

Slavery and the Night: An In Depth Look into Slaves' Lives During the Night

By:

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When discussing transatlantic slavery, there is much to be said on such a large and vitally historic part of the past. Scholars in secondary literature emphasize the importance of the slave trade as a new form of labor that helped sustain empire from the fifteenth through the nineteenth centuries. Slaves provided a labor force in North America that sustained empires and benefited the economies of the western world. However, while it was economically advantageous, it is also one of the darkest parts of the past. Scholars stress that it is a crucial part of the timeline that changed the way our world works and its repercussions still affect the way race is socially constructed today.

During the day, slaves were required to do labor. Whether it was working on plantations, childcare, or general maintenance, they were working. This raises questions about what exactly slaves were doing in the night and whether all slaves spent their time in the same way. In the diary of African Slave trader Antera Duke, he writes about slaves being traded and transported in the night on various occasions. From this we can assume that the night was a time for slave exchanges and business to take place just like the day.¹ These trips were long, so some of the traveling had to take place in the night. While this is important, it still does not give us much insight about their life at night once they were slaves in North America. Through ego documents, we can gain more insight into the slave's night. Slaves discuss what they did at night in diaries, while slaveholders express their concerns about what slaves were doing during the night in their journals, and people who lived on plantations wrote about what slaves were supposed to be doing at night. By using ego documents from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that discuss slavery in various parts of North America, universality in Atlantic slavery appears because it is analogous across time and space. Based on evidence found in ego documents of various people

¹ Antera Duke, *The Diary of Antera Duke, an Eighteenth-Century African Slave Trader*, ed. Stephen D. Behrendt, A. J. H. Latham, and David Northrup (New York: Oxford University Press, with the Assistance of the International African Institute, 2010), 192.

enslaved and connected to slavery, this essay argues that slaves used the night as a time for both normal activity and abnormal behavior. First, I will discuss the average nightly tasks that most slaves engaged in, such as working, sleeping, and being punished by their slave masters. Following, I will go into detail about the slave transgressions that took place and what was done by others to stop it.

In published secondary literature that speaks about slaves in the night, there is very little talk about nightly routines such as labor or sleeping, and there is a lot of dialogue about revolution recruitment and planning. In Bryan D. Palmer's book, *Cultures of Darkness*, he associates the imperialism slavery was born out of with the night and extensively discusses revolts in the night. He writes, "The Dark Continent was born in the night of empire's material need."² The other reference to slavery and the night in his book discusses revolts. Palmer writes, "...sheriffs broke up nocturnal meetings of slaves...it was at night that recruitment was most likely, darkness providing a cover for conversations that tested the convictions of slave recruits" because it was "a moment that could be used to run away or plot rebellion."³ While this may be true, it raises the argument that most slaves spent their time at night rebelling. Kenneth Morgan writes about slave revolts in his book, *Slavery and the British Empire* and uses few primary sources to back up his claims. Similar to Palmer, Morgan does not discuss any other nightly activities that slaves were or could have been partaking in. There is no disagreement among these scholars about what slaves were doing during the night, but there are a lot of unanswered questions. A common pattern in the secondary literature is the desire to write only about rebellion, most likely because it is more enthralling than where slaves slept at night. As a result of this, they focus on the transgressions rather than basic night activities. While the latter may

² Bryan D. Palmer, *Cultures of Darkness: Night Travels in the Histories of Transgression, from Medieval to Modern* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 173.

³ Palmer, *Cultures of Darkness*, 180.

sound more mundane in comparison to the excitement of insurgence, it is still an aspect of slaves' world that should be researched further in order to get the full picture of slavery at night.

