THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Beyond What is Written: Enslaved Women and the Production of Intellectual Traditions Independent of Literacy

By

Jael Davis

May 2025

A paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Arts degree in the

Master of Arts Program in the Social Sciences

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Rashauna Johnson

Preceptor: Dr. Alexander Hofmann

Dedicated to my mother, my brother, and dad for their endless support and patience as well as my nana and every woman who has inspired my love of learning.

In the spring of 1937, Mildred Graves recounted her experience as an enslaved midwife. Born into slavery in Hanover, Virginia, Mildred worked a variety of roles on the Tinsley plantation. She was a housemaid and cook, caring for the sick and working as a midwife. Mildred's slaveholder frequently hired her out to tend to the sick in Hanover to bring additional revenue. She described a specific instance when, while delivering a child, she could tell the mother was suffering complications. Upon entering the room to deliver the child, two doctors attempted to stop Mildred from working. They told her that her help was not needed and that they didn't want "...any witch doctors or hoodoo stuff."[1] Mildred delivered the baby herself, with both mother and child recovering safely.

The doctors that Mildred encountered dismissed her because of a racialized assumption that, as a black midwife, she participated in spiritual practices that sat outside the realm of what they considered acceptable. As the nineteenth century progressed, medical practice became associated with masculinity leading many doctors to undercut the medical knowledge that midwives held. The shift was felt by midwives across racial groups. The anxieties reflected in how doctors spoke to Mildred related to this shift. Along with this, the doctors in Mildred's story understood that the healing practices of enslaved peoples existed on a spectrum that sat beyond what they perceived as proper medical practice. The midwife and conjure doctor were two figures that represented the spiritual and healing practices of enslaved communities. Both held positions that required not only an understanding of how to heal the physical body but also an understanding of the spiritual realm and the physical realities it could affect. Viewing the spectrum of African religious and healing practices as a circle, one would find the midwife and

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[1]Charles L. Perdue, Thomas E. Barden, Robert K. Phillips, and Virginia Writers' Project. *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*. (University Press of Virginia: 1976) 120.

the conjure doctor sitting at opposite points. The larger spectrum unites them while their positions prioritized different facets. Both were vital to the intellectual traditions that enslaved people developed as a means of surviving bondage.

Early examples of black intellectual traditions spur thoughts of Frederick Douglass, Phillis Wheatley, and Harriet Jacobs. These authors, along with others, sit in a realm of knowledge that appears separate from the knowledge that enslaved people developed on plantations. This research asks how the work of these intellectual giants was informed by the experiences of those who lived and died in bondage. More specifically, it centers on how enslaved black women created and expressed intellectual traditions developed independent of literacy to survive bondage and sustain future generations. Inquiry into this question reveals that the intellectual traditions enslaved women created were most tangibly expressed in how they practiced and preserved knowledge in the realm of healing and spirituality. The intellectual traditions they developed rejected the binaries imposed by white slaveholders and leveraged the ability to be both read and misread to protect a sense of interiority. The building of these traditions by enslaved mothers and kinswomen also allowed freed black people to bring the same ideas into new spaces and reproduce them in innovative ways.

The primary methodological approach used in this research is a black feminist reading of source material to glean how black women produced, sustained, and used intellectual traditions created outside of literacy as tools to survive enslavement. Angela Davis's work on the role that enslaved women played in their communities has guided this work.[2] In her essay, Davis argues for how enslaved communities hinged on the work of enslaved women. Their labor, both voluntary in the family context and forced through their bondage, was what allowed space for the

[2] Angela Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves." *The Massachusetts Review.* 13, no. ½ (1972): 81-100. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25088201

black community to exist as a community.[3] It is through this lens that the production and sustaining of intellectual traditions is considered. In centering this approach, there is a focus on reading for what is not immediately present to see where black women directly influence the production of ideological tools for surviving enslavement. The goal of exploring traditions created within religious and healing practices is to demonstrate how these constituted the intellectual traditions enslaved women developed.

An acknowledgment of communal wellbeing, a recognition of spiritual forces, and recognizing the value of good and evil are all expressions of the intellectual traditions that enslaved women created as a way to survive bondage. For the purposes of this research, intellectual traditions are defined as ideological tools developed to address issues of morality, spirituality, and interpersonal relationships within the plantation context. The primary goal in using the phrase "intellectual traditions," is to complicate ideas of what intellectual production looks like for populations barred from literacy to expand historical imagination and analysis of the traditions they created. This work focuses on the reconciling of opposite realities through the acknowledgment of moral spectrums and the use of religious legibility as a tool for surviving bondage as aspects of the intellectual frameworks that enslaved women developed.

The goal of defining these ideologies as intellectual traditions is twofold. On one hand, it is important because it challenges the idea that complex intellectual thought begins and ends with literacy. The word "intellectual" is included to actively disrupt who has been considered intellectual and producers of complex knowledge across historiography. What the use of this phrase does not seek to do is argue that enslaved women's knowledge production is only made valuable through proximity to white academic thought or when viewed through the lens of

[3] Angela Davis, “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves.” *The Massachusetts Review.* 13, no. ½ (1972): 81-100. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25088201

academia as intellectual thought so often is. The goal of using this word is the opposite. It centers on stretching understandings of intellectual thought to include knowledge production created outside of literacy.

Another reason why the ideas these women produced are framed as intellectual is to bring attention to how they grappled with bondage through ideological processes and reconciled these with their sense of interiority. It is an attempt to better understand the logic that enslaved women built to navigate their physical realities. In focusing on this, I hope to join other scholars in creating an image of enslaved black women that is nuanced and well-rounded in its understanding of her beyond the commodified body. Through this work, a better understanding of how enslaved black women understood the world around them and the logic they gleaned from it can be reached.

Included throughout this argument are pieces of evidence gathered from interviews collected by the Federal Writers Project. As with any source base, these interviews and the information they provide are imperfect. Scholars such as John W. Blassingame and S.M Grant have agreed on the struggles that come with reading for the experiences of the enslaved through editing and the social ramifications of using white interviewers.[4] The interviews that are included in this piece took place in Virginia. The Virginia interviews were one of few that black interviewers could participate in. Their presence changes the texture of the information that was shared. Rather than encountering a "featherbed resistance" as white interviewers faced, black interviewers were able to establish trust with participants in ways that led them to share more information.[5]

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[4] John W. Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems." *The Journal of Southern History* 41, no. 4 (1975): 475. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2205559

[5] S.M. Grant, "'Dere Never Wuz a War like Dis War': The WPA Narratives and the Emotional Echoes of the Civil War." *Slavery & Abolition* 43, no. 1 (2021): 160–184. https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2021.1956193.

Another aspect of the FWP interviews that these scholars agree on is that the age of the participants presents a challenge. Many participants were children during the time they were enslaved. Along with this, the age at which they were interviewed means that the memories they shared may be challenging to recall. This research uses the narratives of interviewees to glean more information about how the women they were in community with developed intellectual traditions to navigate bondage. The goal in doing this is not to focus on development across generations but to address the paucity of sources available that provide direct insight into these women's intellectual lives between 1830s and 1850s Virginia. As a result, the use of these interviews focuses less on seeking out an unquestioned veracity and more on analyzing how knowledge and women are recounted by those who discuss them.

Literature on the healing and religious traditions of enslaved communities is united in its acknowledgment that good and evil, helping and harming, existed as dual ideas that coexisted without negative connotation rather than sitting at opposite ends of a moral spectrum. Conjure doctors represent a clear example of this. As spiritual figures whose work extended to healing, they sat at the intersection of doctoring and religious practices in the plantation context. Jason Young explores conjure doctors and how they were positioned as spiritual leaders and inspired slave revolts. Young acknowledges that "Conjurers certainly had the power to heal, but they could also inflict harm"[4] Informed by the scholarship of Theophus Smith, Sharla Fett acknowledges the same dualism in relation to practices of black doctors and how healing and harming were important parts of the curing process rather than existing as separate dichotomies.[5]

Fett and Young draw attention to the duality and complex position of the conjure doctor in both spiritual and doctoring contexts. In conversation, their work reveals that the conjure doctor was a figure in the enslaved community capable of holding seemingly opposite ideas as

simultaneously true to enact a desired change in the physical world. The position of the conjure doctor as sitting between the world of faith and medicine while holding extreme influence in both is a position that does not have a true equivalent in the medical and spiritual lives of white planters and slaveholders. Thus, the existence of the conjure doctor marks a distinct difference in the intellectual traditions that the enslaved built to survive bondage. Conjure doctors occupied a complex and abstracted space in the enslaved black worldview that sat beyond the imagination of slaveholders. In this way, they represented an expression of the ideologies that enslaved people created to survive.

