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"Gendering the Carceral State:
African American Women, History, and the Criminal Justice System"

Guest Editors Kali N. Gross and Cheryl D. Hicks

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“UNDER THE STING OF THE LASH”: GENDERED VIOLENCE, TERROR, AND RESISTANCE IN THE SOUTH’S CONVICT CAMPS

Talitha L. LeFlouria

On 31 December 1904, Lula (Lou) Sanders, a twenty-eight-year-old, single, “Negro woman” and former cook, was convicted in the Superior Court of Tarrant County, Texas, for the crime of “assault to murder” and sentenced to serve three years in the state penitentiary system. Two days after the ruling was made, Sanders was transported from the state prison at Huntsville to the Johnson (Bowden) Farm, a privately operated plantation in Walker County, seven miles from the penitentiary. There, she labored from “sun to sun, rain or shine” in the fields, under the watchful eye of temperamental guards and observed as the men unleashed their reign of terror and violence on the other female inmates—when she wasn’t a recipient of it herself.¹

On 15 August 1907, “2 years, 8 months, and 12 days” after arriving at the Johnson Farm, Sanders was finally freed from the clutches of captivity.² Yet, for weeks after her release, she remained haunted by the shrill sound of wounded women suffering under the sting of the lash. Inevitably, the physical, mental, and emotional scars she endured left an indelible imprint on her person, but no level of pain or fear could prevent her from telling her story. Staying true to her promise to speak up for the women she left behind, Lula Sanders sent a letter to Texas Governor Thomas Mitchell Campbell on their behalf.

“Dear Governor. The commissioners have been down there [to the Johnson Farm] and they tell you all that they treat the convicts nice but it is a sad mistake. We were afraid to mention it to you for if we had it would have been hard for us,” wrote Sanders.³ She continued, “that is shure a tough place for poor female prisoners for they are treated like brutes. And when they whip poor women they tie [their] clothes up over their heads and expose their [hakedness] to all the guards and in some cases I have seen some of the women during their monthly period have been whipped so bad until they have had to [scrub] the floor after them. . . . Women have gotten on the[ir] [knees] and begged me to make this appeal to you for [their] sake. Oh Governor, you shure ought to go down there and see the condition of those poor women.”⁴

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Lula Sanders’s testimony illustrates how, after the Civil War, violence was evenly applied in the lives of southern African American women—free and imprisoned. In the countryside, city, and cell block, black women’s lives were circumscribed by terror and unmitigated cruelty. White southerners utilized physical assault, rape, and lynching as a means to regulate black freedom and mobility, to dissuade freedpeople from becoming independent economic actors, to stymie educational and political progress (for African American men), to perpetuate fear, and, most importantly, to reassert white supremacy and hegemonic authority. The southern convict camp was merely an added space where the imprisoned black female (and male) body served as a “corporal site” upon which white supremacy was “exercised, reformulated, and redeemed.”⁵

Until recently, the experiences and hardships of women like Lula Sanders have remained unaccounted for in the historical literature on African American women in America, and within carceral studies literature. Yet, a growing body of scholarship is emerging that challenges this historiographical oversight. Scholars such as Kali Gross, Cheryl Hicks, Cynthia Blair, Anne Butler, and LaShawn Harris, have made critical interventions in the study of black female crime and punishment in the urban North and in the West and have opened up new conversations about how black female migrants were affected by the U.S. criminal justice system during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Canonical works such as *Gendered Justice in the American West: Women Prisoners in Men’s Penitentiaries* (1997), *Colored Amazons: Crime, Violence, and Black Women in the City of Brotherly Love, 1880–1910* (2006), *Talk With You Like a Woman: African American Women, Justice, and Reform in New York, 1890–1935* (2010), and *I’ve Got to Make My Livin’: Black Women’s Sex Work in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (2010), have provided a much-needed foundation for understanding the historical roots of black female mass incarceration, and for locating the main causes of black female criminality: occupational exclusion, socioeconomic duress, poverty, violence, and racism.

These studies have played a key role in shifting the research focus to women. In like manner, the pioneering scholarship of historian Mary Ellen Curtin has helped redirect scholars’ attention toward the plight of the southern black female prisoner. In *Black Prisoners and Their World: Alabama, 1865–1900* (2000), Curtin discloses, for the first time, the abysmal nature of convict leasing in Alabama from a gendered perspective. She contends that while gender conventions were upheld in the area of labor, sex was of no consequence when it came to the application of physical violence in the state’s prison camps. What’s more, black female inmates—unlike their male counterparts—found themselves routinely imperiled by both corporal and sexual assault.

The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate how gendered violence and terror impacted the lives and laboring experiences of black female felons and misde-

meanants held in the South's convict camps after the Civil War and to answer all-important questions about the extent and nature of violence against the incarcerated black female body. While historians Catherine Clinton, Hannah Rosen, Crystal Feimster, Kidada Williams, and others have made critical contributions to the historical literature by placing racial violence in a gendered context, and clarifying the unique ways in which southern black women's lives were imperiled by physical and sexual assault and lynching, there is more to the story.⁶ Living and laboring off the grid, "everywhere, yet nowhere," tucked away in "flying" railroad camps, brickyards, chain gangs, lumber mills, mines, plantations, washhouses, barns, and "big houses," southern African American women prisoners were also terrorized, whipped, raped, and emotionally bruised.

