"The All-Seeing Eye is Upon You": Racialized Religious and Sacralized Spiritual Spaces in Antebellum Northeast Mississippi

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“THE ALL-SEEING EYE IS UPON YOU”: RACIALIZED RELIGIOUS AND SACRALIZED SPIRITUAL SPACES IN ANTEBELLUM NORTHEAST MISSISSIPPI

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of History
The University of Mississippi

by
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ABSTRACT

During the antebellum era, white people and enslaved people of Northeast Mississippi ascribed multiple and often contradictory meanings to religious and spiritual spaces. Resistance to day-to-day racialized oppression in work and religious settings simultaneously showed how white people’s restrictions shaped enslaved people’s interpretations of Christianity, as well as how enslaved people shaped the boundaries of religious and spiritual spaces in antebellum Northeast Mississippi. Through the discourse of the family, evangelicals created a social hierarchy that assigned specific gender and racial roles for white men and women, as well as enslaved men and women. White evangelicals defended enslavement as compatible with Christianity but debated the religious instruction of enslaved people. While slaveholders feared that the religious instruction of enslaved people would undermine their own authority, black people knew that education provided the key to emancipation from white-controlled spaces. Although slaveholders controlled the forms of visible religious activity, enslaved people often shared religious spaces with white evangelicals through the 1850s. Illicit gatherings contested plantation spaces and afforded enslaved people the opportunity to strengthen community ties, appropriate time and space for themselves, express creativity, and combine evangelical teaching with their own messages of liberation. The overriding of plantation order empowered enslaved people but also risked discovery in a space constantly subjected to the white gaze. Communication with the spiritual world showed how enslaved people linked African and Anglo systems of belief and transcended the physical boundaries imposed by white people to occupy a spiritual plane.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents who have always provided boundless encouragement, love, and support.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Words do not adequately express my gratitude toward those who have seen my thesis to completion. I am grateful to all the staff in the archives and libraries that I visited, including Evans Memorial Library in Aberdeen, Mississippi and J.D. Williams Library in Oxford, Mississippi. Mattie Sink Abraham at Mitchell Memorial Library in Starkville, Mississippi was incredibly helpful in pulling and copying numerous collections. During fall of 2010, I entered the University of Mississippi Department of History’s graduate program with individuals who made Oxford into a home, and provided much-needed companionship and support during the writing of this thesis. I have benefitted from the scholarly examples of Nancy Bercaw, Michele Coffey, Deirdre Cooper Owens, Charles Eagles, Chiarella Esposito, Lester Field, John Neff, Elizabeth Payne, Anne Twitty, Joseph Ward, and Charles Reagan Wilson. Nancy Bercaw’s course on making race during Fall 2010 provided a foundation for my understanding of racialization. Although I never took a course with him, Charles Reagan Wilson generously agreed to be a member of my thesis committee. I thank him for his supportive words about my ideas on religion, slavery, and the construction of space. I can only look forward to future collaboration. Native Mississippian Elizabeth Payne first spurred my interest in Northeast Mississippi, and recognized the regional differences in the state, and encouraged me to enact this project. Deirdre Cooper Owens’s mentorship has played a vital role in all of my work since I entered graduate school, and has overseen my development as a scholar with her constructive criticism, positive voice, and flexibility. She demonstrated how my work on rural people in the South always matters, and showed how inequity extends across time and generations.
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INTRODUCTION

Not expecting to find “a large or a very elegant town,” an antebellum writer found himself “in the handsomest town of its size in the South, and amid a population as intelligent, refined and ‘fashionable’ as in any you can name.” The antebellum observer related that he had “never seen a town that has a more pleasing aspect to the eye, or where so much attention is given to the beauty of dwellings, the cultivation of flowers and the beautifying of the home.” The aesthetic qualities of Aberdeen, Mississippi reflected the fruits of its white population’s economic and political success. Aberdeen’s “daily advance in wealth and importance” was mirrored in its homes “furnished with as much costly elegance as any in New Orleans.” Further drawing comparisons to southern centers of culture, the observer noted “a Mobile furniture merchant told me that the richest furniture he sold was bought by the people of Aberdeen” and that the private carriages of Aberdeen’s families rivaled and surpassed those he had seen in Adams County, home to many of the wealthiest Mississippians. Beyond the aesthetically-pleasing accoutrements of Aberdeen, the observer found “more than usual literary taste, and a liberality and hospitality among the citizens that must always render Aberdeen an agreeable place to strangers, as well as a desirable residence.”

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Founded by Scottish trader Robert Gordon in 1834, Aberdeen became the county seat of Monroe County in 1849, and represented a cultural, economic, and political hub for Northeast Mississippi. Heavily Democratic, Aberdeen operated as a political center for Northeastern Mississippi for several decades. Antebellum Aberdeen developed a reputation as a center of education, and nine colleges and schools operated in the town by 1851. Due to its close proximity to the Tombigbee River, which connected it to Mobile, Alabama, Aberdeen formed an important economic center in Mississippi. By 1860, the steamboat trade on the Tombigbee River had made Aberdeen the largest city in Mississippi. One antebellum observer estimated that Aberdeen shipped “upwards of 30,000 bales of cotton to Mobile.” The town boasted lively commerce, “which one meets with in large cities,” including “dry goods stores, grocery and

2 Established on February 9, 1821, Monroe County, Mississippi is situated on a bend of the Tombigbee River, a tributary of the Mobile River, which provides a nautical connection to Mobile, Alabama. During the 1840s, when planters brought enslaved people to Monroe County to work on prairie plantations, the county’s population became a majority black. In 1840, Monroe County had a total white population of 5,146 and a total slave population of 4,083, with a total population of 9,250. By the 1850 census, Monroe County had a total white population of 9,418 and a total slave population of 11,717, with a total population of 21,172. Data from Historical Census Browser, from the University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/collections/ (accessed February 8, 2012). See Charles Granville Hamilton, “Historic Monroe: An Introduction,” The Journal of Monroe County History 1 (1974-1975): 5-6.

3 Robert Gordon gained the trust of the Chickasaws, and convinced them to cede their lands. The Chickasaws requested that the federal government give Gordon land, which would become the site for the town of Aberdeen. After first naming the town “Dundee” and asking settlers to use the Scottish pronunciation “Dunday,” Gordon became frustrated when settlers pronounced the town as “Dundy.” As a result, Gordon changed the name of the town to “Aberdeen,” and reportedly remarked “try and mispronounce that.” See Hamilton, “Historic Monroe,” 7.

4 An early settler of Monroe County, Samuel J. Gholson served as a member of the United States Congress in 1837 and 1838. Later, President Martin Van Buren appointed Gholson to serve as the judge of the United States Court of Mississippi, a position he held until Mississippi’s secession in 1861. Reuben Davis, a former practitioner of medicine, decided to study law and became a prominent criminal defense lawyer. In 1842, the governor of Mississippi appointed Davis to the High Court of Errors and Appeals, where he served for only four months. From 1855 until 1857, Davis served in the Mississippi House of Representatives. In 1857, Davis was elected to the United States Congress, and served until Mississippi’s secession in 1861. See Hamilton, “Historic Monroe,” 5; Robert Lowry and William H. McCordle, A History of Mississippi (Jackson, MS: R.H. Henry & Co., 1891), 539.

flourishing stores… equal to any in Natchez.”6 Historian Charles Sackett Sydnor found that Aberdeen housed a “more or less permanent” slave market, in addition to Mississippi’s largest slave market located in Natchez.7

As Monroe County developed and Aberdeen rose to prominence, evangelicalism had spread throughout the South. Although white evangelicals espoused an egalitarian view of salvation, they never made significant attempts to correct the power imbalances between white enslavers and black enslaved people: “the degradation and enslavement of Africans and African Americans served as the ultimate basis of Mississippi’s society.”8 While white evangelicals fundamentally swayed the social power structure of Northeast Mississippi in their own favor, evangelicalism’s teachings about salvation imbued the spiritual lives of enslaved people with unintended messages of liberation. Religion formed a dual relationship between white evangelicals and enslaved people. As evangelicals transformed the spiritual lives of enslaved people, enslaved people also transformed the nature of evangelicalism.

Evangelicalism in the South occurred in distinct phases. In the eighteenth century, as an extension of revivals that originated in Britain, evangelicalism gained traction as a social movement among lower class white men and women and black people against the rigid hierarchy and superfluous lifestyle of the elite class.9 Starting in the early 1800s in Kentucky, the Great

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6 “Aberdeen,” Monroe Democrat, May 21, 1851.


8 Randy J. Sparks, Religion in Mississippi (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi for the Mississippi Historical Society, 2001), 75-76.

9 Ibid., x-xi.
Revival strengthened evangelical denominations. Evangelicals assumed that their version of Christianity formed the “only basis for a healthy civilization.” The tenets of evangelicalism found roots in Common Sense philosophy, which appealed to Enlightenment-era Americans through a scientific approach to morality and reality. Evangelicals believed that an all-knowing and benevolent Creator governed the universe through a rational system of laws; the Bible, as the highest source of authority, revealed moral law; all people, as moral agents capable of free choice, had the capacity to know Godly truth, understand the Bible, and directly know the world; and people were born sinners, but with an intellect that suffered only “slight astigmatism.” The Great Revival introduced emotional intensity, an individual and a personal commitment to God, and a standard of holy living, or piety.

Unlike more emotionally-oriented denominations that stressed the practical experience of Christian faith like the Methodists, Calvinists placed importance on intellect, correct doctrine, higher education, and cognition in faith. During the Great Revival, theological distinctions between Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians seemed less important than winning converts: “theological precision was deemed irrelevant because shared beliefs seemed so much more important in the face of threatening deism and indifference.” Historian John B. Boles sees the blending of Calvinism with Arminianism, along with associated denominational particularities,

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12 Ibid., 14, 16. In contrast to Common Sense philosophy, strict Calvinists maintained that all humans were born sinful and blinded by the Fall from innocence. They also incorporated depravity and determinism.

13 Ibid., 15-16.

as “epicycles rotating around a circumference containing the general belief in the role of Providence, repentance, and prayer.”15 During the nineteenth century in the “New School,” Jonathan Edwards provided the model for Calvinist denominations like the Congregationalists and the Presbyterians, and “combined educational and doctrinal emphases with intense emotion.”16

Methodists and Baptists successfully expanded in the South. While Baptists rejected the notion of a formally-educated and salaried clergy, Methodists employed circuit preachers who traveled the countryside and preached “on a regular schedule at specified locations.” Unlike Baptists and Methodists, Presbyterians relied upon a long tradition of formally-educated ministers, which made expansion in the South more difficult and ultimately less fruitful in comparison to Baptists and Methodists.17 By the 1820s, revivalism led by Charles Finney combined an emphasis on intellect with emotional intensity. In practice, the revivals build a “Christian community united by intense feeling” through witnessing, or the act of “testifying to one another about how God transformed their lives.”18

Social gatherings provided the mechanism for the spread of evangelicalism. During the decades after the Great Revival, Methodists especially relied upon emotional camp meetings to gain converts.19 By the 1830s, evangelicals in the South centered their beliefs on individual salvation and the “spiritual purity of the individual congregation—maintained through strict


16 Marsden, Fundamentalism and American Culture, 44-45.

17 Boles, “Evangelical Protestantism in the Old South,” 16-17.

18 Marsden, Fundamentalism and American Culture, 44-45.

19 Boles, “Evangelical Protestantism in the Old South,” 25. According to Boles, Baptists and Presbyterians often characterized camp meetings as “too emotional.”
church discipline.” Because individual converts shared strong bonds with their own local congregations, churches gained moral authority as arbiters of and spaces for discipline and piety. Converts stressed an overarching concern for the morality of their individual congregations, which meant a rejection of worldliness. Instead of reforming society as a whole, southern evangelicals emphasized individual conversion of the sinners in their midst. Contrary to northern revivalism which stressed “social perfectionism,” southern evangelicalism took a localistic and an individualistic approach to reforming sin, the overall cause for social problems. The issue of slavery thrust evangelicals into the realm of “worldliness.” To facilitate further expansion and growth, evangelical denominations had to defend slavery as a way to save black souls.20

As cultural and social centers, Monroe County churches housed schools and hosted annual revivals, usually held in August after the laying of crops. Church services served as major weekly events with singing and preaching on Sundays. During the week, many preachers taught school and became known for producing more literary work than any other profession in the county.21 According to the 1850 census, Monroe County boasted a total of twenty recorded churches, including eleven Methodist, seven Baptist, and two Presbyterian churches.22 During the antebellum era, most Monroe County churchgoers were Methodists, followed by Missionary Baptists, while Primitive Baptists, Free Will Baptists, and Presbyterians numbered less than two

20 Ibid., 27-29.


22 During the 1850s, Monroe County saw the establishment of a Christian Church, an Episcopal Church, and a Missionary Baptist Church, as well as three Primitive Baptist, three Methodist, two Presbyterian, and two Baptist churches. Until the 1940s, Monroe County’s inhabitants remained a majority Methodist. Data from Historical Census Browser, from the University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/collections/ (accessed February 8, 2012). See Hamilton, “Monroe County Churches to 1876,” 41, 47-48.
hundred, with even fewer attendants at Christian and Episcopal churches. Methodist churches had the closest proximity to Monroe County inhabitants, with churches within at least four miles of every person. Most white people of the business, planter, and professional classes claimed Methodist membership. For Monroe County in particular, the presence of Methodist Bishop Robert Paine after 1846 and the holding of the Methodist annual conference in 1848 provided Methodism with great sway among residents.23

As evangelicalism spread in the South, lower class white people and enslaved people worshipped together in biracial churches. Evangelicalism offered opportunities for lay participation, which especially appealed to women who assumed roles as leaders in prayers and songs, teachers in Sunday schools, and organizers in missionary associations. Women’s leadership roles offered an alternative to the isolation of daily work.24 For many enslaved people, evangelicalism’s emotional style shared similarities with many West and West-Central African systems of belief, such as the possession of a spiritual entity during conversion and the collectivity of worship. The liberating elements of evangelicalism provided many enslaved people with a critique of white dominance.25 Many early evangelicals opposed slavery, and their egalitarianism critiqued white male authority. When evangelicalism spread to Northeast Mississippi, many white people strayed from their opposition to slavery, even as they criticized social hierarchy. After the 1830s cotton boom enabled lower class white people to become part

23 Hamilton, “Monroe County Churches to 1876,” 42, 44.


of the slaveholding class and with the conversions of wealthy slaveholders, the social structure of evangelical denominations fundamentally shifted towards a hierarchal social system.\textsuperscript{26}

Evangelical Mississippians developed a Biblically-sanctioned defense of slavery in the 1830s and 1840s. By the 1840s, Mississippi’s population consisted of a black majority. For proslavery Mississippians bent on spreading their particular brand of evangelicalism, the challenge laid in controlling the spaces in which enslaved people received religious instruction. Enslaved people’s conversion to Christianity would benefit the spread of evangelicalism as well as provide a divine sanctioning of the hierarchal master-slave relationship. Due to evangelicalism’s focuses on individual conversion, personal relationship with God, and spiritual equality, many evangelical white men opposed the conversion of enslaved people and white women as a threat to patriarchal authority. Many enslaved people refused to believe that God could sanction slavery, and sought to upend the arguments of proslavery white evangelicals.\textsuperscript{27}

An analysis of religious and spiritual spaces in antebellum Northeast Mississippi provides an opportunity to use a holistic approach to the histories of southern religion, antebellum-era slavery, African American spiritual beliefs, and gender. Although they lacked the paternalistic authority of their masters and the access to sexual purity and virtue of their mistresses, enslaved people actively participated in shaping the power dynamics of plantations.\textsuperscript{28}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Sparks, \textit{Religion in Mississippi}, x-xi.
\item Ibid., 75-77, 122-123.
\item During the 1970s, important historical scholarship addressed the character of American slavery. Attempting to reassert the masculinity of enslaved men in the face of literature that reduced them to childlike dependents of slave masters, historians largely dismissed the contributions of enslaved women. In his book \textit{Slavery, A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968 [1959]), Stanley Elkins argued in favor of the “Sambo theory,” which emphasized enslaved men’s childlike dependency upon slave masters. Because the American institution of slavery inhibited self-determination in every form on the part of the enslaved, “Sambo” represented the enslaved male’s laziness and childishness. Elkins’ work set the parameters for debate over the character of American slavery in the 1970s. In \textit{The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), John W. Blassingame argued that slaves possessed varying character traits, not just “Sambo.” Because different masters’ varying temperaments dictated
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historiographies of these subfields have added contours to the study of the antebellum South, no historian has attempted to blend interpretations of antebellum-era evangelicalism and African American folk beliefs in terms of spatial construction. Donald G. Mathews sees evangelicalism as both perceptive and a social process. While evangelicals sought to transform and save souls, they also constructed institutions like churches and schools that fundamentally altered the moral and social fabric of the South which informed the functioning of plantation spaces and provided a guide for antebellum social hierarchy.29 Mitchell Snay shows how religion functioned simultaneously as an institution, a theology, and a discourse. The major denominations in the South differed little in their stances on slavery by the 1840s and 1850s, and “proslavery Christianity both contributed and borrowed from the discourse on slavery.” By advocating a slaveholding ethic for masters and establishing religious missions to bring evangelicalism to the slave quarters, southern clergymen connected slavery to religion and morality.30 Janet Duitsman Cornelius examines slave missions, which originated in the late 1820s and early 1830s. While slave missions purportedly operated with primarily spiritual goals, they had secular functions, which held major implications for freedom, power, and control: “Missionaries perpetuated the

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image of a patriarchal slave system based on religious values and preparation of slaves and masters for a better future in this world and the next.” Many white missionaries believed that they could “appease slaveholders with reassurances about the value of religion for preserving safety and order while at the same time protecting religious rights for slaves.” The inhumanity of the slave system ultimately depended on white indifference, racism, and violence which undermined the goals of missionaries to slaves.\footnote{Janet Duitsman Cornelius, \textit{Slave Missions and the Black Church in the Antebellum South} (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 2.}

In an attempt to restore agency to African Americans, Charles F. Irons posits that white evangelicals in colonial and antebellum Virginia shaped proslavery arguments based on their own relationships with enslaved people. Irons applies black agency to the ecclesiastical process, and demonstrates that enslaved people allowed white Virginians to articulate a “politically relevant” proslavery argument. Although he grants enslaved people a central position in the development of evangelicalism, Irons hesitates to employ the term “evangelical” to describe African American Christians in the invisible church.\footnote{Charles F. Irons, \textit{The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia} (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 2, 15.}

Scholars have discussed the merging of African American folk beliefs and evangelical Christianity, but they rarely place their discussions in dialogue with work on the spread of evangelicalism in the South and the construction of Christian proslavery ideology. Milton Sernett provides a simplistic framework for the rise of African American evangelicalism and notes the non-existence of a “black church” before the Civil War but instead the existence of black Baptists, black Methodists, and black Presbyterians, among others. While Sernett calls for greater specificity in defining antebellum African American religious culture, he frames his
study in terms of winners and losers: “I have begun with a portrait of American Evangelicalism because it was… Christianity rather than traditional African religion that won out in the fusion of cultures and became the faith of the Negro church.” Enslaved people incorporated evangelical beliefs into their traditional systems of belief. Framing the religious consciousness of enslaved people in solely Christian terms ignores the continuation of important folk practices under evangelical Christianity that maintained intimate connections to the spiritual world. Sernett asks his readers to hold a “double consciousness.” He also asserts, “Sometimes our spotlight is on whites, sometimes on blacks, yet both groups are on the same stage.” While Sernett correctly points out that many black people would have seen themselves on the same stage as white people due to their conception of the spiritual world as an obvious extension of the physical world, he takes for granted that white people would have seen themselves either on such a stage or allowed black people to enter the stage. Given the paternalistic foundations of proslavery Christianity, many white people would have seen enslaved people as unworthy of having a presence on their religious stage and at the very least participants on an adjacent but separate stage.

Other scholars have emphasized the importance of the continuation of West and West-Central African folk beliefs upon enslaved people’s arrival in North America and have asserted their centrality to understanding the culture of enslaved people. Lawrence Levine responds to the absence of African Americans in intellectual history, and considers how enslaved people used expressive culture, folklore, and oral traditions to articulate their identities as both human and spiritual beings. The words of spiritual songs and the lessons in stories gave enslaved people

senses of pride, self-worth, and social cohesion. Albert J. Raboteau takes the first comprehensive look at the transformation of African religions into evangelical Christianity, the “invisible institution” of the black church on the plantation. Placing black biographies and folklore in dialogue with more traditional sources like missionary reports, travel accounts, and plantation journals, Raboteau reconstructs the day-to-day religious life of enslaved people.

