

For My Children's Sake:
Enslaved Women and the Idea of Home in Nineteenth-Century Tennessee

By
Halee Robinson

Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
Department of History of Vanderbilt University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For Honors in History

April 2019

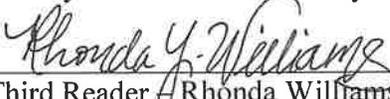
On the basis of this thesis defended by the candidate on May 1, 2019
we, the undersigned, recommend that the candidate be awarded Highest honors
in History.



Director of Honors – Arleen Tuchman



Faculty Adviser – Brandon Byrd



Third Reader – Rhonda Williams

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*To my grandmothers and mother—
Thank you for showing me what home means.*

*To all of the Black women who came before me—
Thank you for the worlds you imagined and created.*

“The world is in this room.
This here’s all there is and all there needs to be.”
—Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

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Author's Note
On Violence

“We cannot redeem or rescue them, but we can reconsider their pain.”
—Marisa Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive*

Violence was fundamental to the institution of slavery and the everyday lives of enslaved people. Because of this, many of the sources that I use in this thesis are inherently violent. From enslaved people's emotional first-hand narratives to impersonal deed books of sale records, the violence of slavery was everywhere I looked. These sources show the full range of the violence and trauma that these women endured in the most intimate ways in a space that they sometimes (and sometimes did not) call home. On an emotional level, I struggled with these primary sources intimately. I cannot count the amount of times I sat in the library and cried as I read or wrote. Most days, I kept reading and writing; I thought that it was my duty as a Black woman to record their experiences in a compassionate way. Sometimes, however, I had to walk away. I felt intimately connected to the enslaved women I studied—their pain, terror, resistance, and strength.

In addition to how I felt about these sources, I struggled with how I should represent the violence. I worried about inflicting epistemic violence, the violence of knowledge production, on the enslaved and free(d) women I wrote about. Through reproducing the violence of the archive, epistemic violence can lead to reproducing the lived subjugation and violence historical actors experienced. I did not want to present them mutilated, disfigured, violated, or objectified. Like other historians, I recognized that doing so would cause further harm to the Black women I wrote about.

With this in mind, I have tried my best to avoid the possibility of inflicting any sort of epistemic violence on these historical actors.¹ Using Marisa Fuentes' work, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive*, as a model, I centered Black women's experiences in my storytelling and omitted some of the most violent aspects of the sources. When possible, I wrote about Black women's experiences through their eyes. I considered *their* pain, trauma, and heartache. I did not intricately describe the violence enslavers inflicted on enslaved people or linger on Black women's scars and bodies. Instead, I focused on their humanity. When Black women appeared in archival fragments, however, this became more difficult. How do I write about Black women in a considerate way when all I had was the violence they endured? If I am completely honest, I still do not think I know the answer to that question. When I found these archival fragments, I tried my best to capture Black women's humanity in other ways—their names, relationships, screams of pain. Marisa Fuentes tells us (i.e. historians) that we must find the breaks in the violence, “in the rupture within the moment of absolute terror.” There, we find Black women's pain, agency, and, importantly, humanity.

I cannot give these women justice. I cannot relieve their pain. But through researching and writing this thesis, I have tried to elevate these women's voices and bear witness to their complexity and humanity. I have attempted to find the “breaks.” I hope that this is enough.

¹ For scholarship on how epistemic violence leads to the continued subjugation of subaltern historical subjects see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory*, ed. Laura Chrisman et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993): 66-111. See also Ashley Farmer, “In Search of the Black Women's History Archive,” *Modern American History* 1, no. 2 (July 2018): 289-293. doi:10.1017/mah.2018.4; Marisa Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016): 5-7; Halee Robinson, “Black Women's Voices and the Archive,” *Black Perspectives*, November 15, 2017, <https://www.aaihs.org/black-womens-voices-and-the-archive>.

Introduction

“The dream of my life is not yet realized,” Harriet Jacobs declared in her 1861 narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.¹ After liberating herself from slavery and ensuring the freedom of her children, she authored a narrative about her experiences and newfound freedom. Jacobs cherished her freedom, but she also noted its shortcomings. “I do not sit with my children in a home of my own,” she told her readers. “I still long for a hearthstone of my own, however humble. I wish it for my children’s sake far more than my own.”² At the time, Jacobs lived with her employer, and her children were engaged in various jobs in the North, which often left them separated from each other. She did not possess the means to support her family, so she struggled to establish the home she desired. While Jacobs’ words showed the insecurities of freedom, they also revealed its possibilities. Written in the last pages of her narrative, Jacobs revealed to her readers one of the most important possibilities of freedom—building a home. She associated home with reuniting her family, creating a safe place, and building a future for her children. Thus, Jacobs understood home as more than a physical place. It was a refuge, an aspiration, and a way to realize her understanding of freedom.

When the Civil War ended in 1865, recently freed women took every opportunity to realize their newly found freedom. Much like Jacobs, they demanded what the historian Thavolia Glymph describes as “the right to build their families and households according to their own light.”³ They negotiated work contracts, reunited families, distanced themselves from their

¹ Harriet Jacobs, 1861, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself, Documenting the American South*, University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1998, 302, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/jacobs/jacobs.html>.

² *Ibid.*, 302-303.

³ Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 203.

former enslavers and, importantly, built “free homes” for themselves and their families.⁴ For many formerly enslaved women, building free homes meant securing a safe place for themselves and their children, ensuring bodily autonomy, and creating a sense of privacy—qualities that were not possible under the confines of slavery.

Much of the historical scholarship on Black women’s households in the nineteenth century focuses on the post-emancipation period between 1865 and 1900.⁵ During those decades, most Black women worked as domestic workers in white people’s households, and in rural areas, formerly enslaved women worked as agricultural laborers. Yet although freed women felt compelled to take any available work due to economic necessity, especially mothers, many still actively negotiated the terms of their labor with their employers, and they began to spend more time in their households. Other freed women worked inside their households for wages as laundresses and seamstresses, which allowed them to further distance themselves from white people’s households. Historians have explored Black women’s households as a site where Black women negotiated and determined the promises of freedom, especially through their labors, communities, and families. They have revealed how the household became a key site where Black women worked and redefined the value of their labor. In the post-emancipation period, Black women had more power and freedom to determine when they worked inside of their households.⁶

In addition to Black women’s labor, historians have focused on the importance of the family in understanding how Black women built free homes in the post-emancipation period.

⁴ Ibid., 227.

⁵ For scholarship on enslaved women’s households in the post-emancipation period see Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*; Tera W. Hunter, *To ‘Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 2009).

⁶ Hunter, *To ‘Joy My Freedom*; Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*; White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*

Realizing the promises of freedom also meant reconstructing and reuniting Black families together in their households.⁷ Labor and family tied together Black women's strong desire for self-determination in the post-emancipation era, an important characteristic of the Black households.⁸ While thinking about freed women's labor for wages is essential to understanding Black households, this focus yields little insight into Black women's interior lives—their emotions and ideas.

While a large body of scholarship on Black people's households in the post-emancipation period exists, historians have paid little attention to Black homes during the antebellum era (1820-1860). This thesis seeks to fill this gap. The rapid expansion of slavery and the domestic slave trade separated enslaved families at unprecedented rates, and, as a consequence, slavery and the slave trade disrupted enslaved families and communities. The national demand for cotton during the antebellum era led to increased forced movement of enslaved people to meet these agricultural needs. Between 1820 and 1860, 60 to 70 percent of migrations of enslaved people were a consequence of the domestic slave trade. This would have resulted in many families and communities being separated throughout this period. For example, in the Upper South, one-third of enslaved children experienced family separation.⁹

Because of the rise of the domestic slave trade and the plantation regime white people created, this period of time immensely shaped the personal, intimate lives and spaces of enslaved women and how they understood them. This was true across the South. Yet despite the large enslaved population in Tennessee and the richness of available sources, few studies on slavery in

⁷ Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 58

⁸ Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 210; Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 58; Heather Andrea Williams, *Help Me to Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 172-188.

⁹ Walter Johnson, *Soul By Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 11, 225; Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 5. Williams, *Help Me To Find My People*, 25.

this state exist. Thus, focusing on Tennessee allows me not only to work with the largely unexplored Fisk University slave narratives, but also to provide an analysis of how the geographic location, laws, and social customs of one state affected the homes of its enslaved population.

This thesis explores enslaved women's homes in antebellum Tennessee, which is an essential contribution to understandings of freed women's households in the post-emancipation period. It argues that enslaved women had already formulated ideas of the home as an intimate, safe, and private place for themselves and their families. They made these intellectual moves toward creating a home, despite laws, enslavers, and plantation rules which all thwarted enslaved women's attempts at realizing their ideals. When the Civil War ended, formerly enslaved women's imaginings and conceptions of home endured. As they explored their freedom, freed women took steps toward building the homes they had imagined during slavery.

I consider the home as a space and an idea—a possibility that enslaved women strived for. I center the home in conversations not only about resistance, but also about womanhood, motherhood, and freedom. Enslaved women's homes sat at the nexus of slavery and freedom—a site where they imagined the possibilities of freedom despite their enslavement. Even as I consider Black women's homes in the immediate post-emancipation period (1865-1875), I examine how these women's actions further illustrate how they understood their homes in slavery. After emancipation, enslaved women realized the dreams of slavery by building homes for themselves and their families.

In building my argument, I draw on the work of Stephanie Camp, who analyzes how enslaved women participated in everyday resistance. Camp centers enslaved women in discussions of resistance and suggests that the slave quarters were sites of resistance for them.

She explores how two enslaved women used abolitionist print material to create what she calls a “rival geography” in these women’s cabins.¹⁰ Camp’s theoretical framework for enslaved women’s use of space is useful for portraying the quarters as a contested space. Thus, it is essential to the understandings of enslaved women’s interior lives.

Camp’s focus on the slave quarters is a small part in a broader conversation about resistance. While Camp provides an important framework in which to think about the home and its meanings, she does not explore definitions of the home or its meanings to enslaved women. Her conversation on the quarters and resistance rests primarily on the existence of abolitionist material and its implication for enslaved women’s rethinking of space. It does not, however, reflect on the home’s emotional attachments or further uses as intellectual space.

Building on Camp’s theoretical ideas about enslaved people’s experiences of plantation space and the home as a site of resistance, I examine the many ways enslaved women understood their homes in emotional and intellectual terms. I show that they used these spaces to develop ideas on womanhood and freedom, which sometimes could also come across as acts of resistance. I explore the emotional attachments to home by examining the relationships among family members, especially between mothers and children, and communities. Finally, I tie resistance and emotional attachments together through the idea enslaved mothers used the home as a significant site to teach their children about various ideas regarding womanhood, resistance, and freedom. Thus, I employ a definition of home that critically considers the language enslaved women used and the meanings they associated with home to analyze enslaved women’s interior lives.

¹⁰ My use of Camp’s theories to describe the spatial tension of the slave quarters will be analyzed more fully in chapter two. Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 93-116.

Contrary to other scholars of slavery, this thesis reflects on the multiple meanings of the word home. Many scholars who have worked on Black women's households have used household, slave quarters, and home interchangeably. In doing this, historians reduce home to a physical place without considering the complexities of what occurred inside or the hopes and aspirations that the home elicited. To avoid this, I do not use the terms interchangeably, but rather employ home in specific instances to evoke the emotional ties and intellectual labor enslaved women believed essential to their homes. To uncover its significance to enslaved women and their understandings of it, I examine the potential distinctions and relationship between a household or the slave quarters and the home. The latter held the possibilities of privacy, intimacy, emotional attachment, intellectual labor, and freedom. Therefore, the language that historians use to analyze enslaved women's homes must also consider these meanings.

Black women's fragmented presence in the archive makes studying histories of slavery, especially their homes, laborious and difficult. Because of these difficulties, limited scholarship on enslaved women's homes currently exists. When enslaved women appear in the historical record, they often appear distorted, marginalized, brutalized, and unnamed. Saidiya Hartman theorizes an archetypal Black Venus, an anonymous Black woman who appears fragmented and incomplete in the historical record: "no one remembered her name or recorded the thing she said, or observed that she refused to say anything at all."¹¹ Similarly, enslaved and free(d) women's homes were everywhere and nowhere. While homes were central to enslaved women's lives, they were often pushed to the periphery or marginalized in historical documents. Thus, to get at the meaning of the home, I critically examine historical documents, reading, as Ashley Farmer

¹¹ Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 2, <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed January 1, 2019).

and Marisa Fuentes suggest, against and along the bias grain.¹² I try to find Black women's homes and voices in documents that would rather ignore or obscure them.

When possible, I have centered sources where Black women spoke about their own homes, although because enslaved women were largely illiterate, they left few written records. Formerly enslaved men, for example, wrote the eight existing published narratives about personal experiences during slavery in Tennessee.¹³ Thus, to understand enslaved women's experiences in their own words, I make extensive use of interviews with formerly enslaved women produced by the Works Progress Administration and Fisk University.

Between 1936 and 1938, federal WPA employees interviewed formerly enslaved people from all former slave states and produced an expansive collection of ex-slave narratives. WPA employees completed the interviews later than the Fisk narratives, but still managed to interview twenty-six formerly enslaved people. Most of the interviewers were white, which influenced how formerly enslaved people responded to interview questions.¹⁴ John Blassingame identified that the interviewer's race resulted in a "high premium placed on giving the 'right' answers," which resulted in some formerly enslaved people giving answers that romanticized slavery and the Old

¹² I utilize what Fuentes calls "reading along the bias grain," which "...expands the legibility of these archival documents to accentuate the figures of enslaved women present in the society who are a spectral influence on the lives of white and black men and women." Ashley Farmer, "In Search of the Black Women's History Archive," *Modern American History* (2018): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2018.4> (accessed March 13, 2018). Marisa Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 78.

¹³ Sterling N. Brown, Pharaoh Jackson Chesney, James W. Holley, Thomas James, Edmond Kelley, J.W. Loguen, Nat Love, and John McCline authored the known Tennessee narratives. "North American Slave Narratives," *Documenting the American South*, University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, accessed February 21, 2019, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/chronautobio.html>.

¹⁴ While the race of Tennessee interviewers was not recorded, white interviewers outnumbered Black interviewers in eight states. Out of the twenty-nine interviewers with a recorded race, only seven of them were Black. "Appendix II: Race of Interviewers," *Library of Congress*, accessed February 21, 2019, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/articles-and-essays/introduction-to-the-wpa-slave-narratives/appendix-race-of-interviewers>.

South.¹⁵ Formerly enslaved people told interviewers the answers they wanted to hear, and this lessened the severity of their experiences in the narratives. However, this also allowed formerly enslaved people to shield more private parts of their lives. Historian Stephanie J. Shaw also concluded that impoverished formerly enslaved people's living conditions during the Great Depression influenced their responses to questions asked by interviewers.¹⁶ Interviewed Black women were reticent to share their stories because they wanted to preserve some privacy in their lives. Black women forged what Darlene Clark Hine has called a culture of dissemblance, which "created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors."¹⁷ In the WPA narratives, Black women would have further hidden and shrouded their interior lives for their own protection. Enslaved women's homes were some of their most intimate spaces, and they probably attempted to hide some of the most personal aspects and activities of their lives in their homes and not share them with interviewers.