As the scholarship continues to evolve, it is necessary for historians to begin questioning how female prisoners experienced racial violence when compared with their male peers whose sufferings have been well documented in the historical literature. It is important to ask: How did black women (and teenage girls) internalize or process the violence wielded against them? What were the potential long-term psychological, emotional, and physical effects of the wounds engraved on their person? How did the culture of violence engendered by imprisonment influence the ways in which women prisoners responded to one another during periods of conflict? And, how and to what extent did female inmates brave the indignities of incarceration and the brutality it evinced?

"TWO SNAKES FULL OF PISEN"

After the Civil War, the penal system became a driver of white supremacy throughout the southern states. The suppression of African American freedom was codified in state-sponsored Black Codes and vagrancy laws that strategically undermined the freedpeople's social, economic, and political (in the case of black men) mobility, and sought to regulate African American life. In describing the transition from slavery to freedom, North Carolina ex-slave Patsy Mitchner put it best: "Slavery was a bad thing en' freedom, of de kin' we got wid nothin' to live on was bad. Two snakes full of pisen. One lying wid his head pintin' north, de other wid his head pintin' south. Dere names was slavery an' freedom. . . . Both bit de nigger, an' dey was both bad."⁷

During the post-emancipation period, vagrancy statutes were enforced in all of the southern states. Poverty-stricken, landless, unemployed, and underemployed freedmen and women were the targeted population for these edicts, as evidenced in the lexical nature of the laws. It was the duty of police officials to round up "shiftless negroes," "vagabonds," gamblers, and "loafers," charge them with misdemeanor offenses, and put them to work on county chain gangs or in the service of a farmer

willing to pay their fines or court costs. All told, vagrancy laws helped buttress the development of the debt peonage system by legally restoring hegemonic authority to white planters who eagerly purchased black farm labor from county courthouses.⁸

In the states of Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, Arkansas, Texas, Florida, and Louisiana, where black citizens were under siege, it was the job of every civil officer to "arrest and carry back to his or her legal employer any freedman, free [N]egro, or mulatto who shall have quit the service of his or her employer before the expiration of his or her term of service without good cause."⁹ It was left to the county magistrates to decide whether the "alleged deserter shall be remanded to the alleged employer or otherwise disposed of. . . ." ¹⁰ Yet vagrants and peons were not the only ones crushed beneath the wheels of involuntary penal servitude. Felony offenses brought an equally problematic fate.

Like the southern vagrancy laws, the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution allowed for the disproportionate arrest and incarceration of African American men, women, and youth. The amendment declared that "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."¹¹ With a system of chattel slavery no longer in place, white southern entrepreneurs came to rely on the state as the new supplier of prison "slaves." Inspired by the New South doctrine, which promoted a mixed economy of industry and agriculture, southern state governments and motivated industrialists exploited the constitutional loophole and capitalized on the growing pool of long-term felony offenders who could be used to work in newly formed industries and prison camps while, at the same time, reviving the region's war-torn economies. In the decades after the end of the Civil War, thousands of freedpeople and their progeny were forcibly contracted to private parties who established the terms of their labor, living conditions, diet, and medical care and assumed total control over their bodies.¹²

In the expanding industrial empire of the New South, where black convict labor was an indispensable commodity, these women and men worked individually and collectively, grading surfaces for railroads, laying tracks, mining clay, firing bricks, building roads, digging ditches, smelting iron, chopping down trees, harvesting turpentine, plowing fields, hoeing weeds, and picking crops. Female inmates also had the added burden of domestic service: cooking meals, cleaning camp kitchens, sewing, laundering soiled garments, and working as the private servants of lessees, wardens, or other penal authorities. Without a doubt, African American women and men shared an equally hostile relationship to the carceral regimes of the post-Civil War South, but black female prisoners were exploited in uniquely gendered ways. Not only were they overworked (often doing the same jobs as men), they were also subjected to fiendish acts of physical cruelty, often sexualized in nature, and raped with impunity.



African American women inmates of Raiford Prison making shirts, 1928.
Courtesy of the State Archives of Florida, *Florida Memory* Photographic Collection.

“WHIPPED WITH A RAWHIDE”

In slavery and freedom, violence was a mainstay in the lives of African American women. Southern white men whipped, raped, maimed, and lynched black female bodies. But, sadly enough, these “southern horrors” were not confined to slavery’s bloodstained territory. In the screened enclosure of the South’s convict camps, violence was implemented with full strength. And, in the industrial carceral sphere, black female prisoners were subjected to the same level of wanton violence as African American men.

