

# Power, Perception, and Interracial Sex: Former Slaves Recall a Multiracial South

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MY FATHER'S NAME WUZ ROBERT STEWART. HE WUZ A WHITE MAN. My mother wuz named Ann. She wuz part Indian. Her father wuz a Choctaw Indian and her mother a black woman—a slave."<sup>1</sup> This is how Charley Stewart, a former slave, described his lineage. Stewart was not alone in claiming parents and grandparents of mixed racial heritage; there are many references to mixed-race ancestry in the interviews of ex-slaves collected by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in the 1930s. The interviews also contain candid observations about interracial unions in general and about how people of African descent understood relationships that crossed social, legal, and racial boundaries. The former slaves described various combinations of racial unions and their ramifications for the participants, families, fellow slaves, and offspring. This article will consider the words of ex-slaves, using the WPA collection and a selection of biographies and autobiographies of slaves, and will re-create descriptions of and attitudes toward interracial sex during the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> These accounts

<sup>1</sup> George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (41 vols. and index; Westport, Conn., 1972–1981), Supplement, Series 1, Volume X: *Mississippi*, Pt. 5, p. 2041. All subsequent references to Rawick's compilation of the WPA interviews, often referred to as ex-slave narratives, will be cited giving the interviewee's name, short title of compilation, volume number with state in parentheses, part, and page number. Supplements and series will be indicated if necessary. For example, Charley Stewart interview, *American Slave*, Supp., Ser. 1, X (Miss.), Pt. 5, p. 2041.

<sup>2</sup> During the antebellum period, abolitionist groups aided the publication of several slave biographies and autobiographies. These include Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Boston, 1861), reprinted in Henry Louis Gates Jr., ed., *The Classic Slave Narratives* (New York, 2002), 437–668; Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave. Written by Himself* (Boston, 1845), reprinted in William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates Jr., eds., *The Civitas Anthology of African American Slave Narratives* (Washington, D.C., 1999), 104–93; Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an*

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indicate that their views on interracial sex varied according to the race of the participants because power with regard to sexual consent also varied according to race.

The reminiscences of former slaves reveal that they had been aware of the interracial relationships around them and their heritage as the progeny of these relationships.<sup>3</sup> Though both types of relationships—between black slaves and whites and between black slaves and American Indians—traversed racial boundaries, the ex-slaves interpreted the power dynamics within these unions differently. In the eyes of many ex-slaves, relationships between whites and blacks were usually matters of forced sex between the powerful and the powerless: “[I]mmoral white men have, by force, injected their blood into our veins . . . .”<sup>4</sup> From the perspective of former slaves, relationships between blacks and American Indians, in contrast, were apparently more equal because both groups were stigmatized by the dominant white culture. Thus, the ex-slaves understood sexual relationships between blacks and whites as coercive and unions between blacks and American Indians as consensual. Some of these accounts also discuss the thoughts and feelings of the offspring of interracial unions and the slave community’s response to mixed-race progeny. The narratives illustrate that within the slave community interracial sex provoked a range of emotions from anger and fear of racial degradation to acceptance and pride, depending on how slaves perceived the context of such unions.

This examination of interracial sex in the nineteenth-century South deliberately focuses on the slaves’ voices. Other historians of this

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*American Slave* (New York, 1849), *ibid.*, 286–401; Henry Box Brown, *Narrative of Henry Box Brown, Who Escaped from Slavery Enclosed in a Box 3 Feet Long and 2 Wide* (Manchester, Eng., 1851); William W. Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, An American Slave* (Boston, 1847), (the London, 1849 edition is in Andrews and Gates, eds., *Civitas Anthology*, 194–284); and William Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (London, 1860). James Mars offers an example of a northern slave narrative in *Life of James Mars, A Slave Born and Sold in Connecticut* (Hartford, 1864). In rare instances, those who were not abolitionists aided in the preservation of antebellum slave narratives, as in the case of Solomon Northup and Nat Turner. Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave* (London, 1853); and Nat Turner, *The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Va. As . . . Made to Thomas R. Gray . . .* (Baltimore, 1831). Many former slaves published accounts of their lives in the post-emancipation era. These include Henry Clay Bruce, *The New Man. Twenty-Nine Years a Slave. Twenty-Nine Years a Free Man. Recollections of H. C. Bruce* (York, Pa., 1895); Lucy A. Berry Delaney, *From the Darkness Cometh the Light, or, Struggles for Freedom* (St. Louis, 1891); Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley, *Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* (New York, 1868); and Harry Smith, *Fifty Years of Slavery in the United States of America* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1891).

<sup>3</sup> There are roughly four hundred references to interracial sex and mixed ancestry in the Rawick collection of ex-slave narratives, which includes two thousand interviews. In some cases a single interview contains multiple references to interracial sex.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce, *New Man*, 130–31 (quotation on p. 130).

region and era usually touch on the topic only briefly and rely heavily on sources produced by whites, such as travel diaries, personal papers, plantation records, and legal documents.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the behaviors, thoughts, and words of black participants are mediated through white informants. Or the black perspective in such relationships is lost altogether; black people become silent figures instead of actors in their own right. Furthermore, scholars have questioned the accuracy of the WPA slave narratives and of biographies of and autobiographies by slaves. Despite questions of emphasis and accuracy, however, these sources provide direct links to the inner lives of slaves.<sup>6</sup> Many of the

<sup>5</sup> Works on southern slavery that touch on interracial sex (almost entirely in terms of sexual relationships between blacks and whites) include William Dusbier, *Them Dark Days: Slavery in the American Rice Swamps* (New York, 1996), 111–14 and 419; Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York, 1956), 350–61; George P. Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (Westport, Conn., 1972), 79 and 86; John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1979), 154–56 and 172–73; Ann Patton Malone, *Sweet Chariot: Slave Family and Household Structure in Nineteenth-Century Louisiana* (Chapel Hill, 1992), 218–24; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974), 413–31; and Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (New York, 1976), 393–402. More recent works that deal explicitly with interracial sex and focus on relationships between blacks and whites include Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South* (New Haven, 1997); Elise Lemire, “Miscegenation”: *Making Race in America* (Philadelphia, 2002); and Joshua D. Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families across the Color Line in Virginia, 1787–1861* (Chapel Hill, 2003). Some newer works move beyond the black/white paradigm. See Martha Hodes, ed., *Sex, Love, Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History* (New York, 1999), especially Gary B. Nash’s “The Hidden History of Mestizo America,” 10–32; Jennifer M. Spear’s “‘They Need Wives’: Métissage and the Regulation of Sexuality in French Louisiana, 1699–1730,” pp. 35–59; Daniel R. Mandell’s “The Saga of Sarah Muckamugg: Indian and African American Intermarriage in Colonial New England,” 72–90; and Richard Godbeer’s “Eroticizing the Middle Ground: Anglo-Indian Sexual Relations along the Eighteenth-Century Frontier,” 91–111. See also Kirsten Fischer, *Suspect Relations: Sex, Race, and Resistance in Colonial North Carolina* (Ithaca, 2002), chap. 2; Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill, 1996), 66–67, 72–74, and 194–201; Jack D. Forbes, *Black Africans and Native Americans: Color, Race and Caste in the Evolution of Red-Black Peoples* (Oxford, Eng., 1988), chap. 6; and Stephanie Cole and Alison M. Parker, eds., *Beyond Black and White: Race, Ethnicity, and Gender in the U.S. South and Southwest* (College Station, Tex., 2004). Though the following essays in *Beyond Black and White* cover the post-emancipation period and beyond, they offer perspective on the subject discussed here: Stephanie Cole, “Finding Race in Turn-of-the-Century Dallas,” 75–96; Sarah Deutsch, “Being American in Boley, Oklahoma,” 97–122; and Neil Foley, “Partly Colored or Other White: Mexican Americans and Their Problem with the Color Line,” 123–44.

<sup>6</sup> James Mellon discusses issues to consider when using the WPA slave narratives in *Bullwhip Days: The Slaves Remember* (New York, 1988), xvi–xviii. Other authors who consider the reliability of the slave narratives, both those collected by the Works Progress Administration and other autobiographies and biographies, include Marion Wilson Starling, *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History* (2nd ed.; Washington, D.C., 1988), especially chap. 4; David Thomas Bailey, “A Divided Prism: Two Sources of Black Testimony on Slavery,” *Journal of Southern History*, 46 (August 1980), 381–404; Donna J. Spindel, “Assessing Memory: Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives Reconsidered,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 27 (Autumn 1996), 247–61; Stephanie J. Shaw, “Using the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives to Study the Impact of the Great

ex-slaves spoke quite passionately about the pain of racial amalgamation in the antebellum South.<sup>7</sup> In autobiographies and biographies, former slaves recounted their own histories as the progeny of interracial liaisons and gave their opinions of such relationships. Moreover, former slaves did not talk about interracial sex only in terms of black and white participants; they also mentioned American Indian relatives and ancestors—in other words, progeny of and participants in another category of interracial sex.

The former slaves described a variety of relationships. This essay will begin with their accounts of relationships between white owners and overseers, the aggressors, and slave women, their victims. Next, the essay will consider interracial sex between white women and men of African descent. Ex-slaves were clear in their negative opinion of unions between blacks and whites because they understood the vulnerable position of the black sexual partners of whites. The former slaves also expressed opinions about the offspring of these unions. The essay will then shift to explore accounts by former slaves of sexual relationships between blacks and American Indians. The ex-slaves had more positive opinions of black–American Indian unions and often described them as matters of choice. Further, many ex-slaves proudly claimed American Indian ancestry and detailed the physical beauty of mixed-race relatives. Former slaves mentioned relationships with American Indians less frequently than they did relationships with whites because most slaves did not come into daily contact with

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Depression,” *Journal of Southern History*, 69 (August 2003), 623–58, especially 624–26; Paul D. Escott, *Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives* (Chapel Hill, 1979), 7–13; C. Vann Woodward, “History from Slave Sources,” *American Historical Review*, 79 (April 1974), 470–81; and Charles J. Heglur, *Rethinking the Slave Narrative: Slave Marriage and the Narratives of Henry Bibb and William and Ellen Craft* (Westport, Conn., 2001), chap. 2. In particular, Heglur argues that the prominence of Frederick Douglass’s autobiography as the classic slave narrative has led to the neglect of other narratives and subjects such as marriage. Scholars in the field of literary criticism have also explored the slave narratives and issues of narrative honesty, authorship, and the place of the slave narrative in larger literary traditions. See Frances Smith Foster, *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Antebellum Slave Narratives* (2nd ed.; Madison, Wisc., 1994), especially chaps. 4 and 7; and John Sekora and Darwin T. Turner’s edited volume of essays, *The Art of Slave Narrative: Original Essays in Criticism and Theory* (Macomb, Ill., 1982). In *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill, 1988), Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, though hesitant herself about using the narratives for discussions of interracial sex, does offer suggestions for a careful approach to the narratives, including checking them against other accounts of slavery based on more traditional sources, comparing the narratives to each other for consistency, and putting the narratives in context. See pages 32–34.

