Chapter 5
“Women’s Sweat”:
Gender and Agricultural Labor in the Atlantic World

While enslaved women grappled with the new dimensions and implications of their reproductive lives, they undertook considerable and onerous agricultural work. The preceding two chapters have emphasized the connectedness of reproduction and enslavement by exploring the ways in which reproduction functioned foundationally in the development of racialist thinking, the onset of modern slaveownership, and the experience of enslavement. These chapters preceded a discussion of manual labor because in order to fully appreciate the degrees to which sex and gender infused the development of racial slavery, one must momentarily isolate the ideological and material valences of reproductive potential, of childbirth and loss, and of the multiplicities of “women’s work” for the daughters of Africa. Early American slavery was fully imbued with assumptions about and measures taken against African women’s gendered bodies. Slaveowners came to understand racial slavery as well as plantation management through a series of images, calculations, and experiences in which the notions of sex and race were fully intertwined. Enslaved women, and men too, from the moment they set foot aboard slave ships or were born in American colonies, came to understand their identity under slavery as marked by sex and race. It is from this point then, that we move on to a discussion of agricultural work, for to fully understand the role of reproduction in the lives of enslaved women, one must grasp the role of grueling work regimes for women who also suffered under the onslaught of this most fundamental appropriation of their labor.

Hard labor, daily and relentless, underlaid all ideologies of race and reproduction and all experiences of birth, parenting, and loss under slavery. The obscene logic of racial slavery defined reproduction as work, and the work of the colonies—creating wealth out of the wilderness—relied on the
appropriation of enslaved women’s children by colonial slaveowners. But, at the risk of stating the obvious, reproductive work did not alone define daily life. The effort of reproducing the labor force occurred alongside that of cultivating crops. And even as enslaved women engaged in a process of community formation that was simultaneously resistant and acquiescent and ultimately the inevitable byproduct of their dispossession and oppression, they struggled to protect their bodies and their spirits from the ravages of unrelenting hard labor.

An overdetermined connection between women and the domestic has dominated the ways we think about women’s work. The very phrase conjures the domestic—cleaning, childcare, food preparation—and inevitably leans in the direction of the family. Images of enslaved female house servants tend to populate the collective imaginary with as much tenacity as do gentle-hearted mammies. But as slaveowners perused the bodies of their newly purchased human property, they quickly made decisions about the kind of work each was capable of performing and in almost all cases put women to work cultivating land. To be exempted from the field in favor of the house was a fate open to very few enslaved women, particularly in the colonial period, when the luxury of large houses and the niceties of china, silver, and fine furniture were still part of the slaveowners’ imaginary future rather than their tangible present. It was far more likely that women would end up in the fields. Indeed, the entire system of hereditary racial slavery depended on slaveowners’ willingness to ignore cultural meanings of work that had been established in England and to make Africans work in ways the English could not conceive of working themselves. Once slaveowners received almost equal numbers of African men and women from slave traders, they inverted the gender ideology that they applied to white women and work. As more and more enslaved persons were brought to the Americas, African women and girls found themselves in the fields. Early American slaveowners felt no compunction about using women for this kind of hard labor. As Thomas Nairne calculated the cost to the crown of sponsoring settlers to Carolina in the first decade of the eighteenth century, he speculated on the wealth that would be produced by transported settlers. “I will suppose for the present, that white Women and Children are of no Advantage (tho’ tis not altogether so) and only reckon Men fit to Labour, and the Slaves of both Sexes.” During the crucial frontier period of slavery in the mid-eighteenth-century Georgia lowcountry, for example, a contemporary stated that “in the planting and cultivation of fields the daily tasks of a good Negro Woman” was exactly the same as that of a man. Another planter,
outfitting a Florida plantation in 1769 wrote, “very strong and able wenches will do as much work as any man.” And on the island of Barbados, eighteenth-century Codrington Plantation owners calculated the monetary value of enslaved male and female field hands equally at £56. As the role of African women in all manner of cultivation, production, and marketing in African societies was reduced to a singular drudgery on a white man’s lands, the narrowing of their lives and skills would compound the violation of this new manner of work. It is ironic that the reliance of slaveowners on African women as fieldworkers made their economic role as significant to the American economy as it had been in Africa; African women on both continents produced the agricultural goods that were the base of the respective economies. As they cleared fields and cultivated and harvested crops, enslaved West African women found themselves performing familiar tasks whose cultural meaning had radically changed.

Field Work: Sugar Fields

The invisibility of enslaved women in the iconography of early American slave labor is a modern omission. For the men who put black women to work in the fields and for the women who worked there, women’s capacity for backbreaking labor was hardly incidental. Indeed, it was central to developing racialist ideology; the “natural” difference between “Negroes” and Englishmen often was evidenced by black women’s supposed ability to labor ceaselessly. As Europeans registered their “wonder” at African difference, the image of the black woman who “slaved” for lazy African men was both recurrent and necessary. The intellectual and social milieu from which English slaveowners emerged supported an approach to the organization of labor that fully exploited enslaved women’s real and imaginary capacity for grueling agricultural toil.

Field Work: Sugar Fields

The diverse labor needs of the early American settlement have been well documented. While often rhetorically reduced to their most important export, “sugar islands” and other staple crop-producing colonies were actually sites of a wide array of work—ranging from road building to navigating small craft to blacksmithing and tailoring to carpentry and butchering. While clearly it would be wrong to present the sole undertaking of the early American slave society as producing monoculture crops, it would not be far from the truth to suggest that enslaved women found themselves
confined to the monotony and drudgery of the field more regularly than their male counterparts.

