters were twice as likely as sons to stay with their mother,” adding that “because so many women with children were entrusted with the care of elderly parents, the resultant pattern reinforced the maternal kinship ties and tended to produce three-generational matrifocal families.”⁶² Such trends towards matrifocality, privileging the mother-daughter bond at its core, echo not only the logic of matri-segmentation within the Yoruba patrilineage, but also the transmission of witchcraft from mothers to daughters in submerged maternal lines. As Cody argued, slave naming practices favored patrikin precisely because paternal and fraternal ties were most vulnerable to separation.⁶³

Episodic divisions associated with the dispersal of an estate had a matrifocal impact on slave family structure, but occurred intermittently, with variable outcomes depending upon the planter’s longevity, number of recognized children, size and type of plantation, and profitability of his crop. Contradictions on a daily basis, however, were built into women’s competing roles as laborers and mothers, so perversely represented by Matthew Lewis’s complaint that overseers and bookkeepers “kick black women in the belly from one end of Jamaica to another.”⁶⁴ If planters encouraged slave fertility to replenish the labor force, those responsible for labor productivity tried to minimize the “costs” of pregnancy and childrearing. Clearly the imperatives of production and reproduction were at odds, pitting the demands of the field against those of the house. Pregnant women seeking special

dispensations could be flogged; most worked long hours in gangs “where they performed the same field labour as men . . . from sun-up till sun-down.”⁶⁵ In this capacity enslaved women were effectively de-feminized, converting reproductive value into labor power and thereby minimizing their caring capacities as mothers in the domestic domain. Whereas the Yoruba mother was masculinized in the market, seeking opportunities and accumulating profits at the expense of her domestic obligations, the enslaved mother was masculinized in the field, where even the flow of her breast milk was blocked. In one of the most profound manifestations of the split between labor units and breeding units, some plantations had “weaning houses” where specialized “sucklers” would wet-nurse newborns while their mothers toiled in the fields. Small wonder that overworked and exploited enslaved women resorted to abortion and infanticide; in West African terms, these women were forced into a “witch-like” mode of plantation production that converted mother’s milk into the master’s monetary gain. It was only in markets that such extreme exploitation of laboring women was partially redressed.

Huckstering and Markets

The development of slave provision grounds and an internal market system for cultivated goods is a well-known chapter in the history of New World plantation societies beginning in the 17th century.⁶⁶ It charts significant gains for enslaved women who took charge of an emergent sphere of circulation and exchange. According to the “standard” narrative, planters introduced provision grounds to offset the costs of feeding enslaved workers—and thus of maintaining the labor force by allowing them to augment minimal rations with staples like root crops, corn, and plantain as well as vegetables and domestic animals raised on garden plots. These grounds could be worked collectively on larger plots located miles from their homes, as in the Jamaican *polink*, or individually, as in the “small house spots” of Antigua and Barbados.⁶⁷ In both cases, provision grounds produced enough agricultural surplus to generate barter and monetary transactions in markets that were typically held on Sundays. Over time these markets developed into differentiated systems of internal commodity circulation in which Africans and “coloureds” sold their goods directly, retailed as “middlemen,” and traded with free blacks and whites of all strata. They were also characteristically dominated by “aggressive” women who drew upon a West African heritage of market-teering to outmaneuver the white competition. According to Barbara Bush, enslaved women “carried these skills with them to the Caribbean and, in addition to participating fully in the cultivation of provision grounds, they became prominent as market sellers and ‘higglers’ or commercial intermediaries who sold the crop surplus of other slaves for a small profit.” Historian Hilary Beckles similarly argues that in opposing British legislation that criminalized their market activ-

ities, “slaves fought for the right to be legitimate, autonomous economic agents, as this was the only way to preserve aspects of the commercial heritage they had brought to the New World,” adding that “it was slave women, African-born and Creole, who, from the beginning, dominated numerically the huckstering business in Barbados.”⁶⁸ Nor was this trend limited to the British West Indies, but extended throughout the French Antilles and in areas of the American South, where “the market scene was dominated by women.”⁶⁹

There is no question that enslaved workers, particularly women, were empowered by these more independent forms of production and exchange.⁷⁰ On a basic level, they re-appropriated their labor power to work and sell for themselves, accumulating money and profits that could lead to manumission, as evidenced by free alongside enslaved women in the markets. But short of acquiring freedom through the courts, they pushed against the limits of bondage by exercising greater agency through spatial mobility and economic bargaining.