While formerly enslaved people likely were not as open with WPA interviewers, Black interviewees may have been more willing to share their stories with Ophelia Settle Egypt. Egypt, a researcher at Fisk University, completed the Fisk narratives in 1929. As a Black sociologist, Egypt assisted in many studies of Black people's experiences, including the Tuskegee syphilis

¹⁵ John W. Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems," *The Journal of Southern History* 41, no. 4 (Nov. 1975): 482, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2205559> (accessed February 18, 2019).

¹⁶ Shaw argues that extreme hunger, white people's assistance to formerly enslaved people in the post-emancipation era, and the interviewees' age during slavery contributed to many freed people glossing over the realities of slavery during the WPA narratives. Stephanie J. Shaw, "Using the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives to Study the Impact of the Great Depression," *The Journal of Southern History* 69, no. 3 (August 2003): 623-658.

¹⁷ Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," *Signs* 14, no. 4 (Summer 1989): 912. When Black women participated in this culture of dissemblance, they did so out of the necessity of mental, emotional, and physical self-preservation. While Hine specifically uses dissemblance to describe the secrecy of the interiority of Black women's lives in relation to the realities of sexual violence, it also applies to other intimate aspects of enslaved women's lives. The culture of dissemblance also became a way to create a world outside the intentions of white people. It allowed enslaved women to have a secret, personal life of their own in a way that allowed them to experience and develop their womanhood.

study and the Fisk interviews. Her work was completed in the late 1920s and produced 100 interviews with formerly enslaved people in Tennessee. Because of Egypt's identity as a Black woman, formerly enslaved people likely answered her questions more truthfully and openly. Additionally, Egypt's grandparents had been enslaved, which could have created a connection between Egypt and those she interviewed.¹⁸ This is apparent while reading the narratives; Formerly enslaved people told candid and raw stories about the horrors and tragedies of slavery and did not hold back.

While formerly enslaved people were more open in the Fisk interviews, the problem of memory plagues both sets of narratives. The interviews occurred approximately sixty to seventy years after emancipation, and all of the formerly enslaved people interviewed were children during slavery. Because of this, some historians, like Donna J. Spindel, have questioned "the reliability of long-term memory" in the narratives.¹⁹ Spindel does not call for historians to stop using the narratives, but claims "that the research into memory provides only a weak empirical basis for trusting the interviews," especially in regards to enslaved people's everyday experiences.²⁰

While Spindel offers an important critique, the narratives are essential to understanding enslaved people's experiences. As Thavolia Glymph notes in *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household*, a work that heavily relies on the WPA narratives, these interviews were formerly enslaved people's "last formal opportunity to speak openly about

¹⁸ "Ophelia Settle Egypt – (1903-1984) – Social worker, historian and pioneer in family planning," *VCU Libraries Social Welfare History Project*, Virginia Commonwealth University, accessed April 14, 2019, <https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/eras/great-depression/egypt-ophelia-settle-1903-1984>; Louise L. Stevenson, "The New Woman, Social Science, and the Harlem Renaissance: Ophelia Settle Egypt as Black Professional," *The Journal of Southern History* 77, no. 3 (August 2011): 559.

¹⁹ Donna J. Spindel, "Assessing Memory: Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives Reconsidered," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 27, no. 2 (Autumn 1996): 252, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/205156> (accessed February 18, 2019).

²⁰ Spindel, "Assessing Memory," 260.

slavery.”²¹ To understand how enslaved women understood their experiences in the home, historians must center enslaved people’s voices in studies of slavery. The narratives are the best sources we have for this purpose. Even if formerly enslaved people misremembered or embellished in their interviews, their storytelling provides an important lens to enslaved people’s experiences. As formerly enslaved women told stories about their homes, they may have exaggerated, interjected their contemporary ideals, or imagined things they desperately wanted to believe that were better than their reality. No matter the circumstances, their storytelling reveals enslaved women as intellectuals who thought about their homes as intellectual spaces where they formulated ideas about womanhood and freedom.

To explain how enslaved women understood their homes, I first examine the spatial tensions within the space of the slave quarters. Chapter One describes how the slave quarters were both a part of enslavers’ geography of containment and a site of enslaved women’s rival geography, which are theories developed by Stephanie Camp. While enslavers attempted and often succeeded in restricting enslaved people’s movements and actions within the places they lived, enslaved people resisted their control through everyday actions. In focusing on the spatial tension, this chapter illuminates enslaved women’s intimate experience in the quarters.

In Chapter Two, I consider how the spatial tension of the quarters informed how enslaved women’s roles in reclaiming the slave quarters ultimately shaped their understandings of home as a part of their emotional geography and as an intellectual space.²² As enslaved women created home, they also taught their children important lessons. Enslaved women used these spaces to share their ideas on resistance, freedom, and personhood with their children. Distinct from yet connected to the physical spaces in which they lived, building “the home” was an aspiration

²¹ Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 16.

²² I will define these terms in chapter two.

toward freedom. While enslaved women aspired to free homes, they also created homes in the spaces they inhabited through acts of resistance during slavery. Building a home while enslaved was infused with resistance and claims of agency—control over their bodies, their families, humanity, and the intimate spaces they inhabited. In these spaces, enslaved women formulated ideas about what the home should look like and, in turn, what freedom could be like.

Chapter Three explores how enslaved women (re)built their homes in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. I argue that enslaved women's actions in the immediate post-emancipation period reflected how enslaved women had imagined and understood their home. After emancipation, freed women took steps to reimagine and create their homes in ways that were not possible during slavery, and children were essential to this process. Many enslaved women established their homes in different places, separated themselves from their previous enslavers, and reunited their families. Others, however, continued to live near their previous enslavers and work for them, sometimes under similar mechanisms of control, but still managed to build homes. Therefore, this chapter explores how freed women built homes despite of and in the midst of white control and violence. Furthermore, this chapter explores how Black women explored and realized the promises of freedom through building free homes. In doing this, freed women built a hopeful future for their children.

This thesis offers a glimpse of the most intimate and private parts of enslaved women's lives. By centering the slave quarters and enslaved women's ideas of home the study of slavery and emancipation, this thesis ekes out the complexity of enslaved women's interior lives. When enslaved women built and maintained their homes under the confines of slavery, they not only tried to create an intimate space for themselves and their families, but they also claimed their

personhood. Focusing on the home not only allows me to examine how enslaved women understood freedom, but also how they understood their own world and themselves.

Chapter 1

“We’d hide ‘em in the closets”: Slavery and the Spatial Tension of the Slave Quarters

In 1865, a formerly enslaved woman sat on the witness stand of a Freedmen’s Court and gave testimony against her former enslaver in Nashville, Tennessee. While *The Daily Press and Times* did not name this recently freed woman, her defiant testimony jumps off of the page, demanding attention. During her testimony, she admitted to the court that her former enslaver was the father of her children and demanded that he support them financially.

In requesting this support for her six children, this woman also defiantly revealed how she had experienced the sexual violence perpetrated by her former enslaver. When the interviewer asked how her enslaver “removed” her from her house—took her from her house and raped her for the first time—she detailed her experiences. She told the court that she “was first laid out in a straw stack from one night to the next.”¹ Confirming her experiences, this woman’s mother took the stand, admitting how their enslaver “frequently visited my daughter at my house...[and] often acknowledged to me that he was the father of my daughter’s children.”² When the woman got pregnant, her enslaver forced her to leave the house she shared with her family and move into a free Black man’s house and live there, isolated, for one year. Neither she nor her mother had the power to refuse.

At this man’s house, her enslaver continued to visit her. While she did not detail whether she experienced sexual violence after the birth of her child, it was extremely likely that she did so. These visits likely filled this woman with terror and dread, powerless to resist his advances.

¹ “Miscegenation in Middle Tennessee—Highly Interesting Details of Free Love—Abolitionist Thrown in the Shade,” *Nashville Daily Press and Times*, August 4, 1865, Box 3, Folder 20, Paul Clements Black History Research Collection, Metro Archives, Nashville Public Library, Nashville, Tennessee.

² *Ibid.*

Eventually her owner asked her to give up her child, and recalling what happened, she told the court, “That I refused to do.”³

This unnamed enslaved woman’s experiences reveal how enslavers used the slave quarters as a site to control enslaved people, including the most personal aspects of their lives. Through enslavers’ use of violence, surveillance, and control, the quarters acted as a site where they enacted their domination over enslaved people. In doing this, enslavers made the quarters into a violent and traumatic space. These disruptive and violating acts changed how enslaved women experienced their living quarters because these spaces were deeply intertwined with their trauma and pain.

Yet enslaved women actively resisted this control, which made the quarters contested spaces. They attempted to reclaim the space of the quarters. While the woman who testified at the Freedmen’s Court experienced sexual violence in the quarters, she also intimately interacted with her family there. She lived with her mother and raised her six children in her cabin. Like many enslaved women, she most likely sought and created privacy and intimacy in the place where she lived. By refusing to let her enslaver take away her child, she refused to allow her enslaver to dictate what the quarters would look like for her or the intimate relationships she nurtured.

For enslaved people, the slave quarters were central yet fragile parts of their lives. Essential to family and community life, these houses were among the few physical spaces on plantations that held the possibilities of privacy, refuge, and intimacy. However, they also functioned as spaces filled with pain, violence, and domination. Oftentimes, these states existed simultaneously, inextricably tied to one another. The slave quarters had “twoness,” as Stephanie

³ Ibid.

Camp argues, because they were “spaces of labor reproduction and key instruments in the larger social agenda of containing and exploiting enslaved people. They were also, uneasily, enslaved people’s homes.”⁴ The slave quarters existed in this constant tension between the terror and violence of slavery and the private and intimate experiences of enslaved people.

Geography of Containment

In order to control enslaved people, elite white enslavers people created systems of surveillance and control to monitor the activities and movement of enslaved people. These systems of control were geographies of containment—“principles of restraint” created to govern enslaved people’s location and movement in Southern space.⁵ White people created rules and regulations to control enslaved people’s movement, actions, and time in order to further surveil and reinforce their bondage. Enslavers viewed the enforcement and enslaved people’s adherence to this control as necessary to maintain the order of white supremacy and the institution of slavery.⁶ For enslaved people, on the other hand, enslavers’ geographies of containment reinforced their social place and attempted to control every aspect of their lives.

In Tennessee, like many other slave states, white people used laws, plantation rules, and violence to establish and sustain geographies of containment. These different aspects of geography of containment act on enslaved people’s spaces simultaneously and often reinforced each other. Enslavers used each element of containment to restrict enslaved people’s use of Southern and, specifically, plantation spaces, which shaped enslaved people’s experiences of the physical space of the quarters.

⁴ Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 93-94.

⁵ Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 17.

⁶ Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 27.

Laws dictated enslaved people's movements and actions throughout Southern space in very tangible ways. The Code of Tennessee mandated that enslaved people had to use passes given by their enslavers in order to travel.⁷ If enslaved people were caught without passes by slave patrols, enslavers, or other white people, they were often punished, especially if they were fugitives. In Nashville, when patrols or police caught traveling enslaved people without their owner's permission after seven at night, the authorities whipped them.⁸ While enslaved, Ellis Ken Kannon and her fellow enslaved people "had ter hab a pass" to travel from one plantation to another. When this rule was broken, "ef dey disobeyed dey got a whuppin, en ef dey had a pass widout de Marsters signature dey got a whuppin."⁹ Frankie Goole, an enslaved woman born in Smith County, witnessed paddyrollers punishing enslaved men who were traveling, hearing "screams ob de ones dat wuz bein' whup'd."¹⁰ When Goole talked to her owner about the men, her owner said, "See, dat ez w'at will happen ter you ef'n you try to leave."¹¹ So, not only did these laws control their movement in Southern space, white elites also designed these laws to confine enslaved people to the plantations and farms they lived on.¹²

Tennessee laws did not allow Black people, enslaved or free(d), to gather together unsupervised. In Nashville, when enslaved or free(d) people gathered, they risked receiving punishments by patrols or police.¹³ Laws like this intensified after paranoia regarding rumored enslaved uprisings swept through Tennessee in the 1850s. This panic spread across Tennessee

⁷ "The Slave Policy," *The Nashville Daily Union*, February 17, 1863, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83025718/1863-02-17/ed-1/seq-3/>.

⁸ "Corporation Law. AN ACT to amend an Act, entitled, An Act to regulate Slaves, Free Blacks and Mulattoes within the City of Nashville," *Nashville Daily Gazette*, Box 3, Folder 6, December 20, 1860, Paul Clements Black History Research Collection, Metro Archives, Nashville Public Library, Nashville, Tennessee.

⁹ Ellis Ken Kannon, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 15, Tennessee*, 1936, 38.

¹⁰ Frankie Goole, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project*, 22.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 13.

¹³ "Corporation Law," *Nashville Daily Gazette*, December 20, 1860, Paul Clements Black History Research Collection, Metro Archives.

quickly, so the Nashville City Council adopted stricter slave codes to further control enslaved people in 1856.¹⁴ While no actual enslaved insurrection occurred, the possibility terrified white people. The new codes placed additional restrictions on enslaved and free(d) people's gatherings and movements in Nashville. Specifically, the laws mandated that enslaved people could not gather with other Black people without the explicit permission of their enslavers. The city of Nashville increased police presence to monitor any meeting and the overall activities of enslaved and free(d) Black people, further restricting Black people's ability to move within Nashville.¹⁵ White elites believed that they needed to create and enforce stricter laws, so that they could have greater control over enslaved people and their actions in physical spaces.

On plantations, white enslavers used the physical structure of plantations and established formal and informal rules to enforce their control over enslaved people's use of space. The slave quarters became a central location for enslavers' exertion of spatial power. Within these houses, enslaved people spent time with their families and communities and engaged in personal and private activities. Because the quarters were among the most personal spaces that enslaved people inhabited, enslavers, then, used their cabins to control the most intimate aspects of enslaved people's lives.

At Belle Meade Plantation in Davidson County, William Giles Harding, the owner, placed a bell in the middle of the slave quarters to enforce enslaved people's work schedule. The slave quarters, small two-room cabins facing inward toward a central court, housed the "farm bell." This bell "rang each morning to awaken the hands, each noon to call the hands to dinner,

¹⁴ Bobby Lovett, *The African-American History of Nashville, Tennessee, 1780-1930: Elites and Dilemmas*, (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1999), 40-41.

¹⁵ "Corporation Law," *Nashville Daily Gazette*, December 20, 1860, Paul Clements Black History Research Collection, Metro Archives; "Important Laws. A Compilation of the Laws now in force, relative to Free Persons of Color and Slaves," *Nashville Gazette*, December 20, 1860, Box 3, Folder 6, Paul Clements Black History Research Collection, Metro Archives, Nashville Public Library, Nashville, Tennessee.

and each afternoon to announce the day's work finished."¹⁶ The bell rigidly structured enslaved people's days, not only reminding them of each day's work schedule, but also reinforcing Harding's control over their time. The bell's location in the center of the slave quarters constantly reminded enslaved people of who had control of their labor, time, and movement. Because it dictated their work schedule, it determined when and for how long enslaved people could spend time in the slave quarters.

The physical location of the quarters influenced enslaved people's experiences in their cabins. Depending on the size of the farm or plantation and enslaved people's jobs, they sometimes lived in close proximity to enslavers. At Carnton Plantation in Franklin, Tennessee, at least one slave cabin, which housed domestic workers, was located very close to the main house, while a number of other slave quarters were located further away.¹⁷ At the Hermitage, President Andrew Jackson's plantation, a yard cabin existed approximately ninety feet away from the main house.¹⁸ On smaller farms, such as the Carter House in Franklin, enslaved people lived near their enslavers' houses because of the smaller size of the farm.¹⁹ The location of these slave quarters in relation to the main house must have created a sense of anxiety and pressure for the enslaved people living in them.