As we saw in Barbados, as planters moved from tobacco culture toward sugar, for example, almost all planters enslaved nearly equal numbers of men and women, and it was not uncommon for slaveowners to own more women than men (see Figure 7 above). At the time of his death in 1659, John May’s estate included three men—Pattorne, Tome, Oge, and an unnamed “able negroe.” With them were five women—Hagar, Mareah, Nell, Jugge, and another unnamed “able negroe.” Thomas Kennett had only female slaves; two unnamed women who labored alongside a male Irish servant. John Waterland owned four women; Jude, Maria, Mall, and Hagar; two men, Mingo and Sambo; and two children, James and Peter.

English incorporation of colonial settlements and racial slavery into the parameters of acceptable labor management required some dramatic ideological maneuverings and a fundamental restructuring of the notion of women’s work; a similar transformation of thinking about men’s labor did not occur. Outnumbered by women two to one, then, the men on Waterland’s plantation would have been diverted to craft and stock work because the four women would amply cover his twenty acres of land. But once Waterland faced his mortality, Jude, Maria, Mall and Hagar became more than simply workers; they were workers with riches embedded in their intimate behaviors. Calculating their contribution to his wealth, along with their enduring value, Waterland attached Mingo and Hagar to the land in his bequest to his eldest son. The others would ultimately be dispersed between his wife and children, but together Hagar, Mingo, and their progeny would, with luck, carry young Nicholas Waterland far into the future.

John Wolverstone also owned twenty acres of land in Barbados, but he had purchased only women to work it—Anne, Hagar, and Jone. A “pickaniny negroe” named Hopsey lived with them, but on his St. George’s plantation he, and his son Benjamin after him, oversaw a female-only workforce. Anne, Hagar, and Jone, possibly balancing sexual demands with the daily toil on a small struggling plantation, would also have to parse out parenting responsibilities for Hopsey as they faced the uninterrupted demands of the field and presumably shouldered “domestic” work for each other and the Wolverstone men as well.

By the 1660s, women frequently outnumbered men on the larger plantations. In 1661, John Lewis’s plantation contained nineteen enslaved adult women, four enslaved men, and eight children. Judith Powery’s 200-acre Hope Plantation in St. Thomas contained eighteen enslaved women and
eleven men in 1662.14 The same year Philip Banfield’s property included ten enslaved women, five men, and eight "pickaninies."15 The numbers of women in the fields would also strike slaveowners surveying the workforce on their lands elsewhere in the English Caribbean.16 The connection between physical and reproductive labors was already clear to the island’s planters and, as we saw in Chapter 3, at the very moment at which Barbados power as a sugar producer was being established, the work these women performed in the field did not obliterate a recognition of their ability to also produce wealth in the form of enslaved children.

Forced to accommodate a demography that was determined on the African coast, slaveowners throughout the colonies struggled to bring their assumptions about gender and labor into line with this new labor force. The work of constructing colonial settlements, of manufacturing the goods and products ancillary to staple crops for export, further complicated the relationship between labor and gender. Slavery regimes did not erase the connections between domesticity and women. Indeed, slaveowners made the connection between domestic servitude and black women early on. Writing in 1675 from Barbados, one recent arrival complained that his white female servant was a “slut,” but “until a neger wench I have, be brought to knowledge, I cannot . . . be without a white maid.”17 But the numbers of “Negro wenches brought to knowledge” meant that such connections were secondary and, moreover, fell under the purview only of the very rich.

By the mid-eighteenth century, such practices were solidified on plantations like the Roaring River plantation in Jamaica, where, for example, 76 percent (seventy of ninety-two) of enslaved women were field workers compared with only 33 percent (twenty-eight of eighty-four) of enslaved men. These women, it should be noted, were also the parents of forty-three boys and thirty-six girls, most of whom were too young to work at the time of the plantation’s inventory in 1756.18 It was to this pattern of consistent reliance on women as laborers that Michael Craton spoke in 1978 when he wrote of eighteenth-century Jamaica that “it was indeed a curious society, as well as an inefficient agricultural economy in which women for the most part were the laborers and men the specialists.”19 But of course, the importance of staple crops produced in the Americas to the domestic and colonial economies of Europe is evidence enough that enslaved women can hardly be said to have been inefficient manufacturers of American wealth.

Because of what we know about depressed fertility and increased infant mortality, we can safely say that most enslaved women found fieldwork, rather than childbirth or parenting, to be that which they experienced
in common. Cutting eighty acres of cane was not the same as cultivating subsistence crops, but important connections existed between the rhythm of working plantations both large and small on the sugar islands and the mainland colonies. On small estates, both women and men worked the land. On larger plantations, however, enslaved men worked in the boiling house, tended cattle, or made barrels and worked with wood, leaving fieldwork to women. The refusal to allow enslaved women to occupy skilled or artisanal positions meant that the mobility that accompanied such work was also denied them.

The work of the field was, in part, responsible for the low fertility of enslaved women. However, many women still shouldered the burden of fieldwork alongside the difficulties of parenting under slavery. Robert Rumball enslaved twelve children, eleven women, and only five men on his 89-acre plantation in Barbados. The women Rumball owned lived on the small sugar plantation that had a sugar works. Two white female indentured servants did the domestic work. The work of sugar processing and animal husbandry (the plantation also contained a curing house and forty-two assorted livestock) fell to the five male indentured servants and most of the five enslaved men. This left the backbreaking work of the field to the eleven enslaved women—Grete Jugg, Wasshaw, Backoe, Great Marrea, Dido, Violettoe, Lille, Hagar, Affee, Frown, and Little Marea—many of whom were also mothers to the twelve children who appear in Rumball’s inventory under the heading “Negroe Children.” Childbirth simply meant that the demands of the field had to coexist with the emotional and physical pull of parenthood.

