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The Pleasures of Resistance: Enslaved Women and Body Politics in the Plantation South, 1830–1861

By STEPHANIE M. H. CAMP

AS A YOUNG WOMAN, NANCY WILLIAMS JOINED OTHER ENSLAVED PEOPLE and “cou’tin’ couples” who would “slip ’way” to an “ole cabin” a few miles from the Virginia plantation where she lived. Deep in the woods, away from slaveholding eyes, they held secret parties, where they amused themselves dancing, performing music, drinking alcohol, and courting. A religious woman in her old age, Williams admitted only reluctantly to her interviewer that she had enjoyed the secular pleasures of dressing up and going to these outlaw dances. “Dem de day’s when me’n de devil was runnin roun in de depths o’ hell. No, don’ even wanna talk ’bout it,” she said. However, Williams ultimately agreed to discuss the outlaw parties she had attended, reasoning, “Guess I didn’ know no better den,” and remembering with fondness that, after all, “[d]em dances was somepin.”¹

Musicians played fiddles, tambourines, banjos, and “two sets o’ [cow] bones” for the dancers. Williams was a gifted and enthusiastic

¹ Charles L. Perdue Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips, eds., *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves* (Charlottesville, 1976), 316. Williams was fourteen years old when the Civil War began. Before slavery ended, however, she had reached young adulthood; she told her interviewer that she had “growd up” when she left the slaveholding house for field work. At about the same time, she “start[ed] dis cou’tin’.” Like many, but not all, formerly enslaved interviewees in the 1930s, Williams had more than a child’s memories of bondage. She offers, as do other interviewees, the remembrances of young adulthood.

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dancer; she would get “out dere in de middle o’ de flo’ jes’ a-dancin’; me an Jennie, an’ de devil. Dancin’ wid a glass o’ water on my head an’ three boys a bettin’ on me.” Williams often won this contest by dancing the longest while balancing the glass of water on her head without spilling a drop. She “[j]es’ danced ole Jennie down.” Like the other women in attendance, Williams took pride in her outfits at these illicit parties, and she went to great trouble to make them. She adorned one dress with ruffles and dyed others yellow or red. Her yellow dress even had matching yellow shoes; they were ill-fitting, as many bondpeople’s wooden brogans were, and “sho’ did hurt me,” but, animated by her own beautiful self-presentation, “dat ain’ stop me f’om dancin’.” By illuminating a part of everyday life that bondpeople kept very hidden, Nancy Williams’s account of attending outlaw slave parties helps uncover one part of the story of enslaved women’s lives: the role that the body played in slaveholders’ endeavors to control their labor force and in black resistance to bondage in the nineteenth-century plantation South. Despite planters’ tremendous effort to prevent such escape, enslaved women and men sporadically “slip[ped] ’way” to take pleasure in their own bodies.²

At the heart of the process of enslavement was a geographical impulse to locate bondpeople in plantation space. Winthrop D. Jordan found that it was confinement, “[m]ore than any other single quality,” that differentiated slavery from servitude in the early years of American slavery’s formation. Not only a power or labor relation, “[e]nslavement was captivity.” Accordingly, black mobility appears to have been the target of more official and planter regulations than other aspects of slave behavior.³ Slaveholders strove to create controlled and controlling landscapes that would determine the uses to which enslaved people put their bodies. But body politics in the Old South were not dictated by a monologue as slaveholders wished. To the contrary, slave owners’ attempts to control black movement—and, indeed, most aspects of black bodily experience—created a terrain on which bondpeople would contest slaveholding power.

² *Ibid.*

³ Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill, 1968), 55–56 (quotations), 107; Philip J. Schwarz, *Twice Condemned: Slaves and the Criminal Laws of Virginia, 1705–1865* (Baton Rouge, 1988), 22; Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1998), 113. For more on the social geography of the colonial and antebellum South see Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* (Chapel Hill and London, 1982), 11–57; Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeomen Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York and Oxford, 1995), 10–15; and David Goldfield, *Region, Race, and Cities: Interpreting the Urban South* (Baton Rouge and London, 1997), 69–86, 103–44.

Bondpeople, who had their own plans for their bodies, violated the boundaries of space and time that were intended to demarcate and consolidate planters' patriarchal power over plantation households. Their alternative negotiation and mapping of plantation space might best be called, in Anne Godlewska and Neil Smith's phrase, a "rival geography." Enslaved people's rival geography was not a fixed spatial formation, for it included quarters, outbuildings, woods, swamps, and neighboring farms as opportunity granted them. Where slaveholders' mapping of the plantation was defined by rigid places for its residents, the rival geography was characterized by motion: the secret movement of bodies, objects, and information within and around plantation space. Together, but differently, women and men took flight to the very woods and swamps that planters intended to be the borders of the plantation's "geography of containment."⁴ There they held clandestine and illegal parties. These parties were sporadic affairs, contingent as they were upon opportunity (itself informed by the season), availability of resources, and no doubt on the emotional climate within local black communities and between enslaved people and their owners. This article studies the personal and political meanings of bodily pleasure made and experienced at these parties, focusing on the activities of women, for whom dress was an especially important dimension of their enjoyment of slave communities' secret and secular institution.

No mere safety valve, bondpeople's rival geography demands to be understood in multiple ways. To a degree, black mappings and uses of southern space were the result and expression of the dialogic of power relations between owner and owned—part of day-to-day plantation relations characterized by a paternalistic combination of hegemonic cultural control and violent discipline. To a larger extent, however, the paternalist framework fails to sufficiently explain everyday slave resistance. The paternalist model offers an apt theory of plantation management but a fundamentally incomplete perspective on plantation, and particularly black, life. Viewing resistance other than organized rebellion or running away as only partial or even as cooptative distracts us

⁴ Anne Godlewska and Neil Smith cited in Matthew Sparke, "Mapped Bodies and Disembodied Maps: (Dis)placing Cartographic Struggle in Colonial Canada," in Heidi J. Nast and Steve Pile, eds., *Places Through the Body* (London and New York, 1998), 305. John Michael Vlach discusses the "black system of place definition," its emphasis on movement, and its rejection of fixity in *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery* (Chapel Hill and London, 1993), 13–17 (quotation on p. 14). The phrase "geography of containment" is Houston Baker's, from his response to Michael Hanchard, "Temporality, Transnationalism, and Afro-Modernity" (paper presented to the "Reshaping Afro-American Studies" seminar at the Center for the Study of Black Literature and Culture, University of Pennsylvania, March 27, 1997).

from interesting and important possibilities for understanding black politics during slavery, such as the hidden, everyday acts that help to form overt resistance. The tendency to draw a sharp line between material and political issues on the one hand and aesthetic, spiritual, and intimate (emotionally and physically) issues on the other also limits our understanding of human lives in the past, especially women's lives.⁵

Evidence is spare, but it comes to us consistently from the upper South and the lower South in slaveholders' diaries and journals, in state legislative records, in nineteenth-century autobiographies, and in twentieth-century interviews of the formerly enslaved.⁶ Many recent studies

⁵ Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* (New York, 1918; Baton Rouge, 1966), 327; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1972), 3–7. Genovese's paternalist thesis has been the subject of intensive debate since the publication of his monumental *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. Among the many questions at issue is the extent to which enslaved people could resist bondage and the importance of such resistance. Some historians have agreed that paternalist, slaveholding hegemony determined the shape of every feature of black life and, further, that the lives of bondpeople must be understood primarily in terms of their exploitation and oppression by slaveholders. Slaveholding power, in this view, flattened the possibility of meaningful oppositional activity, except for running away and organized rebellion: everyday forms of resistance "qualify at best as prepolitical and at worst as apolitical." Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 3, 6, 7, 22, 90–91, 125, 143–44, 284, 598 (quotation). See also Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill and London, 1988), 30, 49–50, 319; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "The Mask of Obedience: Male Slave Psychology in the Old South," *American Historical Review*, 93 (December 1988), 1228–52; and William Dusbiberre, *Them Dark Days: Slavery in the American Rice Swamps* (New York and Oxford, 1996), 235, 248, 265, 270–71, 273. The focus on hegemony overestimates the extent of consent at the expense of the determining role of force. Other historians in the traditional debate have placed black communities, their struggles, and their sufferings at the center of bondpeople's lives—not slaveholders and their hegemonic aspirations. This article builds on this tradition, which includes Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York, 1943); George P. Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (Westport, Conn., 1972); John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (rev. ed.; New York and Oxford, 1979); Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York, 1977); Charles Joyner, *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* (Urbana and Chicago, 1984); Roger D. Abrahams, *Singing the Master: The Emergence of African American Culture in the Plantation South* (New York, 1992); Douglas R. Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802* (Chapel Hill and London, 1993); Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1998); and Douglas R. Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey* (Madison, Wis., 1999). This article departs from this literature and this debate, however, in its focus on women, gender difference and conflict, and cultural politics, as well as in its attention not to lore or religion (that is, to the intellectual and moral history of enslaved communities) or to organized rebellion, but to values embodied in the everyday physical use of space, to political belief put into movement.

⁶ All of these sources present difficulties, and alone none tells all we might want to know. For all of the difficulties of plantation records and legal sources, however, historians of slavery tend to focus their methodological critiques on the interviews of ex-bondpeople. The criticisms contend that the interviews collected by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) were conducted decades after emancipation, after too much had transpired in the lives of the informants to make

on American slavery focus on a subregion, a crop, or a county. This trend has deepened our understanding of the variations of work and culture in American slavery, has furthered our sense of important differences among enslaved people, and has added texture and detail to our picture of day-to-day life in bondage. At the same time, studying slavery as a regional system—a system of domination, of profit, of racial formation—remains a valuable practice, as recent innovative and informative works on the slave past have also demonstrated.⁷ Throughout the antebellum period and across the plantation South, enslaved people took flight to nearby woods and swamps for the secret parties they occasionally held at night for themselves.⁸

This article pieces together the story and politics of these illicit parties, arguing that these celebrations and the bodily pleasures that accompanied them occupied the wide terrain of political struggle

their recollections creditable. Many of the interviews were also done by whites, further warping the information respondents gave. I do not dispute the problems inherent in the WPA interviews, but I do not conclude from these difficulties that the source is unworkable. This article gathers material from a range of sources—including black and white, contemporaneous and subsequent, and written and oral sources—building a story out of their agreements and common accounts, as well as from the insights offered by their differences. These sources also explain the periodization of this article. Because the WPA interviews refer, mostly, to the last decades of slavery and because black autobiographies proliferated in the same period, this article focuses on the years between 1830 and the beginning of the Civil War.

⁷ Thomas D. Morris, *Southern Slavery and the Law, 1619–1860* (Chapel Hill and London, 1996); Christopher Morris, “The Articulation of Two Worlds: The Master-Slave Relationship Reconsidered,” *Journal of American History*, 85 (December 1998), 982–1007; Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1999). For all of the important differences caused by farm size, crop, type of work, and subregion, American slavery was, above all, a system of economic exploitation and racial subjugation that, when studied in a broad geographic range, reveals strong continuities as well as differences. We have much to learn about the interplay of local and individual experiences of enslavement, about slavery as a system, and about resistance to it as a practice with patterns and trends. In particular, the fragmentary nature of the evidence on a topic such as women’s everyday forms of resistance demands a broad geographic sweep.