While Levine and Raboteau provide an entry point for future scholars to employ black folklore and slave biographies in their discussions of religion and spirituality, Mechal Sobel argues that Africans brought a worldview of the Sacred Cosmos to North America, which blended with white cultural values and Christianity over several decades to produce a new understanding. The hardship of enslavement gave African Americans a “new coherence which preserved and revitalized crucial African understandings and usages regarding spirit and soul-travels, while melding them with Christian understandings of Jesus and individual salvation.” Sobel dates the blending of African beliefs and Christianity back to the 1750s black Baptist church which resulted in the creation of a new Sacred Cosmos. Under different terminology, this study will consider the basic concepts of Sobel’s Sacred Cosmos as a hybrid space for the practice of evangelical Christian values as well as West and West-Central African folk beliefs.

In a revision to the scholars who identified antebellum Christianity as a “culturally unifying force” within the enslaved community and a system that provided masters and slaves with mutual duties, historian Daniel L. Fountain finds that most enslaved people did not convert

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to Christianity, and enslaved people who converted to Christianity “likely did so because of the Christian core’s demonstrated faith in the coming of freedom and salvation.” Instead of interrogating the fusion of African beliefs and evangelical Christianity, Fountain investigates the existence of enslaved Christians and recasts the historiographical trajectory of enslaved people’s religious and spiritual lives with his contentions that a “small, strong, and visible Christian core existed within the southern slave population,” and that “emancipation provided African Americans far more incentive and opportunities to convert to Christianity than ever existed under slavery.”

The present study will reinforce Fountain’s claims that “many slaves saw whites as not only different but oppositional in nature” and that different approaches to religion forced whites and blacks to “view the world with greatly different eyes.” For instance, most white observers of enslaved people would not have recognized African beliefs in public worship as different from Christian beliefs, a perspective which could explain gaps in the source material. Next to plantation labor, attendance at church services would have been one of enslaved people’s most visible public activities. The disparities between enslaved people’s public and private beliefs would have remained invisible. At the same time, the present study will argue that nominal Christianity would have mattered only in the eyes of white people. While Christianity provided enslaved people with a dialogue and a space through which they articulated the meanings of

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37 Daniel L. Fountain, *Slavery, Civil War, and Salvation: African American Slaves and Christianity, 1830-1870* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 2-5, 16, 33. Out of the 381 slave narratives which Fountain surveyed, 148 indicated conversion to Christianity prior to emancipation (38.8%) and 233 indicated no conversion to Christianity prior to emancipation (61.2%). Despite representing 45% of Fountain’s survey, enslaved women represented 50% of all enslaved converts to Christianity. While 35.1% percent of all enslaved men surveyed converted to Christianity, 43.8% of all enslaved women converted to Christianity.

38 Ibid., 1, 39.

39 Ibid., 8-9, 61, 71.
freedom, spirituality in the broadest sense provided them with a space to negotiate the terms of emancipation with white people through resistance. In simple terms, for enslaved people, Christianity represented another method by which they connected physical and spiritual spaces. Because of his focus on the entire antebellum South, Fountain’s work, while admirable, ignores regional particularities. With the focus on antebellum Northeast Mississippi as an identifiable region in the South, the present study will attempt to refine Fountain’s contentions as well as question the importance of his findings. Northeast Mississippi had a near-even split in population between white people and enslaved people rather than a black majority, so regional demographics may play a role in Fountain’s findings.

Unlike historians who have synthesized the fusion of enslaved people’s spirituality with Christianity since their arrival in North America, Sharla M. Fett innovatively demonstrates the power of folk healing as a mode of resistance. Rejecting analyses that present African American healing beliefs as superstitious and others as scientific, Fett argues that enslaved communities connected individuals’ health to broader community relationships, emphasized collective affliction and healing, linked ancestors and living descendants, and centralized healing authority in elders and divine revelation. When enslaved people blended West and West Central African spirituality with their own version of Christianity, they critiqued slaveholders’ versions of Christianity and ideas about medical care. Enslaved people’s relational visions of healthcare constantly faced invasions from slaveholders, overseers, and white doctors who sought to practice their own versions of medical care. Enslaved women experienced the tensions between relational healthcare and professional white medical care in specific ways. On the one hand, enslaved women cared for the sick, made medicinal remedies, and attended births. On the other
hand, because enslaved women lacked the moral authority afforded to white women as caregivers, white society denied enslaved women the authority to care for their own families.\footnote{Sharla M. Fett, \textit{Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations} (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 5-6, 9-11.}

Few scholars have paid serious attention to the Northeast as a distinct region within the state of Mississippi. Randy J. Sparks delineates the relationships between black and white people, as well as men and women throughout the state of Mississippi in evangelical churches from 1773 to 1876. Evangelical Mississippians envisioned a society most properly organized around the space of the patriarchal household. As black and white people came into contact with one another within the spaces of evangelical society, their interactions created questions about discipline that required answers to meet the demands of evangelical duty, order, and virtue. Evangelicalism ultimately informed the political behavior of Mississippians through its shaping of individuals’ self-perceptions and power over “basic assumptions about the nature of society, economic structure, and government.”\footnote{Sparks, \textit{On Jordan’s Stormy Banks}, 3, 111.}

Instead of attempting an overview of antebellum slavery throughout the South, this study heeds Charles Joyner’s call for more localized studies of slavery and a re-creation of the “emotional texture of slave life.” As Joyner keenly observes, “no history, properly understood, is of merely local significance.” While local studies make statements about particular communities, they broaden the historiographical strokes of subfields like slavery.\footnote{Charles Joyner, \textit{Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community} (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1984).}

One scholar has attempted a comprehensive treatment of antebellum Northeast Mississippi but concentrates only on one subgroup of white people. Charles C. Bolton draws comparisons between tenant farmers and laborers in central North Carolina and Northeast
Mississippi and argues that poor landless whites held a significant place in the local economy and the political and social landscape. Poor whites threatened elite whites’ ideals of white independence and black dependence but failed to form cohesive political alliances among themselves and with enslaved people because of white racism, kinship ties, religion, education, and mobility, which all enforced racial barriers. In his analysis of Northeast Mississippi, Bolton considers only Pontotoc and Tishomingo counties. Scholars tend to obscure the importance of slavery in Northeast Mississippi with their focuses on roles of the Delta and the Natchez District in developing the Cotton Kingdom.

Due to imbalanced social demographics, the system of slavery in the Delta and the Natchez District have become the trademark for the experience of enslaved people in Mississippi. Population statistics overshadow Northeast Mississippi’s rich slaveholding past. Unlike in the Delta and the Natchez District, the ratio of enslaved people to white people in Northeast Mississippi remained relatively evenly divided in 1840 and 1850, and better reflected the state’s total population statistics. Moreover, because of fertile soil and close proximity to the Mississippi River, settlers found the Delta and the Natchez District more suitable for cotton’s production.

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45 In many counties along the Mississippi River, enslaved people overwhelmingly outnumbered white people. For instance, enslaved people in Adams County represented approximately 73% of the total population in 1840, and 77% in 1850. Enslaved people in Washington County represented 91% of the total population in 1840, and 93% in 1850. By contrast, enslaved people represented 44% of the total population in Monroe County in 1840, and 55% in 1850. Throughout the entire state of Mississippi, enslaved people represented 52% of the total population in 1840, and 51% in 1850. Data from Historical Census Browser, from the University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/collections/ (accessed April 11, 2012).
long growing season. In contrast, hilly terrain and rocky soil dominated the landscape of counties in Northeast Mississippi. For instance, the land in Monroe County during its earliest settlement was filled with loamy soil and thick forests. With the opening of land following the Chickasaw cession, planters gained access to more fertile prairie lands which proved more ideal for the establishment of plantations. While the scholarly work on slavery in the Delta provides many of the contours framing this study, Northeast Mississippi provides an attractive location for study due to its proximity to the Tombigbee River, which allowed for cultural interaction with Mobile and provided both black and white people with a wide variety of occupations and access to material resources.

During the last decade, historians of slavery have taken a spatial turn in their work. While many historians have analyzed space in terms of enslaved people’s resistance, the creation of community bonds and relationships among enslaved people and slaveholders over time within and across plantation spaces, this work will extend the discussion of space to the spiritual realm, a space that many enslaved people saw as untouched by the cultural, economic, legal, political, and social regulations imposed upon the physical space of plantations. Stephanie M.H. Camp provides the fundamental building block for the discussion of religious and spiritual spaces in

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46 Moore, *Agriculture in Antebellum Mississippi*, ix, xi.

47 Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth*, 4-5.

antebellum Northeast Mississippi, and emphasizes that enslaved people represented “many things at once, and they were many things at different moments and various places.”

Enslaved people lived and worked under both “geographies of containment” and “rival geographies,” two competing and overlapping spaces in the plantation South that provided the stage for resistance and contradictory notions of morality. Within geographies of containment governed by the logic of paternalism to increase productivity, slaveholders constricted time and space and controlled the activities and locations of enslaved people to ensure that plantations operated with great order. Under the guise of a system that promoted enslavement as a positive good with mutually beneficial obligations, enslaved people faced “cultural alienation, reduction to the status of property, the ever-present threat of sale, denial of the fruits of one’s labor, and subjugation to the force, power, and will of another human being.” Within the rival geography, characterized by mobility, enslaved people created an alternative knowledge and use of plantation space, which allowed them to move their physical bodies and objects and transmit messages, as well as provide a challenge to the constraints and demands of planters. Because slaveholders and patrollers always had access to the rival geography, enslaved people constantly faced the danger of discovery in their movement. The actions of enslaved people within plantation spaces carried multiple circumstantial meanings, so Camp’s framework of resistance applies to multiple settings in the antebellum South, including Northeast Mississippi.

When enslaved people ran away, interacted with enslaved people from other plantations, and faced the realities of sale, they constantly re-created and created their senses of place. Anthony E. Kaye takes a broader approach to the spatial dynamics of slavery and conceives of


50 Ibid., 6-10, 12, 17-18, 20.
multiple slave neighborhoods instead of an overarching slave community. Through their leisure and work activities, enslaved people “re-calibrate[d] the balance of power in their society” during their interactions among each other and with white masters.\textsuperscript{51} Enslaved people’s appropriation of social spaces allowed them to strengthen ties through resistive activities like secret romantic unions, running away, and secretly buying goods.

Places, boundaries, and mobility defined the spaces of the antebellum South. Bondage represented the ultimate restriction on mobility and clearly defined inclusion or exclusion in plantation geographies and social hierarchy. Literacy governed the content intellectual spaces which included any readable or written form of communication. While literacy controlled the content of intellectual spaces, that content had great mobility through vocal and auditory forms of communication. White southerners controlled access to religious spaces, which could include church buildings, illicit plantation meetings, or Biblical messages. Enslaved people often placed their own meanings on religious spaces. Thus, individual power governed spiritual spaces, which could often blend both Christian and folk practices.

For this study on antebellum Northeast Mississippi, the spatial approach serves multiple interwoven purposes. First, many enslaved people conceived of a spirituality that transcended the physical world. Spiritual enslaved people constantly interacted with metaphysical entities through the appearances of ghosts and the powers of enslaved healers. Second, although white people placed limitations on their mobility, enslaved people transcended physical limitations in their minds as a way of coping with the trauma associated with bondage and coercion. Through spiritual songs and illicit spiritual gatherings, enslaved people imagined liberation and experienced communal spiritual power. Third, white people justified the appropriation of

\textsuperscript{51} Kaye, \textit{Joining Places}, 10-12.
physical spaces within and around the plantation through a paternalistic interpretation of
Christianity that provided divinely-ordained gendered and racial roles. Even under the confines
of evangelical order within plantation spaces, enslaved people found power to undermine white
authority and appropriate time and space for their own spiritual development. Fourth, a spatial
analysis emphasizes the importance of enslaved people’s efforts to conceal their spiritual
activities under the watchful eyes of white authority. Although enslaved people commanded
their spiritual destinies in many ways, they always did so under a system of white hierarchy.

Historians of slavery in the United States face the unique task of interpreting sources
from diverse gendered and racial perspectives. These sources often obscure gendered notions of
slavery and present inherently racist assumptions. This study relies heavily upon agricultural
journals from Mississippi, antebellum newspapers, and the W.T. Lenoir family’s plantation
records52 as well as ninety-five oral interviews conducted by the Federal Writers’ Project in the

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52. The W.T. Lenoir family of Northeast Mississippi represented a group of educated white southerners.
The Methodist family used the written word in letters to show the success of religious conversions and spread
religious advice among family members. During the 1830s, half-brothers Hope Hull Lenoir (1786-1865) and
Absalom Blanchard (1771-1854) and their families migrated to Marion County, Mississippi from Camden, South
Carolina. The two half-brothers shared a mother, Mary (d. 1788), whose second husband Thomas Lenoir (1741-
1816) fathered Hope Lenoir. Virginia-born Thomas Lenoir descended from the French Huguenot LeNoir family.
After first settling in Cooter’s Bluff on the eastern side of the Pearl River, Hope Lenoir later moved to White Bluff,
which was close to the home of his brother William Thomas Lenoir (1785-1845) in Red Bluff. Both Hope’s son
William Thomas Lenoir (1811-1860) and Absalom’s son William Adolphus Blanchard (1812-1862) attended
LaGrange College, a Methodist Episcopal school started in a mountain hamlet in northeastern Franklin County,
Alabama. In 1840, William Thomas Lenoir married Mary Elizabeth Blanchard (1810-1894), the daughter of
Absalom Blanchard. After the purchase of 3,500 acres of land in 1845, William Thomas and Mary Lenoir moved to
Monroe County, Mississippi and enjoyed success in the cotton trade. By that time, William A. Blanchard had set up
a law practice and resided in Columbus, Mississippi. Between 1842 and 1855, Absalom Blanchard and William A.
Blanchard purchased several tracts of land in Monroe County, Mississippi. Around 1847, William Thomas and
Mary Lenoir initiated the construction of the Lenoir Plantation house in present-day Prairie, Mississippi. Unlike
many other planter families in the area who typically built smaller and less grandiose homes on the space of the
plantation and instead erected larger and more spectacular homes in town, the Lenoir family built a comparatively
grand home on the space of the plantation. In addition to their land holdings in Monroe County, Mississippi, the
Lenoir family also owned 5,000 acres of land on the Brazos River near Marlin, Falls County, Texas. Records
indicate that William Lenoir had been in Texas around 1837 and that he purchased property in Texas through the
1850s. William Smith Lenoir, Sr. (1842-1911) and James Lawrence Lenoir (b. 1844), two of William Thomas and
Mary Lenoir’s sons, attended Greene Springs School for Boys in Alabama. William Smith Lenoir, Sr. was one of
William Thomas and Mary Lenoir’s oldest surviving sons. After they left school, both William Smith Lenoir, Sr.
and James Lawrence Moore served in the Confederate Army. In 1868, William S. Lenoir, Sr. married Julia Paine
(1851-1918), the daughter of Aberdeen, Mississippi doctor Sterling L. Paine (1824-1890). Sterling L. Paine had
Works Progress Administration (WPA) of the New Deal with formerly enslaved African Americans residing in Chickasaw, Clay, Itawamba, Lee, Lowndes, Monroe, and Pontotoc Counties in Mississippi. While Monroe County itself provides a rich body of slave narratives, respondents often mention circumstances that occurred in nearby areas, and the geographic boundaries of counties constantly shifted in antebellum Mississippi. Interpreted together, these sources show a vibrant spiritual life in Northeast Mississippi between the spread of evangelicalism in the 1830s and just before Mississippi’s secession in 1861.

served as a doctor in Aberdeen, Mississippi since 1847, and cared for wounded soldiers during the Civil War. Sterling’s half-brother Bishop Robert Paine (1799-1882), a native North Carolinian, of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, served as the first president of LaGrange College from 1830 until 1846, and then moved to Aberdeen, Mississippi. In 1865, James L. Lenoir married Caroline Watkins Hoskins (b. 1840), a first cousin of Julia Paine Lenoir. Information obtained through “Guide to the Lenoir Plantation Records,” Lenoir Plantation Records, Special Collections Department, Mississippi State University Library.

53 Lee County formed in 1866 from land in both Ponotoc County and Itawamba County. The WPA performed interviews in the 1930s with formerly enslaved Lee County residents who had been enslaved in either Ponotoc County or Itawamba County. In the late 1820s, the Mississippi legislature added all of the Chickasaw territory to Monroe County, which made it the largest county in both geographic area and population in Mississippi. Over the proceeding years, twenty five counties would form from the land in Monroe County, earning it the moniker “Mother Monroe.” In 1830, the Mississippi legislature carved the southern portion of Monroe County into Lowndes County. At the time, Athens held the Monroe County seat, and would house the county courthouse until 1847. The Chickasaw cession of 1836 opened a vast area of prairie land west of the Tombigbee River to planters, who constructed large plantations. See Hamilton, “Historic Monroe,” 5-6.

54 In the late 1820s, the Mississippi legislature added all of the Chickasaw territory to Monroe County, which made it the largest county in both geographic area and population in Mississippi. Over the proceeding years, twenty five counties would form from the land in Monroe County, earning it the moniker “Mother Monroe.” In 1830, the Mississippi legislature carved the southern portion of Monroe County into Lowndes County. At the time, Athens held the Monroe County seat, and would house the county courthouse until 1847. The Chickasaw cession of 1836 opened a vast area of prairie land west of the Tombigbee River to planters, who constructed large plantations. See Hamilton, “Historic Monroe,” 5-6.
Federal agents conducted WPA interviews during the backdrop of the 1930s, which presents several methodological difficulties. Because the interviews occurred several decades after Emancipation in 1863, most respondents had been young children during their experience of enslavement and were elderly at the time of the interview. Length of time and accuracy of memory pose serious questions about the reliability of the interviews. Historian Edward E. Baptist argues that formerly enslaved people understood enslavement as a shared experience rooted in loss and separation, and the repetition of narrative elements in WPA interviews denotes a collective memory. Although WPA interviews occurred many decades after Emancipation, narrative repetition in the interviews as a body of literature attests to the depth of the scars of enslavement. Former bondspeople “encoded a critique of slavery, whiteness, power, and white

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history that contradicts academic historians’ assessment of these interviews as inherently limited."\(^{56}\)

As with any interview, historians must interrogate the objectivity of the interviewer. During questioning, the interviewers could signal emotional cues for specific types of responses and length of answers. The race of the interviewer could influence respondents as agents conducted interviews in a highly conflicted racial environment. Historian Helene Lecaudey compared WPA interviews from South Carolina and Virginia. In South Carolina, the presence of a white male interviewer influenced the responses of formerly enslaved women to questions of interracial sexual relations. In Virginia, the presence of a black female interviewer provided formerly enslaved women with greater comfort and more openness when discussing interracial sexual relations. When using WPA narratives, historians must constantly contextualize the roles of race and gender as well as the extent to which formerly enslaved women responded to questions. The sensitivity of discussing miscegenation underscores its centrality to the history of enslavement.\(^{57}\)

Beyond the racial struggles and questions of African American citizenship during the 1930s, federal agents conducted the interviews under the economic distress of the Great Depression. State repression forced homeless and hungry southern African Americans to rely


upon southern white politicians for their livelihoods. Historians must read the interviews with an awareness of African Americans’ trust and distrust of federal bureaucrats.\textsuperscript{58}

Although WPA narratives present methodological constraints, historian Deborah Gray White argues that WPA interviews remain less problematic than using sources like plantation records dictated by white slaveholders and informed by racist ideas about enslavement and African American women.\textsuperscript{59} Slaveholding men’s and women’s diaries, journals, and personal family papers reflect white views of enslavement and gendered notions of African American sexuality. Court records create greater gaps in source material. Victoria E. Bynum notes that because masters generally governed enslaved women’s behavior, public records obscure either their “unruliness” or resistance to slavery. Enslaved women possessed nearly no access to the court system to address their own grievances. So, even with the paucity of existing public records, the appearance of enslaved women in public records provides greater meaning to the extent of resistance.\textsuperscript{60} Use of folklore and memory presents similar difficulties. In examining \textit{The Echo of the Black Horn}, a racist book about the legend of Rachel Knight, Bynum “re-imagines” the narrative. Written by white segregationist Ethel Knight, the story portrays Rachel as a seductive mulatto Jezebel. By deconstructing the elements of Ethel Knight’s narrative, Bynum rediscovers Rachel’s silences.\textsuperscript{61}


\textsuperscript{59} Deborah Gray White, \textit{Ar’n’t I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South} (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999 [1985]), 192.