<sup>7</sup> Leslie M. Harris, “From Abolitionist Amalgamators to ‘Rulers of the Five Points’: The Discourse of Interracial Sex and Reform in Antebellum New York City,” in Hodes, ed., *Sex, Love, Race*, 191–212. Harris argues that, prior to 1860, in the entire United States—North and South—the term for interracial social and personal relationships, including sexual ones, was *amalgamation*.

American Indians as they did with their white owners and overseers. White communities usually surrounded the slave communities; slaves lived in the midst of whites. Thus, more interracial relationships occurred between slaves and whites, and the ex-slaves said more about these liaisons. Finally, the essay will turn to comments made by former slaves about people of mixed race. These remarks demonstrate the meaning and importance of physical appearance as evidence of ancestry and suggest that slaves held complex and complicated notions of racial hierarchy going beyond black and white.

Slave testimony most frequently referred to sexual activity between slave women and white men.<sup>8</sup> One ex-slave remarked, "You know when a man would marry, his father would give him a woman for a cook and she would have children right in the house by him . . ." The former slave continued, "A white woman would have a maid sometimes who was nice looking, and she would keep her and her son would have children by her." Apparently, some men and women were permissive about their sons' sexual behavior with slave women. Henry Bibb even suggested "that the strongest reason why southerners stick with such tenacity to their 'peculiar institution,' is because licentious white men could not carry out their wicked purposes among the defenseless colored population, as they now do, without being exposed and punished by law if slavery was abolished." Simuel Riddick described his master's son in this way: "He loved his liquor and he loved colored women." Simuel expressed no surprise about the young man's preferences; black women were just another pleasure or pastime for southern white men.<sup>9</sup> The collected narratives contain many claims by ex-slaves that they had been sired by their master or overseer.<sup>10</sup> Many

<sup>8</sup> The records of the Freedmen's Bureau at the National Archives also contain numerous references to the offspring of unions between white masters and slave women. Far more freed people of color claimed to be the offspring of such relationships than of any other type of interracial union. E285, Register of Marriages, 1865-1867, pp. 22-23; E368, Register of Marriages, 1864-1866, vol. 121, pp. 1-4, 46-47, and pp. D, H, J, M, P, R, S, T, W; E419, Register of Marriages, March 1864-July 1865, vol. 151, pp. 1, 3, 5, 11, 17, 19, 23, 25, 27; and E420, Copies of Marriage Certificates, December 1864-June 1867, vol. 150, pp. 25 and 112, Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, Record Group 105 (National Archives, Washington, D.C.). All of the records cited above relate to marriages registered in Arkansas. The freedpeople did not necessarily live in Arkansas, but they registered their marriages in that state.

<sup>9</sup> Unidentified female slave interview, *American Slave*, XVIII (Unwritten History of Slavery), 1 (first quotation) and 2 (second quotation); Bibb, *Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*, 399; Simuel Riddick interview, *American Slave*, XV (N.C.), Pt. 2, p. 208.

<sup>10</sup> Ethel Harrison interview, *American Slave*, Supp., Ser. 1, III (Ga.), Pt. 1, p. 311; Georgia Baker interview, *ibid.*, XII (Ga.), Pt. 1, p. 44; Edd Shirley interview, *ibid.*, XVI (Ky.), 23; and Joe Coney interview, *ibid.*, Supp., Ser. 1, VII (Miss.), Pt. 2, pp. 488-89. There are many more examples, as well.

slaves identified this as the most common form of interracial sex and were aware of the frequency of these liaisons.

Some slave women may have sought sexual relationships with owners or overseers to improve their own or their families' lives and futures. Ellen Craft claimed that masters sometimes promised slave women to educate and emancipate the children of their union; however, Craft quickly added that "a great majority of such men care nothing for the happiness of the women with whom they live, nor for the children of whom they are the fathers." Craft's own father/master neither educated nor freed her.<sup>11</sup> The possibility of better accommodations, increased food rations, and luxuries might have also prompted slave women to seek out their white masters or overseers as sexual partners. Several former slaves suggested that the long-term mistresses of white men fared better than field hands.<sup>12</sup> Some historians suggest that the relationships were frequently consensual and based on mutual affection between master and slave, undermining the image of the rapacious white planter attacking the helpless female slave.<sup>13</sup>

Affectionate relationships between masters and slaves most assuredly existed; however, the stress on harmony rather than violence implies that the cases of forced sexual relations between masters and slave women were anomalies and relegates these stories to the margins of slave experience. Given Darlene Clark Hine's contention that "virtually every known nineteenth-century female slave narrative contains a reference to, at some juncture, the ever present threat and reality of rape," an emphasis on consensual interracial unions seems historically

<sup>11</sup> Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 406 and 413–14 (quotation).

<sup>12</sup> See Bibb, *Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*, 393–94; Octavia V. Rogers Albert, *The House of Bondage or Charlotte Brooks and Other Slaves* (New York, 1890), 50; Isaac Johnson, *Slavery Days in Old Kentucky* (Ogdensburg, N.Y., 1901), 21; and Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 52–53. I feel compelled to note that none of these stories of hopes for good treatment for the slave mistress ended well. First, Octavia Albert related Charlotte Brooks's observations that French men treated their slave mistresses and children more generously than American masters. In Johnson's account, the slaveholder's mistress fell in love with a fellow slave but ended up betraying him and his plans to run away. In Northup's narrative, Elisha Berry's family sold Eliza, his mistress, to a slave trader despite Berry's promises of freedom for her and their daughter.

<sup>13</sup> Joel Williamson, *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (Baton Rouge, 1980), 42–43, states that relationships between upper-class white masters and mulatto domestics were often long-term and very much like white marriages. See also Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 428 and 417. In many cases, southern white men lived with slave women in long-term familial arrangements resembling those between husbands and wives and willed property to these women and their mixed-race progeny: See Virginia Meacham Gould, *Chained to the Rock of Adversity: To Be Free, Black, and Female in the Old South* (Athens, Ga., 1998); Adele Alexander Logan, *Ambiguous Lives: Free Women of Color in Rural Georgia, 1789–1879* (Fayetteville, Ark., 1991); and Mary Frances Berry, "Judging Morality: Sexual Behavior and Legal Consequences in the Late Nineteenth-Century South," *Journal of American History*, 78 (December 1991), 835–56.

unsound.<sup>14</sup> The dynamics and differentials of power between masters and slaves complicate the notions of consent and choice. The subtext for interaction of this sort is the threat of violence: both slaves and masters recognized that masters could force their will upon slaves by means of physical punishment. The prospect of violent reprisals impinged on decisions by slaves to comply with or resist the sexual demands of masters.

From the perspective of many former slaves, all relationships between master and slave were coercive. White masters controlled material provisions, punishment, and work routines. The ex-slaves were all too aware that in theory their masters' authority knew no bounds. Ellen Sinclair recounted the incestuous tangle of relationships on the plantation where she grew up: "Ol' man Anderson he hab a daughter by one of he slaves and he son hab a chile by dat daughter [his half-sister]. Dey mek de wimmen do what dey want and cose, dey slaves and couln't help deyself."<sup>15</sup> Given the taboos among slaves against sexual relationships with consanguineous kin, this young woman must have found the relationship with her half-brother repugnant.<sup>16</sup> However, refusing him might have caused violent retribution. Another ex-slave remembered the punishment that a slave woman endured for refusing the sexual advances of her master: "Old Bufford—his darkies had chillen by him, and Mammy wouldn't do it; and I've seen him take a paddle with holes in it and beat her, and everywhere it hit it raised a blister; then he would take a switch and break them blisters." Slave women had little power to refuse their masters, and there were often benefits from acquiescing to them. Anthony Christopher's family avoided punishment and received better treatment because of his sister Deenie's relationship with the master, a Mr. Patton. Though not overtly stated, undoubtedly Deenie understood that her family faced negative repercussions if she denied the master sexual access to her body.<sup>17</sup>

Another ex-slave informant suggested that some slave women chose

<sup>14</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," *Signs*, 14 (Summer 1989), 912–20 (quotation on p. 912), as quoted in Melton A. McLaurin, *Celia, a Slave* (Athens, Ga., 1991), 24.

<sup>15</sup> Ellen Sinclair interview, *American Slave*, Supp., Ser. 2, IX (Texas), Pt. 8, pp. 3593–94. See also Julia King interview, *ibid.*, XVI (Ohio), 61, for another example of the lack of choice for slaves confronted with the sexual desires of their masters.

<sup>16</sup> Gutman, *Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, 88–91. In *Notorious in the Neighborhood* (pp. 149–63), Joshua D. Rothman recounts the case of a slave woman who murdered her father/master in order to avoid an incestuous sexual relationship with him.

<sup>17</sup> Martha Harrison interview, *American Slave*, XVIII (Unwritten History of Slavery), 118 (quotation); Anthony Christopher interview, *ibid.*, Supp., Ser. 2, III (Texas), Pt. 2, p. 719.

white men, but she undermined her own assertion by saying, "Now, mind you, all of the colored women didn't have to have white men, some did it because they wanted to and some were forced. They had a horror of going to Mississippi and they would do anything to keep from it."<sup>18</sup> These slave women did not choose their sexual partners; their white masters coerced them by threatening more strenuous work and harsher conditions in Mississippi. The women chose to avoid being sold to Mississippi, which is not the same as freely choosing sexual relationships with their white masters. Clearly, circumstances constrained the nature of slave women's choices; southern white men owned slave women as property, and the law permitted them great latitude in the treatment of their human property. Masters could force themselves on slave women, and there is an account of a particularly heinous incident in which a young master threatened a thirteen-year-old slave girl with a gun and then raped her.<sup>19</sup> Slave women had to consider the consequences of their refusals for themselves, their families, and their fellow slaves. Masters and overseers had power over almost every aspect of slaves' lives, and slave women could not freely choose whether or not to enter sexual relationships with these men.

