Introduction

Old Age and American Slavery

On June 30, 1814, in Botetourt, Virginia, an enslaved woman named Fan was murdered by Ralph, a fellow slave. Ralph sought to cover his tracks by claiming that Fan had accidently drowned, but he failed to convince his enslaver and was quickly taken to jail. Under the threat of torture, and with evidence from Black and white witnesses mounting up, Ralph confessed that "he had struck [Fan] with his Fist, choked her & threw her into the creek." This first assault did not suffice and Ralph determined to finish the job: "observing she was swimming & making to the opposite side of the creek, he got a stick, followed her & struck her on the head & finished her." When asked why he had killed Fan, Ralph claimed that "she was very quarrelsome & told lies on him." The brutality of the assault perhaps speaks to the violence that permeated a slave society, and there may have been motives left unsaid. Ralph's willingness to use extreme force to settle this grudge, however, also reflected the belief that he could get away with it. According to Ralph, Fan was too old to be of any concern to her enslavers: "she was such a trifling old negroe he did not expect he would be hung for killing her."[1] Formerly enslaved people commonly claimed they tried to protect Black elders in slavery; Frederick Douglass, the most famous Black activist of the nineteenth century, insisted that the aged enslaved found solace and support among their own: "there is not to be found, among any people, a more rigid enforcement of the law of respect to elders."[2] Ralph, however, had not received this message.

[1] Executive papers, James Barbour, July 1814, Box 13, Folder 1, Misc. Reel, 5522, 0241–0244, Library of Virginia (LVA). Ralph was mistaken.

[2] Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom: Part* I. – *Life as a Slave. Part* II. – *Life as Freeman* (New York: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855), 69.

White southerners also understood age was a vector of power. Writing to his sister in 1858, North Carolina enslaver William Pettigrew explained how the process of aging inevitably entailed a loss of sorts: "he who has attained 50 must soon expect the inexorable hand of time to soften that vigour which is all important in a ruler and without which he soon permits some stronger spirit than his own to assume the mastery over him."[3] White male enslavers lauded authority and independence and were supposed to exert dominance over "dependents" – whether women, children, or those whom they enslaved, while Stephanie Jones-Rogers shows that white women also sought to "acquire and exercise mastery over enslaved people."[4] But Pettigrew's fear that some "stronger spirit" would "assume the mastery over him" indicates wider fears among antebellum whites that age-related decline did not necessarily inspire collective social or familial support, but could be seized upon by rivals looking to assert themselves.

In *Old Age and American Slavery*, I explore perceptions of old age and attitudes toward "old" people in the US South. I focus on the experiences and identities of enslavers and enslaved alike and reveal the implications of aging on the institutional and ideological structures underpinning the so-called Peculiar Institution. As both a system of economic exploitation and a contested site of personal domination, slavery was shaped by concerns with age. In revealing how enslavers and enslaved people negotiated

[3] Robert Starobin (Ed.), *Blacks in Bondage: Letters of American Slaves* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1974), 34–5.

[4] Examples of this work include: Dickson D. Bruce Jr., *Violence and Culture in the Antebellum South* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979); Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19th-Century American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Honor and Slavery: Lies, Duels, Noses, Masks, Dressing as a Woman, Gifts, Strangers, Humanitarianism, Death, Slave Rebellions, the Proslavery Argument, Baseball, Hunting, and Gambling in the Old South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *The Shaping of Southern Culture: Honor, Grace, and War, 1760s–1890s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Craig Thompson Friend and Lorri Glover (Eds.), *Southern Manhood: Perspectives on Masculinity in the Old South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004); Lorri Glover, *Southern Sons: Becoming Men in the New Nation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007); John Mayfield, *Counterfeit Gentlemen: Manhood and Humor in the Old South* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2009); Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *A Warring Nation: Honor, Race, and Humiliation in America and Abroad* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014); Robert Elder, *The Sacred Mirror: Evangelicalism, Honor, and Identity in the Deep South, 1790–1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Stephanie Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property: White Women As Slave Owners in the American South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 62.

pressures associated with aging, and how their communities addressed these issues, this book develops vital and ongoing debates on power, resistance, and survival. In doing so, it deepens our understanding of the structures of American slavery, and of the most personal experiences of those enmeshed in it.

* * *

This book developed out of questions arising from my first monograph, *Contesting Slave Masculinity in the American South*.[5] I could not move past the case of Moses, "a feeble old man," murdered by King, a fellow slave, in Richmond, 1848. During the beating Moses tried to protect himself by making explicit reference to his age: "King I ain't fit to die. I don't want to go to Hell King, don't kill such an old creature as I." Moses even offered King "every cent of money I have got." Neither these pleas nor his advanced age saved him. King taunted and beat his elder before drowning him in a puddle of muddy water.[6]

I was struck by the cruelty of the assault, during which King repeatedly mocked his overmatched opponent, interspersing the beating with the pointed request Moses acknowledge "how come his name was King." The terror and sadness in Moses's cries led me to critically reappraise existing work on old age in enslaved communities. From the revisionist historiography of the 1970s onwards, scholars have overwhelmingly emphasized communal support, even reverence, for Black elders.[7] There has been a wave of important new scholarship on age in slavery which

[5] David Stefan Doddington, *Contesting Slave Masculinity in the American South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[6] Executive Papers, William Smith, Box 7, Folder 4, March 18, 1848, LVA.

[7] Examples here include: John Blassingame, "Status and Social Structure in the Slave Community: Evidence From New Sources," in Harry P. Owens (Ed.), *Perspectives and Irony in American Slavery* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1976), 137–51, 151; Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (Oxford: Basil Blackwall, 1976), 198–9, 218; Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: First Vintage Books Edition, 1976), 522–3; Leslie Pollard, "Aging and Slavery: A Gerontological Perspective," *Journal of Negro History*, 66.3 (1981), 228–34; Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I A Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W.Norton & Company, 1999 [1985]), 114–18; Brenda Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 227; Stacey Close, *Elderly Slaves of the Plantation South* (London: Routledge, 1997); Sharla Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 26, 55–88; Dorothy Smith Ruiz, *Amazing Grace: African American Grandmothers as Caregivers and Conveyors of Traditional Values* (Westport: Praeger 2004); Daina Ramey Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved from Womb to Grave in the Building of the Nation* (Boston: Beacon

emphasizes the exploitation of slavers, and which argues that in the face of this violence enslaved communities respected their aged and lauded their guidance.[8] As Daina Ramey Berry explains, "despite low external values, their soul values excelled. They carried great wisdom and stability for the community and were respected by younger enslaved family and friends."[9]

I kept encountering material, however, that suggested peers viewed enslaved elders in more complex ways than some of this historiography allows, and that elders themselves did not always believe due reverence had been granted. Moreover, "respect" granted on account of advanced years could seem condescending, being based on a perception of reduced abilities or accommodation on account of age. On Solomon Northup's Louisiana plantation, "Old Abram . . . [was] a sort of patriarch among us." Northup also emphasized, however, that "age and unremitting toil" had "somewhat shattered [Abram's] powerful frame and enfeebled his mental faculties." Northup's respect for Abram was predicated on pity, not parity. Indeed, he later used the trope of aging to reflect his own fear of remaining enslaved and his desire to avoid transitioning into the "patriarch" of the plantation: "The summer of my life was passing away; I felt I was growing prematurely old; that a few years more, and toil, and grief, and the poisonous miasma of the swamps would accomplish their work on me – would consign me to the grave's embrace, to moulder and be forgotten."[10] Associations of old age with physical decline, social isolation, and even submission to bondage shaped personal identities and community dynamics in slavery. Enslaved people perceived as old by others sometimes resented or resisted such reasoning, and this led to tension in enslaved communities.

* * *

Press, 2017), ch. 5; Jason Eden and Naomi Eden, *Age Norms and Intercultural Interaction in Colonial North America* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017), ch. 6.