The whip, a weapon of terror first deployed against the enslaved, was reintroduced in southern prison camps. “Whipping bosses” were hired by private lessees, with permission from the state, to enforce discipline among convicts and to energize tired workers. Any prisoner who slacked in his or her labor duties, squabbled with other inmates, physically or verbally challenged camp authorities, or dared test the bounds of white supremacy were “whipped with a rawhide.” Some “bosses” went one step further by combining flogging with a practice known as “bucking,” a carryover from antebellum days, where a victim was stripped and forced to lay bound across a log upon which a whipping would be carried out.¹³ These carefully staged rituals were performed in the presence of other inmates for the expressed purpose of showing off the “rude power of the law.”¹⁴

In 1893 the penitentiary investigating committee of the Tennessee legislature condemned the “perfectly brutal, inhuman, and destructive” punishment of female prisoners after it was reported that several women had been excessively flogged. According to one observer, the inmates “are compelled by the guard, in the presence of women and sometimes of a man, to lie down on the ground or floor, their clothing drawn up and, stripped thus, they are whipped, as the men, on their naked buttocks.”¹⁵ In some instances, “one foot of the guard is placed on the neck or arms of the prisoner to hold her down as she writhes under the lash.”¹⁶

Overall, corporal punishment served as an essential tool to control and impress unwilling, unmotivated workers to engage in forced labor. It was also a way for southern white men to channel their frustrations by routing their anxieties onto the black body.¹⁷ Yet, the application of violence in the lives of African American women prisoners had slightly different implications when compared to men. As a rule, African American women were not entitled to the protections afforded to white women.¹⁸ Hence, the heightened devaluation of free black womanhood, the overall societal exclusion of southern black women from the “cult of true womanhood,” together with the withdrawn incentive to preserve black life after slavery, and the new presence of a highly regenerative penal system (that legally sanctioned violence), helped foster brutality. As one former lessee explained, “Before the war, we owned the [N]egroes. . . . But these convicts, we don’t own ‘em. One dies, get another.”¹⁹ This “one dies, get another” labor principle engendered and encouraged unabated forms of violence to persist in the South’s convict lease and chain gang camps, yet conditions in debt peonage camps proved to be just as (if not more) perilous than state-run and public carceral settings.

The murder of Sarah Nealy, a “colored girl” and peon, graphically underscores the disposability of African American life and the unrestricted nature of violence in clandestine carceral spaces. In 1903 Nealy was arrested for “some trumped up charge” and forced to labor in an Alabama peonage camp. The day after her arrival, she was “bucked” and stretched “across a log, her clothing drawn up and while her hands and feet were held by [N]egroes [presumably by force], the white guard, who was the son of the planter, gave her one hundred lashes with a buggy trace.”²⁰ But the beating did not stop there. Nealy was then “handcuffed, her feet tied together, [and had] a rope put around her neck [and] was drawn up until her toes barely touched the ground.” She was kept in this condition from 10:00 a.m. until 12 noon when she was released and crawled away. She was “afterward ordered to go to work, but being unable, the guard beat her on the head and jumped upon her stomach. Before three o’clock she was dead.”²¹ There is no evidence of anyone being charged in her murder.

"COMPELLED TO SUBMIT TO HIS CARNAL DESIRES"

Violence was an ominous presence in the lives of all African American captives, female and male. But brazen violence was only one part of a twofold assault on black women's humanity. Female bondservants were inordinately susceptible to shameless sexual attacks. Rape was a potent weapon used to terrorize, punish, torture, demoralize, and exact power over female subjects.² With no protection, women and girl prisoners were raped in barns, storehouses, and other private spaces by whipping bosses, guards, and lessees, all of whom lived on the premises of private lease camps.

Freedwomen and their daughters were extremely vulnerable to sexual violence in the post-emancipation South. Unfortunately, antebellum notions about the "unrapeability" of African American women were grafted onto the social and legal landscape of the post-Civil War South, allowing white men to sexually terrorize African American women unchecked by the law. This trend was not limited to freedom's territory, but found its way into the South's prison camps. Convict camp officials were exempt from legal penalty for raping black female prisoners. Indeed, the historical record is devoid of any example of an authority being legally punished for sexual assault on a female prisoner.

Alongside power, enduring notions of black female licentiousness and immorality encouraged the sexual abuse. During the era of slavery, a mythology of black female sexuality was contrived that equated the enslaved woman's body with promiscuity. Antebellum southerners advanced the notion that enslaved women and girls were "lewd and lascivious," and that they seduced white men. Any refusal to yield during a sexual attack was considered "mere feigning."²³ Hence, prison camp authorities took liberties with black female inmates based on these longstanding racialized assumptions.

Beyond the overt act of rape, floggings often bordered on the sexual, as is reflected in the practice of forcefully stripping female inmates. But the physical posturing of male assailants during these attacks was also sexualized in nature. Whipping bosses often wrestled their victims, groping their breasts and buttocks in the process. Others demeaned their "prey" by nearly suffocating them with their genitals. In one Georgia railroad camp a female prisoner was whipped with her clothes pulled over her head with "the overseer standing on them, with her head between his knees, and he was whipping her on her naked butt."²⁴

In some instances, physical and sexual violence intersected. In 1893 prominent anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells exposed a case involving the rape, impregnation, and physical abuse of a "young colored woman" who was sentenced to serve a total of eighteen months on a "convict farm" in Mississippi for fighting. As Wells reported, "during her imprisonment she gave birth to two children, but

lost the first one from premature confinement, caused by being tied up by the thumbs and punished for failure to do a full day's work. She and other women testified that they were forced to criminal intimacy with the guards and cook to get food to eat."²⁵ Social reformer Rebecca Latimer Felton exposed a similar incident in her 1887 essay, "The Convict System of Georgia," where she drew attention to the rape of four women in W. B. Lowe's camp in Dodge County. The women "complained that the camp overseer compelled them all to submit to his carnal desires—that he would threaten them with the lash if they did not submit."²⁶

Felton, an outspoken critic of convict leasing in the state of Georgia, used the grisly effects of gendered violence on black female convicts as a way to lay bare the evils of miscegenation, which, in her view, undermined the white woman's position as a mother and wife. Although white supremacy was at the center of her protest against the rape of African American women, and was equally influential in her campaign to defend the lynching of African American men, Felton's example is important because it illustrates that not only African American women recognized the impact of gendered violence on black female prisoners. Southern white women acknowledged its effects as well, but, more importantly, its implications for the "virtue" of the white race.

