“Freedom” to Freedwomen After the Civil War

[The house at] 124 was spiteful. Full of a baby’s venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his own way, but by 1873 Sethe and her daughter Denver were its only victims.¹

So begins Toni Morrison’s historical novel Beloved, depicting a home suffering from the emotional wounds of slavery. The story follows a runaway slave and freedwoman named Sethe and her one surviving daughter, Denver during the postbellum period after the Civil War. Her other children were taken from her by illness and violence, leaving her to question her identity as a woman and a mother. Her story begins as the lone female slave at the plantation Sweet Home, subject to the constant threat of rape. She delivers Denver, her youngest in the woods during her escape. Beloved asks questions about agency and ownership of one’s body as Sethe grapples with her painful past and uncertain future. Sethe’s experiences are not unlike those of other freedwomen in terms of reproductive oppression, best defined as “the control of women, girls, and individuals through [their] bodies, sexuality, labor, and reproduction.”² Though Morrison’s novel is fictional, her prose readily explores the very real dehumanization of the Black body through slavery, and its lasting implications after emancipation.

In this paper, I explore the idea of what “freedom” meant to freedwomen after being emancipated, particularly in terms of their bodies. This definition includes the attainment of reproductive justice, a school of thought “link[ing] sexuality, health, and human rights to social justice movements by placing abortion and reproductive health movements in [a] larger


context.” Though this framework is decidedly modern, our understanding of the experiences of freedwomen can be enhanced immensely by examining their testimony through a lens of reproductive justice. In doing so, it is clear that to freedwomen, freedom came in the form of bodily autonomy, bodily integrity, and parental agency.

One type of valuable testimony in considering bodily freedoms comes in the form of affidavits, or sworn government documents, detailing the physical violence freedwomen and their families were subjected to. While it is important to consider that such testimony was given to military officers and therefore may reflect more of the attitudes of the latter, they offer a vivid firsthand perspective of the cruelty freepeople faced. In an affidavit dated September 1866, freedwoman Rhoda Ann Childs described an incident in which eight white men appeared at her door late one night and assaulted her and her two daughters. The wife and family of a Black former Union soldier living in Georgia, they were particularly vulnerable to the vitriol of former Confederates. During the assault, the men took Childs into the woods, forcibly removed her clothes, and brutalized her, “beat[ing her] across [her] posterior…hip and thigh,” and “appl[y]ing a] Strap to [her] private parts until [she]…was more dead than alive.” Such sexualized violence denied Childs of bodily integrity — the right to freedom from violation of the body — denying her “dignity, respect, and self-determination over [her] bod[y].” Additionally, at one point in the assault, “one of the men ran his pistol into me,” she stated, “sa[y]ing he had a hell of a mind to

3 “Understanding Reproductive Justice”


5 Ibid.

pull the trigger…as my husband had been in the ‘God damned Yankee Army.’” In this respect, the dehumanization and degradation Childs and her family had faced as slaves was perpetuated even after they were freed. As such, to Childs and other freedwomen, ideal freedom meant the attainment of bodily integrity.

The dehumanization of sexual violence followed freedwomen for years after the Civil War as well. As such, though they were technically free, their hopes for freedom at this time would include reprieve from the persecution and violation of abuse. In an assault testimonial from 1866, Lucy Smith recalled being assaulted and robbed by Confederate soldiers who broke into her home demanding dinner and “‘some woman to sleep with,’” and that who it was “‘didn’t make a damned bit of difference.’” Smith and her roommate, fellow freedwoman Frances Thompson, were seen as property in the eyes of these men, denied of dignity and bodily integrity. Their attackers felt entitlement to violate their home and take what they wanted, demonstrative of the constant danger faced by freedwomen simply for their presence in society.

The persecution of sexual violence towards freedwomen also indicates a dominant attitude of the acceptability of devaluing and dehumanizing Black women. An account similar to Smith and Thompson’s was given by freedwoman Elvira Walker, who was accused of being a prostitute before being raped at knife point during a home invasion. Her assailant threatening that “he would kill [her] if [she] did not let him do as he wanted,” and “violat[ing] her person”

7 Rhoda Ann Childs, *Affidavit of the Wife of a Discharged Georgia Black Soldier*.


while commanding “‘By God, you must.’” Like Smith, Walker tried to fight the attacker off, but was held against her will and forcibly subdued. The weakness of this testimony, however, lies in lack of detail — because Walker was unable to identify her attacker, it is unclear whether this assault was random or premeditated. While rape of a Black woman by a white man was certainly not uncommon, it is also not commonly perpetrated by strangers. Cases like these contribute to the idea that “black women’s bodies...constituted another...battleground” of the Civil War, where rape was the weapon of choice, used to control and coerce an already marginalized group. In the post-war years in particular, freedwomen sought bodily integrity as a form of self-determination, and on a larger scale, to dismantle the dominant paradigm of inequity and sexual conquest.