Like Yoruba women pulled further afield through interlocking ring markets in West Africa, enslaved hucksters enjoyed a freedom of movement at odds with their restrictive plantation lives. Whereas such Yoruba mobility challenged male authority in the management of household and lineage affairs, enslaved women participating in Sunday markets threatened the patriarchal authority of the slaveholding class. On a concrete level, female hucksters were physically liberated during their weekly sojourns to the market, escaping the confines of the plantation to enter a broader public sphere. In the French Antilles, where movement was more regulated, marketeers were required to carry passes or “tickets” signed by their owners, giving rise to a black market in “false passes” that destabilized white control. In the British West Indies, enslaved workers traveling to market were exempted from pass requirements otherwise in place, indicating the recognized importance of internal marketing at large. But if planters valued this weekly marketing as an external subsidy, they also suspected higglers and hucksters of stealing goods from the plantation stores and converting them into trading capital, thereby gaining socially and financially at the owner’s expense. In Barbados, the legislature criminalized the slaves’ market trade as theft, first in the 1688 Slave Code, again in 1708, and in 1733 through the draconian “Act for the Better Governing of Negroes, and the More Effectual Preventing of the Inhabitants of this Island, from Employing their Negroes or Other Slaves in Selling or Bartering.”⁷¹ Even with such laws on the books, however, the slave huckster’s marketeering prevailed, harnessing a movement and momentum that continued to grow with the rise of rural peasantries after abolition.⁷² If the Yoruba market woman in West Africa profited by “eating” her children and family, New World hucksters “ate” the plantation itself, diverting its productive surplus into their own mercantile pathways of commodity exchange.

The spatial mobility of enslaved traders defined a moral topography of the social landscape, correlating distance from the plantation “center” with immorality at the margins. It is no coincidence that in Georgia’s Low Country, the slave women who dominated the informal markets were not just accused of hoarding goods and inflating prices, but also of selling their bodies. Savannah’s “Cake Wenches” were singled out by whites as “African harpies” whose sexual behavior would “vitate the morals and dilapidate the constitutions of young [white] men,” thereby “posing a particularly invidious threat to the social and moral fabric . . . of the white community.”⁷³ That the author of this particular diatribe signed himself “ANTI-MULATTO” in capital letters graphically highlights the fears of interracial sexual relations generated by successful market women, establishing an implicit homology between immoral economic and sexual exchange.⁷⁴ The demonic figure of the harpy, part-woman and part-bird, not only recalls the image of the Yoruba witch-bird, but also captures the hybrid “monstrosity” of racial and legal boundary-crossing.

This latter confounding of legal categories went beyond the material opportunities that huckstering provided for augmenting agency and buying freedom; it was rooted in the very dialectics of commodity exchange. In his study of markets in antebellum South Carolina, appropriately titled “Money Knows No Master,” Lawrence McDonnell explores the phenomenological implications of transacting value in market contexts, highlighting the principle of *commensuration* governing exchange relations between subjects and objects: “Exchange, in Aristotle’s words, ‘treats all parties as equals’; as Marx put it, the ‘social relationship between the two owners is that of *mutual alienation* . . . each exists as his own surrogate (equivalent) and as the surrogate of the other.” Thus through the exchange of money and commodities, African Americans and whites became *socially* equivalent, not in a fully fledged legal sense, but phenomenologically, through intersubjective recognition and realignment. “In the marketplace,” McDonnell writes, “not only were blacks raised, but whites were lowered,” a leveling that manifested the spatiotemporal coordinates of the market system itself. Thus according to Charles Ball, the enslaved “became a kind of freeman on Sunday all over the southern country.”⁷⁵ It is therefore no wonder that whites were threatened by the growing influence of enslaved hucksters and hawkers, for their presence “as equals” confounded the categorical distinctions that upheld plantation slavery. Like their Yoruba counterparts, New World market women mixed money and blood, converting the general equivalent of commodity value into the social equivalence of generalized exchange. In the white backlash that their success inspired, they were portrayed as “serpents gnawing at the vitals of plantation society,” recapitulating with striking symmetry the blood-draining profits of the Yoruba witch.⁷⁶