⁸ Bondpeople living on farms, in neighborhoods, and in states with small numbers of other enslaved people (like Florida or Delaware) would certainly have enjoyed far less frequent illegal parties, if they managed to organize any at all. There would have been differences between the upper South and the lower South, but the scarcity of sources precludes knowing for certain. It is possible to note, however, that while it might appear that illicit movement would have been more common in the upper South because of its proximity to the free North, the evidence does not support this hypothesis. Bondpeople in the lower South were also able to form an active rival geography and to organize and attend their own secret parties. Indeed, these forms of movement may have taken on special importance in the lower South precisely because bondpeople had little chance of escaping as fugitives. In particular, South Carolina’s black majority no doubt enjoyed greater discretion and autonomy when having parties. But enslaved South Carolinians were not the only ones to know life as a black majority: in 1850 about half (50.6 percent) of all bondpeople in the South lived on farms that had at least twenty enslaved people (with a significant minority of 13.1 percent living on holdings with fifty to a hundred enslaved people). Lewis Cecil Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860* (2 vols.; Washington, D.C., 1933), I, 530. Locally, then, many enslaved people inhabited communities among and near enough others to make independent socializing viable.

between consent and open, organized rebellion.⁹ The bondpeople who participated in activities in the rival geography expressed, enjoyed, and used their somatic selves in terms other than those of their relationship to their owners. They took pleasure in their bodies, competed with other enslaved people with them, and contested their owners' power over them. Bondpeople's everyday somatic politics had more than symbolic value: they resulted in temporal and material gains for enslaved people and in some loss of labor for slaveholders. If bondpeople's uses of their bodies and their time were contingent upon the season, the ignorance of their owners, and the ability to find a safe location (and they were), these uses nonetheless also undermined slaveholders' claims to their bodies and their time. Everyday resistance to pass-laws and plantation rules was an endemic problem in the rural South, one that had real and subversive effects on slaveholding mastery and on plantation productivity—both of which rested on elite white spatial and temporal control of enslaved bodies.

The body, as French historian Dorinda Outram has written, is at once the most personal, intimate thing that people possess and the most public. The body, then, provides a "basic political resource" in struggles between dominant and subordinate classes. Second-wave feminists put it like this: the personal is political. Earlier, C. L. R. James, Grace C. Lee, and Pierre Chaulieu had already argued that "ordinary . . . people . . . are rebelling every day in ways of their own invention" in order to "regain control over their own conditions of life and their relations with one another"; oftentimes "their struggles are on a small personal scale." Enslaved people's everyday battles for regaining control—albeit temporally limited—took place on this very personal terrain.¹⁰

⁹ For the theory of everyday forms of resistance that undergirds the approach taken here, which sees day-to-day resistance as neither a safety valve, nor as revolutionary, but as a form of political struggle before and behind open political organization, see James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, 1985), esp. xv–xvi, 35–36, 285–303, 317; and Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven and London, 1990), esp. 66, 178, 184–88. Historians who have skillfully employed Scott's theories to study U.S. slave resistance include Alex Lichtenstein, "'That Disposition to Theft, With Which They Have Been Branded': Moral Economy, Slave Management, and the Law," *Journal of Social History*, 21 (Spring 1988), 413–40; and Marvin L. Michael Kay and Lorin Lee Cary, *Slavery in North Carolina, 1748–1775* (Chapel Hill and London, 1995). Critics of Scott's work include Rosalind O'Hanlon, "Recovering the Subject: *Subaltern Studies* and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia," *Modern Asian Studies*, 22 (February 1988), 189–224; and Sherry B. Ortner, "Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 37 (January 1995), 173–93.

¹⁰ Dorinda Outram, *The Body and the French Revolution: Sex, Class and Political Culture* (New Haven and London, 1989), 1; C. L. R. James, Grace C. Lee, and Pierre Chaulieu, *Facing*

Enslaved people possessed multiple social bodies.¹¹ Inhabitants of a premodern society, they were made to suffer domination largely through the body in the form of exploitation, physical punishment, and captivity. Theorists of colonialism have analyzed the effects of somatic suffering in other, analogous contexts. Describing the consequences of European colonialism on twentieth-century Africans' somatic experiences, Frantz Fanon wrote:

[I]n the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness. The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty.

Caught in the white gaze, Fanon argued, blacks were "sealed in that crushing objecthood." Under colonialism, experiences of the body were "negating activit[ies]," in which identification with the colonizer resulted in degrees of self-hatred and humiliation. Students of American slavery will find much with which to agree in Fanon's analysis of black bodily experience. Violence, brutal and brutalizing labor, diseased environments (particularly in South Carolina's rice swamps), and the auction block were basic characteristics of life in slavery. Indeed, these characteristics were, in combination with elite white confinement of the black body, the essence of bondage.¹²

Reality (Detroit, Mich., 1974), 5; Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 289–99. Dagmar Herzog and Uta Poiger have demonstrated that German feminist analyses connecting the personal and the political grew out of broader German New Left efforts to do the same. American and German feminist movements in the 1970s may have popularized the concept and applied it in especially liberatory ways to women's lives, but they did not invent it. See Dagmar Herzog, "'Pleasure, Sex, and Politics Belong Together': Post-Holocaust Memory and the Sexual Revolution in West Germany," *Critical Inquiry*, 24 (Winter 1998), 393–444; Uta G. Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 2000), 219, 269 n. 32.

¹¹ This discussion is informed by the work of anthropologists and philosophers who have posited the body as an important terrain of conquest and as a site for the reproduction of the social order. They have also detailed what, following Mary Douglas's account of "two bodies," may be called a second body: the social imprint on the body that shapes and limits the experience of the body. See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York, 1967), 109–40; Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York, 1970), chap. 5; and Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1977). Recent scholarship has demonstrated that the black body has been more than a site of racial subjugation and suffering. Historians of black bodily joy include Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York, 1994); Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labor After the Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1997); Helen Bradley Foster, "*New Raiments of Self*": *African American Clothing in the Antebellum South* (New York and Oxford, 1997); and White and White, *Stylin*'.

¹² Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 110–11. There are at least two criticisms to be made of Fanon's point here. First, Fanon equates the experience of "being black" with domination, allowing for no experience of "blackness" that is something other than oppressive or "othering." Fanon also goes too far in arguing for a space outside of ideology. Resistance is not created

However, brutality did not constitute the whole of black bodily experience. For people, like bondpeople and women as a group, who have experienced oppression through the body, the body becomes an important site not only of suffering but also (and therefore) of resistance, enjoyment, and potentially, transcendence. Studying the body through a framework of containment and transgression grants us access to new perspectives on resistance and the workings of gender difference within enslaved plantation communities. Thinking about the black body in space allows us to think about it materially and to watch as the prime implement of labor in the Old South moved in ways inconsistent with the rigors of agricultural production. And attention to the body also facilitates thinking about issues beyond the material, such as the roles of movement and pleasure in the culture of opposition developed by enslaved people. A somatic approach, such as the one employed here, risks objectifying people, but the point is the opposite: to demonstrate how enslaved people claimed, animated, politicized, personalized, and enjoyed their bodies—flesh that was regarded by much of American society as no more than biddable property.

Most of all, attention to uses and experiences of the body is mandatory for those interested in the lives of women in slavery, for it was women's actual and imagined reproductive labor and their unique forms of bodily suffering (notably sexual exploitation) that most distinguished their lives from men's. Feminist scholars have shown that to study women's lives requires posing different questions of our sources, using new methods to interpret them, and fundamentally changing how we think about politics.¹³ Historians of enslaved women have revealed

outside of hegemonic ideologies and other forms of domination but is constituted within them. Domination not only calls forth resistance, it also establishes the terrain over which struggle ensues. Slaveholders, who understood the importance of regulating the body to social control, identified the black body as a site of domination. Enslaved people responded by rendering their bodies a site of political struggle and enjoyment. This is no neat teleology, for everyday forms of resistance were not the mere shaping or measure of repression (though they were that, as well), as critics of everyday politics would have it. Everyday resistance also reveals the formation of genuine black subjectivities and the expression of human agency. These objections notwithstanding, Fanon's suggestion that in spaces away from the white gaze, colonial subjects may experience some freedom from domination is instructive. See also Ann Farnsworth-Alvear, "Orthodox Virginity/Heterodox Memories: Understanding Women's Stories of Mill Discipline in Medellín, Columbia," *Signs*, 23 (Autumn 1997), 71–101; and Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 299.

¹³ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London and Boston, 1966); Douglas, *Natural Symbols*; Carolyn Kay Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1987); Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988); Elizabeth Faue, *Community of Suffering and Struggle: Women, Men, and the Labor Movement in Minneapolis, 1915–1945* (Chapel Hill and London, 1991); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs*, 17 (Winter 1992), 251–74.

the falseness of the dichotomy between the material/political and the personal, in large measure by showing how the body, so deeply personal, is also a political arena. Their work has demonstrated the extent to which women's bodies were unique sites of domination under slavery; yet, this scholarship has also shown that enslaved and formerly enslaved women used their bodies as sites of resistance.¹⁴ Women employed their bodies in a wide variety of ways, from seizing control over the visual representation of their physical selves in narrative and photographic forms (both of which were in enormous demand among nineteenth-century northerners) to abortion.¹⁵ In addition to the body's reproductive and sexual capacities and its representations, however, enslaved women's bodily pleasure was a resource in resistance to slavery. These diverse uses of the body are a fruitful site for investigating the origins of and women's role in bondpeople's political culture.

Recent scholarship has shown that perceptions of the proper uses of the black body, especially the female body, were central, materially

¹⁴ For work on the somatics of bondwomen's enslavement see Darlene Clark Hine and Kate Wittenstein, "Female Slave Resistance: The Economics of Sex," in Filomena Chioma Steady, ed., *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981); Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York and London, 1985); Stephanie J. Shaw, "Mothering Under Slavery in the Antebellum South," in Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang, and Linda Rennie Forcey, eds., *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency* (New York and London, 1994), 237–58; Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (New York and London, 1996); and Leslie A. Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina* (Urbana and Chicago, 1997). Many southern women's historians are also blurring the dichotomy between the personal and creative, and the political and material. See, for example, Elsa Barkley Brown, "Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom," *Public Culture*, 7 (Fall 1994), 107–46; Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill and London, 1996); Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "'You Must Remember This': Autobiography as Social Critique," *Journal of American History*, 85 (September 1998), 439–65. Paul Gilroy's work also informs the discussion here. See "One Nation under a Groove: The Cultural Politics of 'Race' and Racism in Britain," in David Theo Goldberg, ed., *Anatomy of Racism* (Minneapolis, 1990), 274.