The stories of Harriet Jacobs and Celia recount powerful resistance by two slave women to the sexual demands of southern white men. Harriet Jacobs frequently rejected the sexual advances of Dr. Flint, her master, and finally accepted the overtures of Mr. Sands, a white neighbor, in an ill-conceived effort to escape her master. She ultimately staged her own escape and hid in an attic for seven years to avoid succumbing to Flint. Melton A. McLaurin's book painstakingly recreates the life of Celia, a young slave woman who killed Robert Newsom, her owner, because of his repeated demands for sex. This act meant certain death for Celia. The lives of these women do not suggest that their encounters with white men were moved by affection but instead demonstrate the constrained position of slave women. For Celia, Jacobs, and other slave women, the notions of choice, coercion, and resistance took on greater meaning because of their status as property before the law.<sup>20</sup>

The stories of the ex-slaves often reveal a harsh picture of relation-

<sup>18</sup> Unidentified female slave interview, *ibid.*, XVIII (Unwritten History of Slavery), 2.

<sup>19</sup> Morgan Ray interview, *ibid.*, Supp., Ser. 1, V (Ohio), 422. A similar story surrounds the conception of Amanda America Dickson. Kent Anderson Leslie's *Woman of Color, Daughter of Privilege: Amanda America Dickson, 1849–1893* (Athens, Ga., 1995), 7, recounts that David Dickson, age forty, abducted Julia Frances Lewis Dickson, age thirteen, and raped her.

<sup>20</sup> Gates, ed., *Classic Slave Narratives*, 470–71; McLaurin, *Celia*, 34–35.



ships between white masters and slave women. Harriet Jacobs referred to her relationship with Mr. Sands as a “painful and humiliating memory” that would “haunt [her] to [her] dying day.” She was greatly ashamed of her behavior and concerned about how family members might view her actions.<sup>21</sup> This relationship generated feelings of guilt and self-disgust. The relationship between another mulatto slave woman, Aunt Phyllis, and her master, Major Odom, also reveals the emotional turmoil such relationships could cause. Major Odom “never married, but he had a nigger woman, Aunt Phillis.” Together they had at least five children, and Aunt Phyllis also had one child by a slave. Major Odom’s reputation for being “good to his niggers” and “so easy on ’em” and the long-term nature of their relationship hints at a consensual union between the two. However, she sometimes expressed her deep resentment of the relationship: “When she [Aunt Phyllis] was drunk er mad she’d say she thought more of her black chile than all the others.” This story suggests that Aunt Phyllis deplored her sexual availability to Major Odom, and only when extremely agitated did she disclose her true feelings.<sup>22</sup> Slave testimony often does not reveal how slave women felt about their participation in interracial liaisons, and some slave mothers refused to discuss the paternity of their children.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps these women did not want to discuss a situation that highlighted their powerlessness over their own bodies and did not want to acknowledge the circumstances surrounding the conception of their children.

White owners and overseers and their male relatives sometimes resorted to violence to coerce slave women. Mary Peters described the brutal circumstances of her own conception: “My mother’s mistress had three boys—one twenty-one, one nineteen, and one seventeen. One day, Old Mistress had gone away to spend the day. Mother always worked in the house; she didn’t work on the farm, in Missouri. While she was alone, the boys came in and threw her down on the floor and tied her down so she couldn’t struggle, and one after the other used her as long as they wanted, for the whole afternoon . . . [A]nd that’s the way I came to be here.”<sup>24</sup> The trauma of Mary Peters’s conception must have psychologically marked both Mary and her mother. Morgan Ray was also the product of interracial rape and remarked that his

<sup>21</sup> Gates, ed., *Classic Slave Narratives*, 502.

<sup>22</sup> Mrs. Thomas Johns interview, *American Slave*, Supp., Ser. 2, VI (Texas), Pt. 5, p. 1973.

<sup>23</sup> Annie Osborne interview, *ibid.*, Supp., Ser. 2, VIII (Texas), Pt. 7, p. 2989; Celia Robinson interview, *ibid.*, XV (N.C.), Pt. 2, p. 218; Minnie Davis interview, *ibid.*, XII (Ga.), Pt. 1, p. 253.

<sup>24</sup> Mellon, *Bullwhip Days*, 297.

mother “nevah did fergive [my] pappy for what he done to her, nor I either.”<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Julia Dickson, a slave woman, never forgave her attacker for the rape that produced her daughter, Amanda, even though Amanda’s father reared the child and provided every material advantage. Even Julia’s own privileged position on the plantation did not move her to forgive the rapist.<sup>26</sup> For slave women, the anguish of rape was magnified by the reality that they were often in the same households with their attackers and faced them daily.

The sexual availability of slave women confirmed the impotence of slave men to protect their daughters and wives. As Jacob Aldrich recounted, “Marster would come ’round to de cabins in de quarters. Sometime he go in one and tell de man to go outside and wait ’til he do what he want to do. Her husband had to do it and he couldn’t do nothing ’bout it.”<sup>27</sup> The slave men endured the humiliation of knowing that masters and overseers could demand sexual access to their wives. Bondmen often stood helplessly by while their wives and daughters endured the unwanted attentions of white men. Slave men faced the same physical punishments as slave women and were equally dependent on the goodwill of slave masters. Further, slave men could be punished even when they did not act directly to protect the women in their families: Uncle Reuben was punished when his wife, Dinah, complained to the mistress about the master “having outraged and violated her youngest daughter . . .”<sup>28</sup> Plantation owners’ and overseers’ assertions of sexual access to the wives, daughters, sisters, and mothers of slave men must have been emasculating.

A few slave men attempted to protect their wives, but with deadly consequences: “Then there was old Sam Watkins,—he would ship their husbands (slaves) out of bed and get in with their wives. One man said he stood it as long as he could and one morning he just stood outside, and when he got with his wife he just choked him to death. He said he knew it was death, but it was death anyhow; so he just killed him. They hanged him.” This slave equated his powerlessness to protect his wife from Sam Watkins with a kind of death. And with full consciousness of the punishment for his actions, he chose to act and die rather than continue to watch in silent rage. In another example of a

<sup>25</sup> Morgan Ray interview, *American Slave*, Supp., Ser. 1, V (Ohio), 422.

<sup>26</sup> Leslie, *Woman of Color*, 37, 43–44.

<sup>27</sup> Jacob Aldrich interview, *American Slave*, Supp., Ser. 2, II (Texas), Pt.1, p. 24.

<sup>28</sup> Jacob D. Green, *Narrative of the Life of J. D. Green, a Runaway Slave, from Kentucky, Containing an Account of His Three Escapes, in 1839, 1846, and 1848* (1864) in William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates Jr., eds., *Slave Narratives* (New York, 2000), 959.

slave trying to protect a loved one, Jacob D. Green recounted the tragic story of a young slave couple, Dan and Mary, on the Tillotson plantation. Dan discovered his young master, William Tillotson, in the barn attempting to rape Mary, and, in a passionate attempt to protect her virtue, Dan stabbed Tillotson with a pitchfork. To punish Dan for murdering his master, the community lynched him. Mary, realizing that the whites would view her as an accomplice, drowned herself in Chesapeake Bay. In a less extreme example, Josiah Henson's father received one hundred lashes and his ear was nailed to a post for striking the overseer while "defending his wife from outrage . . ." <sup>29</sup> In reacting to southern white men's sexual predations in the quarters, slave men had to balance a wish to escape punishment and to preserve their own lives against the masculine pride found in protecting their loved ones.

Some slave men refrained from unions with slave women precisely because they did not have exclusive claim to sexual access and could not protect the women from sexual and physical abuse. Slave wives often had two competing intimate relationships—with husbands and with masters. Henry Bibb described the conflicted position of slave wives who could not "be true to her husband contrary to the will of her master." Furthermore, a union with a slave woman sometimes required that the slave man participate in rearing the master's children. Jacob Green's wife, Jane, had a child five months after marrying him and told him that the father of the child was their master. Jacob helped rear this child and built a family with Jane for six years, after which Jane and her child were sold away at the request of their master's new wife. The new mistress refused to encounter her husband's former paramours and their mulatto offspring. The possibility of such loss might have caused slave men not to enter long-term relationships with slave women. <sup>30</sup> Moses Grandy offered further insight into why slaves sought wives from neighboring plantations rather than from within the same plantation: "no colored man wishes to live at the house where his wife lives, for he has to endure the continual misery of seeing her flogged and abused, without daring to say a word in her defence [*sic*]." <sup>31</sup> By

<sup>29</sup> Unidentified female slave interview, *American Slave*, XVIII (Unwritten History of Slavery), 2; Green, *Narrative of the Life of J. D. Green*, 968–70; Henry Bleby, *Josiah: The Maimed Fugitive. A True Tale* (London, 1873), 12–15.

<sup>30</sup> Bibb, *Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*, 395; Green, *Narrative of the Life of J. D. Green*, 971–72.

<sup>31</sup> Moses Grandy, *Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy, Late a Slave In the United States of America* (Boston, 1844), 16. Austin Steward, *Twenty-two Years a Slave and Forty Years a*

living apart from their wives, slave men did not have to confront the daily abuses and injustices heaped upon their wives and their own inability to provide protection. Though an “abroad marriage” was an obstacle to family ties and domestic relationships, it might permit slave men to preserve their masculinity. The narratives in this study do not refer explicitly to slave women’s decisions to live away from their spouses, but at least one historian has made the case that some slave women may also have preferred abroad marriages for their own reasons.<sup>32</sup>

Slaveholding men frequently treated their slave mistresses well. Willie McCullough’s parents claimed, “Some of the half-white and beautiful young women who were used by the marster and his men friends or who was the sweetheart of the marster only, were given special privileges. Some of ’em worked very little. They had private quarters well fixed up and had a great influence over the marster.” Hattie Rogers’s former master left his property to his slave concubine upon his death. Similarly, Andrew Moss’s white grandfather and master never married; he maintained a relationship with his slave concubine for his entire adult life and willed her and their five offspring land and property.<sup>33</sup> These examples suggest that the men had genuine affection for their mistresses and children. However, the women could not, because they lacked legal identities, indicate ties of affection by bequeathing objects and money. The behavior of slaveholding men permits conjecture about their feelings, but the emotions of their slave partners could not be demonstrated in the same manner and therefore remain unclear.