The first thing that comes to mind when we think of what slaves were doing at night, as well as most people in general, is sleeping. Slaves worked long hard days and were exhausted from the laborious tasks they completed. This calls attention to slaves' sleeping arrangements. Most slaves, with the exception of some women and children, had separate sleeping quarters from their masters and other people of the household. Usually, the quarters were an independent building away from the master's house on the plantation. Fanny Kemble, a woman who spent the winter of 1838 on a plantation in Georgia writes in her diary:

I never was on a Southern plantation, and I never hear of one, where any of the slaves were allowed to sleep under the same roof with their owner. With the exception of the women to whose care the children of the planter, if he had any, might be confided, and perhaps a little boy or girl slave, kept as a sort of pet animal, and allowed to pass the night on the floor of the sleeping apartment of some member of the family, the residence of any slaves belonging to a plantation night and day in their master's house, like Northern or European servants, is a thing I believe unknown throughout the Southern states.⁴

Her diary entry confirms beliefs and speculation that have circulated about where slaves slept at night. It was thought to be improper to have slaves, people that were considered property and nothing more, to sleep under the same roof of their white masters. This may have been for security precautions in addition to the notion that slaves were "unclean" people. Generally, slaves' separate sleeping quarters were not of high quality. Mary Prince, a West Indian slave in the United States, speaks of her lodgings in her narrative. She writes, "We slept in a long shed, divided into narrow slips, like the stalls used for cattle. Boards fixed upon stakes driven into the

⁴ Frances A. Kemble and Frances A. Butler Leigh, *Principles and Privilege, Two Women's Lives on a Georgia Plantation*, ed. Dana D. Nelson (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995), 313.

ground, without mat or covering, were our only beds.”⁵ Essentially, slaves were just cattle to their masters. Plantation owners wanted the least expensive living arrangements for their slaves and would pack however many slaves they had into them. The least expensive options came at the expense of a slave’s comfort, something most slaveholders were not concerned about.

Another naturally assumed activity of slave night life is labor. Johann Conrad Döhla was a Hessian soldier whose service was sold to George III to suppress the American Revolution, which he chronicled. He attributes the hard work of slaves to the laziness of the white people in his account by stating that slaves “must tend the estates and fields of the inhabitants, and do all other work throughout the year, because the white inhabitants of America are accustomed to doing very little work, having their blacks do it for them.”⁶ Slaves’ purpose in life was to work, and many slaveholders did not have their slaves stop working once the sun went down. In John W. Blassingame’s book, *The Slave Community*, primary sources lead him to conclude that on both cotton and sugar plantations, slaves often worked well into the night. He recounts:

During the cotton-picking season, the men sometimes ginned cotton until nine o’clock at night. For the hapless slaves on the sugar plantation, the work of boiling the sugar cane continued far into the night: they often worked eighteen hours a day during the harvest season; some sugar favorites ran in shifts seven days and nights each week.⁷

Frederick Douglass describes working later at different times of the year, most likely more during the summer when the days were longer. In his autobiography he wrote, “From the dawn of day in the morning till the darkness was complete in the evening I was kept hard at work in the field or the woods. At certain seasons of the year we were all kept in the field till eleven and

⁵ Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself*, ed. Ziggi Alexander and Moria Ferguson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 62.

⁶ Johann Conrad Döhla, *A Hessian Diary of the American Revolution*, trans. Bruce E. Burgoyne (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 35.

⁷ John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 155.

twelve o'clock at night."⁸ Slaveholders took advantage of changing seasons, and also did not let shorter days in winter affect the output of their labor. They wanted to get the maximum amount of labor out of both their slaves and the day. Some slaves labored all through the night and then were expected to continue working the next day full-strength without any rest in between. Mary Prince writes, "Sometimes we had to work all night...then we had no sleep—no rest—but were forced to work as fast as we could, and go on again all next day the same as usual."⁹ Slaves were forced to work through the night to get the job done and output more than could be achieved in daylight alone. However, not all slaves were doing hard labor for their masters at night. Harriet A. Jacobs, another slave in the United States, wrote a book on her life under the pseudonym Linda Brent and described her grandmother baking at night and then selling the baked goods for money:

Her grandmother asked permission of her mistress to bake crackers at night, after all the household work was done; and she obtained leave to do it, provided she would clothe herself and her children from the profits. Upon these terms, after working hard all day for her mistress, she began her midnight bakings, assisted by her two oldest children.¹⁰

This is an interesting revelation because it is commonly believed that the slaves had no means of revenue. Here is an instance where a woman was profiting from baking done at night after working all day.