* * *

Throughout this somewhat experimental essay I have explored New World plantation societies through the lens of Yoruba gender, focusing on the blood of mothers and its bivalent antinomies of witchcraft and fertility. I have justified the relevance of this “ethnomodel” to a wide range of cases in the Americas not because the Yoruba as such predominated among African captives, but with reference to Mintz and Price’s generative approach to the historical dynamics of cultural abstraction. I have used Yoruba idioms of female power as something of an ideal type—a set of symbolic relations, transpositions, and conversions—that extends beyond Yorubaland to designate a broader regional “grammar” in West Africa, those “deep-level cultural principles” underlying a transethnic zone from Ouidah to Calabar and their associated hinterlands.⁷⁷ The salience of this model as a “common denominator” among African captives taken from this region emerged through the dialectics of enslavement and encounter precisely because structures of reproduction and transformation governed the core dynamics of creolization.⁷⁸

Within this regional grammar—what I would recast as a regenerative scheme—the blood of mothers mediated basic contradictions within the households, plantations, and emerging markets of the Americas: within enslaved African American families, the “witchcraft” of low fertility, infanticide, and domestic fission; within the Big House, the “witchcraft” of concubinage, interracial sexual contacts, and the appropriation of the planter’s blood-based patrimony; throughout the plantation, the conflicting demands of production and reproduction; and in the internal marketing system, the progressive empowerment of enslaved women as higglers and hucksters. It is important to emphasize that these blood-based idioms—and the women who embodied them—did not just reflect the core transformations of plantation societies, but took an active role in shaping them, an activism and agency that had “witchcraft” overtones for Africans and Europeans alike: whether in overt accusations of sorcery, theft, and infanticide; more muted conceptions of motherhood and promiscuity; or more general discourses of race and sexuality framing encounters from “above.” Against the racial ideologies and gender discourses of the master class, the blood of mothers provided a critical counterpoint, a space of body politics and black female agency that is gaining new attention in Atlantic history.

NOTES

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¹Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison, WI, 1969), 3–13; Sydney W. Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (Boston, MA, 1992).

²Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston, MA, 1958), 33–53; Mintz and Price, *Birth*, 1992.

³For the basic paradigm shift from roots to routes, see Melville J. Herskovits, *Myth of the Negro Past*, and *The New World Negro: Selected Papers in Afroamerican Studies*, ed. Francis S. Herskovits (Bloomington, IN, 1966); Roger Bastide, *African Civilizations in the New World* (New York, 1971), and *The African Religions of Brazil: Toward a Sociology of the Interpenetration of Civilizations*, trans. H. Sebbá (Baltimore, MD, 1978); Mintz and Price, *Birth*, 1992; and Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA, 1993). For more recent Atlantic case studies, see Stefania Capone, *Les Yoruba du Nouveau Monde: Religion, Ethnicité et Nationalisme Noir aux États-Unis* (Paris, France, 2005); Kamari M. Clarke, *Mapping Yorubá Networks: Power and Agency in the Making of Transnational Communities* (Durham, NC, 2004); James L. Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (Princeton, NJ, 2005); and Solimar Otero, *Afro-Cuban Diasporas in the Atlantic World* (Rochester, NY, 2010). For a precise methodological reformulation, see Stephan Palmié, “*Ekpe/Abakuá* in Middle Passage: Time, Space and Units of Analysis in African American Historical Anthropology,” in *Activating the Past: History and Memory in the Black Atlantic World*, ed. Andrew Apter and Lauren Derby (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK, 2010), 1–44.