On the other hand, many southern white men showed their slave mistresses and mulatto children no preferential treatment whatsoever: “But dey was all slaves just de same, and de niggers dat had chillen with de white men didn’t get treated no better. She got no more away from work dan de rest of ’em.” Another slave recalled that the master regularly sold away slave concubines when his wife discovered the relationship and “would sell his own children by slave women just like

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*Freeman* (Reading, Mass., 1969), 14 and 60–61, also described the difficult position of slave men who were forced to stand by silently as wives and sisters were abused.

<sup>32</sup> Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York, 1996), 223, 230, and 231. Stevenson suggests that slave women may have preferred to maintain female-centered households as a remnant of African practices, to preserve “emotional distance” between oneself and one’s loved ones,” or to exercise greater domestic control in their households. In these pages, Stevenson also discusses slave men’s pursuit of abroad marriages to protect their own sense of masculinity.

<sup>33</sup> Willie McCullough interview, *American Slave*, XV (N.C.), Pt. 2, p. 78; Hattie Rogers interview, *ibid.*, XV (N.C.), Pt. 2, p. 230; Andrew Moss interview, *ibid.*, XVI (Tenn.), 50.

he would any others. Just since he was making money." Mary Reynolds remembered a slave woman, Aunt Cheyney, on Dr. Kilpatrick's plantation who claimed to have had four children by Dr. Kilpatrick and was possibly pregnant with a fifth. Aunt Cheyney ran away, and Dr. Kilpatrick sent dogs to find and attack her. The dogs "et the breasts plumb off'n her body" before Kilpatrick ordered them to stop.<sup>34</sup> These stories illustrate a dark, harsh side of interracial relationships that differs from the accounts by some scholars of responsible white fathers who made legal provisions for their mulatto offspring.<sup>35</sup>

Sexual relationships across the color line in the plantation South did not, of course, occur only between white men and black women; they also occurred between black men and white women. Martha Hodes argues that before the Civil War the white community tolerated unions between white women and black men and that not until the post-emancipation period, with its accompanying disruption of the social and political order, did black men meet with violence for their sexual relationships with white women.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Gary B. Mills finds that though there were higher than imagined numbers of legal and extra-legal unions between poor white women and black men in antebellum Alabama, "no instance has yet been found within Anglo Alabama of any community action, overt or covert, taken against whites who became sexually involved with free Negroes."<sup>37</sup> Hodes also suggests that black men sometimes chose white women because relationships with black women, who were usually slaves, presented risks: the possibility of separation through sale and the possibility of punishment when black men tried to protect slave women from sexual advances.<sup>38</sup> Some ex-slaves remembered interracial couples composed of black men and white women. One ex-soldier recounted the story of a soldier in his company who married a white woman during the Civil War. Several white men tried to prevent the minister from performing the ceremony, but a group of "colored soldiers" who were also present insisted that the ceremony take place. The soldiers then acted as a guard for the

<sup>34</sup> James Green interview, *ibid.*, Supp., Ser. 2, V (Texas), Pt. 4, p. 1580 (first quotation); Unidentified female slave interview, *American Slave*, XVIII (Unwritten History of Slavery), 298 (second quotation); Mary Reynolds interview, *ibid.*, Supp., Ser. 2, VIII (Texas), Pt. 7, pp. 3292 and 3294 (third quotation).

<sup>35</sup> James Hugo Johnston, *Race Relations in Virginia and Miscegenation in the South, 1776-1860* (Amherst, Mass., 1970), chap. 9.

<sup>36</sup> Hodes, *White Women, Black Men*, 1-3.

<sup>37</sup> Gary B. Mills, "Miscegenation and the Free Negro in Antebellum 'Anglo' Alabama: A Reexamination of Southern Race Relations," *Journal of American History*, 68 (June 1981), 16-34 (quotation on p. 27).

<sup>38</sup> Hodes, *White Woman, Black Men*, 87.

couple and accompanied them to a boat.<sup>39</sup> Adora Rienshaw and Lewis Jenkins claimed to be descended from white mistresses who fell in love with slaves. Rienshaw's mother formed a relationship with her slave carriage driver while she was married to a white man.<sup>40</sup>

Coercion could also be an element in relationships between white women and black men. Martha Hodes deconstructs the myth that interracial sexual relationships involved only white men and black women or occurred only between poor white women and black men. Hodes finds evidence of relationships between slave men and the wives and daughters of the planter class, substantiating the claims of ex-slaves Adora Rienshaw and Lewis Jenkins. Hodes also recognizes the coercive power of southern white women at the time and the constrained nature of choice for slave men pursued by plantation mistresses. The slaveholding wife or daughter held power on the plantation; she could mete out punishments for disobedience and, perhaps more importantly, had the ear of the patriarch of the household. Hodes replaces the image of the black beast rapist with the hypersexual, petulant plantation daughter.<sup>41</sup>

By choosing a slave lover, an elite white woman could coerce the silence of her sexual partner, for she could threaten him with an accusation of rape should he refuse her advances or reveal their relationship. Whites could mete out swift, painful punishment to black men accused of sexually violating elite white women. Sexual codes of the time assumed that the concept of rape did not apply to men, especially not black men, because all men welcomed the sexual advances of women. This standard failed to recognize white women as sexual aggressors. Slave testimony, however, suggests that white women could and did initiate relationships with slave men. Harry Smith reported that, while a slave, he maintained intimate relationships with two wealthy white women. One widow offered to purchase Smith, grant him his freedom, and give him total charge of her plantation if he would marry her. Another woman sold all of her property in Louisville, Kentucky, and made plans to run away with Smith to Canada and marry.<sup>42</sup> Masters occasionally recognized the dangers a male slave

<sup>39</sup> Unidentified male slave interview, *American Slave*, XVIII (Unwritten History of Slavery), 123.

<sup>40</sup> Adora Rienshaw interview, *ibid.*, XV (N.C.), Pt. 4, pp. 213–14; Lewis Jenkins interview, *ibid.*, Supp., Ser. 1, XII (Okla.), Pt. 1, p. 189.

<sup>41</sup> Martha Hodes, "Wartime Dialogues on Illicit Sex: White Women and Black Men," in Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber, eds., *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War* (New York, 1992), 230–42.

<sup>42</sup> Smith, *Fifty Years of Slavery*, 108–9.

might face should his relationship with a white woman become public knowledge. One master gave "Uncle Dave" money and sent him away after learning about the slave's involvement with a white woman in the neighborhood.<sup>43</sup> In so doing, the master placed Dave beyond the reach of local white men who might well have punished him for transgressing racial and sexual boundaries.

Slaves' reactions to the mulatto offspring of interracial relationships were a blend of resignation, anger, and disappointment. Many slaves realized that there was little they could do to stop white men from visiting the quarters; it was simply a fact of life.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, slaves expressed their opinions about race mixing and mulatto children. Eli Coleman remarked, "I'se don't believes in the white and negro races mixing that way." Another ex-slave stated, "Of course the mixed blood, you couldn't expect much from them." In a statement that echoed white racist fears of amalgamation leading to the degradation of the white race, Lizzie Atkins claimed that the presence of so many "half-breeds" indicated that the black race was degenerating.<sup>45</sup> Some WPA interviewers asked directly for the ex-slaves' opinions of interracial sexual relationships and received disapproving responses.<sup>46</sup> Often the slave partner in these relationships had little or no choice in her or his participation. The slave community's negative opinion of sexual activity between black and white people probably stemmed from this powerlessness. Julia King summed up the connection among slavery, interracial sex, and powerlessness: "I think slavery is a terrible system. I think slavery is the cause of mixing. If people want to choose somebody, it should be their own color. Many masters had children from their Negro slaves, but the slaves weren't able to help themselves."<sup>47</sup>

Sometimes tensions arose between mulattoes and other blacks, who perceived that mulatto slaves received better treatment and had greater chances for freedom. Henry Bibb's mother-in-law opposed his marriage to her daughter because she hoped her daughter would marry the slave of a wealthy white man in the neighborhood. It was common

<sup>43</sup> Mellon, *Bullwhip Days*, 9.

<sup>44</sup> Agatha Babino interview, *American Slave*, Supp., Ser. 2, II (Texas), Pt. 1, p. 141. Agatha Babino plainly states the situation: "Some of de marsters had chillen by dey slaves. Some of 'em sold dere own chillen, and some sot 'em free."

<sup>45</sup> Eli Coleman interview, *ibid.*, Supp., Ser. 2, III (Texas), Pt. 2, p. 853 (first quotation); Unidentified female slave interview, *ibid.*, XVIII (Unwritten History of Slavery), 2 (second quotation); Lizzie Atkins interview, *ibid.*, Supp., Ser. 2, II (Texas), Pt. 1, p. 103.

<sup>46</sup> Frances Batson interview, *ibid.*, XVI (Tenn.), 2; Julia Casey interview, *ibid.*, XVI (Tenn.), 4; Cecelia Chappel interview, *ibid.*, XVI (Tenn.), 8; Jenny Greer interview, *ibid.*, XVI (Tenn.), 27; Emma Grisham interview, *ibid.*, XVI (Tenn.), 30.

<sup>47</sup> Julia King interview, *ibid.*, XVI (Ohio), 61.

knowledge that this slaveholder had fathered the slave, and Bibb's mother-in-law was confident that the slaveholder would free his son before his death. She preferred a free husband for her daughter and was willing to gamble on the generosity of the white slaveholder to his mulatto slave son.<sup>48</sup> Sam T. Stewart stated that the free black population consisted of mulattoes and implied that the children of white men and colored women were freed at the behest of their fathers.<sup>49</sup> Black slaves might have also resented the preferential treatment that some mulatto children received from their fathers. Nannie Eaves, Emma Howard, and Adaline Montgomery all claimed to have been treated well by their white fathers through the receipt of extra clothing, shoes, and kind words.<sup>50</sup> These women saw the benefits of their mulatto ancestry.