In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, then, cane fields were places in which women constituted a high proportion of the total work force. Indeed, in some places, the field became a female space as balanced sex ratios across the English sugar islands led to female majorities in the fields. Even when women’s proportional representation in the slave trade declined, in many places—notably Jamaica—sex ratios on the plantations remained quite balanced. Thus, even though they were outnumbered in the population as a whole, women constituted more than half the work force—half the visible source of sugar’s cultivation. On the Mesopotamia plantation in Jamaica, which enslaved 322 men and 216 women, the majority of fieldworkers were women (182 of 359); close to half the enslaved men worked as drivers, craft and stock workers, stock keepers, or marginal workers. Similarly, on the eighteenth-century Beaulieu plantation in Saint-Domingue, there were eighty-seven men and fifty-four women, but
women outnumbered men on the field more than two to one.22 Despite the fact that men were imported at a ratio of 165 to 100 women over the course of the slave trade to Jamaica (1655–1807), on the estates, work gangs were close to even with ratios of approximately 105 men to 100 women.23 Even where the larger population was still demographically weighted toward men, slaveowners’ understanding of gender and work among the enslaved explained the preponderance of women seen in work gangs. On both small and large plantations, women spent their working lives in the field. On the sugar islands as well as in Carolina’s rice swamps and Virginia’s tobacco fields, occupational diversity existed almost solely for enslaved men.24

In the colonial period, slaveowners throughout the Americas became quite willing to put African women permanently to work in the fields, but they balked at allowing them access to any skilled tasks. Skilled work that supported domestic economies such as dairy work or weaving primarily remained the purview of white women—planters’ wives who oversaw the work of overseers’ wives or female servants.25 Black women found themselves on the bottom of the work pyramid on the sugar plantations, exposed to hard labor and drudgery with little chance of escape to more skilled or protected positions. Women of African descent were presumed to be fully capable of the heavy lifting and wielding of rudimentary tools that fieldwork required and were found throughout the French Caribbean cutting cane. On the sugar islands of the French Caribbean, women were regularly assigned the fieldwork dismissed by one ecclesiastic observer as “the easiest of all labor.”26 They prepared the fields for planting, cut cane and did the often dangerous work of feeding sugar cane into the mills, a job that could maim or kill if it was not done with perfect timing and that, despite the need for precision, was often relegated to the evening, after enslaved women had worked a full day on the fields. It is not surprising that accidents were “certainly frequent among female slaves . . . particularly at night, when, exhausted by hard labor during the daytime, they fall asleep while passing the cane.”27

Slave labor was not, of course, limited to sugar cultivation. Women worked on coffee plantations and cultivated indigo as well. An early eighteenth-century observer in Saint-Domingue for example, wrote of a sexual division of labor on the island’s indigo fields; men hoed while women stooped to plant seeds and cover them with earth.28 In seventeenth-century French Guiana, slaveowners sent enslaved women—even in advanced states of pregnancy—to do the public works projects such as road and fortress construction known as corvée labor. Returning from her corvée labor early
after becoming ill, an enslaved woman named Doué gave birth to a stillborn son in April 1690; his death marked the limited expectations that shaped a life controlled by the demands of work. 29

The connection between femininity and domesticity elicits images of cooks and child minders, but the reality was that few women of African descent escaped the field. During a 1706 raid on the island of St. Christopher, French forces absconded with a large number of enslaved persons. When they enumerated those they had lost, the English provided the occupational category each laborer filled and thus left an occupational breakdown for the island’s forced laborers at a juncture when St. Christopher had already been settled for more than seventy years and four decades had passed since the turn to sugar cultivation. Of the captives, 64 percent had been field hands, 10 percent had worked in sugar factories, 14 percent had been domestics, and 12 percent had been artisans, overseers, or other “skilled” laborers. 30

Forty years earlier, planters would have been even less willing to divert ablebodied workers from fieldwork to the care and production of domestic luxuries.

Periods of gender parity would wax and wane according to the internal logic of the slave trade, leaving those West African women who survived the Middle Passage in a gender minority. 31 While Barbados was distinct in maintaining female majorities/gender parity during the entire slavery period, women enslaved on the other English sugar islands would continue to find themselves outnumbered in the quarters even as they labored in the fields alongside mostly other women. They were vulnerable to both white and black men, and their time spent in the fields would have been the only time in which they might achieve anything even approximating the female space that defined daily life in most West African cultures. In the context of closely supervised gang labor, the connection between their centrality to agricultural production in West Africa and to fieldwork in the Americas would be at best a numbing reminder of the violent contraction of their unfolding futures. Moreover, women’s connections with each other and their sense of collective identity must have grown as a result of the sex ratios of the cane fields. In this regard, a world only nominally defined by their identity as parents presaged the community of mutual support, healing, and resistance evidenced among enslaved women in the antebellum American south. 32 Still, it is difficult to fully imagine the ways in which shifting meanings of gender and backbreaking agonies of hard labor came together to assign meaning to women’s work in the colonial cane fields.
Fieldwork: Cattlepens

The slaveowners who made their way from Barbados and elsewhere in the West Indies to the mainland colony of Carolina in the 1670s constructed a labor system that mirrored the sugar fields in many ways. The Barbadian planters who introduced slavery to South Carolina caused the mainland colony to become a slave society from the very moment of its settlement. Although indentured servants accompanied the initial white settlers and landowners, there was never any question that Africans and their descendants would perform the bulk of the colony’s hard labor. Englishmen and women in Carolina cemented the connection between hard labor and black bodies even before their arrival. When South Carolina was chartered, land grants were awarded on the basis of the numbers of servants and slaves that settlers brought with them to the colony. Those with the means transported large numbers of laborers to increase the size of their land grants without fear that in the new colony their status as slaveowners would be undermined. In correspondence concerning the particulars of the settlement plan, the lords proprietors had been quick to clarify that land would be allocated equally for “Negroes as well as Christians”; in other words, those who brought slaves would be rewarded uniformly, in terms of land, with those who brought servants. White settlers coming from the West Indies, where black labor had long since displaced white servitude, were obvious beneficiaries of this landgrant system. The future of Carolina was inextricably linked to enslavement, assuring settlers that land entitlements would be based on generous headrights. The care taken to ensure privilege for slaveowners who settled in the new colony illustrates two implicit assumptions on the part of the new settlers: black laborers would constitute wealth and black laborers would produce wealth on the mainland.