In continually deploying the term “agency,” historians reproduce white supremacist assumptions about African Americans’ control of their own destinies. Thavolia Glymph reinforces Walter Johnson’s call for historians of enslavement to step away from a heavy reliance on the concept of “agency” which has masked the complexity of African American history in favor of abstraction. By implying self-determination and freedom of choice, “agency” contradicts the inhumanity of enslavement and convolutes definitions of “humanity” and “resistance.” Historians should instead view enslaved people as “conditioned by, though not reducible to” their enslavement. Partially obscuring the fact that enslaved people always lived under the yoke of their master, an overuse of agency hides the ways in which enslaved people conceived of their own actions and thought about enslavement and resistance.⁶²

This study will treat religion and spirituality as more than categories of analysis alongside class, gender, and race. Instead, religion and spirituality functioned as fundamental parts of the consciousness of both black and white people, and enslaved people actively participated in shaping the power dynamics of the plantation through their conceptions of religious and spiritual spaces. Influenced by Clifford Geertz, John B. Boles argues that religion served as a “model of and for reality; it explains the perceived world and prescribes the right behavior.”⁶³ Throughout the application of source material, this study assumes George M. Marsden’s definition of culture as the sum of beliefs, commitments, ideals, and values of a society that found expression in art and literature as well as reflected in educational, political, and social institutions. In many societies, religion has played a key role in the formation of institutions and justifies dominant

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beliefs and values. Daily interactions, whether obedient, passive, or rebellious, defined social relationships for both blacks and whites on the plantation. In probing the boundaries of antebellum spaces, both on and away from plantations, historians can complicate the binary of private versus public realms and show that private actions may have intended public and therefore political consequences. The boundaries of antebellum spaces denote the limits to enslaved people’s autonomy and the importance of emancipation.

During the antebellum era, white people and enslaved people of Northeast Mississippi ascribed multiple and often contradictory meanings to religious and spiritual spaces. The first chapter, “White Evangelical Social Order,” provides the basic context of white evangelical social order. Through the discourse of the family, evangelicals created a social hierarchy that assigned specific gender and racial roles for white men and women as well as enslaved men and women. The order of the social hierarchy both institutionalized and sacralized dependencies and inferiority in antebellum-era social and domestic spaces. The second chapter, “White Evangelicals, Racial Slavery, and Religious Education,” shows how white Northeast Mississippians justified enslavement and racial inferiority through the Bible. White evangelicals defended enslavement as compatible with Christianity but debated the religious instruction of enslaved people. While slaveholders feared that the religious instruction of enslaved people would undermine their own authority, black people knew that education provided the key to emancipation from white-controlled spaces.

White people attempted to control enslaved people’s religious lives through strict monitoring and regulation of spiritual spaces. The third chapter, “Restrictions on Mobility,” demonstrates how white Mississippians regulated the mobility of enslaved people and their

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64 Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, ix.
attendance at religious gatherings. Although slaveholders controlled the forms of visible religious activity, enslaved people often shared religious spaces with white evangelicals through the 1850s. Enslaved people’s participation in religious spaces ultimately informed the religious format of their secret meetings, the subject of the fourth chapter, “Enslaved People, Illicit Gatherings, and Conversion Experiences.” Illicit gatherings on contested plantation spaces afforded enslaved people the opportunity to strengthen community ties, appropriate time and space for themselves, express creativity, and combine evangelical teaching with their own messages of liberation. The overriding of plantation order empowered enslaved people but also risked discovery in a space constantly subjected to the white gaze. Spiritual songs allowed enslaved people to associate religion with freedom from bondage. Enslaved preachers often appropriated the messages of Christianity for the purposes of empowerment for enslaved people. Because most enslaved preachers were illiterate, their sermons placed less emphasis on the written words of the Bible. Instead, enslaved preachers listened to the words of white preachers and recited them by memory to their audiences, making Christian sermons part of enslaved people’s oral traditions.

Often random, communication with the spiritual world showed how enslaved people linked African and Anglo systems of belief, and transcended the physical boundaries imposed by white people to occupy a spiritual plane. The fifth chapter, “Communication with the Spiritual World,” describes how enslaved people communicated with the spiritual world, an act that did not occur only on Sundays or in the space of a church building. The sixth chapter, “Enslaved People and Folk Healing Practices,” explores folk healing, a physical extension and application of power obtained in spiritual spaces. Even as many slaveholders reduced black folk traditions to superstition, enslaved healers relied upon their knowledge of physical plantation spaces and
their collective relationships with the living and the deceased to harness power that collapsed the boundaries between the physical and spiritual world and symbolized profound cultural, political, and social meanings. As white people formalized medical training, they often relabeled enslaved people’s herbal knowledge and folk traditions as science.

While this study reacts to historiographical gaps on slavery in Northeast Mississippi and places into conversation scholarship on antebellum religion, black spirituality, and southern slavery, the proceeding chapters employ a comparative model to analyze white people and enslaved people, and show how both groups dealt with racialized religious spaces and conceptions of spirituality. Because white people possessed the power to leave more imprints on the historical record, this thesis concentrates more on white slaveholders rather than enslaved people. Even as white people attempted to impose order upon reality and shape the production of knowledge, the everyday experiences of enslaved people contested white people’s claims to cultural and intellectual dominance. Resistance to day-to-day racialized oppression in work and religious settings simultaneously showed how white people’s restrictions shaped enslaved people’s interpretations of Christianity, as well as how enslaved people shaped the boundaries of religious and spiritual spaces in antebellum Northeast Mississippi.
CHAPTER I

“ARE YOU STRIVING TO MAKE YOUR CALLING AND ELECTION?”: WHITE EVANGELICAL SOCIAL ORDER

Evangelicals articulated their worldview through the discourse of family and believed that Christian society represented the perfected family. The image of the family symbolized the ideal notions of love and intimacy within the family as well as the hierarchy within the household. The bonds and hierarchy within the space of the household reaffirmed, institutionalized, and sacralized dependencies within social spaces which imbued public religious spaces with a set of obligations and expectations.\footnote{Stephanie McCurry, \textit{Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country} (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995), 136, 171-172.} The familial metaphor of evangelicalism effectively increased the mastery and power of slaveholding men as heads of their own households and at the top of the social hierarchy. This acted as both a space and a mechanism prone to disorder and constantly in need of management and policing through the household, literary work, and legal instruments.

The family structure formed the locus of antebellum socialization and provided the apparatus through which children learned how to operate within the structures of the church and the state. Using the model of the family, white evangelicals assumed that their religious messages would gain greater legitimacy by attaching themselves to economic and socializing
mechanisms. The family gave evangelicals a domestic space through which they could enact conversion using a developmental approach that insisted on children understanding themselves as Christians.

White southern evangelicals granted paramount importance as well as moral and religious legitimacy to the home in books, pamphlets, and speeches. The elevation of the home occurred as a trend that “transcended national boundaries.”\(^2\) In contrast to the domestic ideal for southern white women, antebellum notions of southern gentility emphasized honor and piety. By the 1830s, evangelical Christianity had “severely altered” notions of southern gentility. Southern gentlemen added piety to the ideal of honor which made its attainment more democratic for white men. Individuals who possessed Christian gentility involved themselves in performing both formal and informal good works, including charity, as well as kindness toward southerners of lower social classes, strangers, and less-than-well-liked folk. Pious southern gentlemen constantly prayed for their acquaintances, family, and friends, and resigned themselves to God’s will and literal scriptural interpretations. Without a worldview that hinged upon the performance of honor and piety, according to many in the upper ranks of southern society, white southern men possessed neither the character nor the reputation of gentility.\(^3\)

To mitigate the effects of disorder, churches in Monroe County regularly governed the private lives of their members. For instance, Methodist churches required a probationary year-long disciplinary period for new members.\(^4\) New Hope Primitive Baptist Church provided


interesting cases of disciplinary action against its members. New Hope regularly tried its members on charges of drunkenness, fighting, lying, and fiddling but almost always allowed them to return upon admission of guilt and acknowledgement of sin. The emphasis on honesty and morality extended to congregants’ business affairs. In one trial, New Hope found two members guilty of wetting cotton before shipment to Mobile.⁵

The father occupied the head of household and held responsibility for the proper behavior of household members in front of God.⁶ Hope Hull Lenoir gave religious and spiritual advice to his son William Thomas Lenoir and daughter-in-law Mary Elizabeth Blanchard of Monroe County. While his children had been “planning for the body,” Hope Hull Lenoir concerned himself with the salvation of their souls: “Are you striving to make your calling and election?... Do you desire above all things to have the Love of dwelling in you ask in faith that your Joy may be full?” Lenoir needed assurance that he would see his children in the afterlife: “Do not forget My Dear Son the promise made to your Mother in the Hour of Death to meet her in Heaven.” With strong Christian faith, Hope Hull Lenoir hoped his children would “ask that you may receive, seek that you may find, knock, and the door of Mercy will be opening to you.” Hope Hull Lenoir concluded with a blessing: “May God bless you with all the graces of his Holy Spirit guide by his council and save you in Heaven is the continual prayer of your father.”⁷

Evangelical men and women occupied different yet complementary roles. For instance, husbands made possible their wives’ duties in domestic spaces through the exercise of restrained

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⁶ Mathews, Religion in the Old South, 101.

⁷ Lenoir Plantation Records: Box 1- Folder 1, Personal Records: Correspondence: 1832 September – 1857 December, 15 May 1856 – HH Lenoir to Son & Daughter.
authority, love, protection, and household governance. The mother symbolized morality, epitomized in the domestic ideal. As arbiters of mental discipline and moral improvement, southern women gained strength and superiority. Mary Lenoir advised her son William Smith Lenoir, Sr. to pray often. “I hope my dear child you do not forget to look to your Heavenly Father to take you in his keeping… Do not be ashamed of him and he has declared he will not be ashamed of you. I have given you to the Lord. Oh that you may walk in the way of holiness.” W.S. Lenoir should get a Bible and read it during the day as “it is the best of books.” Mary Lenoir’s “constant prayer” would help her son W.S. Lenoir. Having heard from an instructor that W.S. Lenoir had been “a good boy,” Mary Lenoir advised her son to “continue to merit his approbation,” and “be polite to all with whom you [meet]” and “make no friends of bad boys” as “birds of a feather flock together.”

Due to assumptions that conflated affectionate and emotional behavior with femininity, southern evangelicals believed that white southern women occupied the most pious spaces in the antebellum social hierarchy. As one northeastern Mississippi editorial stated about the role of women in domestic spaces, “I have heard many women complaining of their husbands’ neglect of the home. A spoonful of honey will keep more bees in the hive than will ten of vinegar.” Although most white families owned no enslaved people, ideals of religious benevolence assigned white evangelical women with moral responsibilities toward enslaved people.

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8 Mathews, Religion in the Old South, 112-113, 121.

9 Lenoir Plantation Records: Box 1: Folder 2: Personal Records: Correspondence: 1858 May- 1860 June, 11 November 1858 – ML to WS Lenoir.

10 Mathews, Religion in the Old South, 112-113.

11 Monroe Democrat, February 19, 1851.
The spread of evangelicalism changed notions of the white family and gender roles for many antebellum southerners, even as evangelical ideals failed to markedly change individuals’ behavior. White literary spaces reinforced the domestic ideal. One northeastern Mississippi editorial played on the social roles of both men and women. According to the writer, on one hand, men represented

a marvelous and matchless model of mechanism; a mutable mass of mirth and misanthropy; merry midst mourning, mourning midst mirth. Man mars his mundane mission by mixing in monstrous mummeries, mindless of the meek monitions of his mighty master, madly misprising his mild and moderate mandates mid the manifold manifestations of the multiplied mercies meted out by his maker. Muse, then, misguiding mortals, on the magnitude of thy misdemeanors; mind not the meretricious machinations of malevolent ministers, but merit the mead of a merciful Messiah.

On the other hand, women were those

who whilome, was weak, was wrought upon by the wheedling words of the wily one, since when the world weeps o’er its wickedness. Wanting woman, the world were a waste, and we wending our weary way through its wilderness, would wait out wailings to the winds and the waves. Woman, without thy winsome ways, wealth were worthless, a Will o’the Wisp. The witchery waving of the wizard’s wand; witness thy weariless watchings o’er the wounded, and through weal or woe. Wanton waddlers on the wane, writhing under wrinkles, may wage thee warfare, but the wise welcome and worship thee.

The continual reassertion of the white domestic ideal mirrored the insecurity of the antebellum social hierarchy and its shaky foundations in the institution of slavery. Although many southern white evangelicals attempted to naturalize gender roles through the domestic ideal, constant reminders about proper behavior suggested the imminence of debauchery or wickedness, possibly through the close proximity of disorderly forces like enslaved people on plantations and within homes.

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12 Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, 97, 118.

Planters and evangelical ministers linked the education of white women to order in domestic spaces. Evangelicalism shared many characteristics with the ideology of republicanism which challenged old assumptions about women after the American Revolution. Republican womanhood idealized marriage as the most important familial relationship, with men and women as “conjugal equals” and women as “guardians of male virtue.” Women’s fulfillment of the responsibilities of republican wives and mothers would reform society. Because evangelicals clutched notions of feminized virtue, evangelical women used republican ideology to create a larger social and therefore public space through education and literacy.\(^\text{14}\) For white women who could afford to attend school, education would provide instruction on the proper management of the home, which included the allocation and observation of the time and work of enslaved people. Slaveholding women defined themselves by their consumption of luxury goods like imported furniture and clothing. The presence and work of enslaved women had allowed white women to live extravagantly.\(^\text{15}\) Wealthy white southerners possessed the ability and mobility to buy luxury goods sold in cities like Memphis, Mobile, and New Orleans, which communicated the limited availability of cosmopolitanism “only to elites.” The ownership of luxury goods gave wealthy Mississippians the ability to display wealth and hospitality, as well as their capacity to travel and buy merchandise for private pleasures. The accoutrements of elaborate homes expressed the leadership and “permanence” of elite white Mississippians, and contrasted with the small wooden houses of lower class white people and enslaved people that suggested


“impermanence.”

The suggestions of permanence and impermanence directly correlated with mobility and the ability to construct as well as control physical spaces.

White men constantly attempted to keep their households economically independent. Both white men and white women “feared that too much indulgence in the life of cosmopolitan fashion could endanger things they valued more than a new dress.” White women possessed little access to ready-made clothing, and white men preferred to confine white women to domestic spaces in which they could contribute to the independence of the household economy through activities like sewing. When white women avoided the expensive indulgences of fashion, they also applied to their lives the evangelical notions of female obligation to the hierarchy of the household and humility in their outward appearance. One editorial reflected the notion that education would teach white women how to contribute to the household’s economic independence and advised that every woman become her own dressmaker: “She should be instructed in the anatomy and physiology of her system, and be perfectly able to give a correct outline of a classical figure and its appropriate dress, on the black board.” After learning her own measurements, women should “be instructed to cut her own dresses in a simple and elegant manner, and adapt them to her figure so that not the least pressure should exist on any part of her person.” The inability to dress according to the climate demands of northeastern Mississippi had been “one of the principal causes of early decay in our country women.”

Although elite white women left domestic spaces to receive educations, they confronted an academic reinforcement of the domestic ideal. Parents of educated southern women never

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17 Ibid., 25-30.

18 “Every Woman Her Own Dressmaker,” *Monroe Democrat*, May 8, 1850.
intended for their daughters to work outside of domestic spaces. Educators in women’s schools played an important role in maintaining women’s roles within domestic spaces, and were “called upon to educate, particularly, (although not exclusively,) for the female circle; they should on that account represent family in its most attractive and proper form.” One writer advocated the use of both male and female educators, as “God has thus ordained it in the family—why should it not be proper elsewhere?”19 The education of elite southern white women represented a “romanticization of white domination in a slave society.” Compared to northern states, southern states had more female colleges than any other region. Unlike northerners who feared that females’ college education would “become the means for mounting an attack on the sex segregation of the professions,” southerners viewed the classical education of women as emblematic of gentility.

The curriculum of southern schools for white women emphasized the liberal arts and etiquette. As “mostly northern male and female faculty attempted to duplicate in the South the education available in the North,” they had “competing agendas.” Faculty members typically consisted of both male evangelical ministers and northern white females. Ministers instructed white women on benevolence and piety within the domestic sphere. Female teachers attempted to substitute southern standards of sociability, leisure, and fashion with “morally superior” northern “sobriety, frugality, and work ethic.”20

Impious women posed a fundamental threat to social order, and education provided a channel through which white southerners restored order. One editorial bemoaned the “real moral pest” of an impious woman: “Her principles will be impressed upon her children much more

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certainly and deeply than those of the father, on which account, her influence for good or evil is unmeasurable.” The writer suggested that women’s education should contain greater substance, and that “every girl in the land should be well instructed in female work, and all the branches taught in a good common school.” Above all, women’s education should emphasize “sincere piety, true morality, a cheerful pure heart, self-regard, and a high respect for her calling” in all walks of her life. Women would benefit from courses in

Biblical History; Christian morals; History—that of our own country particularly; Geography; Science of Health; the most important and useful part of Botany; at least so much of Natural Philosophy as will enable them to judge correctly and intelligently of the usual phenomena of nature, Ladies fine work, drawings, vocal and instrumental music, foreign languages may be taught too; but if they be taught as superficially as frequent instances would indicate that they are, they had better not be taught at all.21

The patterns in women’s education emphasized courses that directly linked white women’s roles in domestic spaces to evangelical social hierarchy.

White southern women best fulfilled the domestic ideal when they paired themselves with white southern men who embodied gentility. Advice columns instructed white southern women in choosing husbands who characterized the ideals of white southern gentility. Columnists advised white women to avoid marriage with profane men who gambled, drank heavily, broke promises, neglected business, and chased women. The “depravity of his heart [would] corrupt your children,” and “you [could] never trust him.” Dishonest men knew no difference between right and wrong, and were “deplorable… the less you have to do with [them] the better.” When a man “had no regard for himself,” he would “never have any for his wife.” Moreover, a man who ran “after all the girls in the country” possessed “wavering” affections and could “never be permanent.”22

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21 “Female Education,” Monroe Democrat, February 19, 1851.

22 “Rules for Ladies,” Monroe Democrat, February 26, 1851.
Within the space of the household, evangelical slaveholders conflated resistance with bad behavior, which comforted white women even as resistance highlighted their inability to conform to the domestic ideal of controlling enslaved people. In their portrayals of resistive enslaved women as simultaneously dangerous and harmless, southern white women veiled enslaved women’s resistance under the guise of domesticity and hid their own domestic ineptitude from scrutiny in public spaces. Instead of representing a labor conflict, white people equated resistance from enslaved women with a defect in the racial character of black people, especially perceived lack of discipline in the character of black women. Through the control of mobility and time, white slaveholders enacted a civilizing mission.\footnote{Glymph, \textit{Out of the House of Bondage}, 67, 71.} Hope Hull Lenoir wrote to his children, and mentioned giving Sarah Lenoir a slave named Amanda, a daughter of an enslaved woman named Kizzy who worked for the Lenoir family as a cook. In the middle of February of 1856, during morning breakfast, Sarah poured milk from a pitcher, but found it to taste bitter. LeMay, Sarah’s husband, inspected the glass and “turned the milk slowly [and] found a deposit.” Upon further analysis of the glass, LeMay determined the bitter-tasting substance to be strychnine, and attempted to force Amanda to drink the milk. When Amanda refused to drink the milk, Hope decided to send her to jail where she was sold. Although “she insisted that she was innocent,” Hope concluded that “there was no other person to do it” and “from the circumstances, I am convinced her object was to poison Sarah.”\footnote{Lenoir Plantation Records: Box 1: Folder 1: Personal Records: Correspondence: 1832 September – 1857 December, 2 March 1856 – H.H. Lenoir St, Marion Cty., to “My Dear Children.”} If the Lenoir family’s plantation and imposition of discipline could not civilize Amanda, then after her
punishment for bad behavior, she could be sent to another white-controlled space to achieve the civilizing mission.

Enslaved women resisted the space of the plantation household as both an ideological construction and a site of labor, a nexus that maintained the institution of slavery and civilized the South in juxtaposition to the perceived savagery of enslaved women. The success of slaveholding women as managers of domestic spaces provided the standard of progress for civilization. Notions of domesticity characterized southern white womanhood, and obscured conflicts within the space of the household. Enslaved women represented the direct antithesis of domesticity, and symbolized “vessels of disorder and filth [that] had become central to southern pro-slavery ideology.” At the same time, enslaved women resented and resisted the civilizing mission within the plantation household, and often became unreliable in the fulfillment of slaveholding women’s goals and needs. Enslaved women often critiqued attempts of the white slaveholding class to conform to the ideals of domesticity, which undermined the power of white people in the civilizing project. As white slaveholders attributed enslaved women’s resistance in domestic spaces to backwardness, enslaved women controlled slaveholding women’s ability to honor standards of domesticity through their responses to resistance, which often occurred in the forms of physical and verbal abuse.  

Studies on the resistance of enslaved women present methodological difficulties. Because slaveholders cloaked enslaved women’s resistance in the language of domesticity, they could imagine enslaved women as inferior, filthy, ignorant, irresponsible, and uncivilized, as well as unable to navigate outside of domestic space. Slaveholders gendered the notion of enslaved women’s resistance by confining them to domestic spaces and the discourse of

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domesticity. In the historiography, the language of domesticity conceals enslaved women’s resistance as insubordination through divisions of labor within plantation spaces and as inherently gendered through motherly roles within the slave quarters.  