The metaphor of black women’s bodies as a battleground is in part predicated on the idea of there being a potential penalty for perpetrators who commit rape. In reality, however, consequences were not so cut and dry. Legal provisions against sexual assault in the South “varied widely in...clarity and precision” in statutory definitions of rape, as did the application of punishment upon conviction. In the antebellum era, the law did not recognize a white man’s sexual violation of a black woman as a crime. Later on, after the war, interpretations of such definitions were at the discretion of a state’s court-martial, and were often unfavorably biased. However, the opposite was true for Congress’ Senate Bill 511 of 1856, a highly progressive

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11 E. Susan Barber, Charles F. Ritter, “‘Physical Abuse…and Rough Handling’: Race, Gender, and Sexual Justice in the Occupied South,” in Occupied Women: Gender, Military Occupation, and the American Civil War, ed. LeeAnn Whites et. al. (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), 50.

12 Ibid, 56.
document which “routinely ignor[ed] racial prohibitions embedded in…laws against admitting testimony of black witnesses against white assailants.”13 By permitting freedwomen to bring charges against white attackers granted them personal agency, protected under the law. While the legal system remained an institution designed for the benefit of the privileged majority, the ability to testify against their rapists gave freedwomen a chance at attaining bodily integrity.

From a methodological standpoint, interpreting the narratives of freedwomen is both to the advantage and disadvantage of an historian. Logically, it makes sense to dedicate one’s research primarily to documents produced by the historical actors that are being studied. This approach not only provides information directly from the source, but it also gives a sense of local color, vernacular, and other more personal details. For example, reading a handwritten letter from a freedwoman to a family member not only informs the reader of their sentiments, but also, their literacy. The form and function of the writing can be divined through the written word’s organization on the page, whether it is neatly kept between margins or sprawling with many stray ink marks. However, the methodological issues of studying the writings of freedwomen in the Civil War era are of concern as well. As many of these personal narratives come in the form of testimony or affidavits detailing assault or abuse, their accuracy is questionable. When swearing truth to government officials, for example, a freedwoman who claims not to have known her attacker may be protecting herself from further violence by not accusing a military officer. Additionally, in the case of correspondence, the letters’ authors may have known that their writing would be read by their former master or a military officer during occupation, and censored graphic events. While the value of these writings still applies, it is worth noting that

13 Barber, Ritter, “Physical Abuse,” 50.
because freedwomen were subject to vehement persecution, their reliability as narrators is questionable.

Though instances of physical abuse and rape were highly prevalent through the postbellum period, freedwomen sought agency for other reasons as well. While many women were subject to abuse, others were not, yet still pursued bodily autonomy, integrity, and agency for the same reasons. Rape documentation paints a clear image of what freedom meant to freedwomen in that the violence against them fueled their desire for release from persecution. This desire for bodily integrity afforded safety of their person and environment, and granted them bodily autonomy in doing so. In the same respect, freedwomen who were not assaulted wanted to not only maintain their personal safety, but also to control their fertility. By having the option to prevent or terminate an undesired pregnancy, freedwomen were able to not only sever ties from their abusers, but could also resist reproductive coercion in other ways.

Historically, plantation owners distanced slaves from knowledge of contraception or abortion as a method of reproductive coercion. Economically, “Black women’s fertility increased the owners’ labor force and property value,” half-heartedly incentivized by promises of lighter work loads for pregnant women. This method worked in the masters’ favor another way as well: keeping women pregnant weakened their resolve and made them more pliable to the same coercive control. Furthermore, when slaves chose to end these pregnancies, their chief reason was expressly “a commitment to resist the oppressive conditions of slavery” before any personal desire for reproductive autonomy. They knew that to have a child born under slavery meant that


15 Ibid.

they would be seen as property, contributing to the same system of oppression. As such, freedwomen sought reproductive autonomy to free not only themselves, but their potential children as well. To them, freedom included the ability to control their fertility and reproduction.

