



DROPPED "FROM THE CLOUDS": CINCINNATI AND MANUMISSION AMONG  
THE FANCY AND NEWLY FREED, 1831-1901

BY

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DISSERTATION

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation argues that numerous ex-slave mistresses and the children they produced with white men thoughtfully rebuilt their lives as newly freed people by capitalizing on earlier, sometimes ongoing, ties to white men, but also by relying on themselves and others sharing their circumstances. Some such women appear to have been “fancy girls,” the brand name for enslaved women and girls sold for use as prostitutes and concubines during the slavery era of United States history. Relying greatly on letters from ex-slaves and an ex-slave narrative, this study pays close attention to the ways in which some such women were highly valued in the slave market because of their fair complexion, but shifts attention to their experiences outside the market, specifically to their lives as “favored” ex-slaves. It does so by focusing on the migration of such ex-slaves from the Deep South to Cincinnati, a city that had the highest population of mulattoes outside the South before the Civil War. This migration occurred during the rising surveillance of people of African descent in the South during the 1830s and the concurrent rise of cotton as a premier crop, two factors that figured greatly into elite white men’s unwillingness to have their relations with women of African descent scrutinized at the community level. Ultimately, this dissertation seeks to shed light on black-white intimacies and the ways in which Southern white men were hidden actors in antebellum black urban histories. It also hopes to reveal the degree to which focusing on a select slave expands our understanding of how oppressed bodies fit into both political and social histories because of their ability to draw upon the social capital that accrued from their connections to whites in authoritative positions.

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**Chapter One**  
**Introduction**  
**Black-White Intimacies and**  
**the Migration of Fair Bodies to the “Queen of the West”**

Perhaps it was idle banter. Isaac Franklin had an idea for two slave women living in Richmond, Virginia. This man, reputedly the most successful domestic slave trader in U.S. history, wanted to see the “Old Lady and Susan...earn their keep by running a whorehouse.”<sup>1</sup> It is unknown if the women’s master, a fellow slave trader by the name of Rice Ballard, took Franklin up on his idea. More seems to be known about the Old Lady and Susan’s life in another state.

Four years after Franklin’s proposal, Ballard freed two women in Cincinnati. With four children in tow, Ballard, Avenia White, and Susan Johnson stepped down onto a levee so big fifteen steamboats could sit there, still leaving half the harbor empty.<sup>2</sup> Ballard left enough money for his now ex-slaves to eat and sleep for three weeks in a boarding house. Now free, White and Johnson and their children seemed positioned to live better than they ever had as slaves. But within a month, White sent Ballard a letter, describing their woes. She mentioned a drought and the low waters that were slowing traffic coming into Cincinnati. Fewer boats meant fewer passengers and less cargo for area businesses.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, White also told Ballard that she and Johnson were struggling financially because they were remote from “business.” The kind of business White was referring to remains a mystery.

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<sup>1</sup>Robert H. Gudmestad, “The Troubled Legacy of Isaac Franklin: The Enterprise of Slave Trading,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 62 (Fall 2003), 193-217; Sharony Green, “‘Mr Ballard I am compelled to write again’: Beyond Bedrooms and Brothels, a Fancy Girl Speaks,” *Black Women, Gender and Families*, 5:1, (Spring 2011), 24. For more on Isaac Franklin, see Wendell Holmes Stephenson, *Isaac Franklin: Slave Trader and Planter of the Old South; With Plantation Records* (Louisiana State University Press; 1938, 1968).

<sup>2</sup>Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, Donald Smalley, ed. (Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1832; 1974), 35; Louis Leonard Tucker, *Cincinnati: A Student’s Guide to Localized History* (New York; Teachers College Press, 1969), 9; D. J. Kenny, *Illustrated Cincinnati Pictorial Handbook of the Queen City* (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke & Co., 1875),1.

<sup>3</sup>Avenia White to Rice Ballard, September 13, 1838, Folder 24, from the Rice C. Ballard Papers, hereafter called Ballard Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.



