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# Black Slave Gender Roles: How They Were Changed by Emancipation

Submitted by: Caile Morris

Susie King Taylor's autobiography *A Black Woman's Civil War Memoirs* puts her in a small group of African American ex-slaves who were able to record their memories of their lives as slaves and consequent forays after emancipation. What makes her stand out even further is that she is one of the few African American women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to write of her experiences. This information is extraordinary in itself, but the idea of matriarchal power and prestige that she invokes is even more so. She describes her ancestry in a matriarchal way, tracing it from her great-great-grandmother to herself, with all of the relations in between being women as well. Therefore, the first few chapters of her autobiography lead the reader to believe that slaves may not have had what white society would call normal gender roles, and it suggests that African American women may have been more influential in families and within the slave community than we realize.<sup>xcvii</sup>

With this thought in mind, more and more instances of these unusual gender relations reveal themselves in some of the scholarship on the Civil War era. Steven Hahn in *A Nation Under Our Feet* argues that plantation slave elders were not always male and that the exceptions proved that

slaves did not embrace white social and political gender conventions. It is easy to understand why this would be a confusing concept firstly because most students are not usually exposed to this while learning about the Civil War, and secondly because it is so different not only from what was considered conventional for the time period but also what is conventional to a degree today as well. Hahn suggests that slave women, especially those who were older, gained status by how much they contributed to their specific plantation's slave culture. They did so by sustaining the either limited or extensive kinship networks as well as working in the fields by day and managing domestic responsibilities by night. The idea that slave women held an equal and sometimes superior role to slave men makes more sense with this information, because not only did women have the experience of working in the fields but they also had household and family duties to see to as well.<sup>xcviii</sup>

When slavery was theoretically ended in the rebel states by Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, it also effectively ended the solid basis that these unusual gender roles had been built upon. These former slave men and women now had to try and adapt to their new lifestyles, but this leaves a question of what happened to the way of life that had been so closely intertwined with the institution of slavery. Some historians, such as Noralee Frankel, believe that while freedmen acquired some degree of clout that did not necessarily mean that their families followed the more socially acceptable notion of patriarchy. Frankel says that while the new male head of

the family obtained limited authority and now had more economic responsibility, which to most would indicate that the trend was now heading towards patriarchy, she believes that the word patriarchy implies more standing socially and legally than the heads of African American families could actually exercise. She then goes further to say that the new free families were neither matriarchal nor patriarchal. While this change may not have been strictly to the white norm of patriarchy, freedmen held more power as far as status was concerned than women. In short, gender roles on slave plantations in the South, especially for African American women, were altered by emancipation leading to a diminishment of women's status within the black plantation community.<sup>xcix</sup>

While perusing through the autobiographies of former slaves who lived to be emancipated, it is amazing to see how more often than not there are examples of how equal slave men and women were to each other. When describing the plantations of their childhoods many of these authors talk about the difficult work that they saw both men and women doing, or the leadership roles that women would take on within the slave quarters. By using instances from former slave autobiographies of how slave men and women ranked each other, how they were ranked and viewed by their masters, and in what instances slave women held positions of power, we can see how emancipation altered gender relations.

As much as it would seem that former slave women would mostly be ranking themselves equal to men, it was actually the other way around. Perhaps that is because more African American men who were formerly slaves recorded their stories, but the fact remains that they often admitted that women could do a man's work just as well or better. Solomon Northup, who was kidnapped and

forced into slavery in Louisiana, describes four women who were sent to help him and another slave to chop down trees. "In the course of a fortnight four black girls came down from Eldret's plantation," wrote Northup. "Axes were put into their hands, and they were sent out with Sam and myself to cut trees. They were excellent choppers, the largest oak or sycamore standing but a brief season before their heavy and well directed blows. At piling logs, they were equal to any man." This is a case of slave women having special skills, for they were usually found in the fields on plantations. But the fact that they were able to gain these skills that were normally viewed as men's work, and able to equal the men in aptitude as well, was key.<sup>c</sup>

Another way that men who were ex-slaves wrote about the equality of the women bound with them in servitude was simply through observations of them working. In Ira Berlin's *Remembering Slavery*, a compilation of oral histories from former slaves, there was a short piece from a man named George Fleming who was born and worked on a plantation in South Carolina. He describes women slaves in the fields as looking and working just like the men. "Women worked in de field same as de men. Some of dem plowed jes' like de men and boys. Couldn't tell 'em apart in de field, as dey wore pantelets or breeches..." An additional description comes from Frederick Law Olmsted's book which depicts what he witnessed during his travels through Southern rural areas in the 1850s. While in Louisiana, he saw two gangs of slaves being driven by overseers returning to the field after working in the gin-house. "First came... forty of the largest and strongest women I ever saw together," Olmsted remembered. "They carried themselves loftily, each having a hoe over the shoulder, and walking with a free, powerful swing, like *chasseurs* on the march. Behind

them came the cavalry, thirty strong, mostly men, but a few of them women.” While these men and women were mostly separated, they were going to do the same work, and Olmstead describes both gangs using similar militant phrases, i.e. “chasseurs on the march” and “the cavalry,” indicating their equality to men.<sup>ci</sup>