When slaveholding men spent time away from the plantation, they often delegated responsibility to slaveholding women. Although slaveholding men nominally placed slaveholding women in charge of plantations, southern women almost always had a male overseer, friend, or relative nearby to maintain order because of antebellum assumptions about southern white women’s incapacity for mastery, and the notion that plantation management hinged on the maintenance of political power of white men of the planter class. The domination of slaveholding men, therefore, formed the basis of slaveholding women’s relationships as wives, daughters, sisters, and mothers.

Slaveholding women’s utilization of the authority of white male proxies for assistance in plantation management undermined their own claims to authority within the household, and in effect admitted subservience to the authority of white men. Inadequate management of domestic spaces highlighted enslaved people’s resistance and challenges to authority within those spaces.

In correspondence with his wife Mary, William Thomas Lenoir gave Mary proxy as the master of the household in his absence, and advised her on the management of enslaved people: “Do try and get the negroes to be careful about fire. It would be a trouble piece of business to get the houses burned.”

William Thomas Lenoir’s concern about arson reflected white insecurity

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26 Ibid., 93-95.


29 Lenoir Plantation Records: Box 1: Folder 2: Personal Records: Correspondence: 1858 May- 1860 June, 29 November 1858 – Willie to Mary.
about slave uprisings and contemporary racial views that equated blackness with disorder. Slaveholding women, like slaveholding men, viewed violence as central to maintaining order within the plantation household. Through their ordinary and casual depictions of quotidian abuse, many archival records highlight the regularity of domination.\textsuperscript{30}

The relationship between white fathers and sons provided the vessel for the transmission of the ideals of southern gentility. As both a social and a legal relationship, the father to son lineage reinforced the values of honor and piety, as well as advanced material wealth and political power to the next generation. Advising his “dear child” Blanchard Lenoir, in Hot Springs, Arkansas, William Thomas Lenoir believed the Bible would “teach [him] [his] duty to [his] Maker and to [his] fellow man.” Blanchard Lenoir’s behavior necessitated “moral courage you can bring to bear to avoid the whirl pool of sin and folly by [which] you are surrounded.” William Thomas Lenoir constantly prayed that Blanchard Lenoir’s soul “be preserved blameless.” With “high expectations” of his son, William Thomas Lenoir noted that God would “hold [him] accountable in the great day of accts—when the human family will be called to stand in his presence to [sic] each one, the sward of his acts [sic] in this world. May you be clothed with the garment of Righteousness in that day.”\textsuperscript{31}

During their sons’ schooling years, fathers influenced their sons’ lives with their concern over their sons’ behavior, character, and weaknesses. William Smith Lenoir’s time at Greene Springs School showed how the relationship between fathers and sons reflected the values of white southern evangelical families. According to William Thomas Lenoir, his son had to

\textsuperscript{30} Glymph, \textit{Out of the House of Bondage}, 45.

\textsuperscript{31} Lenoir Plantation Records: Box 1: Folder 2: Personal Records: Correspondence: 1858 May- 1860 June, 26 May 1858 – WT Lenoir to Blanchard Lenoir.
remain mindful of how his actions would be judged by a higher power: “Do not my son forget the obligations [sic] to your best friend, recollect, night—and day the all seeing eye is upon you, notes your every act and thought—and in the end, you be judged.” By observing the golden rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” William Smith Lenoir could “be at all times prepassed to stand the test” and “guard will your words and temper, do not let these betray you into acts that your conscience will not approve.” Religious obedience was “the hearts desire of your father,” and in turn, William S. Lenoir would receive blessings from God.32

Fathers feared that school life would threaten the southern social order’s patriarchal authority, and expected their sons to keep them abreast of college life. In the model of the evangelical family, white fathers expected their sons to grow into mirror images of themselves. With long periods of time, often up to two years, spent away from their families, sons developed non-familial relationships and witnessed how other fathers treated their sons. Antebellum fathers feared that new influences and separation would ultimately subvert fatherly authority and cause social disorder.33 When fathers communicated with their sons abroad, they communicated on behalf of the family. For instance, William Thomas Lenoir’s correspondence relayed messages to Blanchard Lenoir from his mother, which showed the pious role of the mother in the reinforcement of plantation patriarchy. Blanchard Lenoir’s mother remembered “her eldest son with all of a mother’s affection and prays daily that she may not be disappointed in the shapes she entertains of you, and she sends her love; a mother’s love; with it a mother’s blessing.”34


34 Lenoir Plantation Records: Box 1: Folder 2: Personal Records: Correspondence: 1858 May-1860 June, 26 May 1858 – WT Lenoir to Blanchard Lenoir.
The discourse of the family provided white evangelicals a space to articulate morality and religiosity through dependency. White antebellum-era fathers served as models of southern gentility, and performed their functions as competent masters to wives, children, and enslaved people. White evangelical Mississippians believed they lived in a society prone to disorder, so a hierarchy built upon immovable rules, expectations, and obligations mitigated conflict and reflected the perfection of Christian society.
CHAPTER II

“TO INSTRUCT OUR NEGROES IN THE TRUTHS OF THE BIBLE, IT IS NOT NECESSARY TO TEACH HIM TO READ”: WHITE EVANGELICALS, RACIAL SLAVERY, AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

In advice manuals, court records, newspapers, and plantation journals, white southerners continually debated the justifications for placing enslaved people at the bottom of the social hierarchy. While some white southerners linked their justifications of slavery to racial superiority and capitalism, many white southerners legitimized black racial inferiority through Christianity, which carved a space for enslaved people at the bottom of the social hierarchy and always excluded them from spaces of domesticity and gentility. Scholar Dwight N. Hopkins argues that the language of Euro-American Christianity and culture defined whiteness in the Americas. After white domination became firmly entrenched through the institution of slavery, white people recognized “Christian shame over black subordination,” and decided to convert enslaved people to Christianity. White control over political and economic structures and day-to-day activity established “normative techniques of being” for enslaved people, which became ritualized in mainstream religious beliefs.1

Amidst a burgeoning abolitionist movement and intensifying regional denominational conflict, the religious instruction of enslaved people stirred controversy and created insecurity

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1 Dwight N. Hopkins, Down, Up, and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 52-54.
among white slaveholders. Slaveholders believed that education, particularly religious instruction, would encourage insurrection among enslaved people and undermine white authority. Yet at the same time, slaveholders and proslavery evangelicals employed religious instruction to prove slavery’s existence as a divinely ordained positive for both white and black people.\(^2\) Southern planters hoped that religious instruction would make bondspeople better and happier servants, as well as spur the evolution of black sensory development.\(^3\) Planters embraced the religious instruction of bondspeople only after southern clergy assured its compatibility with slavery.\(^4\) While white southerners debated the possibility of education for enslaved people, many black people knew that literacy would emancipate enslaved people from spaces under the white gaze.

Antebellum defenses of slavery varied in approach, frequently invoked notions of Christian morality, and always placed enslaved people at the lowest rung on the social hierarchy. Some white southerners advocated a utilitarian position on the institution of slavery. One editorial remarked that southern white people had to “evince more of the ‘sheer devotion’ to slavery if they mean successfully to defend it against hostile influences.” To preserve the institution of slavery and “[southern white] equality under this Government,” white southerners would need to “quit borrowing and adopting the opinions of anti-slavery communities.” White southerners would have to defend slavery as the “greatest good of the greatest number”: “Facts are abundant to show that the separate existence of the black race does not conduce to so great a


good.” Unlike non-slaveholding states, the “greatest good of the greatest number” for free populations of black people in slaveholding states had not been “attained in as high a degree.”

One intellectual directly confronted the weaknesses of industrial capitalism in the North to justify the institution of slavery. Proslavery ideologue George Fitzhugh argued that capitalism contributed to an overall moral decline that exploited workers in favor of employers, and casted the northern system of free labor as the “White Slave Trade.” To a harsher degree than the southern system of black slavery, the northern system of free labor took more profit from workers and provided neither protection nor governance. By contrast, southern slaveholders allowed enslaved people to “retain a larger share of [their] own labor.” In the most ideal situations, southern enslaved black people lived as the “happiest, and in some sense, the freest people in the world”:

The children and the aged and infirm work not at all, and yet have all the comforts and necessaries of life provided for them. They enjoy liberty, because they are oppressed neither by care nor labor. The women do little hard work, and are protected from the despotism of their husbands by their masters. The negro men and stout boys work, on the average, in good weather, not more than nine hours a day. The balance of their time is spent in perfect abandon. Besides, they have their Sabbaths and holidays.

Northern free laborers existed as merely slaves without masters. Fitzhugh argued that the racial character of southern slavery mattered little as abolitionists ignored the enslavement of white people living among them: “You see men subjected to it by express command or by permission of God, with skins as white and intellects as good as yours.” For southern white people to enslaved black people represented an answer to a moral question: “Can it be wrong to enslave the poor negro who needs a master more than any of these?”

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5 “Southern Slavery,” *Monroe Democrat*, April 9, 1851.

Other intellectuals justified the institution of slavery through Christian scriptures. In a review of *Bible Defence of Slavery*, a writer commented that the author Josiah Priest’s “most conclusive argument” showed a “marked distinction, mental, moral, and physical, between the negro and the white race;--and that this distinction has always been in favor of the latter.” In comparison to “white nations,” the “tribes, hordes, and nations of aboriginal blacks,” no matter the level of civilization by white standards, “in a civilized or savage state,” escaped “absolute mental and practical degradation.”

The Hamitic myth provided one of the most widespread justifications for racial slavery, and defended the institution of slavery as a substitute for death. The biblical story of Ham in Genesis resolved the contradiction between enslaved people’s humanity and their existence in perpetual servitude. While the story of Ham provided white southerners with a scriptural justification for enslavement, it also accepted and resolved the conflict between the biblical version of a single human creation and the existence of different racial “species.” For supporters of the Hamitic myth, the sons of Noah represented the different races of America, with Ham as black, Japheth as white, and Shem as Indian. Noah cursed the black children of Ham into slavery, and prophesied the movement of whites into the tents of Indians. Although religious scholars have yet to pinpoint an exact date when people of European descent explicitly linked slavery and race in an Atlantic world context, the application of Genesis to African enslavement finds roots in centuries of racial stereotyping, scriptural interpretation, and servitude, dating back to the medieval period. Religious scholar Stephen R. Haynes finds that American proslavery

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8 Genesis 9-11 recounts the story of Ham.

interpretations of Genesis distinctly revolved around honor and order.\textsuperscript{10} While some scholars have denied the importance of the Hamitic myth to proslavery arguments, Haynes argues that white Americans’ racial understanding of Genesis had become culturally engrained by the antebellum era.\textsuperscript{11} Proslavery Christians could always use the Ham story in place of other Biblical texts, and “considered Ham’s negritude to be as self-evident—as given—as Noah’s identity as the first planter patriarch or the Bible’s applicability to American society.”\textsuperscript{12}

When scriptural interpretations harnessed to racial slavery, white slaveholders subjected enslaved people to white control under the name of God. White slaveowners often justified their harsh treatment of enslaved people with biblical teachings. Anderson Williams of Chickasaw County remembered the consequences of running away, “When slaves run away, dey would catch ‘em wid dogs an’ den beat ‘em nearly to death wid de ‘Bull Whup.’” When Williams told the story of a runaway as an enslaved man, his master “got his hymn book, set down, put me ‘cross his knees an’ as he’d sing de hymns, he’d whup me to de tune o’ ‘em.” After Williams’s


\textsuperscript{12} Haynes, \textit{Noah’s Curse}, 8-12.
master ceased his beating, Williams “didn’ set down for a week an’ I ain’t never seed no more niggers runnin’ away neither!”

While many white southerners envisioned a segregated or separate heaven, others refused to part with their bondspeople in the afterlife. Many white planters saw slaves as part of their families, united even in death. Perhaps planters even saw themselves as controlling their slaves from beyond the grave. Betty Curlett recalled how her master Daniel Johnson “wanted all our niggers buried on our place.” Johnson even told Curlett’s husband Jim that when she died to let him know so that “I’ll help bring her back and bury her in the old graveyard.” When Curlett’s father died, Johnson had a hearse transport his remains to the graveyard. “He was buried by mama and nearly all the Johnson, Moore, and Reed (or Reid) niggers buried there.” Planters like Daniel Johnson saw enslavement as divinely sanctioned and as an application of the model of the evangelical family. For Johnson, the model of the evangelical family applied to both white-controlled physical spaces on plantations and in graveyards, as well as the divine space of the afterlife.

Southern clergy convinced planters that religious instruction was a moral duty and should not be feared. With emphasis on the themes of obedience, morality, humility, and the promise of heavenly reward, the religious instruction of bondspeople suited the need of planters to control the behavior of bondspeople rather than the salvation of bondspeople. Plantation missionaries attempted to instill within slave masters the ideal that they had a moral obligation to enslaved


15 Betty Curlett, Rawick, American Slave, supplemental ser. 2, 8: 72-81.

people, in the hope that “Christianity would regularize and pacify relations between slaves and masters.” Ideally, religion would influence the entirety of the master’s relationship to enslaved people, including both physical treatment and spiritual well-being. To fulfill the Biblically-sanctioned relationship between masters and enslaved people, missionaries encouraged both masters and mistresses to read sermons to enslaved people, include enslaved people in family prayers, and teach enslaved people in Sabbath schools.\(^{17}\)

Around the 1830s, the process of slave religious instruction began in Mississippi. Because Mississippi state law prohibited teaching enslaved people the ability to read and write, enslaved people received oral religious instruction.\(^{18}\) The Mississippi statute banned literacy among enslaved people, and also allowed for thirty-nine lashes to an enslaved person who learned to read or write.\(^{19}\) One minister had “been astonished to find planters of high moral pretensions, and even professors of our Holy Christianity, who keep their blacks shut out almost entirely from the privileges of the Gospel.” In viewing enslaved people as humans “descended from the same ancestry as ourselves and tending to the same ‘bourne from whence no traveler returns,’” the minister thought that slave masters had a responsibility to save the souls of their enslaved people to “promote [their] welfare and happiness.”\(^{20}\)

In the view of many slaveholding evangelicals, the lack of religious instruction had allowed enslaved people to embrace ignorance and superstition. Former bondman John Gilstrap

\(^{17}\) Raboteau, \textit{Slave Religion}, 164-165.


of Itawamba County never believed in the human justifications for his enslavement but thought that God may have seen a purpose in enslaving people of African descent. “It just seems that God in His wise providence, brought the colored people over here as slaves so they could be civilized.” Enslaved preachers proved an obstacle to religion’s civilizing goal.

White missionaries would have to overcome the power of black preachers, whose “influence is such an obstacle in the way of the missionary that he can accomplish but little unless his preaching is in unison with the theology of his sage old Doctor of Divinity.” One minister described enslaved preachers as “oracles” of the plantation: “on almost every large plantation of Negroes there is one among them who holds a kind of magical sway over the minds and opinions of the rest.” Black preachers represented “the most consummate villain and hypocrite on the premises.” The white minister found the paradox of the black preacher in enslaved people’s continual “immoral” actions. One slaveholder complained, “He steals his master’s pigs and is still an object commanding the peculiar regard of Heaven, and why may not his disciples?” To combat superstitious and false spiritual influences, slave masters had to properly educate enslaved people in the “true doctrines and precepts of Christianity.”

The process of religious conversion often occurred at camp meetings held in natural settings, and “missionaries filled their reports with descriptions of the outpouring of the spirit.” William Thomas Lenoir described religious conversions, and mentioned a “protracted meeting going on at our meeting house” that “promis[ed] to be a good hour.” During the conversions, “five sick souls” would hopefully be given the “bread of life” and have “their hearts risen be

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22 Breeden, Advice among Masters, 229-231.
23 Janet Duitsman Cornelius, Slave Missions and the Black Church in the Antebellum South (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 34, 66.
gratified and the Sun of Righteousness depale the gloom which surround[ed]” them. Lenoir viewed the “seeking of religion” as the “noblest employment” of the “converted man or woman.” Without religion, no one could “see God and live.” In regard to a meeting “still in progress,” William Thomas Lenoir mentioned four conversions, with another still in progress. On the previous night, Blanchard Lenoir’s brother James and cousin Whitman had been converted on “the mourners bench”: “My soul’s desire is that they may obtain the Pearl of great price.”

Many white people’s racially informed scriptural interpretations justified enslavement, and their ability to read the Bible and communicate their interpretations of its messages through writing gave white people control over the content of religious discourse. Literacy among white people allowed for the spread of Christianity. According to one agricultural journal, planters’ instruction of enslaved people about “the truths of the Bible” did not necessitate teaching them to read. The entry read,

We well recollect hearing a negro preacher, a slave, many years ago, who went through all the usual clerical exercises with considerable cleverness—giving out his hymns, line by line—announcing his text, and directing his audience to chapter and verse—all this, too, without using any book, and without being able to read if he had had one.

Education and power defined the parameters of the relationship between the master and the enslaved, and contributed to the spread of evangelicalism. According to scholar James C. Scott, oppressed and relatively powerless people develop “hidden transcripts” to critique those holding power. While enslaved people often developed a “public transcript” that deferred to their enslavers, enslaved people’s “hidden transcript” expressed resentment, which threatened the arrangements of white people in power. Heather Williams argues that “literacy constituted one

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of the terrains on which slaves and slave owners wage a perpetual struggle for control,” and finds that whites enacted anti-literacy laws aimed at enslaved people around the same time as the percolation of fears of slave rebellions and abolition rose.  

By the 1830s, white fears about slave insurrections popularized evangelical missions to enslaved people. The Denmark Vesey conspiracy in 1822 in Charleston, South Carolina, and the Nat Turner rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia in 1831 contributed to white southerners’ insecurities about the charisma of powerful black religious leaders. Along with rumors of insurrection, the spread of antislavery pamphlets like black abolitionist David Walker’s *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* prompted white evangelicals to seek greater control over the religious instruction of enslaved people. Criticizing gradual approaches to emancipation and attempts to colonize black people, Walker argued that enslaved people should rebel against slaveholders: “Had you not rather be killed than to be a slave to a tyrant, who takes the life of your mother, wife, and dear little children?” Walker viewed white slaveholders as “unjust, jealous, unmerciful, avaricious, and blood-thirsty” tyrants who relied upon terror to “obliterate from [the minds of enslaved people] the notion of freedom.” Christianity would provide justice for enslaved people, and reconcile the relationships between “our Maker,” white Christians, and black people. According to Walker, education provided the key to emancipation: “I pray that the Lord may undeceive my ignorant brethren, and permit them to throw away pretensions, and seek after the substance of learning.” With education, black people would not allow themselves to be enslaved: “For colored people to acquire learning in this country, makes tyrants quake and

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tremble on their sandy foundation.”

Walker understood that the extension of education to enslaved people carried the potential to upend the entire foundation of southern society. Sunday meetings provided enslaved people with time to learn how to read and write when they were out of the view of the white gaze. Literacy of enslaved people posed several dangers to white control of space. Foremost, the ability to read and write would give enslaved people the means to mount challenges to the institution of slavery through written communication. Literacy would give enslaved people an avenue through which they could find physical freedom beyond the space of the plantation, and the Bible provided enslaved people with a language of liberation. As former bondsman Frederick Douglass revealed about the path to literacy, “The moral which I gained from the dialogue was the power of truth over the conscience of even a slaveholder… a bold denunciation of slavery, and a powerful vindication of human rights.” The ability to read had allowed Douglass “to utter my thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery; but while they relieved me of one difficulty, they brought on another even more painful than the one of which I was relieved.”

Reading the Bible allowed enslaved people to transcend the physical space of bondage and enter an intellectual space. Literate enslaved people appropriated a sacred text for cognitive liberation, a process through which they overpowered slaveholders’ control and language. Frederick Douglass’s knowledge of the Bible gave him the power to run away to the North, as

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“Biblical knowledge through reading made him unfit to remain a slave.”\(^3^1\) Enslaved people re-created themselves and molded new political and social identities through the ability to read. For white slaveholders, Douglass’s reflection symbolized the central dilemma of literacy among enslaved people:

> The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers. I could regard them in no other light than a band of successful robbers, who had left their homes, and gone to Africa, and stolen us from our homes, and in a strange land reduced us to slavery. I loathed them as being the meanest as well as the most wicked of men.\(^3^2\)

Although enslaved people and black preachers relied heavily on the oral transmission of religious messages from whites, the ability to read and write could allow enslaved people the chance to form original interpretations of the Bible and transmit those views of Christianity to wider audiences through the written word. Eugenia Weatherall recalled the education of her white masters and mistresses, who were “all smart, had been to college, you know we was close to Blue Mountain [a college], and they taught us all the good things we ought to know.”\(^3^3\) The education of white southerners provided another avenue to transmit religious messages to enslaved people.

Unlike enslaved people, literate white southerners used the written word to convey religious messages. During the 1820s and 1830s, as evangelicalism rapidly expanded, evangelicals established institutions that allowed them to differentiate themselves from other religious bodies in the social system and allowed them to enhance and secure social power. As historian Donald G. Mathews argues, “evangelicalism was a social process as well as a religious perception.” Evangelicals established schools where students could receive a basic education in

\(^{31}\) Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over*, 121.