Bondage was a system fraught with opposing and often contradictory truths. To be enslaved was to exist at the intersection of paradoxes imposed by white colonial ideologies; women specifically faced this in being depicted as both sexless and seductive. Thus, it makes sense that a figure would emerge in the enslaved black worldview who was capable of holding opposite ideas as simultaneous truths. The complexity of enslaved intellectual traditions has a lineage that traces back into African Diasporic intellectual traditions as well. Use of song in connection with healing practices indicated a strong connection between the spiritual and physical realm.[6] Both needed to be invoked to successfully heal illness or injury. The conjure doctor is an example of figures that emerged as an expression of this worldview and a need to contend with the ideologies that supported chattel slavery. Enslaved communities were constantly defined by paradoxical truths that were held in tandem with one another despite being logically incompatible. The existence of a figure within the community who could symbolize the

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[6]Mary Hicks, *Captive Cosmopolitans: Black Mariners and the World of South Atlantic Slavery* (University of North Carolina Press, 2024)

dualism of good and evil was a natural product of this environment, a tool to read into the contradicting logic of bondage and white supremacy.

Current scholarship on enslaved communities' spiritual and medical practices readily acknowledges the complex knowledge production that existed in these traditions. James Sweet's research on Domingo Alvarez demonstrates the social power associated with healing and how perceptions of healing from black and white communities influenced Alvarez's life. Sweet makes it clear that it was Alvarez's healing abilities that drove his experiences with law and those who upheld bondage. His knowledge was a threat. [7] Fett's analysis of healing in the plantation context explores how black women stood at the intersection of medical progress and exploitation.[8] Both scholars demonstrate how enslaved people's knowledge of healing disrupted social structures in slave societies. In conversation with one another, their work points to the more significant threat that intellectual traditions posed to slaveholders: knowledge of how to heal the body and intellectual traditions that developed around it was significant not only because of how complex successful treatment of the body was but also because of the social weight that came with holding such knowledge. The healing traditions these scholars analyze come from intricate bodies of knowledge created by enslaved people. Fett focuses on an understanding of the body rooted in spirituality and herbalism, while Sweet demonstrates how this knowledge influenced the social experiences of enslaved people. The responses to these traditions that each scholar analyzes demonstrate the threat that intellectual traditions coming out of enslaved communities posed for slaveholding societies. Their work demonstrates the existence of these intellectual traditions. The work of Pablo Gomez joins this in acknowledging intellectual production

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[7] James H. Sweet, *Domingos Álvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World* (University of North Carolina Press, 2011)

[8] Sharla M Fett. *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (University of North Carolina Press, 2002)

throughout the diaspora and arguing for how experiential knowledge "made black ritual practitioners the intellectual leaders of a region saturated with ideas from all over the globe."[9] This work builds off of other scholars' analysis of the intellectual lives of black people across the diaspora to argue for how enslaved women in the U.S south contributed to this tradition. By naming these systems of belief and understanding of the world as intellectual, an understanding of what qualifies as intellectual thought is expanded. A reluctance to do so risks repeating the violence of slaveholders in refusing to name the bodies of knowledge the enslaved created as complex and nuanced expressions of intellectual thought.

For black women, intellectual traditions were built as tools for enslaved individuals and communities to survive bondage. Alexis Wells-Oghoghomeh explores this idea in her discussion of how spiritual practices were a way for black women to ensure the survival of their communities and make them a safe space.[10] Black women also used religion and spirituality as social tools for their individual survival, as evidenced in works from Brenda E. Stevenson and her discussion of how religion was used as a tool for social capital and safety on plantations.[11] The social roles that black women were expected to occupy became blurred. Both scholars demonstrate distinct ways that religion and spirituality became tools not only for surviving enslavement but also for negotiating the position that enslaved women had in relation to the societies that held them in bondage. Thus, their work reveals how the complexity of spiritual

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[9] Pablo F. Gomez, *The Experiential Caribbean: Creating Knowledge and Healing in the Early Modern Atlantic* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2017) 3.
[10] Alexis Wells-Oghoghomeh, *The Souls of Womenfolk: The Religious Cultures of Enslaved Women in the Lower South* (University of North Carolina Press, 2021)
[11] Brenda E. Stevenson, "'Marsa Never Sot Aunt Rebecca down': Enslaved Women, Religion, and Social Power in the Antebellum South." *The Journal of African American History* 90, no. 4 (2005): 345–367. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20064018

practices was a manifestation of the intellectual traditions that black women created to survive and negotiate their positions.

The intellectual traditions created by enslaved black women demonstrate that they held concrete understandings of how slaveholders read their bodies and actions. Jennifer Morgan argues this succinctly in her exploration of how enslaved women made decisions to protect kinship ties based on how they understood their bodies to be commodified.[12] The idea demonstrates that how slavery is understood across the Atlantic world must begin with an acknowledgment that black Africans were familiar with commodification and thus recognized when they had become commodified and where this placed them in relation to the state. In arguing this, Morgan establishes that enslaved women were aware of the value that had been placed on their bodies, and the actions that they took were active responses to this.[13] Stevens builds off of this idea by arguing that enslaved women attained social power by aligning themselves with religion and thus had the opportunity to move between social statuses in a distinct way while holding distinct influence on plantations. Her argument demonstrates that through knowledge of how slaveholders read their bodies and actions, enslaved black women created traditions that were adaptive to their commodification. Building off of what these scholars argue, I posit that the way enslaved women responded to the commodification of their bodies by slaveholders constituted an aspect of the intellectual traditions and ideological tools that enslaved women created to survive bondage.

Community and kinship were central to the survival and transmission of ideas developed from the intellectual traditions enslaved women produced. The transmission of knowledge

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[12] Jennifer L. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic* (Duke University Press, 2021)
[13]Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery*. 180

between those in enslaved communities was an important aspect of this, and it was demonstrated in the realities faced by enslaved midwives. The knowledge that midwives and enslaved nurses on plantations created sat within a contested space. Slaveholders viewed their work as necessary, while Western medical practitioners saw their work as subpar compared to more invasive surgical procedures. Along with this, midwives frequently saw slaveholders and their families at their most vulnerable states, acting as healers, not just for those enslaved on plantations but for slaveholders themselves. Deirdra Cooper-Owens includes a specific example of this idea. An enslaved midwife was repeatedly beaten so that she would not reveal the slaveholder's "secrets." Years later, her grandchild participates in the FWP and shares how the midwife shared her knowledge of healing as a means of reclaiming it where her slaveholder had sought to silence her and claim her knowledge for himself.[14] Here, and within Cooper-Owens' larger argument, it is clear that community and kinship behave as avenues where the knowledge that black women created could be rightly credited to them rather than silenced. The same conversation that helped one generation reclaim knowledge allowed another to become equipped with the same information and continue using it as a tool to survive bondage. Thus, the process of sharing medical information in the community and with kin not only allowed for knowledge to be reclaimed but sustained within the enslaved community; contributing to the legacy of intellectual traditions and ideological tools developed independent of literacy.