While landgrants were distributed equally regardless of the race of a white servant or a Negro slave, the lords proprietors did distinguish between male and female laborers. First settlers would be granted 100 acres for the importation of white or black women, and 150 acres for white or black men. Rewarded proportionately more for the import of men than women, newly arrived slaveowning settlers were not blind to the gender conventions that prevailed around them regarding notions of hard labor. During the first twenty-five years of settlement, enslaved men outnumbered enslaved women by two to one. Most of the early settlers to the colony who received warrants for land between 1672 and 1695 for transporting slaves, or servants and slaves, brought only men or male majorities. (35 per-
Gender and Agricultural Labor in the Atlantic World

cent and 25 percent respectively.) However, more than 20 percent brought pairs of men and women, and others brought only women or a majority of women. (9 and 5 percent respectively). Put another way, enslaved women were considered an investment valuable enough to offset disparities in land acquisition by 65 percent of all the first settlers who went to the expense of transporting laborers to the new settlement alongside themselves and their families. In this moment at which slaveowners themselves momentarily controlled the ratios of men and women imported into a colony, it is particularly telling that women were a logical and consistent choice for transport to the new colony. The proof that women would work in Carolina’s fields would be confirmed, and not only by looking backward to Barbados’s sugar plantations. In the early years of the colony a brisk trade in Native American slaves also confirmed women’s place in the mainland colony. Enslaved Indian women outnumbered men by close to five to one in the first decades of the colony’s history, mostly because slaves obtained as a result of intertribal wars were more likely to be women and children—men were killed rather than taken as prisoners. John Wright enslaved fifteen black men and seventeen women, only four of whom were of African descent. Perhaps wishing to offset the black majorities that defined the English Island colonies, some looked to a different kind of female labor. When writing a promotional pamphlet for the colony, John Norris wrote that a small-scale settler should bring money to purchase “Two Slaves; a good Negro man and a good Indian woman,” while a wealthier settler should plan to purchase

Fifteen good Negro Men. . . Fifteen Indian Women to work in the Field. . . . Three Indian Women as Cooks for the Slaves and other Household-Business and Three Negro Women to be employ’d either for the Dairy, to attend the Hogs, Washing, or any other employment they may be set about in the family.” While a wealthier settler should plan to purchase

The correlation between sex and race was rarely this extreme, nor would the intended designation of black women as domestics become a reality for more than a fraction of enslaved African women in the colony, but of the 4,300 enslaved persons in the colony in 1708, 1,400 were Native American. The vast majority of those 1,400 were women who worked alongside African and Afro-Caribbean women in the new colony.

As the seventeenth century ended, the headright was reduced to 50 acres per laborer, male or female. The desire to reward the first generation of settlers—those willing to risk an uncertain future in the colony—had led
to the generous landgrants in the 1670s and 1680s; but the removal of gendered distinctions of labor by 1685 reflected the shifting understanding of gender, race, and labor on the part of the colonial settlers. It was perhaps in deference to that shift that Peter Hearne Sr., imported a “negro woman” only three months after he brought a single “negro man” to the colony in 1683. Hearne’s choice of a woman would necessarily have been conditioned by the transparent relationship between race and reproduction for seventeenth-century slaveowners. For those women and men transported to the new colony, the confusion of the frontier was possibly abated by clarity about the role they would be performing. The assumption that their working bodies promised more than just their labor on the land must have been as clear to Jone and Andrew, transported together in April of 1673, as it was more than twenty years later to Sam, Tony, Bess, and Jany, who arrived in the colony with their owner and his wife in 1695.

Others would soon join these men and women from the West Indies and from West Africa and together they would embody Carolina planters’ hopes for wealth. They uncritically understood that enslaved women’s value resided both in their roles as producers and as potential reproducers, and as they linked the reproductive lives of those they enslaved to their own acquisition and distribution of wealth, they acted on that understanding in ways that ultimately threatened enslaved men and women’s humanity in the most profound ways. The enslaved women who arrived in the mainland colony from the West Indies and, in increasing proportions, directly from West Africa during the frontier period found themselves adjusting to labor conditions significantly different from those in the sugar fields or on their native soil. The isolation of a new settlement may have provided relief from the rigors of sugar cultivation, but it brought with it new exhaustions, dangers, and vulnerabilities. Many of the colony’s first settlers raised cattle during the time it took to deforest the land to make way for crops. Tending livestock was, for many enslaved Africans, a familiar task. Carolina’s first slaveowners were cognizant of the skills that West African men brought to the settlement and relied upon men from the Fula, Wolof, and Mandinka areas of West Africa—especially Senegambia—to tend the cowpens in the upcountry. For enslaved men re-exported from the Caribbean pastoral agriculture was not only familiar, but would calibrate a sexual division of labor destroyed by sugar cultivation—offering another escape from the woman’s work of the fields.