\(^{32}\) Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 35.

ancient languages, English grammar, and mathematics to strengthen bonds among ministers, professionalize leadership, and educate children. By the 1840s, most precollege education in the South was under evangelical control. The Aberdeen Male Academy reflected the evangelical goal of teaching children ancient languages, English, and mathematics, and sought to instill young boys with “thorough, finished and practical” instruction to meet the “demands of enlightened public sentiment.” A school of “high character” could not be established when the patronage of the community is bestowed upon individuals, who without a knowledge of their own language, undertake to ‘teach cheap’ and by their ignorance and awkwardness, beget in the child a dislike for school, and mar his prospects for thorough scholarship by a defective primary education.

The school would govern students through “individual influence and gentle remonstrance, the only discipline that will make your children men and not slaves.”

White evangelical families spread religious messages to members located abroad. The evangelical model of the family remained intact across long distances and geographic spaces. In a letter to Blanchard Lenoir, William Thomas Lenoir gave religious advice: “if evils benefit you in the end, May God bless the means to your speedy recovery; recollect my son that he holds your destiny in his hands, and imparts life to you from day to day, pray to him that with life He may give you health and pray in faith end he is able and will hear your petitions.” William Thomas Lenoir also mentioned books that Blanchard Lenoir had received from his mother: “May they be a lamp to your path and a light to your past and with them my son reading your bible it will make you wise unto salvation, by washing you your duty, first to your maker and then to yourself and fellow man.” W.T. Lenoir prayed for his son “a deliverance from the

34 Mathews, Religion in the Old South, xvii, 82, 87, 89.
temptations by which you are surrounded. May our Heavenly Father preserve you blameless in
the hearts.”

When evangelical planters carved a space for enslaved people at the bottom of the social
hierarchy, they had to justify racial enslavement as a divinely ordained institution. As white
people debated the utility of education for enslaved people, black intellectuals like David Walker
and Frederick Douglass knew that literacy provided the path to emancipation, and possessed the
platforms through which they could communicate their ideas to wider audiences. White
slaveholders feared the filtering of provocative ideas about education to enslaved people at the
local level, which would result in the decay of white control over the production of knowledge
and effectively weaken the racialized structures of political and social institutions. Education
would have given enslaved people another route to interpret Christianity. As white people used
Christianity to dominate black people through the institution of slavery, enslaved people in turn
fused and reoriented African systems of belief to articulate dignity, liberation, and struggle
through the language of Christianity. For black people, the condition of enslavement rendered a
political and social reality “radically different” from that of slaveholders. Even when enslaved
people and slaveholders heard similar prayers, sermons, and songs, they interpreted meaning
through racial lenses. Walker’s *Appeal* and Douglass’s *Narrative* carried tremendous
intellectual weight because literacy demonstrated that enslaved people held the capacity to
operate their own institutions and justify black freedom, the antitheses of the antebellum
southern social order. Education held the power to render meaningless the boundaries white
people placed between themselves and black people through literacy.

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36 Lenoir Plantation Records: Box 1: Folder 2: Personal Records: Correspondence: 1858 May- 1860
June, 28 June 1858 – WT Lenoir to Blanchard Lenoir.

37 James H. Cone, *Speaking the Truth: Ecumenism, Liberation, and Black Theology* (Maryknoll, NY:
CHAPTER III

“THE PATROLLERS GET YOU, ‘STEAD OF THE DEVIL!’: RESTRICTIONS ON MOBILITY

Although literate white people controlled the content of Biblical interpretations through the written word, black people molded Christian discourse into their own forms through their own formal religious institutions and education from their kinfolk. Many enslaved people in Mississippi converted to Christianity and organized independent churches. Independent African congregations represented some of the largest churches in antebellum Mississippi, and evidenced the rapid growth of Christianity among enslaved populations.¹

As Christianity spread, enslaved people received religious instruction from other enslaved people, not just white people. Kinfolk and elders in enslaved communities taught younger generations about Christianity, and enslaved preachers, often self-appointed or community-appointed, relayed religious messages, many times without the oversight of white people. The spread of Christianity among the enslaved represented an evolving notion of evangelicalism that inadvertently gave greater autonomy to enslaved people. According to scholar Albert J. Raboteau, the spread and subsequent evolution of Africanized evangelicalism

¹ Randy J. Sparks, Religion in Mississippi (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi for the Mississippi Historical Society, 2001), 78.
“deemphasize[d] the role of mediators between the person and God.”

While enslaved people attended churches, they always did so in a white space and under white control. Southern planters feared the religious instruction of enslaved people, especially the possibility of individual enslaved people gaining sway or power over the others. Planters allowed enslaved people to attend their church services. Enslaved people took the religious messages they received in white spaces and transformed them into a discourse of resistance—an alternate or rival imagining of white control that tested the limits of white dominance.

By nature, the institution of slavery fundamentally restricted the movement of enslaved people within physical spaces. Enslaved people in Mississippi faced several statutory limitations on their ability to worship in church services. In 1822, upon the suggestion of Mississippi Governor George Poindexter, the state legislature passed Poindexter’s Code, which restricted enslaved people’s right to worship among themselves. Initially, the code mandated that white ministers conducted church services for black people in Mississippi. White evangelicals, led by Methodist minister William Winans, protested the law as a curtailment of enslaved people’s religious privileges, even as many white evangelicals saw black people as an inferior race of people. Winans’s charge against Poindexter’s Code ultimately led to a loss for George Poindexter in his 1822 run for Congress, as well as a revision to the code. Instead of banning black preachers and black religious meetings, the revised Poindexter’s Code required that religious services “be conducted by a regularly ordained or licensed white minister, or attended by at least two discreet and respectable white persons, appointed by some regular church or

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3 Daina Ramey Berry, “Swing the Sickle for the Harvest is Ripe”: Gender and Slavery in Antebellum Georgia (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 63.
Although the revised Poindexter’s Code granted enslaved people limited autonomy in religious spaces, it more significantly formalized religious spaces as institutions and gatherings always conducted under the control of white people. As a consequence, more black people joined biracial churches.

Slaveholders confronted the contradictions of slavery when they entered public spaces. In 1830, a Mississippi statute prohibited enslaved people from preaching away from their home plantations, and barred slaveholders from allowing enslaved people from other plantations to assemble for religious purposes. In 1857, the state of Mississippi passed a law that integrated religious services and placed limits on the mobility of black people. The statute outlawed the assembly or meeting of more than five enslaved people, free black people, or mulatto people. When slaveholders took enslaved people to court, they entered a public space where they had justified slavery as a positive good that could be managed in accordance with domesticity, which would not condone physical or verbal assault. The appearance of enslaved people in public records attested to both the shaky foundation of plantation order and the importance of enslaved people’s actions in plantation spaces. Scholar Ariela J. Gross argues that enslaved people possessed a “double character,” with characters as persons under criminal law and as property in all other instances. Criminal cases forced white slaveholders to deal with enslaved people and their own culture of honor in contradictory ways. On one hand, enslaved people who committed

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crimes possessed moral and therefore human agency. On the other hand, the appearance of enslaved people in public spaces like courts for committing crimes “challenged slaveholders’ self-conception as honorable masters.”

In *Wesley v. State* (1859), the High Court of Errors and Appeals for the State of Mississippi delineated the legal and social relationship between enslaved people and overseers in terms of race. Wesley, a slave, had been indicted and tried for the murder of William G. Ford, an overseer who worked for John A. Walker. Ford had tied Wesley to Walker’s smokehouse with a strap, and later returned to the smokehouse with his wife. Upon opening the door to the smokehouse, Ford was hit in the head with a large instrument and died the following day. The court ruled that enslaved people charged with the murder of masters and overseers cannot show in their own defense “the violent and cruel character of the master in the government of his slaves, nor specific acts of severity and cruelty committed by him.” Moreover, the “mere fear, apprehension, or belief, however sincerely entertained by one man, that another designs to kill him, will not justify the former in slaying the latter, where the danger is neither real nor urgent.”

The moment that Wesley committed the murder of the plantation’s overseer represented a moment when the court and the slaveholder had to recognize the humanity of enslaved people. However, the committing of a crime like homicide undermined the defense of slavery as a positive good. Because slaveholders expected enslaved people to behave as property and perform work in their daily lives, the ruling in Wesley’s case represented a dual

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acknowledgement of enslaved people’s identities as property and humans. Thus, the ruling in Wesley’s case presents a reaffirmation of Wesley’s status as property. Wesley’s case affirmed a statutory commitment to making courts into public spaces for white redressing of grievances, and further secured the control of white Mississippian over black mobility in the most extreme of cases—homicide.

Churches in Monroe County regularly allowed for the inclusion of black worshippers. Reverend Wamble of Monroe County recalled his master, Mr. Westbrook, who was a deacon in the Methodist Church. Although Westbrook was a deacon in the church, he had two overseers to manage his farm and enslaved people and “was very severe with his slaves and none were ever permitted to leave the farm. If they did leave the farm and were found outside, they were arrested and whipped.” Once Westbrook had been notified of an enslaved person’s escape from the farm, an overseer took the “slave home where he would again be whipped. The slave was tied to a cedar tree or post and lashed with a snake whip.”

Until a Mississippi statute restricted black preaching, New Hope Primitive Baptist Church regularly allowed black ministers to preach to all congregants, both black and white. In June of 1832, when a black member asked for permission to “exercise his gift in exhortation,” the church made an allowance within the space of the church and under the regulation of church authority and boundaries. Some Monroe County churches were located on plantations. Greenwood Baptist Church, established in 1840, held services for a large congregation on the plantation of Isham Harrison. While white and black people worshipped together at most

11 Gross, Double Character, 4-5.


churches in Monroe County, many white churches reserved a separate section for black members. In many churches, the number of black congregants increased, which resulted in the creation of special services for black members, often led by black preachers. In 1847, Aberdeen Methodist Church started a new Methodist church solely for black members, even as the original church continued to have black members. The new black Methodist church became the largest black antebellum church in Mississippi with 437 members.¹⁴

Slaveholders often hired ministers to preach to enslaved people. “By having the appointments for preaching at noon during Summer and at night during Winter, the Preacher could consult his own convenience as to the day of the week, without in the least [interfering, sic] with the duties of the farm.”¹⁵ Evangelicals gained greater social mobility, which allowed town ministers to prosper and accumulate wealth throughout the South. Town ministers benefitted from the education and professionalization of the clergy, but less educated ministers questioned the usefulness of an educated clergy, and its value to the notion of spiritual equality.¹⁶

For each enslaved person, the slave master enforced a rule that it was “the duty of every one to come up clean and decent to the place of worship.” One planter remarked, “I would gladly learn [sic] every negro on the place to read the Bible, but for fanaticism which, while it professes friendship to the negro, is keeping a cloud over his mental vision, and almost crushing out his hopes of salvation.”¹⁷

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¹⁶ Sparks, *Religion in Mississippi*, 114.

White preachers often reinforced the edicts of slaveholders. Jake Dawkins’s experience showed how his master sought to control the religious instruction of enslaved people. The preacher “never did much preachin’. His text was, ‘Obey your marster and mistress’, and he never told us a word about savin’ our souls from hell fire and damnation.”

Henry Gibbs of Clay County recalled Parson Ellis, a Primitive Baptist preacher. "I don't know how come, but he got where he didn't want any slaves.” Ellis turned his enslaved people over to Seth Pool, where they stayed until his death after Confederate surrender during the Civil War. Pool was a deacon in his church near Church Hill Cemetery. “Well, dere was a church right dere. It was moved when Mr. Flanigan bought this place from a Missionary Baptist, Parson Harris. You know Mr. E. H. Dexter's house is a part of dat church. He has added compartments to it.”

Jim Allen of Lowndes County revealed his motivations for joining the church: “To do better and to be with Christians and serve Christ. Dis I learned by association and harmonius living with black and white, old and young and to give justice to all.”

Slaveholders received specific instructions on regulating enslaved people’s movement in attending religious services. “The negroes should not be allowed to run about over the neighborhood; they should be encouraged to attend Church when it is within a convenient distance.” On the plantation, slave masters could only allow and encourage the “pious negroes” to hold “prayer meetings among themselves.” If the number of “pious negroes” exceeded the amount of space available for a prayer meeting, then slave masters should “have a separate building for the purposes of worship.”

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Slave patrollers exacted the power of slaveholders within the antebellum social hierarchy, and represented a “force slaves had to contend with in their ongoing struggle over neighborhood space.” Statutes allowed patrollers to “wield broad, menacing powers,” including the ability to search quarters for disorderly, unlawfully assembled, and pass-less enslaved people, as well as the right to whip enslaved people. Mississippi first initiated pass laws aimed at the restriction of enslaved people in 1823. In 1842, the Mississippi state legislature passed a statute that required slaveholders to enlist an overseer or other white patroller to monitor enslaved people if they were more than a mile from the residence. By 1857, free people could face fines of $20 for allowing pass-less enslaved people on their premises. Enslaved people could receive up to twenty lashes for violations of the pass laws.  

To leave the boundaries set by the master to attend church services, enslaved people required a pass. Attendance at church threatened plantation control and order. According to Henry Cheatam of Clay County, “Mos’ of de slaves could go sometimes to de white folks church then dey gits a pass from dere Massa, but dat mean oberseer always tried to keep us from goin’ so’s us couldn’t learn nothin’. He didn’t want us to learn to read or write neither.” Frank Gill of Lee County attended a white church, which held services for whites in the morning and enslaved people in the afternoons. Although enslaved people could attend the white church, they needed a pass “‘ca’se de church was eight miles away from de plantation.”

Slaveholders enacted specific procedures for church meetings. Jerry Eubanks of Lowndes County remembered Sunday procedures for church meetings. “Some wanted to go to

22 Kaye, Joining Places, 38, 149-150.
church and some didn't. De Boss would go through de quarter and tell em to get out and hear de word of God.”

Lorena Thomas of Lowndes County recalled, “All who wanted to went to Church, or go visiting from plantation to plantation. Dey had to always have a pass, or dey might be caught by de patrollers.” Thomas’s grandmother attended, by wagon or horseback, Hardshell Baptist Church, located several miles from the plantation. Thomas’s mother, a nurse for the white family, attended a Baptist church with the white family and sat in a gallery especially for enslaved people.

Some masters refused to allow enslaved people to attend church, and justified their exclusion with the belief that black people lacked souls. Joe Rollins of Clay County remembered how some enslaved people did not attend church with white people. “Dem niggers would stay home on Sundays under de shade trees. Dey was a cullud man what would talk to us. Us didn’t go to church wid white folks. My mammy just didn’t go to church!”

Non-attendance at church services could represent a silent critique of white notions of Christianity and a statement on the incompatibility of enslavement and salvation. Frances Cobb of Lowndes County recalled the seasonal regulation of church attendance: “We didn't go to no church until July come, when we'd have a bit meeting on Friday, Saturday and Sunday, and dar would be plenty to eat.” Cobb remembered white Preacher Howard, who she “had to like… case he hadn't

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done nothing to me.” Because she was a child at the time, Cobb paid little attention to sermons during church meetings.\(^{30}\)

Some enslaved people “cared not at all about church, revival meetings, or prayers services, would not go if they could, and resented being forced to attend.” Instead of attending church services, nonreligious enslaved people “spent Sundays in hunting, fishing, marble shooting, storytelling, or simply resting when allowed.”\(^{31}\) Historian Ira Berlin argues that the Second Middle Passage, which lasted from the end of the American Revolution until emancipation in 1865, transformed black life. Due to harsh frontier conditions, changes in the cotton work regime, and demands in the market, enslaved people faced a new work routine, which lengthened the work day and cut free Sundays and half-Saturdays.\(^{32}\) With the changes in daily work routines, enslaved people appropriated church time for taking care of their own needs.

Jerry Eubanks of Lowndes County remembered church services from his enslaved days. Although he could not attend many church services as an enslaved man due to holding horses for other church attendees, Eubanks had “been in dat big ole Methodist Church gallery many a time. We set up stairs.” Eubanks also remembered camp meetings that included many enslaved people and their elders, “We'd work till three, den knock off and come to de camp ground.”\(^{33}\)

Eliza Bell’s master did not mind enslaved people having religion. Bell attended Oak Hill church, about five miles from the farm through the timber woods, and “just a little one room log house, with a dirt floor, but it was a place to worship the Lord and nobody worried about what


there was to walk on. Just the dirt, but it was God’s earth, the same earth that Jesus walked on and we was all glad to be there.” On Sunday mornings, Bell’s master had an enslaved male bring a black mare to carry Bell and her mother to church meetings. As Bell and her mother left for church on Sundays, their master would state “Don’t lose your pass, Frebry, the patrollers get you, ‘stead of the Devill” Bell noted that the patrollers never got them because they were so careful with the pass. Furthermore, “we live right so’s the Devil don’t get us when we die. I reckon that would please the old master if he knew.”

Through the 1840s and 1850s, separate worship services for enslaved people became more common. In part, white churches abandoned more emotional styles of worship and congregational ministry. More significantly, blacks desired more control over the content and emotional tenor of worship services. At the same time, Mississippi law mandated that whites oversee black religious services, but the nature and severity of control depended on the minister. Most separate black churches were built in towns, so most rural enslaved people lacked access and continued to worship in biracial or segregated services. Yet for enslaved attendees of biracial or segregated churches, discrimination became more common as the antebellum years drew to a close. Depending on the denomination, white people appointed special committees, mostly comprised of slaveholders, within churches to monitor black behavior, receive black members, and hear black testimony during discipline cases—“a dramatic departure from past practice, in which such cases were handled in the same ways for whites and blacks.”

The growth of separate church spaces for enslaved people necessitated greater restrictions and control from white evangelicals. Unlike earlier years, churches became more directly dominated by

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35 Sparks, *Religion in Mississippi*, 93-96.
white control, which made extra-sensory communication with the spiritual world even more important to enslaved people.

Some enslaved people attended church with white families. According to Anderson Williams of Chickasaw County, the preacher at a white church told the enslaved members of the congregation to “be good to de Massa an’ Missus, don’t steal dey chickens an’ eggs an’ when you die dey will carry you to Heaven.” The words resonated with Williams as he was de only li’l nigger on de place dat would fight Missus’ li’l chullun when dey beat on me an’ Missus would tell me to be good to her chullun an’ when I died she’d put me in de kitchen. I was fool enough to think dat I’d at least see a biscuit if I couldn’ eat one.  

Biracial Christian fellowship threatened the hierarchical relationship between enslavers and the enslaved. White people controlled the content of religious messages transmitted to enslaved people and the movement of enslaved people required to receive religious conversion and instruction. The evangelical belief in spiritual equality held significant implications for the system of slavery, especially in biracial churches. White evangelicals viewed black congregants as part of their religious community, united as the family of God. 

White evangelicals’ recognition of black people as members of the Christian family represented a domestic metaphor for white paternalism, which legitimated white authority and claims to absolute obedience. The application of the “language of family” carried plantation order into the space of the church, which “joined master and slave together in a collective enterprise that benefited all.” Enslaved people could represent co-participants in the eyes of white evangelicals within the space designated for the family of God, but enslaved people always found themselves coerced into

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38 Sparks, *Religion in Mississippi*, 87-88.

participation in spaces designated for white control in the settings of both the plantation and the church. Jim Allen’s neighborhood church in Lowndes County had both black and white congregants, with enslaved people and white people seated on opposite sides of the sanctuary. While a white preacher usually presided over church services, sometimes a black preacher also sat in the pulpit. Allen recalled his favorite preachers, two brothers from Ohio, Williams and Daniel Odem.^[40]

When providing enslaved people with preaching on a plantation, ministers advised that slave masters enact several rules: “Preaching ought to enter into and constitute part of the general regulations and discipline of the place, and in its turn be as much a matter-of-course business as anything else.” First, enslaved people “should be required to observe as strict punctuality in their attendance as in feeding the mules they plow.” Second, the minister advised against weekday religious services:

> Coming in from work, with dirty clothes on, they scarcely wait to hear the text announced [until] most of them are asleep. Then the hurry (especially if the crop is grassy) cramps the preacher and makes him feel like an intruder upon the time that the overseer considers his own.

