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The Trinity of Subjugation:

The Creation of Racialized Stereotypes and Their Impact on Enslaved Black Girlhood in the  
Antebellum South

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## ABSTRACT

### The Trinity of Subjugation: The Impact of Racialized Stereotypes on Enslaved Black Girlhood in the Antebellum South

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This thesis investigates how stereotypes about Black women, specifically the "Black Superbody," "Jezebel," and "Mammy," impacted the lives of enslaved Black girls. By analyzing European travel narratives, antebellum advertisements, and narratives from the enslaved, this research demonstrates how these stereotypes justified the economic exploitation and sexual violence enacted upon enslaved Black girls. The study highlights the systematic reduction of Black girlhood, where young girls were legally and socially recategorized as laboring reproductive assets. Ultimately, this paper argues that these stereotypes were strategic tools engineered to strip Black girls of autonomy, transforming them into manufactured units of labor and reproduction.

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## Introduction

*Even the little child...will learn, before she is twelve years old, why it is that her mistress hates such and such a one among the slaves...She will become prematurely knowing in evil things...She will be compelled to realize that she is no longer a child. If God has bestowed beauty upon her, it will prove her greatest curse. That which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens the degradation of the female slave.<sup>1</sup>*

- Harriet Jacobs

In the antebellum marketplace of 1860, a fourteen-year-old Rose Williams was not seen as a child. She was a prime investment, whose value was calculated by her reproductive potential and the perceived strength of her adolescent limbs.<sup>2</sup> Long before she could understand the societal expectations of womanhood, the legal and economic structures of the antebellum South had already stripped her of the right to be small. Enslaved Black girls were often placed into roles of maturity long before actually reaching it. Childhood was a period of innocence, free of burden, and most importantly, a protective transitional period, in which the enslaved girl was denied. Instead, her youth was distorted to render her as a commodity, stripping away the social safeguards of adolescence to facilitate a lifetime of subjugation.

There are many examples of secondary scholarship by writers who specialize in the intersection of race and gender. Key authors include Jennifer Morgan, Deborah Gray White, Deirdre Cooper Owens, and Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers. Jennifer Morgan's chapter in the *William and Mary Quarterly* titled "'Some Could Suckle Over Their Shoulder': Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1700," draws a connection between the

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<sup>1</sup> Jacobs, "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself," chap. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 16, Texas, Part 4, Sanco-Young. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn164/>.

writings of European men and the demonization of the Black female body. Her work is crucial for understanding where and from whom negative perceptions of Black women stem. Deborah Gray White's work, *Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, illuminates how enslaved women's roles within their families and communities contrasted with traditional female roles within American society. Deirdre Cooper Owens' *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology* revealed how race, health, and status influence doctor-patient, or rather doctor-subject, relationships between Black women and nineteenth-century doctors. Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers, in her chapter titled "Wet Nurse for Sale or Hire" from her book *They Were Her Property*, uncovers the truth about the wet nurse sector of the slave market that is often overlooked in scholarship about enslaved women. Works like these all emphasize the experiences of enslaved women, but what about the enslaved girl? How did ideas about race and gender impact her?

This paper seeks to answer that question and more. Questions such as how did ideas about race and gender combine to form stereotypes about the Black female body? What are these stereotypes? Where did they come from? From whom did they come, and who were their main perpetrators? Lastly, how did they impact enslaved Black girlhood? For the sake of this thesis, girlhood is defined as the social, emotional, and cultural experiences of girls between 5 and 17 as they reach maturity. To answer these questions, the research for this paper is split into two parts. The first half addresses what these stereotypes are and where they came from. By exploring the origins of the stereotypes: "Superbody," "Jezebel," and "Mammy," their roots can be drawn back to the colonial era. However, they truly came into fruition in the antebellum South as a rationale for Black women's subjugation. The second half uses that framework to establish how these stereotypes worked in tandem to disrupt enslaved Black girlhood. By prematurely ascribing

these ideas of adulthood to Black girls, they were not granted the societal protections afforded to children. Stripping them of their innocence and justifying the economic exploitation and sexual violence enacted upon them.

The research for this paper relied on a wide array of primary sources, ranging from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. To understand who planted the seed of stereotypes about the Black female body, the writings of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European male travelers were analyzed. Travelers such as William Smith and Pieter de Marees traveled to Africa and recorded their observations of the geography, colonies, and women. Their perceptions were then translated into full-blown stereotypes in the antebellum South. To discover how European perceptions turned into stereotypes, the paper relies on nineteenth-century newspaper advertisements and narratives from both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By looking at the language in the newspapers, it becomes clear how enslavers viewed the enslaved female body and what qualities about it they deemed important. The narratives provide firsthand accounts from those directly affected by these stereotypes: the women. Their accounts of their childhood experiences, when read with the stereotypes about the Black female body in mind, draw a clear connection between the two. The last primary sources are nineteenth-century court cases. These cases reveal how the law worked against Black girls and perpetuated the stereotypes in favor of White men.

A primary source frequently referenced throughout the paper is the Federal Writers' Project: *Slave Narrative Collection*. In the 1930s, Franklin D. Roosevelt created the Works Progress Administration, later renamed the Works Projects Administration (WPA) in 1939, as part of his New Deal plan to combat the Great Depression. The Federal Writers' Project (FWP) emerged as part of the WPA to employ writers who were out of work to chronicle a “self-portrait

of America.” A significant project was the *Slave Narrative Collection*, in which members of the FWP traveled across seventeen states and conducted more than two thousand three hundred interviews of formerly enslaved African Americans to give their account of what life was like in enslavement and immediately after the Civil War.<sup>3</sup> It is, however, important to note that the narratives were told by elderly people who experienced slavery at a very early moment in their lives. Many of them were reminiscent of a time of security that was absent during the Depression.

Additionally, because of Jim Crow restrictions in the South, there was limited participation from Black interviewers, causing the interviewees to alter their stories because they were telling them to a likely white interviewer in the segregated 1920s.<sup>4</sup> Despite these setbacks, the narratives still provide an understanding of how white society treated enslaved women and girls based on the assumptions about them. Some narratives were firsthand experiences from the women. Others told stories on behalf of their mothers and grandmothers. Overall, these narratives provide informative insight into the lives of enslaved women and girls.

Chapter one analyzes how the writings of European male travelers laid the groundwork for the racialized stereotypes about the Black female body. When they traveled into Africa, they brought with them their European understandings of beauty, civility, and appropriateness. African cultural norms challenged those ideas, and these differences were translated into signs of inferiority. Chapter two breaks down how those European perceptions of difference were transformed into stereotypes in the antebellum South. The stereotypes of the “Superbody,” “Jezebel,” and “Mammy” emerged in the nineteenth century to justify the institution of slavery. They created a narrative of inferiority that implied Black women were destined for subjugation.

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<sup>3</sup>fdrlibrary, *The Federal Writers’ Project*.

<sup>4</sup>“The WPA and the Slave Narrative Collection | An Introduction to the WPA Slave Narratives | Articles and Essays | Born in Slavery.workingto”

Chapter three examines how the Jezebel stereotype influenced the minds of White southern society and excused sexual violence against Black girls in the court of law. Then, when combined with the Superbody stereotype, it justified the exploitation of their reproductive labor by way of forced couplings. The final chapter explores the impact of the Mammy stereotype on Black girlhood. Black girls were raised to become the Ideal servant. Their minds were conditioned into submission, and they began to work as soon as possible so that servitude became second nature. By examining the intersection of the 'Superbody,' 'Jezebel,' and 'Mammy' stereotypes, it becomes clear that the Black woman was a construct designed to start at birth. Ultimately, for the enslaved Black girl, the transition to womanhood was not a coming-of-age; it was the erasure of her right to be a child.

## Chapter One: Tackling Difference

*As to Women, one Happiness, which those of this Part of the World enjoy before those of Europe, must be mentioned particularly, which is, their Labours. These are Times with them so easy, so kind, so natural and so good, that they have no Need of Midwives, Doctors, Nurses, etc.*

- William Smith

On August 20, 1726, English surveyor William Smith embarked on a journey to West Africa to survey castles for the Royal African Company. He traveled to Guinea, where he not only surveyed castles but also observed the people who lived there. In awe of their customs and manners, he kept an account of his trip in *A New Voyage to Guinea*. He took note of the women and their attire, writing, “the Women go almost naked, having only a narrow cloth wound about their middles.” However, this focus on their clothing quickly became a projection of hypersexuality. Smith went on to characterize these women as “continually contriving stratagems how to gain a Lover.”<sup>5</sup> Smith’s account judged the Black women with the standards of European culture, framing their nudity not as a cultural norm but as an invitation. Redefining their bodies as inherently promiscuous and physically available, commentary like Smith’s forged a stereotype of lust and shamelessness that would later serve to rationalize the systematic violation of enslaved women in the colonies.

The stereotypes that were formulated about the Black female body did not emerge during the antebellum era; these ideas were present at the very early stages of colonization and race-making. Europeans created racial categories that established whiteness as the norm and blackness as its inferior. This can be seen in the accounts of European travelers and in early explanations of racial differences. European fascination with difference prompted their

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<sup>5</sup> Smith, *A New Voyage to Guinea*, 102.

descriptions of Black people, and those observable differences were generally condemned. Black skin was attributed to ugliness. The Black body was made to seem abnormal and monstrous. Cultural differences were perceived as signs of deviance and immorality. All of these invented factors were used to create and disparage blackness simultaneously. The concept of blackness was later turned against the very people it was ascribed to and served as a justification for their subjugation.

To understand the ideas surrounding the Black female body and how they affected enslaved Black girls, one must first examine their origins. When Europeans initially began to explore Black-populated areas, they encountered a group of people who did not look like them. They were fascinated by this difference and felt a need to categorize these people whom they deemed foreign. By analyzing the narratives of European travelers from the early colonial period, as well as other early European writers, this chapter demonstrates how the observations of Black women written by European men helped inform early modern constructions of race, setting Black people apart from Europeans. This chapter draws from the scholarship of Jennifer Morgan and her chapter titled “‘Some Could Suckle Over Their Shoulder’: Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1700,” in which she uses the writings of European men to formulate how their perceptions of difference demonized the black body and were later used to create a justification for the institution of slavery. She writes, “Europeans found a means to articulate shifting perceptions of themselves as religiously, culturally, and phenotypically superior to those black or brown persons they sought to define.”<sup>6</sup> By focusing on attributes that deviated from European ideals, travelers created a narrative of difference associated with inferiority and monstrosity.

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<sup>6</sup> Morgan, “*Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder*”: *Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1770*.

## *Skin Tone*

When faced with the darker complexions of African people, Europeans sought to characterize them. In viewing their own appearance as the default, Europeans were determined to find a reason that explained African features, framing blackness as an oddity that required an explanation. They began to ask questions that would serve as the foundation of early race-making. Ultimately, they created systemic categories that distanced themselves from the people they encountered and would later enslave, and they used these same categories to justify their exploitation of them.

In 1645, Sir Thomas Browne wrote a book titled *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, in which he devotes three chapters of the sixth book to explaining possible reasons for blackness. He opens his section “Of the Blackness of Negros” by examining the two commonly held beliefs on why some people have darker complexions, and others do not.<sup>7</sup> Europeans often sought religious explanations for unknown phenomena; they did just the thing to explain their formulation of race and racial categories. To explain blackness, they turned to Genesis 9:18-27, which detailed Canaan’s curse, otherwise known as “The curse of Ham.” The story involves Noah, his three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, and Ham’s son Canaan. In the story, Ham came across Noah lying outside, drunk and naked. Ham called his two brothers, Sam and Japheth, to come and see. Sam and Japheth responded by walking backward and covering him with a garment, while turning their heads so as not to see their father naked and avoid bringing him shame. The book reads:

<sup>24</sup>When Noah awoke from his wine and found out what his youngest son had done to him,  
<sup>25</sup>he said,

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Browne, *Thomas Browne Pseudodoxia Epidemica Or Enquiries Into Very Many Received Tenents And Commonly Presumed Truths*, bk. 6.