[8] See, for example: Nathaniel Windon, "Superannuated: Old Age on the Antebellum Plantation," *American Quarterly*, 71.3 (2019), 767–77; Frederick Knight, "Black Women, Eldership, and Communities of Care in the Nineteenth-Century North," *Early American Studies*, 17.4 (2019), 545–61; Corinne T. Field, "Old-Age Justice and Black Feminist History: Sojourner Truth's and Harriet Tubman's Intersectional Legacies," *Radical History Review* 139.1 (2021), 37–51; Jenifer L. Barclay, *The Mark of Slavery: Disability, Race, and Gender in Antebellum America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021), 41.

[9] Berry, *Price for Their Pound of Flesh*, 131. On page 132, Berry notes that there are generally two positions on enslaved elders. At one end, they "were revered and treated with respect." At the other, "they were isolated and disregarded." Berry's focus is on the former, and I hope to further the debate by emphasizing the latter.

[10] Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853* (Auburn: Derby & Miller, 1853), 185–6, 235.

"Old age" is not a self-evident category, and it is worth outlining the demographic context of the US South. For both enslaved and white people, the US Census of 1850 designated "infancy" as under five, "youth" from five to twenty, and "maturity" as between twenty to fifty. Those aged from fifty to one hundred were in "old age," with "extreme old age" being one hundred plus.[11] Nevertheless, Berry rightly states that "during enslavement, those who reached age forty were considered elderly"; her outstanding work on the declining financial values placed on people in their late thirties underscores the physical depreciation associated with time's onward march, and the violence of slavery itself.[12]

The enslaved population in the antebellum years generally trended young: in 1820, where age ranges encompassed twenty-six to forty-four, and then forty-five plus, the percentage of enslaved people in the latter category was only 10 percent. Seventy percent of the enslaved population were twenty-five or younger. In 1830 and 1840, where classifications encompassed thirty-six to fifty-four, and then fifty-five plus, 16 percent of the overall population were thirty-six or older; only 4 percent were over fifty four. From 1850 age categories were structured by decade, and the percentage of enslaved people aged forty plus was 14 percent in 1850 and 1860. This same cohort made up 17 and 18 percent of the total white population in 1850 and 1860 (see Table I.1).[13]

[11] See Table XXXIII – "Proportion of White Males to Females, for 1850"; Table LXXXV – "Proportion of Male Slaves to Female, for 1850," in United States Census Bureau, *1850 Census: Compendium of the Seventh Census* (Washington, DC: Beverley Tucker, Senate Printer, 1854), 56, 91.

[12] Berry, *Price for Their Pound of Flesh*, 130. Daina Ramey Berry, "Berry Slave Value Database" (Ann Arbor: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2017–10-30). https://doi.org/10.3886/E101113V1. See also Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 521; Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of Negro Slavery* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989 [1974]), 72–5.

[13] Categories for 1820 census: 0–13, 14–25, 26–44, 45+. For 1830 and 1840: 0–9, 10–23, 24–35, 36–54, 55–100, 100+. For 1850 and 1860: 0–4, 5–9, 10–14, 15–19, and then by decade until 100+. Data from Michael R. Haines, "Slave Population, by Sex and Age: 1820–1860," Table Aa2093-2140, in Susan B. Carter, Scott Sigmund Gartner, Michael R. Haines, et al. (Eds.), *Historical Statistics of the United States, Earliest Times to the Present: Millennial Edition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Census material from 1790 to 1810 does not distinguish enslaved people by age.

For comparison to white population, see Michael R. Haines, "White Population, by Sex and Age: 1790–1990." Table Aa287-364 in Carter, Gartner, Haines, et al. (Eds.), *Historical Statistics of the United States*.

I have not disaggregated by gender as for the white and enslaved population there was c. 1 percent difference between men and women in these age categories. From the ages of twenty to fifty – Black and white – this favored men, while "for very old persons the excess

TABLE 1.1 *Slave population by age/sex.*

1820	M	F	Total	% of pop
0–13	343852	324344	668196	43.44
14–25	203088	202336	405424	26.36
26–44	163723	152693	316416	20.57
45+	77365	70637	148002	9.62
Total	788028	750010	1538038	
% 45+	**9.82**	**9.42**	**9.62**	

1830	M	F	Total	% of pop
0–9	353498	347665	701163	34.90
10–23	312567	308770	621337	30.93
24–35	185585	185786	371371	18.48
36–54	118880	111887	230767	11.49
55–100	41545	41436	82981	4.13
100+	748	676	1424	0.07
Total	1012823	996220	2009043	
% 36+	**15.91**	**15.46**	**15.69**	
% 55+	**4.18**	**4.23**	**4.20**	

1840	M	F	Total	% of pop
0–9	422584	421465	844049	33.93
10–23	391206	390117	781323	31.41
24–35	235386	239825	475211	19.10
36–54	145260	139204	284464	11.44
55–100	51331	49746	101077	4.06
100+	750	581	1331	0.05
Total	1246517	1240938	2487455	
% 36+	**15.83**	**15.27**	**15.55**	
% 55+	**4.18**	**4.06**	**4.12**	

For both 1850 and 1860, I have included the n/a in the total population used to calculate the percentages

1850	M	F	Total	% of pop
0–4	267088	273406	540494	16.87
5–9	239163	239925	479088	14.95
10–14	221480	214712	436192	13.61
15–19	176169	181113	357282	11.15
20–29	289595	282615	572210	17.86
30–39	175300	178355	353655	11.04
40–49	109152	110780	219932	6.86

(continued)

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009127974.001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(continued)

1850	M	F	Total	% of pop
50–59	65254	61762	127016	3.96
60–69	38102	36569	74671	2.33
70–79	13166	13688	26854	0.84
80–89	4378	4740	9118	0.28
90–99	1211	1473	2684	0.08
100+	606	819	1425	0.04
Age n/a	1870	1822	3692	0.12
Total	1602534	1601779	3204313	
% 40+	**14.47**	**14.35**	**14.41**	
% 50+	**7.66**	**7.43**	**7.55**	
% 60+	**3.59**	**3.58**	**3.58**	
% 70+	**1.21**	**1.29**	**1.25**	
% 80+	**0.39**	**0.44**	**0.41**	
% 90+	**0.11**	**0.14**	**0.13**	

1860	M	F	Total	% of pop
0–4	322156	331010	653166	16.52
5–9	287299	288650	575949	14.57
10–14	276928	264320	541248	13.69
15–19	220365	228481	448846	11.35
20–29	355018	343023	698041	17.66
30–39	218346	220520	438866	11.10
40–49	140791	139002	279793	7.08
50–59	79776	75926	155702	3.94
60–69	46219	44124	90343	2.28
70–79	15433	15724	31157	0.79
80–89	4627	5334	9961	0.25
90–99	1317	1714	3031	0.08
100+	671	900	1571	0.04
Age n/a	13679	12407	26086	0.66
Total	1982625	1971135	3953760	
% 40+	**14.57**	**14.34**	**14.46**	
% 50+	**7.47**	**7.29**	**7.38**	
% 60+	**3.44**	**3.44**	**3.44**	
% 70+	**1.11**	**1.20**	**1.16**	
% 80+	**0.33**	**0.40**	**0.37**	
% 90+	**0.10**	**0.13**	**0.12**	

Data drawn from Haines, Michael R., "Slave population, by sex and age: 1820–1860." Table Aa2093-2140 in *Historical Statistics of the United States, Earliest Times to the Present: Millennial Edition*, edited by Susan B. Carter, Scott Sigmund Gartner, Michael R. Haines, Alan L. Olmstead, Richard Sutch, and Gavin Wright. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

There are some points of geographical variation to address. The emerging states and territories in the southwest typically skewed younger than elsewhere. In the 1820 census, 7 percent of enslaved people in Mississippi, and 6 percent in Alabama, were over the age of forty-five, as compared to 11 percent in Maryland, Virginia, and South Carolina, 10 percent in North Carolina, and 9 percent in Georgia.[14] In the 1840 census, 13 percent of enslaved people in Alabama and Tennessee, 12 percent in Mississippi, 11 percent in Arkansas, and 10 percent in Missouri were aged thirty-six or older. In Maryland, Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia, the proportion of enslaved people aged thirty-six or older ranged from 15 to 19 percent.[15] In both the 1850 and 1860 census, in Texas, the newest slave state, 11 percent of the enslaved population were recorded as forty plus; the oldest slave state, Virginia, had the same cohort at 18 percent in 1850, and 17 percent in 1860.[16] Notwithstanding regional distinctions, a sizable minority of the antebellum enslaved might have been considered by their peers, if not invariably recognizing themselves, as having entered – or as soon to be entering – the chronological boundaries of "old age" in slavery.