Mulatto children themselves, for obvious reasons, usually railed, not at interracial sex, but at the poor treatment that mulatto children received from their white fathers, their fathers' wives, and other slaves. Dora Franks, a mulatto ex-slave, recalled painful childhood memories: "Lawd, it's been to my sorrow many a time cause de chillen useter chase me around and holler to me, 'Ole yallow nigger!'"<sup>51</sup> Even young slave children recognized that Dora was different and teased her mercilessly. In contrast, Amy Elizabeth Patterson, daughter of her master, John Street, had a very different perspective: "That was the greatest crime ever visited on the United States. It was worse than the cruelty of the overseers, worse than hunger, for many slaves were well fed and well cared for; but when a father can sell his own child, humiliate his own daughter by auctioning her on the slave block, what good could be expected where such practices were allowable?"<sup>52</sup> Patterson understood that a father who was also the owner of his children perverted familial relationships. Instead of being ruled by love and a desire to protect his children, this father could be motivated by greed to sell his children to strangers. Patterson does not seem to have regretted the circumstances of her own birth but protested the larger system that permitted fathers to sell their own children.

In summary, the combined testimonies of the ex-slaves about interracial liaisons between black slaves and members of the white elite present an image of coercive relationships that produced mulatto off-

<sup>48</sup> Bibb, *Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*, 314.

<sup>49</sup> Sam T. Stewart interview, *American Slave*, XV (N.C.), Pt. 4, p. 319.

<sup>50</sup> Nannie Eaves interview, *ibid.*, XVI (Ky.), 61; Emma Howard interview, *ibid.*, VI (Ala.), 211; Adaline Montgomery interview, *ibid.*, Supp., Ser. 1, IX (Miss.), Pt. 4, pp. 1513–15.

<sup>51</sup> Dora Franks interview, *ibid.*, Supp., Ser. 1, VII (Miss.), Pt. 2, p. 782.

<sup>52</sup> Amy Elizabeth Patterson interview, *ibid.*, VI (Ind.), 151.



spring who then occupied a contested place in the community. The power imbalance between slaves and whites in the antebellum South entered into personal relationships and made it impossible for the participants to take part in such interracial relationships freely. Though sincere attachments must have formed in some of these unions, the element of coercion could not be removed. Slaves knew that the reins of power were firmly in the hands of whites. And this knowledge shaped slaves' negative opinions of sexual relationships between blacks and whites.

Former slaves did not limit their comments regarding interracial sex to situations involving blacks and whites but also referred to relationships between blacks and American Indians. Mandy Jones recalled, "Her mother, she say, my great gran'mother was almost pure Injun . . ." The narratives of ex-slaves collected by the WPA contain many references to American Indian grandmothers and interracial sex between Indians and blacks that occurred during the era of slavery. As C. Vann Woodward noted, the slave narratives "invite attention to a relatively unexplored field of race relations—those between Negroes and Indians." Though Woodward's comment is thirty years old, further exploration of the antebellum interactions between indigenous populations and African Americans remains to be done. The frequency of the ex-slaves' claims of American Indian lineage prompted interviewer Bernice Bowden to remark, "I have never talked to a Negro who did not claim to be part Indian." Further, the ex-slaves described unions between Indians and blacks in much more positive terms than they described relationships between blacks and whites. Again, this opinion hinged on the ex-slaves' evaluation of the choice the black participants exercised in sexual relationships between blacks and American Indians.<sup>53</sup>

Many American Indian–black unions resulted from contacts between slaves during the colonial period.<sup>54</sup> The practice in colonial South Carolina of enslaving Indians and putting them to work beside

<sup>53</sup> Mandy Jones interview, *ibid.*, Supp., Ser. 1, Vol. VIII (Miss.), Pt. 3, p. 1236; C. Vann Woodward, "History from Slave Sources," 479; Bernice Bowden, interviewer, *American Slave*, IX (Ark.), Pt. 3, p. 264. On claims of an American Indian heritage, see also Charlie Richardson interview, *ibid.*, XI (Mo.), 290; Ann Matthews interview, *ibid.*, XVI (Tenn.), 43; John Moore interview, *ibid.*, XVI (Tenn.), 47; Mollie Moss interview, *ibid.*, XVI (Tenn.), 57; Will Shelby interview, *ibid.*, Supp., Ser. 2, IX (Texas), Pt. 8, p. 3503; Danie Webster Burton interview, *ibid.*, Ser. 1, XII (Okla.), 82; Sam Jordan interview, *ibid.*, Ser. 1, XII (Okla.), 197; C. G. Samuel interview, *ibid.*, Ser. 1, XII (Okla.), 267.

<sup>54</sup> Jack D. Forbes, *Africans and Native Americans: The Language of Race and the Evolution of Red-Black Peoples* (Urbana, 1993), 189. Recent works on Melungeons posit their origins as the offspring of relations between Africans, Europeans, and indigenous populations during the colonial period. See Wayne Winkler, *Walking Toward the Sunset: The Melungeons of Appalachia*

African slaves created a population of slaves with mixed Indian and African ancestry.<sup>55</sup> Peter H. Wood found that by 1708 South Carolina's population totaled 9,580 and included 4,100 African slaves and 1,400 Indian slaves. Indian women composed 15 percent of the population of adult slaves in colonial South Carolina, and African slave men composed 45 percent. Moreover, within this population of slaves, Indian women outnumbered Indian men while African men greatly outnumbered African women.<sup>56</sup> Unions between African slave men and American Indian slave women were the result of the imbalance in genders within each racial group. Some former slaves referred to relationships between enslaved indigenous and African ancestors one or two generations removed from the informant. For instance, one ex-slave claimed descent from an African grandmother who married an American Indian slave man in Nashville. Former slaves also described relationships between enslaved Africans and Indians that occurred even after the colonial period. White men captured and forced Julia Woodberry's Indian mother into slavery. She later formed a relationship with a slave man of African descent, and Julia was their child. Della Harris, a former slave of mixed African and American Indian lineage, commented, "My muma was a genuine Indian. Some people say you can't own Indians. I don't know how cum, but I do know she was owned by these people, but she surely was an Indian."<sup>57</sup>

American Indian groups owned black slaves during the late eighteenth century and throughout the antebellum period, which accounts for some later African-Indian relationships. In particular, the Five Tribes of the Indian Territory adopted the practice of African slavery: by 1860, slaves composed 15 percent of the Cherokee population, 18 percent of the Chickasaw population, 14 percent of the Choctaw population, and 10 percent of the Creek population. The slave population of the Seminole Nation is harder to determine because of the ambiguous status of people of African descent in that society. Some Seminole Indians clearly regarded slaves as property to be bought, sold, and used for labor, while others purchased or stole husbands, wives, and chil-

(Macon, Ga., 2004), 3–8; and Joseph M. Scolnick Jr. and N. Brent Kennedy, *From Anatolia to Appalachia: A Turkish-American Dialogue* (Macon, Ga., 2003), 1, 9–11.

<sup>55</sup> Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York, 1974), 99, 115–16; Williamson, *New People*, 13 and 39.

<sup>56</sup> Figures from Wood, *Black Majority*, 144, Table 1. In 1708 the Negro slave population of 4,100 consisted of 1,800 men, 1,100 women, and 1,200 children, and the Indian slave population included 500 men, 600 women, and 300 children.

<sup>57</sup> Unidentified slave interview, *American Slave*, XVIII (Unwritten History of Slavery), 225; Julia Woodberry interview, *ibid.*, III (S.C.), Pt. 4, pp. 229–30; Della Harris interview, *ibid.*, XVI (Va.), 24.

dren to reconstitute families and regarded such slaves as kin.<sup>58</sup> American Indian slaveholders differed little from other southerners in their treatment of slaves and in their practice of the institution of slavery.<sup>59</sup> The Cherokee Indians, for instance, passed laws to circumscribe the behavior and activities of their slaves.<sup>60</sup> Several indigenous groups, including the Cherokees, also prohibited legal marriage between themselves and people of African descent.<sup>61</sup> And as in the rest of the antebellum South, such laws did not prevent intimacy between masters and slaves, between the indigenous population and their black bondpeople.<sup>62</sup>

Despite slave ownership among some American Indian groups, many slaves believed that Indians and blacks were potential allies. The experiences of the Hensons, a family of fugitive slaves, affirmed this thinking. In 1830 they resolved to leave their home in Kentucky and relocate to Canada. After the Hensons had been on the run for several days and were starving, they wandered deep into a forest and happened upon an Indian camp. The Indians warmly received them and offered them food and shelter for the night. Upon hearing the family's plans, the Indian chief offered further assistance. According to the chief, the Hensons were only twenty-five or thirty miles from Lake Erie and thus very near reaching their goal of freedom in Canada.<sup>63</sup> Free blacks also thought Indians would help runaway slaves. Martin Delany, a free black entrepreneur, wrote a serialized novel entitled *Blake; or, the Huts of America* (1859). In the novel, Henry Blake, a fugitive slave,

<sup>58</sup> Claudio Saunt, "The Paradox of Freedom: Tribal Sovereignty and Emancipation during the Reconstruction of Indian Territory," *Journal of Southern History*, 70 (February 2004), 63–94, esp. 64–65. For more on the Seminole story, see Saunt, *A New Order of Things: Property, Power, and the Transformation of the Creek Indians, 1733–1816* (Cambridge, Eng., 1999), 211–12; Saunt, "'The English Has Now a Mind to Make Slaves of Them All': Creeks, Seminoles, and the Problem of Slavery," in James F. Brooks, ed., *Confounding the Color Line: The Indian-Black Experience in North America* (Lincoln, Neb., 2002), 47–75; and Daniel F. Littlefield Jr., *Africans and Seminoles: From Removal to Emancipation* (Westport, Conn., 1977), 4–5, 8–9, and 130–32.