“Cursed be Canaan!

The lowest of slaves

will he be to his brothers.”

<sup>26</sup>He also said,

“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Shem!

May Canaan be the slave of Shem.

<sup>27</sup> May God extend Japheth’s territory;

may Japheth live in the tents of Shem,

and may Canaan be the slave of Japheth.”<sup>8</sup>

Shem, Ham, and Japheth were said to be the originators of the Earth’s populations.

Europeans believed themselves to be descendants of Japheth and Africans to be descendants of Ham and Canaan, and therefore the natural inheritors of his curse, under which he was subjected to servitude. They believed African’s dark skin was evidence of Canaan’s curse and thus justified their enslavement. Browne, however, rejected this explanation, arguing that the curse applied only to Canaan, not to all those descended from Ham, the father of Canaan and the instigator of the curse. Additionally, he specified that the descendants of Canaan did not originate the various Black populations of Africa with whom the curse was associated.<sup>9</sup>

In rejecting the theological reasoning, Browne sought to find a more scientific explanation for skin color. He suggested that Africans were black because of their geographical proximity to the sun. He argued that prolonged exposure to the sun "makes men black, and not the fire,"<sup>10</sup> attributing skin color to climate and environment. Nevertheless, his rejection and the

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<sup>8</sup> Genesis 9:18-27 (NIV)

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Browne, *Thomas Browne Pseudodoxia Epidemica Or Enquiries Into Very Many Received Tenents And Commonly Presumed Truths*, bk. 6.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibn*

alternative reasoning behind it did not alter general opinions that associated Africans with natural servitude. His viewpoint became less popular as Europeans needed a justification for slavery, and the assertion that Africans' God-given place was servitude gave them exactly that.

Despite his rejection of the theological reasoning behind African's skin tone, Browne still makes an argument for their inferiority. He constructs a parallel argument for their inferiority based on aesthetics. He asserts that beauty is subjective, while using that relativism to validate why Europeans find Black people to be unattractive and therefore inferior. Browne describes blackness as the antithesis of beauty and black features as less desirable to the European population.<sup>11</sup> He states bluntly, "We that are of contrary complexions accuse the blackness of the Moors as ugly."<sup>12</sup> Browne writes that established definitions of beauty have no mention of color, but "to make color essential unto beauty, there will arise no slender difficulty."<sup>13</sup> To illustrate this, he uses animals as a comparison, suggesting that if an all-black bird were to become white, it would be considered more beautiful by European standards.<sup>14</sup> Propagating the association of whiteness with being more attractive and appealing compared to blackness. He also attributes beauty to a person's "parts," in which he writes, "Flat noses seem comely onto the Moor... none of all these are acceptable in our opinion."<sup>15</sup> Browne framed African features as acceptable to the African, but not those of the "civilized" world. Further asserting that beauty is subjective, yet no European would find the features of an African attractive. Browne transformed a subjective preference into a tool of exclusion, ensuring that in the European mind, African bodies would be positioned as "other" and less than the European ideal.

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<sup>11</sup> Morgan, *"Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder": Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1770*.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Browne, *Thomas Browne Pseudodoxia Epidemica Or Enquiries Into Very Many Received Tenents And Commonly Presumed Truths*, bk. 6.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibsuch asn*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibn*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibn*

### *Physic*

Black skin was not the only fascination of English male travelers; they were also fixated on the physiques of African women. Moving beyond complexion, observers scrutinized the shape of African bodies, hyperfixating on physical features such as their breasts and buttocks. Their features were different from those of the white women they were accustomed to seeing, and they once again needed to define that difference. Jennifer Morgan writes, “Confronted with an Africa they needed to exploit, European writers turned to black women as evidence of a cultural inferiority that ultimately became encoded as racial difference.”<sup>16</sup> Similar to how blackness became the antithesis of beauty, the black female body became the antithesis of the white ideal of womanhood. While the white woman was beautiful and dainty, the black woman was monstrous and built for labor. Europeans dehumanized and sexualized the Black female body, creating the image of the black woman as someone who is not a woman, but a beast whose value is determined by her reproductive and physical labor.

African women possessed a figure that deviated from European standards of beauty and domesticity. As the African woman’s figure differed from that of the average white woman’s, her body was scrutinized and demonized. The breasts of African women were of particular interest to Europeans. Jennifer Morgan draws parallels between the female devils of the Medieval era and depictions of African women. There were tales of “The medieval wild woman, whose breasts dragged on the ground when she walked and could be thrown over her shoulder, was believed to disguise herself with youth and beauty in order to enact seductions that would satisfy her.”<sup>17</sup> When describing African women, European observers would take note of the length of

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<sup>16</sup> Morgan, “*Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder*”: *Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1770*.

<sup>17</sup> Morgan, “*Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder*”: *Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1770*.

their breasts to evoke the image of the “medieval wild woman.” In 1555 William Towerson made a voyage to Guinea, and in recounting his trip, he wrote of African women who had breasts that he described as “in the most part be very foule and long, hanging downe low like the udder of a goate.”<sup>18</sup> His depiction of African women with sagging breasts contrasted with the ideal small-breasted European woman. He attributed their features to those of an animal, effectively positioning African women closer to the animal kingdom than ideals of womanhood. In 1602, Pieter de Marees published his account of his time in West Africa titled *Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea*. In his account, he also highlights the length of African women’s breasts, writing, “When the child crieth to sucke, the mother casteth one of her dug backward over her shoulder, and so the child suckes it as it hangs.” Jennifer Morgan notes that the word “dug” at the time was used to describe the breasts of both women and animals. De Marees’ use of the word dug “connoted a brute animality” to African women.<sup>19</sup> These animal-like connotations served to dehumanize the Black woman and frame her as indistinguishable from livestock. Removing her from the category of human and situating her in the place of property, along with the goats from which Towerson drew his comparison.

Continuing this obsession with the breasts of Black women, European men made note of their breasts to highlight their reproductive capacity. In his narrative, *A Description of the Coasts of North and South-Guinea*, John Barbot recorded his thoughts on African women and their babies. He wrote in admiration of the quiet babies and how, “freely they suck the breasts, which

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<sup>18</sup> Towerson, “*The first voyage made by Master William Towerson*,” in Hakluyt, *Principal Navigations* (1598-1600) quoted in Morgan, “*Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder*”: *Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1770*.

<sup>19</sup> Pieter de Marees, *Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea* (1602), trans. and ed. Albert van Dantzig and Adam Jones (Oxford, 1987), xvii. quoted in Morgan, “*Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder*”: *Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1770*.

are always full of milk, over their mothers' shoulders."<sup>20</sup> This fixation on breasts that had an abundance of milk emphasized the Black women's suitability as a site for reproduction. Not only could they reproduce, but they could continue as laborers afterward. This was displayed in Barbot's note of how the babies suckled over the shoulders of their mother as they worked. Suggesting the act of nursing does not hinder Black mothers, as they are built with larger breasts to throw over their shoulders, a feature of the "wild woman," to continue laboring as they nursed. Framing her reproductive capacity as an asset to capitalize off of, and different from the reproductive capacities of white women.

European men not only highlighted African women's reproductive qualities, but they also put particular emphasis on how easily African women could have babies. Upon his return home from Guinea, William Smith encountered another European who had spent time there, Charles Wheeler. In his remarks shared with William Smith, he boasted, "Their Labours. These are Times with them so easy, so kind, so natural and so good, that they have no Need of Midwives, Doctors, Nurses, & c. and I have known Women go to Bed over Night, bring forth a Child and be abroad the next Day by Noon."<sup>21</sup> Wheeler's narrative starkly contrasts the realities of childbirth, painting it as an effortless activity when performed by Black women. It denies Black women the sympathy that is afforded to white women when they have children by stripping them of the vulnerability associated with childbearing. Jennifer Morgan writes, "If African women gave birth without pain, they somehow sidestepped God's curse upon Eve... not related to Europeans and could therefore be forced to labor on England's overseas plantations with impunity."<sup>22</sup> The narrative of Black women's painless reproduction was eventually exaggerated to Black women's

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<sup>20</sup> Barbot, *A Description of the Coasts of North and South-Guinea . . .*, in A. Churchill, ed., *A Collection of Voyages* (London, 1732) quoted in Morgan, "Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder": *Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1770*.

<sup>21</sup> Smith, *A New Voyage to Guinea*, 263.

<sup>22</sup> Morgan, "Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder": *Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1770*.

inability to feel pain, in general, the same way a white woman would. This ideology conveniently removed Black women as contenders for the social protections given to white women, rationalizing a system where Black women could be heavily worked before and after giving birth.

Misconstrued observations of European men created the idea of the laboring reproducer. The physical features of Black women were attributed to deviations from European beauty standards and were therefore considered subhuman. European men originated this idea of subhumanity through their descriptions of Black women, in which they invoked associations with wild women and animals. They then further separated Black women from their humanity by erasing their pain during childbirth. Stripping them of a pain unique to women and eventually stripping the concept of pain away from them altogether. The Black female body was distinguished as uniquely capable of enduring arduous physical labor and reproduction. It was simultaneously considered repulsive and beastly in its savagery, but essential for its physical and reproductive capabilities.

### ***Cultural Differences***

Upon their visits to Africa, Europeans experienced a bit of culture shock. They observed cultural practices that were unfamiliar to their customs and norms. Instead of registering these differences as a variant practice, Europeans saw it as a violation of natural laws. These men observed African women behaving in ways that they considered unbecoming of a woman and heavily scrutinized them for it. They witnessed African women performing what was deemed “men’s work” and used that to frame Black women as strong and devoid of femininity. Similarly, they demonized their sociosexuality, establishing the framework of the hypersexual black woman. By associating these cultural differences with moral depravity, European travelers not

only misunderstood African women, but actively constructed a distorted image of the black female body as promiscuous and manly. This negative imagery laid the ideological groundwork that would later exclude them from the protections of womanhood whilst suffering from the brutalities of enslavement.

When describing African women, travelers often used words that invoked characteristics of masculinity and separated them from their identities as women. In his 1555 voyage to Guinea, William Towerson depicted the women as indistinguishable from the men. The merchant from London wrote, “[they] goe so alike, that one cannot know a man from a woman but by their breasts.”<sup>23</sup> Instead of the ideas of femininity that were ascribed to European women, African women were defeminized and made to seem identical to their male counterparts. Because these women were phenotypically similar to men, Europeans saw no need to treat them as women. African women were separated from womanhood and instead were deemed inherently masculine and strong. The observers pointed out how African practices blurred traditional gender lines further to push the narrative of the black woman as manly. While visiting the coast of Liberia, William Smith made note of how, “The men do not greatly care for work, but leave it rather to their wives.”<sup>24</sup> He painted the women as the primary laborers of the area, further ascribing masculine ideals to the black female body. This later provided a rationale for the work Black women were subjected to under slavery. Black women were uniquely eligible for men's work because it was determined that they were accustomed to labor that would be unbefitting of a “proper” woman. As Africans were seen as a people who did not conform to established gender roles, it made sense to Europeans to continue this blurring of gender during slavery.

