

TERA W. HUNTER



TO 'JOY MY FREEDOM

SOUTHERN BLACK WOMEN'S
LIVES AND LABORS AFTER
THE CIVIL WAR

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Tera W. Hunter

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To my parents and in memory of my grandparents



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Preface



his book began with a few newspaper articles on the 1881 Atlanta washerwomen's strike. This one event engaged my interest enough to inspire a full-length study and taught me some fundamental lessons about how to research and write a history of black women. The strike piqued my curiosity because it challenged conventional wisdom about the limited capacity of working-class women's protests. What I discovered about the strikers and the astute political strategies they adopted to make their voices heard left me eager to know more about the women and their city. A central tension that would be clear in the bigger story I would eventually piece together was readily apparent in this early event. Here was a group of black women, a decade and a half removed from slavery, striving to achieve freedom, equality, and a living wage against tremendous odds.

The limitations of the extant evidence for this strike cautioned me about the difficulties of finding primary sources covering a broader scope. Just as the strike had yielded limited first-hand accounts by the women, finding direct testimony of black women would be my biggest challenge. The process of researching the strike also taught me how to make the most of sources that are typically used to study ordinary people but have been less frequently applied specifically to black women workers. By thinking expansively about how to find and interpret historical sources and scavenging for clues in whatever evidence was at hand, I was able to discover a great deal of relevant material about the broad dimensions of black and Southern lives. This book

draws from a large variety of primary documents, including diaries, household account books, newspapers, census data, municipal records, city directories, personal correspondence, oral interviews, government reports, business records, photographs, political cartoons, and organizational records.

This is a study of the black female majority in the urban South: women who worked for wages and who were primarily confined to domestic labor. The women worked as cooks, maids, child-nurses, laundresses, and other specialized servants. These laborers and their experiences in the workplace form the core of this book. The women were also mothers, lovers, fraternal members, religious devotees, consumers, political activists, and partygoers, and these experiences are treated in depth as well.

My analysis of black women's struggles covers the period from the final days of slavery during the Civil War through another momentous watershed, the Great Migration during World War I. Their strategies to achieve self-sufficiency and to counter the deleterious effects of subjugation took many forms: they developed an arsenal of everyday tactics of resistance; they built institutions; they developed informal neighborhood networks of support. But as black women struggled to overcome conditions of abject poverty and servitude, employers and public authorities worked even harder to repress and contain them through every means at their disposal. Although this contest often took place behind closed doors, much of it was also fought out in public view. African-American women were central to public discourse about race, gender, and labor in the South. The public airing of presumably private disputes highlighted the broader ramifications of domestic work. Clearly, African-American women were outpowered and outnumbered. They fought for dignity and self-respect and won small gains, moments of reprieve, and symbolic political victories. But their lives involved more than struggle and pain. They found pleasure in their neighborhoods, families, churches, mutual aid organizations, dance halls, and vaudeville theaters.

Atlanta, Georgia, the heart of the burgeoning New South, is the landscape in which these rich and complex stories unfold. In many ways, Atlanta was representative of urban centers throughout the South in the period following the Civil War. But in other ways it was distinctive—in its youth, vitality, and ambition to lead the South into the

modern industrial world. For African Americans, however, Atlanta was a paradox. It fostered a great sense of hope but also despair about the realization of full citizenship rights. Although Atlanta was a self-consciously forward-looking city, it was retrogressive in its race, gender, and labor relations. As the book opens during the last days of the Civil War, we witness the energy and optimism that blacks would carry with them to the city once the war was over. But by the time of World War I, despite the gains they had made, African Americans would find it necessary to take drastic measures to escape mounting repression. As the book ends, the narrative is brought full circle as blacks once again were on the move, emigrating in large numbers out of Atlanta and out of the South.

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Prologue



*I*n the spring of 1866, Julie Tillory journeyed by foot to Atlanta with her two young children in tow. Like the thousands of other newly free people pouring into the city during Reconstruction, they had no earthly belongings except the tattered clothes on their backs. Tillory had been sent word that her brother Paul and his wife and children had relocated to Atlanta recently. Unlike most other freedpeople who arrived without kin, Tillory was fortunate to have her brother's family and could share their cramped quarters and food.