For the white population, scholars frequently pinpoint *around* sixty as the beginning of old age. W. A. Achenbaum notes that, "in virtually every historical moment and site, old age was said to commence around age sixty-five, give or take fifteen years on either end."[17] Using this expanded range allows us to address conflicts surrounding the aging process and its

is with the females, the exceptions being chiefly in the new states." United States Census Bureau, *1850 Census: Compendium of the Seventh Census*, 54.

[14] "Aggregate Amount of Each Description of Persons in the United States and their Territories, according to the Census . . .," in United States Census Bureau, *Census for 1820* (Washington, DC: Gales & Seaton, 1821), 18.

[15] Data drawn from individual state returns in United States Census Bureau, *1840 Census: Compendium of the Enumeration of the Inhabitants and Statistics of the United States, as Obtained at the Department of State, from the Returns of the Sixth Census* (Washington, DC: Thomas Allen, 1841), 24–100.

[16] Data drawn from Table LXXXII – Ratio of Ages of the Slaves in 1850," in United States Census Bureau, *1850 Census: Compendium of the Seventh Census*, 89–90; "Slave Population by Age and Sex," United States Census Bureau, *1860 Census: Recapitulation of the Tables of Population, Nativity, and Occupation* (Washington, DC: Beverley Tucker, Senate Printer, 1864), 594–5.

[17] W. Andrew Achenbaum, "Delineating Old Age: From Functional Status to Bureaucratic Criteria," in Corinne T. Field and Nicholas L. Syrett (Eds.), *Age in America: The Colonial Era to the Present* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 301–20, 301. See also Stephen Katz, Kavita Sivaramakrishnan, and Pat Thane, "'To Understand All Life as Fragile, Valuable, and Interdependent': A Roundtable on Old Age and History," *Radical History Review*, 139 (2021), 13–36, 17–18; Susannah Ottaway, "Medicine and Old

attendant social impacts. Fifty not only designated "old age" in census material, but was commonly portrayed as a transition point in cultural representations of the life-course. James Baillie's 1848 prints – *The Life and Age of Man* and *The Life and Age of Woman* – used long-standing metaphors of the life-course as a rising and falling staircase, and presented both men and women as atop the steps aged fifty.[18] Yet while the fifty-year-old woman was described as a "blessing to the earth," there was a clear sense of shifting powers for men: "strength fails at Fifty, but with wit/fox like he helps to manage it."[19] Nonetheless, even managed decline could only delay the inevitable. In an 1846 lecture to the University of Louisville Medical Department, Charles Caldwell explained that the period from twenty-five to forty-five constituted a (white) man's "chief season of business, enterprise, and action." After this "commences his period of decline. Having reached the mid-day of his life, and basked for a time in the enjoyment of its sunlight, he must now descend, through its afternoon and evening, to its night in the grave."[20]

Pat Thane argues that old age has commonly been divided into "'green' old age, a time of fitness and activity with some failing powers, and the last phase of sad decrepitude," and Corinne T. Field notes that nineteenth-century Americans believed (or hoped) only "the very last steps of life are full of suffering."[21] Such attitudes and demarcations clearly existed among antebellum whites. However, so too did the understanding that aging brought losses – both physical and mental – that came faster than one hoped for, and which occasioned no little strife. Nathanael Emmons, an influential antebellum theologian, lamented that "old age begins so soon

Age," in Mark Jackson (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Medicine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 338–55, 341.

[18] Corinne T. Field, *The Struggle for Equal Adulthood: Gender, Race, Age, and the Fight for Equal Citizenship in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 99–102. For wider discussion on temporal metaphors associated with the life cycle, see Mark Schweda, "The Autumn of My Years: Aging and the Temporal Structure of Human Life," in Mark Schweda, Michael Coors, and Claudia Bozzaro (Eds.), *Aging and Human Nature: Perspectives from Philosophical, Theological, and Historical Anthropology* (Cham: Springer Nature, 2020), 143–59.

[19] James Baillie, *The Life and Age of Woman, Stages of Woman's Life from the Cradle to the Grave* (New York, ca. 1848); James Baillie, *The Life and Age of Man, Stages of Man's Life from the Cradle to the Grave* (New York, ca. 1848). Consulted at www.loc.gov/item/2006686266/ and www.loc.gov/item/2006686267/.

[20] Charles Caldwell, *Thoughts on the Effects of Old Age on the Human Constitution: A Special Introductory* (Louisville: John C. Noble Printer, 1846), 14.

[21] Pat Thane, *Old Age in English History: Past Experiences, Present Issues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 4; Field, *The Struggle for Equal Adulthood*, 102.

FIGURE 1.1 James Baillie, *The Life and Age of Man. Stages of Man's Life from the Cradle to the Grave* (New York, c. 1848). Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

FIGURE 1.2 James Baillie, *The Life and Age of Woman. Stages of Woman's Life from the Cradle to the Grave* (New York, c. 1848). Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009127974.001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

after the meridian of life"; the Reverend John Stanford seemingly concurred: "You gradually ascended from infancy to youth, and from youth to manhood, till you reached the summit of fifty. Now you equally mark the steps of descent to old age, and cannot fail to recollect the animating pleasure of the one contrasted with the feebleness of the other."[22] Time's relentless march could inspire denial, with Emmons claiming "almost every person desires to be young rather than old, and therefore is unwilling to know and realize that he has passed the meridian of life, and is descending to old age, with great but insensible rapidity."[23] It might also entail reflection. David Golightly Harris, aged forty-three, stoically accepted the inevitably of his own decline: "It is a sad thought to know that old age is creeping on me so fast, but sad as it is, it must be borne."[24] Another antebellum writer noted the necessary anguish at realizing:

> that you have had your fair half at least of the ordinary term of years allotted to mortals; that you have no right to expect to be any handsomer or stronger than you are now; that you have climbed to the summit of life, whence the next step must necessarily be decadence. Ay, though you do not feel it; though the air may be as fresh, and the view as grand – still, you know that it is so. Slower or faster, you are going down-hill.[25]

Emmons's suggestion that "there seems to be no impropriety however in calling any man old rather than young, who has passed the meridian of life, which is commonly supposed to be at about forty-five," indicates how even in a "green" old age, nineteenth-century Americans started perceiving themselves or others as beginning their downwards march from around this time.[26] That others (and scholars now) might dispute this designation is part of the story worth telling.

Returning to the numbers, nineteenth-century census data shows a similarly youthful white population, albeit with higher life expectancy than enslaved people. The 1850 census showed that "nearly two-fifths of the whole are between the ages of twenty and fifty, and less than one-tenth

[22] Nathanael Emmons, "Piety, a Peculiar Ornament to the Aged," in Jacob Ide (Ed.), *The Works of Nathanael Emmons, D.D., Late Pastor of the Church in Franklin, Mass., with a Memoir of His Life* (6 vols.; Boston: Crocker & Brewster, 1842), 2: 492–505, 499; John Stanford, *The Aged Christian's Companion* (New York: Stanford & Swords, 1855), 11.

