

# Closer *to* FREEDOM

## Gender and American Culture

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Enslaved Women

and Everyday

Resistance in the

Plantation South

STEPHANIE M. H. CAMP



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# 3

## THE INTOXICATION OF PLEASURABLE AMUSEMENT

### *Secret Parties and the Politics of the Body*

As a young woman, Nancy Williams joined other enslaved people and “court-in’ couples” who would “slip away” to an “ole cabin” a few miles from the Virginia plantation where she lived. Deep in the woods, away from slaveholders’ eyes, they held secret parties where they danced, performed music, drank alcohol, and courted. A religious woman in her old age, Williams admitted only reluctantly to her interviewer that she had enjoyed the secular pleasures of dressing up and going to outlaw dances. “Dem de day’s when me’n de devil was runnin roun in de depths o’ hell. No, don’ even wanna talk ’bout it,” she said. However, Williams ultimately agreed to talk about the outlaw parties she attended, reasoning that “guess I didn’ know no better den” and remembering with fondness that, after all, “dem dances was somepin.”

Musicians played fiddles, tambourines, banjos, and “two sets of [cow] bones” for dancers. Williams was a gifted and enthusiastic dancer; she would get “out dere in de middle o’ de flo’ jes’ a-dancin’; me an’ Jennie and de devil. Dancin’ wid a glass of water on my head an’ three boys a bettin’ on me.” Williams often won this contest by dancing the longest while balancing a glass of water on her head without spilling a drop. She “jes danced ole Jennie down.” Like the other women in attendance, Williams took great pride in her outfits at these illicit parties, and she went to great trouble to make them, adorning one dress with ruffles and dyeing others yellow or red. Her yellow dress had matching yellow shoes; they were ill fitting, as many bondpeople’s wooden “brogans” were, and “sho’ did hurt me.” But animated by her own beautiful self-presentation, “dat ain’t stop me f’om dancin’.”<sup>1</sup>

By illuminating a part of everyday life that slaves kept a close secret, Nancy Williams’s account of attending outlaw slave parties helps uncover one part of

the story of enslaved women’s lives: the role that the body played in slaveholders’ endeavors to control their labor force and in black resistance to that control. Despite planters’ tremendous effort, enslaved women and men routinely “slip[ped] away” to attend illicit parties where such sensual pleasures as eating, dancing, drinking, and dressing were among the main amusements.<sup>2</sup> Contingent upon opportunity, season, locale, the availability of resources, and the emotional climate within enslaved communities and between bondpeople and their owners, slaves’ illegal parties took place in the very woods and swamps with which many planters marked off illicit plantation space and declared off limits. Dense thickets of woods and murky swampland nonetheless proved irresistible to bondpeople who longed for places of independent socializing and activity.

Like another “invisible institution,” slave Christianity, the secular institution was organized and inhabited in whispers and in code, in hiding and in the dark. Like the church, parties promised the rewards of congregation, a moment of release from drudgery and sorrow, and a different form of jubilation.<sup>3</sup> Religiosity, we must remember, was as dependent on temperament, upbringing, and life stage among the enslaved as among any people. Not all bondpeople found the hope and strength in the church that Christians did. There were those who agreed with the version of the song “Run, Nigger, Run” that critiqued enslaved clergy: “Some folks say a preacher won’t steal / I caught two in my corn field.”<sup>4</sup> The young, the cynical, the distracted, and the committed secularists all had their reasons for rejecting religious worship, and some of these worldly minded people sought release in the form of pleasurable amusement. No great divide existed between one and the other social formation, however, for the lives of many individuals coursed through both secular and sacred involvements. Nancy Williams was one among many who engaged in youthful activities of which they later disapproved.

Together enslaved women and men ran to abandoned outbuildings, woods, or swamps where they enjoyed music, dancing, the company of others, and a shared secret. Enslaved partygoers had a common commitment to delight in their bodies, to display their physical skill, to master their bodies through competition with others, and to express their creativity. They also had in common the capability of exorcizing discontents violently on one another. More than men, women indulged in fancy dress, to the extent that they could manage it, and men, more than women, delighted in drinking alcohol. That they engaged in these bodily delights as slaves gives their activities a significance beyond the personal gratification that they, as individuals, experienced. Slaves’ dishonor was in large measure “embodied.”<sup>5</sup> Inhabitants of a premodern society, bondpeople were made to suffer domination largely

through the body in the form of captivity, commodification, exploitation, and physical punishment.<sup>6</sup> As late nineteenth-century activist Ida B. Wells said, slaveholders attempted to “dwarf the soul and preserve the body.”<sup>7</sup> However, brutality did not constitute the whole of slaves’ bodily experience. For those who encounter oppression through the body, the body becomes an important site not only of suffering but also (and therefore) of enjoyment and resistance.<sup>8</sup> Studying the body through a framework of containment and transgression grants us access to new perspectives on resistance and the workings of gender difference within enslaved plantation communities.

### THREE BODIES

The body, French historian Dorinda Outram has written, is at once the most personal, intimate thing that people possess and the most public. The body, then, can provide and has provided a “basic political resource” in struggles between dominant and subordinate classes. Second-wave feminists said that the personal is political, but earlier, C. L. R. James had already argued that the twentieth century’s working people “are rebelling everyday in ways of their own invention” in order to “regain control over their own conditions of life and their relations with one another.” James found that often “their struggles are on a small personal scale.” Enslaved people’s everyday battles for “regain- ing” a measure of “control” took place on very “personal” terrain: their bodies.<sup>9</sup> Thinking about enslaved bodies in space allows us to see them materially, to watch as the prime implement of labor in the Old South moved in ways inconsistent with the rigors of agricultural production. Attention to the body also facilitates thinking about issues beyond the material, such as the roles of movement and pleasure in the culture of opposition developed by enslaved people. A somatic approach, such as the one employed here, risks objectifying people, but my purpose is the opposite: to demonstrate how enslaved people claimed, animated, politicized, personalized, and enjoyed their bodies—flesh that was regarded by much of American society as no more than biddable property.

Most of all, attention to uses and experiences of the body is mandatory for those interested in the lives of women in slavery, for it was women’s actual and imagined reproductive labor and their unique forms of bodily suffering (notably sexual exploitation) that most distinguished their lives from men’s. Historians of enslaved women have demonstrated the falseness of the dichotomy between the personal and the social to a large degree by exploring how the body, so personal, was also a political entity, a site of both domination and resistance.<sup>10</sup> Women employed their bodies in a wide variety of ways,

from seizing control over the representation of their physical selves in narrative and photographic forms (both of which were in enormous demand among antebellum northerners) to abortion.<sup>11</sup>

Perceptions of the proper uses of the black body, especially the female body, were central, materially and symbolically, to the formation of slaveholding mastery. As the English became entrenched in the slave trade in the second half of the seventeenth century, their preexisting perceptions of Africans concretized into constructions of blackness that justified the trade. In addition to Africans’ “heathenism,” the English used representations of bodily difference to rationalize the economically expedient turn to bound black labor. Jennifer L. Morgan has demonstrated that these constructions relied in large part on representations of African women’s bodies as inherently laboring ones. Englishmen came to see African women as drudges through sixteenth- and seventeenth-century male travelers’ representations of African women’s rugged reproductive and laboring bodies that stood in stark distinction to the idealized idle and dependent Englishwoman. Male travelers to Africa in the earliest years of contact remarked on what they saw as African women’s sexual deviance: they lived in “common” (polygamously) with men and they bared much of their bodies, most remarkably their breasts, with “no shame.” Englishmen represented African women’s breasts (“dugs”) as large and droopy, “like the udder of a goate,” as one traveler put it. Animal-like, African women’s exposed “dugs” struck male travelers as evidence of Africa’s savagery and inferiority. African women’s reproductive bodies demonstrated to European eyes their physical strength: they gave birth “without payne,” suggesting that “the women here [Guinea] are of a cruder nature and stronger posture than the Females in our Lands in Europe.” Confirming this conclusion was the fact that African women commonly worked in agriculture. Unencumbered by the delicacy that prevented the ideal Englishwoman from arduous labor, African women, then, were fit—*naturally* fit—for demanding agricultural and reproductive labor on the plantations of the Americas. Over the seventeenth century, representations of African women’s rugged reproductive capacity proved the inherent laboring nature of African women and, by extension, African men and helped to justify the slave trade by naturalizing it.<sup>12</sup>

Englishmen encoded their ideas of racial difference based on constructions of African women’s laboring bodies into law in England’s colony in Virginia in 1643. In that year free African women were declared tithables (their labor could be taxed), along with all free white men and male heads of households, Kathleen M. Brown has shown. Because white women were viewed as dependents, as “good wives” who performed household, not agri-

cultural, labor, they remained untaxed. The very different treatment of African and English women lay in diverse conceptions of their capacity to work in the fields and articulated distinct projections of the roles each would play in the life of the colony. Two years later, African men also became tithables and thus fell within the legal construction of African bodies as inherently laboring ones. Buttressed by constructions of Africans as heathens and savages, which themselves relied heavily on representations of African women's sexual and reproductive bodies, English lawmakers could, by 1670, force those servants who had arrived in Virginia "by shipping" (Africans) to serve lifelong terms of servitude, while those who had "come by land" (Indians) served limited terms. This law combined with the earlier law of 1667 banning the manumission of converted Christians to crystallize the racial form of the emergent slave economy.<sup>13</sup> In the context of slavery, issues of representation of the black body, especially the female black body, and material expropriation could not be separated.