One of Tillory's first concerns upon her arrival was to visit the office of the Freedmen's Bureau. She wanted assistance in locating her husband, John Robinson, who had been separated from her during the war. Robinson and Tillory had been owned by two different masters and lived separately on neighboring plantations. When the war broke out and slaveholders began fleeing for safe territory to escape invasion by the Union Army, Robinson refused to accompany his master and fled. For a while, Tillory would hear occasional news about her husband—that he was hiding out in their county, waiting for the right opportunity to retrieve her and the children. But no such opportunity ever came. The news gradually petered out and Tillory lost contact. She had no idea if Robinson was alive or dead.

When Tillory found the Freedmen's Bureau office, she encountered Northern missionaries and Union Army officials busily tending to the business of helping destitute families find shelter, food, clothing, and work. Her eyes fixed on a missionary woman who was herself over-

whelmed by the tasks before her and the gravity of her responsibilities. Apparently in awe of the seeming contradiction of destitution and determination surrounding her, the missionary pondered the state of affairs. She asked Tillory a question that had been burning in her mind ever since her arrival in the South and her first-hand observation of the monumental changes brought about by Union victory. Why would you want to leave the certainties and comforts of your master's plantation, where subsistence was guaranteed, for the uncertainties before you? she asked. Without a moment's pause, Tillory replied: "to 'joy my freedom."¹ To enjoy the splendid fruits of freedom at last! Here was her opportunity to protect her dignity, to preserve the integrity of her family, and to secure fair terms for her labor. Tillory's resolve and endurance typified the spirit of ex-slaves determined to be truly free, despite the absence of material comforts.

The atmosphere inside the Freedmen's Bureau office was solemn and intense, but a different mood prevailed on the streets downtown. Amid the hustle and bustle of Saturday business there were clusters of freed-people frolicking around and jostling one another, stopping occasionally to buy food from vendors or listen to street musicians. Susie Pride, Minnie Freeman, and Savannah Bruce walked through the crowds. Their multicolored dresses and decorative parasols held above their heads to filter the bright sunlight were striking. They carried fans to cool themselves in the summer heat, and they wiped their brows with embroidered handkerchiefs. A white woman, Abbie Brooks, encountered the trio on the sidewalk and was taken aback by what appeared to her to be "uppity" Negro women enjoying their freedom with just a little too much panache! Brooks would write in her diary: "Their appearance is unmistakably African." The way the women walked with a "swaggering air," and the vivid colors of their dresses sewn together in seemingly incongruent patterns, were for Brooks an eyesore. These sights would "inspire the most casual observer with a feeling of contempt and rebellion," Brooks wrote. "We are in a manner ruled by the typical woolly haired sons of Ham—whose superiority has never been acknowledged by any enlightened race in the world."²

Clearly the joy of freedom signified many things to black women, the full dimensions of which neither sympathetic Northerners nor erstwhile slaveholders fully understood or appreciated. These black women strolling the streets of Atlanta were playfully constructing new identi-

ties that overturned notions of racial inferiority and that could only be interpreted by many white Southerners as signs of African aesthetics run amok. Black women were determined to make freedom mean the opportunity to find pleasure and relaxation with friends, family, and neighbors. Their lives as field and house slaves on plantations and in antebellum cities had been governed by rules and regulations over which they had no control. As freedpeople, however, they were committed to balancing the need to earn a living with needs for emotional sustenance, personal growth, and collective cultural expressions. Despite the topsy-turvy world that Brooks feared, in which sartorial style symbolized the threat of black domination, these women were neither carefree nor almighty. Come Monday morning the parasols, fans, and handkerchiefs would be put aside, as they engaged in washing, cooking, cleaning, scrubbing, and mopping in exchange for a wage.

Racial caste and the demands of the Southern political economy dictated that black women work, and in Southern cities their options were confined to household labor. Their experiences as laborers would determine how meaningful freedom would be. But for ex-slave women, whose social value had long resided in the labor power they could expend to benefit their masters and in the prospective laborers they could reproduce, work was a means to self-sufficiency, not an end in itself. Black women would encounter, however, employers with attitudes like that of Abbie Brooks, resentful of their new status and resolved to prevent the extension of democracy. The tumultuous struggle that ensued between worker and employer would not be easily resolved.