The same literature that discusses the healing traditions that enslaved black people developed also recognizes the tensions implicit in healing in the context of slavery. Looking to the wider diaspora, the enslaved medical practitioners and barbers in Bahia and other parts of the Caribbean played key roles in developing and sustaining the ideologies that defined healing

[14] Deirdra Benia Cooper-Owens, *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology* (The University of Georgia Press, 2017), 50.

practices aboard slave ships. The same barbers who healed the sick aboard these ships were also responsible for assessing their market value. In this position, they both acknowledged the humanity of the enslaved by healing them while also working to support the larger project of the slave trade by assigning value to bodies in a slave economy.[15] Though the Bahian barbers aboard slave ships are worlds away from the enslaved women working on Virginia plantations, both occupy social positions that cause them to view the world according to a moral spectrum rather than binary as imposed by Western, white thought processes. Using a moral spectrum allows for two opposite things to be true rather than entirely contradicting one another. Enslaved barbers lived in a different context and, as men, were able to leverage a different kind of power in slaveholding societies. Simultaneously, the nature of slavery in the Caribbean varied from the experiences of those enslaved in Virginia. Despite these differences, a clear continuity emerges in holding opposite realities as true. The trend demonstrates that this was a key ideological tool in surviving slavery and constitutes an aspect of intellectual traditions.

Evident throughout this work is a discussion of how enslaved women read the actions of their oppressors and the ways that they worked to be read in specific ways by them. The same idea is explored in the work of Samah Choudhury, who analyzes the dialogue between oppressed and oppressor in the context of Muslim identity in the 21st century United States.[16] What Choudhury discusses in her analysis of Muslim humor in the 21st century reverberates centuries into the past and across ethnic and religious lines: the oppressed frequently have to begin dialogues with oppressors from a point that the oppressor has already set. In the context of my work, white slaveholders have set a dialogue with black women that begins with understanding them as sub-human with little room for social elevation. Enslaved women understand this and

[15] Hicks, *Captive Cosmopolitans*, 279
[16] Samah Choudhury, "Racializing Islam Through Humor." *The Journal of Religion* 104, no. 3 (July 2024): 345–367

work to be perceived in specific ways to achieve their own goals while trying to survive slavery. If the oppressor's dialogue began with calling enslaved people who were active in the church tolerable, active religious participation was used by enslaved women to achieve a level of safety. On the opposite end, superstition and the threat of the unknown were also used by the enslaved to protect and conceal their own interests.

Applying Choudhury's framework to this research provides the opportunity to explore the interiority of enslaved women in a new way. Framing their interactions with slaveholders from the perspective of a dialogue and how enslaved women worked to be read in specific ways provides a new way of understanding the logic these women used in navigating bondage.

Much scholarship has explored the interior lives of enslaved women and related this to knowledge production. However, there remains a division of scholarship that is hesitant to name the knowledge produced by enslaved women as intellectual unless they were literate. The work of Paul Teed and Melissa Laad Teed offers an explicit example of this perspective. In a work focused on the daily lives of black American slaves, the authors Teed and Ladd Teed include a chapter on the intellectual lives of enslaved people.[17] They write that "Because of the enormous obstacles placed in the way of enslaved people's ability to develop or express their intellectual lives, their most sophisticated contributions were made by those who escaped from slavery."[18] The specific contributions they reference are slave narratives popularized during the abolitionist movement. An assumption that literacy and the translation of narratives into the written word defines intellectual life is what undergirds this portion of their argument. Yet, the work of Sweet, Oghoghomeh, and so many other scholars demonstrates the direct opposite. Contemporary scholars of the Atlantic world demonstrate that complex intellectual traditions were developed by

[17] Paul E. Teed and Melissa Ladd Teed, "Intellectual Life," in *Daily Life of African American Slaves in the Antebellum South,* (Greenwood, 2020), 166
[18] Teed and Ladd Teed, "Intellectual Life," 166

enslaved people independent of an ability to read or write. Their analysis of healing and religious traditions depicts systems that are clear examples of robust intellectual thought. The research that they have done creates a clear contradiction to the idea that the intellectual lives of enslaved people began with literacy and a translation of narratives into the written word.[19]

This work seeks to align with the work of scholars arguing for the production of complex knowledge systems by enslaved people. It builds off of these arguments by offering that intellectual traditions created by enslaved women were crucial to how they navigated bondage on a personal and communal level. There is great difficulty in centering research on the interior lives of people who were barred from recording their ideas in ways prioritized by traditional archives. Beyond this, it is impossible to know what truly animated historical actors and influenced the decisions that they made. While acknowledging this, there is still great value in asking questions that center on the interiority of enslaved women and interrogate the factors that may have driven their physical actions. The tenuous nature of the sources we are left to draw from means that the ideas offered are likely and not definitive. It works to draw out larger questions of how to think of a bottom-up approach to reading the development of black intellectualism.

Adopting Spectrum, Rejecting Binary

The adoption of a moral spectrum allowed for disparate truths to exist at the same time without contradicting one another. This framework was particularly valuable for enslaved women who found themselves at the intersection of struggles surrounding sex and race; creating an understanding of the world that transcended binaries imposed by white slaveholders was a means of reclaiming an understanding of the self and using it as a tool for surviving bondage.

[19] Mia Bay et al. *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women*. (University of North Carolina Press, 2015.)

In Virginia between 1771 and 1848, Lethe Jackson was enslaved on the plantation of the state's governor, David Campbell. When the Campbell family was not present on the estate, Lethe would manage the property alongside another enslaved woman named Hannah. Their positions in managing the property without the plantation owners indicated a significant level of influence on the property's affairs. Along with managing the property, the women were tasked with sending dictated letters to the mistress of the plantation and her daughter.[20] While their letters are dictated, their very existence points to the influence that Lethe and Hannah held on the plantation and the way their knowledge of how to run the estate blurred their status.

Lethe's letters are specifically interesting because of her meditations on spirituality and religion. Her letters to her mistress are rich with religious advice. They offer a glimpse into the ways that enslaved women developed intellectual traditions that sought to embrace seemingly disparate ideas and reject the binary logic imposed by some white slaveholders. This is demonstrated in the lack of tension seen in the way that Lethe reconciles African religious traditions with Christianity in her discussions of different phases of life. The topics that she covers demonstrate how enslaved women communicated and sustained ideas that they had been raised with and how these were kept in active dialogue with one another to inform the intellectual traditions developed as a means of survival for enslaved women and their communities.

Lethe Jackson's discussion of religion in one letter to her mistress demonstrates the intellectual frameworks that Jackson created to navigate her relationship with religion, bondage, and her mistress. Lethe's letter shows evidence of a reconciliation of African religious traditions with Christianity as it was espoused on plantations. Her writing demonstrates how she sees the

[20] "Letter to Miss Virginia Campbell from Lethe Jackson, April 18, 1838." *Campbell Family Papers*. Duke University, https://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/scriptorium/campbell/1838-04-18/1838-04-18.html

two as parts of the same spiritual realm and existing on a spiritual spectrum rather than being in opposition to one another. Her understanding of the two religions as existing without conflict is a testament to how enslaved women navigated survival through opposing ideologies of white slaveholders and made room for ideological tools that accommodated their personal understandings of the world and those that were espoused by planters.

The clearest example of this comes from Lethe's discussion of how she views life in seasons. In her letters to her mistress, Lethe shares the current state of the property, excitement at the news that her mistress shares about her travels, and offers meditations on religion and the seasons of life. In thinking on the last point, she says "how pat we are in the buoyant days of youth to forget-that the Autumn of age and Winter of death, is coming."[21] Her association between the seasons of the year and phases of life speaks directly to the logic of the West African Cosmogram. The cosmogram was a physical representation of West African Cosmography. It held four points within a circle, each representing a phase of life and a corresponding season. Autumn and Winter directly corresponded with old age and death.[22] This portion of Lethe's letter is distinct in the overt way that she references an African cosmological outlook while discussing Western Christianity. She used the logic of one to make sense of the other and thus represents how the intellectual traditions that enslaved women developed were products of reconciling and negotiating seemingly disparate ideas with one another. In this case, Lethe is reconciling African religious and Christian cosmographies with little tension.