The confidence slaveowners had in African men’s abilities to tend the large and free-ranging herds was not isolated, as we shall soon see, but for
the women who had not learned the fine art of managing free-ranging cattle, the Carolina frontier offered no immediate recognition, or rather exploitation, of their skills. Still enslaved men were not alone out there, nor were they alone in crafting parameters of their lives in Carolina with echoes from Senegambia. The women who accompanied them came from areas in West Africa where rice cultivation, on a small household scale, worked in tandem with tending cattle.41

Often a man and a woman, perhaps accompanied by a child, found themselves together on the cowpens, where their experiences of the familiar and the foreign would have to mesh. Jack and Jugg, for example, tended seventeen head of cattle on Francis Jones’s bleak settlement. Jones’s entire estate, aside from cattle and Jack and Jugg, consisted of some old pots and “one old bedstead, three old chests, two old chaires, one fourme, two stools, and one table top.”42 Likewise, in 1696, Mingo and Mall and a boy named Cudgeon tended thirty head of cattle and fifty-five pigs somewhere in the outer reaches of Carolina. When their owner died toward the end of the century, he could not claim even a single piece of furniture.43 It is quite likely that the rudimentary tools with which Mall and Jugg pounded and winnowed rice escaped the eye of the estate’s executors. Mortar and pestle and homemade straw baskets would, in time, be permanent parts of the colonial landscape. Before the turn of the eighteenth century, however, as tools that were solely the province of black women’s “unimportant” innovation they would not warrant inventory.

Mall and Jugg lived their lives among men and boys in poverty and rural isolation on the colony’s frontier. Other women enslaved on cattle lands were less isolated. Dido and Phebe and the Indian woman Betty were enslaved alongside Jeffry and Timbo and an Indian man called Leander on a large settlement where they were responsible for more than one hundred head of cattle and twenty sheep in addition to a crop of corn. The strength of their combined numbers and the succor of one another’s presence did not protect them from their owner’s financial mismanagements or their sale as a group to clear his debts. The owner was careful to include “ye Increase of ye said sheep slaves maize and cattle” in the terms of the sale, and the careful symmetry of his property in persons suggests that he had hoped for reproductive expertise where cattle-tending insight was deficient.44

As they struggled to survive the frontier, the women at these cattlepens probably nurtured emotional connections to the men enslaved alongside them; though they did not bring children into this world of cows, pigs, and meager living, whether they loved or hated Mingo, Jack, and the others is
not for us to know. What is clear is that there were no “house servants” on the frontier. Women were just as likely to be wielding the sawbuck as their brethren, though it was only to them that their owner looked for reproductive wealth. During this period when the uncertainty of the future for white settlers could not have been clearer, white slaveowners invested limited resources in both male and female laborers. But women were an important part of the frontier, and the conviction that black male volatility needed to be mitigated certainly would have informed purchasing patterns. So would presumptions that women’s capacity for labor made them investments that, unlike the import of luxurious household niceties, did not have to be put off until financial success in the new colony was assured. In all likelihood, the prosaic image of a black man and a white man sharing work on the sawbuck needs to make way for a clear understanding that the white man was undoubtedly thinking that, without an outlet for his sexual needs, the black man’s continual and contained labor could not be assured. Moreover, the proximity of white owners and enslaved women cleared the way for white men to more easily identify black women as potential sexual outlets for themselves. As the slaveowning settler made his tentative way on the colonial frontier, he would certainly rely on his convictions about African women’s ability to work and potential to reproduce as he made difficult economic decisions about investing limited resources into a labor force he might or might not be able to control.

During the first twenty-five years of the eighteenth century, deerskin trading, cattle raising, and the production of naval stores gradually gave way to methods of acquiring wealth that were far more ecologically invasive and, for enslaved women and men, cost much more in human terms. By 1708, the Carolina colony had become the only mainland colony with a black majority as the settlers turned their resources and attention to rice cultivation and transported rapidly expanding numbers of enslaved persons from the West African coast. In 1700 half of the enslaved persons in Carolina were African born; by 1710 that proportion had grown to two thirds. The colony’s transition to rice production brought with it a complicated change in women’s work; both to the rhythms and rigors of their labors and to the cultural milieu in which they performed them. African laborers cleared the forested lands that soon gave way to rice plantations. Women and children worked alongside men. Enslaved Africans brought more than simple hard labor to the process of transforming the land; in both large and small ways they brought expertise that was recognized and exploited by white settlers albeit in ways that would ultimately destroy them. An
observer described black male workers laboring after dark (when the winds had died down) “lopping and fireing,” while women and children cut down shrubs and bushes. In 1679, Jean Barbot observed cultivation techniques among the Wolofs on the Senegal Coast. “They set fire to what is found on the land left fallow in previous years, then afterwards. . . . they turn it over and mix up the earth and the burnt material.”

In 1707, John Archdale remarked that “little Negro Children” performed valuable complementary labor on plantations; their work, essential but light, freed adults for larger, more physically strenuous, jobs.

The colony was beginning its unstoppable journey toward rice culture; it is a great irony that that journey both depended upon African expertise and was devastating to black bodies. In the small cattle-raising outposts of the backcountry, black women had used large mortar and pestles to process the rain-fed rice they grew on dry land. Free-ranging cattle, tended by men, cleared the fields after harvesting in an indigenous complementarity learned on the West African coast. When slaveowners took note of the crop, the move from garden to plantation happened with alarming speed and devastating results. As rice culture developed and the colony expanded in the early eighteenth century, the numbers of enslaved persons brought to Carolina directly from the West African coast rose rapidly. In 1706, only 24 Africans entered the colony by ship. Four years later, 107 persons were forcibly transported from West Africa. By 1725, that number approached 2000 per annum. White Carolinians quickly grasped the significance and scope of the society’s changing demography. In a letter to English officials in 1699, Edward Randolph accurately assessed the numbers of white inhabitants but put the black population at four times the white—a figure at least twice their actual number.