¹⁵ White abolitionists used graphic representations of the exploited, abused, or degraded enslaved body to garner support for the antislavery cause. See Phillip Lapsansky, "Graphic Discord: Abolitionist and Antiabolitionist Images," in Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne, eds., *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America* (Ithaca, N.Y., and London, 1994), 201–30; and Elizabeth B. Clark, "'The Sacred Rights of the Weak': Pain, Sympathy, and the Culture of Individual Rights in Antebellum America," *Journal of American History*, 82 (September 1995), 463–93. Scholars of nineteenth-century slave narratives have demonstrated that black writers—especially women—used rhetorical strategies to draw attention away from their bodies, in order to emphasize their political voices rather than titillate white audiences. See Anthony G. Barthelemy, "Introduction," in Henry Louis Gates Jr., ed., *Collected Black Women's Narratives* (New York, 1988), xxix–xlvi; Carla L. Peterson, "*Doers of the Word*": African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830–1880) (New York and Oxford, 1995), esp. 22; and Jeannine DeLombard, "'Eye-Witness to the Cruelty': Southern Violence and Northern Testimony in Frederick Douglass's 1845 Narrative," *American Literature*, 73 (June 2001), 245–75.

and symbolically, to the formation of slaveholding mastery. As the English became entrenched in the slave trade in the second half of the seventeenth century, their preexisting ideas of Africans concretized into constructions of blackness and representations of bodily difference that justified the economically expedient turn to bound black labor. Jennifer L. Morgan has demonstrated that these constructions relied in large part upon sixteenth- and seventeenth-century male travelers' representations of African women's bodies as inherently laboring ones—as female drudges that stood in stark distinction to the idealized idle and dependent English woman. Male travelers to Africa in the earliest years of contact remarked on what they saw as African women's sexual deviance: the women lived in “common” (polygamously) with men, and they bared much of their bodies, most remarkably their breasts, with “no shame.” Europeans depicted African women's breasts (“dugs”) as large and droopy, “like the udder of a goate” as one traveler put it. Animal-like, African women's exposed dug struck male observers as evidence of Africa's savagery and inferiority. To European eyes African women's reproductive bodies also demonstrated physical strength: they gave birth “without payne,” suggesting that “the women here [Guinea] are of a cruder nature and stronger posture than the Females in our Lands in Europe.” Confirming this conclusion was the fact that African women commonly worked in agriculture. Unencumbered by the delicacy that prevented the ideal English woman from such arduous work, African women were seen as naturally fit for demanding agricultural and reproductive labor.¹⁶

Englishmen began to encode these ideas of proto-racial difference based on perceptions of African women's laboring bodies into law in Virginia in 1643. Kathleen M. Brown has shown that in that year free African women were declared tithables (meaning their labor could be taxed), along with all free white men and male heads of households. Because white women were viewed as dependents—as “good wives” who performed household, not agricultural, labor—they remained untaxed. The very different treatment of African and English women, based on conceptions of their capacity to work in the fields, articulated very different projections of the roles each would play in the life of the colony. Two years later African men also became tithables and

¹⁶ Jennifer L. Morgan, “‘Some Could Suckle Over Their Shoulder’: Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500–1770,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 54 (January 1997), 167–92, esp. 179 (first quotation), 170 (second quotation), 184 (third and sixth quotations), 181 (fourth quotation), and 171 (fifth quotation).

thus fell within the legal construction of African bodies as inherently laboring ones. Buttressed by ideas of Africans as savages, which themselves relied heavily on representations of African women's sexual and reproductive bodies, English lawmakers could, by 1670, force those servants who had arrived in Virginia "by shipping" (Africans) to serve lifelong terms of servitude, while those who had "come by land" (Indians) served limited terms. This law, combined with an earlier 1667 law banning the manumission of converted Christians, helped to crystallize the racial form of the emergent slave economy.¹⁷ In the context of slavery, issues of representation of the black body, especially the female black body, and material expropriation could not be separated.

Enslaved people, then, possessed at least three bodies. The first served as a site of domination; it was the body acted upon by slaveholders. Early constructions of African and black women's bodies and sexuality played a central role in rationalizing the African slave trade and gave license to sexual violence against enslaved women. Colonial and antebellum slaveholders believed that strict control of the black body, in particular its movement in space and time, was key to their enslavement of black people. By the late antebellum years planters were working energetically to master such black bodily minutiae as nourishment, ingestion of alcohol, and even dress, all as part of their paternalist management strategies. In the Old South the slave body, most intensely the female body, served as the "bio-text" on which slaveholders inscribed their authority.¹⁸

The second body was the subjective experience of this process. It was the body lived in moments and spaces of control and force, of terror and suffering. This was the colonized body that, in Fanon's terms, the person "of color" experienced "in the white world," where "consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity." Within the "white world"—within planters' controlled and controlling landscapes, vulnerable to sale, sexual and nonsexual violence, disease, and exploitative labor—enslaved bodies were, surely, "surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty."¹⁹

¹⁷ Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs*, 116–19, 125, 135–36 (quotations on p. 136). For more on notions of racial difference and their relation to the expansion of the African slave trade and American slavery, see Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York, 1975), 295–337; Jordan, *White Over Black*; Alden T. Vaughn, "The Origins Debate: Slavery and Racism in Seventeenth-Century Virginia," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 97 (July 1989), 311–54; and Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619–1877* (New York, 1993), 11–12, 17.

¹⁸ "Bio-text" is John O'Neill's phrase, from *The Communicative Body: Studies in Communicative Philosophy, Politics, and Sociology* (Evanston, Ill., 1989), 3.

¹⁹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 110–11.

And yet, within and around the plantation, enslaved people's bodies were a hotly contested terrain of struggle. Again and again, enslaved people violated plantation boundaries of space and time; in the spaces they created, runaway partygoers celebrated their bodies and did what they could to reclaim them from planter control and view. This reclaimed body, this outlawed body, was the bondperson's third body: the body as site of pleasure and resistance. For enslaved women, whose bodies were so central to the history of black bondage, the third body was significant in two ways. First, their third body was a source of pleasure, pride, and self-expression. The enormous amount of energy, time, and care that some bondwomen put into such indulgences as making and wearing fancy dresses and attending illicit parties indicates how important such activities were to them. Pleasure was its own reward for those experiencing it, and it must be a part of our understanding of the lives of people in the past, even people who had little of it. Second, bondwomen's third body was a political site: it was an important symbolic and material resource in the plantation South, and its control was fiercely contested between owner and owned. Just as exploitation, containment, and punishment of the body were political acts, so too was enjoyment of the body. Far from accommodating bondage, or acting as a safety valve within it, everyday somatic politics acted in opposition to slavery's symbolic systems and its economic imperatives.

By the nineteenth century the centerpiece of the theory of mastery that elites laid out in law books and in plantation journals was a geography of containment that aimed to control slave mobility in space and in time. In his detailed memoir of life in bondage, Charles Ball summarized what he called the "principles of restraint" that governed black movement. "No slave dare leave" the plantation to which she or he belonged, he said, not even for "a single mile," or a "single hour, by night or by day," except by "exposing himself to the danger of being taken up and flogged."²⁰ At stake was nothing less than the good functioning of the plantation itself. One slave management manual instructed its readers that "no business of any kind can be successfully conducted without the aid of system and rule." In pursuit of "system and rule," the manual prescribed two core "maxims": first, "that there must be a time for everything and everything done in its time"; and

²⁰ Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball* (Lewistown, Pa., 1836; reprint, Detroit, Mich., 1970), 125.

second, that there must be “a rule for everything and everything done according to rule.”²¹

Together, lawmakers and planters made up the rules governing spatial and temporal order. Bondpeople everywhere were forbidden by law to leave their owners’ property without passes. Responsibility for enforcing the laws was shared unequally by non-elite whites, who most often manned slave patrols to police rural and urban areas, and slaveholders, who also did their best to enforce compliance with the law by insisting that the people they owned leave only with written permission. Even when planters did grant permission to travel off the plantation, they specified the spatial and temporal boundaries of a pass’s tenure by writing the bondperson’s destination and the pass’s expiration date.²² Enslaved women experienced the limits of the plantation’s geography of containment in especially intense ways. Because most of the work that took bondpeople off the plantation was reserved for men, and because slaveholders almost always granted visiting privileges to the husband in an abroad marriage, women left farms and estates much less frequently than men did. Women were thus fixed even more firmly than men within plantation boundaries.²³

Recognizing the potential for trouble nevertheless, slaveholders focused much of their managerial energy on regulating black movement in the nighttime. Almost all enslaved people were forbidden to leave the plantation at all in the evenings, and some were prohibited from even stirring from their quarters. In December 1846 Mississippi planter William Ethelbert Ervin codified his ideal of slave behavior by setting

²¹ The manual’s instructions are printed on the inside cover of the Richard Eppes diary, 1858, Eppes Family Papers (Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Va.; hereinafter cited as VHS). Mark M. Smith demonstrates the increasing importance of time discipline to plantation production during the antebellum period in the following works: “Time, Slavery and Plantation Capitalism in the Ante-bellum American South,” *Past and Present*, 150 (February 1996), 142–68; “Old South Time in Comparative Perspective,” *American Historical Review*, 101 (December 1996), 1432–69; and in his brilliant *Mastered by the Clock: Time, Slavery, and Freedom in the American South* (Chapel Hill and London, 1997).

²² For a single example, Virginia slaveholder John Bassett wrote a pass for an enslaved person named Edward: “Edward is sent to Rich[mon]d. To remain till Monday next[.] Feby 25th 1826. John Bassett.” The note at the bottom of the pass confirmed Edward’s movements: “I have recd five Dollars by your Boy Edward[.] R[.] Brooks.” Section 17, Bassett Family Papers (VHS). More passes can be found in Section 4, Hundley Family Papers (VHS); and Sections 5, 42, and 86, Spragins Family Papers (VHS). On slave patrols see Gladys-Marie Fry, *Night Riders in Black Folk History* (Knoxville, 1975); and Sally E. Hadden, *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 2001).

²³ White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?* 75; see also the passes cited at note 22. Women occasionally were able to procure (legal) passes and leave the plantation, usually to perform labor. For example, enslaved women on the Hunter family’s Virginia estate obtained written permission to take their cloth to a dressmaker. Box 10, Mary Evelina (Dandridge) Hunter Papers, in Hunter Family Papers (VHS).

to paper the rules that were to govern his human property. Total control over his bondpeople's bodies was central to Ervin's conception of the master-slave relationship, as it was for so many other slaveholders; out of the four fundamental rules on Ervin's estate, two sought to control slave mobility. First, he indicated that plantation borders marked not only the edges of his estate but also hemmed in his bondpeople: No one was to "leave the place without leaf of absence." Second, within those spatial borders, he added temporal limits that bound enslaved people's movement even more: "at nine o'clock every night the Horne must be blown Which is the signal for each to retire to his or her house and there to remain until morning." Doing his best to guarantee a rested and orderly workforce, Ervin directed his overseers to check on people in the quarters, and if anyone was found "out of their places," they would be "delt with" "according to discretion." Most often, transgressors of boundaries of space and time were dealt with violently. Only so long as, in the words of one former bondwoman, "slaves stayed in deir places," were they not "whipped or put in chains."²⁴

The nineteenth-century plantation system was a symbol for larger social relations, though, and the importance of rules of containment went beyond plantation efficiency and issues of production: the need for rules struck at the core of what it meant to be a master in the antebellum years. Seeking to restrain black bodies even further, some planters used plantation frolics as a paternalist mechanism of social control. Plantation parties, which carefully doled out joy on Saturday nights and on holidays, were intended to seem benevolent and to inspire respect, gratitude, deference, and importantly, obedience. As North Carolinian Midge Burnett noted sardonically, his owner held plantation frolics on holidays and gave bondpeople Christmas trees in December and an Easter egg hunt in the spring—all "ca[u]se Marse William intended ter make us a civilized bunch of blacks."²⁵

Most of all, these sponsored frolics were supposed to control black pleasure by giving it periodic, approved release. Paternalist slaveholders

²⁴ December 31, 1846, entry, William Ethelbert Ervin Diaries #247-z (Wilson Library, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; hereinafter cited as SHC); George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (19 vols.; Westport, Conn., 1972), XIII, Pt. 3, p. 128. Andrew Boone recalled, "If you wus out widout a pass dey would shore git you. De paterollers shore looked after you. Dey would come to de house at night to see who wus there. If you wus out of place, dey would wear you out." Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, XIV, 134.