Reproductive autonomy was important to freedwomen not only as resistance to slavery, but also to exercise control over their own bodies and fertility. As such, many historians find themselves concerned with questions of method — just how were freedwomen avoiding unwanted pregnancy? As this was before modern pharmaceuticals, purported methods were unclear, particularly to plantation owners, who desired fertility as a commodity, and the doctors they charged with explaining this phenomenon. The Comstock Law of 1873 had not yet been passed, which would federally criminalize the sale or distribution of information about abortion or contraception, and as such, answers were highly speculative.17 White Southern doctors were convinced that “slave women were aborting either by ‘medicine, violent exercise, or by external and internal manipulations.’”18 Another 1856 essay by Dr. E.M. Pendleton reported several “planters [who had] regularly complained of whole families of women who failed to have children.”19 Though abortion methods were illicit, it is clear that they could be effective, and in this sense, fertility control was an active and stubborn resistance to slavery. Freedwomen were grasping at the right to control their own fertility and resist reproductive coercion and abuse by any means necessary. The definition of freedom to freedwomen not only included bodily autonomy, but reproductive autonomy as well, allowing them to control their own fertility both by contraception and abortion.

17 “A Short History of African-American Women and Abortion.”
19 Ibid.
Contraceptives and abortifacientst at this time were often home remedies, passed down as a furtive secret through the generations. African-American midwifery brought “African folk knowledge about…abortifacients” to slaves, but “unlike modern pharmaceuticals, some herbs and methods were used as…contraceptives [as well].” Abortion was a way in which slave women exercised bodily autonomy, and did so by any means necessary. For example, “boiling rusty nails yielded a douche used as both a contraceptive and an abortifacient,” as well as quinine tablets, turpentine, and laxatives to “bring about severe cramps and contractions which approximated giving birth.” Additionally, natural supplements such as “poultices of petroleum jelly mixed with quinine” served as makeshift contraceptives in rural Southern communities, while “pennyroyal and papaya seeds” were abortifacients. Such effortful practices to avoid pregnancy, it is evident that to freedwomen, reproductive autonomy was an important component of freedom.

No longer leveraged as a resistance to slavery, potentially having reproductive autonomy meant freedwomen wanted to have children and raise them in safe and healthy environments. The desire of freedwomen to have agency in childrearing was intensified by the prolonged separation experienced by many slaves and their children. As it was not uncommon for slaves to be sold and taken from their families, the same conditions of estrangement persisted for freepeople in the antebellum and postbellum periods. For example, in a letter to her former mistress, Patsey Patterson, freedwoman Vilet Lester detailed the specifics of her travels through the South from North Carolina to Georgia, then inquiring about the whereabouts of her young

21 Ibid, 276-7.
22 Ibid.
daughter. “I wish to [k]now what has Ever become of my Presus [sic] little girl,” she wrote, pleading that “I do wish to See her very mutch [sic],” and even offering to buy her from her former master. Though she had been freed by manumission, Lester was denied the full extent of that freedom without her daughter, demonstrated by her written plea. By writing to her mistress instead of her master, Lester was appealing to Patterson’s own motherly sensibility in the hopes of evoking empathy. To her, as to many freedwomen, the agency to raise one’s children was an integral part of what freedom could mean.

In personal correspondence between former slaves, however, discussion of their frustration over their estrangement was more frank and deliberate. In an 1838 letter to her husband, Michael, Hannah Valentine depicted the sordid task of tending to her former master’s children during a bout of the measles, then inquired about the health of their own children. Such a juxtaposition is telling, indicating her heartache over providing care for another family while her own was without their mother. “I begin to feel anxious to see you all,” she wrote, “I am afraid my patience will be quite worn out if you do not come back soon.” Like many women decades later during the Civil War, Valentine experienced profound depression over the absence of her family. She begins the letter by professing that she is often “anxious to hear from [her husband] and [their] children.” Their letters were few and far between due to the miles between

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24 Ibid.


26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.
them, and she struggled to remain connected to her family. As the letter is private correspondence between husband and wife, Valentine’s tone is emotionally honest as she confides her feelings. One weakness of this source, however, is its brevity. Either due to lack of time or writing materials, Valentine’s correspondence is limited to one page, front and back. While she conveys her emotional state through the anecdotal nature of the letter, a longer form would perhaps shed more light on her experiences. In contrast, letters such as Vilet Lester’s to her former mistress required the author to align herself with formality to access the information she desired. For Lester, there is a script that must be followed, whereas the tone of Valentine’s writing is decidedly more candid.