In the same quote, Lethe demonstrates a rejection of time as linear and an embrace of time as cyclic according to African cosmography. This is evidenced in Lethe's discussion of the seasons and how they relate to God. Through her description, she interacts with time and divinity

[21] "Letter to Miss Virginia Campbell from Lethe Jackson, April 18, 1838." *Campbell Family Papers*.
[22] Young, *Rituals of Resistance*, 48

as cyclic things that are predictable in the pattern they will follow. The idea marks a stark difference from the logic of Christianity that hinges on time being linear. Lethe's understandings of Christianity are in tension with the linear chronology it depends on to be logical. Nevertheless, she did not express anxiety over this. Rather, she used the logic she found between both faith systems to comfort her mistress as she wrote, "I know that you do reflect on these things- I know there are a few young persons who are as pious as you are."[23]

The process of bringing together separate religious frameworks also speaks to the process of creating complex intellectual traditions that informed approaches to religion. Lethe's understanding of African religious traditions likely came from older generations of enslaved people that she lived in community and in kinship with. She was an heir to intellectual traditions that sought to understand African religious traditions that had been sustained and adapted for the context of the plantation on a spectrum with Christianity as white planters espoused it. Lethe's description of her faith shows little tension between the different faith frameworks she was reconciling. The lack of tension demonstrates that, by the nineteenth century, Lethe and women similar to her were familiar with placing disparate ideas onto spectrums as a means of rejecting the binary that Western Christianity often imposed. The process speaks to how new and complex understandings of faith were built as necessary tools for surviving bondage.

Enslaved women were made not only to reconcile the disparate ideas projected onto them and the opposing frameworks they confronted but also to reconcile the positions of those who held authority over them. Colcock Jones, a reverend and slaveholder, is an example of this. As a reverend, C.C Jones was deeply embedded in white christian tradition. As a planter, he was also deeply embedded in white slaveholding traditions. The people that Jones enslaved would have

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[23] "Letter to Miss Virginia Campbell from Lethe Jackson, April 18, 1838." *Campbell Family Papers*.
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had to contend with what it meant to interact with a man who denied their humanity while also being in such close relationship to the divine. C.C Jones demonstrated a complex figure that the enslaved intellectual outlook would have to contend with; one that allegedly worked for a christian God that had been incorporated into their own faith systems while still holding them as chattel and denying their humanity. C.C Jones represents a figure that occupies two positions that create tension with one another and thus demonstrated another way that the enslaved intellectual worldview had to reconcile opposites.

C.C. Jones was a planter in Liberty County, Georgia. During the 1830s, spent much time away from his property while traveling for his work as a reverend. During his travels, he wrote to his wife, daughter, and other family members frequently. A specific letter written to his wife, Mary, in 1835 indicated a trend throughout his writing; his position as reverend and occupying a prominent space within his faith is forefronted while his ideas surrounding being a slaveholder operated in the background of his thinking. In his letter, brief glimpses into the way he thought of black people appear. He described working with two other men "...in relation to the formation for the religious instruction of the negroes and they oppose it." He went on to say that the state is divided between those who oppose religious instruction and those who support it. The father of those who oppose it, and whom he deems infidels, was a man who had "...done this state more evil than fifty years can reason." After discussing his distaste for their leader he concludes that "there may be decided opposition to the religious instructions of the negroes and there may need be."[24]

This section begins with C.C Jones implying that he was leading the charge in advocating for the religious instruction of black people. His religious advocacy for freed or enslaved black

[24] "Correspondence and other Papers, January 1835-December 1837." *Charles Colcock Jones Papers,* Manuscripts Collection 154, Louisiana Research Collection, (Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University)

people would make sense, given that he is owner of several properties with each holding over twenty enslaved people on them. His position as reverend and as slaveholder make it likely that C.C. Jones would be invested in the religious outlook of those he enslaved, if for no other reason to inspire ideas of God-ordained obedience. Yet, the focus of the letter quickly shifts away from this work and to frustrations with a particular man who opposes it. It is important to note that C.C. Jones' frustration with this group comes from a strong dislike for their leader and not from an opposition to his ideas. This is evidenced in the final line of the section where he appears to concede that there may be benefit in opposing the religious instruction of black people. The switch in tone makes it appear as though Jones is impartial. It is a brief glimpse into how Jones discusses religion in relation to the enslaved.

The texture of the section, in the way that focus is shifted from Jones' work in religious instruction of black people to his disgust with a colleague, demonstrates how the enslaved operated in the background of how he viewed his religious responsibilities. They are present, but overall he revealed himself as impartial regarding whether they received formal instruction or not.[25]

In relation to how enslaved women developed intellectual traditions, Jones was an example of a man who did not conceptualize his position as a slaveholder as in tension with his position as reverend. It is clear that black people operate in the background of his worldview, seeping into the foreground when directly related to his spiritual work. Yet, it was men like Jones who the enslaved had to foreground in their intellectual traditions to ensure survival. Being enslaved by a man who was both reverend and slave master demanded that black intellectual traditions developed on the plantation respond to a system that could allow for such statuses to coexist. As a result, Jones was an example of the ways that intellectual traditions and a necessity

[25] "Correspondence and other Papers, January 1835-December 1837." *Charles Colcock Jones Papers.*

to reconcile opposites went beyond the ideas projected onto the black body and contended with the variety of social positions held by slaveholders.

The healing practices of enslaved women were also a testament to their uses of moral spectrums. Phebe Jackson stands as an example of an enslaved woman whose healing practices were informed by western and african traditions. An account book belonging to Jackson holds records of her healing operations and money collected from them. It is penned in her hand with brief notes from a man named R. Ritchie Jr. The purpose of the account book was to keep track of patients who had received treatment and the amount of money they owed. It holds patient records from 1833 to 1846 in Petersburg, Virginia. Jackson reappears in the archive in the preservation of her manumission papers written in 1840 by her mistress, Jane Minor. Analyzing the manumission papers alongside the account book indicates that Jackson was born into slavery and manumitted on account of her knowledge of healing.[26]

Alongside the list of names were services rendered and the price of treatment. The two clearest examples of these include "Mr. Millor Paid for Leeching Child- 1.00" Another page notes "Sept 22nd. Mr. James Leo for cupping Sylvia- PAID."[27] Cupping and leeching are practices that demonstrate Jackson was utilizing medical approaches from both western european and African traditions. Looking to the larger Atlantic world, the use of cupping was seen in the West African context as well. It was a practice utilized by black healers aboard slave ships in their attempts to maintain the health of the recently enslaved.[28] Leeching was a recognized approach to medicine in America at this time as well. Yet, to see the two practices used together points to a significant African and white western influence on the medical practices that Jackson

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[26] Phebe Jackson. *Account Book of Phebe Jackson, 1833–1846, and Medical Note by R. Ritchie, Jr.* (University of Virginia Library)
[27] Phebe Jackson, *Account Book of Phebe Jackson*
[28] Hicks, *Captive Cosmopolitans*, 280.

utilized. Thus, these elements indicate another aspect of how enslaved women used the knowledge imposed on them with that shared between the people they are in community with to create new intellectual traditions.

Jackson's knowledge of healing was the result of learning from those in her community and those external to it. Since Jackson's manumission is related to her capabilities as a healer, her knowledge of healing had to begin prior to her being freed, likely beginning with lessons from other healers in her community. The intergenerational sharing of knowledge concerning approaches to healing was a crucial aspect of this.[29]

Being Read and Misread

Closer attention to ideas of legibility in the context of enslaved women in Virginia reveals that how one was perceived by slaveholders characterized a complex and nuanced aspect of the way intellectual traditions were developed to survive bondage. In combination with their discussion of a religious spectrum, Lethe's letters also demonstrate the tension in fashioning the self in the context of white Christianity on plantations and the disparate but coexisting identities that enslaved women adopted. The intellectual traditions and ideologies that black women fashioned needed to accommodate both positions. Scholars have argued that black women across history held a triple consciousness in navigating not only white colonial but also patriarchal gazes.[30] Lethe's letter demonstrates the idea of multiple consciousnesses in the early sections of her letter when she assured her mistress that "everything is goin on finely and prosper in my hands."[31]concerning the state of the plantation.