Slaveholders regarded all of their slaves as property. While they were separated by the tasks they could and should perform, slaves were all equally a step lower than whites because of the fact that they were property and were treated as such. Sometimes, this treatment would be humane, while for the most part it was anything but. A good example can be taken from the marriage of Tempie Herndon to Exter Durham. Tempie’s master, “Marse George,” not only allowed this marriage to take place but recognized it and took part in the ceremony. “Marse George” held the traditional broomstick and added the qualification that whomever could jump over the stick would be in charge of the household. Tempie made it over, but Exter tripped on the stick. This master clearly afforded his slaves the luxury of being recognized in marriage and managing their own household. Unfortunately, most slaveholders did not treat their slaves with that much respect or humanity. John Brown, an African American man born into slavery in Georgia who was bought and sold many times, described examples of just how equally some of his masters gave out punishments. He writes that he had heard that people who are not acquainted with slavery believe that women were treated less harshly as a rule, but he was quick to deny this assumption. “Men and women, boys and girls, receive the same kind of punishments, or I would say rather, that the same kind of tortures are inflicted upon them.” There are instances in his autobiography where masters overworked and abused female slaves, especially those that were pregnant, and these seemed to equal out

with his tales of atrocities committed against male slaves.<sup>cii</sup>

Slave women were also found to have the opportunity to hold positions of leadership within the slave plantation communities. This was important because not only did women have the chance to exceed expectations within the area of their labor but they also could be considered elders among other slaves. Despite the fact that slaves had the model of white gender norms to follow, they had no reason to do so. Steven Hahn says that this is possible firstly because slave women did not have to be subordinate to slave men and secondly because of how central they were to the domestic side of plantation life. Since the men could not be the stereotypical provider in a slave family, this allowed women the right to hold positions of authority. Also, they were well suited to hold power within a slave community namely because they had insight in most areas of slave life. Slave women worked in the fields or worked in the master’s home, as well as taking care of domestic needs in their very limited free time.<sup>ciii</sup>

The positions of authority within the community that a woman could take varied in form. They could be the person that other slaves went to for any form of advice, like Frederick Douglass’ grandmother. She was sought after for her nursing abilities and her fishing nets, as well as to help plant sweet potato seeds since she had the knowledge on how to make them grow and flourish. Women could also hold honored positions on a plantation: such as an elder who could “marry” other slaves. These fortunate women were the ones who needed to be consulted whenever a slave couple wished to be joined, and their opinions and blessings were far more important than those of the slaveholders. One such situation was recalled by Caroline Johnson

Harris, who had to check with “Aunt Sue” that her proposed marriage was acceptable and then asked her to perform it. Harris remembered, “Didn’t have to ask Marsa or nothing’. Just go to Ant Sue an’ tell her you want to git mated.” This woman held tremendous power over the personal lives of slaves on that particular plantation and is the embodiment of the idea that slave women could hold positions of authority.<sup>civ</sup>

Clearly, these gender roles were an integral part of life for slaves laboring on Southern plantations. This establishes that once emancipation was granted, these roles, along with everything else about the lives of former slaves, were no longer a certainty. The largest influencing factor was the Union Army, for the soldiers and officers of it were the ones who were there to pick up the pieces. They were the ones who gave opportunities for advancement and jobs to African American men and women. Since those in charge had the social norms of men being the workers or breadwinners, they forced this way of life on freedmen and women, unaware that they might have done things differently when they were slaves. With the aid of autobiographies, by comparing the kinds of jobs that were offered to African American men versus those that were offered to African American women, it can be proved that men were the ones who were given the most opportunity for advancement and that gender roles became more patriarchal.

Fugitives, both runaways and former slaves who were emancipated by the Union Army as it progressed South, flooded into army camps looking for some way to start their lives over. W.E.B. Du Bois describes how they came in multitudes, with little or no possessions, not knowing if they were going to be treated better or worse once they arrived at a Union camp, but they had hope. The mindset of the runaway

slaves made it probable that they were not going to complain about who received work and supplies from the army, since they had nothing else. There was certainly a great deal of work available to the freedmen who came to the camps. As mentioned by Du Bois, they made up a workforce for the army consisting of laborers, servants and spies, among other things. In return they usually received shelter and clothing for at least them and perhaps for their families if the manager of the camp was benevolent. However, freedwomen did not receive as many opportunities to work. As Noralee Frankel writes, they were given the opportunity to stay in the army camps by being employed to lowly positions such as laundresses, hospital nurses, or officers’ servants. If they were allowed to stay in the camps other than that, they were usually considered burdens who could not earn their keep.<sup>cv</sup>