She lived in Cincinnati before the era of ghettos. In 1838, African Americans were scattered throughout the six-square mile area that was the city.<sup>4</sup> Here, she, Johnson and their children resided close beside Irish and German immigrants and white natives.<sup>5</sup> But, the boarding house in which they lived was in the Second Ward, a community that was predominantly white. This house was blocks away from “Bucktown,” a predominantly black business district to the east.<sup>6</sup> It was also several blocks north of “Little Africa,” a waterfront community where blacks also congregated. These African Americans were a lower class, many would say. There, prostitution was rampant.

Given what we know about White’s beginnings in Richmond, maybe she and Johnson were remote from this waterfront. Perhaps she and Johnson had been forced to run a brothel in Richmond and were expected to do so in Cincinnati, something to which they might have agreed because it was one way to earn money when most other avenues of employment were closed to women of color. Certainly prostitution was regarded as a suitable line of work, given the near-universal image of African women as sexual and promiscuous beings.<sup>7</sup> Also, in her letter White asked her former master for money to purchase a “bed a piece” for her and Johnson.

But White also asked for money to purchase “little articles toward housekeeping.”

Perhaps the two women were simply trying to find their own home, one in which they could live

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<sup>4</sup> For more on the transformation of the geographic distribution of urban African Americans in the north during the nineteenth century, see Henry Louis Taylor, Jr., “City Building, Public Policy, the Rise of the Industrial City, and Black Ghetto-Slum Formation in Cincinnati, 1850-1940,” in Henry Louis Taylor Jr., ed., *Race and the City: Work, Community, and Protest in Cincinnati, 1820-1970* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 156-192; David Katzman, *Before the Ghetto: Black Detroit in the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975); and Nikki M. Taylor, *Frontiers of Freedom: Cincinnati’s Black Community, 1802-1868* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), 12.

<sup>5</sup> Henry Louis Taylor Jr. and Vicky Dula, “Black Residential Experience” in Taylor, ed., in *Race and the City*, 99.

<sup>6</sup> Taylor and Dula in Taylor, ed., in *Race and the City*, 100; Taylor, *Frontiers of Freedom*, 38.

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the view of women of color as being uninhibited sexually was a “ubiquitous part of Europe’s critique of and encounter with Africa.” In 1727, one surveyor’s initial visit to the Gold Coast demonstrates this point. During his first view of the landscape, the surveyor was intrigued by the African women he saw, calling them “hot constitution’d Ladies.” Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 44-45.

respectable lives. Perhaps they intended to look for work as domestics, another employment option available to African American women in their day.

Decoding White's letter is a difficult task, but no matter what she and Johnson were doing in Cincinnati, they were inarguably moving forward as free women though, interestingly, while looking to their former master for financial and, as will be seen, emotional support.<sup>8</sup> And they did so at his invitation. He appears to have given them the address not only to his home in Natchez, but one he had recently purchased in nearby Louisville. A man who leaves an address wants to be found. That said, it is possible White found his addresses in a directory or knew of someone who was aware of his whereabouts. But given that he complied with her requests for aid, it is more likely that he provided a way to contact him. That he even kept her correspondence, which was among several thousand other documents at the time of his death in 1860, suggests her importance to him and to the historical record.

This study argues that ex-slave mistresses thoughtfully rebuilt their lives as newly freed people by capitalizing on earlier, sometimes ongoing, ties to white men, and also by relying on themselves and others sharing their circumstances. White's ongoing contact with her former master demonstrates that the emotional bonds between white men and slave or ex-slave women were often stronger than the literature generally reveals. Many, if not most, scholars, African

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<sup>8</sup> In the past decade, researchers have been amassing a body of literature addressing the emotions of historical actors. Such research is a result of the scholarly community being fully attentive to its usage of the words "emotion" or "emotional." Barbara H. Rosewein has argued that when emotions are referenced in historical writing, it is far too often an attempt to make one's writing livelier. She points out that sociologists now claim that the origins "of emotion, its governing laws, and its consequences are an inseparable part of the social process," something historians and others are only beginning to appreciate. While this study is attentive to the emotions of antebellum people of color and whites, it relies more on *the words and actions* of such individuals than with *exploring emotions as a part of their socialization*. What is at stake here is investigating how the words and behaviors of historical subjects permit us to learn more about certain ex-slaves, and further, how their relations with white men can reveal more about black-white intimacies during the nineteenth century. This study, thus, assumes the emotional entanglements of such individuals were ever-present, but the emotions themselves – be they anger, fear, etc., - are not the primary focus. Barbara H. Rosewein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 1. For more on emotions as a historical field, see Susan Broomhall, *Emotions in the Household 1200-1900*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) and Nicole Eustace, *Passion is the Gale: Emotion, Power and the Coming of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

American and white, do not want to address this issue because of the lack of evidence. Few surviving documents unveil such relationships to be emotionally laden. Indeed, we are only able to verify White and Johnson's manumission because of the former's letters – five exactly – in Ballard's personal papers.