[23] Emmons, "Piety, a Peculiar Ornament to the Aged," 499.

[24] Philip N. Racine (Ed.), *Piedmont Farmer: The Journals of David Golightly Harris, 1855–1870* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 426.

[25] By a woman [anon], "Growing Old," *The Ladies' Repository: A Monthly Periodical, Devoted to Literature, Arts, and Religion*, 18.5 (May 1858), 276–82, 276.

[26] Emmons, "Piety, a Peculiar Ornament to the Aged," 492.

over fifty; whilst more than one-half are under twenty years of age."[27] Ralph Waldo Emerson's claim that "America is the country of young men" is borne out in earlier data too.[28] Between 1800 and 1820, 12 percent of whites were recorded as forty-five or older. From 1830 onwards age categories were set by decade. In 1830, fifteen percent of white people were over the age of forty, and this had risen to eighteen percent by 1860. By 1860, 10 percent of the white population were over fifty, 4 percent sixty plus, 1 percent seventy or more, and below 1 percent for the age ranges from eighty to one hundred plus (see Table I.2).[29]

The antebellum satirist Joseph Baldwin's statement that "in the new country, there are no seniors" was an exaggeration, but it spoke to regional trends identified earlier.[30] In 1820, 8 and 9 percent of the white population in Alabama and Mississippi were over the age of forty-five; in comparison, 12 percent of whites in Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina were forty-five or older, with South Carolina and Georgia having 11 and 10 percent of their population within this age cohort.[31] In 1840, 9 percent of whites were fifty or older in Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina, with the same group making up 8 and 7 percent of South Carolina and Georgia's white population. In Alabama, Mississippi, and Missouri, the fifty-plus cohort made up 5 percent of the population; in Arkansas this dropped to 4 percent.[32] In Texas, for 1850 and 1860, 5 and 6 percent of whites were over the age of fifty; the same age cohort represented 10 percent of Virginia's white population.[33] A sizable minority of white people in the antebellum slave states would thus have been considered as having passed "the meridian of life" and, perhaps controversially, beginning their "[descent] to old age, with great but insensible

[27] "Table XXVIII – Per Cent of the Several Ages of the White Population to the Total Whites, 1850," in United States Census Bureau, *1850 Census: Compendium of the Seventh Census*, 51.

[28] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Old Age," *The Atlantic Monthly* (January, 1862).

[29] Data drawn from Haines et al., "White population, by sex and age: 1790–1990."

[30] Joseph G. Baldwin, *The Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi: A Series of Sketches* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1854), 234.

[31] "Aggregate amount of each description of persons in the United States and their Territories, according to the Census . . .," in United States Census Bureau, *Census for 1820*, 18.

[32] Data drawn from individual state returns in United States Census Bureau, *Compendium of the Enumeration of the Inhabitants and Statistics of the United States*, 1840.

[33] "Table XXVIII – Per Cent of the Several Ages of the White Population to the Total Whites – 1850," 51; Data drawn from "White Population by Age and Sex," United States Census Bureau, *1860 Census: Recapitulation of the Tables of Population, Nativity, and Occupation*, 592–3.

TABLE 1.2 *White population by age/sex.*

For 1790, only broad age categories for males were given: age 0–15, 802, 327; age 16 and older, 813, 298. No age data for females were given.

1800	M	F	Total	% of pop
0–9	764118	715197	1479315	34.37
10–15	353071	323648	676719	15.72
16–25	393156	401499	794655	18.46
26–44	431589	411694	843283	19.59
45+	262487	248030	510517	**11.86**
N/A	0	0	0	0.00
Total	2204421	2100068	4304489	
% 45+	**11.91**	**11.81**		**11.86**

1810	M	F	Total	% of pop
0–9	1035058	981421	2016479	34.40
10–15	468083	448322	916405	15.63
16–25	547597	561956	1109553	18.93
26–44	571997	544256	1116253	19.04
45 +	364836	338478	703314	**12.00**
N/A	0	0	0	0.00
Total	2987571	2874433	5862004	
% 45+	**12.21**	**11.78**		**12.00**

1820	M	F	Total	% of pop
0–9	1345220	1280570	2625790	33.40
10–15	612515	605375	1217890	15.49
16–25	776030	781371	1557401	19.81
26–44	766283	736600	1502883	19.12
45 +	495065	462888	957953	**12.18**
N/A	0	0	0	0.00
Total	3995113	3866804	7861917	
% 45+	**12.39**	**11.97**		**12.18**

From 1830-1860, I have included the n/a in the total population used to calculate the percentages

1830	M	F	Total	% of pop
0–4	972980	921934	1894914	17.99
5 to 9	782075	750741	1532816	14.55

(continued)

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009127974.001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(continued)

1830	M	F	Total	% of pop
10 to 14	669734	638856	1308590	12.43
15–19	573196	596254	1169450	11.10
20–29	956487	918411	1874898	17.80
30–39	592535	555531	1148066	10.90
40–49	367840	356046	723886	6.87
50–59	229284	223504	452788	4.30
60–69	135082	131307	266389	2.53
70–79	57772	58336	116108	1.10
80–89	15806	17434	33240	0.32
90–99	2041	2523	4564	0.04
100+	301	238	539	0.01
N/A	5318	0	5318	0.05
Total	5360451	5171115	10531566	
% 40+	**15.08**	**15.27**	**15.17**	
% 50+	**8.21**	**8.38**	**8.30**	
% 60+	**3.94**	**4.06**	**4.00**	
% 70+	**1.42**	**1.52**	**1.47**	
% 80+	**0.34**	**0.39**	**0.36**	
% 90+	**0.04**	**0.05**	**0.05**	

1840	M	F	Total	% of pop
0–4	1270743	1203319	2474062	17.43
5–9	1024050	986940	2010990	14.17
10–14	879530	836630	1716160	12.09
15–19	756106	792223	1548329	10.91
20–29	1322453	1253490	2575943	18.15
30–39	866452	779120	1645572	11.59
40–49	536606	502183	1038789	7.32
50–59	314528	304852	619380	4.36
60–69	174238	173329	347567	2.45
70–79	80067	80565	160632	1.13
80–89	21677	23962	45639	0.32
90–99	2508	3232	5740	0.04
100+	476	316	792	0.01
N/A	6100	0	6100	0.04
Total	7255534	6940161	14195695	

(continued)

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009127974.001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(continued)

1840	M	F	Total	% of pop
% 40+	15.58	15.68	15.63	
% 50+	8.18	8.45	8.31	
% 60+	3.84	4.05	3.95	
% 70+	1.44	1.56	1.50	
% 80+	0.34	0.40	0.37	
% 90+	0.04	0.05	0.05	
1850	**M**	**F**	**Total**	**% of pop**
0–4	1472053	1424405	2896458	14.81
5–9	1372438	1331690	2704128	13.83
10–14	1225575	1176554	2402129	12.29
15–19	1041116	1087600	2128716	10.89
20–29	1869092	1758469	3627561	18.55
30–39	1288682	1128257	2416939	12.36
40–49	840222	748566	1588788	8.13
50–59	498660	459511	958171	4.90
60–69	264742	256480	521222	2.67
70–79	111416	112648	224064	1.15
80–89	31243	34403	65646	0.34
90–99	3653	4499	8152	0.04
100+	357	430	787	0.00
N/A	7153	3154	10307	0.05
Total	10026402	9526666	19553068	
% 40+	17.46	16.97	17.22	
% 50+	9.07	9.11	9.09	
% 60+	4.10	4.29	4.19	
% 70+	1.46	1.60	1.53	
% 80+	0.35	0.41	0.38	
% 90+	0.04	0.05	0.05	
1860	**M**	**F**	**Total**	**% of pop**
0–4	2091460	2025985	4117445	15.29
5–9	1788711	1739387	3528098	13.10
10–14	1590472	1523281	3113753	11.57
15–19	1400536	1452045	2852581	10.60
20–29	2497210	2420139	4917349	18.26
30–39	1867378	1636213	3503591	13.01