NOT MY SISTER'S KEEPER

While interracial, male-on-female violence was the norm in the South's convict camps, infighting among female inmates was not uncommon. Defenseless against their oppressors, female convicts sometimes directed their rage at one another. During his term of service on the Macon & Augusta Railroad, Georgia ex-prisoner Thornton Hightower saw a woman whipped, bucked, and "struck 20 licks with a leather strap. . . . She was whipped because she had been quarrelling with another woman and was ordered to hush."²⁷ But sometimes verbal bickering escalated into full blown "scraps." At the women's prison in Wetumpka, Alabama, also referred to as the "Walls," Ethel May Turk and Ruth Brown decided to settle their differences by "fighting it out." Turk claimed that, "Ruth Brown kept picking on me." According to prison warden A. R. Dennison, Turk "started an argument with Ruth Brown [which] resulted in a fight and [Turk] was hit over the head with a poker during the fight."²⁸

Exploiting the already tense relationships that sometimes existed between women prisoners, some guards deliberately instigated rivalries between female inmates. In her letter to Texas Governor Thomas Mitchell Campbell, Lula Sanders made mention of a fight (spurred by one woman's jealousy of another) that broke out at the Johnson (Bowden) Farm. According to Sanders, "One woman by the name of Charity Williams whipped a woman by the name of Bess Baily [Bailey] over the head with a wash board because the guard told her she [was] too pretty to work."²⁹

Beyond personal animosities and jealousies, women prisoners quarreled over stolen goods and for other unspecified reasons. Though the historical record does not allow for a thorough investigation of the causes of internal conflict among black female convicts, there are a number of plausible explanations that can be given to account for violent behavior among the incarcerated. Emotional strain caused by captivity or physical and sexual violence may have provoked hostile behavior among female inmates. The buildup of psychological stress, exhaustion, and unsparing work routines also made for an explosive situation.

At the tailor shop at the women's prison in Wetumpka, Alabama, Linnie Holt was stabbed by Mary Jackson for working too slowly. According to Holt, "I was sitting at my machine sewing when the difficulty started, and Mary Jackson was insisting that I speed up my work on collars which I was making." The warden corroborated her statement, asserting that "Mary Jackson cut Linnie Holt first then Linnie cut her. The argument started in the sewing room over some work then the cutting followed."³⁰

Albeit buried deeply in the sources, some evidence of lover's quarrels between intimate partners is found in the historical record. In the summer of 1934, lesbian companions Oscie Pearl Toney and Lucinda Davis got into an argument at the prison factory at Wetumpka, which culminated in physical violence. Toney claimed that "Lucinda Davis and I have been 'lady lovers' for some time and we agreed we would stop and just be good friends." One day, when Toney was "talking to some other girls," Davis "called me and we had some words and she cut me. She has jumped on me twice before."³¹

Just as same sex relationships among African American women prisoners is an understudied and unexplored area of historical inquiry, sexual violence against African American women prisoners by African American male inmates is an equally undeveloped topic. In recent decades historian Mary Ellen Curtin and others have made critical inroads in the study of African American women and convict labor and, more importantly, the interpersonal relationships forged between male and female prisoners ensnared in Alabama's prison camps. Curtin has deftly illustrated how African American men and women engaged in consensual sexual relationships and drew an emotional benefit from their amicable intimate associations. Yet, there is some evidence—albeit very little—that supports an alternative claim. In a rare, unpublished essay penned by social reformer Clarissa Olds Keeler, one is offered a sordid snapshot of one African American woman's suffering at the hands of a group of black male prisoners. According to Keeler's findings, in 1895 a female inmate in one of the Florida county jails was "confined in a cell at the jail with eighteen male convicts. The woman herself testified that she had been confined there three months, and that the men permitted her to have no privacy, and had repeatedly assaulted her. She had repeatedly begged the sheriff for mercy, but he only laughed at her complaints. She was then a physical wreck."³²



African American women standing outside the "Negra Women's Building" at the Wetumpka Prison in Etowah County, Alabama, circa 1890-1899. Courtesy of the Alabama Department of Archives and History.

Keeler's discovery provides a crucial opening for a deeper exploration of intra-racial, male-on-female sexual violence. Yet it is essential to note that more often than not, African American men were coerced into committing acts of violence against black female convicts. The same can be said of African American women prisoners who were sometimes forced to inflict violence upon their male paramours. This tendency to pit African American male and female convicts against each other is best illustrated in the 1891 memoir of Captain J. C. Powell, a former manager of a Florida turpentine camp. In *The American Siberia*, Powell recalls remarkable moments in his career as a supervisor. Among the sundry, malicious deeds he performed, one of his most ignoble acts involved the coercive flogging of William Hadley and a young woman whom Powell presumed to be the man's lover.