⁴See e.g., Hilary McD. Beckles, *Natural Rebels: A Social History of Enslaved Black Women in Barbados* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1989), and “Female Enslavement and Gender Ideologies in the Caribbean,” in *Identity in the Shadow of Slavery*, ed. Paul Lovejoy (London, 2000), 163–82; Daina Ramey Berry, “*Swing the Sickle for the Harvest Is Ripe*”: Gender and Slavery in Antebellum Georgia (Urbana, IL, 2007); Kathleen Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1996); Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650–1838* (Bloomington, IA, 1990); Gwyn Campbell, et al., eds., *Women and Slavery, Vol. Two: The Modern Atlantic* (Athens, OH, 2008); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1988); D. B. Gaspar and D. C. Hine, eds., *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (Bloomington, IN, 1996); Arlette Gautier, *Les Soeurs de Solitude: La Condition Feminine dans L’esclavage aux Antilles du XVIIe au XIXe Siècle* (Paris, 1985); Sidney W. Mintz, “Caribbean Marketplaces and Caribbean History,” *Radical History Review* 27 (1983): 110–120; Bernard Moitt, *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles, 1635–1848* (Bloomington, IA, 2001); Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia, PA, 2004); Marietta Morrissey, *Slave Women in the New World: Gender Stratification in the Caribbean* (Lawrence, KS, 1989); Claire Robertson “Africa into the Americas? Slavery and Women, the Family, and the Gender Division of Labor,” in *More Than Chattel*, ed. Gaspar and Hine (Bloomington, IA, 1996), 3–40; and Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York, 1996); “Gender Convention, Ideals and Identity among Antebellum Virginia Slave Women,” in *More Than Chattel*, ed. Gaspar and Hine (Bloomington, IN, 1996), 169–90; and “The Question of Slave Female Community in the American South: Methodological and Ideological Approaches,” *Journal of African American History* 92 (Winter 2007): 74–95. This last essay is part of a special issue of the journal focusing on “Women, Slavery and Historical Research,” which Brenda E. Stevenson edited as well.

⁵It could be argued that the English term “witchcraft” itself belongs to the European ideology I am trying to transcend. However, African languages have terms for malign female doubles that consume children, as in the Yoruba term *àjé*,—first recorded by Samuel Ajayi Crowther in 1843—which contracts *iyá je*, or “mother eats.”

⁶For the exceptional majority of female exports to Barbados, see Beckles, *Natural Rebels*, 7–23.

⁷Henry Drewal and Margaret Drewal, *Gelede: Art and Female Power among the Yoruba* (Bloomington, IN, 1983), 79.

⁸Andrew Apter, *Black Critics and Kings: The Hermeneutics of Power in Yoruba Society* (Chicago, IL, 1992), 97–116.

⁹*Ibid.*, 235, n. 11.

¹⁰For one of the best accounts of Yoruba kinship and family organization, see Nathaniel A. Fadipe, *The Sociology of the Yoruba*, ed. F. O. Okediji and O. O. Okediji (Ibadan, Nigeria, 1970), 65–146, published posthumously from his 1939 (University of London) Ph.D dissertation.

¹¹The literature on Yoruba witchcraft is extensive. Key descriptions and discussions include Andrew Apter, "Atinga Revisited: Yoruba Witchcraft and the Cocoa Economy, 1950–51," in *Modernity and Its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa*, ed. Jean and John Comaroff (Chicago, IL, 1993), 111–128; Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede*; Barry Hallen and J. Olubi Sodipo, *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft: Analytic Experiments in African Philosophy* (Stanford, CA, 1997); B. Idowu, "The Challenge of Witchcraft," *Orita* 4, no. 1 (1970): 3–16; James L. Matory, *Sex and the Empire That Is No More: Gender and the Politics of Metaphor in Oyo-Yoruba Religion* (Minneapolis, MN, 1994); Peter Morton-Williams, "The Atinga Cult among the South-Western Yoruba: A Sociological Analysis of a Witch-Finding Movement," *Bulletin de l'IFAN* 18, nos. 3–4 (1956): 315–334; Raymond H. Prince, "The Yoruba Image of the Witch," *Journal of Mental Science* 107 (November 1961): 795–805.