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<sup>23</sup> Towerson, “*The first voyage made by Master William Towerson*,” in Hakluyt, *Principal Navigations* (1598-1600) quoted in Morgan, “*Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder*”: *Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1770*.

<sup>24</sup> Smith, *A New Voyage to Guinea*, 100.

The cultural differences observed by Europeans, particularly those concerning sociosexuality and marital practices, were weaponized as evidence of the perceived inferiority of African peoples. Europeans often harped on the polygamous practices within African marriages, interpreting their sexual freedom as proof of their lack of morals and civility. In his account, William Smith dedicated special focus to writing about women's sexual freedom within marriage; at one point, it was mentioned twice within three pages. He wrote of handsome women who, "are permitted to grant favors for grain."<sup>25</sup> His noting of their sexual autonomy was not only an observation but the construction of a narrative that shaped ideas about black women for centuries. The narrative that the black female is willing to use her body in exchange for goods and is inherently promiscuous. Stripping them of modesty and virtue, and instead making their bodies commercially available, and justifying their impending commodification under slavery.

European's fixation on female attire also contributed to notions of deviance. African attire was observed as an open display of sexuality that was rampant and unchecked. Traveler's accounts detailed the clothing, or lack thereof, with fascination and judgment of moral character. As mentioned at the start of this section, Smith wrote of women who "go almost naked, having only a narrow cloth wound about their middles." What was not included was the second half of his statement in which he remarks, "and some go quite naked, not in the least ashamed of what nature has bestowed on them."<sup>26</sup> European culture relied on the idea of women as virtuous and chaste. They demanded that women stay physically and sexually concealed under the notion of respectability. The African comfort with nudity and their "lack of shame" was interpreted as a lack of civilization. Instead of viewing their open displays as a cultural difference, they took them as an indicator that Africans lacked natural laws and moral constraints.

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<sup>25</sup> Smith, *A New Voyage to Guinea*, 100.

<sup>26</sup> Smith, *A New Voyage to Guinea*, 102.

## ***Conclusion***

The negative perceptions of Black women constructed by European travelers were not the result of cultural misunderstandings. They were strategically created to justify European colonization and the institution of slavery. As Europeans pursued the system of chattel slavery, they needed an explanation to reconcile their morality with their economic aspirations. They found the solution through the intentional and eventual systematic dehumanization of the African population. By scrutinizing the Black female body and cataloging its differences, European travelers laid the foundation for the pseudo-scientific proof that Black people belonged in a separate and inferior category of existence.

The construction of the Black female body as fundamentally different served to transform the Black woman from a human being to a unit of production. By depicting her as masculine, hardy, and biologically unable to feel pain during childbirth, European ideology stripped Black women of the vulnerabilities and securities associated with white womanhood. The concept of Black women being unable to feel pain eradicated the moral impediment of enforced arduous labor during and after pregnancy. European travelers rewrote the biology of Black women to situate them perfectly within a system that transformed human beings into chattel.

The sexualization of Black women through narratives of promiscuity and immodesty rationalized their sexual exploitation. Their nudity was misinterpreted as availability, and cultural polygamy was taken as a sign of moral depravity, forging a stereotype of hypersexuality. This misinterpretation stripped Black women of their virtue and right to consent. They were denied the protections of womanhood that were afforded to the chaste, fragile European woman. Ensuring that the violation of Black women within slavery was not a crime, but a consequence of her nature.

In conclusion, the stereotypes that surround the Black female body originated from these early encounters that were weaponized to justify the institution of slavery. Black women were categorized and then demonized long before the images created within the American antebellum South. European travel narratives provided the framework for racial categorization and eventual racism. The perception of inferiority was not founded on the pursuit of truth, but on the pursuit of a justification for what Europeans deemed an economic necessity. Through the distortion of the Black female body, European writers left a legacy of bias and dehumanization that would follow Black women for centuries.

## Chapter Two: Stereotypes in the Antebellum Era

*Everybody wanted women who would have children fast. They would always ask you if you was a good breeder, and if so they would buy you at your word, but if you had already had too many chillun, they would say you warn't much good. If you hadn't ever had any chillun, your marster would tell 'em you was strong, healthy, and a fast worker. You had to have somethin' about you to be sold.*

- Unidentified formerly enslaved person

The fascination with difference detailed in the narratives written by European travelers evolved and was redefined by the racialized institution of slavery. Ideas about difference were developed into signifiers of inferiority. Said inferiority was associated with blackness and whiteness, as its antithesis, became associated with superiority. Stereotypes surrounding Black inferiority emerged to fit the narrative of Black women's natural place as servants to White society. They were depicted as endowed with physical strength and heightened pain tolerance beyond the "average human" to withstand the harshness of slavery. Some were also depicted as both sexual deviants and loving servants. Black women's assumed nature and alleged distinctive physical characteristics portrayed them as both well-suited and deserving of their position within slavery.

While there were general stereotypes associated with Black people, there were three specifically tailored to Black women. This chapter identifies the stereotypes of the "Superbody," "Jezebel," and "Mammy" as the primary influencers of Black enslaved girlhood. To uncover how and why these stereotypes about Black women were created, it is important to look at who is creating these narratives, the enslavers. The enslavers held a particular view and understanding

of their enslaved women. This chapter uncovers the antebellum fascination with Black women's bodies and the stereotypes ascribed to them by studying newspaper advertisements from the antebellum era. It draws on scholarship from Deirdre Cooper Owens' *Medical Bondage* and Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers' *They Were Her Property* to conceptualize how White society viewed the capabilities of Black women and the treatment they deemed suitable for them because of those capabilities. Additionally, to gain perspective from those upon whom these attributions were placed, this chapter uses Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and the narratives provided in the Federal Writers' Project: *Slave Narrative Collection* from the mid-1930s.

By looking at advertisements about enslaved women, the biases and beliefs of enslavers are revealed in their descriptions of the women. The adverts reveal enslavers' thoughts on the agency and capabilities of Black women. Although some advertisements, like runaway slave adverts, contain a negative bias because the women had run away, their choices in adjectives when describing how the women look and act are important to note. Their language reveals what qualities about enslaved women they deemed important and what they found condemnable.

Under the pseudonym "Linda Brent," Harriet Jacobs wrote her poignant autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, which was published in 1861. Her autobiography revealed the trials and tribulations she was subjected to as a girl growing up as an enslaved person. Her narrative challenged pro-slavery ideas propagated by the antebellum South and asserted the truth. Jacobs' autobiography, combined with the accounts in the *Slave Narrative Collection*, provides insight into the ideas ascribed to Black women and how they reacted to these ascriptions.

This chapter draws on concepts from Deirdre Cooper Owens' *Medical Bondage* and Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers' *They Were Her Property*. In *Medical Bondage*, Cooper Owens

explores the relationship between black women and the emerging medical industry in the nineteenth century. By examining the works of early medical men and other sources, she reveals how ideas about race, health, and status influenced the doctor-patient relationships between Black women and White doctors. Chapter five of *They Were Her Property*, titled “Wet Nurse for Sale or Hire,” highlights the role Black women assumed as wet nurses within slavery. A role that was severely unrecognized within studies of enslavement. Previously determined to be an unpopular and condemned practice, Jones-Rodgers argues that enslaved women worked as Wet Nurses from the niche market created and spread by female enslavers. Both of these works contain concepts that provide further insight into ideas about the Black female body.

### ***The Black Superbody***

The black female body in the eyes of their enslavers was not the same as that of their white female counterparts. In *Medical Bondage*, Deirdre Cooper Owens coined the term “medical superboddy” to describe the way white society viewed the capabilities of the black female body.<sup>27</sup> They viewed Black women as possessing strength and male-like qualities, setting them apart from their womanhood. They also saw them as capable of withstanding greater levels of pain than the average person because of assumed biological differences. That assumption led to the creation of pseudoscientific beliefs that Black women’s bodies were unlike those of a “normal” woman’s body. Newspaper advertisements reveal aspects of the Black Superbody, and show that enslavers believed that Black women were capable of withstanding harsh punishments and physical pain. It also justified their exploitation within the American medical society. Their bodies were determined to be biologically distinct in a way that made them strong and suitable to endure pain, and therefore, they were suitable for labor and servitude.

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<sup>27</sup>Cooper Owens, *Medical Bondage*, chap. 1.

Black women were believed to have capabilities and qualities that made them well-equipped to endure the tortures of slavery. Strength was a quality enslavers took special note of and emphasized for their enslaved women. In the newspaper advertisements for runaway slaves, enslavers would use adjectives that connoted ideas of masculinity and strength. For example, the May 27th Issue of *The Daily Picayune*, published in 1845, featured an advertisement seeking the capture of Mary Anne. Her enslaver described her as a yellow girl, with straight black hair and a large mouth, who was “well and strongly built.”<sup>28</sup> Compared to the feeble, delicate White woman, Black women were perceived to be built with strength, a quality generally associated with men. Manliness was often used to delegitimize Black women’s womanhood. In suppressing said womanhood, enslavers were able to masquerade them as undeserving of female treatment and protections. As seen in advertisements for women like Mary in *The Daily Picayune* in July of 1854<sup>29</sup> and Viletta in the *Charleston Mercury* in August of 1829,<sup>30</sup> adjectives like “stout” and “robust” were used to describe their bodies, emphasizing their strength and invoking images of masculinity. The manly stereotype enabled enslavers to subject their enslaved women to long hours of work in the fields. Often with little to no breaks in grueling weather. The stereotype of the Black female superbody served to strip Black women of their femininity, therefore disqualifying them from the protections afforded to women.

Describing Black women in masculine terms helped enslavers justify harsh treatments. Black women were often the subjects of punishments that would have been deemed too extreme for a woman to endure. The Black superbody stereotype ensured that Black women were not attributed the delicate qualities that were generally attributed to women. Instead, they were determined to be beings who did not feel pain the way humans naturally do. Delia Garlic, a

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<sup>28</sup> Runaway Slave Ad, "Twenty Dollar Reward," advertisement, *The Daily Picayune*, May 1845, 27.

<sup>29</sup> Runaway Slave Ad, "Ten Dollar Reward," advertisement, *The Daily Picayune*, July 1854, 15.

<sup>30</sup> Runaway Slave Ad, "Fifty Dollars Reward," advertisement, *Charleston Mercury*, August 1829, 11.

woman about one hundred years old, formerly enslaved in Alabama, lived her early years as an enslaved person in the home of a sheriff in Virginia around 1837. She shared with the FWP her experiences living with the sheriff's daughter and wife, both of whom physically abused her under the guise of punishment. In her account, Garlic recalled the time she fell unconscious after being hit with a piece of wood after her mistress mistook emulation for mockery. Garlic had seen her mistress blacken her eyebrows with smut, and she was moved to do it as well. After seeing that Garlic had copied her, her mistress became angry and started yelling. Then she struck Garlic with a piece of stovewood, resulting in her falling unconscious. Shocked that Garlic had collapsed, the sheriff's wife told the women around her, "I thought her thick skull and cap of wool could take it better than that."<sup>31</sup> The mistress's understanding of the black body was that it contained thicker bones and hair that served to alleviate pain or prevent injury. These assumed biological differences provided some protection against being struck by a piece of wood or any object that enslavers saw fit to use to inflict harm. Upon seeing that they did not, Garlic's mistress was shocked. Like many people of her time, the mistress operated under the belief that her enslaved female was biologically suited to handle such an extreme punishment because Black women were not delicate like "real women."