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[29] Fett, *Working Cures,* 130
[30] Wells-Oghoghomeh, *The Souls of Womenfolk,* 2
[31] "Letter to Miss Virginia Campbell from Lethe Jackson, April 18, 1838." *Campbell Family Papers*.

Lethe writes as an enslaved woman who is maintaining the plantation while her mistress is away. She has also dictated these letters to someone literate, meaning that her direct words on the state of the property were valued above what may have been written by overseers or other white persons present on the property. Put more succinctly, Lethe is an enslaved woman who has been entrusted with maintaining the Campbell plantation in the family's absence. This position points to a level of authority and trust that is held in her by both the family and others living and working on the property. However, the question of her influence is complicated when she writes that she is glad that her mistress' mother "...has not forgotten lowly me-"[32] The line demonstrates another side of Lethe, one that emphasizes subservience to the women she writes to. The idea is in tension with evidence of the social influence that she holds on the property. It is from this tension that the presence of a triple consciousness can be read. In juxtaposing these lines, it is clear that Lethe was reconciling her influence on the property with her relationship to her mistress. She was balancing her position as a black woman surviving bondage, and the logic of these lines is a demonstration of this.

The tension between these lines in the texts points to how issues of consciousness appear in the intellectual traditions enslaved women created. Throughout the letter, Lethe constructs herself in relation to a variety of external factors including whiteness, religious frameworks, and how these influence her experience as an enslaved woman. Her words demonstrate a carefully constructed balance between asserting how she views herself and the way in which others view her as a bondswoman. It is a dance done in response to the consequences of being read as a threat or deemed dangerous by slaveholders-a reality that loomed as a constant threat in Virginia during the nineteenth century. By aligning herself with how Lethe understood her mistress to perceive her as lowly, Lethe was able to maintain a level of safety while simultaneously understanding

[32] "Letter to Miss Virginia Campbell from Lethe Jackson, April 18, 1838." *Campbell Family Papers*.

how significant her knowledge of maintaining the property was. The ideological balancing that Lethe demonstrated in the text speaks to how intellectual traditions were fashioned to protect enslaved women and their sense of interiority based on their understanding of how slaveholders viewed them. Understanding these concepts contextualizes the tension in identity seen in Lethe's letter as a process of building intellectual systems that respond to enslavement.

Religion was another avenue in which enslaved women leveraged how they were read to protect interiority. Analyzing the relationship between enslaved black women and Christianity initially begs a question of whether it was a system imposed onto or embraced by them. The reality of enslaved women's experiences at this time reveals that these are not opposing but simultaneous realities. The intellectual traditions that they developed reflected this.

The idea that Christianity appears as a tool that black women have relied on across history in the United States is well supported.[33] While the faith may have been initially imposed on enslaved populations and heavily censored by slaveholders, enslaved women found in the figure of Christ someone whom they could align themselves with. As a population that was also subjected to humiliating and tortuous experiences while being expected to carry on in service of their communities, the figure of Christ was one in which black women were able to align with and find their own meaning outside of what slaveholders sought to control.[34]

Thus, the role that Christianity began to occupy in black spirituality necessarily impacted the already existing ideas of how to protect an interior self. The protection of an interior self was one recognized by the larger black community and was expressed in how it navigated the status of the black religiosity in relation to the cosmologies held by white slaveholders.[35] The power of

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[33] Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women and Religion* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).
[34] Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice,* 25.
[35] Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

spirituality is seen in interviews with ex-slaves who recount their experiences in attending white churches. Frequently, interviewees cited mothers and grandmothers as the family members who attended and brought them to white church services. Since many interviewees were children at the time of the experiences they recount, their understanding of whether it was their mother's decision to take them to white churches or done through force of slaveholders is unclear. Regardless of whether families were forced to attend white churches, it remains significant that enslaved women cultivated spiritual practices in line with Christianity. Examples of the kinds of sermons shared in some of these churches are demonstrated in a description from Cornelius Garners- an ex-slave from Norfolk, Virginia. He mentions that white pastors only focused on teaching congregations to obey their masters.[36] The tendency to preach obedience to masters can be read as a response to religion's role in rebellions across the nineteenth century. Among these, the Southampton rebellion sat closest to the lived experiences of both pastors and congregations in Virginia. Outside of this, a general superstition of the religious practices of the enslaved also drove a rhetoric of Chrisitan obedience. The interviewees included in the Federal Writers Program were children in the memories that they recount. However, their parents, grandparents, and pastors indeed would have recalled the legal and social chaos that came in the wake of the Southampton rebellion. Thus, the proximity of the experience may have been a significant influence on sermons that centered on emphasizing obedience among the enslaved.

In sermons that focused on obedience, there was a tacit acknowledgment of the power associated not only with black spirituality but also with collective actions that were driven by it. These sermons attempted to combat this and reemphasize the moral and religious value of

[36] Perdue et al. *Weevils in the Wheat.* 99-100.

submission while framing the opposite as evil. Yet, black intellectual traditions and the ideological tools developed out of them did not acknowledge a moral binary in the same ways that white Christian sermons imposed.

The nature of these sermons also demonstrates that there were underlying anxieties present not only in black congregants but also among white pastors. For white pastors and congregants, there was an underlying anxiety concerning collective action driven by black spirituality. Pastors were preaching obedience to masters because they had seen the power of collective action under spirituality in the Southampton rebellion and other tensions between the enslaved and slaveholders. For black congregants, there was an impetus to attend white churches for the sake of being read as pious and use this as a tool to navigate bondage.A similar idea appears in the work of Brenda E. Stevenson.[37] There is value in pushing the idea of how black women were read by white, christian perspectives further to argue for their utilization of this as an aspect of the larger intellectual traditions that enslaved women developed.Participation in white churches demonstrates how the adoption of white religious traditions could be used as tools for legibility.

Black religious traditions were, at times, made purposefully illegible to white slaveholders. In order to wield perceptions of religious practices as a tool, enslaved people had to show themselves as active participants in Christianity to be read as pious and non-threatening by white slaveholders. There was safety in this. To be outwardly perceived as a stalwart Christian created a lack of interest in the religious lives of the enslaved that then allowed for a level of privacy in forming interior non-Christian religious practices. Examples of this were also seen in

[37] Stevenson,"'Marsa Never Sot Aunt Rebecca Down."

how enslaved black women, specifically older generations, were able to depict themselves as hyper religious as a means of gaining social power on plantations.[38]

It is important to keep in mind that black and white intellectual traditions concurrently shaped one another.[39] As enslaved mothers and grandmothers took their children to white churches throughout the nineteenth century, Nathaniel Hawthorne sent Young Goodman Brown and Hester Prynne into the woods to contend with the devil in the form of a black man.[40] The religious anxieties and tension between white churches and black congregationalists were palpable beyond the walls of the church-they were ubiquitous. These ideas necessarily influenced the intellectual traditions of enslaved communities. Black mothers and grandmothers participating in white churches as a means of survival became expressed in the larger intellectual traditions that were built. Black intellectual traditions created independent of literacy understood that creating complex ideological tools was necessary to survive enslavement. The adoption and subsequent wielding of legibility within white religious perspectives is an example of this. For those enslaved people who actively attended white churches, there was an opportunity to be read by white slaveholders as particularly religious in a way that the larger white Christian tradition could recognize at the time. In being marked as particularly religious or God-fearing, enslaved black women were able to use this to their advantage in a plantation context.[41]

The production of manuals outlining the medical treatment of the enslaved also demonstrates this idea. Texts that focused on how to treat enslaved peoples were a testament to how the intellectual traditions of the enslaved and slaveholders shaped one another. While the

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[38] Stevenson,"'Marsa Never Sot Aunt Rebecca Down," 346.
[39] Toni Morrison, "Black Matters" in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. (Harvard University Press: 1992)
[40] Nathaniel Hawthorne, Inc NetLibrary, and University of Virginia. Library. Electronic Text Center. *Young Goodman Brown*. (University of Virginia Library ; NetLibrary, 1996) and Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*. (Cambridge: 2002).
[41] Stevenson,"'Marsa Never Sot Aunt Rebecca Down," 347.

enslaved often approached healing through externally influencing illness through therapeutic practices, healing manuals intended for planters demonstrate a reliance on combining therapeutic and surgical approaches to healing.