Slave import levels fluctuated greatly over these years (from 25 to 600 per annum between 1706 and 1723) and women whose pasts likely included labor in Barbados or elsewhere in the Americas were joined in small numbers by those coming from the West African coast. Childbirth and parenting must have occasionally provided a bridge that connected women and men whose pasts were so divergent and whose futures were now necessarily conjoined. As they parented, or mourned the conditions that made parenting impossible, they would also be caught up in the overwhelming demands for their labor in the forests or on the fields. Faced with cargoes they could not control, slaveowners’ connection to a Barbadian tradition of slaveholding helped to create the ideological room for women in the fields. The fact that women provided valuable labor, and more valuable children, meant
that as the colonial economy developed, slaveowners in Carolina followed the example set by decades of slaveownership in the English Caribbean and did not shirk from using women as laborers on Carolina plantations. Through their presence, their work, and their children, enslaved African women unwillingly contributed to the developing definitions of slavery and control in colonial South Carolina. Randolph estimated that 5,000 enslaved men and women could produce staples for export, with hundreds of others located in and around Charlestown in occupations central to constructing the colonial infrastructure. While the black population didn’t reach 4,000 until 1708, his exaggerated numbers are offset by the precision of his assessment that enslaved persons were at the heart of the new colony’s economic future.51

The Africans whose numbers began to eclipse those born in the West Indies or in Carolina in the first decades of the eighteenth century constituted the only black majority in the mainland American colonies. During the 1710s and 1720s, the population of enslaved women and men grew rapidly, jumping from 3,000 in 1703 to 12,000 in 1729 and 29,000 by 1739. The growing population did not escape the concern of travelers and observers. In 1730 The Boston News-Letter published a letter from Charlestown that reported that “we have a bout 28 thousand Negros to 3 thousand Whites;” and in 1741, a visitor to the colony suggested that “it is estimated that there are fifteen heathen slaves for every white man,” though in the low country the actual ratio was closer to two to one.52 Moreover, both the value and the danger of a reproducing labor force were absolutely clear to slaveowners. In 1714, Carolina legislators noted that “the number of negroes do extremely increase in this province, and through the afflicting providence of God, the white persons do not proportionally multiply.”53

Probate records indicate that faced with a black population in which men continued to outnumber women, slaveowners seemed to balance their slaveholdings to assure a relatively even, if outnumbered, female presence on many plantations. For women enslaved on small plantations, the rice boom that would ultimately envelop the colony had not yet touched their lives. Enslaved on a plantation outside Charlestown in Berkeley County in 1716, Marina labored on the land alongside two other women, three men, a “negro boy” and a negro “Girle.” The man who purchased Marina and the rest, assiduously balancing a workforce from whom he expected much, held out some hope that, in addition to the work he required from her, Sarah, and Hagar on this 350-acre plantation, one or more of them would augment his wealth through childbirth. The terms of the sale included “the
increase and offspring of ye said Women,” though neither Marina, Hagar, nor Sarah had yet complied.\textsuperscript{54}

For other women, the shift toward a staple-crop export economy meant the opening up of space in domestic labor. As with the Caribbean, the proportion of domestic servants was quite small; it grew from 1 percent of all enslaved laborers at the start of the eighteenth century to somewhere between 5 and 10 percent by the turn of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{55} When the tanner William Chapman died in 1711, for example, Moll found herself answering to not one but two new “Mistresses.” Chapman willed that she “equally be divided” between two white women in Charlestown. Moll had previously worked surrounded by men—William Chapman, the “negro men Cudjo and Dick,” and two black boys named Jack and Sam.\textsuperscript{56} Now Moll would work in an atmosphere shaped by the housebound duties required of urban dwellers Mary Reynolds and Elizabeth Adams. Whether the shift worked to Moll’s advantage is unclear. As town women who socialized with an artisan, it is likely that Reynolds and Adams were involved in some kind of commercial endeavors. Shopkeepers, grocers, and milliners—these “female” professions would have kept Moll hard at work.\textsuperscript{57}

The joint ownership of Moll, while unusual, simply facilitated the mobility that characterized urban enslavement for the few enslaved women who found themselves in Charlestown. Urban settings throughout the Americas provided limited access to unsupervised movement for enslaved women. Indeed, not only creole women but also those born in Africa might find anonymity and autonomy in Charlestown. An Angolan washerwoman and an Angolan seamstress were both suspected of having supported themselves (and, ultimately, their ability to run away) by hiring themselves out to “free Negroes and others” in Charlestown.\textsuperscript{58} The ability to work in a setting sheltered from the environment and the disease of the rice field, to walk unsupervised down the street on the way to market, to meet friends or family, were perquisites of women’s domestic work that may have balanced the violation of living in close quarters with those who enslaved them; the considerable physical burdens of laundering, cleaning, sewing, and child care; or even the emotionally draining imperative to escape notice.

The Charlestown market was, for most of the colonial period and beyond, a space within which enslaved women gathered, sold their wares, and exchanged information and friendship with one another. Concern over the economic and community-building activity of these women erupted frequently in the city’s legislature and newspapers. In 1747, a petition was
presented to the assembly complaining “of the great Liberty and Indulgence which is given to those Negroes . . . to purchase quantities of flour butter apples, &ca., all which they retail out to the inhabitants of Charlestown,” who were “entirely ruined and rendered miserable” as a result. Women were the majority of market traders, and as such they attracted the ire and rancor of many Charlestown residents, who resented being made dependent on “notorious” and “impudent” women.