<sup>59</sup> Saunt, "Paradox of Freedom," 68–70. See also R. Halliburton, *Red over Black: Black Slavery among the Cherokee Indians* (Westport, Conn., 1977), x, 43–44, and 141; and Katja May, *African Americans and Native Americans in the Creek and Cherokee Nations, 1830s to 1920s: Collision and Collusion* (New York, 1996), 10. Halliburton's work considers only Cherokees. As a later illustration of the similarity of attitudes between white southerners and American Indians, after the Civil War, prohibitions on marriages between Indians and blacks, originally adopted to apply to black slaves, continued in force in the Indian Territory. Murray R. Wickett, *Contested Territory: Whites, Native Americans, and African Americans in Oklahoma, 1865–1907* (Baton Rouge, 2000), 35.

<sup>60</sup> Halliburton, *Red over Black*, 68–69, 80–88; Daniel F. Littlefield Jr., *The Cherokee Freedmen: From Emancipation to American Citizenship* (Westport, Conn., 1978), 8–9; Theda Perdue, *Slavery and the Evolution of Cherokee Society, 1540–1866* (Knoxville, 1979), 84–90.

<sup>61</sup> Littlefield, *Africans and Seminoles*, 199–202; Wickett, *Contested Territory*, 35.

<sup>62</sup> See Perdue, *Slavery and the Evolution of Cherokee Society*, 84–85.

<sup>63</sup> Bleby, *Josiah: The Maimed Fugitive*, 113–15.

becomes a revolutionary after a sojourn with the Choctaw Indians. Blake learns about the use of violence as a tool for resisting white oppression. The Choctaw chief apparently “accepts Blake as a friend and brother, offering him the ‘pipe of peace’ and ‘olive-branch of hope’ to symbolize the union between the two races.” Delaney’s message was clear: blacks and Indians shared a common foe in whites and should work together to defeat them.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, some indigenous tribes refused to return their African-Indian kin to slavery, which provided even more evidence that slaves might find friends among the Indians.<sup>65</sup>

Former slaves took note of the precarious position of American Indians and the parallels between the condition of blacks and Indians. James Roberts admitted to killing many Indians during the American Revolution while fighting with his master, Francis De Shields, in George Washington’s army. Roberts regretted killing and scalping “innocent and defenceless [*sic*]” Indians who “were fast tending to a condition not much better than my own.” Roberts recognized that as a slave he had more in common with American Indians than with his white master.<sup>66</sup> Likewise, Douglass Wilson, a former slave who fought in the Civil War, insisted that blacks should not accept a separate space for settlement: “That’s the way they got the Indians, you remember, and we know too well what became of them. My plan is for us to stay right in this country with the white people, and to be so scattered in and among them that they can’t hurt one of us without hurting some of their own number.”<sup>67</sup> Wilson drew connections between the inability of American Indians to exist as separate nations surrounded by the United States and the impossibility of blacks creating such a society. The comments of former slaves—the Hensons, Roberts, and Wilson, along with Martin Delaney’s novel—suggest that the black population, both free and enslaved, not only were aware of the condition of the Indian population but also saw similarities between themselves and Indians.<sup>68</sup>

Some slaves reported that Indian slaveholders were kinder masters than white southerners were. Henry Bibb described his Cherokee master as “the most reasonable, and humane slaveholder that I have ever belonged to.” Bibb elaborated on this by comparing Indian

<sup>64</sup> John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), 182–83.

<sup>65</sup> Johnston, *Race Relations in Virginia*, 287–89; William Loren Katz and Paula A. Franklin, *Proudly Red and Black: Stories of African and Native Americans* (New York, 1993), 28.

<sup>66</sup> James Roberts, *The Narrative of James Roberts, Soldier in the Revolutionary War and at the Battle of New Orleans* (Chicago, 1858), 9.

<sup>67</sup> Albert, *House of Bondage*, 146.

<sup>68</sup> See also Steward, *Twenty-two Years a Slave*, 136–40.

slaveholders to white slaveholders in the South: Indians gave their slaves adequate food and clothing, did not employ overseers, offered equal religious instruction to slaves and free people, and did not separate slave families through sale. Bibb concluded, "All things considered, if I must be a slave, I had by far, rather be a slave to an Indian, than to a white man, from the experience I have had with both."<sup>69</sup> Likewise, Mary Grayson remembered her days as a slave in the Creek Nation as fairly benevolent: "We slaves didn't have a hard time at all before the war." She heard from slaves owned by whites about cruel masters and backbreaking work. Grayson stated that Creek slaves "always had plenty of clothes and lots to eat, and we all lived in good log cabins we built." The slaves worked independently with little supervision by their Creek owners. In 1850 Frederick Douglass declared, "The slave finds more of the milk of human kindness in the bosom of the savage Indian, than in the heart of his *Christian* master."<sup>70</sup>

Despite accounts of benign Indian slaveholders, there are also records of cruelty and inhumanity toward slaves owned by Indians. For instance, in 1819 Reuben Lewis, an agent among the Cherokees in Arkansas, wrote to the secretary of war describing an incident involving a Cherokee woman and her male Negro slave. The slave had displeased her husband in some way, so she demanded that he kill the slave. When he refused, the Cherokee woman directed him to tie up the slave. He did so, and then she chopped off the slave's head and threw the body into the river. Reuben Lewis inferred that the Cherokees had no laws or customs to protect slaves.<sup>71</sup> Sarah Wilson, formerly a slave owned by a Cherokee family and part Cherokee herself, described young Master Ned, her father and master, as a "devil" and the Old Mistress, who was also her grandmother, as someone who "took most of her wrath out hitting us children all the time."<sup>72</sup> Wilson's story is particularly sad given the family ties between herself and her abusers. Slaves sometimes ran away from Indian owners, and, as in the rest of the slave South, owners placed advertisements for their runaway slaves in newspapers.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, in 1842 a large group of slaves from the

<sup>69</sup> Bibb, *Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*, 372 (first quotation) and 373 (second quotation).

<sup>70</sup> Mellon, *Bullwhip Days*, 411–12 (first two quotations); Stauffer, *Black Hearts of Men*, 189 (third quotation).

<sup>71</sup> Halliburton, *Red over Black*, 42.

<sup>72</sup> T. Lindsay Baker and Julie P. Baker, eds., *The WPA Oklahoma Slave Narratives* (Norman, Okla., 1996), 492–95. Tiya Miles also discusses the story of Sarah Wilson in "Uncle Tom Was an Indian: Tracing the Red in Black Slavery," in Brooks, ed., *Confounding the Color Line*, 137–60 (especially p. 152).

<sup>73</sup> For an example, see New Echota (Ga.) *Cherokee Phoenix*, November 12, 1831, p. 3, col. 5.

Cherokee and Creek Nations attempted to escape to the far West. The two nations sent a posse to capture the slaves. In the end, Indian authorities hanged several of the ringleaders and whipped other participants.<sup>74</sup> Indian slaveholders had much in common with their white counterparts. The treatment of slaves owned by Indians and whites varied widely, and slaves owned by American Indians were susceptible to the same abuses as slaves owned by whites.

Therefore, some interracial relationships between blacks and American Indians occurred under coercive conditions. For instance, a man of Choctaw Indian and white ancestry owned and parented Charley Moore Brown's father. Similarly, another part-Choctaw slaveholder fathered Charley's mother. R. C. Smith's American Indian grandmother, in a reversal of the general pattern, purchased a black slave man and "took him for her husband." Smith's father was the offspring of this relationship.<sup>75</sup> One wonders what Smith's grandfather thought of this arrangement. He may have willingly entered the relationship, or perhaps he felt pressured to submit to the desires of his owner. Relationships between masters and slaves, regardless of the races and genders of the individuals involved, always contained an element of coercion. What slaves refused, masters could demand. Dennis Grant's parents are another example of coercion, and their relationship illustrates how little distinction whites made between black slaves and American Indians. Sometime in the late 1850s Grant's mother and father met near Beaumont, Texas, when she, a free Indian girl, caught his, a slave man's, eye. He abducted her at the instigation of his owner and made her his wife. The Indian girl was forced to be not only a wife but also a slave. Grant did not report any protest or punishment for his Indian mother's arbitrary enslavement.<sup>76</sup>

In particular, ex-slaves frequently claimed descent from Indian women. By the late eighteenth century, southerners no longer enslaved Indians. Because the status of children followed that of the mother, Indian women gave birth to free children. Perhaps this connection to free status led ex-slaves like Charlie Richardson, Ann Matthews, John Moore, and Della Harris to claim American Indian ancestry through women.<sup>77</sup> Lulu Wilson asserted that her paternal grandmother was a

<sup>74</sup> Document entitled "The Negro Insurrection," Folder "Cherokee Slavery," Box 7, Grant Foreman Collection vertical file 83-229 (Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City). See also Saunt, "Paradox of Freedom," 69.

<sup>75</sup> Charley Moore Brown interview, *American Slave*, Supp., Ser. 1, XII (Okla.), 74; R. C. Smith interview, *ibid.*, Supp., Ser. 1, XII (Okla.), 281.

<sup>76</sup> Dennis Grant interview, *ibid.*, Supp., Ser. 2, V (Texas), Pt. 4, p. 1548.

<sup>77</sup> Charlie Richardson interview, *ibid.*, XI (Mo.), 290; Ann Matthews interview, *ibid.*, XVI

“full-blood Creek Indian.” Wilson’s father, then, was a free person of color prior to emancipation by virtue of his free mother. Wilson described her own mother as part Indian as well and attributed her mother’s strong rebellious streak to that Indian ancestry. Wilson’s mother fought back when her master tried to whip her: “she’d knock him down and bloody him up.” Similarly, Charlie Davenport reported that no one meddled with his part-Indian mother.<sup>78</sup> The comments reflect a general perception of Indians and especially Indian women as defiant and unruly. As formerly subjugated and enslaved people, ex-slaves probably found kinship to this tradition and heritage attractive.<sup>79</sup>

Though they did so less frequently, former slaves also mentioned American Indian fathers and grandfathers in their WPA interviews. George Ward’s father was a Chickasaw Indian, and Eugenia Weatherall’s paternal grandfather was a Choctaw Indian. Charley Stewart’s and George Ward’s accounts of their families point to unions between free Indian men and enslaved women of African descent. Della Mun Bibles said her father was “a full blooded Indian.” Fannie McCullough Driver, on the other hand, remarked, “Pappy had some Injun blood in him, but he wasn’t no full-blood one.” Mollie Moss also stated that her father was a Cherokee Indian. At least one Indian man, Anna Baker’s grandfather, made the difficult choice to become a slave in order to remain with his African American slave lover: “When he took up wid my grandmammy de white man what owned her tells him iffen he want to stay wid her dat he’d give him a home iffen he’d work for him lak de niggers on de place. He ’greed case he thought a heap of his black woman, dat was what he called her.” Clearly this relationship involved genuine affection and consent, and Anna Baker’s grandfather sacrificed freedom to be with the woman he loved.<sup>80</sup> Ex-slaves often related such genealogical information proudly. Apparently they valued these family memories and oral traditions because they had

(Tenn.), 43; John Moore interview, *ibid.*, XVI (Tenn.), 47; Della Harris interview, *ibid.*, XVI (Va.), 24.

