

Article

Kinship, Cooking and Childcare: Older Enslaved Women's Labor of Care in the Antebellum US South

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Abstract

Older enslaved women in the nineteenth-century US South performed vital work—designated under the label of ‘care’—in supervising infants and children whose mothers labored elsewhere, as well as cooking collective meals for enslaved people. Tasking older women (sometimes assisted by girls) with preparing and serving communal-style meals to enslaved children and adults formed an important part of enslavers’ capitalistic moves towards regimented, institutional modes of cooking and food consumption, as well as childcare. This increased regimentation affected kinship. Older women ‘othermothered’ children not biologically their own by performing physically arduous and mentally demanding caring labor, sometimes alongside enslaved wetnurses and younger girls. These women often cared deeply for these children, but the challenges of their work meant they sometimes struggled to adequately provide for them, and they must have resented their coerced labor. However, when women cooked of their own volition in the relatively private environments of the quarters’ family-based cabins, they regarded caring labor differently. Here, care and nurture served as a source of pleasure and pride. Enslaved women hence recognized the duality of their caring labor as both a chore and also a manifestation of love. This contrasts with enslavers’ perceptions of women’s ability to prepare and cook food for their immediate and extended families as a ‘privilege’ they could readily take away from them.

Keywords: slavery; antebellum US; older women; cooking; caring labor; kinship; gender; coercion

1. Introduction

The trope of the plantation ‘Mammy’—a senior female domestic toiling in a plantation kitchen to prepare meals for her white enslavers, sometimes assisted by more junior girls and women—has rightly been dismantled by historians as a racist stereotype of idealized enslaved womanhood. This image gained particular credence in the postbellum era of the Lost Cause, when white southerners created a hegemonic cultural discourse that romanticized the slave regime as benign and paternalistic. According to this interpretation, Mammy’s primary affective ties were to her beloved enslavers, people who allegedly regarded her as part of their extended familial or kin network, and this clichéd version of Black womanhood remained prominent well into the twentieth century (White 1985; Fox-Genovese 1988; Sharpless 2010; Deetz 2017).

More overlooked than the senior domestics of plantation homes who cooked for enslavers, however, have been the lives of mostly older—this is a relative and contingent term—enslaved women who cooked for the quarters, whether imposed by enslavers or through their own volition (Doddington 2024; Barclay et al. 2011; West 2026). These women



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performed vital caring labor by meeting the nutritional needs of others alongside often looking after babies and children. They did this through preparing and serving meals to the infants and younger children they cared for and also by sometimes cooking for enslaved adults. It is true that many older women have informally cared for younger children across time and space, especially among kin networks. It has been an enduring and long-lasting responsibility for many women in different contexts. However, as Diana Paton has noted, enslavers first began deploying systematized modes of infant and childcare in the Caribbean when mothers were increasingly needed to perform agricultural labor elsewhere. Childcare therefore enabled more intense exploitation of younger women in agriculture by the early nineteenth century (Paton 2020; Pargas 2011). Coercing older women into caring labor such as childcare and cooking also made economic sense to enslavers in the USA, especially after the closing of the international trade in January 1808. Their increased regimentation of both childcare and food preparation and consumption (enslavers often conflated the two, assigning them both to older women) had significant implications for enslaved people's conceptualizations of kinship and care.

1.1. Historiographical Context

Few historians have critically explored older enslaved women's care of children. Damian Allen Pargas writes that, in the coastal lowcountry of South Carolina and Georgia, the area's relatively large plantations facilitated the emergence of institutional-style nurseries where elderly enslaved people (mostly women) supervised infants, assisted by older children (Pargas 2011). Marie Jenkins Schwartz similarly claims that enslavers' use of formal nurseries grew over the course of the antebellum era due to a growth in plantation size as the US expanded westwards and also to enslavers' increasing desires to make infant care 'more efficient and less costly' (Schwartz 2000). Wilma King drew a distinction between enslavers' use of nurseries on plantations (consisting of twenty or more enslaved people) and more informal, ad hoc arrangements in smaller households. She claims nurseries 'were far from adequate', although they gave elderly and young enslaved people a chance to develop relationships (King 2011).