²⁵ Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, XIV, 157 (quotation). See also Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 3–7, 570, 577–80, 584. Roger D. Abrahams has shown how bondpeople sometimes turned paternalistic events like corn shuckings into rituals of their own meaning. Abrahams, *Singing the Master*, 83–106.

accomplished this goal by attending and surveilling the parties. Indeed, the most important component of paternalistic plantation parties was the legitimating presence of the master. It was common for whites to “set around and watch,” while bondpeople would “dance and sing.”²⁶ Though sanctioning black pleasure, the slaveholders’ gaze oversaw and contained that pleasure, ensuring that it would not become dangerous. For example, to make certain that the alcohol, music, dancing, “sundrie articles,” and “treat[s]” he provided his bondpeople at holiday time served the dual purpose of giving limited expression to and restraining their bodily pleasure in time as well as space, John Nevitt made sure to “s[i]t up untill 2 oclock in the morning to keep order with them.”²⁷ Both the former slave Henry Bibb and the former slaveholder Robert Criswell remembered the surveillance role that the slaveholders’ presence played at plantation frolics, and both illustrated the constrictive effects of that gaze in their memoirs of antebellum plantation life (see Illustrations 1 and 2).

Alcohol proved an important lubricant for production at plantation affairs. Neal Upson watched adults set a rhythm for their work of shucking a season’s corn harvest by singing. As they sang and shucked, “de little brown jug was passed ’round.” The “little brown jug” of alcohol gave the workers just enough liquor to warm their muscles and their spirits to the enterprise at hand: “When it [the jug] had gone de rounds a time or two, it was a sight to see how fast dem Niggers could keep time to dat singin’. Dey could do all sorts of double time den when dey had swigged enough liquor.” Similarly, Bill Heard’s owner provided “[p]lenty of corn liquor” to his bondpeople at corn shuckings in order to speed up the work. “[Y]ou know dat stuff is sho to make a Nigger hustle,” Heard remembered. “Evvy time a red ear of corn was found dat meant a extra drink of liquor for de Nigger dat found it.”²⁸ Even as planters attempted to master black bodily movement and pleasure in these ways, however, some enslaved people were not satisfied with official parties. They sought out secret and secular gatherings of their own making.

²⁶ Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, XVI, 23. Some WPA informants reported that attending plantation frolics was an activity reserved for white men. For instance, George Fleming said, “White ladies didn’t go to de frolics, but some of de white men did.” George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, supplemental series 1 (12 vols.; Westport, Conn., 1977), XI, 128; hereinafter cited as *American Slave*, supp. ser. 1.

²⁷ December 27, 1828, entry (first and third quotations), John Nevitt Diary #543 (SHC). “Treat[s]” are mentioned in the December 25, 1827, December 25, 1829, and December 27, 1830, entries.

²⁸ Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, XIII, Pt. 4, p. 68 (Neal Upson), and XII, Pt. 2, p. 142 (Bill Heard).



Illustration 1, *The Sabbath among Slaves*. This illustration shows plantation festivities as Henry Bibb, a man who had been enslaved, remembered them. Enslaved people dance, play music, lounge, tussle, and drink, while four elite whites on the left watch, amused. The plantation patriarch, to the right of center, distributes alcohol to a respectful bondman who has gratefully removed his hat and bows slightly. Note the very obvious presence of a fence on the right, as well as the wall of four white onlookers on the left. Together, these barriers contain and control this scene of black pleasure. From Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave* (New York, 1849), 21.

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Bondwomen and men who worked in the gang system, the predominant form of work organization in the Old South, worked hard all day, almost every day of the year, with breaks only on Sundays and some holidays. "Dey wucks us from daylight till dark, an' sometimes we jist gits one meal a day," Charlie Crump said of his slavery experience.²⁹ Bondpeople in South Carolina and parts of Georgia who worked under the task system did not necessarily have to wait for the evening to end their toil, but they, like bondpeople employed in gang labor, were prohibited from leaving their home farms without a pass. Even bad weather meant only a change in routine—respite only from field labor but not from plantation maintenance chores. As they worked, bondpeople, in the words of one folk song sung by women textile workers in Virginia, kept their "eye on de sun," watching it cross the sky as the

²⁹ Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, XIV, 213.



Illustration 2, *The Festival*. This illustrated memory, from a former slaveholder's autobiography, represents the centrality of white surveillance at plantation parties. Here, the planter and his family watch from a platform in a nearby tree. From Robert Criswell, "*Uncle Tom's Cabin*" *Contrasted with Buckingham Hall, the Planter's Home* (New York, 1852), 113.

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day wore long. Because "trouble don' las' always," they anticipated the end of the work day and on occasion planned illicit parties in the woods.³⁰

Speaking for enslaved people everywhere, Charlie Crump recounted that "we ain't 'lowed ter go nowhar at night . . ." "[D]at is," he added, "if dey knowed it." In violation of the planters' boundaries of space and time, Crump and many of the young people he knew who had worked "from daylight till dark" left at night. At the risk of terrible punishment, blacks "from all ober de neighborhood [would] gang up an' have fun anyhow . . ." Similarly, Midge Burnett and his friends

³⁰ The lyrics, as Bob Ellis remembered them, were, "Keep yo' eye on de sun, / See how she run, / Don't let her catch you with your work undone, / I'm a trouble, I'm a trouble, / Trouble don' las' always." Perdue et al., eds., *Weevils in the Wheat*, 88. For another version see *ibid.*, 309.

knew that “[d]e patterollers ’ud watch all de paths leadin’ frum de plantation” to prevent bondpeople from running away. What the paterollers did not know, however, was that “dar wus a number of little paths what run through de woods dat nobody ain’t watched ca[u]se dey ain’t knowed dat de paths wus dar.” Many partygoers traveled to their covert events through just such paths (see Illustration 3).³¹

“Yes, mam, they had dances all right,” Georgian Jefferson Franklin Henry remembered. “That’s how they got mixed up with paterollers. Negroes would go off to dances and stay out all night . . .”³² Since secrecy demanded a high level of planning, the outlaw gatherings were often prepared well in advance. Austin Steward and his neighbors and friends in rural Virginia were well aware of the laws and rules that forbade enslaved people from leaving “the plantation to which they belong, without a written pass.” Nonetheless, they occasionally left their plantations to visit family, to worship, and sometimes, to hold parties. One spring the enslaved people on a nearby estate held an Easter frolic with the permission of their owner. But word of this legitimate “grand dance” quickly spread to “a large number of slaves on other plantations” who intended to attend the party whether or not they could obtain official passes.³³

Meanwhile, the hosts began preparations. Reappropriation was the main way of obtaining the goods they needed. “[T]hey *took*, without saying, ‘by your leave, Sir,’” the food and drink they wanted, Steward wrote, “reasoning among themselves, as slaves often do, that it can not be *stealing*, because ‘it belongs to massa, and so do *we*, and we only use one part of his property to benefit another.’” The women took the ingredients and moved their owners’ culinary property “from one location to another”—a relocation that made an enormous difference in the purposes of both the frolic and the food. With the ingredients in hand, women hid themselves in “valleys,” swamps, and other “by-places” in order to cook in secret during the nights. “[N]ight after night” this went on: women prepared dishes late into the night, then “in the morning” headed back to their cabins, “carefully destroy[ing] everything likely to detect them” on their way. At the same time, the

³¹ Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, XIV, 213 (Charlie Crump), 156 (Midge Burnett).

³² Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, XII, Pt. 2, p. 188.

³³ Austin Steward, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave, and Forty Years a Freeman*, intro. by Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease (Reading, Mass., and other cities, 1969), 19–22 (first quotation on p. 19; second and third quotations on p. 20). Steward’s autobiography was originally published in 1857.



Illustration 3, *A Live Oak Avenue*. Avenues around the plantation, the concourses of slaveholding leisure and business, branched off into smaller paths known only to enslaved people. Bondpeople used these paths to reach the secret spaces in the woods where they held outlaw slave parties. From *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 19 (November 1859), 733.

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“knowing ones” continued to plan the celebration, encouraging each other’s high spirits “with many a wink and nod.”³⁴

Finally, the appointed night arrived. A little after 10 P.M., the music began when an “old fiddler struck up some favorite tune,” and people danced until midnight, when it was time to feast. The food was “well cooked,” and the wine was “excellent,” Steward reported. But he recalled more than the events; he went to the trouble of recording the

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

affect of the moment. Steward had noted that planters believed that enslaved people hobbled through life “with no hope of release this side of the grave, and as far as the cruel oppressor is concerned, shut out from hope beyond it.” Yet, despite—or perhaps in part because of—their abject poverty and the humiliations and cruelties of bondage, here at the party, “Every dusky face was lighted up, and every eye sparkled with joy. However ill fed they might have been, here, for once, there was plenty. Suffering and toil was forgotten, and they all seemed with one accord to give themselves up to the intoxication of pleasurable amusement.” In the context of enslavement, such exhilarating pleasure gotten by illicit use of the body must be understood as important and meaningful enjoyment, as personal expression, and as oppositional engagement of the body.³⁵

But there were limits to alternative uses of the body for the enslaved. Late in the night the fiddler suddenly stopped playing and adopted “a listening attitude.” Everyone became quiet, “listening for the cause of the alarm.” The dreaded call came to them when their lookout shouted, “*patrol!*” and perhaps ran away from the party, a common technique to throw off patrols. If the lookout at this party did so, he was unsuccessful, for the slave patrol, whose job it was to ensure that enslaved people (in Steward’s words) “know their place” and stay in it, found the party and broke it up. Many people had run away immediately after the call came, but others, including Steward, had only managed to hide themselves and overheard the patrolmen talking.³⁶

Two of the patrolmen debated the wisdom of a few white men attempting to disband a meeting of so many bondpeople. One hesitated to push the matter, arguing that they might “resist.” After all, “they have been indulging their appetites, and we cannot tell what they may attempt to do.” His colleague mocked his apprehension and wondered if he was really “so chicken-hearted as to suppose those d—d cowardly niggers are going to get up an insurrection?” The first patrolman defensively clarified that he only worried the partygoers “may forget themselves at this late hour.” This patrolman’s concerns were based on the realities at hand. In these woods, on the figurative if not the literal margins of the host plantation, there was a black majority. This particular black majority was made up of those who already had proven their lack of deference to white authority and their willingness to defy rules. While unprepared and perhaps unwilling to “get up an insurrec-