In other colonial southern cities as well, the dominant role of enslaved persons, particularly women, in the marketplace was a cause for alarm. By the middle of the 1760s, enslaved women in and around Savannah, Georgia, were plying their wares in the city’s market both with and without their owners’ consent. Whites complained of women’s behavior in the market in terms that, as Robert Olwell has shown, suggested direct insubordination and rebellion. Their dependence on these market women for food and goods only fueled their ineffectual attempts to regulate the market and the mobility among the enslaved that the market both depended upon and generated.

The mobility of Esther, a “Girl” enslaved by the merchant and slave trader Robert Pringle at the end of the 1730s would bring devastating results. Pringle praised her skills and integrity, saying

She is a Very Likely Young Wench & can doe any House Work, such as makeing Beds, Cleaning Rooms, Washing, attending at Table, &c. & talks good English being this Province Born, & is not given to any Vice, & have always found her honest.

Her only vice, it seems, was an inability to stay away from her parents, who were also enslaved by Pringle and who lived on his plantation outside of Charlestown. He complained of her “goeing frequently to her Father and Mother, who Live at a Plantation I am Concern’d in about Twenty Miles from Town from whence there was no Restraining her from Running away there, & Staying every now & then.” As a result, he shipped her to Portugal, where he had business contacts, to be sold. The relative proximity of her parents proved too much for Esther, as it did for Pringle, who concluded that banishment to a non-English-speaking nation over 2,000 miles away was just punishment for this honest, skilled, and hard-working young woman’s enduring connection to her parents. Esther’s story, and her inability to protect herself from her owners’ malicious caprice, augment the evidence of enslaved women’s dominance in Charlestown markets, and the never-ending legislative complaints and decrees directed toward such women in a failed effort to reduce white dependence upon black women for foodstuff and wares.
Marina and Moll and Esther (before her exile) experienced their enslavement under conditions quite separate from the majority of black women. Certainly connections such as those between Esther and her parents could have bridged the experiential gap between the rice fields and the houses of Charlestown, but regardless of their families’ connection to the plantations, these women faced quite different dangers. Working in Charlestown during the early years of the rice boom insulated them from some physical labors and exposed them to others. For these particular women, their enslavement, sex, and childlessness may have provided the only obvious connections between them.

Fieldwork: Rice Swamps

Throughout the slaveowning south and Caribbean, one of the consequences of white commitment to slave labor was an unwillingness to invest heavily in more efficient but delicate equipment that would make the agricultural work done by the enslaved less labor intensive. The significant differences in the lives of enslaved people that accrued from the staple crops they cultivated were mediated, especially for the women who found themselves in fields of tobacco, rice, sugar, and coffee, by the work of the hoe. In the antebellum period, Frances Kemble described enslaved women as “hoeing machines,” and recently, historian Leslie Schwalm has suggested that the hoe itself might be considered the “universal implement of slavery,” one with particular significance for women across the Americas.65

With the advent of rice culture in South Carolina, another implement served to reinscribe the difference and particularities of cultivation and culture in the lives of African and African American women—the mortar and pestle.66

The particular role of African women in the harvesting and processing of rice cannot be underestimated. In order to make rice edible, the indigestible outer husk must be removed while keeping the inner kernel whole. This involves a delicate balance of strength and finesse that was undertaken completely by hand until the advent of mechanized threshing in the 1760s and 1770s. Until that time, the only way to mill rice was with the mortar and pestle that was used by African women in Senegambia and Sierra Leone, and in South Carolina. Many questions have been raised about how rice culture was brought to South Carolina. Rice was a crop with which Englishmen were unfamiliar, and for some time the introduction of the crop with
its complex system of water management—the use of dikes and dams to periodically flood and drain the fields—was attributed to some combination of planter ingenuity and grain brought by the captain of a slave ship from Madagascar. But the connection between West African slaves (particularly those from the Senegambia region, who came with a long tradition of both dry and tidal rice-cultivation skills) and the introduction of rice to the colony is compelling. Recent scholarship has cemented the link between the knowledge Africans from the Senegambia region brought, however involuntarily, to South Carolina and the development of the wet growing techniques that transformed the physical and economic landscape of the lower South.67

The turn to rice culture in the colony had devastating effects on enslaved women and men. Rice is among the most onerous and labor intensive food crops, and the duration of the growing season and the dangerous and repellent nature of the work placed it at the extreme end of any continuum of forced agricultural labor in the early Atlantic world. Cultivating the crop over the duration of its 14-month growing season involved clearing the land of trees, bushes, and shrubs in January and February; planting acres of seeds by hand and foot; weeding constantly with hoe and hand; spending weeks in knee- and waist-deep water scaring birds away from the ripening crop; harvesting and stacking the rice over the course of three to four weeks; and finally threshing, winnowing, and pounding the rice to remove the kernel from the husk. Runaway numbers peaked during the hoeing and weeding seasons of June through early August as enslaved men and women stole away in search of respite from the “laborious and tedious” task of hand-picking grass from around the rice shoots that had taken root.68 But the pounding of the harvested rice had to be the most arduous and dangerous work over the course of the season of rice. Not until the 1770s would technology begin to replace the exhausting work of pounding rice by hand.69 Slaveowners were mindful of the toll that this work on the health and lives of those they enslaved:

The worst comes last for after the Rice is threshed, they beat it all in the hand in large wooden Mortars . . . which is a very hard and severe operation as each Slave is tasked at Seven Mortars for One Day, and each Mortar contains three pecks of Rice. Some task their Slaves at more, but often pay dear for their Barbarity, by the loss of many . . . valuable Negroes.70

The constant work of lifting a ten-pound pestle, arms over one’s head, for hours a day was exhausting, so much so that the task was often divided into
two separate sessions in the mornings and evenings. The act of pounding the rice required not only physical strength but acumen as well. Pounding too strenuously would leave one with less-valuable broken rice and bring castigation on the worker whose exhaustion level was costing the plantation owner his profits. The information necessary to cultivate and harvest rice drew heavily on female West African expertise, as women who had for generations begun their day with the pounding of a small amount of rice for daily use found their relationship with the crop utterly transformed—beginning with the need to teach men how to efficiently and carefully perform this task.