Ballard's interest in White and the others he freed with her in 1838 demonstrate the ways in which Southern white slaveholders made different kinds of investments in human capital, the sort not easily discussed in their lifetime and ones that remain polarizing even today. "It's a volatile subject," a white southern woman once told me upon hearing the topic of my dissertation though she admitted wanting her biracial granddaughter to learn more about this facet of American history.

The degree to which Southern white men and ex-slave women had emotional connections is evident in White's last surviving letter. It was sent a year and a half after their manumission in Cincinnati. In it, White wished him success, "and all the happiness in this world." She added, "[If] you have forgotten me[,] I hope you have not forgotten the children."<sup>9</sup> The tone of this letter and others, even one from a local Cincinnati man who facilitated the transfer of money to White from Ballard, strongly suggest that he and the Old Lady shared a bond forged during their former intimacy in slave territory. It was one that stemmed from her earlier special place in the slave market.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Avenia White to Rice Ballard, February 2, 1840, Folder 31, Ballard Papers.

<sup>10</sup> David Henry Shaffer, *The Cincinnati, Covington, Newport and Fulton Directory for 1840* (Cincinnati: J.B. & R.P. Donogh, 1839), 181; Gayle Thornbrough and Dorothy L. Riker, eds., *Diary and Letters of Calvin Fletcher, Vol. I (1838-1843)* (Indianapolis: Indianapolis Historical Society, 1973), 210. See also clipping of Fletcher's obituary in an unidentified newspaper, which was placed in a November 17, 1860 diary entry of his cousin, Calvin Fletcher who lived in Indianapolis. Saturday, November 17, 1860, Diary No. 10, Container BV 1968, Collection KF368.F54 A33, *The Diary of Calvin Fletcher*, Manuscript and Visual Collections Department, William Henry Smith Memorial Library, Indiana Historical Society.

White and Johnson appear to have been “fancy girls,” the brand name for light-skinned female slaves sold for use as concubines or prostitutes during the antebellum period.<sup>11</sup> From the

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<sup>11</sup>Frederic Bancroft’s 1931 study of slave trading in the south is one of the earliest explicitly to mention fancy girls. He notes that fancies were common in most large American cities, but especially prevalent in New Orleans and Lexington, Kentucky. Bancroft’s work also discusses major slave dealers, including Isaac Franklin, who sold fancy girls in Natchez, Mississippi, and New Orleans, and Lewis Robards, a trader who monopolized the market for such slaves in Lexington. Retired contractor and Kentucky native, J. Winston Coleman, builds on Bancroft’s work, providing details about Robards’ operation in his 1940 study on slavery. Whether in Lexington, New Orleans, or elsewhere in the south, fancies were purchased for use as either slave mistresses or prostitutes, though commercial sex was readily available in port cities and river communities throughout the United States in the nineteenth century even amidst mid-century moral reform campaigns. Beginning in the 1820s, it was especially visible in New York City where black and white run establishments could be found even as many city residents frowned on interracial sex. In the South, enslaved women were generally not independent contractors when employed as prostitutes. One account from former slave Henry Bibb illustrates this point. He shared how a slave trader forced his wife into prostitution and presumably kept her earnings.