Instead, religious instruction should be saved for Sundays: “You find all hands dress out in their best ‘bib and tucker’ and promenading the street ready at a moment’s warning to assemble for preaching. All look lively and cheerful. The contrast is great.” However, no matter which day a slave master should choose to hold religious services, “there are some Negroes who make it a settled point to sleep during sermons, whether it be Sunday or not.”^[41]


Even as white people restricted mobility, enslaved people found ways to carve semi-autonomous religious spaces. White people regularly allowed for the inclusion of enslaved people in churches, but always subjected inclusion to strict rules. Many enslaved people chose to carve time for themselves in place of religious services, and in effect resisted the notion that white dominance could restrict free time on Sundays. While white preaching often reinforced the edicts of mastery, many enslaved people alternatively took religious messages from white spaces and applied them to their own conceptions of spirituality. Ideas about mastery contradicted the evangelical concept of spiritual equality, and coercion and immobility made that paradox a reality for enslaved people.
CHAPTER IV
“TO CAANON’S HAPPY LAND, WHERE MY POSSESSIONS LIE”: ENSLAVED PEOPLE, ILLICIT GATHERINGS, AND CONVERSION EXPERIENCES

Enslaved people held their own religious meetings “out of disgust for the vitiated Gospel preached by their masters’ preachers.” Although enslaved people risked violent punishment for attending illicit religious meetings, they devised ways to avoid drawing the attention of masters and overseers. Depending on the plantation, the “religious format” of secret meetings varied. Through attendance at church services and revival meetings, enslaved people not only prayed, but also gossiped, attended picnics, and socialized.1 The opportunity to interact with enslaved people from other plantations lends credence to the idea of a web of interlinked enslaved neighborhoods. Although Sunday services gave enslaved people brief and rare opportunities to interact with enslaved people from neighboring plantations, white people carefully monitored their activities, which strained the development of black communities.2 Yet the enslaved used secret meetings to strengthen the social ties whites sought to manage. Stephanie M.H. Camp shows how enslaved people’s ability to move on the geography of the plantation informed their abilities to engage in acts of resistance, and demonstrated that private actions had intended public

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and therefore political consequences. Enslaved people actively created a “rival geography” within plantation space where they used alternative communication, expression, and knowledge to challenge the demands of planters.  

Taking place in “illicit plantation space,” illegal gatherings allowed for independent socializing and activities like eating, dancing, drinking, and dressing. Enslaved people “disregarded curfews and pass laws to escape to secret parties where sensual pleasures… were the main amusements.” Enslaved partygoers shared 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.”

Pet Franks of Monroe County recalled religious meetings. “We had some mighty good meetin’s on our place. Dey was plenty of niggers dere cause it was a powerful big place.” Old Daddy Young’s preaching “could sho’ make de niggers shout and roll. You’d have to hold some of dem, dey’d get so happy.”

Enslaved women’s truancy confronted and opposed the authority of their owners and created a labor problem. Clara C. Young of Monroe County recalled the fun of religious meetings. “We had dem mos’ every Sunday an dey lasted way inter de night.” Lasting from early Sunday mornings until late in the night, enslaved people developed ingenious ways to ensure their meetings would not catch the attention of overseers. Young noted, “When dark cum de men fo’ks wud hang up a wash pot, bottom up’ards, in de little brush chu’ch house us hed, so’s it’d catch de noise an de oberseer wouldn’ hear us singin’ an shoutin’.”

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4 Ibid., 61, 68.


the noise of illicit meetings, but they also linked Christianity with West African cultural symbols of the womb and fertility, which made them more significant for enslaved women. Water symbolized life, and many enslaved people believed that water housed the gods. Unlike field workers, household bondwomen directly impacted slaveholders since someone had to complete household tasks. Because it withheld labor and immediately impacted productivity, planters strongly objected to truancy.

Scholars have advanced cultural history in their discussions of enslaved women’s resistance through physical display. Recent work suggests that the notion of fashion provided an active means of protest. Deborah Gray White showed that enslaved women prided themselves on their outward appearance even as circumstances limited their ability express femininity. Stephanie M.H. Camp complicates the significance of enslaved women’s outward appearances through her discussion of enslaved women’s bodies as sites of domination, subjective experience, and pleasure and resistance, each of which connected pleasure to political action and awareness. Illegal parties signaled a chance for enslaved women to reclaim their femininity by wearing highly ornamented clothing, claim the products of their own labor by appropriating cotton for their own purposes, and take pleasure in their body by rejecting planters’ claims to their commercial value. In terms of resistance, illegal parties burdened the orderly operation of the plantation system, and ruptured slaveholders’ authority.

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7 Sparks, *Religion in Mississippi*, 84-85.


Contrary to the experiences of many enslaved women, enslaved men often possessed knowledge of spaces outside of plantation boundaries. Due to divisions in labor, enslaved men like Jack Turner, who spent time in Chickasaw County and worked as both a coachman and a houseboy, traveled while they worked.\(^\text{11}\) Bondsman John Sella Martin spent time in Columbus, Mississippi, and traveled the Tombigbee River to Mobile, Alabama as a captain’s messenger: “Once a week Mr. Marriot used to come to Pickensville—a place on the river where the boat stopped on her way up and down the river—both to look after his merchandise on freight with us, and to see me.”\(^\text{12}\) The mobility of enslaved men’s work required a forced movement that broke familial bonds, as well as an inability to supply the needs of community and kin and mentor the next generation. Many white men questioned the manhood of enslaved men. If black men submitted to enslavement, they could not be real men, as “whites denied African American men the fruits of their labors, seized their possessions, destroyed their marriages through sale and forced migration, and prevented them from raising their own children.”\(^\text{13}\)

Religious meetings among enslaved people had to be conducted with secrecy. Robert Williams of Pontotoc County recalled that enslaved people had no access to schools or churches. Although enslaved people could not attend church, they could have meetings to the chagrin of the master. According to Williams, the master “want us all to sleep instead of listening to preaching. Said we could work better with the rest.” Meetings would interfere with the productivity of enslaved people. When enslaved people planned meeting nights, “everybody slip

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away quiet so the old master wouldn’t know about it.”\textsuperscript{14} Dora Brewer of Lowndes County remembered her master never told her or the other Brewer slaves about either God or Christ. Instead of attending churches, the Brewer slaves conducted “Brush Harbor meetings.” But, when one enslaved woman confessed to “having religion,” the angry master “beat her within an inch of her life” until she renounced her faith.\textsuperscript{15}

Late night meetings posed problems for plantation control and order. Believing their bodies functioned as more than “implements of agriculture,” bondpeople’s illegal parties burdened the orderly operation of the plantation system and “insulted slaveholders’ feelings of authority.” First, heavy drinking and the late hours of parties meant financial loss for planters since hangovers and sleep depravity hindered productivity. Second, planters believed that the parties “corrupted” the minds of the enslaved because “night activity appeared to encourage many bondspeople to see their ‘Masters’ as their ‘natural enemies.’” In holding illegal parties, enslaved people stole time and space for themselves, ignored slaveholders’ control over their bodies, and failed to hold their proper position in the framework of society.\textsuperscript{16} According to Clara C. Young, the overseers did not mind meetings during the day, but they “thought if we stayed up ha’f de night we woulden’ work so hard de next day, an dat was de truf.”\textsuperscript{17} Victoria Randle Lawson of Monroe County described the late night meetings. If her master knew about the meetings, he would not allow them to continue, so “we had meetin at night at one house and next night at a nudder.” To ensure that overseers would not break up the meetings, Lawson revealed

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14} Robert Williams, Rawick, \textit{American Slave}, supplemental ser. 1, 12(1): 392-396.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Dora Brewer, Rawick, \textit{American Slave}, supplemental ser. 1, 6(1): 200-203.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Camp, \textit{Closer to Freedom}, 90-92.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Clara C. Young, Rawick, \textit{American Slave}, supplemental ser. 1, 10(5): 2400-2406.
\end{itemize}
that “we put a wash pot down in front ob de meeten house so’s de overseer couldn’t hear us a singing and a prayin. Dis wash pot caught de sound.”

Many enslaved people distinguished between the secular and spiritual nature of meetings. Lorena Thomas of Lowndes County remembered that she and other enslaved people did not have “frolics” because the enslaved were “church people,” who “liked to pray and sing.” While praying and singing, enslaved people had to take extra caution to avoid the attention of overseers who would not allow such activities. “Dey would put their heads in barrels or wash pots when praying, to keep the sound from being heard.”

Jake Dawkins of Monroe County recalled how his master regulated the possibility of attending church. Although “de ole marster wouldn’t low de niggers to have no meetin’s on his place,” some older enslaved people would leave without the master’s knowledge and go to the neighboring Davis place, and “dey had big meetin’s there.” If patrollers caught enslaved people leaving for illicit meetings, they would “give dem thirty nine lashes wid dey whips. De paterollers was a bunch of de meanest overseers from all de plantations around.” Dawkins recalled his own attendance at a meeting “when de marster took all de slaves over to de white folks church at New Hope and had a white preacher to preach to us.”

When allowed to attend church, enslaved women played significant roles in the religious life of enslaved communities. As Randy J. Sparks notes, “the important role of slave women as religious leaders in their community has not been fully appreciated.” Like enslaved men, enslaved women coped with bondage through their faith. While evidence shows how enslaved

18 Victoria Lawson, Rawick, American Slave, supplemental ser. 1, 8(3): 1302-1308.
19 Lorena Thomas, Rawick, American Slave, supplemental ser. 1, 10(5): 2095-2097.
20 Jake Dawkins, Rawick, American Slave, supplemental ser. 1, 7(2): 592-599.
21 Sparks, Religion in Mississippi, 81-82.
women preserved African traditions like the use of the wash pot to conceal the singing and praying of illicit religious meetings, little evidence from Northeast Mississippi suggests how enslaved women conceived of themselves as Christian women and performed formal roles, if any, in churches. For instance, evidence shows that enslaved women in fact attended religious gatherings. Describing her favorite preacher Mathew Ewing, Clara C. Young of Monroe County revealed “he was a comely nigger, black as night, an he sho cud read out’n his han’.” Although Ewing could neither read nor write, he knew the Bible and held “his han’ out an mek lak he uz readin’ an preach de pur’t’est preachin’s you ever heared.”

Depending on the location and level of white supervision, the format of religious services varied in churches. Jerry Eubanks of Lowndes County recalled the preaching style during his attendance at church. Preacher Stainback once invited black preacher to the Columbus Church, but Eubanks had never known one of the black preachers “to preach in dat pulpit.” Yet Eubanks had heard of black preachers who preached to enslaved people. In regard to black religious style, Eubanks said, “You know niggers will shout and sing if dey is living. White folks would come to our church jis to see us have a good time.”

By monitoring and limiting enslaved people’s behavior within religious spaces, slaveholders legitimized the gathering’s encroachment upon plantation time, sanctioned the expression of enslaved people’s creativity, and censored the extent of enslaved people’s cognitive and bodily pleasure.

Eugenia Weatherall of Lee County recalled her Uncle Ned, a Baptist preacher and “as good a one as you've ever heared.” Although her uncle could neither read nor write, Weatherall remembered how “one of the women on the place would read him his text and parts of the Bible

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and he would remember it and would preach grand sermons.” According to Weatherall, her uncle had a special style of baptizing: “He and the head deacon would carry the person out in the water that they was gwineter bantize and have all de rest stand around in a circle and shout and sing. They would be quiot til the person comed out of the water and then the noise would start in right.” In one instance, as Weatherall remembered, her uncle helped carry a large man, so heavy that he carried them “both down with him and all you could see for a minute was, footses as black as night and what scrambling’!... De shoutin’ sure started up right then and if it hadn’t been for some of the other men folkses they would’ve all drowned like rats. That was one more big day for all.”

After 1830, white suspicion and control forced many black preachers underground. Randy Sparks notes that the performances of black preachers often “outshined even the most elevated white ministers.” Thus, black preachers had to find congregants and influence at the illicit religious meetings of enslaved people. The prestigious status of black preachers, some of whom had direct ties to Africa, within enslaved communities aided in the growth of black converts. Enslaved preachers were usually illiterate, and “often had native wit and unusual eloquence.” Often without permission, enslaved preachers organized spiritual meetings in secrecy with the perpetual threat of careful observation from whites. Illiteracy forced enslaved preachers to memorize and listen intently to the Biblical recitation of white preachers, and then repeat for enslaved congregants. Black preachers employed a formulaic yet dramatic speaking style in their sermons. Beginning with a conversational tone, black preachers’ sermons gradually built rhythm and incited exclamatory shouts from congregants, and “climaxed in a tonal chant


26 Sparks, *Religion in Mississippi*, 81.
accompanied by shouting, singing, and ecstatic behavior.” Black preachers attributed the
dramatic flair of their sermons not to their own skill, but to the power of the spirit inside of them.
The success of sermons directly depended on the preacher’s ability to rouse the congregation to
an excited response.

Although some enslaved people accused black preachers of speaking for masters, black
preachers often spoke of liberation in coded religious language. The participation of enslaved
people as preachers and deacons in churches contradicted enslavement’s hierarchical structure.
For instance, the Methodist church’s hierarchy limited the possibility of organizing autonomous
black congregations. But Methodist churches before and after 1845 allowed large numbers of
black members in circuits, missions, and stations, and permitted black men to serve as exhorters
and preachers.27 According to historian Randy Sparks, across all denominations with biracial
churches, a general pattern emerged through the 1840s and 1850s from “relative egalitarianism
to segregation and discrimination.” At the same time, many churches continued evangelical
worship traditions, which emphasized, “all are one in Christ.” Worshippers transcended racial
boundaries during worship, baptism, and singing.28

Enslaved people often took message of resistance and liberation from sermons, contrary
to the intent of white planters to indoctrinate obedience and submission. Forced to attend white
religious services on “distinctly unequal terms” segregated from the white congregation,
enslaved people often reinterpreted white Christianity based on their experiences with white
people.29 Black evangelicalism had roots in West Central African folk beliefs, as well as

28 Sparks, Religion in Mississippi, 101-102.
traditional Christianity and Islam. Although some enslaved people did not join churches, they could still comprehend its messages of liberation. According to Joe Rollins of Clay County, “I aint never jined de church. I ought to I knows. I can’t sing, I just listens.” Jerry Eubanks of Lowndes County gave reasons for why he joined the church. “I believed if I jined I'd be saved. De scripture says, ‘Ye that believeth and are baptized shall be saved.’” If people lived good lives according to Christian teachings, they would “die that life. When he does God will take care of you.”

Frank Gill of Lee County remembered how he thought he could only be a Baptist as an enslaved man. “You see John de Baptist come here baptizing, an’ ever’body had to offer up sacrifices, a goat or a sheep or sumpin’, jes’ lack de man who was going to offer up his son for a sacrifice. But you knows, Jesus come an’ changed all dat. De folks in dem times didn’t hab nobody to worship.” With Jesus, people would have an entity to worship. Gill mixed his religious beliefs with the idea of liberation. According to Gill, “den one come, who said, ‘Father, hand me a body, and I’ll die for dem,’ Dat’s Christ, an’ He was baptized, an’ God gib Jesus dis whole world.”

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32 Jerry Eubanks, Rawick, American Slave, supplemental ser. 1, 7(2): 687-701.

The focus on religion and the afterlife allowed enslaved men a “way to avoid complete despair, but to survive in body and spirit.” Prayer and conversion emphasized “ordinary virtue” and replaced “heroic resistance and self-destruction” as responses to the “traumas of forced migration.”

Henry Gibbs revealed his own religious beliefs: “Well, now listen, God Almighty give every boy de same spirit - the Spirit of God. God aint made no hell for us.” Religion guided his treatment of others in the physical world, and would ultimately determine his eternal fate. “For your disobedience you shall be striped with many stripes. Dis in de flesh. Religion is de way I treat my fellow man. I gwine reap what I sew.” With a faith in Christianity, Gibbs believed that “de flesh is goin be punished befo he die, but the spirit belongs to God, and he goin take care of it.”

Enslaved people applied Christian teachings to their work with white people. According to Jerry Eubanks of Lowndes County, "When I nussed old Dr. Brothers, he would get in a rage.” To calm Brothers, Eubanks said "Dr., remember your Mother. She lived a Christian and you must. So he would quiet down.”

Conversion showed enslaved people the promise of salvation, which allowed entry into God’s kingdom, an eternal site beyond the space of the plantation. Historian Anthony Kaye observes that “a Christian’s walk of life had interior moments when slaves transcended the neighborhood without setting foot outside it.” Enslaved people sacralized spaces within the geography of their neighborhood, and grounded their interpretation of these spaces in Scripture and imagined heaven as a place.

34 Baptist, “The Absent Subject,” 151.
36 Jerry Eubanks, Rawick, American Slave, supplemental ser. 1, 7(2): 687-701.
Conversion experiences represented intense and personal spiritual events that lasted often several days or weeks. According to scholar Albert J. Raboteau, “the normal context for sinners to become seekers was the mourners’ bench, or anxious seat, at prayer meetings and revivals. But some were suddenly moved when alone in the wood or fields.”

Frank Gill of Lee County recalled conversion experiences: “I ‘members how us would hab big baptizing an’ shout.” Pet Franks of Monroe County remembered his own conversion experience: “I knowed I had ‘ligion when I got babbtized. Dey took me out in de river and it took two of dem to put me under but when I come up I told dem to turn me loose I believe I could walk right on top of de water.”

Clara C. Young of Monroe County described the conversion experiences of enslaved people, and their reactions to religion. “You shoulder seen some of de niggers get ‘ligion. De best way was to carry dem to de cemetery an let dem stand ober a grave. Dey wud start singin’ an shoutin’ ‘bou seein fire an brimstone; den dey would sin’ some mo’ an look plum sanctified.”

Jim Eubanks of Lowndes County recalled the religious conversions, and the participation of both enslaved and white people. “We had Baptizins do, and dere would be as many white folks on de bank as niggers.” Eubanks described how both Baptists and Methodists “got to put em under de water. Yes mam, de would shout. Some time we would have to go in de water after em.”

Henry Gibbs recalled religious rituals and baptisms. He described the foot-washings in May: “De women would wash each others feet, and men would wash each others feet.”


Although some enslaved people were baptized in Tibbee Creek, Methodists sprinkled their converts, as “Dey didn't believe in washing feet.” Gibbs recalled spiritual songs recited during foot-washing: “Come ye that love de Lawd” and

Let your joys be known.
Join in de songs with sweet accord
And thirst around de throne.

Gibbs recalled spiritual songs during baptisms:

On Jordans stormy banks we stand.
And cast a wistful eye
To Caanons happy land
Where my possessions lie.
That generous fruit that never fails
On trees of mortal glory.

The emancipatory lyrics of spiritual songs represented a desire to break free from the constraints of bondage. As Stephanie M.H. Camp argues, planters institutionalized restrictions on movement of enslaved men and women within a “geography of containment” through slave patrols, curfews, and laws that required passes and banned unauthorized travel and meetings. Enslaved people used the coded language within spiritual songs to find hope and strength in dealing with the geography of containment.

During prayers and praise meetings, enslaved people often conflated religious lyrics with secular enjoyment, blurring the distinction between spiritual and secular music. According to scholar Albert J. Raboteau, spirituals symbolized more than printed notes and words, and “emerged as communal songs, heard, felt, sung and often danced with hand-clapping, foot-stamping, head-shaking excitement.” Enslaved people’s spiritual songs relied as much on performance as singing:

41 Henry Gibbs, Rawick, American Slave, supplemental ser. 1, 8(3): 815-836.

44 Camp, Closer to Freedom, 6.
The verses of some spirituals take on new meaning when one realizes that the spirituals were not only sung in the fields or at prayer and worship services but were shouted—that is, danced in the ring shout—with the result that the lyrics of the songs were acted out or dramatized by the band of shouters.

Because enslaved people often improvised spiritual songs, they incorporated individual experiences into lyrics. The act of personal experience and worship spoke for the entire group through participation and made the performance of spiritual songs a communal experience, which gave the individual “consolation for sorrow” and “heighten[ed] joy.” Enslaved people connected the physical world with the spiritual world, and identified intensely with the children of Israel. The experience “extended [the present time] backwards so that characters, scenes, and events from the Old and New Testaments became dramatically alive and present.”

Spirituals carried multiple deep religious meanings. Many bondspeople expressed joy, sorrow, hope, and despair, and often alluded to the experiences of uprooting, separation, and migration. The theme of movement manifested itself in references to chariots, running, and bodies of water. According to historian Ira Berlin, spirituals drew upon the travel imagery of the Old Testament in their emphasis on place and processes of continuous recreation, “sometimes the nostalgia for a place lost, the desire to be ‘returned’ and ‘carried home’; sometimes that other place, of final rewards.”

Frank Gill of Lee County recalled the songs from his days as an enslaved man in church:

Wonderful Peter, 
Wonderful Paul, 
Wonderful Silas, 
Who for to make a 
Mah heart rejoice.

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Oh Good Shepherds, feed a’ mah sheep.
Don’t you hear de young lambs a bleatin’?
Don’t you hear de young lambs a bleatin’?
Don’t you hear de young lambs a bleatin’?
Oh! Good shepherds feed a’ mah sheep.⁴⁷

Jim Allen of Lowndes County remembered several of his favorite church songs, including “Am I Born to Die,” “Alas and Did My Savior Bleed,” and “Must I to de Judgment be Brought.” According to Allen, the preachers said, “Pull down de line and let the spirit be a witness, working for faith in de future from on high.” Another song Allen remembered was

Come on Chariot and Take Her Home
Home, take Her Home
Here come Chariot, les ride,
Come on Les ride.
Come on Les ride.