(continued)

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009127974.001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(continued)

1860	M	F	Total	% of pop
40–49	1224086	1058246	2282332	8.48
50–59	740429	659246	1399675	5.20
60–69	400862	380011	780873	2.90
70–79	153649	156583	310232	1.15
80–89	38001	42753	80754	0.30
90–99	4135	5634	9769	0.04
100+	385	542	927	0.00
N/A	14073	11085	25158	0.09
Total	13811387	13111150	26922537	
% 40+	**18.55**	**17.57**	**18.07**	
% 50+	**9.68**	**9.49**	**9.59**	
% 60+	**4.32**	**4.47**	**4.39**	
% 70+	**1.42**	**1.57**	**1.49**	
% 80+	**0.31**	**0.37**	**0.34**	
% 90+	**0.03**	**0.05**	**0.04**	

Data drawn from Haines, Michael R., "White population, by sex and age: 1790–1990." Table Aa287-364 in *Historical Statistics of the United States, Earliest Times to the Present: Millennial Edition*, edited by Susan B. Carter, Scott Sigmund Gartner, Michael R. Haines, Alan L. Olmstead, Richard Sutch, and Gavin Wright. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

rapidity."[34] Despite regional distinctions, then, demographic trends show sufficient continuity to allow for a wide-ranging discussion on old age in the American South.

* * *

My concern is less, however, with chronological age than with exploring intersubjective perceptions of the aging process and intergenerational dynamics – in other words, showing how people understood embodied time in a relational and functional context, used temporal language to position themselves and others in social hierarchies – and considering the consequences

[34] Individual state returns drawn from 1820, 1840, 1850, and 1860 censuses. The national average for whites aged fifty plus from 1830 to 1860 was 9 percent. Average drawn from data presented in Haines, "White population, by sex and age: 1790–1990." Quote: Emmons, "Piety, a Peculiar Ornament to the Aged," 499.

of such positioning.[35] Theologian and philosopher Michael Coors argues that "understanding aging is not only about understanding the embodied Self, but always about understanding how the embodied Self interacts with other embodied Selves,"[36] and Kirsi Pauliina Kallio and Mary E. Thomas show that age is an identity that "gains sensibility through performative experiences, struggles, and intersections through a range of social meaning." They insist that age can only be "experienced in relation to others and made specific and contingent through contexts of encounter."[37] These wider theoretical positions are of value when assessing antebellum perceptions of, and experiences relating to, old age. Contemporary discussions on aging were situational and intersubjective. People may have been considered "old" in some settings, and by some observers, but not in or by others; these unstable categorizations could inspire reflection or, indeed, tension.[38] Emmons noted, for example, "How many have been startled the first time they heard themselves called old, or the first time they realized themselves to be so!" Contemporaries used terms such as "old" or "elder" fluidly, and so do I. As Emmons pithily put it, "Children always think their parents are old."[39]

Moreover, the hardships of slavery, commonly said to have sped up the physical effects of aging, detached the concept of old age from consistent chronological moorings and underscored the embodied nature of time's passage. Josiah Henson recalled stopping at a Vicksburg plantation on the way to New Orleans, where he faced sale from his conniving enslaver. Some of his "old companions" now lived there and Henson was devastated by their decline: "It was the saddest visit I ever made. Four years in an unhealthy climate and under a hard master had done the ordinary work

[35] On chronological, functional, and comparative readings to "old age," see Thane, *Old Age in English History*, 4; Steven Mintz, "Reflections on Age as a Category of Analysis," *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, 1.1 (Winter, 2008), 90–4; Corinne T. Field and Nicholas L. Syrett (Eds.), "AHR Roundtable: Chronological Age: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 125 (April 2020), 371–459; Alexander R. Schwall, "Defining Age and Using Age-Relevant Constructs," in Walter C. Borman and Jerry W. Hedge (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Work and Aging* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 170–86. On age and intergenerational dynamics as relational, see Kirsi Pauliina Kallio and Mary E. Thomas, "Intergenerational Encounters, Intersubjective Age Relations," *Emotion, Space, and Society*, 32 (2019), 1–4, 2. On embodied time, see Michael Coors, "Embodied Time: The Narrative Refiguration of Aging," in Schweda et al. (Eds.), *Aging and Human Nature*, 129–41, 133.

[36] Coors, "Embodied Time," 133.

[37] Kallio and Thomas, "Intergenerational Encounters," 2.

[38] Schwall, "Defining Age and Using Age-Relevant Constructs," 172–7.

[39] Emmons, "Piety, a Peculiar Ornament to the Aged," 493, 492.

of twenty."[40] Enslaved people were thus commonly depicted as "prematurely worn out by labor, and the whip, hunger, and the branding iron."[41] Henson's former companions may not have been chronologically old, but their experience of body, health, and self told a different story. Henson became convinced of the need to escape after seeing their premature aging, telling himself: "If this is to be my lot, I cannot survive it long. I am not so young as those whose wretched condition I have but just seen, and if it has brought them to such a condition, it will soon kill me."[42] Such subjective elements of perception – both personal and public – are critical to this book and to wider understandings of embodied time. I examine age as a functional category, metaphor, and symbol, as a means of comparatively constructing identities, and ultimately as a relation of power, rather than exploring the demographics of antebellum slavery or medicalized understandings of aging.[43] In delineating the contexts and consequences of assessments of "old age" among enslaved people and their enslavers, I underscore how far age factored into the conflict and negotiations within enslaved communities, and between enslaved people and their enslavers.

The book therefore also contributes to work on enslavers and notions of mastery itself. Much existing work stresses the significance enslavers and their peers accorded to public demonstrations of power, dominance

[40] Josiah Henson, *"Uncle Tom's Story of His Life."An Autobiography of the Rev. Josiah Henson (Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom")* … (London: Christian Age Office, 1876), 67.

[41] William G. Hawkins, *Lunsford Lane; or, Another Helper from North Carolina* (Boston: Crosby & Nichols, 1863), 187–8.

[42] Henson, *"Uncle Tom's Story of His Life,"* 69–70.

[43] On these topics, see Fogel and Engerman, *Time on the Cross*; Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996 [1989]); Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Todd L. Savitt, *Medicine and Slavery: The Diseases and Health Care of Blacks in Antebellum Virginia* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981); Peter McCandless, *Slavery, Disease, and Suffering in the Southern Lowcountry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Jim Downs, *Sick from Freedom: African American Illness and Suffering During the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006); Marli F. Weiner, *Sex, Sickness, and Slavery: Illness in the Antebellum South* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012); Dea H. Boster,*African American Slavery and Disability: Bodies, Property, and Power in the Antebellum South, 1800–1860* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Stefanie Hunt-Kennedy, *Between Fitness and Death: Disability and Slavery in the Caribbean* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020); Barclay, *The Mark of Slavery*.

of others, and independence, increasingly including women in these analyses.[44] Scholars have examined the transition from infancy to adolescence then maturity, the roles of white men and women in the "prime of life," and death in the antebellum South.[45] Few have considered, however, how the march of time affected the performance of mastery. General studies on old age in American history, moreover, rarely examine the US South. Instead, most studies focus on northern states, moving rapidly through earlier periods before concentrating on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[46] In contrast, I emphasize how enslavers – men and women – adapted to, resisted, or failed to overcome changes associated with age, both real and imagined. I show the consequences of these actions and choices in southern communities, Black and white.

* * *

Gender, to paraphrase Joan Scott, is everywhere.[47] However, although I address gender and age throughout the text, I do not foreground it. The book hopes to lay the groundwork for future studies of age as crucially determining multiple aspects of the experience of slavery. I have thus

[44] See note 4.