Eugene D. Genovese in his 1974 pivotal work on “the worlds slave made” briefly, but accurately addresses fancy girls within the context of his discussion on miscegenation in the plantation south. He described how “a beautiful girl or young woman could bring \$5, 000,” a price that surpassed the \$2, 500 price tag on a slave, who was a first-class blacksmith. “Wherever slavery existed...such markets existed,” for such female slaves, Genovese writes. It is here that he signals one of the chief historical problems on the subject of fancy girls. While pointing to the existence of Eastern European fancies in Renaissance-era Tuscany of all places, he does not fully explain the brand’s arrival in the New World. Can we attribute her appearance in the plantation south to the white aristocrat’s sexual exploitation of his female servants, presumably carried over from the Old World? Genovese’s mention of New Orleans’ institutionalized concubine system is an excellent opening for this discussion. The field of slavery studies still has not fully explained the term’s historical trajectory. Is it only a market term? A cultural one? If one or both, what historical developments permit us to understand it as such?

In 1985, Deborah Gray White includes fancy girls in her study on black women in the antebellum South. In her discussion on how the black woman surfaced as the archetype Jezebel, one who exploited her relationships with white men, White mentions light-skinned female slaves who were sold in a “so-called Fancy Trade” in southern cities such as Charleston, St. Louis, Columbia, Lexington, and Richmond.

In 1999, Walter Johnson’s exploration of the interactions of slaves with slaveholders in the New Orleans market provided essential details about fancy girls. Known as “choice stock,” women and girls, some as young as age 13, sold under this designation ranged in price from \$2,000 to more than \$5,000. This was a considerable sum given that the average price of a slave, male or female, was \$1,000 from the early nineteenth century up until the Civil War.

Edward E. Baptist’s important investigation of the ways in which nineteenth century domestic slave trading objectified slaves - including those destined for prostitution or concubinage - as commodities, also published in 1999, situates the fancy girl squarely within the free market. But his project does so with the social implications not fully explored in earlier studies. Building on Anne McClintock’s arguments that race, class and gender were relationally linked in imperial settings across time, Baptist makes a strong case for how the slave economy was built on what he calls the “fetishization” of black female slaves including fancy girls. Where Baptist runs into a speed bump is his use of only slave traders’ personal and business correspondence and business records to support his arguments. He does not fully take into account these men’s actual interactions with female slaves and ex-slaves who had been fancy girls, which are revealed in at least six letters appearing in the archive on which he relied. Avenia White, one of the women in my first case study, “wrote” five of the letters. This study builds on Baptist’s by reviewing her letters and other sources with the aim of demonstrating how black female slaves were not mere commodities, but historical actors whose writings impart critical information about black-white intimacies and the worldview of antebellum women of color. Frederic Bancroft, *Slave-Trading in the Old South* (Baltimore: J.H. Furst Company, 1931), 131; J. Winston Coleman, *Slavery Times in Kentucky* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1940), 137; Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave* (The Author: New York, 1849), 98-99; John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972, Rev 1979), 155; Timothy J. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York*

moment a slave trader bought a slave he could market as “fancy,” that bondswoman or girl was shaped as a high-priced commodity. On her, ideas that placed a premium on white skin were super-imposed. Hence, the one Virginia trader who described his purchase of a “Girl Bright color nearly a fancy for \$1135.”<sup>12</sup> Perhaps following the convention of Western book publishers who as early as the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century began capitalizing important words, the letter “b” in the word “bright” suggested that this woman’s skin color was seen as being valuable.<sup>13</sup> Such a detail is important in ongoing conversations about this historical actor. But the many historical references to such slaves have not been brought together, nor have they fully conveyed the complexities of their lives. Nor have the references fully unveiled such bondswomen as real people who engaged in emotional exchanges with their masters, the kind that could lead to many things, including their freedom.

Using various sources - letters from ex-slaves and whites, excerpts from narratives, legal documents, slave traders’ business records, diary entries, travelers’ and media reports, and literary sources - this study seeks to draw together the pieces of a fragmented and quieted story. It largely proceeds thematically and chronologically. A central theme is favor, an idea that will be repeatedly stressed. How does favor manifest itself in manumitted mixed race mistresses and children of antebellum white men? What can it tell us about master-slave relationships and human interaction during the nineteenth century?

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*City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), 29-30 and 41-4; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon, 1974), 416-417 and 423-424; Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985 and 1999), 34-38; Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 113; Edward E. Baptist, “‘Cuffy,’” ‘Fancy Maids,’ and ‘One-Eyed Men:’ Commodification, and the Domestic Slave Trade in the United States,” *The American Historical Review*, 106:5, pp. 1619-1650. For more on fetishism as a racially gendered concept, see also Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest* (New York, Routledge, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> Philip Thomas to William Finney, July 26, 1859, William A.J. Finney Papers, Duke University.