¹²Apter, "Atinga Revisited," 116–119. Lineage segmentation refers to emerging lines of differentiation between half-siblings; fission refers to the actual division of the lineage into two distinct parts; optation refers to a lineage member's decision to "opt" out of his father's descent group and into his mother's (in a patrilineal descent system); see note 16 below.

¹³For the application of the legal term *per stirpes* to Yoruba lineage segments of full siblings, see P. C. Lloyd, *Yoruba Land Law* (London, 1962): 296–300.

¹⁴For intricate discussions of such characteristic patterns of lineage segmentation and fission, see Peter C. Lloyd, "The Yoruba Lineage," *Africa* 25, no. 3 (1955): 235–251; Peter C. Lloyd, "Agnatic and Cognatic Descent among the Yoruba," *Man* (New Series) 1, no. 4 (1966): 484–500; and William B. Schwab, "Kinship and Lineage among the Yoruba," *Africa* 25, no. 4 (1955): 352–375.

¹⁵For examples, see Andrew Apter, "The Historiography of Yoruba Myth and Ritual," *History in Africa* 14 (1987): 1–25; Samuel Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas* (Lagos, Nigeria, 1921).

¹⁶The concept of complimentary filiation was first developed in Meyer Fortes, *The Web of Kinship among the Tallensi* (London, 1949); that of optation was first developed in John A. Barnes, "African Models in the New Guinea Highlands," *Man* 62 (1962): 7.

¹⁷For the basic organization and transactional dynamics of Yoruba markets, see Fadipe, *Sociology of the Yoruba*, 159–163; B. W. Hodder, "Markets in Yorubaland," in B. W. Hodder and U. I. Ukwu, *Markets in West Africa: Studies of Markets and Trade among the Yoruba and Ibo* (Ibadan, Nigeria, 1969), 3–109; Niara Sudarkasa, *Where Women Work: A Study of Yoruba Women in the Marketplace and in the Home*, Museum of Anthropology, University of Michigan, Anthropological Papers, no. 53 (Ann Arbor, MI, 1973); and Lillian Trager, *Yoruba Markets and Trade: Analysis of Spatial Structure and Social Organization in the Ijesaland Marketing System*, Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 1973. For the ritual representations of value and profit associated with market responses to Atlantic trade, see Bernard Belasco, *The Entrepreneur as Culture Hero: Preadaptations in Nigerian Economic Development* (New York, 1980).

¹⁸For a detailed analysis of such popular mobilization led by Yoruba women, see Andrew Apter, "Things Fell Apart? Yoruba Responses to the 1983 Elections in Ondo State, Nigeria," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 25, no. 3 (1987): 489–503.

¹⁹Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays by Natalie Zemon Davis* (Stanford, CA, 1975), 124–151.

²⁰Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede*, 75.

²¹See Apter, "Atinga Revisited," 125–6, n. 2.

²²For popular depictions of the Yoruba Cash Madam, see Karin Barber, *The Generation of Plays: Yoruba Popular Life in Theatre* (Bloomington, IN, 2000), 271; and Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, *Africa Wo/man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women* (Chicago, IL, 1996), 171.

²³See also James L. Matory, "Vessels of Power: The Dialectical Symbolism of Power in Yoruba Religion and Polity," M.A. Thesis, University of Chicago, 1986.

²⁴For Yoruba idioms and dramas of money-making magic, see Andrew Apter, "Discourse and Its Disclosures: Yoruba Women and the Sanctity of Abuse," *Africa* 68, no. 1 (1998): 68–96; and *The Pan-African Nation: Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria* (Chicago, IL, 2005), 248–49; Karin Barber, "Money, Self-Realization, and the Person in Yoruba Texts," in *Money Matters: Instability, Values and Social Payments in the Modern History of West African Communities*, ed. Jane Guyer (Portsmouth, NH, 1995), 205–224.

