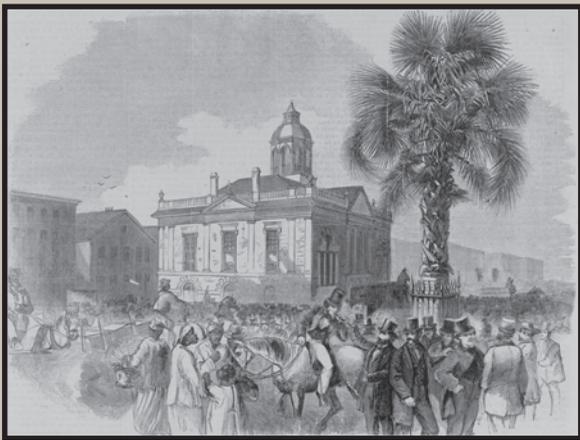


Braided Relations, Entwined Lives



*The
Women of
Charleston's
Urban
Slave
Society*

Cynthia M. Kennedy

Braided Relations, Entwined Lives

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For Ellie, Jerry, and Deborah Kennedy

If you're going to hold someone down you're going to have to hold onto the other end of the chain. You are confined by your own system of repression.

Toni Morrison, in Brian Lanker, *I Dream a World* (1989)

It is not really difference the oppressor fears so much as similarity.

Cherríe Moraga, "La Guëra," in Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds.,
This Bridge Called My Back (1983)

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Braided Relations, Entwined Lives

Introduction

Early in 1820, Charleston, South Carolina, municipal authorities captured Lavinia and John Fisher, leaders of the infamous “Six Mile House Gang.” Two men claimed that “lovely Lavinia” lured travelers into the Six Mile House—an inn situated six miles outside the city—poisoned their food, and pushed their bodies into a cellar. No mere myrmidon, Lavinia allegedly plotted and orchestrated a series of grizzly murders by capitalizing on her physical beauty. City guardsmen found several human skeletons on the grounds of the Six Mile House, giving credence to these sensational accusations. The court quickly convicted Lavinia and her husband and sentenced them to hang. In response, several “amiable ladies” of the master class rallied behind Lavinia. They publicly declared “distasteful” the very thought of a white woman being hung. Such an act, they proclaimed, “would reflect badly on all women.” The ladies petitioned Governor John Geddes for a pardon, incorporating into their plea notions of the ideal woman and arguing the necessity of protecting this image and assuring proper treatment of white women. The images they elaborated were, of course, wholly antithetical to Lavinia Fisher’s conduct. This genteel cabal failed to save Lavinia’s life. In February during the city’s high social season, a huge crowd assembled to watch her and John swing from the gallows. Unrepentant and unladylike to the bitter end, Lavinia shouted to them, “if you have a message you want to send to hell, give it to me—I’ll carry it!”¹

Despite their inability to save Lavinia Fisher, these Charleston ladies revealed the complicity of southern white women in constructing both gender and race. They explicitly demarcated women whom they judged to be above public punishment (white women) and implicitly identified those who were not so privileged (women of color). Lavinia Fisher threatened these women of the master class because she did not act white and because she was white but no lady. They responded to this quandary by publicly defending a convicted murderess and, more precisely, by reiterating and defending the place of white women in slave society. In the process, members of this “amiable” cabal of 1820 engaged in the ongoing work of patrolling social boundaries and weaving the power relations of urban slave society.

This study explores women’s lives in one of the antebellum South’s most fascinating cities. In doing so, it also elaborates the roles of women and gender, as well as race, condition (slave or free), and class, in conveying and replicating power in slave society. It builds on the work of scholars who have reassessed the complexity of these overlaid and interrelated social categories—gender, race, color, condition, and class—in creating and upholding racial slavery in the American South. It extends their analyses of what it meant to be a woman in a

world where these historically specific social classifications determined destiny and where people of color and white people mingled frequently. In particular, it builds on Kathleen Brown's study of the uses of "patriarchal forms" in forging early American culture and extends Brown's analysis of the ways people used gender to construct racial categories and legitimate authority. It investigates these processes and their effects on women of African and European descent in the urban South during the American Revolution and continuing until the decade before the American Civil War. It reveals southern women as complicit in producing and reproducing the pyramid of power relations in slave society.²