When William Hadley was caught stealing portions of food and sharing it with his female companion, Powell forced the pair to whip one another. In keeping with his recollection, the overseer "told Hadley to get down for punishment, and handing my strap to the [N]egress, requested her pretty shortly to lay it on to the best of her ability." After Powell put on "a finishing touch or two," he told Hadley to get up. The man "rose sullenly to his feet, and the [N]egress, who was breathless with her exertions, began to move off."³³ But Powell stopped the woman in mid stride. "Hold on," said Powell. "I have a little business with you first. Get down [where] Hadley was' . . . 'Give it to her Number 54,' I said; 'remember how she tanned your hide . . . When I thought that she had obtained a good lesson and Hadley's revenge was sufficiently glutted, I bade her to get up and be a good girl in the future.'"³⁴

Not unlike his slaveholding forbears, Powell used the tool of communal violence to plant seeds of bitterness between the sexes and to emasculate the African American male and debase the female. Yet one is left to wonder what silences may exist in his narrative. Reading between the lines, one is led to ask: Did Powell omit the fact that the young woman was the object of his sexual desire? If so, did finding out that she had amorous feelings for Hadley provoke the overseer's rage? Could violence have been applied, in this case, as a means by which to prevent or suspend a loving relationship from developing between the pair? Had Hadley outright disobeyed a directive to deprive the young woman of rations as a form of punishment and was flogged for challenging white male supremacy? Or, was the whipping in response to Hadley's attempt to protect the woman from some form of abuse? Many questions can be asked of Hadley's actions and Powell's violent response to those actions, but identifying the full source of the "captain's" unprovoked, irrational rage is nearly impossible.

"WOUNDS OF THE SPIRIT"

The physical and sexual violence imposed upon imprisoned African American women left indelible somatic, psychological, and emotional injuries. Their bodies were wounded through the transgressions of others, and they bore the brunt of the assaults meted out against them. In the historical literature where female voices have been muted, the impact of physical and sexualized trauma on southern black women prisoners has been overlooked. Thus, this section of the essay offers a scholarly attempt to narrate the survivors' pain and to explore the physical and psychological dimensions of abuse on the incarcerated black female body. Undergirding this intellectual decision is historian Deborah Gray White's charge, to pursue with rigor the violence levied against African American women as a way to de-center lynching as the principal site and foremost expression of white (sexual) anxiety on the black body.³⁵

The imprisoned black female body was a living, breathing manifestation of African American women's suffering. It was inscribed with cuts, scratches, bruises, and lacerations left by the whip. The type and placement of scars often told a sad and harrowing story. Bruises on the abdomen, torso, and lower body reflected one's attempt to fight off a sexual attack. Lash marks scored into the delicate skin of a woman's back were demonstrative of the fury with which whipping hoses expressed their supreme authority over "unruly," "lazy," or disobedient inmates. Cuts and broken bones were another indicator of the brutal violence used to cultivate greater productivity in the workplace.³⁶

The lasting effects of unchecked physical violence are multifarious. Some women were permanently maimed, while others died from their injuries. In January 1904, a fourteen-year-old girl was sentenced to the Bibb County chain

gang in central Georgia, near Macon, for larceny. Six months after her confinement, the adolescent was sent home to die. As stated by social reformer Clarissa Olds Keeler, "the scars on the girl's body corroborated her dying testimony that she 'had been whipped to death.' The verdict of the coroner's jury was, 'her death was the result of cruel treatment.'"³⁷

Like physical scars, emotional injuries caused by rape left a permanent imprint in the mind and spirit of female victims. Rape survivors were almost certainly afflicted by a multitude of psychosomatic challenges that can be best understood in modern terms. While one must be cautious not to project 21st century knowledge onto late-19th and early 20th century social conditions, current research methods provide new ways of understanding the psychological impact of sexual violence on female victims. The only way to really account for the ways in which rape affected African American women prisoners is to use present-day scientific approaches.

Not unlike most rape victims, imprisoned women likely suffered from anxiety, depression, withdrawal, insomnia, flashbacks, nightmares, low self-esteem, and a host of medical problems.³⁸ In extreme cases, some sufferers may have experienced long-term sexual disorders, such as hypoactive sexual desire disorder (chronic lack of interest in sexual activity) or sexual aversion disorder (phobic avoidance of sexual contact with an intimate partner).³⁹ It was not unheard of for a formerly enslaved woman who was raped by her "master" and/or forced to couple with enslaved mates to put off marriage or abstain from sexual relations with the opposite sex for the remainder of her life. The same may also be true of formerly incarcerated women.