“Answering Bells Is Played Out”: Slavery and the Civil War



Ellen, a house slave in Atlanta, violated a long-established code of racial etiquette by wearing her mistress's toiletries during the early years of the Civil War. Imagine Ellen standing in the master bedroom of the Big House, playfully staring at her likeness reflected in a looking-glass mounted on a Victorian vanity. She primps her hair, rearranges her clothing, and shifts the view of her profile from front to side. Taking her pick among an array of dainty crystal bottles, she sniffs earthy and then floral fragrances and carefully applies one of the perfumes. While reveling in the crisp, cool feel of amber-tinted drops of liquid against her skin, she dreams about a life far away from the drudgery of her circumscribed existence—a life she believes could soon be within her reach.

Ellen audaciously indulged these vicarious pleasures repeatedly, even after being reprimanded by her owner, Samuel P. Richards, and eventually whipped. In pampering and adorning her body with the magical elixir, Ellen transgressed feminine beauty rituals intended to enhance white bodies only. She laid claim to a measure of possession of her own person—and a womanly person at that. The Civil War, as Ellen perceived, could erode the rituals of daily life in the South. Bondwomen like Ellen notified slaveowners that they could neither take servile obedience for granted nor be assured that chattel slaves would cook, clean, wash, mend, or greet arriving visitors as they had before. As another slave woman abruptly replied in response to her owner's command to attend to her duties: “answering bells is played out.”¹

Such incidents expose the increasingly pronounced clash of expectations between masters and slaves during the Civil War. Ellen waged her bets on the destruction of slavery, which strengthened her resolve to take risks in testing the limits of bondage as she awaited its official demise. Samuel P. Richards, by contrast, believed the war was a temporary annoyance and inconvenience; he predicted that “when we come to a successful end to the war” slavery would continue. Despite Richards’s disinclination to concede to the winds of change, Ellen’s defiance and similar acts by other slaves exasperated him as he struggled to protect his diminishing authority. Richards complained: “I am disgusted with negroes and feel inclined to sell what I have. I wish they were all back in Africa,—or—Yankee Land. To think too that this ‘cruel war’ should be waged for them.”² The war of nerves conducted by slaves taxed Richards’s patience more severely than any actions on the battlefields and served as a harbinger of future difficulties in Southern labor relations long after the Confederacy’s defeat. However small and symbolic this friction may appear, conflicts and renegotiations over the meaning of slavery and freedom increased as the war progressed, with prolonged consequences for all Southerners.



SIMILAR vignettes of contestation between slaves and masters were repeated throughout the region. As the Union and Confederate troops faced off at Fort Sumter, African Americans were poised to intervene in this revolutionary moment to influence the outcome of the war in their favor.³ A slave mistress in Savannah summed up the changed dispositions of slaves who were testing the limits of the institution: the Negroes “show a very different face from what they have had heretofore.”⁴ Slave resistance was not unique to the Civil War, but black countenances evinced new meanings not readily discernible to masters under normal conditions in the antebellum era. African Americans articulated objections against the system of human bondage more consciously and openly than ever before.

Slaveholders formerly secure in their privileged positions and confident in the docility and loyalty of their most prized slaves in the Big House showed new faces as well—the faces of disillusion and betrayal. Slaves, the critics most cognizant of the constraints of human bondage, rejected the long-held beliefs of masters. Planters learned of

“the perfect impossibility of placing the least confidence in any Negro” very early in the war, as one Savannah patrician noted. “In too many numerous instances those we esteemed the most have been the first to desert us.”⁵ And those who stayed were no more reliable inasmuch as they ceased to labor on former terms. “I was sorely tried with Fanny, my cook a very dull, obstinate servant,” remarked another Georgian. “I make our coffee every morning and then find great difficulty in getting her to get our simple breakfast.”⁶ Masters had not yet discerned that the worrisome, but seemingly innocuous, concessions they reluctantly made, such as making coffee or cajoling the cook to prepare the morning meal, would hasten the collapse of slavery.

As the certainty of slavery became more tenuous during the War, latent tensions and sharply contrasting world views and ambitions of various groups surfaced. The internecine battles between slaves and masters, North and South, slaveholding and nonslaveholding whites prefigured conflicts that would continue to plague the region for many years. In cities like Atlanta, where urban conditions made slavery precarious long before the war began, the sudden and dramatic population growth and commercial expansion during the war helped to secure slavery’s demise.