Compared to field workers who typically lived further from the main house, the quarters closest to the enslaver's house were under near constant and direct threat of surveillance, sexual violence, and disruption. Enslavers could easily access these quarters simply because of their proximity to the main house. Enslaved people always had to be on guard, which disturbed the

¹⁶ "Belle Meade" Sketches, Box 4, Folder 8, Microfilm Accession Number 842, William Hicks Jackson Papers, 1766-1978, Tennessee State Library and Archives (TSLA).

¹⁷ Carnton Archaeological Report, Carnton Plantation Private Collection, Franklin, Tennessee.

¹⁸ Leslie Cooper and Larry McKee, Mansion Backyard Yard Cabin, The Hermitage, Digital Archaeological Archive of Comparative Slavery, accessed November 15, 2018, <https://www.daacs.org/sites/yard-cabin/#background>.

¹⁹ When visiting the Carter House in Franklin, Tennessee, the slave house, still in its original location, is located very close to the main house.

possibility that the slave quarters could provide a place of refuge. This is not to say that those who lived further away from the main house did not experience surveillance and disruption in the slave quarters. Their distance, however, offered more opportunities to act outside of enslavers' intentions than the quarters closer to the main house. Because domestic workers tended to be women more often than men, enslaved women were more likely to live and work in closer proximity to their white enslavers. Thus, they faced a greater likelihood of surveillance in their cabins.

Enslaved women had gendered experiences of geographies of containment particularly in the slave quarters. While enslaved men experienced more flexible geographies of containment, enslavers rules and enslaved women's responsibilities further restricted their time and mobility. Men were able to move more easily because they were allowed to leave plantations and farms more often than their women counterparts.²⁰ Women traveled away from plantations rarely, and they labored on behalf of their family more consistently than men. While both men and women worked outside of the labor mandated by slaveholders, such as work for their families and communities, the responsibility for housework and family work fell disproportionately on enslaved women. Their labor has been categorized as a "double duty" which explains the extensive work enslaved women did for their owners, families, and communities.²¹

When enslavers created geographies of containment, they threatened and perpetrated gendered violence against enslaved women. Broadly, this violence limited the mobility of all enslaved people and changed their experiences of the space. Despite enslaved people's intentions for the physical spaces they inhabited, enslavers' violence disrupted attempts to make the slave

²⁰ Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 32.

²¹ For additional scholarship on enslaved women's "double duty," see Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 27; Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 27; Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1999), 122-123.

quarters a safe place. In this struggle over this contested space, gender was central to enslavers' use of physical, sexual, and emotional violence.

In Hartsville, Tennessee, an anonymous enslaved woman had just broken a clock in her enslavers house. When her enslaver, Jim Hale, found out, he decided to punish this unnamed enslaved woman. Because this woman broke the clock in the house, she worked as a domestic worker. Domestics were more likely to be women, so this punishment was a form of gendered violence. The enslaved woman's job in the house would have been subject to closer scrutiny and, in turn, more immediate violence. So, while Hale whipped her, her "ole mistress," likely Eliza or Priscilla Hale, played an important role in the violence enslaved women experienced.²² These women likely told Jim Hale about the broken clock, and, then, he dragged her into the yard to beat her. Hale whipped her in the yard of the slave quarters, and as he beat her, she could likely see her cabin nearby. For this act of violence to occur so close to enslaved people's cabins embedded violence in the space. This punishment's close proximity to the physical space of her house (and other enslaved people's) connected the experience of violence to the quarters intimately.

As Hale harmed this unnamed enslaved woman, her parents and siblings were forced to watch. Narrated by this enslaved woman's little brother years later in the Fisk narratives, he noted his feelings of helplessness because "none could come to her rescue."²³ In that moment, this woman's family were paralyzed, forced to watch her violent punishment and unable to help her. This, then, incurred its own kind of violence. Not only did these witnesses have to deal with

²² White women played a large role in the violence committed against enslaved people, especially enslaved women who worked in their enslaver's household. Historian Thavolia Glymph shows that slaveholding white women often delegated the violence to their husbands or overseers in order to maintain the façade of a gentle, nonviolent white womanhood. Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 49.

²³ "Slaves Have No Souls" *Unwritten History of Slavery: Autobiographical Accounts of Negro Ex-Slaves* (Nashville: Fisk University Social Science Institute, 1945), 44.

the emotional and psychological trauma this experience wrought, it also imposed the constant threat of violence on the space of the quarters.

In her work on eighteenth-century urban slavery in Bridgetown, Barbados, historian Marisa Fuentes claims that spectacles of violence (i.e. holding cells and public punishments) created “spatial reminders of the looming violence of slavery” for enslaved and self-emancipated Black people. While slavery in Barbados differed from nineteenth-century slavery in Tennessee, the idea of “spatial reminders” of violence provides a useful conceptual framework for thinking about space, violence, and the quarters in Tennessee.²⁴ When enslaved people had to watch or experience this violence inside or near their houses, it created the sense that the threat of violence seemed nearly constant in these spaces. Thus, this violence reminded enslaved people that the places they lived always held the possibilities of enslavers’ violence and disruption.

Enslaved women’s fear of impending physical and sexual violence in and around their houses shaped their experiences of the space and the relationships with loved ones, especially their children. The Reverend Jermain W. Loguen’s mother, Jane, an enslaved woman in Tennessee, had a sexual relationship with her enslaver, David Logue. In Jermain W. Loguen’s narrative, he called himself the “offspring of brute passion,” which revealed his mother’s experience with sexual violence.²⁵ Jane was often “in the sight and hearing of these vulgar men [her enslavers], and often the subject of their brutal remarks.”²⁶ After David Logue raped Jane and beat her, she feared for her son’s safety. Before she shared what Logue had done to her, Jane

²⁴ Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 21.

²⁵ Jermain Wesley Loguen, *The Rev. J.W. Loguen, as a slave and as a freeman: a narrative of real life, including previously uncollected letters*, ed. Jennifer A. Williamson (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2016), 39.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

feared that telling her son would endanger his safety. When she finally told her son about the violence that she had endured, she exclaimed, “I fear they may whip you as they whip me.”²⁷

While it is unclear where these moments of violence occurred, it is possible that they occurred in the slave quarters. Even if they did not, the threat of this violence entered the slave quarters easily. Jane’s experience changed how she interacted with Jermain, specifically in terms of how she conversed and shared knowledge with her son. This threat of violence would have influenced the way that Jane and other enslaved mothers interacted with their family, especially their children, in the places they lived. The lingering trauma of violence influenced how enslaved women moved throughout their spaces and the ways that they interacted with their children about how to act and feel. Jane’s experiences with her enslaver illustrated the reality of violence within enslaved people’s quarters and revealed the constant threat of violence against enslaved women and their families, which shaped how they understood and experienced the space.

Enslavers use of forced coupling and forced reproduction among enslaved people viscerally brought sexual violence inside the slave cabins. In order to control enslaved women’s reproductive labor, enslavers paired enslaved men and women, forced them to live together, and sanctioned nonconsensual sexual activity among these couples.²⁸ One enslaved woman remembered how enslavers would often “buy a fine girl and then a fine man and just put them together like cattle; they would not stop to marry them.”²⁹ This happened within and between plantations, with slaveholders pairing a “big boy” and “big gal” and making “dem live tergedder.”³⁰ As a young teenager, one enslaved woman described how her enslaver matched her

²⁷ Ibid., 43.

²⁸ Daina Ramey Berry, *Swing the Sickle for the Harvest is Ripe: Gender and Slavery in Antebellum Georgia*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 78.

²⁹ “One of Dr. Gale’s ‘Free Niggers,’” *Unwritten History of Slavery*, 1.

³⁰ Sylvia Watkins, *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project*, 81.

with a much older man and “just bought them and put them together.”³¹ Enslavers placed a lot of value in a woman’s ability to reproduce, and if a young woman “was a good breeder, they was proud of her.”³² So, enslavers implemented their own intentions for enslaved people’s intimate relationships and the space of the quarters. They attempted to use enslaved people’s cabins for the purpose of increasing the labor force. These methods of sexual coercion limited enslaved women’s possible experiences of sexual pleasure and associated the space of their houses with nonconsensual sex. Therefore, this sexual coercion and violence transformed the slave quarters into traumatic space for enslaved men and women.

Enslavers exerted their control over enslaved people’s movement by determining enslaved people’s very presence in their cabins and, more generally, on the plantation at all. Forced separation and sale loomed over enslaved people as a constant threat—the threat to be moved away from the places they lived and the people they loved. While Camp does not focus on sale as a mechanism of maintaining a geography of containment, enslavers’ ability to control where enslaved people lived restricted enslaved people’s voluntary mobility. Forced separation limited and removed enslaved people’s abilities to choose where they wanted to go (or stay) and when. Thus, it reinforced another, less tangible form of violence that violated and shaped the experiences of the slave quarters.

Many Tennessee enslavers engaged in the practice of hiring out, which temporarily separated families from each other and limited their time in the quarters. This practice entailed hiring enslaved people’s services to other white people for a period of time in order to earn additional money. Records, like Elizabeth Harding’s farm journal, revealed the extensive network of enslaved hiring. In 1839 alone, twenty-one unique people hired Harding’s enslaved

³¹ “One of Dr. Gale’s ‘Free Niggers,’” *Unwritten History of Slavery*, 5.

³² *Ibid.*, 1.

people temporarily. Between 1839 and 1843, Elizabeth Harding hired out many of the people she enslaved in Davidson County, which resulted in the consistent separation of mothers and children.³³ During these years, Harding hired out Amy almost every year, oftentimes without all of her children. Amy and her four children remained together in 1839, but only two of her children remained with her the next year.³⁴ While it was unclear how long enslaved people were hired out, the records were recorded on January 1 of every year, potentially suggesting that the term lasted approximately a year. Thus, when Harding separated Amy and her children, they were separated for a year at a time. John Hall and William Giles Harding hired an enslaved woman named Hetty in 1839. Her mother, Susan, and Hetty's siblings, however, continued to work on Elizabeth Harding's property, which resulted in Hetty and Susan's separation. Elizabeth Harding separated many other enslaved women from their children between 1839 and 1843, including Sally, Nancy, and Winny.³⁵

While the existing records are limited to this five-year period, it was very likely that Harding hired out many enslaved people in different years as well. This widespread practice separated enslaved families from each other temporarily, thus deciding when enslaved people could live in the slave quarters with their family and community. In doing this, forced separation exacted an emotional violence on enslaved people. Historian Heather Williams examines the grief and sorrow of permanent separation, but neglects the idea that temporary separation could have caused similar emotions. In addition to the emotions associated with hiring out, it could have reminded enslaved people of the very real possibility of permanent separation through sale.

³³ Harding Farm Journal, 1839-1843, Metro Archives, Nashville Public Library Nashville, Tennessee.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

Forced separation through sale ripped apart families and communities. Because families and the space of the quarters were deeply intertwined, sale shaped how enslaved people understood the space of the slave quarters. Enslavers made the quarters into a pertinent site of emotional violence, where families and communities were left to deal with the grief, loss, anger, and resentment that accompanied separation. As many scholars have identified, sale separated families at unprecedented rates during the antebellum era.³⁶ Because of this, sale was a part of the everyday experiences and conversations of many enslaved people. When they remembered auction blocks and the reality of sale, they focused on the separation from family.

The stories of separated families filled sale records in the South. In a deed book that recorded sales of enslaved people between 1854 and 1856 in Davidson County, many children appeared in the records. 153 children aged sixteen-years-old and under were sold between these years, which made up thirty-eight percent of the total number of people in the deed book.³⁷ Thirty-two percent of these children were likely sold away from parents, grandparents, or other family members.³⁸ On November 20, 1855, Delilah Bosley sold three-months-old Louisiana to Mary Eliza Newell.³⁹ Louisiana's brief appearance in the historical record is heartbreaking. While additional information about Louisiana and her family are unknown, the possibilities of grief and heartbreak undergird this archival fragment. The deed book did not reveal Louisiana's family's heartbreak at the sale of their infant to an unknown woman. It did not reveal the

³⁶ Johnson, *Soul By Soul*, 11, 225; Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves*, 5. Williams, *Help Me To Find My People*, 25.

³⁷ Deed Book 22, 1854-1856, Metro Archives, Nashville Public Library, Nashville, Tennessee.

³⁸ Because deed books have little information on enslaved children's family members, I had to make estimations. Out of the total number of children under age sixteen, thirty-two percent of these children likely were sold away from parents. I calculated this number in three steps: 1) counted the number of children aged sixteen and under, 2) calculated the amount of children who were sold that did not have any explicit mentions of family ties (i.e. children that did not have "daughter of" or "son of" next to their names and 3) from this number, I counted the amount of children who were not sold with other people of age to be parents (these ages ranged from 15 to 40 at the birth of the child in question). These numbers, however, likely underestimated the amount of children in Davidson County who were actually sold away from their parents.

³⁹ Deed Book 22, 1854-1856, Metro Archives.

emptiness in her family's house—the absence of cries or giggles or nonsensical babbling typical of newborns. This deed book, however, revealed the prevalence of the forced separation of families, especially between parents and children, in antebellum Tennessee.

Some enslaved people described the effect that family separation had on the places they lived. A formerly enslaved man, Mr. Huddleston, recalled how members of his communities discussed the realities of family separation. Specifically, he remembered hearing Black folks talk about the separation of mothers and children. Many mothers and children were put on the auction block together, but not all of them stayed together. “Maybe some [white buyers] wouldn't want the baby, but they would want the mother; then the baby would be sold to someone else,” Huddleston recalled. Describing moments of separation between mothers and children, Huddleston recognized, “That's the reason niggers are so scattered out, 'cause they [traders and enslavers] never would sell them as a family, but as individuals.”⁴⁰ Huddleston tied family separation to the literal places enslaved people lived, which suggested how sale changed in the space of the quarters.

Family separation through sale was a violent experience for enslaved people. Scholars like Heather Andrea Williams have described the emotional toll that sale has had on enslaved people, but have neglected enslaved people's experience of the space itself. Sale and other forms of forced separation severed kinship ties between enslaved people, and those that remained had to grieve for those they lost.⁴¹ This was felt most deeply in spaces where the everyday interactions and conversations between families and communities occurred. Therefore, the quarters became a site of emotional violence perpetrated by white enslavers and traders through sale.

⁴⁰ “When It's Right to Steal From Your Master,” *Unwritten History of Slavery*, 31.

⁴¹ Williams, *Help Me To Find My People*, 34, 41.

When Mr. Huddleston described the separation of mothers and children, he also noted that he knew this information from the conversations he heard from the enslaved community he lived in. Huddleston did not experience sales or auctions first-hand, but rather knew “only what I heard the folks talk about.”⁴² This knowledge about sale flowed in enslaved communities freely, and sometimes the quarters were the site of sharing this information. Even as enslaved families and communities dealt with the loss of loved ones, they also served as each other’s solace and knowledge source. In the face of tragedy, families and communities turned inward to each other for help. They appropriated the slave quarters for their own purposes—to feel the raw and powerful emotions enslavers ignored and prepare, protect, and support each other for the painful realities of slavery.