<sup>78</sup> See Mellon, *Bullwhip Days*, 322 and 324–25, for Lulu Wilson’s family history and *ibid.*, 372, for Charlie Davenport’s description of his mother.

<sup>79</sup> Laura L. Lovett, “‘African and Cherokee by Choice’: Race and Resistance under Legalized Segregation,” in Brooks, ed., *Confounding the Color Line*, 192–222, especially 193, 194–203, argues that African Americans invoked American Indian ancestry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to resist legalized segregation.

<sup>80</sup> George Ward interview, *American Slave*, Supp., Ser. 1, X (Miss.), Pt. 5, p. 2175; Eugenia Weatherall interview, *ibid.*, Supp., Ser. 1, X (Miss.), Pt. 5, p. 2215; Charley Stewart interview, *ibid.*, Supp., Ser. 1, X (Miss.), Pt. 5, p. 2041; Della Mun Bibles interview, *ibid.*, Supp., Ser. 2, II (Texas), Pt. 1, p. 289; Fannie McCullough Driver interview, *ibid.*, Supp., Ser. 2, IV (Texas), Pt. 3, p. 1231; Mollie Moss interview, *ibid.*, XVI (Tenn.), 57; Anna Baker interview, *ibid.*, Supp., Ser. 1, VI (Miss.), Pt. 1, p. 99.

little information about their forebears. Memories of family and oral accounts of lineage were especially significant to these people, who lacked access to written records and were separated from family members by distance and time. These accounts often provide information about lineage but very little detail of how such relationships began.

Many of the former slaves who claimed Indian ancestry made geographical references concerning their ancestors that correspond with the historical movement and location of native groups. For instance, Chaney Mack stated that her mother was a “pureblood Indian” born near Lookout Mountain in Tennessee. She described her maternal grandfather as a Choctaw chief. Susan McIntosh’s “part Injun” grandmother had been purchased in Virginia. Likewise, Mattie Logan’s “half-blood Cherokee Indian” grandmother was also from Virginia.<sup>81</sup> Several ex-slaves residing in Oklahoma at the time of their interviews offered family histories that included Indian ancestry. Richard Franklin was very specific about the particulars of his lineage: “I was born in the Creek Nation, March 1, 1856. My mother was named Thamore Franklin, she was one-fourth Creek Indian and was married to a negro slave, Fred Franklin, who was a slave of James Yargee of the Creek Nation. I am one-eighth Creek Indian and seven-eighths negro.” In their accounts of slavery, Sam Jordan, C. G. Samuel, and Lucinda Vann each referred to black-Indian sexual relationships or mixed-race children.<sup>82</sup> As slaves who had lived in the Indian Territory, these informants either knew of sexual activity between blacks and American Indians or claimed to be the children of such relationships.

The slave community did not disparage unions between American Indians and blacks or their offspring as they did unions between whites and blacks. In fact, the ex-slaves had little to say about sex between Indians and blacks. Many of them merely fondly mentioned a mixed-race relative or stated that they themselves had some “Injun” blood. A few expressed resentment, not of this type of amalgamation but of African Americans who identified more with Indians than with other people of African descent. Patsy Perryman’s brother had married a “full-blood Indian woman” and had many children. Later he became “just like an Indian, been with them so much, talks the Cherokee language and don’t notice us negroes any more.” She did not speak

<sup>81</sup> Chaney Mack interview, *ibid.*, Supp., Ser. 1, IX (Miss.), Pt. 4, p. 1419; Susan McIntosh interview, *ibid.*, XIII (Ga.), Pt. 3, p. 80; Mattie Logan interview, *ibid.*, VII (Okla.), 187.

<sup>82</sup> Richard Franklin interview, *ibid.*, Supp., Ser. 1, XII (Okla.), 132 (quotation); Sam Jordan interview, *ibid.*, Supp., Ser. 1, XII (Okla.), 197; C. G. Samuel interview, *ibid.*, Supp., Ser. 1, XII (Okla.), 267; Lucinda Vann interview, *ibid.*, Supp., Ser. 1, XII (Okla.), 351.



poorly of her American Indian sister-in-law or her mixed-race nieces and nephews, but of her brother's lack of association with and acknowledgment of his own African American relatives and heritage. Sylvester Sostan Wickliffe's testimony hints at his jealousy over the close relationship that his "half Injun" father had with Sylvester's Indian half siblings. Sylvester's half brothers and sisters visited their father and stayed up late speaking an Indian language that Sylvester found indecipherable. The language barrier prevented Sylvester from participating in these conversations. Perhaps Sylvester also envied the time his father spent with the other children. The reactions of Sylvester Wickliffe and Patsy Perryman had less to do with interracial sex than with being ignored or left out because of their relations' American Indian ties.<sup>83</sup>

Many offspring of Indian-black unions were proud of their physical appearance and the beauty of their relatives. Mandy Jones said, "When my granny walked along de road, all dem Africans say, 'What a fine lookin' woman.' She had hair down to her shoulders, an' was a yaller woman, dey say she was kin to de Injuns." Mandy's statement implies that the grandmother's mixed heritage made her very attractive physically. Charlie Davenport somewhat arrogantly announced, "I's part Injun. I aint got no Nigger nose an' my hair is so long I has to keep it wropped." He seemed proud of his appearance and described himself in opposition to the stereotypical image of an African: a person with a broad nose and short hair.<sup>84</sup> Many other ex-slaves mentioned mothers or grandmothers with long, straight hair and light skin.<sup>85</sup>

In light of the lack of documentation and the lack of personal contact between the slave informant and the Indian relative in question, physical appearance was often the most important evidence of ancestry. As Eugenia Weatherall commented, "My mother was part Indian too, way back some of her folks was an Indian. My grandmammy's nose was hooked down just like the pictures you see of Indians in the georgraphy [*sic*]." The former slave offered her grandmother's resemblance to pictures of Indians as proof of Indian ancestry. Mary Davis's maternal great-grandmother was a "full-blooded Injun," which, according to Davis, explained why "Even my mothaw had high cheek bones and a

<sup>83</sup> Patsy Perryman interview, *ibid.*, Supp., Ser. 1, XII (Okla.), 250; Sylvester Sostan Wickliffe interview, *ibid.*, Supp., Ser. 2, X (Texas), Pt. 9, p. 4038.

<sup>84</sup> Mandy Jones interview, *ibid.*, Supp., Ser. 1, VIII (Miss.), Pt. 3, p. 1236 (first quotation); Charlie Davenport interview, *ibid.*, VII (Miss.), 35–36 (second quotation).

<sup>85</sup> See, for example, Susan McIntosh interview, *ibid.*, XIII (Ga.), Pt. 3, p. 80; Mary Davis interview, *ibid.*, Supp., Ser. 2, IV (Texas), Pt. 3, p. 1070; John McDonald interview, *ibid.*, Supp., Ser. 2, VII (Texas), Pt. 6, p. 2485; John Williams interview, *ibid.*, XI (Ark.), Pt. 7, p. 173; and Drucilla Martin interview, *ibid.*, XI (Mo.), 243.

yaller skin.” Davis’s mother’s appearance confirmed the Indianness of their ancestor. Similarly, Allen Carthan’s “Papa was black all right, but he had long, straight hair and dey do say his mammy had some Injun blood in her.” According to Carthan, people explained the texture and length of his father’s hair by referring to “Injun blood,” simultaneously using Carthan’s father’s appearance to validate the family’s claim to Indian ancestry.<sup>86</sup> An individual’s features and a family’s claim of Indian ancestry could be mutually reinforcing.

The physical appearance of people of mixed ancestry often defied classification. For instance, Solomon Northup described Lethe, one of the slaves he encountered in a slave pen: “She had long, straight hair, and bore more the appearance of an Indian than a negro woman.” Lethe may have been of Indian ancestry or of mixed European and African ancestry. Northup did not offer any information about Lethe’s ancestry, perhaps because Lethe herself did not know the particulars. George Fleming’s wife Elizabeth McKantz “look[ed] jes’ like a Indian” though her father was white.<sup>87</sup> Ex-slaves offered physical descriptions of Indian relatives that mirrored descriptions of individuals of mixed European and African ancestry. Perhaps claiming Indian ancestry, with its connection to a fierce, independent people and its implication of consensual unions, was more palatable to ex-slaves than was alluding in their personal accounts to coercive, possibly violent relationships between slaves and whites.

Similarly, the progeny of interracial relationships between blacks and whites frequently focused on physical appearance. Cora Gillam told her interviewer, “No ma’am, oh no indeedy, my father was not a slave. Can’t you tell by me that he was white?”<sup>88</sup> Cora considered her appearance to be evidence of her mixed racial ancestry. Appearance took on meaning as a marker of sexual relationships and a signifier of the intermingling of people of different status and race. Most slaves were illiterate, had no access to written records, and relied on oral history to preserve a memory of family relations. Thus, physical characteristics were often the only tangible evidence of mixed-race lineage. Will Parker reported that his mother could sit on her long, flax-colored hair, and Louise J. Evans, a free woman of color during slavery, remembered “clearly how the sun shone on her [mother’s] golden

<sup>86</sup> Eugenia Weatherall interview, *ibid.*, Supp., Ser. 1, X (Miss.), Pt. 5, p. 2215 (first quotation); Mary Davis interview, *ibid.*, Supp., Ser. 2, IV (Texas), Pt. 3, p. 1070 (second and third quotations); Allen Carthan interview, *ibid.*, Supp., Ser. 2, III (Texas), Pt. 2, p. 653 (fourth quotation).