The assumption of Black women's ability to endure pain because of their "superbodies" can also be seen in the origins of American Gynecology. As the medical specialty emerged in the nineteenth century, doctors relied on the bodies of enslaved women for their experimental operations. Doctor James Marion Sims, for example, experimented on the bodies of enslaved Black women to make his mark in the medical field. Sims, who is still known as the "Father of Gynecology," used enslaved women as test subjects while he attempted to cure vesico-vaginal

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<sup>31</sup> Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 1, Alabama, Aarons-Young. to 1937, 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn010/>.

fistulae, an abnormal opening within the vagina, often caused by traumatic childbirth.<sup>32</sup> The enslaved women, Lucy, Anarcha, and Betsy, were all put into Sim's care and operated on without anesthesia for five years. After the first two years, Sims had yet to produce any results, causing him to lose support within the local white community and the loss of his medical assistants. This lack of support prompted Sims to turn his subjects into his assistants, using the enslaved women as both patients and nurses. According to Cooper Owens, some of these women had children whom they had to raise, "under the fog of post-surgery opiates that kept them dehydrated, constipated, and bound to their beds for at least two weeks while their bladders and vaginas healed."<sup>33</sup> Sims subjected his enslaved patients to a nonstop rotation of being operated on and working on his property. Their bodies were pushed to unknown limits to pursue medical advancement because of the assumption that Black bodies were suited to endure such taxing circumstances. Those women deserve a lot of credit for their contributions to Sims' discoveries, both as patients and as nurses. The "Father of Gynecology" would not have been able to make his medical breakthroughs without the expense of the Black woman's "Superbody."

### *The Jezebel*

Black women and promiscuity were all but synonymous since the moment the first Black women came to America. Misinterpretations that stemmed from European travelers who mistook African nudity as a sign of lewdness traveled to the Americas, where Black women were labeled sexual deviants. The name "Jezebel" signifies the depiction of Black women as inherently predatory and promiscuous. The association of the name "Jezebel" with sexual immorality originates from the biblical Phoenician princess named Jezebel, who later became the queen of Israel. In the Bible, Jezebel was portrayed as a cunning, seductive, and wicked queen who tried

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<sup>32</sup>Cooper Owens, *Medical Bondage*.

<sup>33</sup>Cooper Owens, *Medical Bondage*, 38.

to turn people away from God. In Revelation 2:20, it is written, “Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality ... I have given her time to repent for her immorality, but she is unwilling.”<sup>34</sup> Jezebel was a condemnable woman who was full of sin and felt no shame about it. A woman with the Jezebel spirit, in that same vein, was a hypersexual who committed acts of sexual deviancy with no remorse. In the context of antebellum slavery, she was the antithesis of the white women who were portrayed as models of self-respect, self-control, and modesty. The Jezebel tempts men into committing sin with her, leading them towards moral degradation. White enslavers insisted that Black women had the spirit of Jezebel.

The bodies of the Black women were interpreted as a sign of their innate hypersexuality. Their large breasts and buttocks signified a heightened libido to white onlookers. Black women’s bodies and sexuality became a sight of fascination to white society. For instance, Saartjie, or Sarah, Baartman became a famous European spectacle in the nineteenth century because of her body. Baartman was an African woman from Cape Town who had large breasts and steatopygia. Her steatopygia caused her to have an excessive accumulation of fat in her buttocks and thighs. Her figure attracted European entrepreneurs who put her on display as the “Hottentot Venus” and profited from her exhibitions. In the early nineteenth century, advertisements to see “That most wonderful Phenomenon of Nature, the HOTTENTOT VENUS” were displayed, enticing onlookers to come see Baartman in skin-tight clothing, seeming almost naked. She was adorned with beads and feathers, and observers were able to poke and pry at her figure as she stood on display for hours. Hottentot was the derogatory term Europeans used in reference to the Khoekhoe people of South Africa, as Baartman was a Khoekhoe woman.<sup>35</sup> Venus was a

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<sup>34</sup> Revelation 2:20 (NIV)

<sup>35</sup> Jeffreys, M. D. W. “The Origin of the Name Hottentot.” *African Affairs* 46, no. 184 (1947): 163–65. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/719230.traveler>

reference to the Roman goddess Venus, who is the goddess of love, beauty, fertility, and desire. She represents femininity, sensuality, and pleasure. By calling Baartman the “Hottentot Venus,” her enslavers were essentially calling her an African object of desire, playing on notions of primitivity, exoticism, and promiscuity, fostering associations of the Black body with blatant and outward sexuality. Outside of Baartman’s role as an exhibitionary item, she was also exploited sexually as her “owners” collected payments, allowing men to have sex with her. She served as a reminder of how available the Black body is to white society. Her natural features were observed and turned into a spectacle. A spectacle that was sexualized and determined to be an example of the nature of Black women.

White men used the stereotype of Jezebel to justify their sexual relationships with Black women. They painted Black women as temptresses with insatiable appetites for sex that could not be satisfied by Black men alone. Black women were depicted as desirous of sex with white men. According to abolitionist James Redpath, Black women were “gratified by the criminal advances of Saxons.”<sup>36</sup> This assumed desire and egregious sexual appetite meant to enslavers that Black women could not be raped, and because enslaved women were property, they legally could not be. Sexual assault was common between Black women and their enslavers, as some women believed they had no choice but to submit. In his novel titled *Travels in the Confederation*, Johann Schoepf wrote, “in almost every house there are negresses, slaves, who count it an honor to bring a mulatto into the world.”<sup>37</sup> While some enslaved women were rewarded for their relationships with their masters, most women simply had to endure the abuse. If the woman had a child as a result of the abuse, she and the child were to remain the enslaver’s property, oftentimes with the enslaver not acknowledging his paternal ties to the child.

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<sup>36</sup> Redpath, James. *The roving editor: or, Talks with slaves in the southern states*. New York, A. B. Burdick, 1859. Pdf. <https://www.loc.gov/item/11011700/>. Pg 141

<sup>37</sup> Schoepf and Morrison, *Travels in the Confederation, 1783-1784*.

After the trans-Atlantic slave trade was banned in the Americas, enslavers turned to Black women to supply their labor force, as they were viewed as happily obliging sexual objects. Following the legal doctrine *Partus Sequitur Ventrem*, which dictated that children born to enslaved mothers would assume the same enslaved status as their mother, Black women were transformed into reproductive laborers. Enslavers converted Black women's ability to reproduce into a way to make a profit and increase their personnel. The belief that Black women were impervious to pain due to assumptions tied to the Black superbodily was applied to Black women's ability to give birth. There was a preconceived notion that they could bear children easily and in large quantities. Notions of the Black Superbody were combined with notions of the Jezebel, leading to Enslaved women being forced to have children as "breeders." Niche sectors within the slave market formed around Black women's reproductive labor, calling for breeders and wet nurses. Slave traders specifically examined women for signs of heightened fertility and desirable features to determine the financial value of their reproductivity.<sup>38</sup> The phrase "future increase" was put into slave advertisements, ensuring that the buyer acquired not just the woman, but all children she might have in the future.

Breeder women's reproductivity was not only valued for the ability to create enslaved children, but also for how it benefited white children and mothers. Some enslaved women served as both breeder women and wet nurses. Amy Elizabeth Patterson of Evansville, Indiana, gave an account to the WPA interviewers of her mother, Louisa Street, who was both a breeder woman and a wet nurse for her enslavers. Louisa Street, the mother of seventeen children, was sexually assaulted by her enslaver, resulting in the birth of Amy Elizabeth Patterson on July 12, 1850. Her mistress, aware of her husband's transgressions, had a child around the same time as Street, "and

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<sup>38</sup>Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh*, chap. 1.

Louisa was a wet nurse for both children.”<sup>39</sup> Patterson’s mother was sexually exploited, made to carry a child full-term, then, on top of her responsibilities as a mother, she was expected to raise and nourish the child of another woman. She was forced to feed her rapist's legitimate and illegitimate children, which had to be a mental and physical strain.

On top of the expectation to nurse white children, in some cases, wet nurses were expected to prioritize nursing the white child over their own. T. W. Cotton of Helena, Arkansas, shared the story of his mother with the WPA interviewers. Cotton recalled being raised by his grandmother in 1858 because his mother, who had birthed 21 children, was busy raising his master’s child, Walter. He told the interviewers, “Grandma raised me on a bottle so mother could nurse Walter...I nursed my mother four weeks and then mama raised Walter and grandma raised me.”<sup>40</sup> Because Walter was the child of her enslaver, his health was prioritized over that of her enslaved child. At four weeks, Cotton’s mother could no longer nurse her child to ensure there was enough breast milk for the White child. After being given to his grandmother, Cotton presumably drank an animal’s milk, denying him the necessary nutrients found in breast milk. Cotton’s mother was forced to prioritize raising another woman’s child and risk the health of her own by not giving him her milk.

### ***The Ideal Servant: Mammy***

To solidify Black women’s position as enslaved people, the stereotype of the Ideal Servant was created. The Ideal servant was a Black woman who was devoted to her work and the White family. They were highly skilled and praised for their domestic skills, such as cooking and cleaning. In Harriet Jacobs’ narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, her grandmother was

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<sup>39</sup> Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 5, Indiana, Arnold-Woodson. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn050/>.

<sup>40</sup> Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 2, Cannon-Evans. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn022/>.

depicted very similarly to the Ideal Servant stereotype. Her grandmother had “evinced so much intelligence, and was so faithful, that her master and mistress could not help seeing it was for their interest to take care of such a valuable piece of property. She became an indispensable personage in the household, officiating in all capacities, from cook and wet nurse to seamstress.”<sup>41</sup> The intelligence and faithfulness exhibited by Jacobs’ grandmother increased her value as an enslaved person and made her more of an Ideal Servant. Her idealness all but guaranteed her position within the home as she became indispensable to her enslavers.

Enslaved women who fit the characteristics of the Ideal Servant were often revered with a different level of respect compared to other enslaved people. Katherine Eppes of Alabama told the WPA interviewers that her mom worked, “in de Big House, aspinnin’ an’ anussin’ [spinning and nursing] de white chillun. All of dem called her ‘mammy,’” around 1850.<sup>42</sup> She told the interviewers the story of when an overseer whipped her mother while their mistress was away. When her mistress found out, she was “de maddes white lady I eber seed.”<sup>43</sup> She called for the overseer and fired him on the spot. Her mother had garnered such a special place in the enslaver’s heart that she was afforded special protections. Protections that were extended to her after she proved herself to be a valuable servant and someone worth protecting. Ideal Servants were often held to a higher esteem by White families, giving them special treatment because of their irreplaceable position in the White family.

The Ideal Servant was not only valued by their enslavers. These women also garnered respect and influence within the community in which they lived. Harriet Jacobs’ grandmother’s status as the Ideal Servant extended beyond her household. Jacobs wrote, “She was much praised

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<sup>41</sup>Jacobs, “Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself,” chap. 1.

<sup>42</sup>Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 1, Alabama, Aarons-Young. to 1937, 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn010/>.

<sup>43</sup>Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 1, Alabama, Aarons-Young. to 1937, 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn010/>.

for her cooking; and her nice crackers became so famous in the neighborhood that many people were desirous of obtaining them...numerous requests of this kind, she asked permission of her mistress to bake crackers at night...provided she would clothe herself and her children from the profits.<sup>44</sup> Jacob's grandmother's household efficiency gave her the privilege of starting an illustrious business in the community, garnering her greater respect. Jacobs believed her grandmother's reputation protected her from her enslaver, a man named Dr. Flint, and his ill intentions. Jacobs wrote, "...Dr. Flint was afraid of her. He dreaded her scorching rebukes. Moreover, she was known and patronized by many people; and he did not wish to have his villainy made public."<sup>45</sup> As the Ideal Servant, she not only had influence in the home, but she could also influence the minds of the community around her. Although she was enslaved, she had the ability to ruin that White man's reputation because of the respect and esteem she possessed. Her devotion earned her many freedoms and respect from those in her community.