Rival Geography

Despite these geographies of containment that enslavers created, enslaved women used the slave quarters for their own purposes in many ways. Enslaved women created “alternative ways of knowing and using plantation and Southern space that conflicted with planters’ ideals and demands.”⁴³ The idea of rival geography reveals enslaved people’s resistance to enslavers’ complete control of their spaces and bodies and challenged their place in Southern society. Enslaved women used plantation space for purposes outside of the intentions of enslavers, which allowed enslaved women to reclaim these spaces. When enslaved women created rival geographies, the slave quarters became contested spaces, consistently in tension between

⁴² “When It’s Right to Steal From Your Master,” *Unwritten History of Slavery*, 31.

⁴³ Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 7.

enslavers' and enslaved people's desires and intentions. Camp's concept of rival geography is useful to uncover the ways enslaved women made and remade the space of their houses. In turn, enslaved women used these spaces to experience the most intimate and personal parts of their lives away from the prying eyes of enslavers and other white people.

Enslaved women produced rival geographies in many ways. For example, they used the slave quarters to help self-liberated people and truants, enslaved people who escaped their owners for brief periods of time.⁴⁴ In the slave quarters, one formerly enslaved woman recalled, "Many a one has come in our house and we'd hide 'em in the closets—men, women, and children, too."⁴⁵ When truants and self-emancipated people came to another enslaved woman's cabin, she "help[ed] them the best she could..." and invited these enslaved people to "come in at night, and...give them something to eat."⁴⁶ Through their efforts to help enslaved people escaping slavery, enslaved women remade the space of the slave quarters by repurposing the space. They appropriated the slave quarters for their own, sometimes liberating, purposes. These enslaved women infused the possibilities of hope and freedom into their homes by making it a brief respite from enslavers and the violence of slavery. Through enslaved women's actions, the slave quarters became a refuge from slavery.

Enslaved women tried to claim their labors in the quarters. An enslaved mother in Tennessee "would do the house work before going out to the field. When [the] time come to go back to the house to cook, she would quit and go back."⁴⁷ She cooked, cleaned, and took care of her children, all contributing to the upkeep of her enslavers' labor force. This enslaved woman

⁴⁴ Enslaved people, especially women, participated in truancy because it "provided space and time for relief from exploitation, control, and surveillance" and provided the opportunity for independent activities. Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 36.

⁴⁵ "One of Dr. Gale's 'Free Niggers,'" *Unwritten History of Slavery*, 12.

⁴⁶ "I Was a Boy Slave," *Unwritten History of Slavery*, 53.

⁴⁷ "Slaves Have No Souls," *Unwritten History of Slavery*, 51.

and many like her did a disproportionate amount of labor.⁴⁸ While she had the opportunity to labor on behalf of her family in the slave quarters, she also was forced to do arduous, time-consuming, and backbreaking labor. However, this work was contested between enslavers and enslaved women, and the quarters became a central space in this struggle. While enslaved women's labor done on behalf of their families and communities was often difficult to distinguish from labor done for enslavers, they still appropriated the quarters for more meaningful labor.⁴⁹ Enslaved women could have infused the labor they performed for their families with love and care.

Within the slave quarters, enslaved women partially labored on their own terms at working socials. Quilting parties were popular events in Tennessee, and enslaved women played a large role in them. A gendered division of labor may have occurred, and enslaved women were in charge of most of the quilting at these working socials.⁵⁰ Enslaved women used these working socials to labor for their families and communities, creating quilts that they used in the quarters. Quiltings were community events, and enslaved communities would crowd into each other's cabins to work and socialize. Through these working socials, enslaved people transformed the quarters into community spaces. They used the spaces for merriment and socialization, which would have provided the opportunity to alleviate some of the realities of slavery.

⁴⁸ Historians argue that enslaved women perform a disproportionate amount of domestic work in their own households because of necessity and a traditional gendered division of labor. This "double duty" work placed enslaved women in a position to work for themselves, their families, and their communities. Enslaved women cooked, made clothes, took care of children, and performed many other chores within their homes in addition to the work they did for their owners during the day. Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 26-37; White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 115.

⁴⁹ Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 28.

⁵⁰ Berry, *Swing the Sickle*, 61.

Some scholars even believe that quilts were used to signal stops on the Underground Railroad.⁵¹ These quilts, then, would have functioned as signs of and hope for people traveling to freedom. Enslaved women wove and intertwined the possibilities of their hopes and dreams of freedom, resistance, and pleasure in these quilts. By physically making these quilts and participating in quilting parties, enslaved women metaphorically remade the space of the slave quarters—infusing them with their own ideals of home and community. Enslaved people appropriated these spaces to create—to labor for themselves, families, and communities in ways that were separate from and less influenced by the intentions of enslavers.⁵²

Enslaved people made working socials into parties, where they sang and danced. In doing this, they took pleasure in their own bodies. Enslaved people “would have nice suppers and nice quiltings, and play the fiddles, and have a good time.”⁵³ Camp imagines the enslaved body as divided into three bodies: “a site of domination,” controlled by enslavers; a “vehicle of feelings of terror, humiliation, and pain,” experienced by enslaved people; a “site of pleasure and resistance.”⁵⁴ This theory describes the relationship between space, pleasure, and the body, and can be applied to how enslaved women used the space of the slave quarters for events like working socials. When enslaved women produced a rival geography, they created spaces where enslaved women moved in ways that they wanted to. Enslaved women, then, experienced pleasure and resistance through changing how their bodies moved throughout their houses.

⁵¹ Some historians believe that quilts signaled stops on the Underground Railroad or conveyed messages to runaway slaves. For more on quilts and the Underground railroad, see Deimosa Webber-Bey, “Runaway Quilt Project: Digital Humanities Exploration of Quilting During the Era of Slavery,” *The Journal of Interactive Technology and Pedagogy* 6 (Fall 2014), <https://jitp.commons.gc.cuny.edu/runaway-quilt-project-digital-humanities-exploration-of-quilting-during-the-era-of-slavery/>; “The Underground Railroad and the Secret Codes of Antebellum Slave Quilts,” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 46 (2004): 44, doi:10.2307/4133668.

⁵² Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 85-92.

⁵³ “Now Supported by Children She ‘Raised,’” *Unwritten History of Slavery*, 207.

⁵⁴ Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 66-68.

While enslavers designed the quarters to control enslaved people, enslaved women still managed to use their cabins for enjoyable activities. When Millie Simpkins was enslaved in Tennessee, she recalled, “de young ones would git in ‘nuther room, dance en hab a good time.”⁵⁵ At working socials, enslaved women used their bodies for pleasurable activities like dancing. Thus, they used their bodies for purposes beyond the intentions of enslavers. Instead of exerting energy for agricultural or domestic labor for their enslavers, these young enslaved women reserved their energy for the labor they wanted to do. Enslaved women used the quarters for a space where their bodies performed functions contrary to enslavers’ intentions—laboring and moving throughout space in pleasurable and joyous ways as they danced, talked, quilted, and sang.

When enslaved women produced rival geographies in the slave quarters, they resisted enslavers’ power and control over enslaved women’s bodies, personal relationships, and spaces they inhabited. In doing this, enslaved women actively remade the space of the quarters and created a sense of possibility within them—possibility of pleasure, love, hope, refuge, and freedom. These possibilities fueled enslaved women’s imaginations, so they attempted to build homes for themselves and their families.

⁵⁵ Millie Simpkins, *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project*, 67.

Chapter 2

“The almost daily talks of my mother”: Enslaved Women and the Home as an Intellectual Space

As a child, an anonymous enslaved woman who lived on Thomas or William Gale’s plantation in Nashville, Tennessee experienced many house raisings and log rollings.¹ At these events, enslaved people built their own houses, creating cabins out of the meager supplies that their enslavers made available. She remembered the house raisings with fondness, recalling how “they would give a big dinner and put up the frame of a house in one day.”² This woman’s cabin was small, “just a little weatherboard cabin with two rooms,” and she lived there with her mother and approximately thirteen siblings.³ The house had “old fashioned windows that you would just shut, no glass at all,” and when winter came, they felt the chill deep in their bones.⁴ A fireplace stood in each room, a hearth where this woman’s mother likely performed some of her and her family’s labor, like cooking.

In recalling the physical building of enslaved people’s cabins, the anonymous enslaved woman also remembered the quarters as a central part of enslaved people’s lives. While enslaved women were within enslavers’ geographies of containment, they were also their homes. Enslaved women produced rival geographies, creating space(s) in their homes for expressions of their

¹ This enslaved woman called her enslaver “Dr. Gale” and did not mention a first name. According to census records, there were two slaveholders with the last name “Gale” in Davidson County. I was unable to determine which one of these men was Dr. Gale, so I have referred to Dr. Gale as Thomas or William Gale in the beginning of this chapter. Going forward, I will refer to him as Dr. Gale or Gale. 1850 U.S. Census, Davidson County, Tennessee, population schedule, p. 17, dwelling 115, family 115, Thomas Gale; digital image, Ancestry Heritage Quest, accessed April 11, 2019, <https://www.ancestryheritagequest.com>. 1850 U.S. Census, Davidson County, Tennessee, population schedule, p. 16, dwelling 114, family 114, William Gale; digital image, Ancestry Heritage Quest, accessed April 11, 2019, <https://www.ancestryheritagequest.com>. 1850 census records; 1850 slave schedule. 1850 U.S. Census, Davidson County, Tennessee, slave schedule, p. 129, lines 22-36, Thomas Gale, slaveowner; digital image; Family Search, <https://www.familysearch.org>. 1850 U.S. Census, Davidson County, Tennessee, slave schedule, Nashville, p. 129, lines 13-21, William Gale, slaveowner; digital image, Family Search, <https://www.familysearch.org>.

² “One of Dr. Gale’s ‘Free Niggers,’” *Unwritten History of Slavery: Autobiographical Accounts of Negro Ex-Slaves* (Nashville: Fisk University Social Science Institute, 1945), 10.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

humanity. They labored and lived in their homes, investing time and energy in their passions, families, community, and themselves. Stephanie Camp captures the reality of the enslaved women's homes by recognizing that they had a "twoness"—they "encompassed slavery's cruelties and the internal life of the home; they were both object and subject." This chapter adds to Camp's analysis by providing more detail on enslaved people's "internal life of the home."⁵ In focusing on this, I shift my language from "slave quarters" or "slave cabins" to "home" to emphasize enslaved women's complex and meaningful understandings of the places they lived. These women understood their homes as more than just a physical place.

The home was a physical, emotional, and intellectual space simultaneously. Enslaved people's homes were a part of their emotional geography. The term refers to the feelings and emotions associated with a physical place and expressed "a sense of emotional involvement with people and places, rather than emotional detachment from them."⁶ Because of the home's role as the "locus of family feeling," it engendered its own emotional attachments.⁷ The familial and community relationships that developed inside the walls of the home, especially between mothers and children, made the home a central part of enslaved women's emotional geography.

Enslaved women's homes were also intellectual spaces. Some scholars have recognized Black women as intellectuals through identifying their roles as producers of knowledge. Enslaved women's ability to pass down information to their children was an essential role in producing knowledge, too.⁸ While most scholars describe elite Black women as intellectuals, I

⁵ Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 94.

⁶ Liz Bond et al., "Introduction: Geography's Emotional Turn," in *Emotional Geographies*, ed. Liz Bondi et al. (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007), 2.

⁷ Jaqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 2.

⁸ Mia Bay et al., "Introduction: Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women," in *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women*, ed. Mia Bay et al. (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 1-14; Keisha N. Blain et al., "Introduction: The Contours of Black Intellectual History," in *New Perspectives on the Black Intellectual Tradition*, ed. Keisha N. Blain et al. (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2018), 3-16.

argue that enslaved women were also intellectuals. They defined their own ideas of resistance, womanhood, and spirituality and conveyed this knowledge to their children. Enslaved women's homes were central spaces where enslaved women developed and transferred this knowledge, which made it an intellectual space.

The ideas of emotional geography and intellectual space informed one another inside enslaved women's homes because of how enslaved women's feelings for their children were tied to the knowledge enslaved women transferred to their children. Scholars have argued that Black women believed that passing down knowledge was integral to conceptions of Black motherhood. So, for enslaved women, their love and care of their children very much included teaching them not only about how slavery works, but also how to affirm their personhood. Oftentimes, this also included enslaved mothers teaching their daughters lessons of Black womanhood.

While many archival fragments regarding enslaved women and their homes could be shared, I have decided to focus on two narratives in this chapter. I primarily did this to dedicate the substantial textual space and analysis that these sources needed to live and breathe. These narratives were rich and detailed, which has provided the best opportunity to describe the home as an intellectual space and a part of emotional geography in a clear and definite way. While only one of these women's names appears in the historical record, both of their narratives reveal how enslaved women used and understood their homes. Not only did these women imagine and practice freedom, they also used these spaces to teach and inspire their children.

These women's experiences were not unique or singular, but rather hint at a larger trend about enslaved women's homes in nineteenth-century Tennessee. Many other enslaved women experienced similar things and came to similar understandings of what their homes were and

could be.⁹ If the richness of the Fisk sources and more fragmented stories tell us so much about home, I must also consider what is missing from the archive. In the archive, the home is everywhere and nowhere. It was a central part of enslaved people's lives, yet many enslaved people were reluctant to share stories about it. Some, however, did.

I Wanted to Be Like Ma Now

In Eden (likely Eaton), Tennessee, an enslaved woman named Fannie, struck her enslaver, Sarah Jennings, and chased Jennings out of her house. Jennings had just hit Fannie with a stick, and Fannie intended to fight back. When a white man pulled Fannie away from Sarah Jennings, she screamed, "Why, I'll kill her, I'll kill her dead if she ever strikes me again."¹⁰ A few days later, two white men, policemen or slave patrolmen, arrived at the Jennings with the intent to punish Fannie. At that time, it was illegal for a Black person, enslaved or free(d), to physically harm a white person.¹¹

Fannie watched as the two white men approached her home, a whip in one of their hands, but "she intended to meet them halfway." So, Fannie ran toward the men and "swooped upon them like a hawk on chickens...Her body was made strong with madness." Fannie fought the two men and struggled to avoid their whip. When one of the men aimed his gun at her, she told him defiantly, "use your gun, use it and blow my brains out if you will." In that moment, she

⁹ See also "One of Dr. Gale's Free Niggers," *Unwritten History of Slavery*, 1-16; "Knows Nothing About Slavery But 'Whipping Niggers,'" *Unwritten History of Slavery*, 181-188; "Blacks have no more choice than slaves do," *Unwritten History of Slavery*, 189-197; "Mulatto Whom Owners Treated Like Family Members," *Unwritten History of Slavery*, 198-200; "Now Supported by Children She 'Raised,'" *Unwritten History of Slavery*, 201-215; "'Stock' Was Treated a Great Deal Better," *Unwritten History of Slavery*, 216-220.

¹⁰ "My Mother Was the Smartest Black Woman in Eden," *Unwritten History of Slavery*, 286.