Likewise, it is notable that only a few historians have attempted to analyze *how* enslaved people ate on an everyday basis (in contrast to that consumed during 'special occasions' such as Christmas, Easter, the Fourth of July, or harvest time feasts). Conversely, the literature discussing *what* foodstuffs the enslaved consumed, as well as the longer-term appropriation of their food by whites Americans, is voluminous (Bower 2007; Covey and Eissach 2009; Hall 2007; Harris 2007; Opie 2008; Twitty 2016, 2017; Wallach 2015, 2019; Williams-Forsen 2006, 2022; Witt 1999). Eugene Genovese, from whom a considerable amount of subsequent research about enslaved people's food cultures is derived, believed the enslaved preferred to eat in the privacy of their own quarters when permitted, despite problematically describing communal kitchens as 'more economical and healthy', an assertion not supported by evidence from those formerly enslaved (Genovese 1972; Beoku-Betts 1994). More recently, Jessica Harris summarizes eating regimes on plantations 'of some size' as consisting either of feeding 'from a centralized kitchen' or else that enslavers provided rations on a schedule before allowing people 'to prepare them in their own cabins or within whatever communities they might have created for themselves (Harris 2011)

But no work has thus far centered enslaved older women in their analysis of coerced caring labor under the regime, bringing together the work performed by older women who looked after children with those who cooked for the quarters (and sometimes for enslavers as well). This omission is important because these women were usually one and the same. Enslavers typically tasked one or two women with performing these roles simultaneously,

assuming that this work was not onerous, and consigning it under a label of ‘domesticity’ that belittled its arduous and challenging nature (West 2026).

1.2. Quantification and Enslaved People’s Eating Practices

Notwithstanding some of the wider issues associated with the quantification of limited source bases, some analysis of how enslaved *adults* ate (children all tended to eat collectively while their parents labored elsewhere) can be explored empirically through the comments about food preparation and consumption made by formerly enslaved people interviewed in the 1930s as part of a Works Progress Administration (WPA) initiative to preserve the history of the slave regime. Only 210 respondents, not all of whom indicated whether they lived on a plantation or smaller holding, commented explicitly about modes of eating for enslaved adults, but nearly half of these (47%) described communal regimes (West 2026). Typical are the memories of Louis Davis, enslaved in Arkansas, who recalled. ‘My mother cooked for all the slaves, both grownups and children. Everybody ate in the big kitchen (Rawick 1979).’

In contrast, nearly a third (32%) of respondents mentioned flexible eating patterns with food sometimes prepared and consumed in family-based cabins, at other times more collectively. Practice varied (West 2026). William Thomas, enslaved in Texas, said that, while weekday meals were prepared in the kitchen and served up in a ‘big shed’ by a woman named ‘Old Pat’, every family could cook for themselves on a Sunday (Rawick 1979). Other enslavers might allow only breakfast and an evening supper to be consumed within kinship groups in the quarters. Under this system, enslaved women typically prepared and then carried, sometimes with the help of younger children, a midday dinner to fieldworkers in buckets or other receptacles.

Finally, just over one fifth (21%) of respondents remembered enslaved adults receiving rations and growing enough produce to enable them to consume all their meals within their cabins in the quarters, again usually within family groups (West 2026). These broad categories are useful, suggesting a dominance of collective food preparation and consumption by the end of the antebellum era, a time that most of the WPA respondents clearly remembered. While first-hand evidence from the perspectives of older caregiving women themselves is lacking from the archive, using a range of testimony about their lives from WPA respondents and formerly enslaved autobiographers who remembered them, alongside other types of evidence from enslavers, can allow for the creation of a more complete, albeit sometimes speculative, picture of what these women’s lives must have been like and how they regarded the caring labor enslavers forcibly coerced them into.