Another difference between Lester and Valentine’s writings is the form in which they are constructed. In a letter to her daughter Eliza the year before, Valentine expresses her desperation in the way she eagerly relates day-to-day events and excitedly asks about those living far away. Notes are scribbled in the margins of the document, asking Eliza to send her mother’s love to various aunts and uncles, reminding them all to write to her as well.28 Such jottings are similar to those of a cheerful grandparent sending a holiday card, wishing well and imploring younger relatives to keep in touch. This form is variant from the defined structure of Lester’s letter to her former mistress, in which words appear neatly confined to each page, tucked perfectly between margins of one sheet of paper.29 While Lester’s audience required her to conform to a certain air, the scribbled notes Valentine leaves for her daughter demonstrate motherly love through both her loving tone and her determination to fit every thought on the page. Even more telling is the


29 Vilet Lester, Vilet Lester to Patsey Patterson.
gentle scolding Valentine gives to her children, writing that “Nothing Will give me as much pleasure as to hear of your Good Conduct and it is all my thought for fear you not conduct your selves as Genteel as I would wish you to do.” Overall, the adversity faced by freedwomen extended beyond the plight of soldiers’ wives separated from their husbands in the Civil War. A freedwoman’s definition of freedom had to include the ability to live with and care for one’s own family.

Additionally, the struggle of freedwomen for parental agency was more dire in that they faced active persecution of having custody of their children. In an affidavit from Baltimore military headquarters in November 1864, freedwoman Jane Kamper recounts her children being hidden from her by her former master in Talbot County upon becoming free. As of the first of that month, slaves in Maryland, a borderland state, were freed, but the status of their children varied. As such, her former master considered her children and belongings to still be his property, and actively tried to take them from her. “He locked my Children up so that I could not find them…[and] pursued me to…get possession of my children but I hid them on [a] boat,” she stated. Though the affidavit is a brief statement made by Kamper to a military officer, it is representative of a widespread occurrence for freedwomen at this time — denial of parental agency and self-determination as parents. Furthermore, similar to abortion as resistance to slavery, freedwomen also resisted through the assertion of parental agency.

Self-determination is integral to freedwomen's definition of freedom in that it applies to all elements of reproductive freedom, including childbearing free of coercion or reproductive

30 Hannah Valentine, Letter to Eliza from Hannah Valentine.


32 Ibid.
oppression. During the Civil War, masters had a stake in the reproduction of slaves, and treated infertile women poorly. Childbearing was an expectation, but childrearing a privilege in this sense: slaves were expected to have children for the benefit of the plantation, but were not allowed to parent them. Parents and children could be bought or sold at any time, forcing apart families already suffering at the hands of slavery. What made their experience distinct is that unlike families of white soldiers in the Civil War, this separation had no determinate end — a condition which persisted for freedwomen as well due to their lack of agency as well as geographic and communication barriers. With revocation of parental agency in their recent history, freedwomen’s concept of freedom was driven by a desire for both safe, healthy environments to raise children, as well as to simply have them in their care. As such, the ability to have children, to raise them, and to have agency as a parent were equally important to the reproductive freedom of freedwomen.

In my research, I came across the life story of a freedwoman, Elizabeth Johnson Harris, who carefully denoted in her writings that her decision to have children was entirely her own. Born in 1867, after her parents were freed, Harris dedicated her fifty-some-odd page, handwritten notes to her children, apologizing for “the errors that my [sic] be found in these work from an unfinished scholar.” Throughout the lengthy document, Harris attests to the kind and gentle nature of her husband, Jacob Walker Harris, whom she met as a child and married at sixteen. She describes their relationship as happy and devoted, calling Jacob her “first choice in love and

marriage.” As such, the decision to have each of their six children was a joyful one, free of coercion or reproductive oppression. Born a freedwoman, Harris was able to enjoy the bodily autonomy and parental agency sought by many before her, even her own relatives. She fondly refers to her children as “willing and honest workers,” proudly recounting their various career paths and education levels. In the very generation before, not only would such achievements have been impossible, but Johnson’s level of parental involvement as well. Without the reproductive oppression of slavery, freedwomen like Elizabeth Johnson Harris were able to enjoy their right to bodily autonomy and parental agency.

Reproductive justice as an ideology promotes the right to have children, not have children, and to raise one’s children in safe and healthy environments, ideals that are still relevant today. However, it is clear that for freedwomen after the Civil War, such ideals were at the forefront of their consciousness. “Freedom” in the context of their bodies meant bodily autonomy, bodily integrity, and parental agency, demonstrating that this modern framework can be utilized to enhance our understanding of the past, as well as the motivations of historical actors.


36 Elizabeth Johnson Harris, *Marriage and Children*.  
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