Beyond the issues noted above, the pain of sexual violence likely engendered other somatic and psychological responses. It is possible that some victims turned their suffering inward, shielding the extent of their anguish from public view and choosing not to share their inner feelings with the outside world. These women may have employed the art of dissemblance, a phrase used by historian Darlene Clark Hine to describe the manner in which some African American women adapted their behavior and attitudes to create an appearance of transparency and disclosure, while actually shielding the truth of their inner lives from their oppressors as a coping mechanism.⁴⁰ Some may have also experienced denial or purposely blocked out the traumatizing episode(s) in an effort to retain soundness of mind—which would have been paramount to one's ability to survive her remaining years or months of imprisonment. Others probably found relief by doing just the opposite. For some, sharing the details of a painful event to a trusted party, or gaining emotional support from another victim of sexual violence, could have functioned as a powerful mode of therapy. Even though scholars may never know the full extent of the strategies used by African American women to cope with their post-assault suffering and recoveries, it is still important that scholars begin raising critical questions around the subject.

REBELS, RUNAWAYS, AND RESISTANCE

In spite of their oppression, pains, and discontents, African American female convicts waged a formidable struggle to maintain their dignity and self-respect. Women prisoners malingered, defied orders, ran away, set fires, destroyed property, and hurled profanities at their oppressors. Even with few victories to celebrate, these women, young and old, fought persistently to preserve their humanity. The methods of resistance pursued by women prisoners were quite similar to the strategies utilized by enslaved female workers. This is because formerly enslaved women and second generation inmates cohabited within the South's prison camps and peonage farms where they exchanged ideas on how to best defend themselves against their oppressors. The result was a hybridized resistance model that combined the tactics sown in slavery with new strategies forged in freedom. Lest we forget, as in slavery, African American women's lived and laboring experiences, and the spatial aspects of their confinement, dictated the means by which they resisted.

For some incarcerated women in the post-Civil War South, malingering was a preferred method of opposition. The act of working slowly, sloppily, or avoiding work altogether, was done in an attempt to undercut the lessees' earnings and to undermine the profitability of the carceral state. Moreover, African American women prisoners sidestepped their duties as a conscious rejection of their (rented) chattel status. For example, in Jefferson County, Georgia, Mary Puckett, a formerly enslaved woman convicted of arson and serving a life term, was put in charge of plowing the fields of the Old Town plantation. She had the ability to move through the fields with the adroitness of a man, and to command her mule like a drill sergeant. But instead, she opted to play clumsy and shirk her duties. As a consequence, she was flogged multiple times for "bad plowing" and "neglect of work."⁴¹ In a similar instance, Jeraline Bond, a prisoner at Eastham Farm in Houston County, Texas, was whipped for "not working." Willie Tunsill, a fellow prisoner and witness to the flogging, recalled that "Sergeant Brabham had it in for Jeraline Bond. . . . The captain said, when he was whipping Jeraline Bond, 'I'll learn you how not to talk so much, and work.'"⁴²

Within postbellum prison camps, female captives routinely applied day-to-day resistance in the enduring battle between themselves and their supervisors. But "everyday resistance," a phrase used by historian Stephanie Camp to describe the covert acts of dissent and discreet ways of regaining a degree of control over belongings, time, or parts of one's life, was not always conveyed on private terms; it frequently involved the intersection of both the public and "hidden transcripts" of black female resistance.⁴³ This interchange of resistance techniques is most perceptible in the case of Mattie Crawford.

In 1896 Mattie Crawford of Meriwether County, Georgia, was convicted of murdering her stepfather who allegedly "abused her." Although by this time all of

the state's female felons were put under the supervision of William Henry Mattox at the Camp Heardmont prison farm for women, Crawford's large size and muscular build encouraged officials to reorder her route to the Chattahoochee brickyard. According to one source, "after being there a while, her great strength and activity caused those in charge of her to plan heavy work for her. She expressed a desire to become a blacksmith and she was taught the trade. . . ." Crawford's choice (if what is said is true) to learn the ironsmith trade was not a conscious disavowal of her womanhood. On the contrary, she valued her femininity and put up a fight to preserve it. It is important to mention that Crawford began her blacksmithing apprenticeship wearing skirts. But with "her skirts being in the way, the guards forced her to put on the trousers. Several whippings were necessary to make her consent to this."⁴⁴ Unable to physically resist the guards' attempts to defeminize her, Crawford resorted to the use of a different resistance technique: she performed masculinity, and took advantage of the perks it afforded her. Yet within, she secretly affirmed her womanhood—using her proficiency as an ironsmith as a measurement of her own womanhood.

ONLY WOMAN BLACKSMITH IN AMERICA IS A CONVICT



MATTIE CRAWFORD.
She is a blacksmith at the Eastham Farm Prison and wears men's clothing.

Prisoner Mattie Crawford. From the *Atlanta Constitution*, 19 August 1903.

It is quite plausible that Crawford saw blacksmithing as a way to stretch her vocational competencies, perhaps hoping that if she was ever released from captivity she may be able to circumvent the rigid social boundaries and limitations placed on black women's work. Moreover, it is possible that Crawford welded herself to the trousers, recognizing that masculine garb may help form a pathway toward "trusty status"—and it did. As they had been under slavery, African American artisans possessed great social and economic value to lessees. In Crawford's case, performing a masculine skilled trade, albeit by force, allowed her to accrue a certain level of esteem for her work. She earned respect in the sight of camp management which, in turn, translated into exclusive privileges and a level of mobility that was denied to her peers.⁴⁶

Imprisoned for a lifetime, Crawford opted to use her skills to liberate herself intermittently from the physical and representational limitations of prison life. At the same time, by embracing masculine garb and practicing male oriented labor, she contested the imposed heterosexual violence levied regularly against the black female body. While male clothing certainly did not make an African American woman immune to sexual assault, it is still quite possible that Crawford used her dress and vocation as a blacksmith to redirect the gaze of her jailers and to refashion the way in which her body was framed by her keepers and the system at large.