This study of the women of Charleston, South Carolina, also reveals a simple but formative reality of southern slave society: women knew who they were precisely because they mingled daily in explosive intimacy and observed constantly who they were not. Southerners of all social groups entwined women inextricably (the subordination of all women was imperative to slave society) yet separated them relentlessly based upon race, color, condition, and wealth. Their relationships were like a braid, a metaphor that informs this work and conveys the intricacies of human relationships and the processes and functions of identity formation. The metaphor is not intended to represent a united community of women or to diminish the continual power struggles among women. Disparate types of Charleston women—wealthy white mistresses, slaves, laboring free women of color, white women of the laboring classes, women of the brown elite—encountered different realities and possibilities. Their lives were driven or constrained by different practices and aspirations. These distinctions simultaneously defined, separated, and connected women. Just as important, the contingent definitions of "woman" were, in turn, crucial to the maintenance of power by wealthy white people—the master class—who remained a numerical minority in Charleston during the period covered.

There are several reasons for focusing on the women of an urban society rather than the more typical rural South. While it is true that the southern population was more homogenous than the northern population, southern cities were home to Germans, Scots, Irish, French, and Huguenots, as well as Caribbean émigrés of all colors and—while the international slave trade flourished—Africans as well as African Americans. Population diversity in the urban milieu permits greater elaboration of the mercurial alliances and enmities among different groups of women and between women and men. These dynamic, shifting relations of power were constructed, contested, and reconstructed in mundane social exchanges as well as during times of personal and citywide upheaval. People encode meaning and power in language, and the city affords ample opportunity to eavesdrop. I have listened carefully to what Charleston women and men said in their personal correspondence, journals, reminiscences, novels, wills, meeting minutes, laws, legal testimony, court reports, medical theses, and newspapers. This analysis of words and deeds in private and public arenas discloses women's centrality to the task of building and patrolling social boundaries so crucial to urban slave society.

Work and labor relations also differ in cities. Studying women in a southern

city provides greater prospects of analyzing the skilled and unskilled work of women, slave and free, black, brown, and white. The urban environment also serves as a window on slave hiring, one of the best examples of the malleability of slavery as a labor system and of the prevalence of women in the city's economic transactions. This contested yet common practice afforded constraints and opportunities to all parties involved: those hiring out their slaves, those hiring the labor, and the laborers themselves, some of whom negotiated their own terms of service. White women of the laboring classes also found greater opportunities in the cities. Their experiences add complexity to our understanding of the American South and the labor relations of slavery. The work of enslaved and free market women, as well as sole traders of all colors, reveals the vital roles women played in the city economy. Their economic independence, however, was contested. White sole traders, in particular, violated southern domestic ideology mandating their economic dependence. Consequently, the courts increasingly constrained their privileges. Statute and case law bolstered not only the power of owners over slaves, white over color, and the better sorts of people over the lower sorts but also of men over women. Judges distinguished between worthy and unworthy women—they wielded gender as a judicial tool in upholding patriarchal authority—and in this way courts protected a white man's dominion over his household, an institution that represented slave society in miniature.³

Many qualifications make Charleston, South Carolina, an excellent place to study women of the urban South. In 1776 Charleston, with approximately 12,000 residents, ranked second only (in mainland North America) to New York in population. The city had established itself as a vital commercial center of the British Empire, with three to four hundred commercial trading vessels clearing Charleston's harbor annually, carrying cargo to England, Holland, the Mediterranean, Portugal, the West Indies, and the northern colonies. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries it was the port of entry for tens of thousands of enslaved Africans as well as thousands of free white immigrants. Hordes of transient sailors, businessmen, and travelers passed in and out of the city. A surveyor general for the southern colonies described Charleston in 1773 as "the most imminent and by far the richest city in the southern district of North America." Mainland North America's wealthiest residents called Charleston home on the eve of the American Revolution. In sharp contrast, nearly two-thirds of those living in the city were white people or slaves without property of their own. Enslaved people of African descent consistently comprised at least half of the city's population from the Revolution until the final decade before the Civil War.⁴