The Mammy caricature stems from the Idealized Slave stereotype. Mammy signified a devoted, submissive, and asexual caretaker for white families. The earliest characterization of the Mammy can be found in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which was published in 1852. The caricature is represented by the book's mammy, Aunt Chloe, an enslaved woman who cooked on the Shelby plantation. Stowe's book offered the standard depiction of the Mammy:

A round, black, shiny face is hers, so glossy as to suggest the idea that she might have been washed over with the whites of eggs, like one of her own tea rusks. Her whole plump countenance beams with satisfaction and contentment from under a well-starched checkered turban, bearing on it; however, if we must confess it, a little of that tinge of

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<sup>44</sup> Jacobs, "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself," chap. 1.

<sup>45</sup> Jacobs, "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself," chap. 5.

self-consciousness which becomes the first cook of the neighborhood, as Aunt Chloe was universally held and acknowledged to be.<sup>46</sup>

The mammy was characterized as an older black woman, overweight, and darker-skinned. She wore a dress with an apron and a wrap on her head. She was deliberately constructed to imply ugliness, thereby desexualizing the character and focusing on her role as a servant. Serving as the Jezebel's antithesis, the mammy was portrayed as lacking all sexual qualities and was therefore no threat to the white wife or temptation to the white husband. She was different from the deviant Black woman because she devoted herself to servitude. Her sole focus was caring for her beloved white family.

The caricature of the Mammy and the Ideal Servant stereotype were used to idealize slavery and normalize servitude as the status of Black women. It was used to depict Black women as happy and content within their position as servants to white people. Masking the subhuman treatment they endured in their life of servitude. Implying that enslaved women were where they were because they wanted to be, not because they could lose their lives if they tried to leave. The desexualization of the Mammy served to cover up the sexual abuse that house servants often faced while serving in such close proximity to their masters. Both archetypes work to conceal and suppress the harsh realities of slavery. Framing its victims as happy participants, ready and willing to serve.

### ***Conclusion***

The institution of slavery in the antebellum era took ideas formulated in the colonial period and reshaped them into stereotypes. The "Superbody," "Jezebel," and "Mammy" each functioned to pigeonhole Black women and validated their treatment and status as enslaved

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<sup>46</sup>Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly* (Boston: John P. Jewett & Company, 1852), Chap. 4.

people. They ascribed ideas to Black women that were based on misinterpretations or were simply imagined in the minds of enslavers. Each stereotype served to degrade Black women while serving the interests of White society.

The stereotype of the Superbody asserted that Black women were built to endure slavery because of their anatomy. Their strength was emphasized, and that strength was made to imply imperviousness to pain. Black women's ascribed strength was exploited as it was used to warrant abuse under the guise of punishment, and made them the main subjects for experimentation. The Jezebel stereotype pronounced Black women to be hyper-sexual beings who were willing and happy when presented with opportunities to have sex. The claim that Black women were hyper-sexual beings led to their sexualization and justified the sexual violence enacted upon them. It also legitimized the exploitation of their reproductive abilities, which was commercialized by enslavers. The stereotype and eventual caricature of the Mammy maintained that Black enslaved women were satisfied and even cheerful to be servants to White society. They were given special privileges and respect because of their proven devotion. The Mammy was used to suppress anti-slavery sentiment by distorting the realities of slavery. Implying that the enslaved were there by will, not force.

In conclusion, the stereotypes of the "Superbody," "Jezebel," and "Mammy" created false images about Black women, which altered how the people around them treated them. These stereotypes all pertained to notions about Black women, but they were also ascribed to Black girls, stripping them of their childhood innocence and heavily impacting their girlhood. Their developmental years were warped, essentially denying them the protections of youth, and instead putting on them the expectations of these adult caricatures.

## Chapter Three: The Jezebel, the Law, and the Exploitation of the Black

### Superbody

*But I now entered on my fifteenth year—a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl. My master began to whisper foul words in my ear...He peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of...where I saw a man forty years my senior daily violating the most sacred commandments of nature. He told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things.”*<sup>47</sup>

- Harriet Jacobs

In her 1861 autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs detailed what her life was like in enslavement and how her experience shifted once she turned fifteen. She described a peaceful upbringing that was tainted once her enslaver began to make frequent sexual advances towards her. Because of her status within slavery, she felt as though she had no way to escape his propositions. She wrote, “But where could I turn for protection? No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death; all these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men.”<sup>48</sup> Jacobs felt alienated while enduring her enslaver's harassment. Her shame and his threats kept her from finding solace in her family, and the law offered her no protection. She felt as though she had nowhere to turn.

Stereotypes concerning the hypersexuality of Black girls, such as the Jezebel, rationalized and decriminalized the sexual violence committed against them. Enslavers viewed it as within their rights to treat their enslaved girls in whatever manner they wanted to, and it was. Both

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<sup>47</sup> Jacobs, “Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself,” chap. 5.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibn*

White and Black men took advantage of the little security Black girls had around their bodies, and the law enabled their actions. However, eventually, protections were extended to Black girls under the age of twelve. Ideas about the Black Superbody were ascribed to Black teenage girls, separating them from Black girls because of their ability to reproduce. Their ability to have children and assumptions of promiscuity excluded black teens from the legal protections afforded to younger enslaved girls and white women of any age. They were expected to give up their bodily autonomy and succumb to the whims of men, whether that meant providing their bodies for sexual pleasure or for reproductive labor in forced couplings.

By analyzing court cases of the nineteenth century, a deliberate attempt to justify the sexual abuse of Black girls emerges. As cases involving sexual violence, like *State of Tennessee v. James Keyton* and the *State of Missouri v. Celia, a Slave*, were brought into courtrooms, judges and jurors reinforced ideas of Black girls as property, and as such, they were not provided with the rights of men. Yet, cases like *George v. State* and the *Commonwealth of Virginia v. Ned* granted an unlikely olive branch to young enslaved girls, but not teenagers. That lack of protection allowed enslavers to exploit Black teenage girls' ability to reproduce without impunity. They would force the teens into relationships with enslaved men with the intention of having children that they could profit from. The accounts given by Rose Williams and Louisa Everett to the FWP provided unique perspectives into what life was like and the lasting impact of being in one of those forced couples. All of these demonstrate how the Jezebel and Black Superbody stereotypes served to justify the sexual exploitation of Black girls, but more specifically, Black teenage girls.

### ***Black Girls as Property***

The Jezebel stereotype attributed ideas of heightened sexual desire and promiscuity to Black enslaved girls. The Black body became a highly sexualized figure that piqued the curiosity of White men. They would enact their desires onto these girls by way of sexual assault because they could do so without fear of repercussion. The law had no jurisdiction in these cases, as enslaved people could not legally testify in court against White people. Two 1855 court cases, *State of Missouri v Celia, a Slave*, and *State of Tennessee v. James Keyton*, demonstrate how the law worked in tandem with the Jezebel stereotype to solidify Black girls as sex objects available to White men.

Sexually violent acts committed against enslaved female teens were generally unrecognized because of their position as chattel. When enslavers forced themselves upon these girls, rather than punishing them for assault, the law penalized victims who dared to stand up for themselves. The 1855 case of *State of Missouri v Celia, a Slave*, highlights the defenselessness imposed upon Black teens who tried to defend themselves. Celia, a pregnant nineteen-year-old enslaved person, was brought to trial on October 9, 1855, for killing her enslaver, Robert Newsom. The proceedings unveiled the truth of how Newsom had sexually abused Celia from the day of her purchase when she was only fourteen years old, without interference from anyone, despite her pleas. After becoming pregnant for the third time since her purchase, Celia pleaded with Newsom to stop and threatened him if he came into her cabin again. After ignoring her warning, Newsom entered her cabin on the evening of June 23, 1855, with the intention of having sex with her. After exchanging a few words and Newsom's refusal to leave, Celia struck him with a stick twice and killed him.<sup>49</sup> Her lawyers tried to base her defense on two 1845 Missouri statutes. The first declared that women could defend themselves against "Every person

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<sup>49</sup> McLaurin, Melton. 1998. *Celia, a Slave*. New York, NY: Avon Books.

who shall take any woman, unlawfully, against her will...to be defiled, upon conviction thereof shall be punished by imprisonment in the penitentiary.” The second defined homicide as justifiable when resisting an attempt to “commit any felony upon him or her.”<sup>50</sup> Their defense strategy proved unsuccessful because, in the eyes of the judge and jurors, Celia did not qualify as a woman; she was property. As property, she had no legal right to defend herself against Newsom’s abuse. She was later hanged for attempting to exercise a right afforded to “any woman,”- a category that she unfortunately was not a part of.

In the same year of 1855, a white man named James Keyton was charged with sexually assaulting an enslaved girl, Beck, in Shelby County, Tennessee. After testimonies from six witnesses, the grand jury indicted him for actions “contrary to the form of the statute,”<sup>51</sup> which may have referred to Section 15 of an 1829 law, which specified that the rape of “any female child under the age of ten years” resulted in imprisonment for ten to twenty-one years.<sup>52</sup> The jury saw that, as Beck was a child under ten, she deserved justice under that law. However, once the trial, *State of Tennessee v. James Keyton*, took place on January 26, 1855, the path leading to Beck’s justice was brought to an end. Jurors rendered a verdict of not guilty, keeping with an 1852 statute that stated, “If any slave or free person of color, shall be guilty of the crime of rape, upon the person of any white female child, under the age of ten years, he shall suffer death for such offence, upon conviction...”<sup>53</sup> While Beck was a female child, she lacked a vital determinant for her justice, whiteness. Her assaulter, however, was a white man, meaning

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<sup>50</sup> The Revised Statutes of the State of Missouri, ch. 47, art. II, sec. 4, 29

<sup>51</sup> Minutes of Shelby Circuit Court, January Term 1855, 400–401, 425–26; *State of Tennessee v. James Keyton*, Nashville, Tennessee quoted in King, “Prematurely Knowing of Evil Things.”

<sup>52</sup> King, “Prematurely Knowing of Evil Things.”

<sup>53</sup> “Public Acts of the State of Tennessee (1829),” HeinOnline 1829; Tennessee Codes, “An Act to Amend the Criminal Laws of This State,” ch. CLXXIV, [home.heinonline.org](http://home.heinonline.org) (1851–1852), 251. quoted in King, “Prematurely Knowing of Evil Things.”

charging him with the assault was impossible. Keyton was protected by his status as a white man, but Beck was not because she was enslaved.

Both of these cases ended with neither victim receiving justice for the sexual abuse they endured. Their status as enslaved people hindered their protection under the law. Instead, the law served as a tool to decriminalize the actions of white men. Although neither case had favorable outcomes for the enslaved girls involved, they do highlight a discrepancy in how society viewed the two girls. The case involving Beck was brought to the courts by the people of Shelby County because they believed Keyton had done something wrong. His morality was called into question because of his actions towards a child.