By the antebellum period, planters had so thoroughly assimilated ideas that reduced enslaved people to their bodies that they often referred to them by their parts: "hands" was a common term, and "heads" was not unfamiliar. At other moments women slaves, those natural workers, were as one with their farming tools and called, simply, "hoes."<sup>14</sup> Planters, and white southern men generally, had also learned of black women's tough, sexual nature and preyed on them shamelessly. Among some enslaved people the white men who seduced or raped bondwomen earned the name "Carpet Gitters"<sup>15</sup> and were understood to be a flourishing population. "Did de dirty suckers associate wid slave wimmen?" the Reverend Ishrael Massie exclaimed to his interviewer in the 1930s. "I call 'em suckers—feel like saying something else but I'll 'spec ya, honey. Lord, chile, day wuz common."<sup>16</sup> "Dat happ'ned a lots in dem days," and liaisons were scarcely considered extraordinary. Nonetheless, they were the subject of comment and (disparate) judgment by both black and white.<sup>17</sup> Bondpeople and many planter women often shared a critical view of white sexual predators as "suckers" and "vile wretches."<sup>18</sup> But white women also tended to agree with white men that black women possessed a certain "wickedness" and were, essentially, "prostitutes."<sup>19</sup> Slaveholding woman Rachel O'Connor thought her overseer a despicable "villain" when he was found "together" with the bondwoman Eliza. Eliza had been a "good girl before that villain came here," although that did her no good when O'Connor "whipped her myself, and cut her curls off." Months later the association between Eliza and the overseer continued, as did O'Connor's abuses. February and March found Eliza's neck in a "rather tight" iron. Eliza not only endured her owner's judgment. Of greater anguish, no doubt,

was the possible end of her engagement to a bondman who O'Connor now did not "expect . . . will take her."<sup>20</sup> Rape of enslaved women broke bondmen's hearts, too. And a few enslaved men broke hearts when they, also, assaulted women.<sup>21</sup>

Antebellum planters, as we have seen, were very interested in the control of black movement. They were also keen to master their slaves' senses of pleasure. Seeking to contain black bodies even further than laws, curfews, bells, horns, and patrols already did, some planters used plantation frolics as a paternalist mechanism of social control. Plantation parties, which carefully doled out joy on Saturday nights and holidays, were intended to seem benevolent and to inspire respect, gratitude, deference, and importantly, obedience. As North Carolinian Midge Burnett noted sardonically, his owner held plantation frolics on holidays, gave bondpeople Christmas trees in December, and organized an Easter egg hunt in the spring—all "'case Marse William intended ter make us a civilized bunch of blacks."<sup>22</sup> The person who "acted rude" instead of grateful and deferential might find him- or herself punished, perhaps even put "in Jail."<sup>23</sup> Those who attended without passes were certainly reprimanded; when one planter caught two of a neighbor's bondmen with "no pass[es]" at a Christmas frolic for his slaves, he ran them off and "broke my sword Cane over one of their skulls."<sup>24</sup> It was one planter's policy to provide "a dance house for the young, and those who wish to dance" or pray. He made "it a rule to be present myself occasionally at both" types of events. He did these things because he believed "negroes will be better disposed this way than any other."<sup>25</sup>

Most of all, these frolics were supposed to control black pleasure by allowing it periodic, approved expression. Paternalist slaveholders accomplished this goal by attending and surveilling the parties. Indeed, the most important component of paternalistic plantation parties was the legitimating presence of the master. It was common for whites to attend these frolics and to "set around and watch" while bondpeople would "dance and sing."<sup>26</sup> Though sanctioning black pleasure, the slaveholder's gaze oversaw and contained that pleasure, ensuring that it would not become dangerous. For example, to ensure that the alcohol, music, dancing, "sundrie articles," and "treats" he provided his bondpeople at holiday time served the dual purpose of simultaneously giving limited expression to and containing their bodily pleasure, John Nevitt made sure to "s[i]t up untill 2 o'clock in the morning to keep order with them."<sup>27</sup> Both former slave Henry Bibb and former slaveholder R. Criswell remembered slaveholders' supervision of plantation frolics, and both illustrated the constrictive effects of that gaze in their memoirs of antebellum plantation life.



*The Sabbath among Slaves*, from Bibb, *Narrative*. This illustration shows plantation festivities as Henry Bibb, a man who had been enslaved, remembered them. Enslaved people dance, play music, lounge, tussle, and drink while four elite whites on the left watch, amused. The plantation patriarch, to the right of center, distributes alcohol to a respectful bondman who has removed his hat and gratefully bows slightly. Note the very strong presence of a “fence” on the right, here represented as a wall. The wall and the four white onlookers contain and control this scene of black pleasure. (The Library Company of Philadelphia)

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

Enslaved people, then, possessed at least three bodies. The first served as a site of domination; it was the body acted upon by slaveholders. Early con-



*The Festival*, from Criswell, “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.” This illustrated memory from a former slaveholder’s autobiography depicts the centrality of white surveillance at plantation parties. (The Library Company of Philadelphia)

structions of African and black women’s bodies and sexuality played a central role in rationalizing the African slave trade and gave license to sexual violence against enslaved women. Colonial and antebellum slaveholders believed that strict control of the black body, in particular its movement in space and time, was key to their enslavement of black people. By the late antebellum years, planters were working energetically to master such black bodily minutiae as nourishment, ingestion of alcohol, and even dress, all as part of their paternalist management strategies. In the Old South the slave body, most intensely women’s, served as the “bio-text” on which slaveholders inscribed their authority and, indeed, their very mastery.<sup>29</sup>

The second body was the subjective experience of this process. It was the body as vehicle of feelings of terror, humiliation, and pain. The senses of this second body were “associated with poverty, suffering, and shame,” with “dark fears and darker realities.”<sup>30</sup> In planters’ controlled and controlling landscapes, vulnerable to sale, sexual and nonsexual violence, disease, and exploitative labor, enslaved bodies were, in the words of colonial theorist Frantz Fanon, “surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty.”<sup>31</sup> They were, then, the source of frequent anxiety and misery.