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 15 (fourth quotation), 21 (first, second, third, and fifth quotations).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 20–24 (first, second, and third quotations on p. 22; fourth quotation on p. 20).

tion,” they just might have been capable of “forgetting themselves” by challenging white authority to an incalculable extent. Indeed, in a sense they already had forgotten themselves, having abandoned “their place” in the plantation spatial and temporal order—and the “self” they had to be there—in favor of their own space and their own place.³⁷

The party that Austin Steward remembered illustrates what was generally true: that the most important part of preparing a night meeting was evading slave patrols. In addition to doing their best to keep their own movements stealthy, bondpeople carefully monitored patrol activity. Inverting the dominant ideal of plantation surveillance, household, skilled, and personal bondpeople watched their surveillants and sometimes learned of a patrol’s plan to be in the area. These bondpeople would pass the word along in the code, “dey bugs in de wheat,” meaning the scheduled party had been found out. Sometimes the party was canceled; when it was not, some bondpeople would avoid the party completely, while others would attend anyway, alert and ready to leap out of windows and sprint out of sight when the patrol arrived. Revelers also protected their space by constructing borders of their own. They stretched vines across the paths to trip patrolmen and their horses, and they posted lookouts at key locations along the periphery.³⁸

Young people also gathered in spaces outside of their owners’ view. Very often they met, like Nancy Williams and the people she knew, in unoccupied cabins in the woods. At other times they simply came together in the open air (see Illustrations 4 and 5). Occasionally, on very large plantations where outbuildings could be quite a distance from the slaveholder’s house, they would meet in barns or in the quarters. Male musicians performed for their friends and neighbors, playing fiddles, banjos, and tambourines. They also made their instruments; for instance, the popular “quill” was created in places where sugar was grown from ten or so cane stems cut to different lengths, with a hole drilled in the top of each, bound together to make a flute. Musicians also improvised instruments out of reeds and handsaws to perform the melody and created the percussion with spoons, bones, pans, and buckets to play songs like “Turkey in the Straw” and other popular tunes.³⁹

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 23–24 (first quotation on p. 23; subsequent quotations on p. 24).

³⁸ Hadden, *Slave Patrols*, 109; Fry, *Nightriders in Black Folk History*, 93; Perdue et al., eds., *Weevils in the Wheat*, 93, 297 (quotation); Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, XIII, Pt. 4, p. 80, XIV, Pt. 1, p. 213, and XVI [Maryland], 49–50.

³⁹ Perdue et al., eds., *Weevils in the Wheat*, 316; Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, XIII, Pt. 4, p. 306, XV, Pt. 2, p. 132, and XIII, Pt. 4, pp. 40, 64, and 124; Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, supp. ser. 1, XI, 128.



Illustration 4, *A Negro Funeral*. It was in the remote spaces in the woods bordering plantations that enslaved people gathered for funerals, religious services, and secret, secular parties. From *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 19 (November 1859), 731.

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When no musicians were available, and even when they were, outlaw partygoers made music with their voices, singing lyrics sure to amuse. According to Dosia Harris, one went “somepin’ lak dis”:

Oh! Miss Liza, Miss Liza Jane!
 Axed Miss Liza to marry me
 Guess what she said?
 She wouldn't marry me,
 If de last Nigger was dead.⁴⁰

Dancers also sang, perhaps gloatingly, of their subterfuge:

⁴⁰ Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, XII, Pt. 2, p. 110.



Illustration 5, *The Country Church*. Deep in some woods were abandoned or simply unoccupied church buildings, old barns, and other outbuildings, like this one. Enslaved people occasionally used these structures to hold outlaw parties. From *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 19 (November 1859), 728.

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Buffalo gals, can't you come out tonight,
Come out tonight, an' dance by the light of de moon?⁴¹

As morning approached, those who had caroused the night away warned each other of the approach of day and the danger of violating that temporal boundary (which located them properly at work): "Run nigger run, pattyrollers ketch you, run nigger run, it's breakin' days."⁴² A variant elaborated:

⁴¹ Rawick ed., *American Slave*, VII [Mississippi], 161.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 126.

Run nigger run, de patterrollers ketch you—
 Run nigger run, fer hits almos' day,
 De nigger run; de nigger flew; de nigger los'
 His big old shoe.⁴³

Dance tunes contained political meanings as well as entertainment value. The self-deprecating song about the rejected lover is one example: Liza Jane, the object of affection, is called by a title, "Miss," a sign of respect that whites denied bondpeople. Other songs were bolder. Mississippian Mollie Williams danced to and sang the following song, which was inflected by the spirit of resistance nurtured at outlaw parties:

Run tell Coleman,
 Run tell everbody
 Dat de niggers is arisin'!⁴⁴

Together, women and men performed a variety of period dances. Many formerly enslaved people described the dances of their youth as proper and respectable (without the "man an woman squeezed up close to one another," as Mrs. Fannie Berry put it). When she was young, Liza Mention danced "de cardrille (quadrille)[.] de virginia reel, and de 16-hand cortillion." Mention insisted, "Dances in dem days warn't dese here huggin' kind of dances lak dey has now."⁴⁵ Instead, bondpeople chose physically expressive, but still respectable, dances like "pigeon wings" (flapping the arms like a bird and wiggling the legs, while "holdin' yo' neck stiff like a bird do"), "gwine to de east, an' gwine to de west" (leaning in to kiss one's dance partner on each cheek but "widout wrappin' no arms roun' like de young folks do today"), "callin' de figgers" (following the fiddler's challenging calls), and "hack-back" (in which couples stood facing one another and "trotted back and forth"). Other dances included "set de flo" (partners began by bowing to each other at the waist, with hands on the waist, then the dancers tap-danced, patting the floor firmly, "jus' like dey was puttin' it in place"), "dancin' on de spot" (the same as "set de flo" except that dancers had to remain within the circumference of a circle drawn in the ground), "wringin' and twistin'" (the early basis of the "twist"), the "buzzard lope," "snake hips," and the "breakdown."⁴⁶

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁴⁵ Perdue et al., eds., *Weevils in the Wheat*, 49–50 (Fannie Berry); Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, XIII, Pt. 3, p. 124 (Liza Mention).

⁴⁶ The "pigeon wings," "gwine to de east, an' gwine to de west," "callin' de figgers," "set de flo," and "dancin' on de spot" are described in Perdue et al., eds., *Weevils in the Wheat*, 49–50; the "hack-back" is described in Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, supp. ser. 1, XI, 127–28; and the

Competition was a common form of amusement at outlaw dances, one that sometimes forged camaraderie among equals. To win a dance competition required the combination of expertly executing complex dance moves while maintaining an outward demeanor of “control and coolness,” dance historian Katrina Hazzard-Gordon has written. For example, Nancy Williams competed with another woman, Jennie, to see who could dance most deftly and with the most mastery of their bodies. To make the challenge even greater, the two women danced with glasses of water on their heads; the winner was she who maintained her cool, making the performance of the dances look easy. Dance competition allowed some women to demonstrate the strength and agility of their bodies, as compared with men’s, whose physical power was usually recognized as greater. Jane Smith Hill Harmon “allus could dance” and enjoyed, even as an old woman, “cut[ting] fancy steps now sometimes when I feels good.” Her talent was awe-inspiring, and she regularly competed with men. “[O]ne night when I wuz young,” she related to her interviewer, “I danced down seben big strong mens, dey thought dey wuz sumpin’! Huh, I danced eb’ry one down!” Dance competition could provide women moments of relief from black gender hierarchies as well as from slaveholding control.⁴⁷

Such an issue as violence between women and men at secret parties is difficult to access in the sources. We know that enslaved families, like free ones, were home to resentment, betrayal, anger, and other disappointments of family life. Brenda E. Stevenson and Christopher Morris have shown that physical and verbal abuse between spouses was a part of life in the quarters in Virginia and in Mississippi.⁴⁸ For a single example, James Cornelius, who had been enslaved in Mississippi, openly told his interviewer about the time he hit his wife in the postbellum years. During their marriage ceremony, Cornelius had interrupted the preacher to make his wife promise never to accuse him of lying. She promised, and Cornelius reciprocated; he pronounced the exchange “‘a bargain’ an’ den de preacher went on wid de wed-din’.” A few years later his wife was suspicious about his whereabouts one evening, and when his excuse failed to convince her, she told him,

remaining dances are described in Katrina Hazzard-Gordon, *Jookin’: The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African-American Culture* (Philadelphia, 1990), 19.

⁴⁷ Hazzard-Gordon, *Jookin’*, 20; Perdue et al., eds., *Weevils in the Wheat*, 316 (Nancy Williams); Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, XII, Pt. 2, p. 99 (Jane Smith Hill Harmon).

⁴⁸ Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York and Oxford, 1996), 23, 255; Christopher Morris, *Becoming Southern: The Evolution of a Way of Life, Warren County and Vicksburg, Mississippi, 1770–1860* (New York and London, 1995), 63.

“that’s a lie.” Cornelius responded in the manner he viewed as appropriate: “right den I raised my han’ an’ let her have it right by de side of de head, an’ she niver called me a liar ag’in. No ma’m, dat is somethin’ I won’t stand for.” While rates of domestic violence may have changed in the transition from slavery to freedom, incidents such as this one were certainly not new. Moreover, Cornelius learned of his manly prerogative to violently maintain the rules of his marriage from multiple sources, and a major influence on his conception of domestic life must have been his own (enslaved) family.⁴⁹ Violence was also a common aspect of drinking culture among both whites and blacks. It is therefore difficult to imagine that violence, as a part of life in the quarters and a part of drinking culture, did not occur between men, between women, and between men and women at outlawed parties. In particular, men’s drinking must have created some difficulties for bondwomen. But violence was not solely a male form of expression. Sometimes slave parties gave space for the continuation of rivalries between women who were not always, or even often, motivated by feelings of honorable competition between equals. Women’s competition could turn viciously bitter and have tragic results. For instance, when two women, Rita and Retta, misunderstood “Aunt” Vira’s laughter at a party as directed at them, they poisoned both Vira and her infant.⁵⁰

While women and men danced together, outlaw parties were also characterized by gender differences in ideas of pleasure. Women, more than men, reclaimed their bodies through dressing up; and men, more than women, enjoyed drinking alcohol. Dress was a contested terrain: planters attempted to use it for disciplinary purposes, and women utilized it for purposes inconsistent with the social demands and economic imperatives of slave society. Under cover of night, women headed for secret frolics dressed in their best fancy dress, marking on their bodies the difference between the time that belonged to the master and the time that was their own.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, VII [Mississippi], 30. Domestic violence was a source of both comedy and moral judgment in the folk song “Old Dan Tucker,” in which Tucker, “a mighty mean man” who “beat his wife wid a fryin’ pan,” ends up passed out drunk in a “red hot” fire. Dora Franks remembered singing this song with other enslaved youth in Mississippi. *Ibid.*, 53.