A compilation edited by Ira Berlin, *Free At Last*, focuses on war and emancipation, and how they affected former slaves. It has reprints of many first-hand documents with reactions from both former slaves, members of the Union and Confederate armies, along with citizens from both sides. Most of these documents affirm the fact that freedmen were more well suited for the labor-intensive work that needed to be done in the camps. The opinion of General Benjamin Butler, who was the famous general who started accepting runaway slaves as contraband of war, was one of the few that believed that any freed person who was able could work. His letter to General-in-Chief Winfield Scott defended his decision to allow *all* able-bodied applicants to work, and taking in and giving rations to both them and those who could not work. He states, “I have had come within my lines men and women with their children.” He continues by giving his course of action: “I have therefore determined to employ,

as I can do very profitably, the able-bodied persons in the party, issuing proper food for the support of all, and charging against their services the expense of care and sustenance of the non-laborers.” This was a statement that could provide hope, but unfortunately, this is not how things worked in the majority of camps.<sup>cvi</sup>

Two examples that represent the order of things at most of the other camps are those headed by Generals William T. Sherman and John E. Wool. General Sherman, in a letter to Thomas Hunton, writes that he only accepts African American men in his camp. He states in a definitive manner, “we never harbor women or children--we give employment to men, under the enclosed order.” This is coming from a relatively conservative general, but it reflected the views of many others who were in charge of camps, unsure of their ability to lawfully shelter runaways. General Wool, on the other hand, not only stated that work was limited to African American men and boys, but also that in order to support those in the camp who couldn't work, a cut would be taken from the wages of the men. Negro men over 18 were given ten dollars a month, while Negro boys from 12-18 and sickly Negro men were given five dollars a month. Wool stated in his orders from November of 1861, “each individual of the first 1<sup>st</sup> Class, will receive two dollars per month; and each individual of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Class one dollar per month for their own use. The remainder of the money valuation of their labor,” Wool continued, “will constitute a fund to be expended...for the support of the women and children, and those that are unable to work.” So not only were women denied the right to work for wages at this camp, they were taking away from the earnings of those who could.<sup>cvi</sup>

An example of women being able to get some jobs, but not as many compared to men

and receiving little or no compensation for this can be found in a report made by Vincent Colyer. He was a Northern missionary sent by the War Department to find out ways in which former slaves supported themselves in the army camps. He says that the men were offered eight dollars a month and one ration of clothes to do their assigned tasks. There is one small description of what women did, which states: “The women and children supported themselves with but little aid from the government by washing, ironing, cooking, making pies, cakes etc for the troops. The few women that were employed by the government in the hospitals received \$4 a month, clothes and one ration.” Basically, only some of the employed women received payment for their work, and it was half of what the men were making. Clearly, freedwomen held less authority compared to men now that they were free.<sup>cvi</sup>

Towards the end of the war it was African American men who received the opportunity to be soldiers in the Union Army, not women. This was clearly a measure of the times, for it was a convention that white women could not be soldiers as well. There were many debates about how being a soldier equated to being a citizen. After the Civil War, the debate continued as the country struggled to find a place for four million liberated African Americans. In order to refashion the white dominated society, compromises were made. This meant that while African Americans could now be involved in politics, they had to be African American men. Black men and women did not necessarily think of each other in terms of white gender norms; put simply, they were still apt to treat each other as they did while in bondage rather than following the white convention of men being superior to women.

To prove that this compromise occurred, which would complete the transition of gender

roles and show that emancipation did in fact change them, it is more prudent to consult scholarly research. In a book of Reconstruction black leaders, one thing is obvious from the start: all of the leaders mentioned are men. Some examples are Congressmen such as John Roy Lynch and James Rapier as well as state and local leaders such as Holland Thompson and William Finch. As the vote was only extended to African American men, it makes sense as to why men were the ones who were most involved in politics. What is inferred from this information is that the hope that gender roles in this time period mirrored what is conventional in modern times faded with emancipation and was extinguished by Reconstruction because the only reason they existed at this time was due to the institution to which they were previously bound: slavery.<sup>cix</sup>

During slavery, since men could not conceivably protect and provide for their partners and children, it allowed women to be equal in status to men. They all worked on the fields or in the master's home during the day, but at night the women had their domestic duties to attend to as well, giving them a more well-rounded area of expertise to draw from when giving advice or help to another slave. As ironic as it sounds, slavery was the institution which made it possible for African American women to be free from subordination to African American men.

Susie King Taylor was an exception in so many ways. She and her family had been freed early on in the war, about April of 1862, who lived with Union soldiers on St. Simon's island. She was asked by the commodore on the island to be a teacher, and she also learned a lot of things about army life that many black men at this point were keen to learn. However it was not this way for most African American women. Once emancipated, amongst the upheaval involved with the Civil War and Reconstruction,

women lost their equal status in a public domain. They now had to look to their husbands for support in every sense: financially, domestically, and politically. It is truly a shame that freedom in the eyes of the American government meant being subjected to another kind of slavery for African American women.<sup>cx</sup>

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