Within and around plantations, however, enslaved people’s bodies were a

hotly contested terrain of struggle. Again and again, slaves sought out illicit, secular gatherings of their own creation. They disregarded curfews and pass laws to escape to secret parties where sensual pleasures such as drinking, eating, dancing, and dressing up were the main amusements. This was the slave's third body: a thing to be claimed and enjoyed, a site of pleasure and resistance. For enslaved women, whose bodies were so central to the history of black enslavement, the third body was significant in two ways. First, women's third body was a source of pleasure, pride, and self-expression. The enormous amount of energy, time, and care that some bondwomen put into such luxuries as making and wearing fancy dress and attending illicit parties indicates how important these activities were to them. Pleasure was its own reward for those experiencing it, and it must be a part of our understanding of the lives of people in the past, even—especially—people who had precious little of it. Slaves' third body was also a political entity: it was an important symbolic and material resource in the plantation South and a fiercely contested terrain between owner and owned. Just as exploitation, containment, and punishment of the body were politically loaded acts, so, too, was slaves' enjoyment of their bodies. Far from accommodating bondage or acting as a safety valve within it, everyday somatic politics functioned in opposition to slavery's symbolic systems and economic imperatives. The nineteenth-century plantation system was a symbol for larger social relations, though, and the importance of rules of containment went beyond plantation efficiency and issues of production. The need for rules struck at the core of what it meant to be a master in the antebellum years. For slaves were more to their owners than just property, and more than just workers; they were the building blocks of planters' way of life, social mobility, and self-conceptions.<sup>32</sup>

#### THE KNOWING ONES

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

"eyes on the sun," watching it cross the sky as the day wore long. Because "trouble don't las' always," they anticipated the end of the workday and on occasion planned illicit parties in the woods.<sup>33</sup>

Speaking for slaves everywhere, Charlie Crump recounted that "we ain't 'lowed ter go nowhar at night." "Dat is," he added, "if dey knowed it." In violation of the rule against leaving at night, Crump and many of the young people he knew who had worked "from daylight till dark" sometimes ventured out at night, the dark sheltering their movements. "Night is their day," one planter complained about slaves' nighttime activities.<sup>34</sup> Risking punishment, blacks "from all ober de neighborhood [would] gang up an' have fun anyhow." Similarly, Midge Burnett and his friends knew that "de patterollers 'ud watch all de paths leadin' frum de plantation" to prevent bondpeople from running away. What the patrollers did not know, however, was that "dar wus a number of little paths what run through de woods dat nobody ain't watched case dey ain't knowed dat de paths wus dar."<sup>35</sup> Many partygoers traveled to their covert events along just such paths. Some audacious men went on horseback, seeing the world from planters' viewpoint, about a yard higher than slaves' foot-borne perspective.<sup>36</sup>

"Yes, mam, they had dances all right," Georgian Jefferson Franklin Henry remembered. "That's how they got mixed up with paterollers. Negroes would go off to dances and stay out all night."<sup>37</sup> The secrecy of illicit dances demanded a high level of planning, so they were often prepared well in advance. Austin Steward and his neighbors and friends in rural Virginia were well aware of the laws and rules that prohibited enslaved people from leaving "the plantation to which they belong, without a written pass." Nonetheless, they regularly left their plantations to visit family and, sometimes, to gather for festivities. One spring the enslaved people on a nearby estate held an Easter frolic with the permission of their owner. But word of this legitimate "grand dance" quickly spread to "a large number of slaves on other plantations" who were determined to attend the event whether or not they could obtain official passes.<sup>38</sup> The dance now straddled legal and illegal spheres.

Meanwhile, the hosts began preparations. Theft was the main way of obtaining the goods they needed. "They *took* without saying, 'By your leave, Sir'" the food and drink they wanted, Steward wrote, "reasoning among themselves, as slaves often do, that it cannot be *stealing*, because 'it belongs to massa, and so do we, and we only use one part of his property to benefit another.'" The women took the ingredients and moved their owners' culinary property "from one location to another"—a relocation that also gave new values to the frolic and the food. With the ingredients in hand, women hid themselves in "valleys," swamps, and other "by-places" in order to cook



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

in secret. "Night after night" women prepared dishes into the late hours. Then, "in the morning," they headed back to their cabins, carefully "destroying everything likely to detect them" on their way. At the same time, the "knowing ones" continued to plan the celebration, encouraging one another's high spirits "with many a wink and a nod."<sup>39</sup>

Finally the appointed night arrived. A little after 10:00 P.M. the music began when an "old fiddler" struck up "some favorite tune," and people danced until midnight, when it was time to feast. The food was "well cooked" and the wine was "excellent." But Steward recalled more than the events; he went to

that planters believed that enslaved people hobbled through life "with no hope of release this side of the grave, and as far as the cruel oppressor is concerned, shut out from hope beyond it." Yet despite—and, in part, because of—their abject poverty and the humiliations and cruelties of bondage, here at the party "every dusky face was lighted up, and every eye sparkled with joy. However ill fed they might have been, here, for once, there was plenty. Suffering and toil was forgotten, and they all seemed with one accord to give themselves up to the intoxication of pleasurable amusement." In the context of enslavement, such exhilarating pleasure gotten by illicit use of the body must be understood as important and meaningful enjoyment, as personal expression, and as oppositional engagement of the body.<sup>40</sup>

But there were limits to slaves' amusements. Late in the night the fiddler suddenly stopped playing and adopted "a listening attitude." Everyone became quiet, "listening for the cause of alarm." The dreaded call came when their lookout shouted, "Patrol!" and perhaps ran away from the party, a common technique to throw off patrols. If the lookout did so, he was unsuccessful. The slave patrol, whose job it was to ensure that enslaved people (in Steward's words) "know their place" and stay in it, found the party and broke it up. Many people had run away immediately after the call came, but others, including Steward, had only managed to hide and now overheard the patrolmen talking.<sup>41</sup>

Two of the patrolmen debated the wisdom of a few white men attempting to disband a meeting of so many bondpeople. One hesitated to push the matter, arguing that they might "resist." After all, "they have been indulging their appetites, and we cannot tell what they may attempt to do." His colleague mocked his apprehension and wondered if he was really "so chicken-hearted as to suppose that those d—d cowardly niggers are going to get up an insurrection." The first patrolman defensively clarified that he only worried that "they may forget themselves at this late hour." In these woods was a black majority made up of slaves who already had proven their lack of deference to slaveholders' authority and their willingness to break rules. While unprepared and perhaps unwilling to "get up an insurrection," they might be capable of "forgetting themselves" by challenging white authority to an incalculable extent. Indeed, in a sense they already had forgotten themselves, having abandoned "their place" in the plantation spatial and temporal order—and the "self" they had to be there.<sup>42</sup>

The party that Austin Steward remembered illustrates what was generally true: that the most important part of preparing a night meeting was evading slave patrols. In addition to doing their best to keep their own movements



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The party that Austin Steward remembered illustrates what was generally true: that the most important part of preparing a night meeting was evading slave patrols. In addition to doing their best to keep their own movements stealthy, bondpeople carefully monitored patrol activities. Appropriating,



and in the process inverting, the dominant ideal of plantation surveillance, household, skilled, and personal bondpeople monitored their surveillants and sometimes learned of a patrol's plan to be in the area. These bondpeople would pass the word along in the code "dey bugs in the wheat," meaning the scheduled party had been found out. Sometimes the party was canceled; when it was not, some bondpeople would avoid the party completely, while others would attend anyway, alert and ready to leap out of windows and sprint out of sight when the patrol arrived. Revelers also protected their space by constructing borders of their own: they stretched ropes and vines across paths approaching their location to trip patrolmen and their horses, they posted lookouts at key locations along the periphery, and they stationed people "on the roads" to "create a disturbance to attract the patrollers' attention."<sup>43</sup> Watching a patroller fall off his tripping horse added to the night's entertainment and was "a favorite sport of slaves."<sup>44</sup>

Young people gathered in unoccupied cabins in the woods or simply in the open air. Occasionally, on very large plantations where barns or churches could be quite a distance from the slaveholding house, they would meet in such outbuildings or even in the quarters.<sup>45</sup> Typically, elderly and very young people did not attend. But there were exceptions, such as one rascally group of children who "slip[ped] off" to the place where a dance was being held and got "in de corner or up in de loft of de house an' sp[ie]d on" the revelers. When the partygoers, among whom were probably many older siblings and cousins, caught the youngsters, they "thrashed us out," one former peeper recalled.<sup>46</sup>

Planters' habit of giving passes to men more than to women meant that women were much less likely than men to have them when attending parties. When permitted plantation frolics were expanded by local slaves, men might obtain a pass to attend, while the women who came from the neighborhood would have had to sneak away. Even wholly secret gatherings were shaped by planters' patterns of pass distribution and by enslaved men's relative mobility. A bondman named Ike returned one day late from an errand he was running for his owner because he had stopped to visit "de gals" at a neighboring plantation. The group "got up a dance," and the plantation men brought out their whiskey. Ike then "drunk too much er liquor" and needed to sober up before heading home the following day.<sup>47</sup> Ike and the women he called on assumed it was up to him to visit, and it was his mobility that gave the occasion for celebration. On the other hand, women who slipped away to dances were much less likely to have passes and were, therefore, more likely to be punished if caught by patrols. Patrols were a distinct threat to enslaved women, for in addition to punishing women for breaking the law, patrolmen



*A Negro Funeral*, from *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, November 1859. It was in the remote spaces in the woods bordering plantations that enslaved people gathered for funerals, religious services, and secret, secular parties. (The Library Company of Philadelphia)

were known to abuse women. Samuel Hall could recall how patrols "would come to our place of enjoyment and drive and whip the husbands away from the wives and use those same women for their own pleasure."<sup>48</sup> When they attended covert festivities, women more frequently did so without any form of permission, and they undertook enormous risks.