In the same way that Crawford used her masculine presentation as a way to deflect her sexuality, some women prisoners actually resisted through use of their sexuality. Although rarely documented, there is some evidence of female convicts trading sexual favors with guards as a way to gain special privileges: money, a reduced workload, etc. In her letter to the Governor of Texas, Lula Sanders reported, "The guards women work if they want to and if they don't want to the guards make the rest of the women work for her."⁴⁷ Another prisoner, Louisa Reed, put forth a similar claim in her testimony before a Penitentiary Investigating Committee. She told one interviewer that she saw "Mr. Price [the guard] feeling on Lizzie Berry's rump and breast. Aleck Blakshear [another guard] hugged and kissed Rosa Brewing and gave her money."⁴⁸ In their attempts to resist rape and other forms of exploitation and oppression, these women essentially rendered themselves "unrapeable." To borrow from historian Kali Gross's turn of phrase, these inmates "embraced the illicit in an attempt to dismantle sex as a potential instrument of violation."⁴⁹

While most female convicts used acts of day-to-day resistance in their attempts to thwart the state-sponsored attack on their self-worth, others made more dramatic displays of their discontent by escaping. Some absconded in hopes of securing freedom from overwork. Others fled physical and/or sexual abuse and tyranny. In response, lessees fortified their prison camps with chains, whips, dogs, guns, and other weapons to deter runaways, yet ruthless intimidation did not fully

abate the desire to be free. Some braved the risk of being recaptured, flogged, and having their terms extended. For example, in the summer of 1906 Callie Rogers made a "break for liberty" and "set the pace" for three tagalongs. In late August, when Georgia's earthy thermometer was at its highest, Rogers and her entourage broke away from a chain gang camp in Valdosta and ran "six miles going as far as the Withlacoochee River" with bloodhounds on their trail.⁵⁰ Consistent with one reporter's observation, Rogers decided to "take refuge in a pond of water, hoping the canines would lose the trace of her scent." She was resting on a log, approximately fifty feet from the bank, when "the superintendent and the dogs arrived."⁵¹

In a similar instance, five women escaped from the Camp Heardmont prison farm in Elbert County, Georgia, in 1893 and sprinted toward the Savannah River. The camp was conveniently located on the north bend of the river where flatboats were often kept to transport timber to the nearby sawmill. Two of the escapees "worked in the fields, as did the women field hands of slavery days, while all of them at times were employed in pulling flatboats on the river."⁵² Unsuccessful in their attempt to cross the waterway, these women were recaptured and returned to the fessees.

For decades, southern black women prisoners were beset by violence, terror, and the near impossibility of escape. But despite their circumstances and setbacks, these women did not surrender their will to survive. Inspired by the grit and power of all of slavery's mothers and freedom's daughters, black female convicts rejected their role as "working beasts" or sexual bodies and actively engaged in the struggle to preserve their dignity. Notwithstanding these limited victories, these women clung to a fleeting hope that, one day, they would be liberated from social, economic, political, and gendered oppression, and have their humanity recognized and affirmed.

By exploring how violence operated in the lives of imprisoned African American women in the post-emancipation South, one can gain a fuller understanding of the ways in which southern African American women experienced interracial and intra-racial violence as recipients and witnesses. This study marks one attempt to provide scholars with new ways to think about the history of gendered violence and black female resistance. It also raises new questions and offers alternative ways of understanding how black women prisoners may have psychologically processed violence, by actually participating in the violent culture that emerged in the aftermath of the Civil War. While this work pays a great deal of attention to the impact male-on-female violence had on the black female body, it also underscores how women themselves engaged in violent behavior, and channeled their aggressions toward one another.

Just as southern black women prisoners supported each other, and worked hard to sustain their fragile female network, they also argued, fought, and stole from one

another. These individuals, not unlike free black women all over the South, exhibited a complex humanity. Yet, to date, their lived and laboring experiences remain largely overlooked in the historical literature. This is partly due to the scarcity of sources available, but also because of the abiding interest in histories that place African American women in a favorable light. Hence, it is paramount that scholars begin to view the incarcerated black woman's experience as a part of the African American historical experience, and move toward an understanding of the unpopular and unfamiliar representations of black womanhood, instead of veering away from them. By choosing not to do so, historians run the risk of obscuring the humanity of these women while, at the same time, perpetuating their invisibility.

NOTES

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¹Lula Sanders to Thomas M. Campbell, 2 October 1907, Campbell Records, box 301, folder 229, 1, Texas State Library and Archives, Austin, Texas, hereafter cited TSLA.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., 6.

⁴Ibid., 6-8.

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⁸For a comprehensive reading on the debt peonage system, see Pete Daniel, *The Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South, 1801-1969* (Urbana, IL, 1972).

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¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹U.S. Constitution, Amendment 13, Section 1.