WPA evidence further suggests no direct correlation between size of slaveholding and modes of eating (unlike the provision of nurseries, which were associated with larger slaveholding units). Large plantation owners utilized a variety of practices, as did enslavers who held only a handful of people. However, regionality played a role here. On the large lowcountry plantations of South Carolina and Georgia enslavers mostly deployed the task system, where—rather than forcing people to work from ‘sunup to sundown’ as in the gang system of labor—enslavers permitted those they held in bondage time to themselves after completion of a designated task. Lowcountry enslavers also allocated rations and permitted their enslaved people small patches of land for raising produce. The task system therefore facilitated the development of more autonomous food cultures within the relative privacy of the quarters and meant that enslavers did not involve themselves in the regimentation of food for adults. Moreover, while communal eating regimes among enslaved adults served the rhetoric of paternalism very well because it evoked among enslavers a sense that they were infantilizing their chattel—that they ‘fed them’ in a manner akin to children—the same can be said of enslavers who distributed rations. These men and women also framed

their actions paternalistically, believing they granted their enslaved people a ‘reward’ of food independence, even though enslavers’ systems of rationing and permitting more private modes of cooking within cabins simultaneously shifted the burden of provisioning and cooking food onto tired women.

1.3. Caring, ‘Othermothering’ and Enslavers’ Regimentation

Older enslaved women in the antebellum era partook in what Patricia Hill-Collins coined as ‘othermothering’, caring for non-biological kin. Also relevant here is Sarah Knott’s framing of ‘mothering’ as a verb, which can be understood in this context of slavery as coerced caring labor (Collins 2000; Knott 2019). These women nurtured children not biologically their own by performing physically arduous and mentally demanding caring work, sometimes alongside lactating enslaved wetnurses and younger girls, all of whom had less value to enslavers as agricultural laborers. So enslavers’ decisions made sound economic sense. But, while women often cared very deeply for the children they ‘othermothered’, the challenges of their arduous workload meant they sometimes struggled to adequately provide for and nurture them. Testimony from the children they cared for collated by the WPA suggests that these women must have resented their mode of coerced labor, especially because most had already spent at least a generation bearing and raising children *and* working for their enslavers prior to being forced into these kinds of gendered caring labor. Being older brought no respite.

Over the course of the antebellum era, enslavers increasingly regarded their regimentation of infant and childcare as a prescriptive model that could be utilized to increase plantation efficiencies in varied ways. Hence they increasingly moved towards more institutional, communal modes of food preparation and consumption using the older women they tasked with childcare that freed up most younger enslaved women’s time to perform agricultural labor. Only rarely did enslavers delegate this responsibility to white women enslavers, the wives of overseers, or to older enslaved men (West 2026). Strategic decisions around the provisioning of food therefore constituted an important part of the regime’s increasingly capitalistic machinations, as well as enabling enslavers to develop their ideology of paternalism in a self-congratulatory fashion. They regarded women’s ability to care and nurture for more immediate kin networks within the relative privacy of quarters-based cabins as a benevolent ‘privilege’ that they could easily withdraw. Enslavers’ control hence denied many women the opportunity to prepare food of their own volition as well as the ability to raise their own biological children during the working day.

One Alabaman enslaver simply forbade his enslaved people from ‘cooking anything’ in their cabins, writing: ‘I have all their meals cooked in the kitchen, I have noticed that when they did their own cooking, they did it at night when tired, and their provisions were either not half done or burnt partly up; therefore they were not wholesome.’ He professed to believe that the communal preparation of all meals was ultimately an act of paternalism by sparing his enslaved women from cooking at night. Racism also enabled enslavers to convince themselves that their enslaved people were not competent cooks (except for when they wanted them to be) (Breedon 1980).