Men musicians performed for their friends and neighbors, playing fiddles, banjos, and tambourines. They also made their own instruments, such as the popular "quill" devised in places where sugar was grown. Five to ten cane stems were cut to different lengths, a hole was drilled in the top of each, and all were bound together to make a homemade harmonica. Musicians im-



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

provided melody-making instruments from reeds and handsaws and created percussion with spoons, bones, pans, and buckets to play "Turkey in the Straw" and other popular tunes.<sup>49</sup> When no musicians were available, and even when they were, outlaw partygoers made music with their voices, singing and dancing to lyrics sure to amuse. According to Dossia Harris, one went "somepin lak dis:"

Oh! Miss Liza, Miss Liza Jane!  
 Axed Miss Liza to marry me  
 Guess what she said?  
 She wouldn't marry me,  
 If de last Nigger was dead.<sup>50</sup>

Dancers also sang, perhaps gloatingly, of their subterfuge:

Buffalo gals, can't you come out tonight,  
 Come out tonight, an' dance by the light of the moon?<sup>51</sup>

As morning approached, those who had caroused the night away warned one another of the approach of day and the danger of violating that temporal boundary (which located them properly at work): "Run nigger run, patty-rollers ketch you / Run nigger run, it's breakin' days."<sup>52</sup>

A variant elaborated:

Run nigger run, de patterrollers ketch you—  
 Run nigger run, fer hits almos' day,  
 De nigger run; de nigger flew; de nigger los'  
 his big ole shoe.<sup>53</sup>

Dance tunes contained political meanings as well as entertainment value. The self-deprecating song about a rejected lover is one example: the object of affection is called by a title, "Miss," a sign of respect that whites denied bondpeople. Many of these songs were sung at plantation frolics under slaveholders' supervision, and no doubt planters and their friends found them entertaining. Indeed, most aspects of illegal parties paralleled the goings-on at plantation frolics; many of the songs, the tunes, the dances, and other activities were identical. But not all were; some songs were surely not sung in the presence of owners. Mississippian Mollie Williams danced to and sang the following song, which is inflected by the spirit of resistance nurtured at outlaw parties:

Run tell Coleman,  
 Run tell everbody  
 Dat de niggers is arisin'!<sup>54</sup>

Together, women and men performed a variety of period dances. Many formerly enslaved people described the dances of their youth as proper and respectable, as not "all hugged up." Consistent with African kinesic morality, slave dancers commonly rejected embracing as immodest and even "indecent."<sup>55</sup> When she was young, Liza Mention said, "dances in dem days warn't dese here huggin' kind of dances lak dey has now" but were, instead, proper dances, like "de cardrille (quadrille), de Virginia reel, and de 16-hand Cor-tillion."<sup>56</sup> To the tunes produced by fiddles, voices, banjos, and flutes, they danced respectably (without "man an woman squeezed up close to one another"), performing such dances as "pigeon wing" (flapping the arms like a bird and wiggling the legs while "holdin' yo' neck stiff like a bird do"); "gwine

to de east, an' gwine to de west" (leaning in to kiss one's dance partner on each cheek but "widout wrappin' no arms roun' like de young folks today"); "callin' de figgers" (following the fiddler's challenging calls); and "hack-back" (in which couples stood facing each other and "trotted back and forth"). Other dances included "set de flo'" (partners began by bowing to each other at the waist, hands on the waist, then the dancers tap-danced, patting the floor firmly "jus' like dey puttin' it in place"); "dancin' on the spot" (the same as "set de flo'" except dancers had to remain within the circumference of a circle drawn in the ground); "wringin' and twistin'" (the early version of the "twist"); the "buzzard lope"; "snakehips"; and the "breakdown."<sup>57</sup> Enslaved dancers also "watched white folks' parties where the guests danced a minuet and then paraded in a grand march." Then they imitated white dancers, but with a twist: "We'd do it too, *but we used to mock 'em*, every step."<sup>58</sup>

Competition was a common form of amusement at outlaw dances, one that sometimes forged camaraderie among equals. To win a dance competition, one had to expertly execute complex dance moves while maintaining an outward demeanor of "control and coolness," dance historian Katrina Hazzard-Gordon has written. For example, Nancy Williams competed with another woman, Jennie, to see who could perform a dance the most deftly and with the most mastery of her body. To make the challenge even greater, the women danced with glasses of water on their heads; the winner was she who maintained her cool and made the execution of the dance look easy. Dance competition allowed some women to demonstrate the strength and agility of their bodies, as compared with men's, whose physical power was usually recognized as greater. Jane Smith Hill Harmon "allus could dance" and enjoyed, even as an old woman, "cut[ting] fancy steps now sometimes when I feels good." Her talent was awe inspiring when she was young, and she regularly competed with men. "One night when I wuz young, I danced down seben big strong mens, dey thought dey wuz sumpin'! Hun, I danced eb'ry one down!"<sup>59</sup> Dance competition could provide women moments of relief from black gender hierarchies as well as from slaveholding control.

The uglier side of competition, violence, must have been an issue at outlawed gatherings, although extremely little documentation describes it. Still, violence existed in other parts of slave life. Enslaved families, like free ones, were home to resentments, betrayals, anger, and other disappointments of family life. Physical and verbal abuse between spouses, especially by men against women, was a part of life in the quarters. Hoping to prevent his wife from attending a holiday celebration their owner was giving them, one bondman "gave his wife Hetty a light cut or two & then locked her up to prevent her going to the Frolick." As owners sometimes did, theirs intervened, "turn-

ing her loose & fastning him."<sup>60</sup> James Cornelius, who had been enslaved in Mississippi, openly told of the time he hit his wife. During their marriage ceremony, Cornelius had interrupted the preacher to make his wife promise never to accuse him of lying. She promised, and Cornelius reciprocated and pronounced the exchange a "bargain an' den de preacher went on wid de weddin'." Years later his wife was suspicious about his whereabouts one evening, and when his excuse failed to convince her, she told him, "that's a lie." Cornelius responded in the manner he viewed as appropriate: "right den I raised my han' an' let her have it right by de side of de head, an' she niver called me a liar ag'in. No ma'm, dat is somethin' I won't stand for." While rates of domestic violence may have changed in the transition from slavery to freedom, such incidents as these were certainly not new. Moreover, Cornelius learned from multiple sources that it was his manly prerogative to violently enforce the rules of his marriage, and a major influence on his conception of domestic life must have been his own (enslaved) family. Domestic violence was a source of both comedy and moral judgment in the folk song "Old Dan Tucker," in which Tucker, a "mighty mean" man who "beat his wife wid a fryin' pan," ends up falling down drunk onto the "red hot" coals of an (earthly) fire.<sup>61</sup>

Violence was also a common part of drinking culture among both whites and blacks, and it certainly was a side effect of a drinking problem. In particular, men's drinking must have created some difficulties for bondwomen. In one extreme case a bondman named Isaac, who was "often intoxicated," got into the "habit of visiting" an enslaved woman named Charlotte around the kitchen where she worked. His attention seems to have been unwelcome, as at one point, perhaps in retaliation for her rejection of him, Isaac "threatened to murder" her. Mrs. Taylor Clay, who owned Charlotte, called in the county authorities, who then ordered the sheriff to arrest Isaac. Though officials were aware only of the "constant fear and dread" that Clay felt, we may be sure that Charlotte was more than equally terrified by Isaac's threats.<sup>62</sup> It is difficult to imagine that violence, an element of life in the quarters, did not occur among men and between men and women at outlawed parties.