IN THE antebellum period, Atlanta was barely a blip on the map. In the 1820s, it served as a railroad depot in the foothills of north Georgia for neighboring farmers. By the 1850s, a fusion of Northern entrepreneurs along with the native-born yeomen inaugurated the business of city building. The expansion of railroad lines enabled swifter commerce west, further south, north, and to the Atlantic coast, enhancing the city’s strategic geography by the eve of the Civil War.⁷

Atlanta’s growth was fostered by the Civil War and by the railroad. Its dramatic rise countered an emblematic feature of Southern economic development. The South lagged behind the North in urbanization and industrialization, a tribute to the overwhelming predominance of plantation slavery and agriculture. Cities of any significance in the antebellum era, such as Savannah, New Orleans, and Charleston, catered to the needs of the planter elite.⁸ The Southern states seceded to conserve plantation slavery and its urban subordinates, but secession produced unexpected consequences: the war destroyed slavery, and it

transformed several inauspicious towns into developing metropolises. By the end of the war, New South cities like Atlanta began eclipsing the eminence of Old South cities.

Atlanta was conspicuous within the region from its inception. The predominance of merchants and manufacturers and the absence of planters within the city's economic elite invited early comparisons to the commercial ambitions of cities in the North. Even at this incipient stage of urban development, some Atlantans took pride in an entrepreneurial spirit that attracted young, upwardly mobile white men dedicated to commerce and industry, and this foreshadowed events and accolades to come. Upstarts were welcomed to the city to help build the railroads that stood at the center of the economy, and to develop related industries, like foundries and rolling mills. Other businesses included hotels, a brewery, a saw mill, a flour mill, a shoe factory, wagon builders, furniture shops, cigar factories, leather tanneries, a whiskey distillery, and agricultural implement manufacturers.⁹ This diversity of businesses offered opportunities for consumers and workers, slave and free, not typical of the region. But even as Atlanta self-consciously touted itself as a progressive divergence from the South's dependence on one-crop agriculture, it also resisted social and political change.

Atlanta's distinctive economy presented conflicting interests for the city's power brokers as the Civil War approached. Most businessmen initially opposed secession out of fear that alienation from the Union would obstruct interregional trade, though they relented in due course.¹⁰ Their apprehension regarding the adverse consequences of military invasion and Confederate government policies was well-founded. Farmers and traders fearful of impressment refrained from bringing their wares to city markets, which led to a shortage of foodstuffs and dry goods. Acute class conflict among whites surfaced as deprived consumers rioted, looted provision houses, and stole from wealthy residents in protest over spiraling prices, greedy speculation, and government impressment. Poverty led destitute patriots to turn against their allies. In March 1863, starving wives of Confederate soldiers rioted and pilfered provision houses in the central business district on Whitehall Street. The wives of artisans, factory workers, and Confederate soldiers displayed similar disenchantment in boisterous crowds in other towns. An Atlanta newspaper castigated these "women sei-

zures” as a movement of “very wicked and ignorant women, generally instigated thereto and led by rascally individuals.”¹¹

Though commerce plummeted as predicted, no one could have foreseen the salutary impact of the war on the growth and development of manufacturing and urban expansion. The centrality of cities as distribution centers for the rebel forces boosted the importance of Atlanta as a strategic location, second only to Richmond. The military demand for ordnance and the fabrication of other items for civilian and military use, such as boots, buckles, buttons, saddles, uniforms, revolvers, and railroad cars, encouraged the building of new factories and the retooling of old operations. The influx of slaves, soldiers, runaways, military laborers, military officials, and refugee slaveholders generated a tremendous population expansion. In 1860, Atlanta’s population had stood at less than ten thousand; two years later it had nearly doubled.

This sudden expansion of inhabitants presented an immediate problem of social control. In its earlier frontier days, Atlanta had a reputation as a “crossroads village” that attracted rowdies, vagabonds, bootleggers, and prostitutes. These “disreputable” sorts congregated in Snake Nation, along Peter’s Street, and Murrell’s Row, near Decatur Street, the beginnings of red-light districts and a thriving “underworld.” Early city officials had a difficult time enforcing laws against prostitution, cockfighting, discharging firearms in the streets, and rolling live hogs in hogsheads down hills. Murder, larceny, gambling, insobriety, disorderly conduct, and indecent exposure filled the pages of the court dockets in the antebellum period—an inclination only heightened by the chaos of the war.¹²