¹²For a broader discussion of convict leasing in the southern states, see Matthew Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another: Convict Leasing in the American South, 1866-1928* (Columbia, MO, 1996); David M. Oshinsky, "Worse than Slavery": *Purchaser, Firm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (New York, 1996); Alex Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor: The Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South* (New York, 1996); Mary Ellen Curtin, *Black Prisoners and Their World, Alabama, 1865-1900* (Charlottesville, VA, 2000); Vivien Miller, *Crime, Sexual Violence, and Clemency: Florida's Pardon Board and Penal System in the Progressive Era* (Gainesville, FL, 2000); Douglas A. Blackman, *Slavery by Another Name: The Rebirth of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York, 2008); Mildred Pierce, *Slavery Revisited: Blacks and the Southern Convict Lease System, 1865-1933* (New York, 1994); Karin A. Shapiro, *A New South Revolution: The Battle Against Convict Labor in the Tennessee Coalfields, 1871-1896* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1998); Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the Nineteenth-Century American South* (New York, 1984); Martha A. Myers, *Race, Labor, and Punishment in the New South* (Columbus, OH, 1998); Paul Ortiz, *Emancipation Betrayed: The Hidden History of Black Organizing and White Violence in Florida from Reconstruction to the Bloody Election of 1920* (Berkeley, CA, 2005); and Vivien Miller, *Hard Labor and Hard Time: Florida's "Sunshine Prison" and Chain Gangs* (Gainesville, FL, 2012).

¹³Carolyn, "Sexualized Racism/Gendered Violence," 714.

¹⁴Michole Lisa Tarter and Richard Bell, *Buried Lives: Incorporated in Early America* (Athens, GA, 2012), 11.

¹⁵Jarissa Olds Keeler, Unfiled Manuscript (1898), box 16, folder 285, Manuscript Division, Mootland-Spingam Research Center, Harvard University, Washington, DC.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Leborah Gray White, *Arnt I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York, 1985), 10.

¹⁸Hicks, *Talk with you Like a Woman*, 57.

¹⁹Justings H. Hart, "Prison Conditions in the South," *Proceedings of the National Prison Association* (1919), 200, as quoted in Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another*, 3.

²⁰Jarissa Olds Keeler, *The Crime of Crimes: or the Convict System Unmasked* (Washington, DC, 1907), 16.

²¹Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, African American Pamphlet Collection, Washington, DC.

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²³For an analysis of the historical literature on this issue, see Brenda E. Stevenson, "Introduction to Special Issue: Women, Slavery, and Historical Research," *The Journal of African American History* 92 (Winter 2007): 1-5; 5-95.

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²⁵"Proceedings of the Joint Committee Appointed to Investigate the Condition of the Georgia Penitentiary, June 1870. Legislative Reports and Investigations, 130, Georgia State Archives, hereafter GA.

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³¹Board of Inspectors and Convicts, State of Alabama, Convict Department, Preliminary Report of Accident, 10 June 1934.

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⁴³E. C. Bruffey, "Only Woman Blacksmith in America is a Convict," *The Atlanta Constitution*, 19 August 1903.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

⁴⁶Lula Sanders to Thomas Campbell, October 2, 1907, 6, TSLA.

⁴⁷"Report of the Penitentiary Investigating Committee," August 1910, 984, TPM.

⁴⁸Gross, *Calard Amazons*, 82.

⁴⁹Flight of Women Stopped by Hounds: Negress Escaped from Convict Gang in Lowndes and Took Refuge in a Pond," *Macon (GA) Telegraph*, 1 September 1906.

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"ARMED WITH A KNIFE IN HER BOSOM": GENDER, VIOLENCE, AND THE CARCERAL CONSEQUENCES OF RAGE IN THE LATE 19TH CENTURY

Sowande' Mustakeem

On the evening of 15 May 1891, Amanda Umble left home in search of her philandering lover William Jackson. Finding Jackson out with another woman, Amanda pulled him aside and questioned his recent whereabouts. As the pair began to argue, William's date, Effie Jackson, walked towards Amanda, causing tensions to escalate quickly. A confrontation ensued, and Effie was left in a darkened alleyway, stabbed and on the brink of death. Though the trio's encounter lasted mere minutes, the romantic and sexual triangle of two African American women fighting for the affection of one African American man—that resulted in a murder—created a racially publicized scandal in Kansas City, Missouri, and national news that would forever alter their lives. Their fatal meeting provides a rare opportunity to interrogate gendered violence, black female criminality, and the racial environment in 19th-century Missouri courts.¹

Often obscured in popular understanding, the history of African American life in Missouri remains primarily centered on slavery, freedom suits, music, race riots, civil rights, labor struggles, social welfare, and urban decay. At the same time, any discussion of race and gender in the state's history is most notably directed toward the 1855 case of the bondswoman Celia who killed her owner—in self-defense against the years of psychological torment and sexual abuse endured—for which she was hung.² When looking beyond the slavery era, how do we map violence within the lives of African Americans freed from the social control of the plantations and slave regime? What emphasis should be placed on the moments of violent intra-racial conflict?

Throughout the post-emancipation era African Americans moved in and out of various spaces reconstructing families, seeking economic opportunities, and forging new ties of friendship, love, and community as they set out to live their lives in freedom. With the increase in urban populations due to migration, city officials drafted and many times reinstated judicial codes defining the parameters of acceptable

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