<sup>13</sup> The letter “f” in “fancy” was also sometimes capitalized, as one trader did when he wrote, “Sept 28 1 Girl Sally Fancy Cost 750.” Silas and R.H. Omohundra Ledger, 1857-1864, University of Virginia; and *Collins English Dictionary: Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009) <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/capitalize> (accessed: October 16, 2012).

Chapter Two begins the discussion by looking more closely at the “fancy girl,” an iconic slave recognizable to her contemporaries even though her story has yet to be relayed in a comprehensive way by scholars. This chapter will contextualize her initial appearance as a select slave against wider historical change. This chapter also addresses the obstacles to conveying the complexities of her life by uncovering the ways in which others perceived her during her life. Establishing her special circumstances sets the foundation for introducing a methodology that shows how slave mistresses and their children maneuvered to rebuild their lives before and following their manumission. The methodology draws from and builds on “the hidden transcript” scholarship of political scientist and anthropologist James Scott.<sup>14</sup> Like a peasant worker in a far-flung Asian village, ex-slave mistresses and their children thoughtfully and often quietly resisted the difficult circumstances in which they found themselves as people of African descent.

Class antagonism, or the ways in which conflict erupts owing to certain individuals’ competing economic and social interests, is critical to Scott’s project. It is also critical to mine, but functions in a different manner. The “hidden transcript” I outline depended on the involvement of Southern white men. In other words, racial and gendered hierarchies were ever-present in these men’s emotional exchanges with slave mistresses and their children. However, some measure of power managed to trickle down from the oppressor, the Southern white man of means, to the oppressed, the ex-slaves in question, with each act of favor the oppressed received. In fact, a master or former master’s wealth might almost become a nonissue were it not for how it defined everything permitting the kind of black-white intimacies being explored here. Generally speaking, monied white men had the funds to purchase a highly valued slave woman who lived as his concubine often in conditions that were often superior to that of the average

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<sup>14</sup> James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 1997).

slave. Through money, both subordinate and oppressor enhanced their positions, but the oppressed only did so via the oppressor, and others, usually other white men, working on his behalf.<sup>15</sup>

These issues will be explored via three studies spanning from the 1830s through the first decade of the twentieth century. While not necessarily representative, they present differing situations involving black-white intimacy and its results that are better documented than most. Chapter Three, the first case study, involves the experiences of White and Johnson, the two ex-slave mistresses just discussed. It traces their former master's beginnings as a domestic slave trader in Virginia and his relocation to the Deep South where he transitioned into the life of a planter. By his side for a time were White, Johnson and their children whose lives are recovered from the 1830s through the early 1840s in Cincinnati.

Chapter Four, the second case study, traces the life of Louisa Picquet, another slave mistress, from the 1840s through the 1850s. Picquet, a mixed-race New Orleans woman, fled with her two children to Cincinnati in 1847 shortly after her master's death. She is the subject of *Louisa Picquet, The Octoroon*, a well-known abolitionist narrative chronicling her life.

Chapter Five, the third case, addresses the experiences of the ten mulatto children of a southern planter from the late-1850s through the early twentieth century. In 1854, Samuel Townsend, a Huntsville planter, made legal arrangements for the manumission of ten children he had with five different slave women. Shortly after being freed, these children were relocated to Ohio, where some attended the Wilberforce Boarding School near Xenia, their home until the Civil War forced the school's closure. One settled in Cincinnati and eventually, in New Richmond, where he worked as a waiter on a steamboat shuttling between Cincinnati and

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<sup>15</sup> In courts, this was quite literally the case. See Ariela J. Gross, *Double Character: Slavery and Mastery in the Antebellum Southern Courtroom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

Portsmouth, Ohio, and later, as a porter. While these children appear to stand outside the contextual bounds of the fancy girl's life, especially because their mothers were dark-skinned, their status as the "privileged" offspring of a southern white man, their relocation to southwestern Ohio, and one sibling's life in and near Cincinnati after the war, conforms to the relational and geographical requirements critical to this study.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, including the experiences of these siblings furnishes insight into the viewpoints and experiences of the children of slave mistresses.