Frances Cobb of Lowndes County expressed pleasure in hearing spiritual hymns. She associated spiritual hymns with her conversion experience. During her baptism in a pool at Pilgrims’ Rest in Noxubee County, people shouted and sang “You Can’t Live in Sin and Feel the Savior’s Love.”⁴⁸ Jerry Eubanks of Lowndes County recalled the spiritual songs that he especially liked, including “De Old Time Religion Good Enough for Me” and “When Shall I see My Fathers Face and in His Bosom Rest.” He also recounted the verses of two spiritual songs:

Jesus My all to heaven is gone
Whom I place my hopes upon Den will I tell de sinner around
What a dear Savior I'm found.
He whom I place my hopes upon

and

I'm goin Home to Die no more.


I don't think I can get hold of narry noder one now.\textsuperscript{49}

Lorena Thomas of Lowndes County recalled her grandmother’s favorite spiritual songs, including “Old Time Religion”:

\begin{verbatim}
Watch the sun, how steady she run
Dont let'er ketch you wid de work undone.
\end{verbatim}

Referring to other formerly enslaved people, Thomas noted, “Dey would sing any where, when de spirit struck them. Old Marster would say, Wait till de get de power off. Dont bother me.”\textsuperscript{50}

Even as white people attempted to regulate spiritual spaces in antebellum Northeast Mississippi, enslaved people imagined a spiritual world in which they would be released from the shackles of bondage. Having combined white Christianity with their own folk beliefs from West and West Central Africa, enslaved people appropriated spiritual spaces for their own visions of control and empowerment. Ultimately, enslaved people’s visions of spirituality shaped the ways in which white people controlled spiritual spaces and interpreted their own religious beliefs.

\textsuperscript{49} Jerry Eubanks, Rawick, \textit{American Slave}, supplemental ser. 1, 7(2): 687-701.  

\textsuperscript{50} Lorena Thomas, Rawick, \textit{American Slave}, supplemental ser. 1, 10(5): 2095-2097.
CHAPTER V

“SOME FOLKS SAY DAT DERE AIN’T NO SICH THINGS AS GOSTES, BUT I KNOW DERE IS”: COMMUNICATION WITH THE SPIRITUAL WORLD

Visionary experiences and the belief in a spiritual world linked Anglo and African systems of belief. 1 Enslaved people reached the spiritual plane through hearing, sight, and touch, and communicated with entities on that plane. Communication with the spiritual world could occur at any time, and constituted a form of spiritual revelation that did not just occur on Sundays. Communication with the spiritual world was often random and not limited to certain days or spaces, enslaved people saw their spirituality as a way to transcend the boundaries of forced labor, and explains why some masters sought to control the spiritual lives of enslaved people. If enslaved people could imagine and communicate with entities in a space beyond the master’s physical control, then they could and did turn their spiritual practices into resistive acts in the quarters. The spiritual world existed as a metaphysical space for enslaved resistance. Conceived as both a reality and a manifestation of the supernatural, the spiritual plane provided a space for enslaved people to exact revenge against their masters and to exert control over their own destinies. The spiritual world allowed enslaved people to turn the tables on the physical world to imagine a world unreachable to their masters, where they held complete control over a social space. African American folk beliefs and practices helped to facilitate this process.

1 Randy J. Sparks, Religion in Mississippi (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi for the Mississippi Historical Society, 2001), 82.
Through traditional folk beliefs, enslaved people were convinced they experienced the power of the supernatural world. The practice of conjure opened enslaved people to a space where they could forego the restrictions of the physical world. For enslaved people, perception became reality. According to scholar Albert J. Raboteau, “many slaves, and whites as well, knew the world of conjure to be real because they had experienced its power. In part, conjure was a theory which made sense of the mysterious and inexplicable occurrences of life.”

White interviewers often discarded enslaved people’s folk traditions as superstitious. For instance, many interviews merely list enslaved people’s beliefs in supernatural occurrences instead of placing them into context with other parts of interviews. Josephine Hamilton recounted several “superstitions,” including “if you borrow salt it is bad luck to pay it back” and “comb[ing] hair after dark makes you forgetful.” To prevent being “tricked or hoo-dooed,” Doc Quinn remembered that enslaved people punched a hole through a dime, inserted a string through the hole, and tied it around the left ankle.

Enslaved people combined a rich folk tradition with the teachings of Christianity. Jake Dawkins of Monroe County combined his belief in the supernatural with the Christian dichotomy between good and evil. Dawkins explained, “Ghost’es? Why, cose I believes in dem. Why, don’t de good book teach dat dere is two kinds of sperrits, de evil and de good? And don’t it say dat de sperrit is allus with you? Cose it does.” Dawkins recounted one of his encounters with a ghost during his walk to church with his wife. “Annie, she was my wife then, she didn’t have much faith in ghostes. She asked me what I was steppin’ side for and I told her

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and she laughed at me. But I did see him and he was a big fellow without no head and with a white bosom.” According to Dawkins, ghosts acted as the police of the supernatural realm. “They won’t bother you lessens you get in de way and lessens you do somethin’ wrong.”

Many enslaved people would have understood their connection to the spiritual world as an extension of West and West-Central African beliefs that gave certain people the ability to see and interact with ghosts and other spirits. For instance, according to the folk traditions of some enslaved Africans, an infant born with the caul, or veil-like membrane covering the face of the child at birth, meant that either he or she would likely possess the ability to communicate with ghosts and predict future events, among other interactions with the spiritual dimension. The caul reflected the endurance of African spiritual beliefs during the African Diaspora, and carried similar meanings throughout the enslaved American South and Caribbean, as well as among Africans in the Kingdom of Dahomey, the Gold Coast, and Dutch Guyana. While many Africans believed the caul predisposed certain children to the “ability to manipulate spiritual forces,” anthropologist Melville Herskovits notes that abnormal births, strange birthmarks, and other unique physical features “often made certain children likely candidates to be future root doctors or conjurers.”

Although the spiritual world could represent a space in which enslaved people found release from the shackles of bondage, in the minds of enslaved people, the spiritual world faced the threat of both white control and invasion. Scholar Albert J. Raboteau found that enslaved people used the theme of revenge against masters and overseers in ghost lore to show how

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“ghosts, witches, and conjurers redressed the wrongs which slaves could not.”

Jake Dawkins linked his encounters with ghosts to his experience as an enslaved man: “I sho’ would hate to meet old marster on one of dese dark nights and him drunk, I’se talkin’ bout his ghost. I’d sho’ strike it out for de biggest stream of water in de country and get across as fast as I could cause you know, ghostes can’t cross water.”

Henry Cheatam of Clay County recalled the death of a white man. His mother had been staying with the white man’s sister. According to Cheatam, “dis spirit lak an angel come to my mammy an’ tol’ her to tell de white lady to read de Bible backards three times, ‘caze dere was one talent ‘tween her an’ Jesus. Atter dat she were comforted.”

Letha Gholson took a cautious stance when it came to her belief in ghosts. “I believes in sommin. And you don’t ketch me goin to no grave yard at night. I ain’t never seed none my white folks graves at night. I seem ‘em in de day, but never in de night.”

According to Jim Allen of Lowndes County, “Yes we believed hants would be at de grave yard. I didn't pay no tention to em do, for I know de evil spirit is here, if you don't believe it, let one of em slap you. I aint seed one but I've heard em.”

Jerry Eubanks of Lowndes County said "Well no, I ain't seed no ghosts, but I come so near, I thought I seed em.”

According to Henry Gibbs of Clay

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8 Jake Dawkins, Rawick, American Slave, supplemental ser. 1, 7(2): 592-599.


10 Letha Gholson, Rawick, American Slave, supplemental ser. 1, 8(3): 813-814.


12 Jerry Eubanks, Rawick, American Slave, supplemental ser. 1, 7(2): 687-701.
County, "Hants? Ghosts and Spirits?... Dere is a spirit—but when you really see it in person, its
gone. The Spirit is leading you, and dats what skeers you when it turns back on you."  

Henry Cheatam of Clay County recalled his father’s experience with the supernatural
realm, “Some folks say dat dere ain’t no sich things as gostes, but I know dere is, ‘caze dere is
good spirits an’ bad spirits.” As Sam Cheatam, “a wicked man” sat in front of the fireplace, a
“big brindle dog” came to the door and started barking. Sam Cheatam responded, “What in de
Hell am dat?” When Sam Cheatam snapped his fingers at the dog, the dog dropped dead.

Enslaved people noted specific ways of detecting the presence of ghosts. Jake Dawkins
relied upon the sense of touch to detect the presence of ghosts: “You know how I tells if I is
gwineter meet one? I feels de warm streak of steam in de air.” Jim Allen’s experience with
ghosts proved less remarkable and detailed than Dawkins’s encounter. “I seed someone, dey
said was a ghost - but it got away quick.” According to Joe Rollins of Clay County,
graveyards were the best places to find ghosts: “Who-oo-! I tell you where de hants is. Jes go
down to dem grave yards and you see em.” Ghosts could make their presence known through
bright lights. Rollins said, “I seed a big light. Dat place was lit up so I puts my hat over my head
so I couldn’t see good. Go round dem grave yards and see em. I specs de do talk to you some
time. Dat place hanted to def.”

Ghosts made their presence known to enslaved people in a variety of ways. According to
Jerry Eubanks of Lowndes County, a ghost visited Charlie Cox near Waverly Plantation. As

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Cox sat to read his paper, the light extinguished. Eubanks remembered: “Somein said ‘Phew’—[Cox] lighted it four times. Mr. Charlie Cox and something said ‘phew’ everytime. Mr. Cox left dat house and went to his Sister.”18

For other enslaved people, encounters with ghosts meant that the spirit of an individual had unfinished business in the physical realm. Enslaved people often had common sets of rules through which they handled encounters with the spiritual realm. Henry Gibbs of Clay County had been told that people could not live in a house where someone had died. “My evidence is dey done hid some money and dey come to see about it.” According to Gibbs, "A woman died once and she had hid some money in de wall, and she called up de chillern and told em where to find it. Dats what I been told."19

Ghosts could appear in any location and at any time of the day. Jerry Eubanks of Lowndes County recalled his ghostly encounter while monitoring a cotton gin: “I was dar. Dem ghosts was dar too, and dey run us home. Dey was little bity low things—Let me get you sorter straight so you can see yourself.” According to Eubanks, several black people had drowned in the river near Silver City, located in the Delta, “A whole lot of em had fell out of dis gin house, and dey come back. About eleven oclock de whistle blewed jes like fire, and dar wasn't a bit of fire. But we run and de agent went hisself next night, and he was run off too.” Eubanks recounted another ghostly encounter at a dance at the home of Dr. Brothers’s brother. “We was up stairs and fo God we was a sittin there, preachers, too, and a door was pitched down on us.

18 Jerry Eubanks, Rawick, American Slave, supplemental ser. 1, 7(2): 687-701.
Oh, I done some running. Dat house is dere now, but Somin brings em out. Looks like de house goin be tore down every night. Dey jes runs around all over de house.”

Enslaved people came up with a variety of ways to protect themselves and their homes from the presence of ghosts. According to Letha Gholson, enslaved people did not always have positive encounters with ghosts. During one of Gholson’s encounters with a ghost, she was tormented in bed, and “jes would’n be let alone.” To make the ghost go away, Gholson spread newspapers around her bed, hoping that they would act as a shield of protection. In the future, Gholson noted that she would “stay in any dese sposed to be hainted houses, if ah’m paid and I can git plenty newspaper.”

According to Jerry Eubanks of Lowndes County, “dere is lots of evil around Columbus.” To combat the supernatural invasion of the physical world, residents of Columbus “puts horse shoes over de door but dat don't turn de evil spirits.”

Many times the presence of ghosts was not a random occurrence. For some enslaved people, encounters with ghosts involved people they had known in the physical world. Jake Dawkins recounted his encounter with the ghost of Old Man Burg. “[Burg] useter have a big mill and I worked for him and I was wit him when he died, fact was he died wid his head in my hand. Why I see him most every week, as plain as day. Ghostes can’t talk but I sho’ wish they could for I’d like to talk to dat man.”

Encounters with ghosts were not the norm among all enslaved people. According to Frances Cobb, “Yes, I heard about hants, but I ain't seen but one.” Cobb’s experience showed how many enslaved people interpreted their encounters with ghosts as people they once knew in
the physical realm. In the minds of enslaved people, deceased relatives or acquaintances could appear as ghosts in the physical realm to relay messages to their families. “My Mother came back once when she had been dead a year. I was laying across de bed one day at twelve o'clock, and she come stood by me and said, ‘Don't let my son-in-law, Sam have one thing of mine.’ You know he was mean as a dog to her.”

Because enslaved people connected the physical and spiritual worlds, beings in the spiritual world could encompass white people. Alex Bell of Pontotoc County recalled the death of a nearby white woman. Bell recalled, “The master said one morning he was going to visit with Miss Mary. He called the overseers to him, there was two or three of them to look after all the slaves, and told them what he wanted done on the place while he’s gone. Then he started out on his saddle horse.” Sitting in the house when the master returned, Bell recounted that the master said nothing, and “just walked into the house and humped himself down in a chair. He covered his face with hands that couldn’t hide his grief.” When Mistress Mary Wiley asked the master about his unusual behavior, he responded “Mary’s dead!” Several months later, the enslaved children along with the mistress and her daughters Emma and Lucy played in yard. Someone pointed to the gate in the front yard and said “Look yonder! Look, Mistress, at the gate!” Everyone stopped to see who had arrived, and the mistress exclaimed “It’s Mary!” According to Bell, “there she was, standing by the gate post, something bright shining around her head, and the folks knewed they was seeing a ghost. Reckon everybody was too scared to say anything and whatever it was that was Miss Mary didn’t say nothing either. The form just kinder melted through the gate and run to the house.”

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Soon after, Bell heard piano music coming from the house, and Mary had always played the piano. However, the house was empty. As Bell remembered, “Aunt Betty [the cook] run to call Master Joe and we all followed him into the house, but the music had stopped when we got to the porch and wasn’t heard no more. The master and mistress led the way to the parlor, nobody there.” After combing the rooms of the house, no one saw Mary or any other unusual forms. Reminiscing about the unusual encounter with the ghost of Miss Mary, Bell said: “I can still see her now just like when she come back from the dead.”

Not all ghosts took human form. Henry Cheatam of Clay County knew “dere is gostes.” When he was a child, Cheatam encountered a ghost. After Cheatam’s mother had returned from the field and laid across the bed, Cheatam sat in front of the fireplace when “a big somp’n lak a cow widout no haid come in de do’ an’ I commence to beat on it wid my fists.” Having likened the ghost to a headless cow, Cheatam said his mother asked him what was wrong. Believing he had witnessed the headless cow walk out of the door, Cheatam “looked outen de window an’ dere it was a-goin’ in Aunt Marfa’s cabin. I neber did see it no mo’.”

Enslaved people were not the only physical beings in contact with the spiritual realm. Former bondsman Henry Gibbs of Clay County claimed that domesticated animals felt the presence of ghosts. According to Gibbs, "I ain't afraid of hants. Horses and mules can see hants do." Gibbs witnessed a mule’s encounter with a ghost: "I seed a mule early one morning, what jes looked and looked and backed and backed. I tell my wife ‘Dat mule see a hant.’” Days after the mule’s encounter with the ghost, after plowing, the mule “reared up, and running back, and kept reading up until he fell back on de plow and died.” According to Gibbs, the mule "had seen


[another] hant." Gibbs linked the mule’s experience with the supernatural world to his own religious beliefs: "De Bible say a mule got a soul."

Some enslaved people saw animals as connected to the spiritual dimension. Scholar Stephanie Y. Mitchem shows that animals such as black cats symbolized the interrelationship between humans and nature. Former Monroe County bondsman Doc Quinn attached a powerful spiritual meaning to his encounter with a black cat in a graveyard. “One dark, drizzly night, de niggers wuz out in de woods shootin’ craps. I didn’t hab no money to jine in de game.” In exchange for a dollar, one of the game’s participants dared Quinn to go to the cemetery to steal the foot board from a gravesite. Willing to take the dare, Quinn “ambles off to de cemete’y, ‘cause I really needed dat money.” Once he gets to the cemetery, Quinn entered, but “walks careful, like, not wantin’ to distu’b nuthin’, an’ finally de grave stone leapt up in front ob me.” As Quinn reached down to pick up the foot board, he encountered black cats, which “wuz habin’ a meetin’ ovah dat grave an’ dey objected to mah intrudin’, but I didn’t pay ‘em no mind.” Quinn retrieved the foot board and brought it back to the game participants, and “bless de Lawd,—dey gib me two dollars!” To many enslaved people like Quinn, the appearance of a powerful spiritual animals like black cats on the hallowed ground of a graveyard exemplified the flow of the natural, the spiritual, and relational aspects of life. Just as enslaved people attached meaning to the spirits of deceased humans, animals had contact with the spiritual realm.

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30 Mitchem, African American Folk Healing, 17-18.
Enslaved people interacted with a spiritual world that transcended the limits of evangelical Christianity. While many white slaveholders expected enslaved people to worship on Sundays, many enslaved people viewed communication with the spiritual world as a possibility detached from the space of a church building and as a way to override the physical boundaries of plantation space imposed by white slaveholders. Many enslaved people viewed the spiritual world as an extension of the physical world, a duality that posed opportunities for communication with beings like ghosts and animal spirits whose presence existed beyond the purview of white authority and transcended the structural limitations of Christianity, racial hierarchy, and physical bondage.
CHAPTER VI

“LAWD, IT WAS BITTERER DAN QUININE”: ENSLAVED PEOPLE AND FOLK HEALING

Many enslaved people believed in supernatural occurrences because conjurers proved their powers and gained authority in enslaved communities, even as some interviewers noted the superstitious ideas of enslaved people and placed little importance on the significance of “superstition.”¹ The existence of a spiritual world defined by West and West-Central African folk beliefs explained the occurrence of otherwise unexplainable events. Many times enslaved people understood inexplicable events in terms of the unleashing of spiritual forces against them. George Coleman recalled a story from his Uncle Reuben and Aunt Mary Ann Coleman about a time when the stars fell. He stated, “How scared dey all was. Some of de niggers on dat place jumped in a creek. Jus plain scared to death, you know dey thot de worl had d one cum to a end.”² Enslaved healers described their powers as divinely ordained gifts, and played a crucial role in the web of social relations within enslaved communities. Because enslaved people held a relational vision of health, their collective relationships within the enslaved community and with the spiritual realm influenced how they treated illness and defined well-being. The spiritual


realm encompassed a “broadly defined community of living kin and neighbors, ancestors, and spirits.”

Due to enslaved healers’ perceived ability to communicate beyond the physical plane of the plantation, their treatments gained authority among enslaved people. Within the spiritual consciousness, the boundary between enslaved people and the natural world collapsed.

African American folk healing beliefs carried deep cultural, political, and social meanings. Enslaved communities connected individuals’ health to broader community relationships, emphasized collective affliction and healing, relied upon kinship relations by linking ancestors and living descendants, and centralized healing authority in elders and divine revelation. Enslaved people’s relational visions of healthcare combined West and West Central African spirituality with their interpretations of Christianity and critiqued slaveholders’ authoritative notions of medical care. Although the enslaved practiced relational healthcare within their own communities, they faced invasions from slaveholders, overseers, and white doctors seeking to practice their own versions of medical care.

Scholar Stephanie Y. Mitchem locates expression and content of black folk healing within African American intellectual and mystical traditions, which operated in a holistic and not necessarily institutional cosmology. While folk healing provided an expression of ethics and values that informed individuals and the community, its content and methods changed over time based on cultural reasoning, such as the merging of traditional African folk beliefs with white Christianity.

Through the process of divination, conjurers relied on supernatural knowledge to trace the origins of illness back to social conflicts. Conjurers employed several methods of divination,

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4 Ibid., 5-6.

including reading the movements or alignments of coffee grounds, cards, bones, and other materials. According to Doc Quinn’s interviewer, “Some aged negroes believe that many of the superstitious ideas that are practiced by their race today had their origin in Africa.” The mere listing of folk healing methods in WPA interviews raises questions about authority and power, and represents the interaction of images and language to construct racial hierarchy in both the antebellum South and in the climate of the 1930s. Without cultural or historical context, interviewers’ listing of cures reinforced public images of black ignorance and inferiority and schemes for racial interaction.

In the concept of pharmocosm, healing and harming shared a dual relationship within a “single transformational process.” Historian Sharla M. Fett reassesses the importance of enslaved people’s healing traditions using religion scholar Theophus Smith’s concept of “pharmocosm” to describe the biblical worldview of enslaved people. While conjuration could serve a curative purpose, at the same time it could also serve a destructive purpose. For instance, while conjurers might mend a relationship, the cure might come at the cost of affliction for another person. Former bondsman Doc Quinn noted common folk practices of enslaved people. For instance, each member of a family would commonly extract all of their teeth and believed that doing so would prevent disagreements. To prevent the separation between spouses, enslaved husbands and wives wrapped a “rabbit’s forefoot, a piece of loadstone, and nine hairs from the top of the head in red flannel,” and buried it under the front door steps.