On the other hand, Celia's case was only brought to court because she had murdered her abuser. Why didn't anyone bring Celia's assaulter to court when he first took advantage of her when she was fourteen? The court case revealed that many people were aware of Newsom's actions. To the people around her, a sixty-year-old forcing himself upon a fourteen-year-old was not a crime worthy of punishment or a reason to question his morality. Celia, as a fourteen-year-old, was not afforded the protections of childhood. Rather, she was regarded as a woman, and therefore, Newsom's abuse was acceptable within society. If Beck were not under ten, would her assault seem less egregious to the people of Shelby County? In both cases, these girls were sexually abused, but their ages determined the severity and validity of the crimes committed against them in the eyes of the public.

### ***The Olive Branch***

Black girls were not only assaulted by White men- they sometimes fell victim to the Black men within their communities as well. Black men would force themselves upon enslaved girls, and often those injustices were overlooked legally. Generally, if the same person owned

both enslaved parties, it was up to the enslaver to determine how the perpetrator would be dealt with. The law generally had no jurisdiction, as they were the legal property of enslavers, and it was the enslavers' job to handle grievances between their property.<sup>54</sup> However, in Virginia and Mississippi, cases involving the rape of an enslaved Black girl by an enslaved Black man were brought into their courts instead of being handled privately. These cases were viewed differently by judges and jurors, as both parties involved were of the same race and the victim was a child. The cases resulted in the protection of children under the law rather than the perpetrator, as he could not rely on the color of his skin in his defense.

A case in Virginia came out of the Fredericksburg Circuit Court in 1859, in which an enslaved man named Ned was accused of raping two children. First, a six-year-old enslaved girl named Betty Gordon. After her assault, she told her aunt, Virginia Gordon, who confronted Ned about it, but did not bring Ned to court, as there were no laws in Virginia addressing rape between enslaved people. Things changed, however, once Ned assaulted Betty a second time, and nine-year-old Eunice Thompson. Eunice altered the severity of Ned's case because she was a white child. Eunice's mother, Jane Thompson, learned what had been done to her daughter and went to confront Ned. After being unable to find him, Jane Thompson filed a complaint with the justice of the peace in Fredericksburg, who issued an arrest warrant. Thompson's complaint was followed by another from Virginia Gordon. Her complaint was received, and a second warrant for Ned's arrest was issued. Despite the absence of a law defining sexual assault amongst enslaved people, Ned was charged with raping Betty and attempting to rape Eunice. In the trial, *Commonwealth of Virginia v. Ned*, the court consolidated the cases and heard testimony from both Betty and Eunice, treating the crimes against them equally. Ned was found guilty of both crimes and sentenced to hang as punishment for violating Virginia's Revised Code (1819), which

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<sup>54</sup> Note here about Dred Scott v. Sanford

made an enslaved person's carnal knowledge of a child 9 years of age and younger a capital crime.<sup>55</sup> Instead of choosing to ignore Betty's status as a child because she was enslaved, like how Celia's status as a woman was discarded, the court protected her under the law.

In that same year of 1859, an enslaved man named George was tried in Madison County, Mississippi, for raping a ten-year-old enslaved girl. The circuit court jury found him guilty, and he was sentenced to hang for his crimes. But at the time of the trial, *George (a Slave) v. The State*, there was no law prohibiting George's actions. His attorney entered a writ of error claiming that rape as a crime did not exist between enslaved people in Mississippi. The Mississippi Supreme Court dismissed his conviction in accordance with George's attorney's claim.<sup>56</sup> The results of George's case disconcerted the Mississippi legislators, as he was able to get away with perpetrating a heinous crime against a child. They rectified the injustice by passing a law making the rape of enslaved girls under 12 punishable by death or whipping in December of the same year.<sup>57</sup> Although George was not punished for his crime, his case resulted in the protection of enslaved children from enslaved predators in Mississippi.

These cases highlight a tension between enslaved Black girls and their suitability for legal protection in the eyes of dominant society. As seen in the cases with James Keyton and Celia, enslaved Black girls could not be legally protected from White men who chose to enact sexual violence upon them. However, if the perpetrator is another Black person, the ideology shifts. A desire to protect enslaved Black girls from abuse is displayed in the cases in Virginia and Mississippi because the offender was an enslaved man. In the case of Betty Gordon, in a situation where an enslaved person's status would usually mean their disqualification from a

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<sup>55</sup> The Revised Code of the Laws of Virginia, vol. I (Richmond, VA, 1819), 585.

<sup>56</sup> *George (A Slave) v. The State*, 37 Miss. 316 (1859).

<sup>57</sup> High Court of Errors and Appeals (October Term, 1859): 316–20; The Revised Code of the Statute Laws of the State of Mississippi (Jackson, MS, 1857), 248

law's protection, she was treated similarly to the white child involved and received justice. The people involved did not care about her status as an enslaved person; they cared about the fact that she was a child who had been wronged. George's victim did not receive direct justice because her abuser was able to avoid legal punishment. But her injustice led to the Mississippi legislature ensuring that such an evil against a child will never go unpunished again. The victims' ages played a large role in their ability to receive justice. Note how Mississippi's legislature added an age limit to when rape between enslaved people was considered a crime. They set the cap at eleven years old. What is the difference between an eleven-year-old and a twelve-year-old? Why does the protection from sexual violence end once a child turns twelve? The difference is menarche, or the first period.

Most girls reached menarche between twelve and fourteen, shifting them away from ideas of childhood and towards womanhood.<sup>58</sup> The first period was a sign of reproductive capability, making them available to provide enslavers with reproductive labor. Southern states had adopted the legal doctrine *partus sequitur ventrem*, which dictated that children born to enslaved mothers would assume the same enslaved status as their mother. Therefore, regardless of how the enslaved mother became pregnant, her baby became another economic asset to the enslaver. The age of criminal sexual assault was limited to eleven and under because the rape of eleven-year-old girls did not benefit White society. As long as their bodies could be profited from, lawmakers did not deem it necessary to protect Black female teens from sexual violence.

### ***Forced Couplings and Young Mothers***

As there were no laws condemning sexual assault between enslaved people over the age of eleven or sexual assault by White men, Black girls often became pregnant by way of force. If the enslaver were not impregnating her himself, he would find an enslaved man to do it for him.

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<sup>58</sup> Bullough, "Age at Menarche."

Enslaved girls were put into forced relationships by their enslavers in hopes of creating offspring that would add to their wealth. The enslaver would pair an enslaved woman and an enslaved man together, who they thought would sire a strong child that would generate them more wealth.

Physical attributes such as height and weight made certain enslaved people more suitable to slaveholders and therefore more fit to create future offspring. The stories of Rose Williams and Louisa Everett reveal how being forced into these couples affected their lives.

Rose Williams was a formerly enslaved woman from Bell County, Texas, who shared her experience of being forced into a couple with the FWP interviewers. She described being forced into a relationship as something she would always hold against her enslaver, despite being rather fond of him. When she was about sixteen, she was told to live with an enslaved man named Rufus, whom she did not like. When Rufus initially tried to have sex with Williams, she would fight him off, under the impression that her only job in the home was to tend to it. “I’s ‘bout sixteen year old and has no larnin’, and I’s jus’ igno’mus [ignorant] chile,”<sup>59</sup> she said. After two days of protest, the enslaver called upon Williams and told her, ““Woman, I’s pay big money for you and I’s done dat for de cause I wants you to raise me chillens. I’s put yous to live with Rufus for dat purpose.”<sup>60</sup> Under fear of the whip, Williams yielded and slept with Rufus. She had two children with Rufus before she gained her freedom. She told the interviewers, “one ‘sperience am ‘nough for dis n\*\*\*\*r. After what I does for de massa, I’s never wants no truck with any man.”<sup>61</sup> Her experience in the forced couple hardened her heart towards love and relationships, as she never married or had children after she was freed. After being forced to have children with

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<sup>59</sup> Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 16, Texas, Part 4, Sanco-Young. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn164/>.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibn*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibn*

Rufus, she had no desire to have any more children or pursue a sexual relationship with any man ever again.

Louisa Everett, a formerly enslaved woman from Mulberry, Florida, also shared her experience of being in a forced couple alongside her husband, Sam, with the FWP. They were both sold to “Big Jim,” who owned a plantation with over one hundred enslaved people. On his plantation, enslaved people were mated indiscriminately based on Jim’s discretion. Jim was described as a cruel enslaver who would often force his enslaved to have sex in front of him or with his friends. Louisa described being called into a room when she was a teen and being commanded to have sex with Sam, who was also a teen. Jim asked her, “do you think you can stand this big n\*\*\*\*\*r?”<sup>62</sup> with a whip across his shoulder after commanding Sam to take off his shirt, his only piece of clothing. Jim then proceeded to tell them to have sex in front of him, and from then on, they considered themselves man and wife. Louisa told the interviewers, “Me and Sam was a healthy pair and had fine, big babies, so I never had another man forced on me, thank God. Sam was kind to me and I learnt to love him.”<sup>63</sup> Louisa and Sam had two children together and were freed in 1865 at nineteen and fifteen, respectively. They stayed together after emancipation and sharecropped until they had enough to purchase a small farm. Louisa and Sam were able to find solace in each other despite being forced into a sexual relationship at the whim of their enslaver.

Black girls and their ability to reproduce were exploited in these forced relationships, as there was no law against it. Instead of further experiencing their childhood, they were “married” off and forced to perform the duties of a grown woman. Women, like Rose Williams, were deeply affected by being forced to reproduce with a man not of their choosing. When given the

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<sup>62</sup> Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 3, Florida, Anderson-Wilson with combined interviews of others. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn030/>.

<sup>63</sup> Ibn

choice to love and reproduce freely after emancipation, they chose to remain alone because their perception of relationships was permanently damaged. Others, like Louisa and Sam, found partnership and comfort within each other through such a dark experience, as they were both the subjects of sexual violence. Enslaved girls were often forced into these relationships because of the assumptions about their bodies and nature. The ideas surrounding the Black Superbody rationalized the exploitation of Black girls' ability to reproduce, as it was assumed to not be as laborious a process for Black women compared to White women. Additionally, because of the Jezebel Stereotype, these girls were seen as more willing to participate in this type of labor. The visual of these pregnant enslaved teens created a self-fulfilling prophecy, where the pregnant teens served as proof of Black women's heightened promiscuity, resulting in further exploitation and the creation of more enslaved teen mothers.

### ***Conclusion***

Harriet Jacobs posed a harrowing question in her 1861 autobiography: "Where could I turn for protection?"<sup>64</sup> Her question remained unanswered as nineteenth-century legal and social systems positioned themselves against the unprotected enslaved Black girl. They were specially structured to strip enslaved Black girls of their bodily autonomy the moment they were deemed reproductively capable. Judicial precedent and ideas about the Black Superbody and the Jezebel upheld this structure. Their transition from girlhood to womanhood was hastened by expectations imposed by enslavers to reproduce and provide the next generation of laborers. The law was used to navigate the tension between questions of morality and economic profit that was brought about by the expectations put on these young girls to reproduce and their hastened transition into womanhood.

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<sup>64</sup> Jacobs, "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself," chap. 5.

The trial of *State of Missouri v. Celia, a Slave*, showcases how the law abandoned enslaved girls over the age of twelve. Celia's status as a woman was stripped, and her position as property was reinforced by the court. In doing so, the court ensured that her act of resistance was viewed as a crime rather than self-defense. This dehumanization was fueled by the Jezebel stereotype, which cast teen girls like Celia as hypersexual and complicit, serving to decriminalize the sexual violence committed against them as well as solidify them as fully possessed by their enslavers. The cases of *Tennee v. James Keyton* and *Commonwealth of Virginia v. Ned* reveal a conditional "olive branch" extended to Black girls. In each of their cases, the court was willing to acknowledge the crimes against them because of the extreme youth of the victims. However, as revealed in *George v. State*, the protection was insubstantial until the Mississippi legislature codified it. But even that protection was limited to girls under twelve years of age. An age selected because of what it represented for enslaved girls, the age of menarche, when the Black girl became viable as a reproductive asset. Once a girl reached twelve, she was no longer a child in the eyes of the law. She was a woman who could perpetuate the institution of slavery through her womb under the doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem*.