¹¹ When Cornelia told this story, she likely meant Eaton, Tennessee instead of Eden. Eaton was an unincorporated town in mid nineteenth-century in Gibson County, Tennessee. Her enslavers were Sarah and William Jennings from Gibson County. 1850 U.S. Census, Gibson County, Tennessee, slave schedule, Civil District No. 4, p. 14, lines 30-42, 1-12, William J. Jennings, slaveowner; digital image, Family Search, <https://www.familysearch.org>.

decided that she would rather die than let these men whip her. Fannie struggled with the men until her other enslaver, William Jennings broke up the fight.¹²

She fought for her bodily autonomy and, implicitly, the sanctity of her home. When the two men arrived at the Jenningses' plantation, they intended to go to the yard, the place where enslaved people's homes were located. So, when Fannie saw the two men looking for her with the intent to whip her, she refused to let these men get close. She felt determined to keep these men and, in turn, violence away from her home. Her actions suggest that she intended to keep the space of her home as separated from violence as she could in order to create a refuge for herself and her family.

However, as Fannie fought to keep her home safe from the violence perpetrated by white people, her enslavers still ripped her family and home apart. After this incident, the Jenningses decided to send her to Memphis, Tennessee. While Fannie told them, "I'll go to hell or anywhere else, but I won't be whipped," Sarah Jennings, then, told her that she was not allowed to take any of her four children with her.¹³ Fannie did not respond to this, but her devastation was palpable. Even as she resisted the violence of slavery on her body and home, this forced separation wrought more violence. She loved her children, and now her enslavers planned to separate her from them.

That night in their home, Fannie and her husband whispered about what they would do. Not only was Fannie facing separation from her children, she would also be separated from her husband. Fannie's husband was determined to stay with his wife, but that would leave all of four of their children without either of their parents. As the time for Fannie's departure crept closer, she worked "around [her home] with the baby under her arms as if it had been a bundle of some

¹² "My Mother Was the Smartest Black Woman in Eden," *Unwritten History of Slavery*, 287.

¹³ *Ibid.*

kind.”¹⁴ She held her child close to her because she was aware of the impending separation and determined to take at least one of her children with her. Her husband soon “came up to the cabin with an old mare for [her] to ride, and an old mule for himself. Mr. Jennings was with him.”¹⁵

When William Jennings told her that she could not take her baby, Fannie wept, angry and devastated. Standing inside or right outside of her home, she held her infant close to her. In a last moment of desperation and despair, she vowed she would “smash its brains out before she’d leave it” if Jennings made her leave her child.¹⁶ It is hard to imagine the desperation and despair Fannie felt, that she would rather kill her child before leaving them. Heartbroken yet resolute, Fannie stood her ground. Eventually, Jennings allowed her to take her baby, but she still had to leave her other three children. Still, Fannie left one of her children, a daughter named Cornelia with her fierce and determined spirit.

Amidst Fannie’s actions and forced separation, Cornelia witnessed much of her mother’s resistance and defiance. In the days leading up to the separation from her mother, Cornelia witnessed her mother retaliate against Sarah Jennings and fight two white men who came to punish Fannie. Hidden in the yard near her home, Cornelia “had watched the whole scene [with the white men] with hands calmly clasped in front of me. I felt no urge to do anything but look on.”¹⁷ When her parents left for Memphis a week later, Cornelia and her mother said their goodbyes in their home. Teary-eyed and devastated, Cornelia yearned for her mother to stay with her. Right before her mother left, Fannie boldly told Cornelia, using Cornelia’s nickname,

¹⁴ Ibid., 288.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 287.

“Don’t be abused, Puss.”¹⁸ Fannie gave Cornelia what she could—her advice, determination, and ideas of resistance

The home, then, was a significant site where Fannie demonstrated her conceptions of motherhood and womanhood and Cornelia learned about resistance and womanhood from her mother. When Cornelia told this story decades later, she recalled her mother as a central and formative figure in her home. During the nineteenth-century, enslaved homes were gendered spaces because enslaved women performed most of the domestic work and childrearing. So, motherhood was an essential part of both the home and Black womanhood. When enslaved women became mothers, it was a landmark event in their life cycle.¹⁹

Therefore, Fannie’s words and actions represented how fundamental shared knowledge and experiences were to motherhood and her daughter’s understanding of Black womanhood. When Cornelia was a child, Fannie told her daughter many times “that she wouldn’t be whipped,” and Cornelia noted, “when [Fannie] fussed, all Eden must have known it.”²⁰ Cornelia also remembered “the almost daily talks of my mother on the cruelty of slavery” that occurred inside their home.²¹ So, Cornelia saw her mother engage in multiple forms of resistance in their home. Cornelia witnessed Fannie’s physical forms of resistance, such as fighting white people or not allowing her enslavers to separate her from her children. Cornelia also saw her mother participate in less obvious signs of resistance within their home. Fannie verbally acknowledged the cruelties of slavery and the hatred she had for her enslavement. So, when Fannie taught Cornelia about the realities of slavery and resistance, Fannie revealed how she believed her actions were a part of her responsibilities as a mother. Fannie also used these conversations to

¹⁸ Ibid., 288.

¹⁹ Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 4-10, 27; White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*, 75, 106.

²⁰ “My Mother Was the Smartest Black Woman in Eden,” *Unwritten History of Slavery*, 284.

²¹ Ibid., 285

prepare her daughter for womanhood by sharing her own experiences and possibly experiences of other enslaved women. Their home became an important classroom for Fannie to teach Cornelia about resistance and Black womanhood.

When Fannie left Eden, Cornelia was heartbroken, but determined to follow her mother's examples. Within the year that the family was separated, Cornelia changed. She began to display more obvious signs of resistance and said, she "decided to follow my mother's example."²² She had learned the language of resistance from her mother in her home and began to speak it fluently and loudly. Recalling this part of her life several decades later, Cornelia said, "I intended to fight, and if I couldn't fight I'd kick; and if I couldn't kick, I'd bite."²³ This echoed what her mother told Cornelia as a child, "Fight, and if you can't fight, kick; if you can't kick, then bite."²⁴ When those around her compared Cornelia to her mother, she "delighted in hearing this. I wanted to be like ma now."

Key moments that happened inside her home influenced Cornelia's attitude toward her enslavers and enslavement. Immediately after her mother left, Cornelia demonstrated yearnings for freedom similar to her mother. As a mother, Fannie believed that it was her duty to leave her child with lessons in resistance and she performed the intellectual labor necessary to do this. While Cornelia's mother resisted and fought in places other than the home, the home was the place where her mother spoke more freely against her enslavement and actively voiced her desire for freedom. The resistance that occurred in her home, then, directly instructed and shaped her daughter. Within their home, resistance became tied to family, especially children more personally and intimately. Because of key moments previously described and the centrality of the

²² Ibid., 288.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 284.

home to family relationships, the home was an intellectual space that shaped Cornelia's ideas about resistance and freedom.

This fragmented account allows us to imagine this enslaved woman's home as an intellectual space where enslaved women learned and taught others. Within their secret, intimate moments as a mother and daughter inside their home, Fannie gave Cornelia lessons in resistance. It is in this place that Fannie told her daughter that she should not accept whippings and abuse and that she should fight back. Fannie fought for bodily and personal autonomy in ways that illustrate her clear yearnings for freedom, and, importantly, she showed her daughter. As Cornelia and Fannie experienced the anguish and desperation that came along with family separation, they also used their homes to test the bounds of their enslavement and rethink the possibilities of resistance and freedom within their homes.

Chillen, I'm Free

An unnamed enslaved woman in Robertson County, Tennessee remembered hearing her mother pray "many a time" in their home.²⁵ When the anonymous enslaved woman talked about religion, she named her mother as the sole influence on her spirituality. While the woman's father lived on the same plantation, she never mentioned his religious practices. Some historians and theologians argue that Black mothers' and grandmothers' spirituality played an essential role in Black children's understandings of religion. Religion, then, became another way in which

²⁵ This unnamed enslaved woman was most likely enslaved by J.A. (Jack) Barbee, who lived in Robertson County, Tennessee. He has an 1860 census record and slave schedule. Slave schedule and census record here (looking for citation for this). "I Can't Forgive Her, the Way She Used to Beat Us," *Unwritten History of Slavery*, 282.

enslaved women used their homes as intellectual spaces. They not only developed their own personal conceptions of religion, but they also shaped their children's spirituality.²⁶

The importance of Christianity to this unnamed enslaved woman and her mother reflected the development of Afro-Christianity throughout nineteenth-century slave states. After the Second Great Awakening, an early nineteenth-century religious movement, the number of Black Christians increased dramatically, especially in Baptist and Methodist denominations.²⁷ By the middle of the nineteenth-century, enslaved and free(d) Black people had played an important role in "the Christianization of the South."²⁸ Despite white Southerners' attempts to control how enslaved people understood religion, enslaved people created their own versions of Christianity. They stressed their own understanding of Christianity, especially in private, and it often infused African cultural and religious traditions into their Christian beliefs and practice. For many enslaved people, Christianity provided relief from the realities of slavery, offering them catharsis and comfort.²⁹

Religion for enslaved people was, in the words of one historian, "institutional and noninstitutional, visible and invisible, formally organized and spontaneously adapted."³⁰ Because of this ambiguity, historians have identified religious events and services that occurred in several settings: camp meetings—which often occurred in the woods—churches, and many other informal settings. Enslavers often ran their own religious services and required enslaved people

²⁶ Delores S. Williams, "Sources of Black Female Spirituality: The Ways of 'the Old Folks' and 'Women Writers,'" in *My Soul is a Witness: African-American Women's Spirituality*, ed. Gloria Wade-Gayles (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 189-190; LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant, "'I Had a Praying Grandmother': Religion, Prophetic Witness, and Black Women's Herstories," in *New Perspectives on the Black Intellectual Tradition*, ed. Keisha N. Blain et al. (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2018), 115-130.

²⁷ Paul Harvey, *Through the Storm, Through the Night: A History of African-American Christianity* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), 35, 43; Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978, 2004), 94, 116.

²⁸ Harvey, *Through the Storm*, 35

²⁹ Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 61; Harvey, *Through the Storm*, 53; Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 144.

³⁰ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 144.

to attend these events and gatherings. Enslaved people valued secret religious meetings the most, though, and they devised ways to practice their own private religious services to avoid detection from white people.³¹ At these secret services, enslaved people taught themselves and, more importantly, their children, their own understandings of Christianity. Religious scholars claim that these secret religious services were more “real” to enslaved people because they were able to express “deeper longings for freedom and hatred of the slave regime once white observers left.”³² So, for many enslaved people, religion provided a sense of hope and freedom, and not the duty to obey their enslavers.

While many historians have neglected how often these religious events took place in enslaved people’s homes, indeed, the home became a central place where enslaved people learned about religion.³³ Black men generally had disproportionate power in religious institutions, but Brenda E. Stevenson argues that enslaved women possessed social power in their communities, which allowed them to exert social influence in their homes and in religion.³⁴ Sometimes, these two realms intertwined. Because of this, some enslaved women wielded power in religious meetings and services. On a more personal level, enslaved women took on important roles in teaching enslaved children about Christianity.

The previously mentioned enslaved woman recalled often witnessing religious meetings in enslaved people’s homes often. On more than one night, this anonymous enslaved woman saw members of her enslaved community crowding into her small home where they “turned the pot

³¹ Harvey, *Through the Storm*, 53; Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 146; Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin’ On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979), 172.

³² Harvey, *Through the Storm*, 51; Sobel, *Trabelin’ On*, 172.

³³ Harvey, *Through the Storm*, 51-53; Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 146; Sobel, *Trabelin’ On*, 172.

³⁴ Brenda E. Stevenson, “‘Marsa Never Sot Aunt Rebecca down’: Enslaved Women, Religion, and Social Power in the Antebellum South,” *The Journal of African American History* 90, no. 4 (Autumn 2005): 346, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20064018>. Many enslaved men participated in “lay preaching” as “chairbackers” and “floor preachers.” Sobel, *Trabelin’ On*, 160

up and prayed and sung in the pot to keep the white folks from hearing ‘em.’³⁵ Likely, her mother played an important part in leading and participating in these meetings, especially if they occurred in their home. After a long day of laboring and suffering, enslaved people crowded into one of their small houses and sang spirituals that were infused with hope and the promises of freedom. Already, her mother was a spiritual influence, but now through these illegal and secret religious meetings, her mother taught her one of many ways to produce rival geography.

While enslavers attempted to listen to the conversations and prayer meetings enslaved people had in their homes, enslaved people resisted their surveillance by using pots and kettles. Enslaved people used “ole iron cookin’ pots en turn dem upside down on de groun neah dere cabins ter keep white folks fum hearin w’at dey wuz sayin.”³⁶ According to enslaved people, they used the pots to keep the sound inside of their homes and keep their meetings, songs, and conversations private. While the origin and effect of the pots and kettles are disputed, many enslaved people genuinely believed that the pots and kettles were effective in keeping their homes more private.³⁷

So, enslaved people used these pots to keep religious meetings secret from white people because “they would be scared to death that the white folks would hear them.”³⁸ Enslaved people used these items to “shout and sing all they wanted to and the noise wouldn’t go outside.”³⁹ While they used these pots and kettles to avoid potential punishment from enslavers, they also used them as vehicles to transform their homes into a place that allowed a degree of freedom of expression and privacy. Whether they were using these pots and kettles to have conversations,

³⁵ “I Can’t Forgive Her, the Way She Used to Beat Us,” *Unwritten History of Slavery*, 282.

³⁶ Patsy Hyde, *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project*, 34.

³⁷ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 147.

³⁸ “One of Dr. Gale’s ‘Free Niggers,’” *Unwritten History of Slavery*, 12.

³⁹ “Slaves Have No Souls,” *Unwritten History of Slavery*, 44.

sing, or pray, enslaved people shielded their religious meetings from enslavers and produced actions and knowledge that were private to themselves and other enslaved people. The pots and kettles allowed enslaved people to vocally express their yearning for freedom. Slave spirituals, religious ceremonies, and conversations were often infused with messages of freedom, pleasure, possibility, and defiance.⁴⁰

While the existence of these meetings was significant to enslaved people, the content of them was even more so. In the Fisk University narratives, an anonymous enslaved woman recalled much of the music sung at these meetings. Religious in content, these songs also spoke to ideas of refuge, healing, and freedom. For this woman to recall the lyrics, must have meant that they were incredibly important to her. She likely heard them sung by her mother or other enslaved members of her community, especially at those religious meetings. This unnamed enslaved woman named many of the songs she and her community used to sing (or perhaps still sang at the time of the interview). Many of them were hopeful; they dreamed of healing and better days. Sometimes, the songs invoked the word freedom:

Chillen, I'm free, chillen, I'm free, chillen,
I'm free, my Lord
Washed in the blood of the Lamb⁴¹

In this song, the lyrics could have referred to either spiritual or physical freedom. In fact, religious scholars have recognized the ambiguity of “freedom” in these songs.⁴² The lyric “washed in the blood of the lamb” certainly refers to religious salvation and spiritual freedom of enslaved people. But those who sang this spiritual could have also meant freedom from slavery. When enslaved families and communities sang this in their homes, the secrecy of this religious

⁴⁰ Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 76.

⁴¹ “I Can’t Forgive Her, the Way She Used to Beat Us,” *Unwritten History of Slavery*, 280.

⁴² Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 167-168; Sobel, *Trabelin’ On*, 155.

no doubt invoked the literal meanings of freedom. As enslaved people met in the enslaved woman's home, it was also a communal spiritual experience. The style of some spirituals made these songs communal, including call-and-response and spontaneity. Much of this music put enslaved people in conversation with each other.⁴³ So, while this enslaved woman sang about her own understanding of freedom—spiritual or physical—she also proclaimed and validated the freedom of everybody else in the room. Every other enslaved person in the room, including her mother, would have done the same.