[45] See, for example, Greenberg, *Honor and Slavery*, 91–97; Glover, *Southern Sons*; Stephen Berry, *Princes of Cotton: Four Diaries of Young Men in the South, 1848–1860* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007); Craig Thompson Friend and Lorri Glover (Eds.), *Death and the American South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property*.

[46] See, for example, W. Andrew Achenbaum, *Old Age in the New Land: The American Experience since 1790* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); David Hackett Fischer,*Growing Old in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Howard P. Chudacoff, *How Old Are You? Age Consciousness in American Culture* (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 1989); Thomas R. Cole, *The Journey of Life: A Cultural History of Aging in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Susannah R. Ottaway, Lynn A. Botelho, and Katharine Kittredge, *Power and Poverty: Old Age in the Pre-Industrial Past* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002); Gregory Wood, *Retiring Men: Manhood, Labor, and Growing Old in America, 1900–1960* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012); Field and Syrett (Eds.), *Age in America*; Field and Syrett (Eds.), "Chronological Age: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis." Field's *Struggle for Equal Adulthood* predominantly refers to slavery in the context of youth/maturity. Work that covers the US South has not addressed aging in the context of mastery. See Carole Haber and Brian Gratton, "Old Age, Public Welfare and Race: The Case of Charleston, South Carolina 1800–1949," *Journal of Social History*, 21. 2 (1987), 263–79; Carole Haber and Brian Gratton, *Old Age and the Search for Security: An American Social History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

[47] Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Analysis," *American Historical Review*, 91.5 (1986), 1053–75, 1067.

taken a macro-level approach where the focus is explicitly on demonstrating the importance of age to structuring slavery as a system of exploitation. However, if we recognize gender as coalescing around specific attributes and behaviors, rather than specifically related to sex-based identity, then the book reveals that negative characterizations of old age, such as dependency and frailty, had much in common with antebellum characterizations of femininity/effeminacy. The thrust of much gender history is to portray these characteristics as inherently gendered, and then to argue outward from that position, so that gender is the primary relation of power within this analytic framework. As Jeanne Boydston argues, however, it can be more productive to think in terms of power and then work outward to understand how different subject positions are aligned upon the axis of weak/strong – and therefore what they have in common – rather than awarding any one subject position primacy.[48] This approach enables recognition of commonalities in how the dominant discourse perceives Black/feminine/old age but does not assume that gender (or race) is always prior to age. My focus on age does not preclude others training the lens on gender, and I hope perhaps to illuminate aspects of gendered experience by refracting gender through the less well-studied lens of age.

Old Age and American Slavery suggests, in fact, that within particular contexts age can be more important than gender: in some cases of neglect and abandonment of enslaved elders, younger white slavers overriding the power of old white slavers, or younger Black people gaining positions of authority over old enslaved people there are obviously differences in the specifics of the experience according to gender, but they do not affect the pattern of experience at the same fundamental level as age. In many of the cases noted herein, the power play was predicated on loss of power or authority due to age, rather than gendered differences; the male and female white slavers/enslaved people alike were judged on their age and challenged by those younger than them, and the difference gender makes was only in the form the power play took. In arguing thus, I hope to further establish age as an important category of analysis in its own right.[49]

* * *

[48] Jeanne Boydston, "Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis," *Gender & History*, 20.3 (2008), 558–83, 573.

[49] My thinking in this paragraph has been developed in conversation with Tracey Loughran and in private correspondence, 16/08/22.

This book is deliberately polemical. Aging is, of course, "a multi-faceted phenomenon which includes processes of gain and processes of loss, experiences of competence and experiences of deficit."[50] Here, however, I prioritize *only* the disruptions contemporaries associated with aging, the difficulties people believed they faced as they grew older, and moments of intergenerational tension. This was not the only type of relationship between generations, or between Black and white, and growing older was not always and inevitably perceived as a negative. Yet in focusing near entirely on intergenerational support systems among the enslaved, the overall effect of the scholarship to date has been to flatten the necessarily complex relationships enslaved people forged with one another in the context of oppression.[51] I deliberately focus on tension in the hope not only of inspiring conversation, disagreement, and debate, but also of demonstrating in new ways the corrosive effects of slavery on the identities and experiences of all within the system.

There is more variation in relation to perceptions of white aging, but W. A. Achenbaum's recent statement that "being old and becoming older in antebellum America did not connote loss of functionality" serves as an intriguing point to start interrogating the significance of age and intergenerational conflict in the context of slavery and enslaver identity.[52] Accordingly, I again focus entirely on those occasions when enslavers believed that advanced age meant they, or others, were unable to "function" as "masters." This approach forces deeper reflection on social tension in white communities and on how age, as much as gender, race, and class, shaped hierarchies and power dynamics in the American South. Indeed, it disrupts static notions of mastery. Historians have done tremendous work in exploring the violence enslavers practiced for profit.[53] In presenting

[50] Heinz Rüegger, "Beyond Control: Dependence and Passivity in Old Age," in Schweda et al. (Eds.), *Aging and Human Nature*, 47–57, 48.

[51] See note 7. Scholars who have emphasized conflict in the community, albeit without foregrounding age, include Peter Kolchin, "Re-Evaluating the Antebellum Slave Community," *Journal of American History*, 70.3 (1983), 579–601; Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*; William Dusinberre, *Them Dark Days: Slavery in the American Rice Swamps* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Orlando Patterson, *Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries* (Washington, DC: Civitas/Counterpoint, 1998); Dylan Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Jeff Forret, *Slave Against Slave: Plantation Violence in the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015).

[52] Achenbaum, "Delineating Old Age," 303.

[53] See, in particular, Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013); Edward E. Baptist, *The Half*

enslavers as such dominant figures, however, there is a danger that we confirm their mythology of dominance even while rejecting their claims of benevolence. Enslavers, however cruel and capricious, could not stop time from marching on. The pressures associated with aging, both real and imagined, could wreak havoc on their public and private claims to power. These old slavers are not objects of pity. Their struggles with "time's relentless hand," however, deepen understanding of the interpersonal mechanisms of slavery as an exploitative system; they show how age operated as a vector of power that intersected with race, gender, and class, and which shaped wider concerns over control, exploitation, resistance, and survival in a slave society.[54] Their fates further reveal the all-encompassing effects of the culture of exploitation that drove life in antebellum slavery.

* * *

Sowande' M. Mustakeem's work on the terrors of the Middle Passage reveals how far age-related concerns factored into the dynamics of slavery and resistance in the colonial era.[55] Here, I focus on the early republic and antebellum decades of American slavery, when age categories were explicitly used to manage manumission in the aftermath of the American Revolution. These laws revolved around the assumption that those above a certain age – ranging from thirty-five to forty-five – would be unable to care for themselves. They provide a wealth of material on approaches to age in the context of slavery, and broader understandings of body, health, and self.[56] Antebellum enslavers could adapt, reject, or

Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism(New York: Basic Books, 2014); Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014); Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property*.

[54] Henry Clay, and Felix Octavius Carr Darley, *Odd Leaves from the Life of a Louisiana "Swamp Doctor." In "The Swamp Doctor's Adventures in the South-West. Containing the Whole of the Louisiana Swamp Doctor; Streaks of Squatter Life; and Far-Western Scenes; in a Series of Forty-Two Humorous Southern and Western Sketches . . ."* (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson, 1858), 141–3.

[55] Sowande' M. Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017).