But violence was not solely a male form of expression or conflict resolution. Women, too, communicated frustration and anger physically. A woman named Jane had a "terrible row" with a household slave named Lucy during which she delivered a "blow from a chair." Needless to say, that blow "cut a great gash in Lucy's face" and "hurt her severely." Whatever the root of the conflict between Jane and Lucy, the end result was a real "scene of horror": the "quarreling and screaming, the blood streaming down Lucy's face, and

Jane's fiery looks and speeches" all testify to some enslaved women's capacity for gruesome fighting.<sup>63</sup> Sometimes outlaw slave parties gave space for the continuation of rivalries or the end of festering arguments between women who were not always, or even often, motivated by feelings of honorable competition between equals. During one affair two women, Rita and Retta, misunderstood "Aunt" Vira's laughter as directed at them; they punished the offender by poisoning her and her infant.<sup>64</sup>

#### A DRESS FOR THE 'OMAN

While women and men danced together, they also had slightly different ideas about other enjoyable activities. More than men, women had clothing on their minds when they headed, under cover of night, for secret frolics.<sup>65</sup> For their part, men were much more inclined to drink alcohol. It was not commonplace for bondpeople to have many sets of fancy attire, or even multiple sets of ordinary work clothing. But some enslaved people, especially women, worked hard to piece together one special outfit that could be worn on Sundays and special occasions, such as church meetings, weddings, funerals, plantation frolics, or secret parties. The scarcity of fancy clothing underscores the importance and the value that women seem to have given it, for it is important to analyze "clothing behavior" as well as clothing itself.<sup>66</sup> Bondwomen pushed themselves to stay up late when they were tired and to direct some of their extremely limited resources toward dress and style.

When at work, when their bodies were in the service of their owners, bondpeople looked, according to one observer, "very ragged and slovenly." Planters dressed slaves in clothing of the poorest quality made of fabric reserved for those of their station. In the summer, enslaved people wore tow, a material made from rough, unprocessed flax, or uncolored white or gray cotton. Many women's dresses were straight and shapeless, stintingly cut, sometimes directly on the body, to avoid wasting fabric. Charity McCallister's clothes were "poor. One-piece dress made o' carpet stuff, part of de time." Others' were cut fuller and tapered at the waist, and most dresses were long. Fannie Dunn disagreed with her mother's assessment of conditions under slavery in North Carolina on the basis of the clothes she was forced to wear: "My mother said dat we all fared good, but course we wore handmade clothes an' wooden bottomed shoes."<sup>67</sup> Slaves' crude clothing, along with their gestures, posture, and language, let the world know what their place in society was.

Some planters, as part of their system of rule, annually or biannually distributed clothes with dramatic flair in order to represent themselves as the benevolent source of care and sustenance and thereby instill loyalty in their

bondpeople. Many other plantations were characterized more by slaveholding neglect and avarice than by paternalistic management systems; on such farms, slave owners gave little thought to enslaved people's physical conditions. Year after year, for example, plantation manager Roswell King implored his employer, Pierce Butler, who lived in Philadelphia, to provide his bondpeople with clothing. King subscribed to the paternalist school's combination of cruel violence, stern order, and benevolent encouragement of disciplined behavior, but he could not find an ally in Butler. "Do you recollect," King wrote Butler on one occasion, "that you have not given your Negroes Summer clothing but twice in fifteen years past?" It was only due to the work Butler's bondpeople did "for themselves" on "what is called their own time" that they were able to "git a little Summer clothing, a piece of meat, a pound of sugar or Coffee &c."<sup>68</sup> Old, torn, shredded, and dirty clothing resulted in more than saved costs for slave owners; it had social effects. Poor-quality attire reflected and reified slaves' status and played a role in their subjugation. Former bondwoman Harriet Jacobs wrote bitterly in her narrative of life as a bondwoman that the "linsey-woolsey dress given me every winter" by her mistress was "one of the badges of slavery."<sup>69</sup>

Another badge of slavery was the androgynous appearance imposed on some bondwomen by work and dress. While many women performed gender-specific work in the fields as well as in black and white households, many other bondwomen slaved away at grueling chores that seemed little different from men's work. With a mixture of pride and bitterness, Anne Clark recalled that during her life in bondage she had "ploughed, hoed, split rails. I done the hardest work a man ever did." "Women worked in de field same as de men. Some of dem plowed jes' like de men and boys," George Fleming recalled. Fleming claimed that the women he knew even resembled men in the fields; he "couldn't tell 'em apart in de field, as dey wore pantelets or breeches."<sup>70</sup>

Conversely, when bondpeople, especially women, outfitted themselves for their own occasions, they went to a great deal of trouble to procure or make clothes of quality and, importantly, style. For church some preferred simple white clothing, while others enjoyed something fancier. Certainly secular meetings encouraged attention to ornament. Some women exchanged homespun goods, produce from their gardens, and pelts with white itinerant traders for good-quality or decorative cloth, beads, and buttons. While enslaved South Carolinians had an especially independent economy, some slaves throughout the South engaged in selling or trading that enabled them to obtain goods such as cloth, clothing, and dye.<sup>71</sup> Enslaved women located near ports or major waterways were able to trade with black

boat workers, who carried on a lively exchange with the plantation bondpeople they encountered in their travels. Even inland, women traded the produce of their gardens, their hens' eggs, the berries they picked, and their handiwork such as baskets and animal skins for items like calico, decorative cloth, kerchiefs, or ornamental objects such as buttons. In distinction to their "ragged and slovenly" appearance at work, some of the enslaved Virginia women that traveler Frederick Law Olmsted encountered were able to "look very smart" on their own time, dressed in a few items that they had "purchased . . . for themselves." Women also occasionally earned fancy clothing as a reward for exceptional work. Some planters were aware of bondpeople's preferred treats and rewarded men and women with different prizes at harvest celebrations: "a quart of whiskey for de man what picked de most and a dress for de 'oman what was ahead."<sup>72</sup>

Most women, however, procured fancy apparel—when they could at all—simply by eking out time at night to make it. They grew and processed the cotton, cultivated and gathered the roots and berries for the dye, wove the cloth, and sewed textiles into garments. Women, whose bodies were subject to sexual exploitation, dangerous and potentially heartbreaking reproductive labor, and physically demanding agricultural labor, worked hard to bring personal expression and delight into their lives. Women wove and dyed color, patterns, and designs into their clothing. "Aunt" Adeline was, like her mother had been, an accomplished dyer. On one occasion she wore a dress that she would never forget "as long as I live. It was a hickory stripe dress they made for me, with brass buttons at the wrist bands." She was "so proud of that dress"; her identity refashioned by it, she "felt so dressed up in it, I just strutted!" Tree barks, bamboo, and poison ivy were used to make dyes of yellow, red, brown, and black.<sup>73</sup> Women in Georgia and South Carolina raised indigo for dye, and women outside those areas sometimes bought indigo dye.<sup>74</sup> Women set the colors fast in their cloth with saline solutions, vinegar and water, or "chamber lye" (urine). They hung the fabric on clotheslines to dry and then sewed it into garments.<sup>75</sup> None of this was easy work, and the time and resources for it were not easily found. "Patterns was a GREAT trubble," Clara Allen remembered.

In addition to the symbolic value dress held for plantation blacks and whites, clothing held more tangible meanings as well. The production, distribution, and uses of King Cotton—and cotton products such as apparel—were very material issues in the slave South. Textile production complicated the plantation's temporal order along gender lines. The nighttime was less neatly "off" time for bondwomen than it was for men. While both women and men could quit working for their owners at sunset, many women be-

gan their second shift of labor, their nightly toil for their families. At night and sometimes on Saturdays or Sundays, after agricultural work was done, women had another set of labor to do for their own families. Henry James Trentham saw women plowing during the day, working hard to "carry dat row an' keep up wid de men," quit at sunset, "an den do dere cookin' at night."<sup>76</sup> To be sure, men also worked for their families' benefit after work in the field or around the plantation was done; they hunted, fished, gardened, and taught their children these skills in the "off" hours. Nonetheless, women generally performed more work during their second shift. Most bondwomen returned to their quarters at sundown to cook supper, hoping to make enough for the next day's lunch; to clean their cabins; to produce household goods, such as soap and candles; to work in their gardens; and also to wash and mend their own and their family's clothing. In their off time and during the winters, women were also responsible for the production of some or all of the textiles that plantation residents needed, including apparel for the slaves and cloth for jackets, blankets, linens.<sup>77</sup>