Altogether, these ex-slaves' lives with white men allow us to learn more about some of the least-discussed aspects of slavery: 1) master/slave sexual intimacies, 2) obsession, and 3) companionship – while bringing a new perspective to some of the better-discussed ones, among them, 4) exploitation, 5) reproduction, 6) rape, 7) deals for favorable treatment, 8) commodification, 9) prostitution, 10) secret cohabitation, and 11) acknowledged, partially acknowledged, or secretly acknowledged paternity.

I end with a conclusion and coda, the latter making linkages between the population under review and African Americans in other contexts. Prompted by the tensions between antebellum people of color in Cincinnati, specifically around issues of morality, I address the implications of intragroup conflict in the African American community across time. I believe that examining this dynamic may help us further increase our understanding of select slaves like the fancy girls, who encountered more obstacles than is generally acknowledged. The great irony is that such obstacles were ever-present even though a fancy girl was the best that money could buy. As true of other slaves (and all women), she was still another oppressed subject.

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<sup>16</sup> See the description of Townsend's children, the "first-class" slaves and that of their mothers and other relatives, who were described as "second class" slaves in Samuel Townsend's Will based on their complexion. Samuel Townsend's Will, Box Number 0252.0050, Folder 11, Septimus Douglas Cabaniss Papers, Special Collections, Stanley Hoole Library, University of Alabama, hereafter called Cabaniss Papers.



The identifier “fancy girl” serves a particular function in this examination. It provides an initial way to see how certain women’s experiences manifest themselves on a bandwidth: turn the knob a bit and there appears another individual whose appearance and circumstance suggested her unique place in plantation society, and outside of it as well. When those different “signals” are brought together, they: 1) move the story of the “fancy girl” to the Midwest, a region that has in recent years been the focus of the growing literature on African American urban history; 2) capture the importance of kinship networks for such former slaves, which is to say, they help to reveal how women who had recently been materially and financially supported by their masters suddenly found themselves relying on the support of others, including those whose lives were similar to their own; 3) move beyond the story of the fancy girl and 4) uncover some of the “messiness” of master-slave relationships involving women of color. Regarding the latter, Jennifer Morgan uses the term “messiness” as a way of suggesting the complexities of interracial relationships involving white men and black female slaves when she centered women of color’s reproductive abilities within the story of New World slavery.<sup>17</sup>

As the study proceeds, I will not always be able to say firmly that a particular female slave or ex-slave was ever marketed or sold under the label “fancy girl.” In fact, the term will eventually disappear because this study is not solely about “her.” While it does address the existence of such slaves, the central focus will be examining how certain individuals, some of whom appear to have been fancies, manifested themselves on a continuum because of their past or ongoing relations with white men.

When discussing such ex-slaves including fancy girls, historians have generally focused on the Deep South, the region in which such slaves were sold or purchased. In using an

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<sup>17</sup> Jennifer L. Morgan *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia; University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 195.

understudied historical actor as a starting point, this study pays close attention to the experiences of ex-slave mistresses who settled in Ohio, particularly in Cincinnati.<sup>18</sup> Among the many things that still need to be surveyed are how and why many fancy girls ended up there. Most researchers generally assign the origins of most people of color in Cincinnati to two neighboring states, Kentucky and Virginia. Few acknowledge that many female migrants of color, some undocumented, arrived from the lower south states.<sup>19</sup>

Cincinnati was a favored destination for this population because of ease of access via the important Mississippi-Ohio river network, its position on the southern border, and its abolitionist presence. The latter seemed to assure African Americans of the existence of local white allies. Local allies were valued because Cincinnati and the Ohio River were complex spaces astride two boundaries, one marking slavery and freedom, the other marking urban and rural. Cincinnati was the sole major population center in predominantly rural southern Ohio.<sup>20</sup> Two ideologies mattered for people of African descent in this context: pro-slavery and anti-slavery ones. Indeed, though on free soil, the city was home to a large proslavery white population. Additionally, the racism that was endemic in all of antebellum America awaited newly freed slave mistresses and

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<sup>18</sup> By 1850, 3,172 African Americans resided in Cincinnati. Of these, 54 percent were mulatto, a figure much higher than the North's regional average of 31 percent. Only the Deep South had a higher percentage of mulattoes, 76%, among its free African American population. James Oliver Horton and Stacy Flaherty, "Black Leadership in Antebellum Cincinnati" in Henry Louis Taylor, Jr., *Race and the City: Work, Community, and Protest in Cincinnati, 1820-1970* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 81.