[56] Of the twenty-four manumission by "certificate" acts passed between 1777 and 1864, only five had no age limit: Connecticut in 1777, South Carolina in 1800, New Jersey in 1846, Virginia in 1846, and Missouri in 1864. Connecticut's was changed in 1792 to limit manumission to those under forty-five. New Jersey limited manumission to those between twenty-one to thirty-five in 1786, and changed this to twenty-one to forty in 1798, before scrapping the law in 1846; both Missouri and Virginia limited manumission to those between eighteen and forty-five in 1782 and 1804 and then shifted the categories to twenty-one and forty-five. South Carolina simply eliminated the law in 1820. A number of states also used bond requirements to provide insurance in case of aged and infirm free

resist this type of legislation, but in all cases contemporaries were forced to address the significance of age appertaining to identity, ability, and embodied experience in slavery.

This chronology also places enslavers' protestations around the treatment of elders in the context of the geographic and economic expansion of slavery and the growing political tensions over slavery in the antebellum decades. In this era, existing claims as to the "good" treatment of elders achieved new importance as the politics of paternalism and its associated promises of support from cradle to grave became a vital component of proslavery literature during the antebellum era, and one that was heavily contested by Black activists and abolitionists.[57] In the form of received or denied care for Black elders, age attained crucial political importance in this period.

Across the period, contemporaries showed concern that the process of aging would hinder enslavers' performances of mastery. Cases from the revolutionary era up to the Civil War associated old age with inevitable physical decline, and possibly weakened mental faculties. Antebellum cases sometimes relied on the idea that aged enslavers were incapable of fulfilling the paternalistic bargain. With quite striking consistency, intergenerational disputes revolved around a concern that the aged could not

Blacks becoming a "drain" on resources, and/or required emancipated Black people to leave the state. On the breakdown on manumission statutes by age, see Benjamin Joseph Klebaner, "American Manumission Laws and the Responsibility for Supporting Slaves," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 63.4 (1955), 443–53. For wider literature on manumission, see, for example Thomas D. Morris, *Southern Slavery and the Law, 1619–1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); T. Stephen Whitman, *The Price of Freedom: Slavery and Manumission in Baltimore and Early National Maryland* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997); Bernie D. Jones, *Fathers of Conscience: Mixed-Race Inheritance in the Antebellum South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009); Yvonne Pitts, *Family, Law, and Inheritance in America: A Social and Legal History of Nineteenth-Century Kentucky* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Kelly M. Kennington, *In the Shadow of Dred Scott: St Louis Freedom Suits and the Legal Culture of Slavery in Antebellum America* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017); Loren Schweninger, *Appealing for Liberty: Freedom Suits in the South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[57] See, for example, Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Philadelphia: Richard and Hall, 1788), 151. On the cultural and political symbolism of representations of elderly slaves in the postbellum era, see David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*(Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 284–91; Nathaniel Windon, "A Tale of Two Uncles: The Old Age of Uncle Tom and Uncle Remus," *Common-Place*, 17.2 (2017), http://commonplace.online/article/a-tale-of-two-uncles/; Lydia Ferguson, "Pro-Slavery Appropriations and Inadvertent Agencies: The Elder(ly) 'Uncle' in Plantation Fiction," *American Studies*, 58.1 (2019), 49–72.

control the enslaved, and both families and communities were willing to publicly state these fears. These cases therefore reveal broader tensions inherent to slavery; regardless of the proslavery claims of mutual obligations, enslavers understood the "simmering violence inherent to mastery," the attendant need to demonstrate dominance, and the personal and political dangers if individuals were no longer capable of doing so.[58] Throughout the book I show how this mentality fundamentally shaped the contested nature of mastery and resistance, as well as broader concerns with the aging process in a slave society.

The Civil War–era is a natural end-point for this study, but the Conclusion addresses David Blight and Jim Down's recent imperative to "disrupt the history of emancipation" and to recognize "freedom" as a perilous process.[59] This was particularly true for those most vulnerable, including Black elders who had left "their best days behind them."[60] Violet Guntharpe poignantly recalled the aftermath of the Civil War in her Works Progress Administration (WPA) interview: "Lots of de chillun die, as did de old folks."[61] In setting out the problems elders faced in the aftermath of emancipation, the book ends by underscoring the long-lasting violence of American slavery.

* * *

To assess social and cultural constructions of "old" age and their impacts on enslaved and enslaver alike, I draw on diverse textual and visual sources. I analyze contemporaries' uses of chronological markers, temporal metaphors, and discursive labels such as "old," "aged," and "elderly" to describe and evaluate people's abilities and identities, and consider the intersubjective dimensions of embodied time. Michael Coors writes that "we learn to recognize ourselves as bodies by reference to there being other embodied selves like ourselves and we recognize among those others many embodied selves of different bodily appearance." These bodies may be "larger, have different shapes, probably grey hair," and we thus "experience that the other bodies change in time, and we experience that others perceive a change in our bodily appearance. Those differences and changes

[58] Vincent Brown, *Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2020), 4.

[59] Jim Downs and David Blight (Eds.), *Beyond Freedom: Disrupting the History of Emancipation* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017).

[60] Sterling N. Brown, *My Own Life Story* (Washington, DC: Hamilton Printing, 1924), 7.

[61] George P. Rawick (Ed.), *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, 2.2 (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1972), 217.

are expressed by using the words 'older,' 'younger,' and 'aging.'"[62] My discursive and textual examination thus illuminates contemporaries' feelings about and treatment of people they categorized as old, the changes they associated with aging, and their personal considerations and comparisons on age, health, and self.

I make extensive use of slave testimonies, including nineteenth-century published narratives, postbellum memoirs, and oral histories collected from the Works Progress Administration (WPA) project.[63] The antebellum narratives provide remarkable insight into the structures of slavery, social interactions, personal and public identities, and the politics of abolitionism and emancipation. Their inherent subjectivity, and the complex politics of their production, is less of a burden and more of a boon to scholars seeking to interrogate identities and community dynamics.[64] Critical and creative assessment of the language employed in these texts reveals how elders viewed themselves and were viewed by others, how age affected experiences in – and responses to – bondage, and how abolitionists and Black activist writers figuratively and literally applied concepts of age. The discursive construction of old age in functional, relational, and subjective terms in these texts speaks to the significance of ideas on aging to broader debates surrounding agency, resistance, and survival in (and out of) slavery.

There have been numerous critiques of the WPA interviews conducted with formerly enslaved people in the 1930s, centering on the age of

[62] Coors, "Embodied Time," 133.

[63] All published slave narratives cited were sourced at "North American Slave Narratives," *Documenting the American South* (University Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/texts.html. The WPA narratives are sourced from George P. Rawick (Ed.), *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, Series 1–2*. 19 Vols. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1972); Rawick (Ed.), *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, Supplement, Series 1*. 12 Vols. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1977); Rawick (Ed.), *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, Supplement, Series 2*. 10 Vols. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979); and *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project* (1936), Manuscript/Mixed Material. www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/about-this-collection/. FWP volumes are organized by state/interviewee name. Hereafter cited as Rawick (Ed.), *AS*, with volume/edition number, and FWP by state.