A specific manual titled *Practical Rules for the Management and Medical Treatment of Negro Slaves in the Sugar Colonies* is an example of this.[42] The work was published in London in 1811 by an anonymous source that identifies as a professional planter. Being published in London and specifically marketed to planters in sugar colonies speaks to the transatlantic dialogue occurring between those physically present on plantations and those managing them from the metropole concerning the wellbeing of enslaved populations.

The text is divided into two parts. The first based on practices concerning the general upkeep of slaves. It ranges in topics from religion to diet. The all-encompassing nature of the categories demonstrates that medical treatment referred to in the title refers generally to how to keep an enslaved population alive and forcibly expand the population. A clear demonstration of the difficulty that planters had in contending with the intellectual traditions developed among the enslaved appears in a section titled, "breeding." Within it, the author dedicated much ink to advocating for the quantitative value of naturally increasing a slave population. The author also detailed what should be done at the nascent stages of pregnancy to prevent miscarriage or abortion. His advice spans from the earliest stages of pregnancy to weaning mother and child away from each other as infants grow into toddlers. An important and telling discussion about midwives appears in a section focused on active birth and labor. The author wrote that "When the pains of labour come on, they will require the service of a midwife, one of which you ought to have of your own, as no estate should be without one." The section went on to describe that

[42] *Practical Rules for the Management and Medical Treatment of Negro Slaves in the Sugar Colonies by a Professional Planter*. (London: J. Barfield: 1811)

the midwife should be an "elderly, sensible, prudent woman who has borne children, may easily be instructed in the art of delivering others."[43] The ideal midwife would qualify to deliver children after receiving instruction from a western doctor or another midwife. Though, according to the author, her only purpose was to spot an issue as it occured rather than address it herself. This, he argued, was when "men of science must be early resorted to."[44] There was tension in this section regarding the extent to which planters depend on midwives versus western doctors. On one hand, the author makes it clear that every plantation should have a midwife present. On another, he emphasizes that their only purpose was to alert "men of science" when a birth presents complications. The author was simultaneously undercutting and emphasizing the value of the midwife with his assessment of her utility changing from line to line.

The passage revealed further inconsistencies in the way that therapeutic medical practices appear in conjunction with Western approaches. This idea was exemplified in an emphasis on the need for cold baths to strengthen both women and newborns. The author argues that if women miscarry because they are too weak to give birth, the solution was that "the constitution must be strengthened by nourishing diet, the cold bath, and steel and bitters in small quantities, and very moderate labour." After birth, the author instructs that infants must be immediately plunged into a tub of water after exiting the womb to ensure their health.[45]

In the juxtaposition of therapeutic healing practices alongside the tension that the author feels towards the position of midwives, it becomes clear that they represented an aspect of the enslaved black intellectual thought process that the planter class struggles to define. Given that

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[43] *Practical Rules for the Management and Medical Treatment of Negro Slaves in the Sugar Colonies by a Professional Planter*. 130
[44] *Practical Rules for the Management and Medical Treatment of Negro Slaves in the Sugar Colonies by a Professional Planter*. 133
[45] *Practical Rules for the Management and Medical Treatment of Negro Slaves in the Sugar Colonies by a Professional Planter*. 134

the work is published in London and anticipates an audience of people managing plantations across the Atlantic, there is also motivation for the author to portray planters as less reliant on the work of midwives than they actually were. In truth, the midwife was a crucial figure for enslaved communities across the sugar plantations of the Caribbean and the cotton plantations of the U.S. south precisely due to her knowledge of healing and where this sat in relation to the production of black intellectual healing traditions. The centrality of midwives to the development of intellectual traditions among the enslaved became particularly pronounced with the popularization of abolitionism. Abolitionists frequently argued that white doctors were the most qualified to ensure the safe delivery of enslaved children. Yet, the knowledge that they used to deliver was frequently taken directly from the practices of midwives.[46] Along with this, the lack of regulation that existed in the birthing room prior to abolitionist intervention allowed for enslaved women to reclaim authority over their reproductive health and the health of their newborn children.[47]

The way that midwives and their healing practices appear in the manual is a testament to how planters wrestled with the intellectual traditions midwives represented on the world stage. The representation of these women was linked to the reputation of planters- to be too reliant on them was a reflection of a weakened colonial state and yet the dependence that planters had on them is unavoidable. Thus, the way that they appear in transatlantic dialogues becomes important.

Concerning the production of intellectual traditions, the ways that midwives appeared in transatlantic dialogues demonstrates how planters shaped their own intellectual perspectives on healing and medicine in large part from the intellectual perspectives of the enslaved and the

[46] Sasha Turner, Contested Bodies: Pregnancy, Childbearing, and Slavery in Jamaica. (University of Pennsylvania Press: 2017). 113
[47] Turner, *Contested Bodies*, 120

success of their healing practices. The influence of black intellectual traditions was expressed in the reliance on therapeutic practices and knowledge of the midwife in tandem with western medical approaches. Planter's ideas concerning medicine and healing were not shaped in a vacuum and were heavily reliant on the work of enslaved midwives. Yet, transatlantic dialogues make it clear that this reliance was obscured in order to preserve the reputation of the colonies, pointing to a struggle that planters faced in how to assert their reliance on the intellectual traditions of enslaved communities.

Leveraging power

The intellectual traditions that enslaved women developed became tangible in how they were able to leverage power over the established authority on plantations and create spaces that were intentionally illegible to slaveholders. In leveraging superstition against slaveholders and working to be read in specific ways by white masters, enslaved women were able to outwardly present themselves in ways that were different from their interior selves, thus protecting their interiority from the gaze of white slaveholders. Spirituality relates to intellectual traditions as a tool for negotiating power because, among the enslaved, there was an understanding of the power of predictive ideas and the use of complex concepts to mobilize against an established authority in the plantation context.

Sinda, a woman enslaved on a Georgia plantation, was described as sharing a prophecy that Christ would come to free herself and others enslaved on the plantation within a specific time frame. The power of this idea "had stripped the lash of its prevailing authority and the terrors of an overseer for once were as nothing…"[48] Those working on the plantation had stopped

[48] Frances Anne Kemble. *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838–1839*. (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green & Longman.) 106

maintaining the property, leading to unkempt fields that threatened economic upset. The story was shared in the diary of Kemble Francis, a British woman who stayed on the Georgia plantation between 1838 and 1839.[49] Her retelling of the story imbued the overseer with wit and an ability to outsmart the logic of the prophecy. She framed him as working with rather than against the logic of it in how he waited to punish Sinda until her prophecy proved false and those in her community had lost faith in her words. However, this perspective does not recognize that the overseer was outnumbered and, to some extent, at the mercy of the actions of the enslaved people that he managed. He had no choice but to entertain the prophecy.

In this story, Sinda played a crucial role as a woman who was delivering an influential message to the enslaved community on the plantation. Though short-lived, her message provided an opportunity where the actions of the enslaved only needed to be understood by the overseer on a surface level to create a difference in his behavior. The enslaved stopped working because they believed Sinda's prophecy. The overseer, understanding his limited capacity to force labor, had to work within the beliefs of the enslaved. One consequence of this was that those enslaved on the plantation had effectively shut the overseer out of the spiritual reasoning that drove their willingness to work.