Knowing that slaves worked most of the day and night leads us to wonder when slaves would eat. Fanny Kemble writes about how much work slaves had to do in order to receive their second meal at night. According to Kemble, "Their second meal in the day is at night, after their labor is over, having worked, at the very least, six hours without intermission of rest or

⁸ Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself*, (Seacucus, New Jersey: Citadel Press, 1983), 116

⁹ Prince, *History of Mary Prince*, 63.

¹⁰ Harriet A. Jacobs and John S. Jacobss, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, ed. L. Maria Child and Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 6.

refreshment since their noonday meal.”¹¹ Some slaves were working all day and night without food because they were not allowed to eat until they completed the minimum amount of hours of work. Using Kemble’s minimum of six hours of labor, we can conclude that slaves were eating their second meal around six o’clock at the earliest. During the winter in most areas, this would be dark. For the slaves that worked into the night till close to midnight, this means they were not eating until then if at all.

Punishment also regularly occurred in the night for slaves. Masters used the night as a time to reprimand their slaves for what they believed was wrong. Mary Prince wrote in her diary about the first night she spent on the plantation of her new master Captain I—. She writes:

I was just going to sleep when I heard a noise in my mistress’s room; and she presently called out to inquire if some work was finished that she had ordered Hetty to do. ‘No, Ma’am, not yet,’ was Hetty’s answer from below. On hearing this, my master started up from his bed, and just as he was, in his shirt, ran down stairs with a long cow-skin in his hand. I heard immediately after, the cracking of the thong, and the house rang to the shrieks of poor Hetty, who kept crying out, ‘Oh, Massa! Mass! me dead. Massa! have mercy upon me- don’t kill me outright.’ - This was a sad beginning for me.¹²

What she is describing here is a West Indian item that is a thong of hard twisted hide, used for whipping and striking in this case. It was a common practice among masters to punish slaves who had not done their work quick enough or in the correct way. One extreme instance of this described in Frederick Douglass’s autobiography explained a punishment so severe it resulted in the death of the slave:

The offense for which this girl was thus hurried out of the world was this, she had been set that night, and several preceding nights, to mind Mrs. Hicks’ baby, and having fallen into a sound sleep the crying of the baby did not wake her, as it did its mother. The tardiness of the girl excited Mrs. Hicks, who, after calling her several times, seized a piece of fire-wood from the fire-place, and pounded in her skull and breast-bone till death ensued.¹³

¹¹ Kemble, *Principles and Privilege*, 65.

¹² Prince, *History of Mary Prince*, 55.

¹³ Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 58.

Another common reason why slaves were chastised with physical violence was for trying to escape. Once they were caught and brought back to their masters, they had to pay for what they did. A case in Jamaica described by Thomas Thistlewood in his diary recounted a runaway named Hazat who was captured a few months after he fled. As castigation, his master “put him in the bilboes both feet; gagged him; locked his hands together; rubbed him with molasses & exposed him naked to the flies all day, and to the mosquitoes all night, without fire.”¹⁴ Escape efforts were punished analogously in the next century and in all North American areas where slavery existed. An example of discipline at night in the United States for attempting to run away can be found in Harriet Jacobs’s diary. She writes of a slave who was brought back to the plantation one night after escaping who was then tied up to a beam in the work house with his feet barely off the ground and awaited his master for quite some time while the master finished his tea. Jacobs writes, “I shall never forget that night. Never before, in my life, had I heard hundreds of blows fall, in succession, on a human being. His piteous groans, and his ‘O, pray don’t, massa,’ rang in my ear for months afterward.”¹⁵ In some places where slavery was practiced, slaves were required to help punish other slaves. In Olaudah Equiano’s narrative, he writes of an instance where one night two slaves were forced to row another slave being punished for trying to escape to a desolate location and leave him there through the night while the floated offshore in the boat.¹⁶ While punishment did not happen solely in the nighttime, it was not something only practiced in the day. Discipline took place when necessary, and if that meant that a slave master had to punish his slave after his nighttime tea, it would happen.