Elite planters enjoyed store-bought goods, and only on the South's largest plantations was textile production concentrated in the hands of women specialists such as weavers, seamstresses, and knitters.<sup>78</sup> A prosperous farm might boast a spinning room in which women carded cotton and wool, spun fibers into thread, dyed the thread, and then wove it into fabric and woollens for plantation use.<sup>79</sup> Though such labor was sedentary and considered "women's work" (light and unskilled), it was physically taxing. The work required extremely long hours of constant repetitive motion well beyond the setting of the sun. Weaving engaged the whole body, compelling arms and hands, which carried the shuttle between the warp threads, to coordinate with the efforts of legs and feet, which worked the pedals in rhythm with the movement of the shuttle. Anna Mitchell's mother told her about the grueling nature of a seamstress's work: she labored "all night an' half de day ter make clothes for de slaves."<sup>80</sup> The volume of production could be dizzying. In one day Elizabeth Coles delivered to Nancy, one of her spinners, 14 pounds of cotton and 28 pounds of wool to be spun into thread and yarn. Coles then presented "Old Buffy" with 30 pounds of wool and 110 pounds of cotton to spin. Another bondwoman, "Saly," would knit their yarn into clothing. This volume left its mark on women's bodies; as one woman knitter aged, her finger gnarled into a "twisted an' stiff" appendage—the embodiment of a life spent at work, "holdin' her knittin' needles."<sup>81</sup>

But on most plantations, many women, not only specialists, were involved in this work, and they produced at least some goods for their owners' as well as slaves' use. Especially during the winters, women were responsible for

some to all of the production of textiles for plantation residents, black and white.<sup>82</sup> On most plantations the winter season greeted women with production quotas demanding that they “card, reel and spin” one or two “cuts” (about ninety-one inches of thread) per night.<sup>83</sup> Assisted perhaps by a fatigued child who could hold a candle to provide light or card rolls of cotton or wool before adult women spun it,<sup>84</sup> bondwomen then had to weave the thread into cloth and sew the cloth into clothing, or knit the yarn into usable goods. In Bill Collins’s experience, “older slave women” spun the material that was made into “pants and shirts” for plantation blacks. “They did most of this at night” as well as during the winter months. Some of them had to work in the “fields all day and spin at night.”<sup>85</sup> Bondwomen resented the extra labor. Georgianna Foster’s mother used to complain that “women had to work all day in de fields an’ come home an’ do de house work at night while de white folks hardly done a han’s turn of work.” Frequently, bondwomen did not experience plantation time in the same ways men did, in large part because of the second shift of reproductive labor they performed.<sup>86</sup>

Enslaved women’s second shift of labor, however, presented the opportunity for self-expression. Just as bondwomen made creative work of quilt making, they spent some of their evenings turning the plain, uncolored tow, denim, hemp, burlap, and cotton cloth they had woven into fancy, decorative cloth. Robert Shepherd remembered his mother’s handiwork: “Everything was stripedy ’cause Mammy liked to make it fancy.” Catherine Slim’s mother, a talented weaver, wove stripes of red, white, and blue as well as flowers into the cloth that she then sewed into dresses for her daughter. Women dyed the coarse material allotted them colors they liked. Nancy Williams’s dedication to style was unusual, but it remains instructive. “Clo’es chile? I had plenty clo’es dem days,” she claimed. “How I get ’em? Jes’ change dey colors. Took my white dress out to de polk berry bush an’ a-dyed it red, den dyed my shoes red. Took ole barn paint an’ paint some mo’ shoes yaller to match my yaller dress.”<sup>87</sup>

Once they had the fabric, enslaved women went to great effort to make themselves something more than the cheap, straight-cut dresses they were allowed. When possible, women cut their dresses generously so they could sweep their skirts dramatically and elegantly. Some women accentuated the fullness of their skirts by starching them crisp. Annie Wallace remembered that when her mother went “out at night to a party some of the colored folks was havin’” she would starch her skirts with “hominy water. . . . They were starched so stiff that every time you stopped they would pop real loud.” Wallace’s mother instructed her children to listen carefully for her return, in case the party was broken up by the arrival of Virginia’s rural patrols. “When

we heard them petticoats apoppin’ as she run down the path, we’d open the door wide and she would get away from the patterroll.”<sup>88</sup>

Other women “thought those hoops were just the thing for style” and hooped their skirts with grapevines and “limbs from trees.” Though Salena Taswell’s owner “would not let the servants wear hoops,” Taswell and the other household bondwomen often sneaked to “get the old ones that they threw away.” Secretly they “would go around with them on when they were gone and couldn’t see us.” Hoopskirts came into fashion during the 1850s and stayed in style through the mid-nineteenth century, coinciding with the cult of domesticity. Among the elite women who wore them, hoopskirts symbolized “Victorian ideals of domesticity and . . . of a separate woman’s sphere,” Drew Gilpin Faust has suggested. The style flaunted high levels of consumption and idleness (the wide skirts made physical labor tricky), and consistent with Victorian ideals of respectable womanhood, the hoopskirt hid the lower body. No doubt bondwomen’s frocks were smaller than their owners’, whose skirts could measure up to five feet in diameter. Nonetheless, Ebenezer Brown told his interviewer, hoopskirts were “the fad in those days” among black as well as white women, one that enabled bondwomen to appropriate a symbol of leisure and femininity (and freedom) and denaturalized their slave status. “In dem days de wimen wore hoops. . . . De white folks dun it an’ so did the slave wimen,” Brown said.<sup>89</sup> Enslaved women liked the luxury of abundance, the elegant feel of “wide hoop-skirts, fluffy sleeves and high collars.”<sup>90</sup> As much as women’s bodies were sources of suffering and sites of planter domination, women also worked hard to make their bodies spaces of personal expression and pleasure. If, as it has been said, dress reflects something about the perceptions people have of their place in the world, then it would appear that many bondwomen did not concur with the Old South’s view of them as joyless drudges.<sup>91</sup>

If it is also true that “relations become embodied in things,” then women’s outfits hinted at a distinctive understanding of social relations.<sup>92</sup> Women’s style allowed them to take pleasure in their bodies, to deny that they were only (or mainly) worth the prices their owners placed on them. But not all enslaved people agreed that such self-regard was justified. When a young slave girl named Amelia walked out of her house on her way to church in the hoopskirt she adored, to her mortification the other children “laugh[ed] at me” and accused her of “playin’ lady,” of affecting a status to which she had no right. She was so hurt by their mockery that she ran back into the house, took off the offending skirt, “and hide it in the wood.”<sup>93</sup> Violation of the Old South’s racial etiquette was not uniformly appreciated by all bondpeople, old or young.

Yet black women's style did not simply mimic slaveholding women's fashions. Enslaved women's use of accessories most accentuated their originality. Topping off many women's outfits were their headwraps, a unique expressive form in nineteenth-century America, or hair done just so. Some women wore their favorite headwraps to outlaw parties, and many others removed the scarf to display the hairstyle under it: cornrows, plaits, straightened hair, or tidy Afros. Women straightened or relaxed their curls by "wrapping" sections of their hair in string, twine, or bits of cloth and covering it during the week with a scarf to hide the wrappings and to keep their hair clean and protect it from the sun's harsh rays. On special occasions, such as church or a dance, they removed the scarf and the strings to reveal hair that was straightened or in looser curls.<sup>94</sup>

Beyond the headwrap, other accessories were more difficult to obtain but nonetheless not skimped on. Some women made straw hats from "wheat straw which was dried out." They made buttons and ornaments for their clothing out of "cows and rams horns" and from "li'll round pieces of gourds" covered with cloth.<sup>95</sup> Inspired women used buttons, shells, and animal horns to decorate their clothing. And earrings could be made from something as simple and plentiful as straw.<sup>96</sup> They made necklaces from dried, painted cranberries and perfumed themselves by wearing rose and honeysuckle flowers.<sup>97</sup> When Frances Kemble moved to a Georgia plantation after her marriage to a wealthy planter, she was struck by the women's style, which combined elements that seemed discordant to Kemble. She described what she saw in prim, racist detail: "Their Sabbath toilet really presents the most ludicrous combination of incongruities that you can conceive—frills, flounces, ribbons; combs stuck in their wooly heads . . . , finery, every color of the rainbow . . . chinzes with sprawling patterns . . . ; beads, bugles, flaring sashes, and above all, little fanciful aprons, which finish these incongruous toilets with a sort of airy grace, which I assure you is perfectly indescribable."<sup>98</sup> The clash of colors and textures and the mixture of formal and informal elements (finery, chintzes, and ribbons worn with aprons) that flabbergasted Kemble and a great many other whites delighted enslaved women. At least since the eighteenth century, with roots in African visual arts, black style had distinctively stressed the dynamic interplay of color and texture over the harmonies of similar elements, and surprise, movement, and argument over predictable patterns and order.<sup>99</sup>