The reverse of participating in white Christian traditions to be read as pious was using the superstition that was held against black religious traditions as a tool against planters and overseers. In an interview, ex-slave W.P. Jacobs stated that the enslaved were smart, and more often than not white people were more superstitious than the slaves they accused of being so. He went on to say how "the slaves used superstition to fool the white man."[50] He provided two anecdotes to prove this. The first focused on a man who the plantation's overseer feared because

[49]Frances Anne Kemble. *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838–1839*.
[50] Charles L. Perdue et al. *Weevils in the Wheat.*155.

"He had a red flannel jacket which he could make talk." The man would hang the jacket on a nail and squeeze it until it emitted noise. The sounds only occurred when the specific man interacted with the jacket. Jacobs revealed that the enslaved man had sewn a pocket for a bullfrog in the jacket. When he went to touch the jacket, he would prick the frog with a pin so that "the frog yelled and jumped."[51] In another anecdote, several enslaved men on the plantation would keep snakes, pull out their fangs, and give them liquor to make them aggressive. In both scenarios, the overseers on the plantation were so unnerved at the power that the enslaved appeared to have that they did not beat them and gave few orders.[52]

The anecdotes that Jacobs provided gave clear indications of the ways that enslaved people leveraged the superstition that white people held against them to achieve a level of protection. In these stories, the enslaved men that are mentioned have found ways to utilize the anxieties of overseers to avoid physical beatings and unnecessary orders. The anecdotes revealed how the enslaved were aware of the superstition that white slaveholders and overseers held against them and found ways to utilize this to their advantage. On the surface, a talking shirt and aggressive snakes may appear to be little more than pranks played out on a plantation. Yet, the context in which they were performed- to feed the anxieties of overseers so that they would be less aggressive in their treatment of these men- demonstrates that their actions were part of larger ways that enslaved people understood the world around them and worked to carve out protection for themselves within it. The different ideas that white slaveholders and overseers projected onto the enslaved, whether it be extreme superstition or an association with white Christianity, were held by enslaved people as dual points on a spectrum rather than opposite binaries. The ideas were wielded separately or in tandem when necessary. To hold them as binaries would preclude

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[51] Charles L. Perdue et al. *Weevils in the Wheat.*155.
[52] Charles L. Perdue et al. *Weevils in the Wheat.*155-156.

fluid motion between them. Thus, accepting spectrum and dualism was vital to producing the ideological tools that constituted larger intellectual traditions among enslaved communities.

Leveraging superstition points to how black intellectual traditions necessitated holding opposite things as true to discern the best options for survival. Sinda's story, as well as those that appear in the FWP narratives, demonstrate how there was value in capitalizing off of the superstition that planters held against black religious practices because, on some level, it offered protection and guaranteed a distance between the slaveholder and the religious practices of the enslaved. Simultaneously, there were benefits to being read as pious according to white Christian tradition that could not be denied or overlooked in the social movement they allowed.[53] Both aspects demonstrate that holding strict binaries was detrimental to ideological tools developed on plantations. Rather, accepting a spiritual spectrum was far more effective in navigating slavery.

Movement Into Literate Spaces

One of the most significant goals of the intellectual traditions and ideological tools that enslaved women developed was that they were aimed at protecting the interiority and privacy of themselves and those they were in kinship with. Along with being a means of protection, the intellectual traditions developed by enslaved women outside of literacy were used by those who inherited them to preserve ideas in spaces that prioritized the written word. The way enslaved women appear when their voices have been historically preserved points not only to a use of ideologies that were likely learned from women they were in community with but also represents how these ideas were shifted into spaces that prioritized literacy and were ultimately preserved within historical records.

[53] Stevenson,"'Marsa Never Sot Aunt Rebecca Down'"

Manumission cases represented a way that the intellectual traditions of enslaved women were innovated upon in the courthouse specifically. The practice of suing for manumission demonstrated a way that the goal of protecting interiority was moved into new spaces and fueled by intellectual traditions developed by enslaved women. The localized nature of court proceedings in the nineteenth century meant that asserting a violation of rights through the court system was one that enslaved women did not shy away from.[54] Throughout Virginia's history, manumission lawsuits and their success were a testament to how the accepted racial hierarchy was, to some extent, permeable.[55] Those who brought cases into court did so with the intention of protecting their freedom and seeking to legally overcome any claims of ownership slaveholders made over them. In 1830, Mary Campbell launched a freedom suit that ultimately demonstrated intellectual traditions were moved into new spaces that prioritized literacy while maintaining the goal of protecting an interior self. Mary Campbell was meant to be manumitted upon her slaveholder's death. However, the son-in-law of her master sought to re-enslave her under the justification that she was the property of his wife. Mary filed suit and took the issue to court using the last will and testament of her former master as evidence of her freedom, which stated that all enslaved women "who shall be of the age of Seventeen or upwards at the time of my decease shall have their freedom immediately thereafter."[56] The court ultimately granted her freedom.

Mary's advocacy for her manumission points to a key idea that characterized the intellectual traditions that enslaved women developed. A major aspect of the intellectual traditions that enslaved women developed was to consider ways to conceptualize the interior self

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[54] Laura F. Edwards, "Status without Rights: African Americans and the Tangled History of Law and Governance in the Nineteenth-Century U.S. South." *The American Historical Review* 112, no. 2 (2007): 366.https://www.jstor.org/stable/4136606

[55] Alejandro de la Fuente and Ariela Gross. "Manumission and Freedom in the Americas: Cuba, Virginia, and Louisiana, 1500s–1700s." *Quaderni Storici* 50, no. 148 (2015): 18. https://www.jstor.org/stable/43780194 .

[56] "Mary Campbell: Freedom Suit 1830," *Virginia Untold.*

in the face of bondage and how to protect it. Protecting interiority and personhood was not an idea that was born in the suits that enslaved people brought to court. Rather, their suits indicate the movement of these ideas from conversations between the enslaved on plantations and into a court of law. Mary's decision to file suit made her a bridge for the ideas her kin created outside of literacy and how these ideas were moved into spaces that prioritized the written word. Her actions demonstrate how these intellectual and ideological traditions can move into new spaces as generations of enslaved women found ways to navigate and petition for the freedom and well-being of themselves and their families.

The idea of inheritance is useful when considering the significance of Mary's lawsuit. The legacy of protecting the individual self can be considered an inheritance bequeathed to generations of black women through the intellectual and ideological traditions that their foremothers shared. If viewed this way, it becomes the right of future generations to defend these ideas in new ways, including advocating for these traditions in spaces where they could hold new and tangibly different values. In this case, Mary was advocating for the right to freedom and interiority outside of bondage. Legibility was another important aspect of this suit. Her move to advocate for freedom and interiority in a legal setting demonstrated a different form of legibility. Mary was not working to be read as pious or in a particular way for the sake of surviving. Rather, she was filing suit as a way to have her needs understood in a new way that made her desires clear and challenged those seeking to keep her in bondage on a new ideological plane. Thus, her fight for legibility comes from finding ways to be read for her own desires and goals rather than working to be read in certain ways to protect the interior self. It was a move away from obscuring interiority for the sake of survival and toward working in clear defense of an interior self without the need to be opaque.

The circumstances that lead to Leah's appeal for freedom were also in line with the concept of inheritance. Her mother was manumitted in 1826 through her master's will. The document specified that her children would be freed as well. At the time of his death, it was unclear if Leah's mother had any children and she died before she could be legally freed. Leah came forward with a suit for freedom and identified herself as heir to her mother's freedom and thus entitled to be freed according to the will and testament of her mother's slaveholder.[57] Within this suit, the defense of an interior self was crucial. In stepping forward to sue for freedom, Leah was asserting that no person or legal body had claim to her as chattel.

Both Leah and Mary's lawsuits demonstrate how the legacy of intellectual traditions developed by enslaved women were preserved and innovated upon. Leah and Mary were both enslaved women suing for their freedom. As enslaved women, they were raised in community with other enslaved individuals and were cognizant of the ways that the enslaved rationalize their personhood in relation to bondage. A preservation of interiority and personhood was inseparable from the intellectual traditions that enslaved women created because these traditions were centered on the understanding that there was a self worth protecting. Thus, Leah and Mary's suits were united not by the intricacies of their court cases but by their implicit recognition of the self and the inseparability of this from the intellectual traditions of the women they were in community with. Their stories, traditions, prayers, and remedies taught that black interiority is not only worth preserving but nurturing and protecting in the face of slavery. Leah and Mary build off of this to sue for their freedom and assert that the black self is worth all of these things and that they can be asserted to escape bondage.