¹⁴ Douglas Hall and Thomas Thistlewood, *In Miserable Slavery: Thomas Thistlewood in Jamaica, 1750-86*, (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1989), 73. Bilboes are iron bars with sliding shackles.

¹⁵ Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 13.

¹⁶ Olaudah Equiano, *The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or, Gustavus Vassa, the African* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1999), 165.

Sleeping, laboring, and bearing punishment were normal activities of a slave's night. Aside from them, slaves deviated from these activities and participated in behavior that many of their masters condoned. One of the most common disobediences of slaves was visiting each other in the night. Henry Bibb explains in his diary that slaves were only allowed to visit other people on Sundays if they obtained a permit from their master. If they could not manage to do so, they went at night when they would not be seen by anyone. If they were caught or found out, Bibb writes, "The next morning I was called up to give an account of myself for going off without permission; and would very often get a flogging for it."¹⁷ Although it was viewed as disobedience by slaveholders and regularly punished, this was a minor abnormal activity, because it was generally harmless. Slaves typically met at night to enjoy each others' company rather than cause trouble. Isaac Jefferson, a slave of Thomas Jefferson's talked of fiddle playing and dancing through half of the night in his memoir, indicating that the night was a time that they entertained each other for an enjoyable time.¹⁸ Georgia Baker give an accounts of comparable behavior, "But, oh, dem Sa'day nights! dat was when salves got together and danced. George, he blowed de quills, and he sho' could blow good dance music on 'em. Dem niggers would jus' dance down. Dere warn't no foolishment 'lowed atter ten o'clock no night."¹⁹ In another slave diary, Thomas H. Jones wrote about a night where slaves had gathered to sing, pray and talk. He writes, "We began to express our joy in happy songs...and spent the remainder of the night in

¹⁷ Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave* (Miami, Florida, Mnemosyne Publishing Co., Inc., 1969), 26.

¹⁸ Charles Campbell and Isaac Jefferson, *Memoirs of a Monticello Slave: as Dictated to Charles Campbell in the 1840's by Isaac, One of Thomas Jefferson's Slaves*, ed. Rayford W. Logan (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1951), 35.

¹⁹ Georgia Baker, *Bullwhip Days: The Slaves Remember*, ed. James Mellon (New York: Weidenfield & Nicolson, 1988), 10.

talking, rejoicing, and praying. It was a night of very great happiness to me.”²⁰ Thomas H. Jones and his fellow slaves used the night to get away from their unfortunate lives as property and they still found ways to be happy in life despite the tragedies they faced everyday through labor and mistreatment. They often prayed together in hope that it would help improve their situations. Similarly, Harriet Jacobs writes in her diary about meeting with other slaves for religious purposes at night.²¹ Along with visiting friends and others for various purposes, slaves traveled at night to visit other family members. The only time Frederick Douglass ever saw his mother when he was a child was at night. She traveled twelve miles on foot at night after the daily work was completed and then traveled the same distance back before the sun rose in the morning.²² Another instance of slaves visiting family members at night is mentioned in Mary Prince’s narrative. Harriet’s uncle Benjamin was imprisoned for attempting to escape, so Harriet and her grandmother went to visit him in the jail at night. She writes, “We were not allowed to visit him; but we had known the jailer for years, and he was a kind-hearted man. At midnight he opened the jail for my grandmother and myself to enter, in disguise.”²³ There was no time during the day for family members to visit each other because there was too much work to be done, and often they would not be permitted to leave. As mentioned before, some slaves were allowed to make visits on Sundays with permission, but not all masters were that generous. Many slaves’ only option was to make their visits under the safety of the darkness of night, without their master’s knowledge.