Shoes posed a special problem. Many bondpeople wore no shoes at all during the warm months and received wooden "brogans" against the cold only once a year. On some farms women received footwear even more infrequently. Perhaps because their agricultural labor was denigrated as "women's

work" and therefore considered easier, some women received no shoes at all. Skilled men and drivers might sometimes receive their owners' castoff workboots, but women had much less access to such practical footwear. W. L. Bost was appalled at the hardships women faced, especially their inadequate dress in cold weather: "They never had enough clothes on to keep a cat warm. The women never wore anything but a thin dress and a petticoat and one underwear. I've seen the ice balls hangin' on the bottom of their dresses as they ran along, jes like sheep in a pasture 'fore they are sheared. They never wore shoes."<sup>100</sup> Henry James Trentham was also sympathetic to the hardships women slaves faced. "Some of de women plowed barefooted most all de time."<sup>101</sup>

Women's creation and appropriation of cloth and clothing helped them to express their personalities and their senses of style, but their attire also raised material issues. In their uses of dress, women claimed the product of their labor: they took the cotton that they raised and harvested and used it for their own purposes. "How I get 'em?" Nancy Williams was pleased with her interviewer's question and eager to tell of her ingenuity. In addition to dyeing her rations of plain cloth, Williams stole what she needed. Williams pilfered paint to make yellow shoes to go with the yellow dress she wore to an illicit dance held in a cabin in the woods. "Had done stole de paint and paint de shoes color de dress."<sup>102</sup>

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

women took tremendous risks in procuring and wearing fancy apparel to plantation frolics and outlawed slave parties, and the extent of the danger to which they exposed themselves is also a measure of the significance of activities and interests that might otherwise appear to be trivial.<sup>103</sup>

By dressing up to go to outlaw parties, bondwomen heightened the risk they undertook, because their conspicuousness exposed all of them (especially household bondwomen) to detection. The degree of danger involved in dressing up and running away for an evening and women's willingness to take it suggest just how urgently they needed to extricate themselves from their proper places. Frances Miller, a slaveholding woman, encountered such determination as she endeavored to impose a "system of management" within her Virginia household. She rose at 4:30 every morning, in advance of her bondpeople, to wake them and prod them to work, not shying from physical violence when their "insubordination" proved too much for her. Miller dedicated herself, in what she described as a "herculean" manner, to "always righting things up." Her bondpeople, with the exception of the two men Miller used to discipline the others, refused to submit to her desire for mastery. Thanks to the "open rebellion, impudence and unfaithfulness of domestics," things were "never righted" in her household.<sup>104</sup>

Among the most egregious acts of "unfaithfulness" and "insubordination" that Miller witnessed in her household was the determination of one bondwoman, Rose, to sneak away at night to a party. On her way to bed one night, Miller encountered Rose on her way out of the house, "dressed up as I supposed for a night's jaunt." Caught, Rose thought quickly and, thrusting the candle she held to light her passage toward Miller, asked Miller to carry it back for her. Miller had been hardened by Rose's long history of disobedience and was not distracted from the issue at hand. She sarcastically "asked her why she did not do it herself," and Rose claimed that "she was going to wash." Rose's explanation for still being up and heading out when, according to the late hour, she ought to have been in bed in her room was not convincing. Miller could tell by the way Rose was "dressed so spry" that she was not going to wash and so "didn't believe her." Instead, she reminded Rose of her curfew and of where she ought to be, observing the hour and telling her "it was bedtime and she must go directly upstairs." Rose "refused" and remained determined to go out to "wash." Rose's plans were thwarted only when Miller "shut the door and locked it." With no key, Rose could not get out. Angered that she would now miss the party, Rose insulted Miller, telling her "that I was the most contrary old thing that she ever saw."<sup>105</sup>

As punishment for attempting to disobey the house rules, as well as for her effrontery, Miller told Rose that she was going to flog her, prompting Rose to

assert that she "would not submit to any such thing and that she would go to the woods first." Rose's threats were not idle, as she rarely submitted to whippings without a huge struggle involving two enslaved men and a great deal of time. On this occasion, however, perhaps because she was so disappointed about being caught and prevented from going out, Rose did not carry out her threat and instead "yielded with less difficulty than usual" to the bondman William's "switches." Miller succeeded in stopping Rose from leaving the household, but the incident left her "sorely grieved—sorely." She was frustrated "that the necessity had existed" to whip Rose because Rose had not simply obeyed. Rose's transgression of place mandated, to Miller's mind, the deployment of violence, violence that contradicted Miller's ideal of a mastery so effective as not to warrant its explicit use in the first place.<sup>106</sup>

### THE GOOD DRINK

The antebellum years saw a general decline in rates of alcohol consumption from the national binge of the Revolutionary era. Like the free people around them, enslaved people probably drank less than they had in the early eighteenth century, when spirits were considered good for health, strength, and relaxation, and less, too, than in the second half of the eighteenth century, when liquors were produced more cheaply and were therefore consumed in greater quantities.<sup>107</sup> Of course, this is not to say that bondpeople were unable to procure alcohol, for to the great consternation of their owners, they did manage to trade for it illegally with cooperative white shopkeepers and poor whites (including white prostitutes) in the rural areas and with the free blacks who owned the occasional cookshop, grocery, or grogshop in towns and cities.<sup>108</sup> The sellers of such items were among the few whites to be included in the transportation of goods around the rival geography.

While women typically enjoyed dress more than drink, some did partake of whiskeys or brandies when they could get them. When Caroline Hunter and her husband Elbert Hunter found a bottle of whiskey by chance, it was Caroline who suggested drinking it, and Caroline who held her alcohol better. Elbert became "wobbly in the knees" and soon passed out.<sup>109</sup> Lucy McCullough also liked to drink—enough that when she was charged with bringing a "quart er brandy" to a group of men working outdoors one winter, she warmed herself along the way by "sippin' dat brandy." By the time she found the men, she was "crazy drunk en tryin' ter sing"; the men were furious with her and roughed her up for consuming the brandy that would have mellowed the bitter chill.<sup>110</sup>

Likewise, bondwomen were also involved in procuring alcohol for those



who drank it.<sup>111</sup> Household bondwomen were aptly positioned to act as pivots between planters' households and wider networks of enslaved people. James Henry Hammond discovered what he called a "system of roguery," a coordinated and "long" effort involving Urana, "our house woman," who "gave the key" to Hammond's "wine cellar" to Frank, another household "servant." Frank and a bondman named Abram "dug under" the house and ferreted out "wines & other spirits, corn, glass, meats &c." Urana further assisted them by doing "her conjurations" and "'root work,'" which together "screened" the men from detection. Hammond "punished all that have had any thing to do with the matter" or with the other "depredations" that he had recently "brought to light."<sup>112</sup> Similarly, during one of their owner's trips away from home, household bondwomen Jane and Lavenia "broke into" the storeroom for some of "the good drink"; they "helped themselves very liberally to everything" and shared the spoils with their friends. When their owner returned and learned of their offense, he "Whiped" them "worse than I ever Whiped any one before."<sup>113</sup>

On some plantations the production of ciders and brandies was women's work. At the end of the rice harvest, Charles Ball reported, while most women and men cleared the rice lands, a group of twenty or thirty people, "principally women and children," were put to work for two weeks "in making cider of apples which grew . . . in an orchard on part of the estate." The cider was "converted into brandy, at a still in the corner of the orchard."<sup>114</sup> Sylvia DuBois knew the nooks of her owner's home well—including the whereabouts of "one keg of brandy that I knew was made very good, for I helped make it." DuBois made the most of her insider knowledge on the night of a housewarming party her owners held. At the arranged time, DuBois and a friend met and went to the storeroom where the apple and peach brandy was kept to "see if it had kept well." The pair had forgotten to bring cups, and they drank from an "earthen pot" they found in the storage room, a choice that encouraged them to drink "all we could" and then, not wanting to throw the remains in the bowl away ("that looked too wasteful"), to drink still more. By night's end, more of DuBois's friends had to find her and help "put her to bed."<sup>115</sup> Household bondwomen and women who made liquors would have been instrumental in procuring alcohol for consumption at slaves' illicit parties.