⁵⁰ Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, XIII, Pt. 4, p. 104.

⁵¹ For more on black style under slavery see Patricia K. Hunt, “The Struggle to Achieve Individual Expression Through Clothing and Adornment: African American Women Under and After Slavery,” in Patricia Morton, ed., *Discovering the Women in Slavery: Emancipating Perspectives on the American Past* (Athens, Ga., and London, 1996), 227–40; Foster, “*New Raiments of Self*”; and White and White, *Stylin’*.

While at work, when their bodies were in the service of their owners, bondpeople looked, according to one observer, "very ragged and slovenly." Planters imprinted slave status on black bodies by vesting bondpeople in clothing of the poorest quality, made of fabric reserved for those of their station. In the summer enslaved people wore uncolored cotton or tow, a material made from rough, unprocessed flax. Many women's dresses were straight, shapeless, and stintingly cut, sometimes directly on the body to avoid wasting fabric. Charity McAllister's clothes were "poor. One-piece dress made o' carpet stuff, part of de time." Others were cut fuller, tapered at the waist, and most dresses were long. Almost all bondpeople's clothes were homemade, not store-bought, and those who wore them appreciated the difference. Fannie Dunn disagreed with her mother's assessment of conditions under slavery in North Carolina on the basis of the clothes she was forced to wear: "My mother said dat we all fared good, but of course we wore handmade clothes an' wooden bottomed shoes."⁵²

Some planters, as part of their system of rule, annually or biannually distributed clothes with dramatic flair in order to represent themselves as the benevolent source of care and sustenance and thereby instill loyalty in their bondpeople. Many other plantations were characterized more by slaveholder neglect and avarice than by paternalistic management systems; on such farms slave owners gave little thought to enslaved people's physical conditions. Year after year, for example, Roswell King, Pierce Butler's Georgia overseer, pleaded with Butler, who lived in Philadelphia, to provide his bondpeople with clothing. King subscribed to the paternalist school's combination of cruel violence, stern order, and benevolent encouragement of disciplined behavior, but he could not find an ally in Butler. "Do you recollect," King wrote Butler on one occasion, "that you have not given your Negroes Summer clothing but twice in fifteen years past[?]" Old, torn, shredded, and dirty clothing certainly saved costs for slave owners, but it also had social effects. Poor-quality clothing reflected and reified slaves' status and played a role in their subjugation. Harriet Jacobs wrote bitterly in her 1861 narrative of life as a bondwoman that the

⁵² Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveller's Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States* . . . , ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger Sr. (1953; reprint, New York, 1984), 82 (first quotation); Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, XII, Pt. 1, p. 4, XV, 62 (Charity McAllister), and XIV, 272 (Fannie Dunn).

“linsey-woolsey dress given me every winter” by her mistress was “one of the badges of slavery.”⁵³

Another “badge of slavery” was the mitigation of gender distinctions that some experienced, effected by the grueling work routines that many women followed during much of their lives. With a mixture of pride and bitterness, Anne Clark recalled that during her life in bondage she had worked like a man. She “ploughed, hoed, split rails. I done the hardest work ever a man ever did.” “Women worked in de field same as de men. Some of dem plowed jes’ like de men and boys,” George Fleming remembered. Fleming claimed that the women he knew even resembled men in the fields; he “[c]ouldn’t tell ’em apart in de field, as dey wore pantelets or breeches.”⁵⁴

Conversely, when bondpeople, especially women, dressed themselves for their own occasions, they went to a great deal of trouble to create and wear clothes of quality and, importantly, style. When possible, women exchanged homespun goods, produce from their gardens, and pelts with white itinerant traders for good-quality or decorative cloth, beads, and buttons. In South Carolina the slaves’ independent economy enabled women to purchase cloth, clothing, and dye. But even in Virginia, Frederick Law Olmsted noticed that some women were able to “purchase clothing for themselves” and, on their own time, to “look very smart.” Enslaved women located near ports or major waterways were probably able to barter with black boat-workers, who carried on a lively trade with the plantation bondpeople they encountered in their travels.⁵⁵ Most women, however, procured fancy

⁵³ Drew Gilpin Faust, *James Henry Hammond and the Old South: A Design for Mastery* (Baton Rouge and London, 1982), 100–103; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 5–7; Roswell King to Pierce Butler, December 7, 1812, April 20, 1816, and July 6, 1817 (first quotation), Folder 9, Box 3, Butler Family Papers (Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pa.); Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1987), 11.

⁵⁴ Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, IV, Pt. 1, p. 223 (Anne Clark); Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, supp. ser. 1, XI, 130 (George Fleming). See also George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, supplemental series 2 (10 vols.; Westport, Conn., 1979), VIII, 2990. As enslaved women’s historians have pointed out, this “masculinization” of bondwomen at work was never complete, and rarely did it define enslaved women’s gender identities. At work in their specialized labor, their gender-segregated or gender-specific agricultural labor, and the reproductive labor they performed for their families, enslaved women constructed their own meanings and expressions of womanhood. See White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*; Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York, 1985); and Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We*.

⁵⁵ Joyner, *Down by the Riverside*, 74; Foster, “*New Raiments of Self*”, 111–12; Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We*, 60; Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, XIII, Pt. 3, pp. 2, 186; Olmsted, *Cotton Kingdom*, 82; Thomas C. Buchanan, “The Slave Mississippi: African-American Steamboat Workers, Networks of Resistance, and the Commercial World of the Western Rivers, 1811–1880” (Ph.D. dissertation, Carnegie Mellon University, 1998), 175–84.

dress—when they could at all—simply by eking out time at night to make it, from beginning to end: they grew and processed the cotton, cultivated and gathered the roots and berries for the dye, wove the cloth, and sewed textiles into garments.

When they dressed up and when they refused to perform the regular nightly toil demanded of them in order to make fancy dress, enslaved women indicated that some Saturday nights, Sundays, holidays, and occasionally weeknights were their own. Women, whose bodies were subject to sexual exploitation, dangerous and potentially heartbreaking reproductive labor, and physically demanding agricultural labor, tried not to miss the opportunity to reclaim them from the brink of degradation at the hands of their masters. As much as women's bodies were sources of suffering and sites of planter domination, women also worked hard to make their bodies spaces of personal expression, pleasure, and resistance.

Fancy dress offered a challenge to status-enforcing clothing because dressing up was heterodox behavior. Pierre Bourdieu defines *doxa* as the “naturalization” of the social order accomplished through a number of social and symbolic mechanisms, including assumptions by dominant classes about the “uses” and presentation of the body. Within the reigning *doxa*, the black body was vested in slave dress, dress that enforced and naturalized its status. Enslaved women sporadically engaged in heterodox behavior—behavior that was conscious of the *doxa*, exposed its arbitrariness, and challenged it. When they adorned their bodies in fancy dress, rather than in the degrading rough and plain clothing, rags, or livery that slaveholders dressed them in, they challenged the axiomatic (*doxic*) quality of their enslaved status. In particular, women fashioned new identities that highlighted their femininity and creativity.⁵⁶

Finally, women's heterodox style—expressed as they transgressed the plantation's boundaries of space and time—allowed them to take pleasure in their bodies, while simultaneously denying that their bodies had exclusively fiduciary value and that the sole “[use] of the body” was to labor for their owners.⁵⁷ Indeed, the very act of slipping out of plantation boundaries to attend parties withheld labor, in that by failing to rest properly for the next day's chores, enslaved people worked less efficiently, much to the outrage of their owners. In the Old South, issues

⁵⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Eng., and other cities, 1977), 164–71 (quotations on pp. 164–65).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 165.

of representation of the black body and material expropriation could not be separated from one another.

When women adorned themselves in fancy dress of their own creation, they distanced themselves from what it felt like to wear slaves' low-status clothing. "Aunt" Adeline was, as her mother had been, an accomplished dyer. On one occasion she wore a dress that she would never forget "as long as I live. It was a hickory stripe dress they made for me, with brass buttons at the wrist bands." She was "so proud of that dress"; with her identity refashioned by it, she "felt so dressed up in it, I just strutted!" The heterodox aspects of fancy dress can also be detected in some of the reactions to the young women who dressed up. One time, the young Amelia walked out of her house on her way to church in the hoopskirt she adored. To her mortification, the other children "laugh[ed] at me" and accused her of "playin' lady"—of affecting a status beyond her own, to which she had no right. She was so hurt by their mockery of her status transgression, now seen as presumption, that she took off the offending skirt "and hide it in de wood." Enslaved people, young or adult, did not uniformly appreciate disrespect for the Old South's racial etiquette.⁵⁸

In addition to the symbolic value dress held for plantation blacks and whites, clothing held more tangible meanings as well. The production, distribution, and uses of King Cotton—and cotton products such as clothing—were very material issues in the slave South. Textile production complicated the plantation's temporal order along gender lines: the nighttime was less neatly "off" time for bondwomen than it was for men. While women and men could both quit working for their owners at sunset, many women began a second shift of labor at night, and sometimes on Saturdays or Sundays, working for their families. At these times women performed reproductive labor, such as cooking, cleaning, gardening, washing, and candle- and soap-making, in their homes. Henry James Trentham saw women plowing during the day, working hard to "carry dat row an' keep up wid de men," then quit at sunset "an den do dere cookin' at night." Moreover, in their "off" time and during the winters, women were responsible for some to all of the production of textiles for plantation residents, black and white. Only on the very largest planta-

⁵⁸ Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, XIII, Pt. 4, pp. 212 (Adeline), 220 (Amelia).

tions was some of this work concentrated in the hands of women specialists.⁵⁹

Most enslaved women, then, worked grueling first and second shifts. Their second shift of labor, however, also presented an opportunity, one they exploited, to devote a bit of their time to heterodox activity. Women spent some of their evenings turning the plain, uncolored tow, denim, hemp, burlap, and cotton they had spun into decorative cloth. Morris Sheppard remembered his mother's handiwork: "Everything was striped 'cause old Mammy liked to make it fancy." Catharine Slim's mother, a talented weaver, wove stripes of red, white, and blue as well as flowers into the cloth she sewed into dresses for her daughter. Women dyed the coarse material allotted them with colors that they liked. Nancy Williams's dedication to style was unusual, but it remains instructive. "Clo'es chile? I had plenty clo'es dem days," she claimed. "Had dress all colors. How I get 'em? Jes' change dey colors. Took my white dress out to de polk berry bush an' jes' a-dyed it red, den dyed my shoes red. Took ole barn paint an' paint some mo' shoes yaller to match my yaller dress." Women set the colors fast in their cloth with saline solutions, vinegar and water, or "chamber lye" (urine). They hung the cloth on lines to dry and from there sewed the fabric into garments. Women also traded the products of their nighttime labor—their crafts such as quilts and baskets, the produce of their gardens, the eggs they collected, the berries they picked in the woods, and the skins of animals they hunted—for calico and fine or decorative cloth, as well as for ornamental objects.⁶⁰

Once they had the cloth, enslaved women went to great effort to make themselves something more than the cheap, straight-cut dresses they were rationed. When possible, women cut their "dress-up" dresses generously so as to cover the length of the body and to sweep dramatically and elegantly. Some women accentuated the fullness of their skirts by crisply starching them. Annie Wallace remembered that when her mother went "out at night to a party some of the colored folks was havin'," she would starch her skirts with "hominy water. . . . They were

⁵⁹ Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, XIII, Pt. 3, p. 72, and XV, 364 (Henry James Trentham); *Aunt Sally*; or, *The Cross the Way Freedom: A Narrative of the Slave-Life and Purchase of the Mother of Rev. Isaac Williams, of Detroit, Michigan* (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1858), 47; Octavia V. Rogers Albert, *The House of Bondage; or Charlotte Brooks and Other Slaves* (New York, 1890; reprint, New York and Oxford, 1988), 64. See also Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, XIII, Pt. 4, p. 80, XIII, Pt. 4, p. 183, XV, 129, and XV, 179; and Foster, "New Raiments of Self", 104.