Escape attempts, like Harriet Jacobs’s Uncle Benjamin’s, were also very common at night. Night provided a cloak for slaves and was also a less busy time of the day. Slaves

²⁰ Thomas H. Jones, “The Experience of Rev. Thomas H. Jones,” in *From Bondage to Belonging: The Worcester Slave Narratives*, ed. Thomas L. Doughton and B. Eugene McCarthy (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 142.

²¹ Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 68.

²² Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 15, 23.

²³ Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 22.

attempted to escape their lives on plantations and were hidden and fed by other slaves. Most slaves did not know how to get to the North where they had a better chance of freedom, so they often relied on other slaves to house and feed them. John Thomson confirms this in his narrative, writing, "...the slaves knew little of the friendly guidance of the North Star, and therefore lingered about in swamps and among bushes, where they were fed by their fellow servants during the night, instead of fleeing to the North."²⁴ Mary Prince also writes of her mother hiding her and bringing her food at night once everyone was asleep.²⁵ Slaves sought refuge wherever they thought they could, and sometimes that meant other plantations. In Thomas Thistlewood's diary, he talks of slaves seeking sanctuary from another plantation. He writes of an occurrence during his time in Jamaica, "three Wild Negro men (one of them Cap. Cuffee's son) and a woman belonging to Cudjoe's town, called to beg refreshment and lodging. Gave them about a quart of rum, a bottom of sugar, and eight mackerel, and leave to stay in the plantation all night."²⁶ In some cases, like this one, they were successful. But in most circumstances, plantation owners would send the slaves away or turn the escapees in.

Night was used to plan slave escapes as well. Frederick Douglass writes of meetings with other slaves at night where they discussed what they wanted to do once they escaped and the obstacles they would have to overcome in order to flee. Douglass contrasts himself and comrade plotters to revolutionists as well:

These meetings must have resembled, on a small scale, the meetings of the revolutionary conspirators in their primary condition. We were plotting against our (so-called) lawful rulers, with this difference—we sought our own good, and

²⁴ John Thompson, "The Life of John Thompson, A Fugitive Slave," in *From Bondage to Belonging: The Worcester Slave Narratives*, ed. Thomas L. Doughton and B. Eugene McCarthy (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 51.

²⁵ Prince, *History of Mary Prince*, 60.

²⁶ Hall, *In Miserable Slavery*, 56-7.

not the harm of our enemies. We did not seek to overthrow them, but to escape from them.²⁷

Many slaves desired freedom and went to great lengths to achieve it. They put themselves at risk by attempting to escape and seek liberty. In a narrative by Thomas Cole, he speaks of the underground railroad and how slaves like Harriet Tubman used it to escape slavery during the night, saying, “She allus travels de undergron’ railroad, dey calls it—travels at night and hides out in de day at different places, and den travels all night again, till she gets whar dey was all safe.”²⁸ Not all were victorious but several did succeed and that is where a lot of the narratives in this essay come from.

As a result of slaves’ movements and whereabouts during the night, people of the community and slaveholders created night patrols that looked out for this type of activity. They did this because they feared what slaves were doing at night and why they were meeting, so they came up with a way to end it and prevent it. This was also to appease poor whites that could receive small rewards or pilfer runaways’ possessions. Police were also involved in keeping slaves in check during both the day and night. Johan Conrad Döhla, the Hessian soldier, mentions how many slaves were in America and how they overpowered white people in numbers. Because of this, he notes, “they are kept under sharp discipline and order, and the police keep a watchful eye on the. Nowhere are more than seven male Negro slaves allowed together at one time.”²⁹ If this is how strict they were during the day, one can only imagine the increased restraint at night. Night is a time harder to control, because people can use darkness to

²⁷ Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 158.

²⁸ Thomas Cole, *Bullwhip Days: The Slaves Remember*, ed. James Mellon (New York: Weidenfield & Nicolson, 1988), 65.