<sup>19</sup> Nikki Taylor begins such a conversation by noting one observer's report of seeing in Cincinnati during the late 1820s numerous "unmarried women who had been the mistresses of planters in Louisiana, Mississippi and Tennessee." Taylor, *Frontiers of Freedom*, 135; Darrel E. Bigham, *Jordan's Banks: Emancipation and Its Aftermath in the Ohio River Valley* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 5 and 35; Joe William Trotter Jr., *River Jordan: African American Urban Life in the Ohio Valley* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1998), 27; Horton and Flaherty, in Taylor, *Race and the City*, 81. See also Leonard P. Curry, *The Free Black in Urban America, 1800-1850: The Shadow of the Dream* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 81-111, 245-58.

<sup>20</sup> Amy Hill Shevitz, *Jewish Communities on the Ohio River: A History* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), Amy Hill Shevitz, *Jewish Communities on the Ohio River: A History* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 9.

their children, whose arrival owed largely to Southern white men's guarded charity, in some cases, affection.

Though he did not have at his disposal the evidence amassed since the 1970s, Eugene Genovese concluded in 1974 that stable and durable interracial unions existed in substantial numbers in the antebellum South, even ones in which white men - from wealthy planters or merchants down to modestly paid overseers - engaged black women in "meaningful affairs."<sup>21</sup> That Genovese's assessment is not prevalent owes partly to changing attitudes among white southerners (and perhaps others) during the postbellum period. After losing the Civil War, as a part of reconciling itself to the nation, white southerners reasserted control over their region via Jim Crow laws, lynchings, but also storytelling. Looking to the scholarship of David Blight and Charles Robinson, Annette Gordon-Reed argues that "rewriting the story of slavery" was a "necessary part" of their healing process. The imposition of white domination during the "Redemption" period required that whites remain silent about "ubiquitous" interracial sex and illegitimate children with women of color. Interestingly, while state laws increasingly forbade interracial marriages, they never outlawed interracial sex, which continued to constitute a white male privilege. What is needed is to situate the Midwest into the larger antebellum narrative regarding interracial sex and manumission.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Genovese, 48 and 418-419.

<sup>22</sup> Moving the story of antebellum interracial sex to the Midwest figures greatly into the aims of *Wench*, a recently published historical novel. Dolen Perkins-Valdez wrote this imagined work upon discovering that Wilberforce University sits on land that once held Tawawa House, an idyllic resort to which white men took their slave mistresses before the Civil War. The book offers a "counter-memory" to the representations of such relations, which have been difficult to document because contemporaries rarely discussed or left traces of their visits to this place. Relying on secondary sources and oral interviews, Perkins-Valdez highlights the complexities of the slavery era by presenting imagined characters in pre-Civil War interracial relationships at this resort. Said Perkins-Valdez, "No one was all good and no one was all bad. People were and are complicated...." For more, see Adrian Allan, "Wench: A Haunting Chapter in Women's History," March 11, 2011, *Ms. blog*, <http://msmagazine.com/blog/blog/2011/03/11/wench-a-haunting-chapter-in-womens-history/> (accessed December 12, 2012); Lonnae O'Neal Parker, "A Tender Spot in Master-Slave Relations," *The Washington Post*, January 21, 2011, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/21/AR2011012102960.html> (accessed December 12, 2012); and Dolen Perkins-Valdez, *Wench: A Novel* (New York: Amistad, 2011); Rothman, *Notorious*

Female slaves who exchanged sex and even affection for favor from Southern white slaveholders watched that favor erode when their white male partners freed and relocated them for numerous reasons, including growing restrictions on and societal hostility towards interracial unions, the proximity of death, or as was the case with Avenia White, a pending marriage. In such situations, many bondswomen were sent or taken to Cincinnati. Some arrived with few resources and doubtful ongoing support. A handful of such women might have prospered and moved into the middle and upper class.<sup>23</sup> Because of the evidence on which it relies, this investigation is especially concerned with the experiences of African American female heads of household in antebellum Cincinnati who indeed appear once to have been concubines, or slave mistresses. Some may have been prostitutes. However, the former would have had an easier time leaving behind traces of her life because Cincinnati during the period under review was a place where moral reformers, the black elite included, monitored public behavior.