As enslaved people met in their homes in secret and sang “Chillen, I’m free,” a pot next to the door to keep their music and meetings secret, they transformed their homes into a space that held the possibilities of freedom in a wide range of definitions. During these brief moments of reprieve, enslaved women like this woman and her mother filled their homes with thoughts of freedom and hope. For this anonymous enslaved woman and her mother, these moments were found in their religion, and their home was the site of those meetings. These women's actions hint at their hopes for their homes—a space where they could freely speak about hope and possibilities without disturbance.

On the eve of the Civil War, enslaved communities were buzzing about new Republican presidential candidate Abraham Lincoln. After the Republican Party elected Lincoln as their presidential candidate in 1860, an anonymous enslaved woman “heard the old [Black] folks talking” about him.⁴⁴ They picked up this knowledge from their enslavers because “they would go round to the windows and listen to what the white folks would say when they was reading

⁴³ Harvey, *Through the Storm*, 55; Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 165.

⁴⁴ “One of Dr. Gale’s ‘Free Niggers,’” *Unwritten History of Slavery*, 4.

their papers and talk[ing] after supper.”⁴⁵ As the United States approached sectional crisis, white Southerners were terrified and undoubtedly talking about the possibilities of emancipation that supposedly came along with Lincoln’s candidacy.⁴⁶ This terror increased after he was elected President, contributing to Southern states’ secession from the Union. Despite Lincoln’s claims that he would not eliminate slavery in order to protect the Union, white Southerners did not believe him.

After discovering enslaved people eavesdropping on his debates about Lincoln, Thomas or William Gale told his enslaved people, “You needn’t be laughing and talking, you ain’t gonna be free.”⁴⁷ Despite the reprimand, these enslaved people took these conversations to their homes. To talk about one’s freedom was a dangerous and radical act. Because of this, they tucked their discussions of freedom into the walls of their small homes, and perhaps they whispered in the under the cover of night or early morning light when they had a small amount of time to themselves. The anonymous young woman who told this story likely heard the whispers between her parents and other community members about Lincoln and the potential of freedom. She noted that her parents might not “tell me a thing,” about the realities of the oncoming Civil War and the hope that slavery would end, but she heard them. While listening to these conversations, perhaps she went to sleep imagining her own freedom.

As enslaved women used their homes to develop ideas about freedom and personhood, they were preparing for emancipation. In these spaces, they imagined and practiced freedom, ultimately formulating ideas about what the home could and should look like. When emancipation came to Tennessee and enslaved women became free women, they were able to do

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 4-5.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 5.

one of the many things they dreamed about while enslaved—build a free home. Dreams turned to reality.

Chapter 3

Free Women Building Free Homes: The Home in the Aftermath of the Civil War

After years of enslavement, Lucindia was free. As she contemplated her newly found freedom, she wondered what she would do. How would she realize and embody the freedom that she had craved for most of her life? Like many other formerly enslaved women after emancipation, Lucindia considered family reunification one of her primary priorities. About ten to twelve years ago, Lucindia's former enslaver, Sallie Waters, sold her away from her six-week-old daughter, Frankie. So, Lucindia, a freed woman, searched for her daughter.

Lucindia traveled from Lebanon in Wilson County to the Waters' house in Smith County, walking many miles to search for her daughter. We do not know exactly what happened when Lucindia walked through the gates toward the main house. Perhaps Lucindia saw Sallie and her daughter frantically hide the switches they intended to use on Frankie. She may have felt enraged by these women's treatment of her daughter. What we do know is that face-to-face with her former enslaver, Lucindia defiantly told her, "I'se kum ter git mah chile."¹ With those words, Lucindia staked her claim to her freedom, doing what would not have been possible under the confines of slavery.

While Frankie spent that night with her former enslaver—one last attempt for Sallie Waters to try and assert control over Lucindia and her family—Lucindia and Frankie visited the local courthouse the next morning. The courthouse was packed with many other people, perhaps filled with fellow freed people who wanted to realize their dream—and now reality—of freedom. After Frankie told the judge that her owner had whipped her, the judge, according to Frankie, turned to Lucindia and told her, to "tek dis chile en be good ter her fer she has b'en mistreated."²

¹ Frankie Goole, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project*, 20.

² *Ibid.*, 21.

Then, he granted Lucindia custody of her child. So, Lucindia and Frankie left rural Lebanon, the site of their enslavement, and moved to Nashville, a city rife with possibility. Together, they built a new, free home—one that Lucindia had dreamed of while enslaved.

In the midst of the chaos of Reconstruction, formerly enslaved people hoped that their homes would finally be their refuge. When enslaved people were finally free from bondage, they believed that their homes held a world of possibilities. Despite emancipation's promises, formerly enslaved people still faced challenges to building free homes. These limits on their attempts to create free homes were often informed by where freed people lived. Rural and urban geographies resulted in some distinct differences, but also faced many similar challenges, especially violence perpetrated by white Southerners.

In spite of all of these challenges, freed women still worked to build free homes. Formerly enslaved women's imaginings, expectations, and realities of their homes under slavery informed how they built and understood free homes after emancipation. So, for freed people, the process of building free homes centered the ability to create and choose how they believed their home should be. For Lucindia, it meant reuniting with her child and building a free home together in a new city. For Frankie, a free home required the presence of her mother and the absence of violence.

During this period, free homes had many definitions. It included Black women investing more time and energy on familial relationships and domestic work. Many freed women tried to repair the damaged relationships between themselves and their loved ones, especially their children. Black women believed that free homes meant embedding themselves in thriving Black communities. Freed women engendered greater privacy and limited white control through

movement and labor contracts. Ultimately, building a free home represented Black women's attempts to secure a hopeful future for their children.

Menny lef' but menny stay

Contemplating their first steps into freedom, many formerly enslaved people craved the freedom of movement. They wanted to distance themselves from the physical spaces where they had been enslaved, oftentimes moving to urban areas. Many other recently freed people, however, stayed where they had lived for most of their lives, deciding to continue living on the property of their former enslavers instead. Scott Martin, a formerly enslaved man, captured the decisions freed men and women made when thinking about where to go immediately after emancipation: "Atter freedom de slaves had'n no truble ter go whar dey wan'. Menny lef' but menny stay wid de ole marsters."³

Facing restrictive Black codes, housing insecurity, and poverty, many formerly enslaved people continued to live at the sites of their enslavement. The unpredictability of emancipation led some formerly enslaved people to continue to depend on their former enslavers.⁴ Following emancipation, many formerly enslaved people believed or were told that they would receive resources to start their lives as freed people, such as William T. Sherman's "Forty Acres and a Mule."⁵ One woman, Patsy Hyde, noted, "De slaves wuz tole dey would git forty ak'rs ob groun' en a mule w'en dey wuz freed but dey nebber got hit."⁶ Out of the formerly enslaved people interviewed in the WPA narratives, thirty percent of them mentioned Sherman's Forty Acres and

³ Scott Martin, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project*, 41.

⁴ Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 223.

⁵ Karen Cook Bell, "African American Freedom and the Illusive 'Forty Acres and a Mule,'" *Black Perspectives*, November 16, 2017, <https://www.aaihs.org/african-american-freedom-and-the-illusive-forty-acres-and-a-mule>.

⁶ Patsy Clyde, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project*, 38.

a Mule. Many more commented on the lack of financial or material resources they had after emancipation. When faced with the decision to leave her former enslaver, Cecelia Chappel “cried lak a fool w’ en I had ter leave dem.” Cecelia told her WPA interviewer that she “allus had good clothes en good food en I didn’ know how I’d git dem atter I lef’ her.”⁷ While Cecelia’s statement may have reflected, as historian Stephanie Shaw notes, the dire conditions for Black people during the time of the interviews, the Great Depression, it also reveals the insecurities and unpredictability of the postbellum South for freed people.⁸ When freed people realized that government agencies would provide little to no assistance, freedom seemed even more tenuous.

Former enslavers and Freedmen’s Bureau officials often coerced formerly enslaved people into staying and working on plantations through threatening eviction or arrest under vagrancy laws.⁹ Because of this, former enslavers tried to reassert their control over formerly enslaved people, and labor contracts were the primary mechanism to do this.¹⁰ In many regards, enslavers tried to reaffirm and reconstruct the geographies of containment that they produced to control enslaved people. This was much easier to do in rural areas where freed people struggled more to establish separation and autonomy from enslavers.

Living and working under former enslavers posed serious challenges to the process of building free homes. Former enslavers still wanted to exert control over formerly enslaved people’s actions. As Black people gained their freedom, white men and women held onto any remaining power over the people they had enslaved desperately. Typically, the focus on the slaveholding class’ grasps for power have focused on former slaveholding white men, political power, and violence. Former slaveholding white women, however, played a large role in the

⁷ Cecelia Chappel, *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project*, 6.

⁸ Shaw, “Using the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives,” 623-658.

⁹ Hunter, *To ‘Joy My Freedom*, 24.

¹⁰ Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long*, 366.

power dynamics between the slaveholding class and formerly enslaved people.¹¹ In the immediate post-emancipation period, white women tried to maintain their control over formerly enslaved women by “reclaim[ing] black women’s labor.”¹² For example, groups of white women would adopt a single, unchanging wage to control Black women’s labor or refuse to hire freed women without references. While most white men did not hire or manage Black women laborers in white households, they were still involved in the process. So, while white employers reach was more limited compared to their control as enslavers, they still inserted themselves into Black people’s personal and domestic lives. Having greater contact with former enslavers, then, resulted in white employers attempts to exert significant amounts of control on Black domestic life.

When planters and other former slaveholders hired freed Black men and women, Black people’s contracts came with restrictive rules and regulations that white employers required freed people to follow. For example, William Giles Harding’s 1879 18 Articles of Agreement detailed Harding’s strict control over the Black laborers he employed. Harding tried to reinstated some of the same rules that established his geographies of containment during slavery. Specifically, this included the use of the farm bell in the slave quarters to mandate freed Black laborers work schedule and, in turn, when they can spend time in their homes.¹³ Another rule controlled who could come on Harding’s property and interact with Black workers: “No vicious person or persons of bad character or those in any wise objectionable to the employer will be invited by the employees or be permitted to come on employer’s premises.”¹⁴ Harding determined who visited

¹¹ See also Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*; Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 181-199. James L. Roark, *Masters Without Slaves: Southern Planters in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: Norton, 1977).

¹² Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 24

¹³ “Accounts William Giles Harding cash Vol. 14 account, 1879,” 1879, Box 2, Folder 8, Harding-Jackson Papers, TSLA, Nashville, Tennessee.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Belle Meade, and, in turn, he monitored who visited Black laborers. These meetings between Black laborers and “outsiders,” as Harding would have considered them, would have taken place in freed people’s homes. These meetings between Black people could have included religious services and social meetings. Perhaps these meetings even included school lessons. Oftentimes, Black schools and education occurred informally in Black homes in the absence of formal freedmen’s schools.¹⁵ Because Harding ardently opposed the establishment of a freedmen’s school at Belle Meade, his attempts to monitor visitors could have also included limiting freed people’s access to education after emancipation.¹⁶ Overall, Harding’s lengthy and restrictive labor contract attempted to control Black homes following emancipation.

Many other labor contracts between white employers and Black laborers followed similar patterns. A common practice of former enslavers and other white employers included providing housing for Black laborers, especially in rural areas. In a December 1865 contract between A. Enoch and Black laborers, Enoch furnished Black laborers with food and, importantly, housing in addition to the wages he paid.¹⁷ He owned the housing that his laborers lived in, which gave him the power to remove them from their homes if he chose. If Enoch believed that they broke the contract, or he wanted to remove Black laborers from their homes, he had the ability to force people off of his property. This meant many things for the freed people who lived on their former enslavers’ property like Enoch’s laborers. First of all, this threatened the stability that freed people tried to secure in the post-emancipation period. When formerly enslaved people decided

¹⁵ Hunter, *To ‘Joy My Freedom*, 42-43.

¹⁶ Henry Lee Swint, “Reports from Educational Agents of the Freedmen’s Bureau in Tennessee, 1865-1870,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (March 1942): 54, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42621798>.

¹⁷ “Indentures of Apprenticeship Dec. 1865 - Feb. 1868, Contracts: Jan. 1, 1865 - Jan. 1, 1868,” A. Enoch contract, Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Tennessee, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1869, National Archives Microfilm Publication M999, Roll 20, Freedmen's Bureau Digital Collection, National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution, <https://sova.si.edu/record/NMAAHC.FB>.

to work for their former enslavers, they partially did so in order to secure stability for themselves and family. So, because Eanoch owned freed people's housing, the threat of being forced out of their homes lingered. White employers' control over the physical space of freed people's homes threatened freed people's ability to build a new, free life and home in the post-emancipation period.

White employers' control over physical residences also threatened Black parents' ability to parent their children. In an effort to further control Black laborers Eanoch employed, he required: "The said freedmen are to work unconditionally under the direction of said Eanoch & perform all labour of what ever kind as directed by him."¹⁸ While it did not detail an all-encompassing control over freed people, the contract granted Eanoch a great deal of control over the labor of all his laborers, including multiple children. Many of Eanoch's hired laborers were families: George and Mariah Eanoch and their children, Samuel and Elizabeth; Henry and Hannah Eanoch and their daughter, Sarah; Robert and Becca Wynne and their daughter, Nancy Ann. When Eanoch required Black laborers to "work unconditionally" and "perform all labour of what ever kind," he changed the power dynamics between Black parents and their children. His control over children's labor would have shaped the ways that parents were able to publicly parent their children.

While white employers used contracts to control formerly enslaved people, they also signified negotiation and greater personal agency on behalf of freed people. Immediately after emancipation, the relationships between former enslavers and other white employers changed dramatically. White Freedmen's Bureau agents often coerced formerly enslaved people into entering into contracts with white employers, the Bureau also assisted freed people in negotiating

¹⁸ Ibid.

their contracts.¹⁹ Their quest for economic self-sufficiency contributed to their attempts to establish “household self-determination” and create a separation between white employers and Black women’s personal and home lives.²⁰ Black women negotiated their hours, wages, workplace, which ultimately affected when and how often formerly enslaved women were in their homes.²¹

Therefore, this period of transition and the ability to negotiate labor contracts allowed Black women to distance themselves from white people and their intrusion in these women’s homes. Many Black women spent more time inside of their homes in order to focus on domestic duties and childrearing. Spending more time in their homes also provided a way to separate themselves from the potential of sexual violence perpetrated by white employers. White men and women accused Black women of “playing the lady,” accusing them of trying to practice ideals of white womanhood and domesticity.²² Instead, Black women’s retreat into their homes reflected their priorities—their ability to invest more time and energy into their homes and families. While Black women still performed agricultural work for wages, they tried to spend more time inside of their homes.²³ After emancipation, a freed woman named Ellis Ken Kannon recalled Black women’s increased time in their homes, “De men [worked] in de fiel’s, de ‘omen in de house.”²⁴ Despite Freedmen’s Bureau agents’ and white employers’ attempts to control Black women’s labor, freed women used their contracts to secure some time in their homes. By negotiating their

¹⁹ Hunter, *To ‘Joy My Freedom*, 23; Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 53; Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long*, 279, 283.

²⁰ Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 57.

²¹ For more on how Black women negotiated labor contracts with their employers, see also Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 149-166; Hunter, *To ‘Joy My Freedom*, 52-55; Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 53.