⁶⁰ Foster, "New Raiments of Self", 112, 114 (Morris Sheppard), Appendix III; Perdue et al., eds., *Weevils in the Wheat*, 316–17 (Nancy Williams quotation on p. 316); Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, XI, 52–53, and XIV, 184; Olmsted, *Cotton Kingdom*, 82.

starched so stiff that every time you stopped they would pop real loud.” Wallace’s mother instructed her children to listen carefully for her return, in case the party was broken up by the arrival of Virginia’s rural patrols. “And when we heared them petticoats apoppin’ as she run down the path, we’d open the door wide and she would get away from the patteroll.”⁶¹

Other women liked to draw attention to their skirts with hoops they made from grapevines or tree limbs. Though Salena Taswell’s owner “would not let the servants wear hoops,” she and the other household bondwomen sometimes swiped “the old ones that they threw away.” Secretly, they “would go around with them on when they were gone and couldn’t see us.” Hoopskirts came into fashion during the early 1850s, coinciding with the emergence of the cult of domesticity, and stayed in style until the pressures of the Civil War made them both impractical and expensive. Among the elite women who wore them, however, hoopskirts symbolized “Victorian ideals of domesticity and . . . of a separate woman’s sphere,” as Drew Gilpin Faust has suggested. The style flaunted high levels of consumption and idleness (the skirts made physical labor tricky), and consistent with Victorian ideals of respectable womanhood, the hoopskirt hid the body. No doubt bondwomen’s skirts were smaller than their owners’, whose skirts could measure up to five feet in diameter. Nonetheless, Camilla Jackson told her interviewer that hoopskirts “were the fad in those days” among black as well as white women, one that enabled bondwomen to appropriate a symbol of leisure and femininity (and freedom) and denaturalize their slave status. “In dem days de wimen wore hoops. . . . De white folks dun it an’ so did the slave wimen,” Ebenezer Brown said.⁶²

Yet black women’s style did not simply mimic slaveholding women’s fashions. It was enslaved women’s use of accessories that most accentuated their originality. Topping off many women’s outfits were head wraps or hairstyles done just so. Nineteenth-century bondwomen made the head wrap into a unique expressive form. Some women wore their favorite head wraps to outlaw parties, and many others removed the wrap to display the hairstyles—cornrows, plaits, and straightened

⁶¹ Perdue et al., eds., *Weevils in the Wheat*, 294.

⁶² Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, XVII, 306 (Salena Taswell); Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill and London, 1996), 223; Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, XII, Pt. 2, p. 297 (Camilla Jackson); Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, supp. ser. 1, VI, 249 (Ebenezer Brown). Robert Shepherd similarly said, “De white ladies had nice silk dresses to wear to church. Slave ’omans had new calico dresses what dey wore wid hoopskirts dey made out of grapevines.” Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, XIII, Pt. 3, p. 253.

hair—they had prepared. Women could straighten or relax their curls by wrapping sections of their hair in string, twine, or bits of cloth, then covering it during the week to hide the wrappings and to keep their hair clean and protected from the sun. On special occasions such women removed the head wrap and the strings, and their hair fell down straightened or in looser curls. Although accessories were more difficult to obtain, they were not overlooked. Some women made straw hats from “wheat straw which was dried out.” They also made buttons and ornaments for their clothing out of “li’l round pieces of gourds” covered with cloth and from “cows and rams horns.”⁶³

Shoes posed a special problem for women engaged in the work of refashioning their bodily identities. Many bondpeople wore no shoes at all during the warm months and received wooden brogans against the cold only once a year. On some farms women received footwear even more infrequently. Perhaps because even their agricultural labor was denigrated as “women’s work” and therefore considered easier work, some women received no shoes at all. W. L. Bost was appalled at the hardships women faced, especially their inadequate dress in cold weather: “They never had enough clothes on to keep a cat warm. The women never wore anything but a thin dress and a petticoat and one underwear. I’ve seen the ice balls hangin’ on to the bottom of their dresses as they ran along, jes like sheep in a pasture ’fore they are sheared. They never wore shoes.”⁶⁴

Women’s creation and appropriation of cloth and clothing helped them to express their personalities and their senses of style, but their uses of clothing also raised material issues. Women’s alternative uses of dress laid claim to the product of their labor: they seized the cotton that they had raised and harvested, and they used it for their own purposes. “How I get ’em?” Nancy Williams seemed pleased with her interviewer’s question and eager to tell of her ingenuity. Perhaps exaggerating, Williams said she had “plenty” of clothes during her life in bondage, though not due to any generosity from her owner. In addition to dyeing the plain cloth she was allotted, Williams reappropriated what she needed. Williams, for example, “[h]ad done stole de paint” to

⁶³ Shane White and Graham White, “Slave Hair and African American Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” *Journal of Southern History*, 61 (February 1995), 70–71; Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, supp. ser. 1, XI, 57 (first quotation); Foster, “*New Raiments of Self*”, 115, 252 (second and third quotations).

⁶⁴ See the clothing distribution lists, 1802, in Jane Frances Walker Page, *Commonplace Book* (VHS); “List of negroes who received clothes,” April 1846, November 1846, Vol. VI, George J. Kollock Plantation Journals #407 (SHC); Foster, “*New Raiments of Self*”, 243–44; and Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, XIV, 139 (W. L. Bost).

make yellow shoes to go with a yellow dress she wore to an illicit dance.⁶⁵

Similarly, Mary Wyatt's Virginia owner had a dress that Wyatt adored. "Lawdy, I used to take dat dress when she warn't nowhere roun' an' hole it up against me an' 'magine myself wearin' it." One Christmas season Wyatt decided to wear the dress to a plantation frolic. "[D]e debbil got in me good," she admitted. "Got dat gown out de house 'neath my petticoat tied rounst me an' wore it to de dance." Donning the fancy dress of her mistress, Wyatt shed the most outward markers of her slave status and adopted instead a symbol of freedom. Like other women who reappropriated their owners' clothing, when Mary Wyatt stole her owner's dress she committed not only a symbolic transgression of place, by "'magin[ing]" herself in a dress that was made of a design and material reserved for the free white women who could afford it, but also an act of material consequence. She reclaimed the product of her own labor. Women like her had picked the cotton, processed it, and made it into a dress; the institution of slavery made the dress her owner's, but Mary Wyatt made it hers. In Wyatt's case the act of reappropriation was brief. She returned the dress, putting it "back in place de nex' day." But even as the terror that gripped her while she stole and wore the dress indicates the power of her owners, her act also reveals the strength of her commitment to wearing the dress and suggests something of its importance to Wyatt.⁶⁶

Bondwomen took tremendous risks in procuring and wearing fancy dress to plantation frolics and outlawed slave parties, and the potential extent of this personal endangerment is also a measure of the significance of the otherwise seemingly trivial concerns of dress and style. By dressing up to go to outlaw parties, bondwomen flagrantly violated the somatics of plantation social hierarchy as well as plantation boundaries of space and time. Their fancy dress heightened their risk because their conspicuousness exposed all of them (especially household bondwomen) to detection. The degree of danger involved in dressing up and running away for an evening and women's willingness to take the chance suggest just how urgent it was to some to extricate themselves from their proper places. Frances Miller, a slaveholding woman, encountered such determination as she endeavored to impose a "system

⁶⁵ Perdue et al., eds., *Weevils in the Wheat*, 316. For more on women's use of clothing to exhibit their "individuality," see Hunt, "Struggle to Achieve Individual Expression through Clothing and Adornment," 227–40.

⁶⁶ Perdue et al., eds., *Weevils in the Wheat*, 333.

of management” within her Virginia household. She rose at 4:30 every morning, in advance of her bondpeople, to wake them and prod them to work, not at all shying away from physical violence when their “insubordination” proved too much for her. Miller dedicated herself, in what she described as a “herculean” manner, to “always righting things up.” Thanks to the “open rebellion, impudence and unfaithfulness of domestics,” things seemed “never righted” in her household.⁶⁷

Among the most egregious acts of “unfaithfulness” and “insubordination” that Miller witnessed in her household was the determination of her unruly bondwoman, Rose, to sneak away at night to a party. On her way to bed one night, Miller encountered Rose on her way out of the house, “dressed up as I supposed for a night’s jaunt.” Caught, Rose thought on her feet and, thrusting the candle that she held to light her passage toward Miller, asked Miller to carry it back for her. Miller had been hardened by Rose’s long history of disobedience, however, and was not distracted from the issue at hand. When Miller sarcastically “asked her why she did not do it herself,” Rose claimed that “she was going to wash.” Rose’s explanation for still being awake and heading out, when, according to the late hour, she ought to have been in bed in her room, was not convincing. Miller could tell by the way Rose was “dressed so spry” that she was not at all going to wash and so “did not believe her.” Instead, she reminded Rose of her curfew and of where she ought to be, telling her “it was bedtime and she must go directly upstairs.” Rose “refused” and remained determined to go out to “wash.” Rose’s plans were thwarted only after Miller “shut the door and locked it.” With no key Rose had no way out. Angered that she would now miss the party, Rose insulted Miller, telling her “that I was the most contrary old thing that she ever saw.”⁶⁸

As punishment for attempting to disobey the household’s boundaries of space and time, as well as for her effrontery, Miller promised to flog Rose, prompting Rose to assert that she “would not submit to any such thing and that she would go to the woods first.” Rose, however, did not carry out her threat. Perhaps because she was so disappointed about having been prevented from going out, Rose “yielded with less difficulty than usual” to the bondman William’s “switches.” Miller succeeded in stopping Rose from leaving the household, but the

⁶⁷ Frances (Scott) Miller diary, July 3, 1858 (first, second, third, and fifth quotations), and July 5, 1858 (fourth and sixth quotations), in Section 10, Armistead, Blanton, and Wallace Family Papers (VHS).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, February 7, 1857.

whole incident left Miller “sorely grieved—sorely.” She was frustrated “that the necessity had existed” to whip Rose. Rose’s transgression of place mandated, to Miller’s mind, the deployment of violence, which contradicted Miller’s ideal of a mastery so effective as not to warrant its explicit use in the first place.⁶⁹

Black women’s and men’s absentee nightly pleasures, such as sneaking off to parties to stay up late dancing and drinking, compromised slaveholding authority and plantation productivity. Julia Larken noted that her owner “never laked for nobody to be late in de mornin’,” presumably because of the disorder and the inefficiency that tardiness caused. Nonetheless, lateness and fatigue were not unusual. When enslaved people stayed up late into the night worshipping, for example, they would be “sho tired” the next day. Charlie Tye Smith recalled that, no matter how late they had been up the night before, bondpeople “had better turn out at four o’clock when ole Marse blowed the horn!” They dragged themselves through the motions of their chores all morning and at lunchtime collapsed in the field. Those who had not attended the religious meeting looked upon a field “strowed with Niggers asleep in the cotton rows” until the midday break ended, and they all resumed work.⁷⁰

And so it was after illicit parties. Jefferson Franklin Henry remembered how other bondpeople, but not he, “would go off to dances and stay out all night; it would be wuk time when they got back” These revelers valiantly “tried to keep right on gwine,” but they were worn out; “the Good Lord soon cut ’em down.” These mornings-after did not inhibit future parties, however, nor did the Christian objections of other blacks make an impact: “You couldn’t talk to folks that tried to git by with things lak that,” Henry regretted. “[T]hey warn’t gwine to do no diffunt, nohow.”⁷¹

An extraordinary document survives that articulates for us not the “success” of slave resistance using the body but, given the extent to which the body was a point of conflict between slaves and their own-

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, XIII, Pt. 3, pp. 39 (Julia Larken), 276 (Charlie Tye Smith).