²⁹ Döhla, *A Hessian Diary of the American Revolution*, 128.

their advantage. Because of this, people felt a need to augment during the night. Fanny Kemble talks of concerns of safety “during the unprotected hours of the night” in her diary:

The city guards, patrols, and night-watches, together with their stringent rules about negroes being abroad after night, and their well-fortified lock-up houses for all detected without a pass, afford some security against these attached dependents; but on remote plantations, where the owner and his family, and perhaps a white overseer alone, surrounded by slaves and separated from all succor against them, they do not sleep under the white man’s roof, and for political reasons, pass the night away from their master’s abode.³⁰

Because the slaves were not living under the same roof as their master, it made it even more difficult to keep a close eye on them. That is why people found it necessary for authorities to police the slaves at night. Not only were patrols implemented legally, but regular citizens made rounds during the night as well. Harriet Jacobs speaks of these people, most likely men, going around keeping slaves in check. “At night, they formed themselves into patrol bands, and went wherever they chose among the colored people, acting out their brutal will. Many women hid themselves in woods and swamps, to keep out of their way.”³¹ These types of watch had no regulations, so they could go around and terrorize as they pleased without any repercussions. An incident of a slave being chased by night patrol was divulged in John Thompson’s narrative. He speaks of a night where he was out visiting other slaves and the night patrol found him and another slave and began pursuing them:

One night, at an unusually early hour for the patrollers to be abroad, I was at one of his slave quarters, while the patrollers were at the other... This, you may well guess, was no very pleasant news to me, especially as I was at the time cozily seated beside a pretty young lady... I knew delays were dangerous. I considered a moment, and finally started, thinking it my safest course; but I had not proceeded more than five feet from the door, before the enemy were upon me. There was another colored man in the quarter at the same time, who, if caught, was as liable to be whipped as myself; still, I was their special object of pursuit, as Mr. Bowlding had promised them twenty-five dollars, if they caught me on his place. When we saw the patrollers, we both started at full speed, Ben the other colored

³⁰ Kemble, *Principles and Privilege*, 314.

³¹ Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 64.

man, being about fifty yards ahead, and they after us. They continued the chase about a quarter of a mile, after which they returned.³²

From the tone of John Thompson's voice, it sounds as though they were used to patrollers coming around. Despite this, and despite the fact that there was a bounty on his head, he still ventured out during the night in disobedience and risked being caught. This is also an example of the ineffectiveness of patrollers. Obviously slaves were still meeting each other at night and finding ways around the night-watch, and they were even outrunning them when they were found out.

The biggest anxiety people had about slaves was an uprising. Especially after the Haitian Revolution, people who owned slaves in other countries were fearful that their slaves would plan an insurgency and harm them or overtake them. During the day, it was easier to monitor slaves and their activities. But as we have been learning, the night proved to be a time for deviance and is much more difficult to supervise. This is the time that most slaveholders and scholars speculate that slaves planned revolts and would eventually carry out their plans. The night is when masters were most vulnerable because they did not carry as much control as they could during daylight, and because of this slaves chose to revolt at night when their masters were at their weakest. There is little proof of uprisings happening in America during the night, but through letters and the diary of a Martinique planter, we can confirm that rebellions did happen at night in certain places. In a letter to Madame Bence on October 4, 1811, the Martinique planter Pierre Dessalles writes:

Some mulattoes and free and slave negroes had no doubt conceived hopes of founding at Martinique a second Haitian empire. They had planned to set fire to all four corners of Saint-Pierre during the night of 18-19 September, seize all guns

³² Thompson, *From Bondage to Belonging*, 74-5.

and knives to be found in the stores, sound a fire alarm, and massacre all the whites indiscriminately—women, children, old men, everyone.³³

This is evidence of revolt planning that was trying to mirror the Haitian Revolution. Other slaves believed they could do similar things and live in freedom just as the slaves in Haiti had done. While this was just an incident of planning, Dessalles writes another letter describing a successful upheaval from slaves. On October 18, 1822 writes of a rebellion that happened five days prior:

For the last five days, my dear Maman, we have been living in a state of great anxiety. During the night of October 12-13, thirty slaves who were working out on the canal du Carbet revolted, attacked several plantations, and barbarously murdered seven whites. Two died under their blows, and five are severely injured. The criminals then fled; they have given themselves colonels, and their watchword is Liberty. Colonel Barré with troops of the line and the militia is in pursuit. They are hiding in the woods, and it is to be feared that the core group will get larger. The royal prosecutor at Saint-Pierre writes to Survillié that nine of them have been arrested. Their plans are known now. They were first to pounce on Saint-Pierre, massacre everybody there, and then fan out into the countryside. They are counting heavily on the work gangs, who on this occasion maintained a dangerous neutrality.³⁴

This is one of the few pieces of evidence found of successful slave revolts during the night. It was often attempted, but none with such ramifications afterwards. Nat Turner, an American slave, is a more familiar slave revolt story. In August 1831, Turner was responsible for leading a slave insurrection in Virginia that began in the night and resulted in the deaths of many blacks and whites. Slaves like Nat Turner banded together throughout history in what could be considered large numbers and productively stirred up plantation life in order to prove that they were not going to stand for slavery anymore.

³³ Pierre Desalles, *Sugar and Slavery, Family and Race: The Letters and Diary of Pierre Dessalles, Planter in Martinique, 1808-1856*, ed. Elborg Forster and Robert Forster (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996), 36-7.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

Slaves clearly spent their time at night in different ways. While some kept to normal behavior and used the night as a time for rest or work, there were others that diverged in other directions and used the night as a time for transgressions. Slavery existed in multiple areas, but its meaning and practice was universal. It existed for many years, and in that time not much changed until the mid-nineteenth century when it began to become outlawed. It is hard to say whether or not the night was a better or a worse time for slaves. Some slaves were being worked to death during the night or punished in cruel ways. Others were sneaking around using darkness as a cover to engage in disobedient activities they could not do during the day. In Phillis Wheatley's poetry, she refers to the night as a spiritually powerful time, when God would wrestle with Satan. The night was associated with gloom and depraved unscrupulous things.³⁵ On the other hand, Harriet Jacobs speaks of the night as a trusting time. She writes, "I rarely ventured out by daylight, for I always went with fear," which gives us the impression that she feels safer at night than during the day.³⁶ Scholars tend to focus on the excitement of revolts, but in reality slaves did normal things during the night similar to anyone else. People, slave or not, sleep at night, work at night, even have babies at night. In James Henry Hammond's diary, he mentions one of his slaves going into labor and having complications during the middle of the night.³⁷ In order to investigate this topic further, more ego documents would need to be looked at and we would need more proof of rebellions taking place in multiple places where slavery existed. Through my research I only found evidence that revolts took place in the night in Caribbean colonies, therefore more proof would need to be found in order to conclude that revolts also happened at night in America. There is also little research into the speculation about

³⁵ Phillis Wheatley, *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. John C. Shields (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 23-7.

³⁶ Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 68.

³⁷ James Henry Hammond, *Secret and Sacred: The Diaries of James Henry Hammond, a Southern Slaveholder*, ed. Carol Blesser (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 72.

scientists and doctors graverobbing slaves' graves. When dissection and autopsies became popular as medicine progressed throughout the eighteenth century, there was a need for bodies and the bodies of slaves were viewed as expendable to experiment on because society placed such little value on their lives. There is conjecture about slaves being fearful of this happening, and their fear of a figure known as the "night doctor" who would come and steal both living and dead black bodies for research and scientific purposes.³⁸ This is a topic that has not been explored enough and future scholars should look for evidence in ego documents to validate these claims. Overall, there is now a larger general picture of a typical slave's night, but there is also room for more research.

³⁸ Vanessa Northin Gamble, "Under the Shadow of Tuskegee: African Americans and Health Care," *American Journal of Public Health* 87, no. 11 (November 1997): 1773-1778.

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