Whether the perpetrator was a white enslaver or an enslaved man forced into a pairing, the law remained silent to protect the enslaver's right to profit from the reproduction of his property. The accounts given to the FWP from those forced into relationships emphasized the human cost of this systematic violence. While some, like Louisa, found a way to forge love out of a shared traumatic experience. Others, like Rose, were permanently alienated from the idea of intimacy.

In conclusion, the stories of Jacobs, Celia, Beck, Betty, Rose, and Louisa illustrate an intentional effort to justify the sexual abuse of Black girls. By weaving the Jezebel and Black

Superbody stereotypes together with a legal framework that prioritized property over personhood, nineteenth-century society left the Black girl alienated and unprotected. They were forced to trade their childhoods for an expedited womanhood in which their reproductive labor was prioritized. These court cases and narratives highlight a system that actively facilitated the exploitation and the violence enacted against Black girls, all in the name of economic gain.

## Chapter Four: Manufactured Mammies

*Us play 'roun' in de woods en arter while Marse Ned's overseer cum fine us, en he druv us back tuh de big house yahd en give evvy one uv us uh good beaten'. Ah sho' wuz black en blue, en Ah nebber did fergit en run offen Marse Ned's lan' no mo' lessen I hed uh pass''<sup>65</sup>*

- Lucy McCullough

The figure of the Mammy was characterized as a maternal, self-sacrificing, and fiercely loyal servant. However, the stereotype was not a natural development of the Black female character; it had to be engineered. It was a product of lifelong conditioning and indoctrination. With the image of the Mammy in mind, enslaved Black girls were reared to become the ideal servant. They were conditioned into erasing their autonomy through violence, while a mindset of servitude was established through social associations of blackness with inferiority. By the time they were old enough to support their enslavers sufficiently, they had already learned the skills and knowledge required to prepare them for lifelong servitude as an enslaved woman. In doing so, they were raised to become the ideal servant as depicted in the Mammy stereotype.

To paint a picture of how the Mammy stereotype influenced the way enslaved girls were raised, this chapter once again draws upon the narratives provided in the Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative collection. The first-hand accounts provided by the women who were living through their youth as enslaved people reveal how the ideals and practices of servitude were instilled in them from their earliest memories. Additionally, this chapter utilizes the scholarship of Deborah Gray White from her book *Ar'n't I a Woman?* In her book, White explores the intersection of Race and Gender in the antebellum South. She examines the realities

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<sup>65</sup> Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 3, Kendricks-Styles. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn043/>.

of female slavery and how their roles contrast with the roles of traditional women in American society. By combining the lived experiences found in the FWP with White's theoretical framework, the breakdown of how Enslaved girls were reared into the Mammy stereotype becomes clear.

### *Conditioning into Servitude*

Enslaved Black girls were not born into slavery with the mindset of an enslaved person. They did not immediately assume a subservient status; they had to be taught their place in society. Notions of Black people as secondary members of society to White people were instilled into these girls through violence and conditioning. They grew to find proximity to whiteness as evidence of superiority, creating a social hierarchy amongst the enslaved population. Those who dared to reach for a status beyond that of an enslaved person were chastised by the members of their community as well as punished by enslavers, further instilling the idea that a Black person being more than secondary was wrong. By bearing witness to the public shaming and violence done to enslaved people who did not conform, Black girls were raised to think of themselves as enslaved people and nothing more.

When faced with the realities of slavery, little Black girls tended to resist. They had yet to learn that their place in society was that of an enslaved person and, therefore, they were expected to submit to others. Martha Bradley from Alabama told interviewers that one day, when she was young, she refused to work because it was a rainy day. The overseer came to get her and started to hit her because of her refusal. In response, she jumped on him and bit and kicked him until he left. She told the FWP interviewers, "I didn't know no better then, I didn't know he was de one to do dat."<sup>66</sup> When hit by an overseer, her reaction was to hit back, but as she aged, she was

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<sup>66</sup> Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 1, Alabama, Aarons-Young. to 1937, 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn010/>.

taught that her response was incorrect. She was taught that the overseer was well within his rights to put his hands on her and that she was in the wrong for defending herself. He was in the right because of his position as an overseer, and she was in the wrong because of her position as an enslaved person. Being an enslaved person meant she must be submissive to violence enacted upon her, which was a lesson instilled in her mind. Lucy McCullough grew up on a property in Georgia, where she mostly worked in the kitchen with her mother. Her mother was the cook for the home, and one day, the mistress of the property came in to scold her for doing a poor job. McCullough rose to defend her mother by saying, “Doan you no’ Mammy is boss uh dis hyar kitchen. You cyan’ [can’t] cum a fussin’ in hyar.”<sup>67</sup> Luckily, her mistress laughed it off, displaying no issue. But her mother began instilling the lesson of subservience by picking up a switch and striking her with it. McCullough’s mother’s reaction expressed that she was in the wrong to speak like that to her white master. She taught her daughter that, as an enslaved person, her job is to listen and learn from criticism given by the White population. Talking back was out of the question. Both of these women’s actions were dismissed by their authoritative figures because they were children who “didn’t know any better.” However, as they aged, they learned to behave in accordance with the expectations of an enslaved person. They learned to conform to their position in a slaveholding society and forgo resistance.

As lessons of Black inferiority were instilled in the minds of impressionable Black girls, so were lessons of White superiority. They were taught that whiteness was better than blackness and, therefore, proximity to whiteness was a sign that one was better. Callie Shepherd was a formerly enslaved woman from Texas who was raised alongside White children by her mistress. She told the FWP interviewers that she slept and ate alongside the white family, and she never

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<sup>67</sup> Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 3, Kendricks-Styles. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn043/>.

got in trouble because she “never went with de cullud gen’ration. I set right in de buggy with de white chillen and went to hear Gospel preachen’.”<sup>68</sup> Because she grew up with White children, like a white child, she did not associate herself with her blackness or Black people. Shepherd saw other Black people as “the colored generation,” of which she was not a member. She correlated Black people with trouble and viewed her proximity to whiteness as the reason for her purity.

The varying levels of proximity to whiteness created a social hierarchy amongst the Black population. Lucy McCullough told interviewers, “De house servants hold that dey is uh step better den de field ni\*\*\*\*s. House servants wuz n\*\*\*\*r quality folks.”<sup>69</sup> Their proximity to White people by working in the home made them feel superior to those chosen to work in the fields. This hierarchy within the enslaved community was such that those who worked in the house viewed themselves as better than those who did not.

Additionally, enslaved people who worked in the fields often had darker skin than those who worked in the house because of their long exposure to the sun, further equating blackness with being of a lower class. Harriet Mason epitomized this hierarchy in her interview with the FWP. She was a housemaid and nurse for a white family in Texas, and during her interview, she boasted about not sleeping in the slave cabins. Instead, she slept in the big house and ate what the White people ate. When her master informed her of her freedom, she told the interviewers, “I told him I wusn’t going to the cabins and sleep with them n\*\*\*\*s and I didn’t.”<sup>70</sup> By referring to the other Black people as “them n\*\*\*\*s,” Mason separated herself from blackness and instead situated herself as some form of other. Because she grew up in the house, she viewed herself as above other Black people and therefore above their treatment. Proximity to whiteness

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<sup>68</sup> Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 16, Texas, Part 4, Sanco-Young. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn164/>.

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<sup>70</sup> Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 7, Kentucky, Bogie-Woods with combined interviews of others. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn070/>.

gave Black people a sense of superiority over others, although they were all subjugated as enslaved people. Some Black girls internalized this ideology and took pains to separate themselves from their blackness to seem less inferior.

Although a slight sense of power could be found in some enslaved people's proximity to whiteness, they were still enslaved. Enslaved girls were reminded of this through the violence they witnessed enacted upon other enslaved people, or experienced firsthand, in response to resistance. When asked if she witnessed any violence as an enslaved person, Callie Shepherd responded by telling the interviewers about how some enslaved people would run away because they did not like how their enslavers were treating them, and when they were caught, they were whipped. She said, "I seed 'em whip de n\*\*\*\*\*s, 'cause dey tolt de chillen to look."<sup>71</sup> Having the children watch was an intentional action done by the enslavers. They wanted to let the children know what would happen to them if they tried to run away. Instilling in them that there was no escape from slavery without risking a violent and painful punishment if caught. Charity Anderson of Alabama told the FWP interviewers that she saw enslaved people attacked by dogs and whipped until they bled, "w'em dey did'n' do lak de white folks say."<sup>72</sup> Violence was the common punishment enacted upon enslaved people who did not fall in line. Enslaved girls were exposed to violence at an early age to show them what would happen to them if they dared to defy orders given to them. Violence would be enacted upon them and anyone else who dared to rise above their station as an enslaved person.

Not only would enslaved people be met with violence, but some enslaved people were also met with judgment from others for trying to be more than someone's servant. Emmaline

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<sup>71</sup> Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 16, Texas, Part 4, Sanco-Young. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn164/>.

<sup>72</sup> Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 1, Alabama, Aarons-Young. to 1937, 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn010/>.

Kilpatrick of Georgia told the story of when her enslaver, Billie, sat them down and told them they were free. She described her enslaver as someone who took good care of his enslaved people. When given the opportunity to leave, “Most all de n\*\*\*\*\*s stayed wid Marse Billie, ‘ceppen two er thee brash, good fer nuthin’s.”<sup>73</sup> Kilpatrick was taught to feel indebted to her enslaver for his kind treatment. She was made to feel lucky and, therefore, grateful that her enslaver did not abuse her like other enslaved people were. Those who decided to leave the plantation after emancipation were seen in her eyes as ungrateful instead of claiming their newfound autonomy.

### ***Tasks***

Enslaved girls were primed for their lifetime of servitude from an early age. The process involved extensive psychological conditioning, but just as important was the implementation of physical labor. They were given light tasks and taught specific skills to ease them into an adulthood of unrelenting work. The Mammy stereotype began to take shape as girls were assigned to domestic and caregiving roles, tethering the girls’ identities to a life of service to the White family. Nursing children was a task often assigned to young girls to prepare them for the reproductive labor they were expected to provide the plantation once they were old enough. Young girls and preteens were also put into “trash gangs,” where the labor was less demanding, but they presumably gained a sense of the more gendered labor they were expected to perform in the near future.

The teachings of enslaved girls were essentially lessons in plantation self-sufficiency. They were taught skills that they would later utilize to perform tasks for their enslavers. Charity Anderson bragged to the FWP interviewers about how she “could sho ‘nuff wash, iron and knit

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<sup>73</sup>Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 3, Kendricks-Styles. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn043/>.

and weave. Sometimes I weaved six or seven yahds of cloth and do my house work too.”<sup>74</sup> The skills Anderson boasted about were not passed to her for her own benefit. They served the economic and personal comfort of her enslavers. In training her to do all of these things, her enslavers now had someone on their property to wash, iron, knit, and weave for them. When asked about the work she did on the plantation, Amanda McDaniel of Georgia spoke about nursing three children before she was old enough to do field work. Once she reached an appropriate age, her first job was to “take breakfast to those working in the fields... Besides this I had to drive the cows to and from the pasture,” while still looking after her enslaver’s children.<sup>75</sup> McDaniel was made to work continuously from a young age. As she grew, so did her task list. Leaving no room for things like play or autonomy, only work.