²² For more on white people’s accusation of Black women “playing the lady” when freed women decided to spend more times in their homes after emancipation, see also Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 222. Hunter, *To ‘Joy My Freedom*, 52. Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 18; White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*, 80.

²³ Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 63.

²⁴ Ellis Ken Kannon, *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project*, 38.

labor contracts, formerly enslaved women dictated how and when they would work in and outside of white people's homes, when they spent time in their own homes, and invested financial resources in their families and homes.

For many formerly enslaved people, freedom included freedom of movement and choice—where to build their homes and who they surrounded themselves with. Between 1865 and 1868, many freed people asked the Freedmen's Bureau for monetary support to travel away from the site of their enslavement in search of families and new places to live. Freed people's need to move resulted in formerly enslaved people leaving the plantations they had lived on. While some freed people moved shorter distances and continued to live in rural areas, many others moved to urban areas in search of the promises of freedom.²⁵

Despite the insecurity that accompanied moving to a new, unfamiliar place, cities offered many opportunities to freed people. Many of them moved to search for new job opportunities that could have included less direct influence from white employers. One of the primary motivators for formerly enslaved people to move to different places included their quest to find family, fictive kin, or a sense of belonging and community.²⁶ On the one hand, cities offered greater opportunities to find lost family members because of its larger populations, ease of access to Black newspapers, and the ability to draw on larger Black social networks. Many freed people never found their lost family members, and the neighborhoods they congregated in suggest that they desired to live around other Black people. Thus, they created their own community and fictive kin. As freed women moved to all-Black neighborhoods in cities, they surrounded

²⁵ Transportation Reports, June 30, 1868, Records of the Assistant Commissioner of the State of Tennessee, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1869, National Archives Microfilm Publication M999 Roll 34, Freedmen's Bureau Digital Collection, National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution, <https://sova.si.edu/record/NMAAHC.FB>. See also Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long*, 297; Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 51; Williams, *Help Me to Find My People*, 146-148. Freedmen's Bureau records

²⁶ Williams, *Help Me to Find My People*, 146.

themselves with massive Black communities and family members, which actively created separation between white people and their homes. This provided the opportunity for Black women to shield themselves from sexual and other forms of violence perpetrated by white people.

So, in the immediate post-emancipation period, many cities experienced an influx of formerly enslaved people. In Nashville, freed people congregated in the location of Civil War contraband camps or established new Black neighborhoods. Former contraband camps were located on Edgehill Avenue near Fort Negley, East Nashville near Cedar and Church streets, Edgefield, and northwest Nashville near Fisk University. Other neighborhoods included Cameron-Trimble (or Trimble Bottom) and Black Bottom.²⁷

One of the biggest and well known all-Black neighborhoods was Black Bottom, commonly known as the Bottom by its residents. The Bottom resided between Broad (now Broadway) and Peabody streets, west of the Cumberland River.²⁸ Irish immigrants lived in the Bottom between 1850 and 1860, but after emancipation, formerly enslaved people began moving there. By the turn of the century, approximately 1,800 Black people lived in the neighborhood.²⁹ The Bottom tended to attract low-income Black folks, including formerly enslaved people who would have had trouble affording some of the property in Trimble Bottom or, later, North Nashville near Fisk University. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Bottom was a vibrant hub for Black life in Nashville because it contained many Black churches and all-

²⁷ Michelle Duke, "Blacks strive to restore spirit of lost communities," *The Nashville Banner*, February 2, 1998, Paul Clements Black History Research Collection, Metro Archives; Lovett, *The African American History of Nashville, Tennessee*, 76.

²⁸ 1908 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, Plate 3, Metro Archives, Nashville Public Library, Nashville, Tennessee.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

Black tenements.³⁰ While most white outsiders viewed the Bottom as dirty, crime-ridden, and dilapidated, many of its Black residents saw community, family, and home.

After the founding of Fisk University in North Nashville, many Black families moved there, and it slowly developed into one of the largest Black neighborhoods in Nashville. This neighborhood expanded on a contraband camp between Church and Cedar streets where self-emancipated Black people lived starting in 1863 during Union occupation.³¹ After emancipation, Susanna McGavock Carter and her family—Isaac, Porter, and Joe Carter—moved away from Belle Meade Plantation in Davidson County where they had lived while enslaved. In 1879, none of the Carters were included in William Giles Harding’s labor contract, unlike a large portion of formerly enslaved people who worked for the Hardings in the late nineteenth-century. This suggests that the Carters were not working for the family in a consistent manner. While pictures from the immediate post-emancipation period and a letter written by Howell Jackson to his wife, Mary Jackson, show Susanna working for the Harding-Jackson family in a limited role, she had most likely moved away from Belle Meade by that period.³² She worked as a laundress for the Jacksons, an occupation which allowed Black women to work more often in their own homes and communities.³³

As freed people searched for family, some moved closer to the ones they found. City directories from the early 1880s show the Carter family living on North College street, but by 1889 the Carter family lived on Gay Street near Clay Street.³⁴ This house was a few blocks away

³⁰ 1888 Map of Nashville, Tennessee, Metro Archives, Nashville Public Library, Nashville, Tennessee.

³¹ Lovett, *The African American History of Nashville, Tennessee*, 55, 73.

³² See picture in W. Ridley Wills II, “Black-White Relationships on the Belle Meade Plantation,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 24; Howell E. Jackson to Mary Jackson, September 13, 1876, Box 1, Folder 2, Harding-Jackson Papers, Addition, 1874-1891, TSLA, Nashville, Tennessee.

³³ Most laundresses worked in their own homes rather than the households of their white employers. Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom*, 56.

³⁴ Isaac Carter entries, 1889 Nashville City Directory, p. 177, F444 .N29, TSLA, Nashville, Tennessee.

from Susanna's sister, Joanna Lytle, who lived with her husband and son on Jackson Street.³⁵

The Carter's home in the late 1880s and the Lytle's home were both in the North Nashville neighborhood near Fisk University, where many Black families lived at this period.³⁶

By moving to Nashville, Susanna and Joanna used urban spaces as a way to rebuild their families. In 1854, Sarah McGavock, one of their former enslavers, separated the two sisters, resulting in Susanna's forced move from Carnton Plantation in Franklin to Belle Meade in Nashville. This resulted in Susanna and Joanna's approximately thirty-year separation from each other. So, when the Carter family decided where to move and establish their home, proximity to separated family was essential to them. While, as Heather Andrea Williams recognizes, family reunification between formerly enslaved family members was rare, when it happened it was intensely emotional. When families found each other again, the process of rebuilding their relationships with family and getting to know family for the first time was draining and, at times difficult.³⁷ However, family reunification was a huge priority for freed people after emancipation, which influenced how and where freed women built their free homes.

One of the ways in which Black neighborhoods built a sense of community was at social events. In 1871, the Middle Tennessee Colored Agricultural and Mechanical Association hosted a fair in Nashville. The fair included tons of exhibitions and was "crowded to its utmost capacity."³⁸ While some white citizens attended, the competitions and festivities were for Black people in Nashville. Susanna Carter and Joanna Lytle were among the fifty-one winners of the various competitions. While the sisters won many awards at the fair, they competed against one

³⁵ Joanna Lytle entries, 1879 Nashville City Directory, p. 269, F44 .N29, TSLA, Nashville, Tennessee

³⁶ 1877 Map of Nashville, Metro Archives, Nashville Public Library, Nashville, Tennessee.

³⁷ Williams, *Help Me to Find My People*, 172-188.

³⁸ "The Colored People's Fair," *Nashville Union and American*, September 17, 1871, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85033699>.

another for best blackberry wine. Susanna and Joanna likely made this wine in their homes. Because they lived so close to each other, perhaps they even made the wine together. As they filled their home(s) with the smell of cooking blackberries, they may have spent this time repairing their damaged relationships with quality time and lighthearted conversations. Even if they did not do this, Susanna and Joanna were at the fair together, likely spending time with each other. After emancipation, freed women rebuilt their family connections like Susanna and Joanna. Because they had been deprived of more stable familial relations under slavery, they cultivated these relationships through choosing where to build their homes during Reconstruction.

When the Carter family moved into a thriving Black community and near family members, they exercised their newly found freedom and autonomy. Like Susanna Carter and her family, many formerly enslaved people moved away from their former owners in order to build their new homes. By moving away, Black people were able to establish new homes away from the watchful and controlling gaze of white people—they were shrouded in their all-Black communities. Firstly, the establishment of these communities created safety and privacy in their homes, qualities that were difficult to achieve while enslaved. Black neighborhoods also served as social networks. These networks would have proven to be useful in finding lost family members, alleviate the daily pressures of poverty and insecurity that came with emancipation, and heal from the horrors of slavery. As shown by the 1871 fair, Black communities came together to celebrate and offer relief to the everyday drudgery of their labors. Freed people socialized and strengthened networks that helped formerly enslaved people on a daily basis. Poverty was prominent for freed people, and this resulted in challenges to their homes. Urban communities helped offset the struggles of urban life through helping with childcare and pooling

resources. Black communities broadened ideas of kinship through this support. Like under slavery, Black homes continued to be as much of a community space as they were family spaces. Family reunification and community assistance and support allowed freed women to continue to understand their homes as refuges from white people and the labors they endured.³⁹

Shoot dem ef dey kum on de place

While formerly enslaved women chose to live in different places and environments in the post-emancipation period, they also experienced many challenges to preserving and protecting the homes they built. White violence continued to hang over Black people in the aftermath of slavery, and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and white vigilante “justice” threatened the sanctity of their homes. So, as Black homes became spaces that were somewhat outside the reach of white people, white men continued to use violence to demand entrance into their homes. For white people, the existence of Black homes challenged white patriarchal supremacy and represented Black citizenship and freedom.⁴⁰ For Black women, free homes represented claims on their freedom, citizenship, and womanhood. So, when white men attacked Black homes they rejected and tried to invalidate Black women’s claims to these things.

To undermine and attack their homes, white men used gendered violence, specifically sexual violence. Violence was an ordinary part of post-emancipation life for freed people. While the legality of state-sanctioned violence against Black people changed, whites continued to use it to assert dominance over freed people and their lives.⁴¹ Specifically, the KKK and other

³⁹ Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 49-73, 82.

⁴⁰ Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Post Emancipation South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 181.

⁴¹ Kidada E. Williams, *They Left Great Marks on Me: African American Testimonials of Racial Violence from Emancipation to World War I* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 18.

nightriders used sexual violence to attack Black women and their homes. The Freedmen's Bureau, however, gave Black people the legal tools to fight against white violence. Among its various functions, the Bureau provided a space for Black people to report the violence they endured.⁴² From the available Tennessee Freedmen's Bureau records, nine out of the twenty-five reports on direct attacks of Black people's homes included rape or other forms of sexual violence. This, of course, does not include the many women who did not report experiencing sexual violence. Additionally, these attacks targeted more than one person in any given home. Sometimes, it was mothers and children. White men raped Black women in and near their homes to exert control over Black domestic lives and assert dominance over freed people. In doing so, white men not only attacked Black homes, but they also tried to influence how freed men and women constructed the social makeup of their homes.⁴³

Black women's experiences of white violence get in these reports because of their testimonies. Black people's testimonies not only spoke to the violence that survivors and witnesses endured, but it also provided an avenue to protest these experiences. Whenever Black men and women filed a report with the Freedmen's Bureau, they claimed their citizenship rights and resisted white attempts of subjugation. Similarly, Black women's testimonies to sexual violence defied the imposition of overly sexualized stereotypes on themselves.⁴⁴ Freed women did this especially when they focused on their homes as sites of attacks on their freedom, citizenship, and womanhood. By centering their homes in their testimonies, then, Black women not only claimed the right to secure a safe space for themselves and families, but they also asserted their own ideas of womanhood in their homes. Because Black women's conceptions of

⁴² Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom*, 181; Williams, *They Left Great Marks on Me*, 19.

⁴³ Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom*, 182.

⁴⁴ Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom*, 224.

womanhood were tied to the space of their homes, the (sexual) violence that occurred attacked both the space and role as women. When Black women made their reports on attacks on their homes, they theoretically declared, “Look, bear witness to what has been done to me. It is not what I wanted. It does not align with my understandings of my home. It is not who I am.” Testifying Black women refused to let white men’s violence determine their identities as women or the meanings of their homes.

In 1869, the KKK arrived at the home of Mrs. Bennett, a Black woman, who lived in Williamson County. The white men forced Mrs. Bennett out of her house, ripped off her clothes, and “gave her what used to be called ‘a genteel flogging.’”⁴⁵ Laced with sexual undertones, this “genteel flogging” included being tied up to a pole or tree, stripped to the waist, and beaten with some sort of whip.⁴⁶ By whipping Mrs. Bennett in this manner, the Klan sought to reinforce the violent power dichotomy between “slave” and “master.” The KKK also took Mrs. Bennett’s clothing off. This underlying sexual violence revealed how these white men wanted to assert dominance over a Black woman’s body and, in turn, sexuality. Oftentimes, white men used sexual violence to invalidate Black women’s purity and loyalty as a wife. Thus, the Klan committed this violence in an attempt to assert dominance over Black men’s masculinity and Black women’s femininity.⁴⁷ The Klan forced Mrs. Bennett out of her home, which ripped her away from a domestic space where she acted as a wife, indicated from the “Mrs” in her name. The space of the home was essential to Black women’s understanding of womanhood. When

⁴⁵ Kuklux in Williamson, *Nashville Daily Press and Times*, 1/14/1869, Box 3, Folder 20, Paul Clements Black History Research Collection, Metro Archives, Nashville Public Library, Nashville, Tennessee.

⁴⁶ Martha C. Knack, *Boundaries Between: The Southern Paiutes, 1775-1995* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 92; Frederick Douglass, 1881, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass: His Early Life as a Slave, His Escape from Bondage, and His Complete History to the Present Time*, Documenting the American South, University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1999, 41, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/douglasslife/douglass.html>.

⁴⁷ Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom*, 182.

they were not engaged in agriculture labor or domestic wage labor, they spent much of their time in their homes. So, when the Klan forcibly removed Mrs. Bennett from her home, these white men attacked her understanding of her womanhood and freedom.

Sometimes the violence literally entered Black homes. In September 1866, John Martin, a white man, assaulted an elderly Black woman in Nashville. Martin was “charged with having entered the shanty of a negro woman... and after tearing things up generally, assaulting the aged occupant, and injured her severely.”⁴⁸ The list of outrages listed in the Freedmen’s Bureau records echoed this violence perpetrated in and around the homes of Black women. Twenty-five recorded outrages specifically described violence occurring inside or around Black people’s homes, and fifteen of these crimes were committed against Black women. Nine of these reports specifically mentioned sexual violence.⁴⁹ For Black women, this violence was much more intimate and violating because of the personal ways in which white men used their homes as the site of the violations of their bodies.

In November 1865, Tabby Wheatley’s daughter came home bloodied and crying. She had tried to escape a white man, Andrew B. Payne, who attacked her by coming home and seeking the protection of her mother. According to the report filed by Tabby Wheatley, Payne beat Wheatley’s daughter badly, and Payne and another white man, Miles Ferguson, followed

⁴⁸ “Arrested for Assaulting a Negro Woman,” *Nashville Dispatch*, September 1866, Box 3, Folder 7, Paul Clements Black History Research Collection, Metro Archives, Nashville Public Library, Nashville, Tennessee.