⁷¹ Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, XII, Pt. 2, pp. 188–89. Fatigue, and its effects on plantation production, was a problem after paternalist frolics as well. Some slaveholders accounted for exhaustion and allowed some time the day following frolics for naps. For example, Addie Vinson remembered how after a dance given by her owner, “Niggers dat had done danced half de night would be so sleepy when de bugle sounded dey wouldn’t have time to cook breakfast. Den ’bout de middle of de mawnin’ dey would complain ’bout bein’ so weak and hongry dat de overseer would fetch ’em in and have ’em fed. He let ’em rest ’bout a hour and a half; den he marched ’em back to de field and wuked ’em ’til slap black dark.” Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, XIII, Pt. 4, p. 109.

ers, what meanings the latter group ascribed to that conflict. In the mid-1840s slaveholders in the Edgefield and Barnwell Districts of South Carolina formed the Savannah River Anti-Slave Traffick Association to put a stop to disorderly-house owners' practice of selling alcohol to bondpeople and published their regulations. Slave drinking, and the theft and black marketing that bondpeople engaged in to obtain liquor and other goods from obliging non-elite whites, resulted in what the Savannah River group deemed "very considerable losses." Bondwomen and men—like association member James Henry Hammond's own Urana—appropriated property from slave owners by breaking into "dwelling houses, barns, stables, smoke houses, [etc.]" with "false keys which abound among our negroes," or by "pick[ing] with instruments at which they have become very skilful" at crafting and using. Moreover, the neighbors complained that their crops were also vulnerable to appropriation: "Not content with plundering from Barns, our standing crops are beginning to suffer depredation." Thanks to these various activities, the Savannah River neighbors thought they had noticed their profits decline. "Often when a Farmer has expected to sell largely, he finds himself compelled to use the most stringent economy to make his provisions meet his own wants, and sometimes has actually to buy."⁷²

Slaves' trading, stealing, and drinking were not the only "evils" worrying these South Carolina planters. Equally vexatious was the practice of "prowling" off to "night meetings." Because of the "too great negligence of slave owners in maintaining wholesome discipline," every night, or so it seemed, bondpeople could be found sneaking "abroad to night meetings." The association claimed that "hundreds of negroes it may be said without exaggeration are every night, and at all hours of the night, prowling about the country," stealing, trading, drinking, and meeting, almost certainly for secular affairs.⁷³

The association weighed heavily the financial loss its members believed that they incurred when enslaved people were too hungover and tired to work well. "The negroes themselves are seriously impaired in physical qualities," it noted. The association's regulations further detailed that "their nightly expeditions are followed by days of languor."

⁷² *Preamble and Regulations of the Savannah River Anti-Slave Traffick Association* (adopted November 21, 1846), 3 (first quotation), 4 (subsequent quotations). For Hammond's complaints about drinking and theft among the enslaved population at Silver Bluff, see James Henry Hammond, plantation records for Silver Bluff, October 16, 1835 (South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, S.C.), on microfilm in Kenneth M. Stampp, ed., *Records of Ante-Bellum Southern Plantations from the Revolution through the Civil War*, ser. A, pt. 1, reel 1.

⁷³ *Preamble and Regulations of the Savannah River Anti-Slave Traffick Association*, 3 (first and fourth quotations), 4 (second and sixth quotations), 5, 8 (third and fifth quotations).

Seeing their “owners, and especially their overseers, as unjust and unfeeling oppressors,” bondpeople, it seemed to these South Carolinians, responded with insubordination and work characterized by “sullenness [and] discontent.”⁷⁴

The Savannah River neighbors were mobilized to action by what they saw as a second pernicious effect of black nightly “prowling.” In addition to the damage nightly pleasures had on productivity and the theft associated with such parties, association members complained of the resulting corrosion of slaveholding mastery. Black “minds are fatally corrupted” by these nighttime activities, these South Carolinians believed. In the revisionist history that the association wrote, bondpeople were “beginning to” dissent from the paternalist contract that supposedly governed planters’ estates. “Formerly Slaves were essentially members of the family to which they belonged, and a reciprocal interest and attachment existing between them, their relations were simple, agreeable, easily maintained, and mutually beneficial,” the association contended. It seemed that the freedom bondpeople tasted at night compromised their willingness to be deferential and obedient during the day. The association complained of the “difficulty in managing” the bondpeople since night activity appeared to encourage many bondpeople to see their “Masters” as their “natural enemies.” This perspective facilitated more disorderly behavior, and the members of the Savannah River organization were forced to admit to one another that they were having trouble “preserving proper subordination of our slaves.”⁷⁵

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 3 (fourth quotation), 5 (first, second, and third quotations). Slaveholders’ fears about the effects of slave drinking were not strictly racial in nature; elites attempted to curb poor-white drinking as well. Many antebellum Americans believed that regular or excessive drinking impinged upon a person’s productivity and stimulated flashes of anger. One newspaper editorialist, for example, opined that “in proportion as men become drunkards, they cease to be useful to themselves, to their families, or to society. . . . When a common laborer becomes a drunkard, his family is soon reduced to the utmost need. The more he drinks the less he works, and the greater are his expenditures.” Furthermore, the journalist warned, “An early effect of habitual drinking . . . is IRASCIBILITY OF TEMPER.” Natchez (Miss.) *Southern Galaxy*, July 17, 1828, p. 1. There were, nonetheless, racial aspects to slaveholders’ extreme concern regarding slave drinking. Decreased productivity in a working white man only indirectly cost others; the worker “ceas[ed] to be useful” to “society” generally. But an enslaved person’s decreased productivity directly cost her or his owner. Moreover, alcohol, when imbibed by a black body, was widely believed to unleash black impulses—that is, innate African savagery and violence—otherwise repressed under slavery’s ostensible civilizing influence. Denise Herd, “The Paradox of Temperance: Blacks and the Alcohol Question in Nineteenth-Century America,” in Susanna Barrows and Robin Room, eds., *Drinking: Behavior and Belief in Modern History* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1991), 354–75.

⁷⁵ *Preamble and Regulations of the Savannah River Anti-Slave Traffick Association*, 4 (first quotation), 5 (second quotation), 3 (subsequent quotations). Everywhere in the slave South that blacks traded for and drank alcohol, slaveholders worried, as the Savannah River neighbors did,

The apocalyptic end was clear to the Savannah River residents: in alarmist tones they predicted the end of slavery as they knew it if such unruliness continued. Reappropriating the “fruits of their own labors,” working only with “sullenness [and] discontent,” and skeptical of the authority of their masters, bondpeople in their neighborhood were creating “[s]uch a state of things [that] must speedily put an end to agriculture or to negro slavery.” Engaging in these small, outlawed activities, the association argued, the “negro ceases to be a moral being, holding a position in the framework of society, and becomes a serpent gnawing at its vitals or a demon ready with knife and torch to demolish its foundations.”⁷⁶

Drinking and dancing at night rather than resting for the next day’s work could not and did not bring down the house of slavery. Nonetheless, the histrionics of the Savannah River Anti-Slave Traffick Association are more than amusing; they are revealing. When engaged in these activities, enslaved people ceased, their owners thought, to hold a proper “position in the framework of society” because they disregarded slaveholders’ control over their bodies. Stealing time and space for themselves and for members of their communities, those who attended secular parties acted on the assumption that their bodies were more than inherently and solely implements of agricultural production. While many planters desired and struggled for a smooth-running, paternalistic machine, some bondpeople created, among other things, a gendered culture of pleasure that “gnawed” at the fundamentals—the “vitals”—of slaveholding schemes for domination of the black body, a body that slaveholders had (ideally) located in a particular “position in the framework of society.”

about the integrity of their property rights and the stability of slave “subordination.” Kentucky’s Supreme Court tellingly worried in 1845 that trading liquor to bondpeople would “tempt them to petty larcenies, by way of procuring the means necessary to buy.” Equally important, access to alcohol threatened to “lead them to dissipation, insubordination and vice, and obstruct the good government, well being and harmony of society.” Many white southerners, even those in the cities, would have concurred with the Savannah River Anti-Slave Traffick Association that black marketing and drinking gave bondpeople ideas inappropriate to their station and inspired behavior threatening to those who sought to maintain black “subordination.” For example, in 1846 one Charleston jury pronounced that “the unrestrained intercourse and indulgence of familiarities between the black and white . . . are destructive of the respect and subserviency which our laws recognize as due from the one to the other and which form an essential feature in our institutions.” Just a few years later, in 1851, another Charleston jury argued that slave liquor-trafficking brought “the negro slave in such familiar contact with the white man, as to . . . invite the assertion of equality, or draw from him exhibitions of presumption and insubordination.” *Smith v. Commonwealth*, 6 B. Mon. (Ky.) 22 (September 1845); Charleston juries quoted in Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities: The South, 1820–1860* (New York and Oxford, 1964), 157.

⁷⁶ *Preamble and Regulations of the Savannah River Anti-Slave Traffick Association*, 3 (second quotation), 4 (third quotation), 5 (first and fourth quotations).

In a context where control and degradation of the black body were essential to the creation of slave-owning mastery—symbolically, socially, and materially—bondwomen's and men's nighttime pleasures insulted slaveholders' feelings of authority. Mastery demanded respect for spatial and temporal boundaries, but bondpeople sometimes transgressed these borders and forged spaces for themselves. While slave-owners' drive for production required rested slave bodies, bondpeople periodically reserved their energies for the night and exhausted themselves at play. Perhaps most important of all, enslaved women and men struggled against planters' inclination to confine them, in order to create the space and time to celebrate and enjoy their bodies as important personal and political entities in the plantation South.