²⁵For an ethnographic analysis of the secret dimensions of Yoruba witchcraft and ritual reproduction, see Andrew Apter, "The Embodiment of Paradox: Yoruba Kingship and Female Power," *Cultural Anthropology* 6, no. 2 (1991): 212–229.

²⁶See Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 58–61; and also Ugo G. Nwokeji, “African Conceptions of Gender and the Slave Traffic,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2001): 47–68. The question of “Yoruba” numbers in this trade is moot for many reasons, but I would stress that the high “Ibo” figures from the Bight of Biafra should not be seen as contra Yoruba figures from the Bight of Benin, but as continuous with them—part of a broader regional “grammar” (linking both Bights) where gendered idioms of blood and witchcraft reflect the predominance of women in markets. Cf. Stevenson, “The Question of Slave Female Community,” 84–87; David Geggus, “Sex Ratio, Age and Ethnicity in the Atlantic Slave Trade: Data from French Shipping and Plantation Records,” *Journal of African History* 30, no. 1 (1989): 23–44.

²⁷Here I am following Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (1985; reprinted, New York, 1999), 211, n. 65, where she writes: “In researching links to the African past it is probably unwise to look for one-to-one correlations between African societies and black American society. It seems best to take the approach of anthropologists Sidney Mintz and Richard Price. They argue that the African American’s adaption to Western cultural mores was governed by ‘unconscious “grammatical” principles,’ which provided the framework for the development of new institutions and served as a catalyst in their development.”

²⁸Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 12–49.

²⁹Cited in Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 41. Barbot’s manuscript was completed in 1688, but was published posthumously in English by the Churchill brothers in 1732. Although based on his travels from 1678–82, it also drew upon other travel writings resulting in an intertextual composite not unusual within the genre. For a philological analysis of its historiographical value, see Robin Law, “Jean Barbot as a Source for the Slave Coast of West Africa,” *History in Africa* 9 (November 1982): 155–173.

³⁰Patrick Brantlinger, “Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent,” in “*Race, Writing, and Difference*,” ed. H. L. Gates, Jr. (Chicago, IL, 1986), 215. The phrase “hot constitution’d Ladies,” broadly quoted, comes from William Smith, *A New Voyage to Guinea* (London, 1731), 51–2, who adds that they are “continually contriving stratagem how to gain a lover.” Quoted in White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*, 29.

³¹See William Smith, *A New Voyage to Guinea*, 2nd edition (London, 1745), 253–255, quoted in Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 46.

³²Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 49.

³³But see also Elizabeth Perez, “The Virgin in the Mirror: Reading Images of a Black Madonna through the Lens of Afro-Cuban Women’s Experiences,” *Journal of African American History* 95 (Spring 2010): 202–228, for the religious opposition in Cuba between the black Virgen de Regla (Yemaja), invoked as “the world’s wet nurse,” and the sexualized mulatta Virgen de Caridad del Cobre (Ochun).

³⁴White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*, 49. How often surrogate motherhood extended from mythic to actual wet-nursing is difficult to say, but Beckles, “Black Female Slaves,” 121, maintains that “elite white women in Barbados commonly preferred black nannies to nurse their children,” and provides a vivid vignette from a visitor in the 1790s who witnessed, with some discomfort, “a white child sucking . . . the long breasts of the slave.” See also Gilberto Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves: A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization* (1946; reprinted, Berkeley, CA, 1986), which discusses ideologies of race, breast milk, and the impact of black wet-nurses (*mucama, mucamba*) on white patriarchal sexual culture and psychology in Brazil; and Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender and Southern Memory* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2008).

³⁵Brenda E. Stevenson writes: “The southern ‘slave woman’ was popularly thought of as an evil, manipulative temptress who used her insatiable sexual appetite for personal gain. She was seducer, adulteress, whore for hire, all wrapped into one—the bane of her mistress, the damnation of her master, or any man who fell under her spell,” adding that “the lore about the sexual prowess of slave women pervaded every rank of southern slave society.” See her “‘Marsa Never Sot Aunt Rebecca Down’: Enslaved Women, Religion, and Social Power in the Antebellum South,” *Journal of African American History* 90 (Fall 2005): 355.