⁴⁹ In the Freedmen’s Bureau records I draw from, 178 records were reported in various counties, including Haywood, Gibson, Madison, Hamilton, Davidson, Macon, Maury, Shelby, Rutherford, Robertson, Knox, Cannon, Marshall, Giles, Coffee, Montgomery counties. These records, however, are incomplete. Many of these records do not detail where the violence took place. Some records only detail a few incidents from each county. Some counties are not represented. Therefore, I believe that my analysis of these records underestimates the inextricable relationship between home and white violence. “Reports of Outrages, Riots and Murders, Jan. 15, 1866 - Aug. 12, 1868,” Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Tennessee, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1869, National Archives Microfilm Publication M999, Roll 34, Freedmen's Bureau Digital Collection, National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution, <https://sova.si.edu/record/NMAAHC.FB>.

Wheatley's daughter home "to beat the girl more."⁵⁰ When Wheatley would not allow Payne and Ferguson to enter her home, Payne began hitting her with a stick and forced himself into the house. Payne then took Wheatley's daughter, ripped off her clothes, and began beating her. Tabby Wheatley heard her daughter crying for help, so she ran to help her. Payne and Ferguson, then attacked Wheatley again. While there was no explicit mention of rape, the suggestion of sexual violence endured. Andrew B. Payne committed a similar act of violence a month later against Maria Posey and her child.⁵¹ In an 1866 report filed by Posey, Maria recounted her horrifying experiences. As Maria laid in bed trying to recover from a sickness, Payne forced himself into her house and tried to rape her with her child in the room. When she screamed, Payne stopped, but then tried to beat her with a shovel. Payne's companion pushed Posey into a fire, and they ran off.

In these reports, Tabby Wheatley and Maria Posey refused to allow terror and violence rule their homes. On the one hand, these reports were evidence of these Black women literally fighting off their white attackers to protect themselves and their children. When Payne harmed Wheatley's daughter, Tabby fought to protect her, which resulted in Payne hurting her. Maria fought off Payne when he tried to rape her. On the other hand, both women used testimonies to try and protect their homes. By centering the home in their reports, Tabby and Maria defiantly claimed that they would not tolerate anymore violence in their homes. Unlike under slavery, Black women made it obvious that violence—sexual or otherwise—had no place in their homes. In turn, these Black women made sure that the Freedmen's Bureau, Andrew Payne, and anyone

⁵⁰ "Reports of Outrages, Riots and Murders, Jan. 15, 1866 – Aug. 12, 1868," Murfreesboro, Tennessee, Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Tennessee, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1869, National Archives Microfilm Publication M999, Roll 34, Freedmen's Bureau Digital Collection, National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution, <https://sova.si.edu/record/NMAAHC.FB>.

⁵¹ Ibid.

else who heard or read their testimonies knew that Tabby and Maria's homes would be safe refuges for themselves and their children.

While this violence threatened and entered freed women's homes, Black women asserted the idea that their homes were places to protect through physical forms of self-defense. When members of the KKK rode past Laura Ramsey Parker's home and planned to attack it, she "grab'ed a shotgun en said dat I wuz gwine ter shoot dem ef dey kum on de place."⁵² When faced with the possibility that white men would harm her and her home, Parker decided that it was of utmost importance to protect it with her gun. Black women's need to defend their homes revealed how they were not always able to protect it under slavery. It shows the significance of formerly enslaved women's ability to secure their homes and the people inside them. While they were not always able to prevent the violation of their homes and family, freedom granted them new avenues toward protection. This was essential in building free homes. It allowed them to preserve and protect their bodily integrity and build a home that was secure and private. So, despite this violence, free women still actively built free homes for themselves and their families.

Information Wanted

On October 14, 1865, Charity Moss placed an advertisement in the Nashville-based newspaper *The Colored Tennessean* looking for her two missing sons, James and Horace. Her former enslaver had sold her sons away from her at a young age. The Civil War had ended six months prior, and Charity Moss had likely searched for her children long before she requested that *The Colored Tennessean* publish her advertisement. In the first months of freedom, however, Charity desperately tried to reunite her family. "Information is wanted of my two boys, James

⁵² Laura Ramsey Parker, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project*, 62.

and Horace,” the advertisement began, “one of whom was sold in Nashville and the other was sold in Rutherford county.”⁵³ On one hand, this advertisement reveals one of the many ways that slavery destroyed Black women’s attempts to create a unified home with their families. On the other hand, it shows how freed women made extraordinary efforts to reunite their families and, thus, begin to build free homes. For Black women, reuniting with family in one place and under one roof was an important characteristic of home.⁵⁴ It signaled security, belonging, and hope, qualities that were often disturbed in slavery.

Reuniting family members, however, was difficult. In the antebellum era, the slavery economy moved enslaved people all over the South with no regard for enslaved families, which often left family members separated by long distances and time. While some freed people had more detailed information of their loved ones’ location(s), most only had small amounts of information to go off of, which was evident in the ads themselves.⁵⁵ Some mothers separated from their young children may not even have known what their children looked like when they began looking for them. Sometimes there were monetary restrictions. While any fees for *The Colored Tennessean* are not clear, some newspapers, like the *Southwestern Christian Advocate*, required a fee to place an Information Wanted ad in the newspaper.⁵⁶ Significantly, in the immediate post-emancipation period, searching for family was among the first actions of formerly enslaved women. Amidst the chaos of initial freedom, freed women made family unification a primary goal. These ads are essential for understanding Black homes in slavery and

⁵³ Charity Moss, “Information Wanted,” *The Colored Tennessean*, October 14, 1865, *The Colored Tennessean*, 1865-1866 Collection, Last Seen: Finding Family After Slavery Database, Villanova University, <http://informationwanted.org>.

⁵⁴ Historian Heather Andrew Williams argues, the African American search for family took on even greater urgency” after emancipation. Williams, *Help Me to Find My Family*, 143.

⁵⁵ Williams, *Help Me to Find My People*, 122-124.

⁵⁶ Williams, *Help Me to Find My People*, 151, 154.

emancipation. They suggest how essential family, especially children, were to Black women and their homes.

Many other freed women like Charity Moss placed ads in *The Colored Tennessean* in the aftermath of the Civil War, especially between 1865 and 1866. Freed people placed information wanted advertisements in other newspapers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including in *The Nashville Globe* and *Southwestern Christian Advocate*.⁵⁷ Out of approximately forty-seven advertisements placed in *The Colored Tennessean*, Black men and women published about equal numbers of ads. Freed women, however, tended to place ads searching for children more often than any other family member, while most freed men looked for parents, especially mothers, and other extended family members.⁵⁸ Thus, reunification with children became instrumental in defining free homes.

Some of these women looked for family that had been separated from them a long time ago. Susan Huddleston published an ad on July 18, 1866 looking for her son, Jetson, who had been sold away from her sixteen years ago.⁵⁹ Susan lived in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, while their former enslaver sold Jetson somewhere in Mississippi. In March 1866, Eliza Ann Ratliff placed an ad looking for her sons, George, William, and Bearty, almost a decade after her

⁵⁷ The *Southwestern Christian Advocate* published these advertisements in the early 1880s. While the newspaper was based in New Orleans, some of the ads pertained to people who were thought to be in Tennessee. Additionally, the *Nashville Globe* ran between 1907 and 1912, so even by the early twentieth century, formerly enslaved people were still searching for lost family members. There are hundreds of these ads published in both newspapers. So, for the purposes of this chapter, I'm focusing on newspaper ads published in *The Colored Tennessean* for two reasons: 1) because of the newspaper's focus on the immediate post-emancipation period (late 1860s) and 2) this chapter's limited scope and length.

⁵⁸ The collection of Information Wanted advertisements is from a collection compiled by the History Department at Villanova University and Mother Bethel AME Church. This collection contains forty-seven ads, but it is likely that more advertisements were placed in *The Colored Tennessean* between 1865 and 1866. *The Colored Tennessean*, 1865-1866 Collection, Last Seen: Finding Family After Slavery Database, Villanova University, <http://informationwanted.org>.

⁵⁹ Susan Huddleston, "Information Wanted," July 18, 1866, *The Colored Tennessean*, *The Colored Tennessean*, 1865-1866 Collection, Last Seen: Finding Family After Slavery Database, Villanova University, <http://informationwanted.org>.

enslaver separated her from her children.⁶⁰ Hannah Barnett placed an advertisement in *The Colored Tennessean* searching for her daughter, Martha James, on March 31, 1866. In it, she told readers that her daughter “was sold to Mr. John James, Nashville, Tenn., about nine years ago, since which time she has not been seen by me.”⁶¹ These advertisements gave Black women a place to lament their losses publicly, but also actively piece their lives back together. Despite the amount of time that passed, Black women remained adamant in reuniting with their children.

Much of what freed women did in the post-emancipation period to rebuild their homes was inspired by the realities of slavery. For the first time in their lives, emancipation offered the possibilities to build a free home. Freed women lovingly, and determinedly tried to realize these promises. They envisioned their homes as their refuge in the midst of the chaos and violence of Reconstruction, and amidst the struggles and triumphs of this period, Black women struggled to realize the homes that were only dreams under the confines of slavery.

⁶⁰ Eliza Ann Ratliff, “Information Wanted,” March 24, 1866, *The Colored Tennessean*, *The Colored Tennessean*, 1865-1866 Collection, Last Seen: Finding Family After Slavery Database, Villanova University, <http://informationwanted.org>.

⁶¹ Hannah Barnett, “Information Wanted,” March 31, 1866, *The Colored Tennessean*, *The Colored Tennessean*, 1865-1866 Collection, Last Seen: Finding Family After Slavery Database, Villanova University, <http://informationwanted.org>.

Conclusion

“We could not learn to love or respect ourselves in the culture of white supremacy, on the outside; it was there on the inside, in that ‘homeplace,’ most often created and kept by black women, that we had the opportunity to grow and develop, to nurture our spirits.”
– bell hooks, “Homeplace: A Site of Resistance”¹

On December 29, 1865, Gibson and Leann Light agreed to a contract with Joel A. Light, their former enslaver, in Dyer County, Tennessee.² An excerpt from the contract detailed the terms of Leann’s labor:

The said Light agrees to furnish the land tools & horses to cultivate the same and to furnish the said parities & their family their provisions & give them one third of the crop they may cultivate-the said freedmen furnish their own clothing & pay their own doctors bills. Leann to do cooking washing and all necessary house work & she is spin & work for herself when not employed in house work. The said Gibson is to attend to the stock & to do all necessary work in keeping up the farm. This contract to continue one year from this date.³

Leann signed the contract with her mark, an X next to her name, which suggested her active role in negotiating these terms. While enslaved women attempted to perform as much labor as they could in their homes, emancipation finally offered the chance to invest more time and energy into their homes. Leann demanded the opportunity to “spin & work for herself.” Like most Black women in the nineteenth-century, the work Leann performed inside of her home would have included cooking, cleaning, and sewing for herself and her husband. While we do not know how much actual “free” time she spent working in her home, what we do know is that Gibson and Leann were determined to make this possible. In fact, the inclusion of this phrase in

¹ bell hooks, “Homeplace: A Site of Resistance,” in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 78.

² 1850 U.S. Census, Dyer County, Tennessee, slave schedule, 4th Civil District, p. 216, lines 1-24, Joel A. Light, slaveowner; digital image, Ancestry Heritage Quest, <https://www.ancestryheritagequest.com>.

³ “Indentures of Apprenticeship Dec. 1865 - Feb. 1868, Contracts: Jan. 1, 1865 - Jan. 1, 1868,” Joel A. Light contract, Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Tennessee, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1869, National Archives Microfilm Publication M999, Roll 20, Freedmen's Bureau Digital Collection, National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution, <https://sova.si.edu/record/NMAAHC.FB>.

her contract revealed how highly Leann valued spending time to build a free home. As a freed Black woman, this extra time would have given Leann the opportunity to invest her time, energy, and love into her home. She did this eagerly.

When Leann signed this contract, she was either pregnant or had recently given birth to her first child, Sarah J. Light.⁴ Leann, then, used her home to nurture and care of her newborn child and perform the responsibilities of motherhood for her growing family. Leann and Gibson took steps to build a free home, establishing the home they wanted for themselves and their free-born daughter. Between 1865 and 1880, Leann would give birth to five more children: Rhulim, Vabe, Susan, Moses, and Naseree.⁵ So, her role as a mother would have taken up most of her time and energy inside her home. In this immediate post-emancipation period—this transition from slavery to freedom—Leann made efforts to build a free home for herself and her children.

When Leann demanded to spend more time in her home, she resisted white people's attempts to control it. bell hooks believes that Black women's efforts to create a home for themselves and their children were defiant acts of resistance. In the "homeplace," as she calls it, Black people were subjects, not objects dominated by white supremacy. Black women were the primary actors in the homeplace because they nurtured and cared for their children, which provided a break from their oppression. Their homeplaces "had a radical political dimension" because it allowed Black people to "freely confront the issue of humanization."⁶ Essentially, homeplaces were a place where Black people had the chance to "restore to ourselves the dignity

⁴ 1880 United States Federal Census, District 4, Dyer County, Tennessee, roll 1253, p. 84A, dwelling 143, family 144, Gip Light; digital image, Ancestry Heritage Quest, accessed March 11, 2019, <https://www.ancestryheritagequest.com>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ bell hooks, "Homeplace," 78.

denied us on the outside in the public world”—to challenge white supremacist conceptions of Blackness and embrace Black people’s humanity in the face of dehumanization.⁷

This is exactly what enslaved women did. In the midst of near constant dehumanization, enslaved women invested their labors and love in their homes (or homeplaces). Enslaved women challenged enslavers’ intentions and tried to create a refuge from the horrors of slavery. They produced a rival geography in their homes and created spaces built for their own intention. Thus, they empowered themselves and their children—educating, creating, loving, and resisting.

Enslaved women’s homes gave them the opportunity to be intensely human—to feel and connect. It was in their homes that enslaved mothers expressed fondness and love for their children openly. Sometimes, they voiced their anger and despair at the lived realities of their enslavement. Oftentimes, the home became the site where they expressed their pain and grief. The home allowed enslaved women to cultivate and establish their relationships and identities as mothers, wives, women, etc. In building their homes, they challenged the stereotypical white supremacist notions of what white people believed Black womanhood should be. As a result, they established their own conceptualizations of womanhood. The home, then, became a radical expression of their humanity.

As enslaved women used their homes to affirm and assert their humanity, they shaped their children and future generations. The home was a central place for enslaved children, and the home’s importance for them fills the archive. I told many of these stories through the eyes of children. Throughout this thesis, I relied on the WPA and Fisk University narratives heavily. The enslaved people who told their stories during these interviews straddled enslavement and emancipation, sitting—much like the home—at the nexus of slavery and freedom. Each of the

⁷ Ibid.

narratives inform much of our understandings of slavery, emancipation, and enslaved people's conceptions of personhood. Many of those interviewed told stories of their mothers and the homes they imagined and created. Enslaved mothers nurtured and taught their children in their homes. Therefore, how formerly enslaved people, especially those in the WPA and Fisk narratives, experienced and understood their homes significantly informed much of their understandings of slavery, emancipation, and personhood.

As it did for enslaved women, the home shapes our understanding of enslaved people's humanity—how they felt, thought, and existed. This thesis, then, is not just about the home. It is a study of enslaved women's humanity and how they understood it. More importantly, this study is an affirmation of enslaved woman's radical declaration of their womanhood and humanity.

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