Another reality commends Charleston as a fitting place for this analysis. Its environs became a locus of bloody and tenacious guerilla warfare during the Revolution. In one of the greatest victories of the war, the British occupied the city for two-and-a-half years beginning in May 1780. Consequently, Charleston is a laboratory in which to examine how women encountered the chaos and violence of war. They shared the experiences of terror, privation, grief, loss, and a

determination to survive the turmoil. While adversity potentially nourished female solidarity, unbridgeable chasms of race, condition, wealth, and political allegiance eroded that unity and precluded the formation of any collective women's identity or women's culture forged in the fires of the Revolution. Precisely because this study opens during the American Revolution, it enters the ongoing debate on the extent to which white women participated in forging a new nation, the nature of that involvement, and the effect of the war on the status of women. As such it joins several historians who have revealed women as agents in the creation of a new nation rather than as passive participants whose lives were little changed by the war.⁵

The postwar period—the first reconstruction in American history—underscores the interconnectedness of white freedom and hegemony and black bondage and subjugation. Women figure prominently in this saga of resisting, rebuilding, and accommodating. Charleston ladies and gentlemen wielded antithetical images of lady and wench—stereotypes reified during the war—to reconfigure and revitalize slavery and patriarchy. After American patriots ousted the British from Charleston in December 1782, the lives of African Americans and European Americans quite literally intertwined in mutual definition when patriots of the master class rebuilt their lives, in part, by restraining the lives of people of color. Their experiences provide a southern perspective, complicated by racial slavery, on women's transition from the colonial period to the nineteenth century.

In addition, wealthy white residents fashioned themselves exemplars of southern society and gentility. The city remained South Carolina's social, economic, and political center even after Columbia supplanted Charleston as the state capital in 1786. Its leadership role in the nullification crisis of the early 1830s and in the secession movement of the 1850s solidified Charleston's position as the standard bearer for the southern way of life. Social activities loomed as essential to this southern order, and members of the master class worked exceedingly hard at playing. The city gained a reputation for seasonal debauchery. But these amusements were more than mere frolic. Leisure for the rich—enabled by slave labor—provided forums for exhibiting wealth, status, and power. A slave woman's hard work and the recreation of her mistress were two sides of the same coin. Master-class mothers and daughters took center stage in ritualized social activities, as did women of the brown elite at their separate but similar affairs. Every ball and picnic hosted by women in these distinct social groups served to reenact and reinforce the social boundaries of slave society.

This is a study of women in the urban South, and Charleston acquits itself well on this count also. At the time of the first census in 1790, white women and women of color presided over 18 percent of Charleston's 1,900 households, and together they owned more than 1,300 slaves. Over the next seventy years, slave women, free women of color, and white women consistently made up well over half the inhabitants of the city, which grew from 16,000 in 1790 to nearly 43,000 people at mid-century (see table 1). Slave women outnumbered every other group, female and male, and constituted from 25 to 28 percent of all city residents (see table 2). Because of sheer numbers and women's prominence in the

Table 1. City Population by Condition, Race, and Sex.

City Population by Condition, Race, and Sex, 1790–1810			
	1790	1800	1810
Slaves	7,684	9,819	11,671
As a % of city population	47	49	47
FPOC*	586	1,024	1,472
As a % of city population	4	5	6
White females	3,718	4,599	5,705
As a % of city population	23	23	23
White males	4,371	5,031	5,863
As a % of city population	27	25	24
Total city population	16,359	20,473	24,711

Percentage increases in population 1790–1810		Avg. percentage of the total city population 1790–1810	
Slaves	52%	Slaves	48%
FPOC*	151%	FPOC*	5%
White females	53%	Slaves & FPOC*	52%
White males	34%	White people	48%
All whites	43%		

Continued on the next page

city’s social and economic life, Charleston is an ideal location for an investigation of women’s lives and roles and the work of gender in perpetuating racial slavery.⁶

A major goal of this study is to build on the work of scholars who, beginning in the decade after 1980, rejected the notion of a singular “slave experience” and argued that sex, gender, and class, as well as race, fundamentally determined the lives of both slaves and mistresses. Continuing into the next two decades, these analyses have focused on topics as diverse as interracial sexual relations, political culture, slave childhood, and slave healers. They have roamed from the slave quarters and the big house to the state house. Scholars of the American South and the Caribbean have examined plantation slaves and mistresses, women of the yeomen class, and urban slave women. These works share the fundamental premise that a true understanding of slavery as both a labor system and a social structure requires thorough examination of women’s roles and their status. I