³⁶White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*, 46.

³⁷See e.g., Bush, *Slave Women*, 98. See also Stevenson, “Gender Convention,” 173–74, who argues that—in antebellum Virginia—a more African-derived code of motherhood in the fields emphasizing procreation and protection opposed the Victorian code of the mistress and her more assimilated slaves and servants in the Big House.

³⁸Stevenson, “Gender Convention,” 177.

³⁹Bush, *Slave Women*, 107; Barry W. Higman, “The Slave Family and Household in the British West Indies, 1800–1834,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 6, no. 2 (1975): 261–287; and *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807–1834* (Baltimore, MD, 1984).

⁴⁰Euro-American institutions could also reinforce African-derived family structures. See John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*. 2nd edition (New York, 1979), 178, for evidence

that Episcopalians strengthened extended families among slaves by requiring godparents for all children baptized, a trend presumably echoed throughout the Catholic plantation societies as well, although significant distinctions between “ritual” and “social” kinship should not be overlooked. See also Kevin Roberts, “Yoruba Family, Gender, and Kinship Roles in New World Slavery,” in *The Yoruba Diaspora in the Atlantic World*, ed. T. Falola and M. Childs (Bloomington, IN, 2004), 248–259.

⁴¹Bush, *Slave Women*, 93. The evidence comes from William Beckford, *A Descriptive Account of the Island of Jamaica*, 2 vols. (London, 1790); and Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica*, 3 vols. (London, 1744).

⁴²Morrissey, *Slave Women in the New World*, 85–96.

⁴³White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 135.

⁴⁴Bush, *Slave Women*, 133, citing Gautier, *Les Soeurs*.

⁴⁵Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 11. The phrase “gynecological revolt” comes from Orlando Patterson, “Recent Studies on Caribbean Slavery and the Atlantic Slave Trade,” *Latin American Research Review* 17, no. 3 (1982): 261.

⁴⁶See Moitt, *Women and Slavery*, 94–5; Barbara Bush, “Hard Labor: Women, Childbirth, and Resistance in British Caribbean Slave Societies,” in Gaspar and Hine, *More Than Chattel* (Bloomington, IA, 1996), 199; and White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 100.

⁴⁷Moitt, *Women and Slavery*, 95.

⁴⁸Bush, “Hard Labor,” 198.

⁴⁹White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 83.

⁵⁰Bush, *Slave Women*, 143–46; Moitt, *Women and Slavery*, 97.

⁵¹Cited in White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 85; and Bush, *Slave Women*, 141. For White’s reference, see John H. Morgan, “An Essay on the Production of Abortion among Our Negro Population,” *Nashville Journal of Medicine and Surgery* 19 (August 1860): 117–123; for Bush’s, see Thomas Dancer, *The Medical Assistant; or Jamaica Practice of Physic Designed Chiefly for the Use of Families and Plantations* (Kingston, Jamaica, 1809).

⁵²Gabriel Debien, *Les Esclaves aux Antilles Françaises (XVII–XVIII Siècles)* (Basse-Terre, Guadeloupe, 1974), 365. The association of Arada ethnicity in colonial Saint Domingue with West African cultural practices was enshrined by the distinction between Rada (Arada) and Petwo (as in Creole or Congo) deities (*Iwa*) in Vodou. See Andrew Apter, “On African Origins: Creolization and *Connaissance* in Haitian Vodou,” *American Ethnologist* 29, no. 2 (2002): 233–260.

⁵³Moitt, *Women and Slavery*, 63.

⁵⁴White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 126.

⁵⁵Debien, *Les Esclaves*, 365. “She was made to carry a stick of wood on her back, to punish and humiliate her with the simulacrum of a child” (my translation).

⁵⁶Evoking the most punitive anti-witchcraft sanctions, male and female slaves accused of poisoning whites and blacks alike were burned at the stake in the colonial South. See Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1998), 612–616.

⁵⁷Beckles, *Natural Rebels*, 117–18, however, argues that polygyny remained the norm from 1627–1780 among enslaved families in Barbados, and that “it took many generations of Creolization and pressure from largely European Christian sources before black males were apparently reconciled to abandoning the practice.” The existence of such polygynous slave families raises the correlative hypothesis of witchcraft accusations between co-wives.