1.4. The Duality of Women’s Caring Labor

More broadly, then, enslavers’ control over provisioning complicates understandings of familial-based caring labor. Cooking in the quarters for their own kinship groups enabled enslaved women a degree of power and authority, their cabins sometimes providing a refuge from the everyday travails of the regime. bell hooks’ conceptualization of a ‘homeplace’—a place of safety for Black women away from white subjugation and oppression—explains how many Black women have traditionally labored outside their

homes in service work for white people. This caused tensions for women who had to provide time and energy to work for whites while simultaneously conserving enough of themselves to provide care and nurture for their own families and communities (hooks [1990] 2015). Likewise, enslaved women recognized the duality of their labor of care when it came to cooking for their family members when permitted to cook within the quarters for their loved ones away from the prying eyes of their enslavers. It was both a chore and a manifestation of love and nurture. The two were inseparable. Cooks for the quarters performed complex labor involving a variety of practices and regimes that commonly integrated childcare into their workload as well. Cooks did not have to work under the supervision of an overseer, for example, who probably deemed gendered forms of labor as less significant than the agricultural labor he supervised in the fields (West 2026). But, where women provided food for enslaved adults and children together, communal-style, this work could be extremely arduous and challenging, especially for those who cooked in plantation or quarters' kitchens while simultaneously caring for babies and young children. For example, Polly Turner Cancer, enslaved in Mississippi, recalled to her WPA interviewer how women domestics within her enslaver's plantation kitchen assumed responsibility for infant care in a highly efficient but far from ideal regime. There was a room for 'little children and babies to stay' near the kitchen so women could watch them. Older children still too young for the field helped tend the infants and rock their cradles, and mothers came from the field twice a day to breastfeed their babies (Rawick 1979). These women hence faced multiple and competing demands: preparing food for enslavers *and* the enslaved *and* caring for enslaved babies in hot, stressful and frenetic environments that posed additional dangers if young children entered this kitchen without the busy women noticing.

Likewise, Allen Parker, born into slavery in Virginia, reminisced in his autobiography about a woman named 'Aunt Dina', who assumed command of the entire plantation kitchen. In addition to undertaking all the plantation cooking for her enslavers *and* the enslaved, she also performed all the laundry work and 'had the general charge of the slave children' during the working day within an extremely dangerous working environment that contained both an open fire and very hot iron cooking pots. Children ate their meals in this busy kitchen, including Parker, who remembered eating 'thick sour milk and hoe cake', eaten from what he recalled as 'something like a pig's trough' (Parker 1895).

1.5. Kitchens for the Quarters and for Enslavers Houses

Enslavers intentionally placed kitchens for their enslaved people, and sometimes dining facilities as well, in what Catherine Armstrong describes as the liminal spaces between the quarters and their own 'big house', intentionally separate from where women cooked for enslavers in plantation kitchens (Armstrong 2021). Plantation kitchens were usually situated close to enslavers' homes to order to enable the distribution of food there quickly and efficiently. However, kitchens were housed in a separate building to the 'big house', partly due to the threat of fire but also because of racist desires to keep Black and white worlds separate, argues Deetz (2017). In Mississippi, Jon Matthews lived among 'plenty' of enslaved people, and 'Marster Bill' always deployed two separate cooks. 'Old Betty' catered to the 'big house' and Pheba for the 'Black folks'. Notably, the enslaved people's kitchen was located 'way down de hill frum de udder kitchen'. People ate there collectively, sitting at three long tables. These kitchens, sometimes known as cookhouses or cooksheds, were usually built in shady spots in plantation yards, sometimes with a dining cabin for the enslaved, while at other times people ate outdoors, a practice often seasonally dependent. Millie Williams, enslaved in Texas, remembered to her WPA interviewer how those enslaved consumed their food in 'a scruffy yard', 'like a pig pen'. Everyone ate

together, in summer at long tables set up in the yard, whereas in winter they ate in a separate room off the plantation kitchen (Rawick 1977, 1979).