<sup>87</sup> Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 62–63; Mellon, *Bullwhip Days*, 262.

<sup>88</sup> Mrs. Cora Gillam interview, *American Slave*, Supp., Ser. 2, I (Ark.), 68.

brown hair and gleamed in her green eyes.”<sup>89</sup> Many former slaves offered detailed descriptions of mixed-race family members because physical qualities substantiated claims of ancestry.

The ex-slaves’ preoccupation with appearance reiterates the importance of physical characteristics in determining racial identity, while simultaneously demonstrating that racial categories could be elusive. Physical appearance confirmed racial intermingling and was often proof positive of someone’s claims to a mixed racial heritage. At the same time, physical traits of race were often misleading. Slaves on the auction block who were “perfectly white” or mistaken for a slave trader rather than a slave, as in Henry Bibb’s case, blurred racial lines.<sup>90</sup> Mixed-race slaves of ambiguous physical appearance demonstrated the fallacy of easily determinable, self-evident racial categories. The difficulty of identifying race by looking at physical attributes is why the presence of mixed-race individuals was threatening and why ancestry instead of appearance began to be used to determine race.<sup>91</sup> Appearances, after all, could lie.

Some former slaves recognized the unreliability of physical appearance as shorthand to determine an individual’s race and status:

Dey sets up a platform in middle de yard and one white man gits on dat and ’nother white man comes up and has a white woman with him. She ’pears to be ’bout fifteen years old and has long, black hair down her back. Dey puts her on de platform and den I hears a scream, and a woman what look like de gal, cries out, “I’ll cut my throat if my daughter am sold.” De white man goes and talks to her, and fin’ly ’lows her to take de young gal away with her. Dat sho’ stirs up some ’motion ’mongst de white folks, but dey say dat gal have jus’ a li’l nigger blood and can be sold for a slave, but she look white as anybody I ever seed.<sup>92</sup>

It did not escape the notice of slaves that some of their enslaved brethren were as white as the people who owned slaves or lived in the surrounding communities. Rebecca Hooks, for instance, bore a startling resemblance to the master’s daughter, who was actually her aunt, so close a resemblance that Hooks’s owners cut her long hair to draw a clear distinction between the two women. Moreover, sensational stories circulated about individuals—such as Minnie Rimm’s mother—who were stolen from their white families and sold into slavery as light-skinned mulattoes.<sup>93</sup> Such stories suggest that perhaps

<sup>89</sup> Will Parker interview, *ibid.*, Supp., Ser. 2, VIII (Texas), Pt. 7, p. 3017; Louise J. Evans interview, *ibid.*, Supp., Ser. 1, XI (N.C.), 25.

<sup>90</sup> Bibb, *Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*, 350.

<sup>91</sup> Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood*, 204–8.

<sup>92</sup> Walter Rimm interview, *American Slave*, V (Texas), Pt. 3, p. 247.

<sup>93</sup> Rebecca Hooks interview, *ibid.*, XVII (Fla.), 172–74; Walter Rimm interview, *ibid.*, V

some slaves were white. Many slaves also realized that the physical appearance of mulatto children could lead to unwanted attention from masters and mistresses. Frederick Douglass, himself a product of an interracial union most likely between his master and a slave woman, remarked that the children of white masters and slave women were “a constant offense to their mistress. She is ever disposed to find fault with them; they can seldom do anything to please her; she is never better pleased than when she sees them under the lash, especially when she suspects her husband of showing to his mulatto children favors which he withholds from his black slaves.”<sup>94</sup>

Former slave Adline Marshall offered remarkable insight into the liminal position of the people who were the products of interracial sex between blacks and whites: “Dat’s de reason why dere is so many ‘No Nation’ niggers ’round now. Some call ’em ‘Bright’ niggers, but I calls ’em ‘No Nation’ niggers, cause dat’s what dey is—dey ain’t all black and dey aint white, but dey is mixed. Dat comes from slave times and de white folks did de wrong, ’cause de blacks get beat and whipped if dey don’t do what de white folks tell ’em to.”<sup>95</sup> Marshall’s statement exposes the ambivalence that slaves felt about mixed-race individuals. Moreover, the name “‘No Nation’ niggers” suggests that such individuals belonged nowhere, that they were not fully accepted by either blacks or whites. Recently, scholars have complicated their notions of a simple black-white racial hierarchy during the nineteenth century by paying attention to how whites at that time conceived of race and racial categories, but it is important to understand that slaves themselves also recognized the complexity of racial hierarchy.<sup>96</sup> Slaves distinguished people of mixed African and European ancestry from blacks, and Marshall’s comments laid the blame for amalgamation squarely at the feet of whites.

Slaves also clearly recognized the mark of American Indian heritage. Will Parker, for instance, described his father as a “mixed blood–Indian nigger.” Louisa Davis’s father “look just like a Indian, hair and all, bushy head, straight and young lookin’ wid no beard.” Drucilla

(Texas), Pt. 3, p. 250. A slave trader darkened Minnie Rimm’s mother’s hair and skin before selling her into slavery. When the dye washed out, the master did not return the child to her white family but kept her in the slave quarters. Della Mun Bibles told a similar story of a white child, Della’s mother, raised as a slave, in Della Mun Bibles interview, *ibid.*, Supp., Ser. 2, II (Texas), Pt. 1, 289.

<sup>94</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 118–19.

<sup>95</sup> Adline Marshall interview, *American Slave*, Supp., Ser. 2, VII (Texas), Pt. 6, p. 2578.

<sup>96</sup> For examples, see Ariela J. Gross, “Litigating Whiteness: Trials of Racial Determination in the Nineteenth-Century South,” *Yale Law Journal*, 108 (October 1998), 109–88; Hodes, ed., *Sex, Love, Race*; Fischer, *Suspect Relations*; Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs*; and Cole and Parker, eds., *Beyond Black and White*.

Martin said of herself, "I'se half Indian and I look it too, and if I wo' gold rings in my ears and nose I would look just like my mammy did 'cause she was full blooded Indian." John Williams detailed the appearance of several of his family members and even included an ethnic slur, "She [great grandmother] was bright. All my folks were bright but me. My mother had hair way down her shoulders and you couldn't tell my uncle from a dago. My grandmother was a regular Indian color. She spoke Indian too. You couldn't understand nothing she said."<sup>97</sup> Former slaves claimed Indian-black heritage and described it as distinct from African and African European heritage. The former slaves applied more than two racial categories in their descriptions of individuals. In the minds of former slaves, people were not solely black or white but could also be variations and combinations of black and white and Indian.

The ex-slaves' attitudes toward interracial sexual relationships depended on the race of the participants because the former slaves saw a link between race and consent. They recognized the inherently coercive nature of sex between blacks and whites, regardless of the gender of each partner. Power differentials between slaves and white people, particularly elite members of the planter class, constrained choice and consent by slaves in these relationships. For slaves, the freedom to choose a mate was an arena for the exercise of agency. The slaves developed rituals to recognize marriages in their communities and did not force couples to remain "married" if they chose to separate.<sup>98</sup> Their marriages lacked legal sanction, but many ex-slaves legalized their marriages after emancipation, illustrating the strength of their choices.<sup>99</sup> Of course, white slave owners had the power to approve or deny a slave couple's desire to marry and could separate a couple through sale. White masters and their wives and daughters also exercised enormous power over the well-being of slaves; they controlled food, material provisions, and punishment. These factors affected the decisions slave men and women made about entering into sexual relationships with whites.

From the perspective of many slaves, the social distance separating slaves and American Indians was less than what separated slaves and whites. In instances of relationships between slaves and Indians, ex-slaves thought there was a greater possibility for each partner to

<sup>97</sup> Will Parker interview, *American Slave*, Supp., Ser. 2, VIII (Texas), Pt. 7, p. 3017 (first quotation); Louisa Davis interview, *ibid.*, II (S.C.), Pt. 1, p. 301 (second quotation); Drucilla Martin interview, *ibid.*, XI (Mo.), 243 (third quotation); John Williams interview, *ibid.*, XI (Ark.), Pt. 7, p. 173 (fourth quotation).

<sup>98</sup> Gutman, *Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, 265–84, 157–59.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 19–28, 412–18.

exercise choice in forming unions. When both partners were slaves, as in the colonial period, neither person possessed a great deal of authority over the other, and both were subject to the control of whites. Further, by the antebellum period, black slaves recognized that whites often treated American Indians—even though they were not slaves—poorly, as people of color without power in a society that privileged whiteness. The ex-slaves described relationships between blacks and American Indians as less fraught with violence and emotional turmoil. Some black family members might have resented a relative's immersion in American Indian culture, but, in their narratives about Indian-black relationships, the former slaves implied that the emotional tone was consensual and non-violent. The slave informants often criticized white men who took advantage of slave women but remained silent about American Indians involved in relationships with blacks. The ex-slaves most likely saw many similarities in their own experiences and those of Indians. Some relationships between Indians and blacks occurred under coercive conditions, like those between master and slave, but the ex-slaves rarely commented negatively on the circumstances of these unions.

Slaves' perceptions of interracial sex and mixed-race progeny ran the gamut of emotions from feelings of pride to indifference to degradation and humiliation to anger, depending on the slaves' understanding of their personal freedom to choose such unions. The slaves studied here generally approved of interracial unions in which both partners chose to participate. Unions between individuals whom the slaves perceived as equal in status, like Indians and blacks, provoked few negative comments. Every relationship between whites and blacks, however, implied a threat of force and coercion; power differentials were often so great in these relationships that slaves perceived an ever-present potential for violence. The nature of sexual relationships between masters and slaves redefined the interwoven concepts of choice, coercion, and resistance. As legal human property, bondpeople understood that these concepts applied differently to slaves than to whites. Moreover, the comments of former slaves about the children produced by interracial sexual relationships reveal an understanding of race, racial difference, and racial categories that extends beyond the simple dichotomy of black and white. Ultimately, the ex-slaves' personal narratives demonstrate a complex grasp of race and interracial sexual relationships during the nineteenth century.