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8 Mitchem, African American Folk Healing, 12-13.
of Lowndes County put little stock into the perception of enslaved people’s involvement with voodoo. According to Eubanks, “The voodoo's? Aint nothing to it. Its jes somein to make money off of.” But, Eubanks knew about the charms that enslaved people wore, and his own remembrances corroborated those of Quinn: “Most of em wore dimes with a hole in it to keep off evil spirits, and red flannel bands around the wrist to keep from loasin de nerve.” Quinn’s interviewer also noted: “To carry an axe or hoe into the house means bad luck. An itching nose indicates someone is coming to see you, while an itching eye indicates you will cry.”

The cultural retention of folk healing allowed enslaved people to make claims to dignity. The human body placed enslaved people in touch with the spiritual realm, and unified people with the community. The body connected enslaved people to their ancestors, and new births could mean the return of an ancestral spirit. With the power of healing, people and their communities could be physically and spiritually cured. Enslaved people relied upon homemade medicines, unless illness necessitated the assistance of a doctor. Former bondsman Henry Cheatam recalled: “Us used boneset tea made form a weed. Lawd, it was bitterer dan quinine, an’ it were good for de chills an’ fever, an’ it would purge you too. Den us used life-everlastin’ tea for fever, an’ Jerusalem breshweed to git rid of worms.”

Hoodoo, or conjure, consisted of practices that allowed healers to harness nature’s energy to yield a specific outcome. Formerly enslaved people like Henry Cheatam of Clay County

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15 Like the studies of Sharla M. Fett and Stephanie Y. Mitchem, this study will interchangeably use the terms “conjure” and “hoodoo.” Fett sees conjure or hoodoo as the performance of the ritual harnessing of spiritual
often linked folk healing to the practical purposes it served, and stated “we didn’t know nothin’ ‘bout no hoodoo stuff in dem days.”16 Within the matrix traditional Protestantism, Christians viewed hoodoo through the negative connotations of magic, witchcraft, and sorcery, which broke with the “natural, God-created order of life to align with evil forces, such as the devil, for malevolent purposes.” Traditional Protestant Christians often feared the practice of hoodoo, and equated it with the acceptance of damnation, unlike African American folk believers who revered the powers that the supernatural brought to the adherent. Hoodoo provided enslaved people the opportunity to continue the practice of traditional beliefs under the structure of European religious beliefs, and allowed them to transcend the shackles of enslavement through the pragmatic approach of using “roots and herbs for healing or protection, with a constant awareness of the interconnectedness of all life.”17

Enslaved women served as cornerstones for health practices within enslaved communities, and experienced the tensions between relational healthcare and professional white medical care in specific ways.18 On one hand, enslaved women cared for the sick, made medicinal remedies, and attended births. On the other hand, because enslaved women lacked the moral authority afforded to white women as caregivers, white society denied enslaved women

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16 Henry Cheatam, Rawick, American Slave, supplemental ser. 1, 1(1): 89-94.

17 Mitchem, African American Folk Healing, 15, 19-20.

18 Deborah Gray White, Ar’n’t I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999 [1985]), 22-24. Due to the racialized and gendered condition of black women, studies of enslaved women confront silences in the availability of source material. According to Deborah Gray White, “slave women were everywhere, yet nowhere.” Although sources like WPA interviews and plantation records revealed little about the ways in which sex and race shaped enslaved women’s self-conceptions, White posited that enslaved women understood that they had to hide their true thoughts and personalities to protect themselves and their families from white and male invasion.
the authority to care for their own families. Although enslaved women played crucial roles in healing, they always practiced under the purview of slaveholders, whether in family dwellings, plantation hospitals, and yards, and “their work traversed the frayed boundaries between public and private, home and market, and skill and expected subservience.” Unlike enslaved men, enslaved women possessed fewer options for specialized labor, but engaged in doctoring work that offered prominence and included unique opportunities for work as midwives, nurses, and hospital attendants, as well as cooks and seamstresses.19

Enslaved women’s experiences and experiments with nature provided them with ideas about themselves as women, and formed the foundation of their identities in spiritual spaces.20 Within plantation divisions of labor, plantation mistresses often sent enslaved women into gardens and the woods to retrieve plants for the production of beverages and medicines, which gave them intimate knowledge about the availability and productive use of botanical resources.

19 Fett, Working Cures, 9-11, 114, 125.

Many enslaved women also cultivated their own medicinal herbs in their own small gardens.\textsuperscript{21} In raising, harvesting, and using herbs for their own purposes, women claimed the product of their labor. By treating their bodies with their own remedies enslaved women rejected the commercial value that planters placed on them.\textsuperscript{22}

Josephine Hamilton of Chickasaw County recounted several cures and remedies. Many white interviewers merely listed the cures and remedies that formerly enslaved people remembered. The lack of context for herbal remedies mentioned in interviews reinforces the lack of importance that white people placed in folk healing in the slave context, the powerful position of professionalized medicines, and the gendered dynamics of professionalization and plantation divisions of labor. Knowledge of herbal remedies gave black women crucial roles in spiritual spaces as entities through which the natural entities of the physical world gained meaning and conferred power. To relieve stomach gas, enslaved people beat charcoal. Instead of using soda, enslaved people burned red corn cobs and made white ashes and sifted them.

Enslaved people, and women in particular, also used their herbal knowledge in cooking. For instance, Josephine Hamilton made bread using meal, salt, collard leaves, and water. After combining sifted meal, salt, and water, enslaved people placed the mixture on top of a collard leaf, covered the top with another collard leaf, and placed it into and covered with hot ashes. The resulting bread was “really good.” Along with bread, enslaved people roasted potatoes and eggs in hot ashes. Additionally, to make meal Hamilton grinded either okra seeds or parched corn. Enslaved people also made persimmon beer, which “won’t make you drunk.” In regular beer barrels, they constructed a faucet, and placed old hay in the bottom, along with persimmons,

\textsuperscript{21} Fett, \textit{Working Cures}, 70-72.

\textsuperscript{22} Camp, \textit{Closer to Freedom}, 78-80, 83, 85.
baked cornbread, and water. After sitting in the barrel for “about a week,” the persimmon beer provided a “fine drink with tea cakes.”

Although Hamilton does not mention her exact duties as an enslaved woman, her vast knowledge of cooking and foodways suggests that she or a female acquaintance played a significant role in the plantation household. Enslaved women occupied roles different from and complimentary to those of enslaved men, which often limited their mobility. Enslaved women reproduced labor through childbirth, provided service as domestic laborers and field hands, and cared for their own families. All efforts of enslaved women to care for themselves, their families, and their communities maintained slaveowners’ workforces, enhanced plantation productivity, and contributed to the welfare of the enslaved workforce. As Tilda Johnson of Warren County, Mississippi remembered, “I was a gal of fourteen but I could do a woman’s work. I knew how to wash, iron, clean up, and cook.” While both men and women finished field work around sunset, “second shifts” of work burdened women with cooking, cleaning, producing household goods, washing and making clothes, and producing textiles for general plantation use. Unlike enslaved women who had little opportunity to leave plantations, some enslaved men transported products into town, traded goods with neighbors, and served as messengers, which afforded opportunities to learn the geography inside and outside of the plantation’s boundaries. Due to family responsibilities and gender ideals, women frequently

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turned to absenteeism instead of running away as fugitives. Unlike field workers, household bondwomen directly impacted slaveholders since someone had to complete household tasks.26

The group-oriented and group-dependent nature of enslaved women’s plantation work encouraged a high degree of gender awareness. The separations between the activities of enslaved men and women enabled enslaved women to build their own networks of support and forge alliances for medical and maternal care. Enslaved mothers protected the family’s integrity by supplying children with security against sale and nourishment, as well as providing “information links” when fathers were sold or ran away.27

During the colonial era, white Europeans used observations in travel narratives of African women’s ability for easy birth and breast-feeding to naturalize and rationalize African women’s ability to easily perform hard labor in the Americas. Women’s work and women’s bodies could not be separated under the institution of slavery. The process of creolization among African-Americans rendered childbirth a meaning rooted in loss and alienation as women became the means for articulating and naturalizing slave status in future generations. While time and labor placed demands on their lives, enslaved women attempted to construct families for their children. In the process, both enslaved men and women ordered the intimacy of their own lives.28 The presumption that black male sexuality needed mitigation also informed enslaved women’s labor. Without an outlet for his perceived unrestrained sexual needs, black men’s continual and contained labor could not be ensured for the future.

27 White, Ar’n’t I a Woman?, 22-24, 124, 119-120, 141, 153, 158-160.
Contrary to enslaved men, enslaved women endured harsher punishments with sexually degrading undertones, including possessiveness and violent acts against the private body. Bynum explains the rationale behind the sexual ideology of the plantation. Racial, sexual, and economic systems converged at the rape of enslaved women by white men. Restricting black women’s sexual and reproductive labor within slavery upheld plantation patriarchy, and allowed enslaved women to produce wealth for white men through productive and reproductive labor. Paternalists cast enslaved women as either Mammies or Jezebels. Inspiring the trust of whites and usually receiving better treatment and access to household goods, Mammies occupied a “sexless and loyal” image to whites. However, Jezebels characterized sexually-charged and seductive black women who sometimes reaped material rewards from white men. Jezebel rationalized sexual relations between black women and white men. The coercive nature of sexual relationships between enslaved women and white men reinforced stereotypes of seductive black women, which “made all black women vulnerable to sexual exploitation.”

Herbal knowledge gave enslaved people not only healing and culinary tools, but also provided them with tools to better manage everyday routines. For instance, asafetida and garlic yielded greater success in fishing. By placing herbs on bait, enslaved fishers found that they “make the fish bite well.” Fishers also rubbed fishing worms on the ground to make them “tougher” and therefore easier to place on fishing hooks.

Although enslaved people’s relational vision of health strengthened communal bonds both in the physical and spiritual realm, as well as critiqued slaveholding Christianity and planter intrusions into healthcare, their healing practices did not carve them an autonomous spiritual


space on the physical geography of the plantation. Slaveholders not only frequently intruded upon the healing practices of enslaved people, but also often claimed similar herbal remedies to ease their own medical afflictions. Plantation journals provided detailed descriptions for making and administering homemade medicines. The W.T. Lenoir family’s plantation journal listed treatments for ailments such as fever, edema or “the dropsy,” colic, rheumatism, consumption, cough, skin infections, scurvy, pulmonary imbalance, venereal disease, “lingering diseases,” and cholera, as well as a recipe to cleanse the blood and a cure “for the glut.”

Discourse on superstition and formal medical training allowed white slaveholders to imagine both a “moral and intellectual mastery” over enslaved people, which created a “distinct sphere of knowledge” for white slaveholders. Like enslaved healers, white southerners relied on herbs for their healing power, yet their ability to read and write prescriptive measures granted intellectual authority to white medical advice. White participation in the market also granted access to imported medicines from Europe and the North. For instance, to treat consumption, the Lenoir family combined “horsehound ground ivy, wormwood, and privy tops,” along with “three handfuls sassafrass, sasaprella [sic] charry wirt root one lb.” After boiling the ingredients “in the wort [sic],” patients drank a pint in the morning, at noon, and at night. “For the glut,” the Lenoir family combined “prickly ash root, holly root, wild crab apple root, and black walnut root,” and put “a handful” into two gallons of water to be boiled down to three quarts, “a tumbler full of which [was] to be taken [three] times a day.”

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Both descendants of Africans and Europeans emphasized the importance of blood quality for good health. Many black healers blamed the condition of a person’s blood when they could not make a diagnosis that conjuration or God’s will caused a disease. Many white people based their views on blood quality in Greek humoral theory. After an assessment of the highness or lowness, thickness or thinness, fastness or slowness, hotness or coldness, and purity or impurity of the blood, the practitioner would locate the symptoms of the illness within a key region of the body such as the head, stomach, lungs, or kidneys. An effective cure would bring the blood back into equilibrium throughout the body or within a given region of the body. To cleanse the blood, the Lenoir family combined a handful of snakeroot, poplar root bark, dogwood, and sassafrass, and then “buttons snakeroot with some stargess roots into a gallon pure water, and boil it down to [two] quarts.”

White southerners’ adaptation of herbal remedies represented a striking irony about social relations in a slaveholding society. In describing enslaved people’s herbal remedies as “superstitious,” white southerners devalued the knowledge of enslaved healers. Many formally educated white people “distinguish[ed] between enlightenment and ignorance, progress and primitivism, reason and irrationality, and medicine and quackery,” which “subsumed constructions of race and gender that closely linked ‘women’ and ‘negroes’ to ‘superstition.’” Through associations of Africans and their descendants with emotionalism and the supernatural, planters constantly differentiated the authority of their own knowledge of health and well-being from that of enslaved people. Marie Jenkins Schwartz focuses on the development and

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35 Fett, Working Cures, 75.
37 Fett, Working Cures, 45-47.
professionalization of medical practice as it related to physicians’ and slaveholders’ attempts to control the reproductive lives of enslaved women, and examined fertility, pregnancy, childbirth, postnatal complications, gynecological disorders, and cancer to show how slaveholders managed enslaved women’s bodies. Physicians and many slaveholders focused upon diagnoses and cures and insisted upon pregnancy and childbirth as biological processes, which created a cultural and social gulf between themselves and enslaved women that upheld antebellum hierarchy. With no fundamental right to control their own bodies, enslaved women secretly kept their own healing customs for survival, which created a sense of community among enslaved women. Schwartz further builds upon Deborah Gray White’s observation that enslaved women formed a community based upon shared experiences, specifically in childbearing, wisdom of the body through pregnancy, childbirth, and aftercare, changes in material conditions, and administration of herbal remedies.  

Although white slaveholders attempted to limit the ability of enslaved people to practice traditional healing methods and often dismissed folk healers’ authority as backwards or superstitious, West and West-Central African views of health and well-being permeated antebellum society. While the ability to conjure never carved an autonomous physical or social space for enslaved people, they partially retained a significant cultural contribution in folk healing, which strengthened communal bonds in both physical and social spaces, and allowed enslaved people to adapt their healing practices to the limitations of Christianity. Enslaved women played vital roles in the maintenance of healing practices. Multiple shifts of work gave enslaved women a space to understand the natural world through the concoction of remedies, and allowed them to connect knowledge of the physical world with the spiritual space of healing. 

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When white slaveholders dismissed enslaved people’s spiritual cosmology as primitive and used formal education to infuse medicine as a science, they made healing practices into an indicator of racial aptitude.
CONCLUSION

White slaveholders imposed boundaries and spatial limits that constrained the spiritual lives of enslaved people. Yet enslaved men and women shaped the constraints of cultural, physical, and social space to conceive of a spiritual plane that transcended white people’s restrictions on movement. Scholar Scott Nesbit’s analysis of migration and marriage patterns of emancipated men and women in Virginia shows how enslaved people developed varying concepts of marriage in the face of forced internal migration. Black men and women connected household, community, and legal spaces through marriage: “Black women and men were constantly acting at multiple scales, using governmental agents, employers, and even former slaveholders to buttress their claims to their families.”¹

In a similar fashion to the multiple channels through which formerly enslaved people legitimized their marriages, enslaved people’s constricted time and space and divisions of labor strengthened their religious and spiritual commitments. Church attendance, though restricted, provided both a physical and a liberating force. Often coerced into attending church services, enslaved people also interpreted evangelical notions of freedom. At the same time, non-attendance at church gave enslaved people an avenue through which they critiqued evangelical Christianity and also appropriated time for themselves. Knowledge and literacy, often gained through the Bible, gave enslaved people the ability to undermine the foundation of evangelical

social hierarchy. Enslaved women’s household labor and status as healers allowed for the accumulation of knowledge about medicinal plants and a space to concoct herbal remedies. Enslaved men’s knowledge of areas both within and outside of the geography of containment allowed for safer movement and greater mobility to secret meetings. Illicit religious and spiritual meetings gave enslaved people the chance to conflate spiritual activities with secular enjoyment, and simultaneously resisted evangelical social order and caused disorder. Because of white fears about possible insurrection, all congregative activities of enslaved people fundamentally caused the insecurity of white slaveholders.

Although the present study has presented a broad overview of the religious and spiritual dimensions of antebellum-era Northeast Mississippi, other questions about the experiences of white evangelicals and enslaved people remain and deserve attention. First, greater denominational distinctions need incorporating into the spatial analysis. For instance, a continuation of this work should compare in greater depth the differences among Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians in Northeast Mississippi. Second, the current analysis lacks a discussion of interdenominational dissent against proslavery justifications. The spatial analysis would serve well a critical look at the limitations of dissent. Third, further study would need to more clearly locate and map the plantation spaces in question in Northeast Mississippi, particularly Monroe County. Due to the economic vitality of Aberdeen, the plantation spaces in question have direct economic ties and indirect cultural ties to Mobile, Alabama via the Tombigbee River. Fourth, both the spatial analysis and narrative depth would benefit from clear linkages between historical actors. An investigation of the familial and social ties between the historical actors in Northeast Mississippi would more clearly elucidate the importance of legal, metaphorical, and physical limitations to mobility.
Emancipation may have brought freedom to formerly enslaved people, but the memory of enslavement remained etched in the cultural and social tapestry of Northeast Mississippi for decades. The trauma of enslavement lingered in the lives and minds of former bondspeople. As historian Edward E. Baptist observes, formerly enslaved people understood their experiences as a commonly held set of images and metaphors. In their own daily experiences and interactions after emancipation, formerly enslaved people constructed a “vernacular history” through which they identified their shared histories and constructed their identities.²

At the most basic level, emancipation involved the toppling of an exploitative and often life-threatening social regime. Frank Williams admitted that “I’se glad slavery’s over,” yet “I ain’t gwineter never fergit’ bout my daddy bein’ most whipped to death.”³ When formerly enslaved people recalled family stories from before their own births, they tapped into a collective memory that hinged on coercion and violence. Although born after the Confederate surrender at the end of the Civil War, Ellen Fitzgerald recounted from her family’s oral history the death of her grandmother with a battling stick at the hand of her mistress Callie Gibbs: “[Gibbs] struck her in the small part of her back and broke it. She left her at the spring. Somebody went to get water and seen her there. They took her to the house but she finally died.”⁴

In their lives as free people, many former enslaved people continued to feel the shackles and constraints of immobility. Denied access to literary spaces as bondspeople, many formerly enslaved people could not read or write by the 1930s. Pet Franks could not read or write, and


⁴ Ellen Fitzgerald, Rawick, American Slave, 8(1): 303-304.
admitted that he “aint got much use for a nigger with a little eddication.” Even though Franks had attempted schooling in the years following emancipation, he associated education with “some kinder trouble”: “I went to school twice; de fust teacher I had dey come and carried to de pententchary for signin’ his old masters name. De other teacher, dey put in jail for stealin’.”

The experiences of formerly enslaved people show that the organizing elements of antebellum society in Northeast Mississippi did not occur in a vacuum. For instance, illiteracy continued to block access to wealth, security, basic necessities, and social power.

On the surface, emancipation lifted many restrictions on the bodies of formerly enslaved people, and fundamentally altered the relationships between black people and white people in Northeast Mississippi. Former bondsman Linley Hadley, whose parents had been enslaved in Monroe County, recalled the moment when “Master Collins” called his bondspeople to the house and informed them of their freedom: “Most of the niggers took what all they have on their heads and walked off. He told mama to move up in the loom house, if she go off he would kill her.” Hadley and his mother lived at the loom house until 1866. Although Hadley’s mother had been emancipated, Collins clung to coercive and possibly sexually exploitative control of her body and mobility.

Although many formerly enslaved people lacked literacy skills and formal education well after emancipation, many found solace in religion. The Bible had predicted liberation, according to some formerly enslaved people like Monroe Brackins: “The old Bible predicts all such things as they have now… I came up in the woods, wild, but it’s my nature to be religious.”

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Enslavement restricted not only the physical bodies of black people, but also dominated their minds. Under the guise of Christianity, enslaved people internalized the Euro-American values of white slaveholders. The enslaved condition of bondspeople affirmed a European denial of African identity to black people, and set whiteness as the standard for black existence.⁸

Because many white evangelicals legitimized slavery and domination through the Bible, the southern white evangelical social hierarchy epitomized whiteness. When white people restricted the mobility of enslaved people and confined their movement to certain areas and times, white people racialized the physical geography of Northeast Mississippi. Enslaved people tested the limits of the restrictions in their daily activities on plantations, as well as inside homes and churches. As enslaved people transcended the constrictive boundaries of churches, they shaped the content and form of religious messages, along with restrictions on mobility. The all-seeing eyes of white people racialized religious spaces in Northeast Mississippi, but Christian messages sacralized the spiritual spaces of enslaved people through hope for liberation and deliverance.

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