1.6. Enslavers' Perspectives on Caring Labor

Because enslavers were more interested in their agricultural enterprises than in the realm of what they perceived to be a 'domestic' world of caring labor, it is unsurprising that much of their evidence is rather indifferent to the lives of women who cooked for enslaved people and cared for enslaved children. One Mississippi slaveholder simply wrote: 'My cook feeds the little Negroes who do not go to the field', implying that just one woman fed both enslaved children and the white enslaving family (Breedon 1980). In an 1853 letter to his father, Louis Manigault wondered what to do with two elderly women who arrived on his Georgian plantation within a larger gang of enslaved people he had recently purchased, writing:

What must I do with the two old women that have come? There are eleven prime hands. The woman Harriet is (as list says) $\frac{3}{4}$ hand, so I'll put her in the field. The other old woman is not much. *She can mind all these children*, but when you write me please tell me how you think best to manage that? (Clifton 1978) [italics added]

Louis Manigault probably felt that expecting a newly arrived, older woman to take charge of enslaved children would be challenging, so he sought his father's wisdom about how this assignation might operate. Writing about the Manigault family's Argyle island rice plantations more generally, William Dusinger writes that women's hearts were unlikely to be in the coerced task of 'unremunerated supervision of other people's children' (Dusinger 1996). But this is quite a harsh judgment about women who were known to practice modes of othermothering and renowned for their camaraderie and networks of mutual help and support, although, as will be shown, a small number of examples of behavior remembered as 'unkind' by children cared for by older women do exist. More importantly, providing adequate nurture and supervision for all enslaved children at all times might simply have been impossible for the women coerced into these forms of caring labor. As well as being physically drained by their labor of care, older women most likely felt emotionally and psychologically exhausted by a lifetime of bondage and the variety of exploitative working regimes and types of trauma they had experienced while most attempted to raise their own families over the course of their life cycles as well.

Moreover, enslavers were more inclined to write prescriptive tracts about how enslaved women *should* care for children than to describe the lives of these women themselves. In his *Advice for Planters*, J. Hume Simons suggested the deployment of a 'capable and trusty' woman to feed children collectively. As well as its connotations of reliability, the word 'trusty' also suggests long service, meaning again that these women were more likely to be older. Enslavers' use of this word is significant, then, implying age and seniority, experience, and faithfulness in a way that echoes the 'caring' or 'maternal' aspect of their coerced labor, as well as evoking 'Mammy' type imagery.

Simons further decreed that enslaved children should be fed 'well-cooked' food twice a day because his racist mindset led him to believe that it was 'a common practice among Negroes to eat victuals half raw, and of course, to give the same to their children. Some do it from laziness, others from ignorance of cooking' (Simons 1848). Simons conveniently forgot about these racist ideas, though, when it came to the collective feeding of children by one enslaved woman, whom he assumed would perform the role to his satisfaction. His comments are also deeply ironic because enslaved women also catered to white enslaving families within plantation kitchens. They could cook perfectly well but probably less adeptly at the end of a long and exhausting working day of enforced physical labor. Men who sat at their writing desks issuing guidelines on plantation management—whether for

a more general readership or specifically, for their overseers—from the comfort and safe distance of their comfortable plantation houses often had little idea of how onerous older women's lives actually were.

1.7. Enslaved People's Perspectives on Caring Labor

The idealistic rhetoric of enslavers showcases the powerful ideology of paternalism, but these discourses jar in the face of highly poignant and evocative descriptions from formerly enslaved people about *how* children ate and the onerous, multifaceted workloads of women coerced into preparing food for them. Hunger and monotony constituted a part of everyday life, and most interviewees remembered overburdened, older women serving children's food communally in large receptacles. This must have presented the easiest option available to them in the face of all their competing care responsibilities, and the practice also met with their enslavers' approval because it was cost- and time-effective.

Some WPA respondents had nostalgic memories of communal food during the era of enslavement, but others were less positive. For example, John Finnely recalled to his interviewer the 'good plain victuals' and twice weekly treats on his Alabaman plantation, where 'all cooking' was undertaken in a 'cookhouse' by quarters' cooks, before everyone ate together in an 'eating shed'. In contrast, the enslaved ate only 'rough grub', such as meat fat, greens, collards, and cornbread according to Mariah Synder (Rawick 1979).