Enslaved women and men who sneaked off to parties to stay up late amusing themselves and perhaps fighting returned exhausted from their exertions, and morning-after tardiness and fatigue in the field were not uncommon. Even churchgoers knew the feeling. Religious congregants sometimes stayed up late worshipping and would be "sho tired" the next day. Charlie Tye Smith

recalled how, no matter how late they had been up the night before, bondpeople "had better turn out at four o'clock when ole Marse blowed the horn!" They dragged themselves through the motions of their chores all morning and at lunchtime collapsed in the field, too tired to eat. Those who had not attended the meeting looked upon a field "strowed with Niggers asleep in the cotton rows" until the midday break ended and they all resumed work.<sup>116</sup>

Instead of resting in preparation for the next day's labor, women stayed up late preparing their fancy dress for parties, they danced the night away, and some drank alcohol with the men.<sup>117</sup> Some planters suspected that enslaved people kept some of their energy back during the day in anticipation of better uses at night. Frederick Law Olmsted agreed with those suspicions, noting that bondpeople sometimes seemed "to go through the motions of labour without putting their strength into them. They keep their power in reserve for their own use at night, perhaps."<sup>118</sup> Jefferson Franklin Henry remembered how other bondpeople, but not he, "would go off to dances and stay out all night; it would be wuk time when they got back." These revelers valiantly "tried to keep right on gwine," but they were worn out; "the Good Lord soon cut 'em down." These mornings-after did not inhibit future parties, however, nor did the Christian objections of other slaves make an impact: "You couldn't talk to folks that tried to git by with things lak that," Henry regretted. "They warn't gwine to do no diffunt, nohow."<sup>119</sup> People like that made one think of the song "Poor Sinner":

Head got wet with midnight dew,

What you goin' to do when your lamp burns down?

Morning star was witness, too,

What you goin' to do when your lamp burns down?<sup>120</sup>

#### A SERPENT GNAWING

"Upon ringing my bell" to summon his slaves one evening, Richard Eppes discovered that his "servants" were "all absent." This was not the first time. "The absence of the negroes at night from their houses has become intolerable and finding that talking and threatening had no effect I was resolved to put a stop to it by administering in full effect our plantation laws." Whether for religious or secular meetings, or for separate informal reasons, the departures of Eppes's slaves were not viewed by him as just another part of plantation life. They had reached an "intolerable" level and now prompted the full implementation of Eppes's enforcement measures. How slaveholders regarded the nighttime activities of their bondpeople matters a great deal,

for their responses reveal some of the significance of these activities in their own time.

An extraordinary document survives that articulates not the "success" of slave resistance using the body but, given the extent to which the body was a point of conflict between slaves and their owners, what meanings the latter group gave to that conflict. In the mid-1840s slaveholders in the Edgefield and Barnwell Districts of South Carolina formed the Savannah River Anti-Slave Traffick Association in an attempt to stop disorderly house owners' practice of selling alcohol to bondpeople. The group's published regulations expressed anxiety about slave drinking and the theft and black-marketing bondpeople engaged in to obtain liquor from obliging non-elite whites. One result, the Savannah River neighbors jointly thought, was "very considerable losses." Bondwomen and -men—like association member James Henry Hammond's own Urana—appropriated property from their owners by breaking into "dwelling houses, barns, stables, smoke houses, &c" and by using "false keys which abound among our negroes" or by "pick[ing locks] with instruments at which they have become very skilful" at crafting and using. Moreover, the neighbors complained that their crops were susceptible to theft: "Not content with plundering from Barns, our standing crops are beginning to suffer depredation." Because of these various activities, local slaveholders thought they had noticed their profits decline. "Once when a Farmer has expected to sell largely, he finds himself compelled to use the most stringent economy to make his provisions meet his own wants, and sometimes has actually to buy."<sup>121</sup>

Slaves' trading, stealing, and drinking were not the only "evils" worrying these South Carolina planters. Equally vexatious was the practice of "prowling" off to "night meetings." Because of the "too great negligence of slave owners in maintaining wholesome discipline" every night, or so it seemed, bondpeople could be found sneaking "abroad to night meetings." The association claimed that "hundreds of negroes it may be said without exaggeration are every night, and at all hours of the night, prowling about the country," stealing, trading, drinking, and meeting, almost certainly for secular affairs.<sup>122</sup> The association weighed heavily the financial loss incurred when enslaved people were too hungover and too tired to work efficiently: "The negroes themselves are seriously impaired in physical qualities." The association's regulations further detailed that "their nightly expeditions are followed by days of languor." Seeing their "owners, and especially their overseers, as unjust and unfeeling oppressors," slaves, it seemed to these South Carolinians, responded with insubordination and work characterized by "sullenness [and] discontent."<sup>123</sup>

The Savannah River neighbors were mobilized to action by what they saw as a second pernicious effect of black nightly "prowling." In addition to the damage nightly pleasures had on productivity, the South Carolina neighbors complained of the corrosion of slaveholding mastery. Black "minds are fatally corrupted" by these nighttime activities, these planters believed. In the revisionist history that the association wrote, bondpeople were "beginning to" dissent from the paternalist contract that supposedly governed their estates. "Formerly Slaves were essentially members of the family to which they belonged, and a reciprocal interest and attachment existing between them, their relations were simple, agreeable, easily maintained, and mutually beneficial." It seemed that the freedom bondpeople tasted at night compromised their willingness to be deferential and obedient during the day. The association complained of the "difficulty in managing" slaves, since night activity appeared to encourage many bondpeople to see their "Masters" as their "natural enemies." This egalitarian perspective—hardly unique among slaves in the Americas—facilitated more disorderly behavior, and the members of the Savannah River organization were forced to admit to one another that they were having trouble "preserving proper subordination of our slaves."<sup>124</sup>

The apocalyptic end was clear to the Savannah River residents: in alarmist tones, they predicted the end of slavery as they knew it if such unruliness continued. Reappropriating the "fruits of their own labors," working only with "sullenness [and] discontent," and skeptical of the authority of their owners, bondpeople in their neighborhood were creating "such a state of things [that] must speedily put an end to agriculture or to negro slavery." Engaging in these small, outlawed activities, the association argued, the "negro ceases to be a moral being, holding a position in the framework of society, and becomes a serpent gnawing at its vitals or a demon ready with knife and torch to demolish its foundations."<sup>125</sup>

Drinking and dancing at night rather than resting for the next day's labor could not and did not bring down the house of slavery. Nonetheless, the histrionics of the Savannah River Anti-Slave Traffick Association are more than amusing; they are revealing. Their claim that when engaged in these activities, enslaved people ceased to hold a "position in the framework of society" is key to understanding their disquiet. When engaged in these activities, enslaved people ceased, their owners thought, to hold a proper "position in the framework of society" because they disregarded slaveholders' control over their bodies. Stealing time and space for themselves and for members of their communities, those who attended secular parties acted on the assumption that their bodies were more than inherently and solely implements of agricultural production. While many planters desired and

struggled for a smooth-running, paternalistic machine, some bondpeople created, among other things, a gendered culture of pleasure that “gnawed” at the fundamentals—the “vitals”—of slaveholding schemes for domination of the black body, a body that slaveholders had (ideally) located in a particular “position in the framework of society.”

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

# 4

## AMALGAMATION PRINTS STUCK UP IN HER CABIN

### *Print Culture, the Home, and the Roots of Resistance*

Looking back on his childhood home, former bondman Thomas Jones saw a twoness in it. His parents “tried to make it a happy place for their dear children”; they worked “late into the night many and many a time to get a little simple furniture for their home and the home of their children.” They “spent many hours of willing toil to stop up the chinks between the logs of their poor hut, that they and their children might be protected from the storm and the cold.” Jones could “testify” to the “deep and fond affection which the slave cherishes in his heart for his home and its dear ones.” While they tried to make a life for their family in their quarter, Jones’s parents could not escape the unhappiness they expected would enter it. They took it as their parental responsibility to “tal[k] about our coming misery” and to warn their children of the “inevitable suffering [that was] in store” for them by speaking “of our being torn from them and sold off to the dreaded slave trader.” As they taught their children the needed lessons, they “wept aloud” in the home they cherished, site of their present joy and likely future sorrow when one or more of their six children might be sold.<sup>1</sup>

Slave cabins were extensions of two worlds. They encompassed the public life of the plantation, reproducing and confining the workers who would turn out into the fields, the yards, the kitchens, and the smoking and curing and ginning houses of antebellum farms and onto the auction blocks of the slave markets. The quarters were also private places, home to slaves’ family and community lives and essential elements in the rival geography. Thus far, we have explored the movement of bodies in various changing spaces; now let us turn to the movement of objects in a physically stable place. Slave cabins were simultaneously public and private: they were public spaces of