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[57] "Leah : Freedom Suit 1841," *Virginia Untold.*

In the context of writing and how intellectual traditions were moved into literate spaces, it is important to revisit Phebe Jackson. Jackson's account book indicates that she was not solely a healer, but a record keeper as well. The first few pages of Jackson's account book are not filled with names of patients but bare with the exception of her name. "Phebe Jackson" is written multiple times across the first page of the book. The volume of times it appears and the different styles in which it is written indicates that it was not written for the sake of identifying the book. Rather, it seems to point to a level of dedication to the act of writing itself. The extent of this dedication and focus taken in the process of writing is most clearly demonstrated in a particular version of Phebe's signature that appears closer to calligraphy. It was clearly intended to be a decorative version of her name. This particular version is unfinished, indicating that she may not have had enough time to sustain the detail that she had put into the first half of the signature. The volume of writing on this page and the difference in ways that it appears relates to the intellectual traditions that framed Phebe's knowledge of healing. The record keeping within the book demonstrated that she was able to translate ideas into literate spaces while the doodles of her name present in the first few pages indicate a level of dedication and possibly pleasure in doing so.

Moving further into the book, Phebe's name falls away from the pages and is replaced by an array of calculations that crawl out of the margins to overlap the names of patients and the money that they owed. The calculations are simple arithmetic and are scribbled over one another in a way that gives the book an almost overwhelming chaos when trying to decipher the numbers and names that sit just behind them. The presence of the calculations emphasizes Phebe's relationship to the book, to keep the records of patients and maintain knowledge of money gained from treating them. Turning attention to Phebe as a record keeper allows the chance to

understand her relationship to literacy. The repeated writing of her name indicates a level of dedication to writing that then gives a sense of her relationship to the practice of record keeping.

Phebe's relationship to record keeping relates to the intellectual traditions created by enslaved women she is in community with by demonstrating how she brought her ideas into new, literate spaces and showed care in the way she recorded not only herself but the other records she is in charge of. Her care toward literacy fed into care toward preserving the ideas she has been exposed to through other enslaved women. Thus, her records indicate a level of curiosity and commitment to maintaining records. The larger implications of this being that she is keeping the practices that she has been raised with alive in a way that can be preserved by the archive.

Religion and its use as a means of being legible to slave owners was another aspect of intellectual traditions developed among the enslaved that were then moved into new, literate spaces by other generations. David Walker was a clear example of this. Born to a free mother and enslaved father in Wilmington, North Carolina, Walker's views of freedom were shaped by the constantly changing legal landscape that sought to equate the status of freed and enslaved black people. Sterling Stuckey argues that, though it may be impossible to prove, one can conclude that Walker's deep religious sentiments were because "...his mother exerted a powerful influence on the development of his religious outlook."[58] The conclusion is well supported by evidence that mothers and grandmothers determined the kinds of churches their children attended and how often as well as being at the forefront of shaping younger generations' relationship to spirituality and religion. Influence over spiritual development was a feature of the ways that black women exerted influence over the communities that they were in and the intellectual traditions that they developed because it was a means of ensuring others understood how they could present

[58] Sterling Stuckey. S*lave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*. (Oxford University Press, 1987). 113

themselves as legible or illegible to slaveholders. Thus, it was a way to achieve one of the primary goals of the black intellectual traditions they spearheaded: developing ways to protect the black self and a sense of interiority.

Religion, specifically as a tool for legibility, appears in Walker's collection of four essays directed toward black Americans. The title makes it clear that Walker is writing for a black audience though it was published in 1830 when the abolitionist movement was in its nascent stages. Walker's use of religion as a framing device throughout these essays indicates how he relied on religion as a way to ensure a common language in discussing what early abolitionist ideas entailed. His work was in direct lineage with the intellectual tradition of using religion as a way to be read and understood by white audiences. Across all four articles, religion is used as a means of framing issues and arguing their severity and importance to a wider audience. Walker began the first article by juxtaposing the religiosity of white christians with the suffering that they have made black people endure. He drew comparisons between this relationship and that of the Israelites under the pharaoh, writing that "We will notice the sufferings of Israel some further, under *heathen Pharaoh*, compared with ours under the *enlightened Christians of America*."[59] Walker continued to invoke religious framing across his other articles to the extent that it is difficult to go more than a page without finding a reference to Christianity. The volume of religious framing was significant because the essays were written at a time where people are working to communicate what abolition might encompass. Being able to communicate through the common language of religion proves a useful tool for this. Walker acknowledged the ubiquity of religion at the beginning of his third article writing that "Religion, my brethren, is a substance of deep consideration among all nations of the earth."[60] He then went on to discuss how white

[59] David Walker. *Walker's Appeal in Four Articles: Together with a Preamble to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America*.(Boston 1830), 11
[60] David Walker, *Walker's Appeal in Four Articles.* 41

Christians have defiled the few "pure" expressions of religion that exist through christianity in the way that they have worked to reduce black people to merchandise.[61] His introduction was indicative of his awareness surrounding how powerful a tool religion is to communicate the evils of slavery. Walker's use of religion in these essays was a way for his work to be legible in its argument for the rights of freed and enslaved black people.

To utilize legibility in this way demonstrates that the goals associated with being legible changed once taken into literate spaces. In Walker's writing, legibility was a tool no longer focused on obfuscating the interior self as a means of protection as Walker's mother and father would have been familiar with. Rather, in Walker's articles legibility becomes a tool for explicitly arguing for the liberation of black people and expanding the audience that would be supportive of this argument. His essays demonstrate the evolution of black intellectual traditions between generations showing the changes that take place in how tools are applied as they shift from illiterate to literate spaces. Conceptions of religion as a tool for being read in a way that would obscure and provide protection for an interior self become used by Walker as a way to explicitly argue for the value of their interiority. His work demonstrates the far-reaching nature of the intellectual traditions that enslaved women developed; it was pervasive in its influence of work that came out of black communities.

Conclusion

Enslaved women were crucial in the development of intellectual traditions created independent of literacy. They focused these traditions on the ways that they could be used to protect the individual self and the enslaved communities that they were connected to. Their work

[61] David Walker. *Walker's Appeal in Four Articles*. 41

demands a re-examining of the texts that we often associate with early expressions of black intellectual thought. The writings of David Walker were heavily informed by the intellectual traditions of the enslaved. The same is true of many other well known black authors. Reading their work as expressions of and innovative interactions with the intellectual frameworks enslaved women developed outside of literacy shifts focus to a bottom-up approach to understanding black intellectualism. With this approach comes an opportunity to shift perspective and center the complex intellectual traditions created by enslaved women. The legacy of the intellectual traditions that enslaved women developed is made tangible in the ideas that black intellectual thought continues to center on similar ideas into the present day. Interiority and the balancing of impossible ideas constitute a vast swath of arguments that black scholars have made for centuries and the at the center of these arguments lies with the groundwork that enslaved women laid in theorizing frameworks to survive bondage.

Moving beyond the creation of intellectual frameworks for navigating bondage, enslaved women played a crucial role in preserving these frameworks and passing them to younger generations. Mothers and kinswomen were at the forefront of shaping how communities saw themselves in relation to Christianity and reconciling spiritual practices outside of the faith. As women, they were also situated within the matrices of oppression in a way that demanded a creative reconciliation with the conflicting ideas projected onto them.

Naming the work that these women produced as intellectual endeavors is part of a larger commitment to complicating understandings of history to break past how historical actors are understood and framed. The initial framing of enslaved black women as intellectuals begs the question, "What did they write?" Yet, further reflection on their contributions to the legacy of black intellectualism reveals that a more productive question is, “What did they think?”

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