Numerous interviewees recalled older women having to cook for both the enslaved and enslavers, sometimes, but not exclusively, on smaller holdings where women often had to perform multiple roles and it would have been impractical for enslavers to separate these tasks. Held in bondage in Mississippi with between 15 and 20 enslaved people, Mandy Jones remembered how their enslaver forbade them from cooking on fireplaces in their cabins in the quarters. Instead, her grandmother cooked 'all our vittles' in the big kitchen as well as cooking for the 'white folks' (Rawick 1977). Pauline Grice, enslaved in Georgia, also alluded to her enslaver forbidding any food preparation within cabins' fireplaces. Instead, all cooking took place in the 'main kitchen' of the enslaver's house, prepared by three women. They served up communal meals in a big shed containing long tables, this evidence indicating that Grice lived on a larger plantation (Rawick 1979). Andrew Pullen's enslaver held only three or four adult enslaved people at any one point in time at his home in Texas, so here, the 'old woman' tasked with childcare additionally cooked for all, both white and Black (Rawick 1979).

Indeed, WPA testimony is particularly important when exploring cooking in the quarters because most respondents were young prior to abolition, and in explaining how they ate, they reveal something about the lives of the women who fed and cared for them even though these women's own voices are lost to history. On Ryer Emmanuel's South Carolina plantation, a woman named Lettie provided all three meals for children in the plantation yard: breakfast 'before sunrise', dinner at noon, and then supper before mothers returned from the field. Lettie prepared a liquid base of watery meat or vegetable broth (pot liquor or 'potlicker'), or, alternatively, milk, buttermilk or sour milk (clabber). To this base she then added crumbled cornbread or ashcakes, vegetables, and occasionally meat scraps too (Rawick 1972). These thickened the broth and provided extra nutrition and fiber, but 'one-pot' feeding was also a cost-effective way to use up poor-quality items and spoiled food as well as remains that might otherwise have been given to animals.

WPA evidence is also highly revealing about the nomenclature ascribed to cooks and carers. Sam McCallum noted that on his Mississippi holding of around 30 enslaved people, his own grandmother labored as the 'yard woman', the carer of small children. (Rawick 1977). This terminology related to the place where McCallum's grandmother worked. As well as the ubiquitous descriptions of children's carers and cooks as 'nurses', familial

monikers were also common, especially those using terminology indicating seniority, such as ‘Granny’, ‘Aunt’, or ‘Old Aunt’. These labels are often assigned to elders in many societies, whether biological kin or not, as a sign of respect as well as an indicator of the importance of non-biological community networks. Other respondents equated older women’s labor of care more directly with maternalism, especially through the use of the term ‘Mammy’ (of course, a term also synonymous with senior domestics within enslavers’ houses). Such distinctions were not always discrete. In Mississippi Lizzie Fant Brown claimed *Aunt Mary Ann* served as the *general mother* of all the enslaved children, looking after them while their parents worked (*italics added*). Indeed, Mary Anne Gibson apparently felt as attached to Aunt Nancy, the ‘kinder middle-aged’ cook who also cared for all children, as she did her own biological mother (Rawick 1977, 1979).

Carers and cruelty:

A small number of those interviewed by the WPA remembered cruelty among older women carers. ‘Aunt Emmaline’ was ‘mean’ to the children she looked after on Anna Baker’s Alabama holding. Once she hit Baker with an iron for burning some cornmeal, presumably as she helped look after younger children, meaning it was hard for Baker to give the cornmeal her undivided attention. Realizing the extent of Baker’s injuries, Emmaline then grew scared of her enslavers’ retribution. She ‘doctored’ up Baker’s head, putting soot on her cut to stop it bleeding and making Baker promise to tell their enslaver she hit her head falling over (Rawick 1977, 1979). Power is, of course, relative, and Emmaline herself also faced the risk of violence under the regime. Moreover, this evidence needs to be regarded in the context of the much more substantial testimony about the kindness of ‘othermothers’, as well as the fact that older carers must have been physically and emotionally exhausted, if not traumatized, by the arduous workloads being inflicted upon them after a lifetime of bondage’s travails. The ‘old and crippled’ woman, Peggy, sometimes hit children with her crutch. While not justifying Peggy’s violent behavior, her disability could have made it physically hard for her to reach children who were either putting themselves in danger or behaving mischievously. ‘Old Aunt Mary’, presumably extremely tired, did not impose physical violence but simply decreed children had to sleep ‘in the heat of the day’ in Alabama and forbade them from playing (Rawick 1972).