The skills needed to cultivate rice successfully were transferred from African to Englishman and from women to men to women again. Women, whose knowledge of rice cultivation in Senegambia had been passed from mother to daughter for generations, found themselves in the difficult position of transferring their knowledge to men, whose enslavement would now be exacerbated by the indignity of performing women’s work and the penalty for not performing it well. As Pearson has written, in the process of meeting the demands of the crop, slaveowners “dissolved the gender division of labor” that had characterized the early years of the colony as well as the West African past.71 The introduction and construction of the tidewater cultivation levees, sluices, and dikes that transformed swamps into rice fields demanded an astounding amount of labor from enslaved women and men. Over the course of fifty years, the enslaved workers on a single seventeenth century Carolina plantation moved over 6 million cubic feet of earth in the construction of the rice fields, creating “an earthwork approximately one-half the size of Monks Mound, the largest pre-historic Indian mound in North America.”72 In the aftermath of the War of Independence, white observers noted the connection between the design of rice irrigation systems and military engineers’ fortifications a link that was often materialized as enslaved men worked alongside military engineers in the construction of canals, thus cementing the connection between constructing irrigation systems and male knowledge.73 While men had historically performed much of this work in Western Africa, the conviction held by South Carolina slaveowners that men and women would have “the same day’s work in the planting and cultivating of the fields” suggests that slaveowners did not exempt women from the heavy work of moving earth to create the rice fields.74 In this, enslaved women would follow the lead of the men, whose familiarity with hydraulic design was so essential to South Carolinian planters.
Chapter 5

Rice culture in South Carolina differs from staple crop cultivation elsewhere in the New World not only because of the grueling demands of the crop but because of the relationship between indigenous African female knowledge and rice cultivation. As Judith Carney has so eloquently illustrated, the aural rhythm of a woman at her mortar and pestle pounding rice for the day’s consumption announced the new day all over the West African coast. Women’s expertise was of paramount importance at every stage of the crop’s cultivation in the West African rice region—from seed selection to the use of the long- and short-handled hoe to the use of the mortar and pestle to the construction and design of the fanner baskets for winnowing and, finally, to cooking. For the first generations of enslaved persons in the colony, that sound would continue to punctuate the day. As relatively isolated laborers on the colonial frontier, enslaved women and their families might even have relished the familiarity wrought by the steady rhythmic cadences of the mortar and pestle at the start of the day. But as South Carolina slaveowners wrested the crop from household use and applied it to plantation agriculture, the cadence of the mortar and pestle would resonate in entirely different ways. As Carney writes:

A task performed daily by African women in less than an hour became transformed with commodity production into extended hours of daily toil by male and female slaves over an abbreviated period of the year. The pounding of rice, the preparation of a food that signals daybreak and the re-creation of community life in West Africa, underwent a radical transformation on eighteenth-century rice plantations. As workers arose to the first of two pounding periods, the striking of the pestle represented a new conception of time and labor, calibrated by the dictates of planter and market.75

The continuity between rice culture in the lowcountry and on the West African coast and the essential role of women’s knowledge in that transmission should not suggest that women had less difficult work in the rice fields. Among the enslaved in North America, those who toiled in the South Carolina rice fields suffered the highest mortality. The work was grueling, the tasks stretched the workday out until well into the night, and the toll that the pounding of rice took on the bodies of the enslaved was so extensive that slaveowners took careful notice of the destruction of their human property. One late-eighteenth-century planter reasoned that the value of the hulled rice did not outweigh that of his laborers and wrote to his overseer that “if the Rice made at Goose-Creek is not yet beat out, I wd. Wish to have it sold in the rough, to save Labour of the Negroes.”76 Nonetheless,
the unique connection between the African past and the Carolinian present must be accounted for in the lives of enslaved women in Carolina. The connection between women’s knowledge and the life of Carolina planters raises intriguing questions about the ability of these women to negotiate spaces of autonomy. The task system of labor conceded to the enslaved by South Carolina slaveowners allowed for the development of slave economies and created a clear distinction between time in the service of the slaveowner and time in the service of oneself. The task system itself had African antecedents and may have developed from the transfer of knowledge and skills between the enslaved and the slaveowner. 77 Indeed, the parameters of the task system, which was in place as early as 1712, may have given rise to the natural increase among the enslaved that was evident in the early years of Carolina’s settlement. We know that the space that resulted from task labor generated gardens and markets: perhaps it generated a different relationship to the future that children embodied as well.

On the other hand, in the accounting of rice and women’s lives, the balance should tip toward misery. Women in the Carolina lowcountry watched as one of the most essential cadences of their former lives was utterly transformed. The quotidian task that had given shape to their morning would in its transformation become a reminder of all that no longer existed. Not just the mortar and pestle but also the weaving and basketry that once served the household and the life of the community would be transfigured by the rapacious demands of the slaveholder. 78 Not unlike the birth of a child, the agricultural work that gave meaning to one’s life now gave meaning to someone else’s life. But opportunities to reconfigure the balance of power in slave societies were everywhere and constituted an ongoing narrative thread in the history of racial slavery. Childbirth and the identifiable skills brought to cultivation and processing crops were themselves possible spaces in which to maneuver, even as they simultaneously concentrated the misery and violation enslaved women and men endured.