Enslaved girls, like Amanda McDaniel, were often tasked with nursing the children on the plantation, either alone or under the supervision of an older enslaved woman. The role of the nurse served as an introduction to these girls to the reproductive expectations that would soon be placed upon them. Emmaline Kilpatrick was told her job was to take care of Miss Willie, her enslaver’s child, and “not let her git hurt, er nuthin; happen ter her.”<sup>76</sup> At an early age, Kilpatrick learned what it meant to take care of someone and to care for them in a protective manner. She came to learn how her needs and desires were secondary to the child she was in charge of. Most importantly, she learned that she and her needs and safety were secondary to those of a white child. She was not Miss Willie’s playmate; she was her guardian. This forced maturity required enslaved girls to suppress their childlike instincts and instead take on a protective and maternal

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<sup>74</sup> Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 1, Alabama, Aarons-Young. to 1937, 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn010/>.

<sup>75</sup> Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 3, Kendricks-Styles. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn043/>.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibn*

mindset. Nursing served as a precursor for the domestic and maternal roles they would occupy on the plantation.

Girls around the age of twelve were put into work groups called “trash gangs.” In these groups, they were given light tasks such as pulling weeds, light hoeing, nursing children, and occasionally picking cotton. Trash gangs consisted of preteen girls, pregnant women, nursing women, and old enslaved people, forming a predominantly female group.<sup>77</sup> The young girls in this group were made to socialize with women who had knowledge about motherhood and the particularities of female slavery. It can be reasonably assumed that in these trash gangs, the girls asked the more experienced women questions that helped them develop a sense of what was expected of them as they reached maturity. In this informal apprenticeship, the older women presumably opened their eyes to the reality of men, marriage, and sex.<sup>78</sup> Through conversations with older women, young girls’ minds were transformed into those of women, helping them grasp how their value was tied to their bodies. They began to understand the systemic vulnerabilities and strategies to navigate said vulnerabilities as they aged. Trash gangs represented the Black girls’ transition out of childhood and into the workforce.

### ***Conclusion***

The development of enslaved Black girls into the Mammy stereotype was not part of their organic evolution. It was a calculated formation brought about by a system of subjugation. As the narratives of women like Lucy McCullough and Martha Bradley illustrated, the transition from a resistant child to a compliant servant was accomplished through violence and psychological realignment. By forcing enslaved girls to witness and experience violence, enslavers stripped away thoughts of autonomy, ensuring loyalty and obedience. This

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<sup>77</sup> White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*, 94–95.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibn*

conditioning transformed the identity of the Black girl before she even had a chance to form it herself.

The social stratification within the enslaved community, prompted by ideas of white supremacy, made Black girls desire whiteness and carry disdain for blackness. Colorism and domestic hierarchies created a class of laborers who viewed their own blackness as a burden they must overcome to thrive in society. This internalized inferiority ensured that the future Mammies would not only serve their masters, but would do so while viewing the “good fer nuthin” enslaved people who sought freedom with the same disdain as the enslavers.

The jobs tasked upon young Black girls prepared them for the more arduous labor that awaited them. Learning skills pertaining to domestic labor and the socialization of Black girls through “trash gangs” marked their first steps towards their invented value as enslaved people. These tasks were more than just labor; they were a gendered apprenticeship that served as preparation for womanhood. Transforming their minds to understand that their value lay entirely in their bodies and utility.

The plantation system stole the Black girl’s play, her innocence, and her labor, replacing them with a performance of loyalty and maternal care that served the enslaver’s economic and emotional interests. As seen in the accounts of women like Callie Shepherd and Emmaline Kilpatrick, the “ideal servant” was forged in the wake of violence and the shared wisdom of older women who knew exactly what the world expected of a Black girl. The Mammy was not born into slavery. She was manufactured through intentional rearing practices. In examining this upbringing, it becomes evident that the Mammy stereotype was not just a myth used to justify slavery; it was the blueprint used to build it.

## Conclusion

*Her color is a cross she will always carry.*

– Toni Morrison

Stereotypes that were created to rationalize Black women's status as enslaved people negatively impacted enslaved Black girlhood, as they stripped away the societal protections afforded to children and prematurely ascribed to them ideals of adulthood. Ensuring that the exploitation of their bodies and labor began as soon as possible. The stereotypes of the "Superbody," "Jezebel," and "Mammy" each started as notions in the minds of Europeans. Then, during the antebellum era and through the institutionalization of slavery, they solidified themselves as commonplace ideas about Black women. Ideas that were extended to Black girls effectively eradicating their girlhood.

To understand how racialized stereotypes affected enslaved Black girlhood, it was important to first pinpoint from whom and where these stereotypes originated. Chapter one focused on the question: Where did these stereotypes come from? The answer could be found in the writings of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European travelers, as well as in the writings of other European men. After encountering African women for the first time, European men noted differences in appearance and attitudes that were unlike those of the European women they were used to. Analyzing their writings revealed how their perceptions of difference were written down and later translated into racialized stereotypes. The African skin tone, or Blackness, was described as ugly and degraded by European men. Some suggested that Blackness was a sign from God that Africans were destined to be enslaved because of the Curse of Ham. The physiques of the African women were of particular interest to European travelers, especially their breasts. The breasts of African women were chronicled in a way that made them seem more

animalistic than womanly. European men also commented on African women's reproductive capabilities to create ideas of reproductive ease that manufactured images of African women as reproductive laborers rather than mothers deserving of autonomy. Cultural differences, such as women performing "men's work" and polyamorous practices, were used to masculinize African women and demonize their sexuality. These stereotypes were created alongside racial categorization, ensuring that the world associated Black people with innate baseness, justifying their subjugation through slavery.

Chapter two tackled the question: What are the stereotypes associated with Black Women? The stereotypes of the "Superbody," "Jezebel," and "Mammy" were identified as the main stereotypes associated with Black women and the primary influencers of Black enslaved girlhood. By analyzing antebellum-era newspaper advertisements alongside the narratives provided by Harriet Jacobs and the interviewees in the *Slave Narrative Collection*, these stereotypes become clear, as does their impact. The Superbody stereotype functioned as an excuse for the physical abuse and occasional outright torture that Black women were made to endure as enslaved people. A sense of enhanced strength and pain tolerance was attributed to the Black woman by way of the Superbody stereotype. Instilling the belief that Black women could endure being subjected to egregious punishments and experimentation that a "normal woman" could not. The Jezebel stereotype asserted that Black women were highly sexual beings who frequently sought sex, especially with White men. Their ascribed heightened libido justified the sexual violence they were made to endure as enslaved people. When combined with the Superbody stereotype, it justified the exploitation of their reproductive labor. The last stereotype, the Mammy, idealized the institution of slavery by framing its victims as happy subjects. The Mammy worked to both idealize slavery and subvert the Jezebel stereotype to idealize the

enslaved woman. These stereotypes worked in tandem to subjugate the Black woman and assert a narrative that she had no power to resist. As a result, Black girls were raised with these stereotypes in mind. Ascribing to them themes of adulthood that played out in many different ways.

After establishing what stereotypes were associated with Black women and where they came from, chapter three began the analysis of how these stereotypes affected enslaved Black girlhood. Chapter three specifically focused on the Jezebel and Superbody stereotypes and their effect on the laws pertaining to enslaved Black girls. By taking a critical look at four nineteenth-century court cases, it becomes clear how those stereotypes were utilized to justify the sexual exploitation of enslaved Black girls and the court's dismissal of the injustices. The 1855 court cases, *State of Missouri v Celia, a Slave*, and *State of Tennessee v. James Keyton*, revealed two key points. First, the law was used to decriminalize sexual abuse by White men who acted on beliefs prompted by the Jezebel stereotype. Second, the cases revealed how age played a role in what White society determined to be legally and morally questionable when enslaved Black girls were subjected to sexual violence. The court cases *George v. State* and *Commonwealth of Virginia v. Ned* offered a glimpse into how age played a role in the sexual assault cases involving enslaved Black girls. Sexual abuse enacted upon enslaved Black girls under the age of twelve by enslaved Black men became a legally punishable offense, as seen in these cases. Still, that protection was not extended to all enslaved Black girls because twelve was around the time Black girls got their periods. Because of the Superbody stereotype, enslaved Black girls ages twelve and beyond were looked upon for their reproductive labor by enslavers. Therefore, when they were victims of rape, it was not legally punished because if the rape resulted in a baby, White society profited. This legalized sexual abuse led to the formation of forced couples on

plantations, where enslaved Black girls were forced to procreate with whomever their enslaver deemed appropriate. Being forced into these “relationships” stripped enslaved Black girls of their bodily autonomy, as well as altered their perceptions of love and relationships for the worse. Additionally, the image of the pregnant Black teen served as further proof of the Jezebel stereotype. The law was used as a tool to justify the sexual abuse and exploitation of enslaved Black girls, which was promoted by the Jezebel and Superbody stereotypes.

The third and final stereotype, the Mammy, is arguably the most popular stereotype associated with Black women. Chapter four revealed how heavily the image of the Mammy, or ideal enslaved person, impacted how Black girls were raised. The interviews provided in the Slave Narrative collection of the Federal Writers’ Project, combined with the scholarship of Deborah Gray White, disclosed how enslaved Black girls were intentionally raised to fit into the Mammy stereotype and become the idealized servant. To begin their transformation, enslaved Black girls were psychologically realigned. They were conditioned into having the mentality of the enslaved person, in which their blackness signified inferiority to whiteness. Therefore, they should be loyal and obedient to White people. This conditioning was furthered by forcing violence into the minds of enslaved Black girls through witnessing and experiencing violence when refusing to comply. Enslaved Black girls were given tasks from a young age to prepare them for the work they would endure once they were old enough. They were taught skills such as cooking and sewing that would later become part of their daily tasks as servants. Many young girls were assigned to watch over White children, which served as a precursor for the domestic and maternal roles they would occupy as they aged. Additionally, once they were deemed old enough to work in the fields, the girls would be put into “trash gangs” where they would work alongside pregnant, nursing, and older women. In these trash gangs, the girls were exposed to the

realities and expectations of the enslaved woman. By being raised in these conditions, Black enslaved girls were molded into the “ideal servant,” stripping away their childhoods and embracing servitude.

It is important to recognize how these stereotypes shaped enslaved Black girlhood because they explain the unique ways and motivations behind how Black girls were viewed and treated by the world around them. It is also important because these stereotypes continue to affect Black girls in the present day. Many Black girlhoods are being reshaped and negatively impacted by the lasting legacy of slavery. Ideas about the Superbody can be seen in how Black girls are treated in the medical system, where their pain is often belittled or outright dismissed. The spirit of Jezebel has been transformed into ideas about being “fast” or “too grown,” sexualizing Black girls for wearing tank tops or painting their nails red. The Mammy caricature was transformed into the “supportive best friend.” Often in film, Black girls are portrayed as supportive best friends whose sole purpose is to help the often white protagonist. Even in films where the main character is a Black woman, her best friend is a darker-skinned Black woman whose purpose is strictly supportive. These stereotypes have become cliches, and the fact that they are so deeply rooted within colonialism and slavery is reason enough to leave them behind. Black girls deserve to experience their girlhood without adult characterizations being projected onto them. By dismantling these legacies of slavery, a future can be created where Black girls are afforded the same grace, protection, and freedom to grow that society has always owed them.

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