Relatively scant and monotonous provisioning by enslavers left children grumpy, hungry, and undernourished. Noisy, crying infants would have stretched women carers’ patience, and ultimately they did the best they could with limited supplies, time, and energy in the face of numerous and competing demands. Ultimately, enslavers sought to feed children collectively in time-efficient ways at minimal financial cost, in keeping with the emergence of modern capitalistic profit-seeking among those who held people in bondage. Enslavers hence often overlooked the practical aspects of feeding multiple, hungry, and no doubt upset, children in their prescriptive writings, simply leaving the burden of this responsibility to the ‘trusty’ old women they placed in charge of such matters.

It is unsurprising that enslaved women themselves often bitterly resented enslavers’ communal regimentation of food. Delia Garlic, enslaved in Virginia, then Georgia, boldly referred to slavery days as ‘hell’. People all ate in the ‘big kitchen’, being given ‘no way to cook’, nor any receptacles to prepare food in, within their cabins. Married before the Civil War and older than most respondents, Garlic’s testimony illustrates how she wanted the opportunity to provide for her family, but her enslavers denied her the ability to do so. Henry Daniels, also enslaved in Georgia, was much more positive. Because children ate collectively, ‘at the white folks house’, his mother ‘didn’t have to cook for nobody but her and pa’ (Rawick 1977). Daniels hence framed children’s communal eating as a kind of liberation for his mother, failing to give any credence to the labor of care she provided for

her husband when she prepared his meals at the end of a long working day for them both, perhaps because he as a man was oblivious to the gendered nature of these forms of labor.

Collective cooking within the quarters:

Communal modes of food preparation and consumption were not simply imposed by enslavers. Cooking techniques that utilized a single pot over an open fire constituted a practical way of preparing food for large numbers of people, especially when enslavers limited access to a sufficient range of ingredients, before everyone ate together thereafter. Although evidence is scant, antebellum enslaved women probably employed more communal cooking techniques and modes of eating in the quarters, especially in relation to their evening suppers, than has hitherto been assumed. Kinship networks among enslaved people could be complicated due to sales, hiring out, the system of abroad marriages, voluntary separations, and deaths (Djelid 2024; Dunaway 2003; Hilde 2020; Hunter 2017; Pargas 2010; Stevenson 2023). This meant people's cabins might contain extended family units, members of multiple families, lodgers and other single people. These necessarily flexible and adaptable family forms render more typical Western notions of households unhelpful as a model for conceptualizing how the majority of enslaved people lived—and how they cooked and ate food—in their quarters.

Drawing upon the anthropological work of Niara Sudarkasa in relation to West Africa and America, she believed that on some larger US plantations extended kin networks meant the enslaved lived in large familial compounds—adjoining, intertwined households where people cooked and ate together and women shared child-raising responsibilities (Sudarkasa 1996). Such residential arrangements are more common *outside* modern, Western societies, and living in this way makes sense when considering the ways in which enslaved women's dual labor—working for their enslavers as well as bearing the brunt of the labor of care—rendered a multiplicity of people to perform this work a necessity for women. The African concept of a hearth-hold might also be relevant in this context. Situated outdoors and centering a fire for food preparation, African hearth-holds contained more than one household, often extended family groups, and within them multiple women played a central role in controlling the hearth and cooking everyone's meals (Ekejiuba 2005).