Ramblers and roughnecks did not present the most formidable challenge to the city unless they also happened to be black. Slavery, as it was known in most of the plantation South, did not take root in Atlanta in the same way, where commerce and a complementary “urban promotive creed” prevailed. In the rural South, slavery ordered labor relations and plantation life; in the urban South, slavery was only one source of labor and was merely incidental to a city’s character. In 1860 there were only 1900 blacks in Atlanta, 20 percent of the population, and all but twenty-five persons were slaves. Individual slaves performed important labor in a wide variety of occupations, including brakemen, blacksmiths, boilermakers, and paper mill workers. Yet most African Americans were concentrated in domestic work, as in other antebellum

cities, mainly in hotels and boardinghouses.¹³ Even with such a relatively small number of slaves in the city, however, they were difficult to control, since the usual mechanisms were simply not as effective. Slaves were freer to roam about in the larger society among a denser populace, rather than being quarantined on isolated farms. The kind of labor they performed in small workshops or hotel establishments did not lend itself as easily to direct and constant supervision as did gang labor in the fields.

The economic and political priorities of Atlanta as a relatively young city were different from those of more established Southern cities where slaves were more numerous, but they did not deter slavery altogether. Samuel P. Richards, a British-born merchant, bought slaves for his farm in the countryside, hired the slaves of other owners, and purchased servants specifically to work in his Atlanta home. In December 1862, he purchased thirteen-year-old Ellen after two years of hiring her: "I have committed the unpardonable sin of the Abolitionists in buying a negro. I am tired of the trouble of getting a servant every Christmas and we have found Ellen a pretty good girl."¹⁴ A few months later he purchased a family of three slaves: Joe, Caroline, and their three-year-old child. Richards sent the husband to work on the farm in the country and the wife and child to the city residence. Though somewhat skeptical at first about the outcome of his investment, Richards was soon optimistic about high returns. He purchased Ellen for \$1,225, several hundred dollars below her former owner's asking price, and within five months he estimated that her value had risen to \$2,000. Gloating over the appreciation of his property, despite the exigencies of an economy spun out of control, Richards predicted a Confederate victory and the continuance of slavery. He believed that "negroes will command very high prices as there will be so much demand for labor to raise cotton and a great many will have been taken by the Yankees."¹⁵

In reality, Ellen's price rose because of wartime inflation as well as the scarcity of household slaves. As one slaveholder wrote to another about the prospects of finding experienced domestics in the city: "Many desirable negroes are daily offered by people who are obliged to sell—but the kind most offered are field hands—men[,] boys and young women."¹⁶ The relatively lower prices for field hands advertised by slave dealers lends credence to this observation.¹⁷ The influx of refugee

whites into the city may have contributed to the market for domestic slaves. But the urgent need for able-bodied field workers to sustain the plantation system and to raise crops for the subsistence of civilians and soldiers alike made it more difficult to find slaves hired expressly for domestic labor.¹⁸

The impressment of slaves by the Confederacy was a further drain on waning supplies. Samuel Stout, the head surgeon for the Army of Tennessee, headquartered in Atlanta, wrote to patrons in Florida for help for one of the Confederacy's largest hospitals. "In nothing can you aid us more than by sending us fruits and vegetables. Labor is also very much in demand. Every negro hired to the hospital, enables us to send an able-bodied soldier to the field."¹⁹ Domestic servants were especially in demand—men as nurses, women as laundresses, and both as cooks.²⁰

The hire-out system alleviated some of the inconveniences of scarcity by permitting slaves or owners to make short-term arrangements for daily, monthly, or yearly work. Given the diverse and fluctuating needs of urban economies, whites in cities relied on the hiring system to balance the demands for labor with the legal constraints that slavery imposed on bound workers. Many owners hired out their chattel property to friends as favors. Some sought to lighten their financial hardships by relieving themselves of the daily care of slaves, or to rid themselves of the burdens of managing unruly and willful slaves.²¹ Ellen Campbell, an Augusta ex-slave, described the circumstances leading to her working for hire at age fifteen: "My young missus wus fixin' to git married, but she couldn't on account de war, so she brought me to town and rented me out to a lady runnin' a boarding house." But the arrangement was short-lived. Campbell dropped a serving tray, and the boardinghouse keeper stabbed her in the head with a butcher's knife in punishment. Campbell's enraged mistress revoked the contract immediately.²² Slaveholders, however, were often willing to bear the risks of abuse when the profits reaped from hire contracts provided their sole income.²³

The hire-out system democratized access to slaves by enabling white wage-earners to benefit from the system, even as some white workers were forced to compete with slaves. If they could not afford to buy a slave outright, some could afford to hire slaves as helpers as their needs demanded them. Thus, the proportion of the white population that owned slaves in the cities was higher than in the rural areas, even