[64] The case for their usage has been exhaustively made. On the debates, see John Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems," *Journal of Southern History*, 41.4 (1975), 473–92; Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Eds.), *The Slave's Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); essays in John Ernest (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the American Slave Narratives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); David Stefan Doddington and Elizabeth Maeve Barnes, "Engaging with Sources: Slave Narratives," *Bloomsbury History: Theory and Method Articles* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021). http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350970892.089

respondents – both in terms of their youth while enslaved and their advanced age at point of interview – and the impact of segregation, racial violence, and the Depression on the stories relayed and recorded.[65] As with fugitive narratives, however, the subjectivity and selective memories of the respondents should be embraced in the present context. Many of the formerly enslaved repeated stories told by or about their families; this suggests that the oral tradition was not simply a means by which Black Americans interpreted and attempted to understand the collective legacy of slavery, but that it also framed their most personal memories and identities.[66] A critical reading of the testimonies illuminates tropes and ideas that enslaved people used to make sense of their lives and provides insight into relationships between enslaved people and their enslavers. The testimonies are particularly useful in exploring the quotidian elements of enslavement: suggested questions for case workers typically focused on the day-to-day activities of enslaved people. Moreover, because the majority of interviewees were legally emancipated in 1865, the interviews are not bound by the necessary emphasis on permanent flight in the fugitive narratives and their subsequent teleological construction.[67]

WPA respondents were typically enslaved in childhood and therefore predominantly over the age of seventy when interviewed. Scholars have suggested this limits their usefulness.[68] However, this age-related concern is helpful in the context of this book. As shall be discussed, elders frequently held responsibilities over children deemed too young for work, and thus many respondents recorded their encounters with Black elders and addressed intergenerational relationships in some detail. The

[65] On the WPA narratives, see Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves"; Paul D. Escott, *Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth Century Slave-Narratives* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979); David Thomas Bailey, "A Divided Prism: Two Sources of Black Testimony on Slavery," *Journal of Southern History*, 46.3 (1980), 381–404; Donna Spindel, "Assessing Memory: Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives Reconsidered," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 27.2 (Autumn, 1996), 247–61; Sharon Ann Musher, "Contesting 'The Way the Almighty Wants It': Crafting Memories of Ex-Slaves in the Slave Narrative Collection,"*American Quarterly*, 53.1 (2001), 1–31; Edward E. Baptist, "'Stol' and Fetched Here': Enslaved Migration, Ex-slave Narratives, and Vernacular History," in Edward E. Baptist and Stephanie M. H. Camp (Eds.), *New Studies in the History of American Slavery* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 243–74.

[66] Baptist, "Stol' and Fetched Here," 245.

[67] Charles L. Perdue Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips (Eds.), *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992), xxxiv–xxxvi, 367–76.

[68] Spindel, "Assessing Memory."

experiences of aging are not timeless, but respondents frequently made reference to their own advanced age, openly voiced their anger at a perceived lack of respect from the younger generation, and also compared their experiences and ailments while enslaved and free. Used in conjunction with contemporaneous records, the WPA narratives enable the identification of similarities in recollections and representations of aging across time, which in turn suggests continuities in approaches to age and subsequent intergenerational tension in southern communities, Black and white, over the longer period.

I also engage with a wide range of material from white society, including plantation journals, letters, travel accounts, diaries, medical treatises, and political and prescriptive literature for and by enslavers. This material demonstrates how age factored into enslavers' identities, and their private and public performances of dominance and mastery – both over enslaved people and within the white community. I use legal records – civil and criminal – to explore tensions between white southerners and to illuminate how age shaped broader concerns with authority and control. Although legal conventions mean that testimony was often deliberately antagonistic, scholars have shown that the courts were an important site for the construction of a sociocultural and legal discourse around body, health, and self.[69] Kimberly Welch reiterates how, even if we cannot be certain of the "truth" claims of petitioners, litigants, and defendants, tales told in a courtroom "had to be recognizable to the other participants. They had to be plausible and fit into other narratives."[70] Participants in the legal process had to speak to and through a recognizable discourse to make their case, whether true or false. The courtroom was thus an arena where ideas on the aging process were applied, contested, and reinforced when making judgments on the actions and identities of enslavers.

* * *

[69] Ariela J. Gross, *Double Character: Slavery and Mastery in the Antebellum Southern Courtroom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 98. Wider scholarship on the complexity to, dangers of, and riches within, legal records, including both depositions and courtroom testimony, which has influenced me includes Natalie Zemon Davis,*Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 5, 21; Carolyn Steedman, *Dust* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), esp. ch. 3; Frances E. Dolan, *True Relations: Reading, Literature, and Evidence in Seventeenth-Century England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 113–18.

[70] Kimberly M. Welch, *Black Litigants in the Antebellum American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 46.

The book is split in two. Part I shows how understandings of the aging process affected the dynamics of slavery, with particular attention to the continued exploitation of elders and the efforts of enslavers to rid themselves of responsibilities and costs by selling, abandoning, or neglecting Black elders. Proslavery polemicists – antebellum and beyond – sought to "portray a civilization now obsolete, to picture the relations of mutual attachment and kindness which in the main bound together master and servant." In doing so, they frequently claimed that "no tillers of the soil, in ancient or modern times, received such ample compensation for their labors."[71] This section underscores the mendacity of such paternalistic claims, with chapters showing the continued work expected of elders, the abuse of enslaved people deemed unsound on account of advanced age, and enslavers' cynical efforts to sell, abandon, or neglect those whom they believed were no longer productive. I then consider how age shaped social hierarchies and interpersonal relations among the enslaved themselves, looking at intergenerational struggles in work, leisure time, and community affairs. In contrast to existing scholarship, this section shows how support for Black elders was conditional and sometimes contested. The section concludes with a provocative challenge to the dominant historiographical vision of unquestioned respect for Black elders among the enslaved and considers how survival strategies might conflict with rather than reinforce notions of resistance.

Part II focuses on the pressures enslavers faced as they aged. Proslavery writers commonly presented an image of mastery as innate and inviolable. Patrick Hues Mell noted that "God, in his wisdom, has instituted the family gradations, has established the relation of master and servant, of governor and governed, and commanded each to be content with the situation in which he is placed."[72] Rhetoric was not reality, and this section reveals the concerns of white southerners when they felt "the infirmities of age growing upon [them] very sensibly."[73] I begin by showing how far enslaved people understood that mastery was

[71] R. Q. Mallard, *Plantation Life Before Emancipation* (Richmond: Whittet & Shepperson, 1892), vi, 36.

[72] Patrick Hues Mell, *Slavery: A Treatise, Showing That Slavery Is Neither a Moral, Political, nor Social Evil* (Penfield: Printed by Benj. Brantly, 1844), 21.

[73] Diary of Benjamin Leonard Covington Wailes, August 1, 1861, *Records of Antebellum Southern Plantations from the Revolution through the Civil War*, Series N: *Selections from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History* (microfilm; Frederick, Md., 1985–), reel 19. All references from the *Records of Antebellum Southern Plantations* were consulted at Library of Congress (LOC).

embodied, not innate, and that, as the enslaver's body grew "withered by time," so too might their pretensions of control.[74] The subsequent chapters demonstrate how antebellum whites responded to fears of a loss of mastery on account of age, exploring both enslavers' efforts to exploit this for their own gain and the actions of those who were forced to respond to the depredations of others. The final chapter reveals how, when elderly enslavers proposed emancipation, rivals utilized a discourse that conflated old age with weakness, both of body and mind, to challenge this final expression of mastery. Their efforts to do so, whether successful or not, serve to underscore the personal and political concerns with aging in a society built on exploitation and expressions of power. The recognition of enslaved and enslaver alike that "the ravages of time" came for all shaped the dynamics of American slavery.[75]

Old Age and American Slavery reveals how antebellum southerners adapted to, resisted, or failed to overcome changes associated with age, both real and imagined. It connects concerns with aging to wider debates over strategies of control, survival, and dominance in slavery. In examining how individuals, families, and communities felt about the aging process and dealt with elders, I emphasize the complex and contested social relations that developed in a slave society. Showing how old age ran through the arguments of Black activists, abolitionists, proslavery propagandists, and enslavers, I reveal how representations – and the realities – of aging spoke to wider debates on the politics of paternalism and resistance. Ultimately, by illuminating age as a crucial aspect of the complex web of relations that bound together enslavers and enslaved, this book asks readers to rethink existing narratives relating to networks of solidarity in the American South. It emphasizes the all-encompassing violence and exploitation of American slavery.

[74] Diary of Benjamin Leonard Covington Wailes, July 17, 1860.

[75] W. A. Riddlemoser, "Conception in the Human Female," 1843–4, Box 150, Part II, Joseph Meredith Toner Collection of Manuscripts (Manuscript Division, LOC, Washington, DC).