WPA respondents remembered these more collective forms of eating together in the quarters, including preparing food on a collective hearth, and it is important to note these practices arose through enslaved people's own volition rather than being dictated by enslavers. In 'those days', everyone 'cooked altogether' using an oven and a three-legged skillet on the coals of one large fire, remembered Sol Webb, while Abe Kelley also remembered everyone cooking together in the quarters before eating out of one big communal pot. People sat and ate 'good' food together in the quarters while singing and talking, said Clara C. Young (Rawick 1977). Some of this communality would have been seasonal. Tob David recalled living arrangements within cabins being based on extended kinship groups of parents, children, and 'other relatives'. Everyone cooked together in the yard in summer, unless it was raining, and on their own familial fireplaces only in winter. He held fond memories of his mother cooking potatoes and a skillet of beans in the embers of their fire (Rawick 1979). Autonomous food traditions hence defied enslavers' 'geography of containment', creating 'rival geographies' for the enslaved, spaces where kitchens served not to confine in a negative sense, but instead provided a space for camaraderie and mutual networks of support (Camp 2004).

The author Lola Olufemi has identified care and nurture as forming a duality for women, especially when provisioning food for loved ones. Making meals and sharing food with those who women love and care for can be a source of pleasure, but these actions can also be boring and repetitive. Preparing and providing food is, therefore, a demonstration of love, but labor is needed to make this act possible (Olufemi 2020). They are, therefore,

bound together. Likewise, the sociologist Josephine Beoku-Betts has captured well some of the dilemmas of food preparation for Gullah women residing in the South Carolina and Georgia lowcountry, noting how food preparation perpetuates gender inequalities and simultaneously provides women with identity, a source of empowerment, and a means to perpetuate group survival (Beoku-Betts 1995). While not writing directly about slavery, these authors can help illuminate how enslaved women might have perceived their own food provisioning for their families and communities. Enslavers did not force women into this type of caring work, providing for kin or wider communities. But this work remained intrinsically inseparable from the contours and demands of the regime itself. So while women may have felt a sense of pride in their nurturing roles, they simultaneously suffered from fatigue, the challenges of coping with material scarcity by having too little food, and working within difficult physical environments for food preparation and consumption.

2. Conclusions

Enslaving men and women's regimentation of food for *adults*, as well as children, speaks to the denial of enslaved women's agency when it came to the provisioning for—and nurturing of—their own families and communities. Cooking is undoubtedly a form of gendered oppression because preparing food for kin has traditionally formed part of the 'marital contract' according to Jeanne Boydston. And this is true even under the extra-legal forms of marriage among those enslaved. However, enslaved women's provisioning can be contrasted with some of the wider societal changes that affected white women in the nineteenth-century. What Boydston describes as the 'pastoralization of housework' saw domestic spaces rendered as somehow separate from the wider world, as places where women *cared* but did not really *work* (Boydston 1990).

However, a binary between public and domestic spaces breaks down under plantation slave regimes, rendering it totally comprehensible that, in the longer term, many Black feminists rejected dominant white feminist narratives that defined kitchens as places of domestic confinement and repression from which women should try to escape by entering the paid labor force, as espoused by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (Friedan 1963). Friedan did not speak for all women. As Susan Ferguson noted: 'Black feminists had repeatedly pointed out that not all housework is unpaid and not all women see the work they do to maintain their households and communities as inherently oppressive' (Ferguson 2020). hooks' conceptualization of a 'homeplace' encapsulates this thinking, and for enslaved women, too, sites of food preparation could be places of care, nurture, camaraderie, support and discussion as well as a domestic realm of work where caring labor took place (hooks [1990] 2015; Smith 1989).

Caring can be a means of survival and an expression of love, as well as a practice that took a profound toll on women. As a type of labor, caring can be stressful, arduous and monotonous, and the fact that enslavers forced women into this mandatory and exhausting work further complicated women's burden of care. They simply had no choice.

Caring labor under enslavement can be an elusive topic to research, constrained by archival absences, the priorities and agendas of those who wrote primary sources, and the subsequent interests of historians. Women who cooked and cared for those in the quarters, in contrast to enslavers' cooks, have remained largely invisible, despite the crucial and multifaceted aspects of gendered work that was meaningful and loving, and also coerced, arduous and sometimes violent. The lens of caring labor hence allows us to analyze the complex relationships between women, kinship and power at the intersection of their racial and gendered oppression, as well as to evaluate women's perceptions of the care they performed and to challenge wider assumptions about the nature of what has traditionally been regarded as women's work.

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