⁵⁸Beckles, *Natural Rebels*, 19, 132.

⁵⁹These stereotypical labels are not to be taken literally, but rather as mythic projections of gendered relations of social domination at the intersection of household, caste, and class.

⁶⁰Bush, *Slave Women*, 155.

⁶¹From the standpoint of white female hegemony, the black seductress or colored “coquaine” would be seen as something of a blood-sucking witch, “polluting” the white patriline while converting its blood into money and property, a hypothesis worth testing with reference to contemporaneous white women’s writings.

⁶²Cheryll Ann Cody, “Naming, Kinship, and Estate Dispersal: Notes on Slave Family Life on a South Carolina Plantation, 1786–1833,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (1982): 207–8.

⁶³Cody, “Naming,” 210.

⁶⁴Cited in Bush, *Slave Women*, 45.

⁶⁵Beckles, *Natural Rebels*, 12.

⁶⁶Morrissey, *Slave Women in the New World*, 50–61.

⁶⁷Sidney W. Mintz and Douglas Hall, "The Origins of the Jamaican Internal Marketing System" in *Caribbean Transformations*, ed. S. W. Mintz (Baltimore, MD, 1974), 191. Mintz and Hall also suggest that the etymology of "polink" evokes a semantics of empowerment and emancipation: "Th[e] use of the term *polink*, which H. P. Jacobs (personal communication) believes to be related to the Spanish *palenque* (a palisade or palisaded village . . . ; later, a fortified runaway slave village, as in Cuba or Columbia), is interesting in itself, symbolizing the link between independent cultivation and the status of the slaves"; idem, 187.

⁶⁸Bush, *Slave Women*, 59; Beckles, *Natural Rebels*, 73.

⁶⁹Moitt, *Women and Slavery*, 56; Sydney W. Mintz, "Men, Women and Trade," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 13, no. 3 (1971): 248.

⁷⁰Beckles, *Natural Rebels*, 76.

⁷¹Sidney W. Mintz, "The Jamaican Internal Marketing Pattern: Some Notes and Hypotheses," *Social and Economic Studies* 4, no. 1 (1955): 95–103, reprinted in *Caribbean Transformations* (Baltimore, MD, 1974), 214–224.

⁷²See Betty Wood, "'White Society' and the 'Informal' Slave Economies of Lowcountry Georgia, c. 1763–1830," *Slavery and Abolition* 11, no. 3 (1990): 321. Wood cites *The Savannah Republican* 26 August 1817 for this passage (ibid., 329 n. 41). She also cites other diatribes published by "ANTI-MULATTO" in the same newspaper from 16 and 19, August 1817, 6, 20, and 27 September 1817, and 7 January 1818.

⁷³See also Robert Olwell, "'Loose, Idle and Disorderly': Slave Women in the Eighteenth Century Charleston Marketplace," in Hine and Gaspar, *More Than Chattel*, 97–110, where he explores 18th-century discourses of immorality regarding enslaved market women in the Charleston marketplace, and emphasizes the more general contradiction between patriarchy and the circumscribed "freedoms" of the market.

⁷⁴Lawrence T. McDonnell, "'Money Knows No Master': Market Relations and the Slave Community," in *Developing Dixie: Modernization in a Traditional Society*, ed. W. B. Moore, et al. (New York, 1988), 34, 35, 36.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Mintz and Price, *Birth*, 14.

⁷⁷One would of course expect a greater correspondence between Yoruba idioms and plantation dynamics in the Iberian colonies of Brazil and Cuba, and in Spanish Trinidad, where large numbers of Yoruba slaves, particularly in the 19th century, had a more recognizable "Yoruba" influence, as in Candomblé, Santería, or Trinidad Shango. But it is precisely because the model is salient where it might not be expected—the U.S. plantation south, Barbados, Jamaica, and less surprisingly, the French Antilles—that a case for a broader regional West African influence can be made.