But the sort of women and children discussed in this study seem to occupy in an in-between psychological space separating whites and African Americans. White communities on either side of the Mason-Dixon line did not typically, much less openly, welcome slave mistresses and their children as legitimate partners and family members. Such women and children, many of whom were mulatto, often remained connected to the African American community. Those who managed to prosper as free people were regarded as elites because of their mixed blood. However, they did fit wholly within this subjugated group, which was filled with African Americans who sometimes resented them even while embracing them.

Cincinnati was home to hundreds of mixed race individuals, many, though not all, resembling masters' white children, the ones no one in the antebellum south wanted to claim,

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*in the Neighborhood*, 4; Annette Gordon-Reed, *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 86-87.

<sup>23</sup> Taylor, 3, 6, and 186-202.

those that seemed to “drop from the clouds,” as the plantation mistress Mary Chesnut once lamented.<sup>24</sup> Following their manumission another drama began, one revealing that they and the children they produced with white men had not just dropped from the clouds. They were freed people who had and continued to have ongoing relations with Southern white men.

In examinations of African American life in the Ohio River Valley, researchers have noted that the higher ratio of females to males of color in Cincinnati may reflect interracial sex, especially between white men and black women. These women’s numbers foreshadow future matrifocal urban trends in African American families about which scholars have long debated, but rarely with white males as part of the equation.<sup>25</sup>

This examination builds on black urban scholarship as well as slavery and women’s histories that emphasize the experiences of mixed race people of color, women in particular, both in and outside of slave societies. In its locational attention to Cincinnati, this study joins scholars, among them Nikki Taylor, Clarence Lang and Tracey E. K’Meyer, who have analyzed the

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<sup>24</sup> Horton and Flaherty, “Black Leadership in Antebellum Cincinnati” in Taylor Jr., ed., *Race and the City*, 81; Mary Boykin Miller Chesnut, C. Van Jan Ellen Lewis and Peter S. Onuf, eds. Woodward and Elizabeth Muhlenfeld, eds., *The Private Mary Chesnut: The Unpublished Civil War Diaries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 42.

<sup>25</sup> Until 1983, research generally suggested black women’s household authority enhanced their gender position, but Angela Davis argues that such an arrangement merely shored up racialized inequities. Writes Davis, “the slave woman was first a full-time worker for her owner, and only incidentally a wife, mother and homemaker.” But the degree to which white men have historically and discreetly figured into African American women’s lives as their mates rarely makes it into the master narrative. Partly to this point, a recent controversy concerning independent scholar Henry Weincek speaks. Weincek argues that Thomas Jefferson became so convinced of the economic value of slavery that he abandoned his earlier antislavery sentiments. Weincek’s biggest piece of evidence is a note in the margins of a 1792 report to George Washington, which shows how Jefferson, then serving as secretary of state, calculated the profits he planned to make on the birth of slave children. Annette Gordon-Reed, a Jefferson-Hemings scholar, is among numerous specialists who have said Weincek misread this note and other documents related to Jefferson’s life. In general, she essentially argues that Weincek, whose work has appeared in the *Smithsonian* and *The Atlantic*, is wrongfully downplaying the degree to which some white slaveholders emotionally and financially invested themselves in their relationships with slaves even while they were attentive to their financial bottom line. Paul J. Lammermeier, “The Urban Black Family of the Nineteenth Century: A Study of Black Family Structure in the Ohio Valley, 1850-1880,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, Vol. 35, No. 3, Aug., 1973, 441-443; E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-bellum South* (New York: Vintage, 1956); Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Vintage, 1976); Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 5; Jennifer Schuessler, “Some Scholars Reject Dark Portrait of Jefferson,” *The New York Times*, November 26, 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/27/books/henry-wienceks-master-of-the-mountain-irks-historians.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/27/books/henry-wienceks-master-of-the-mountain-irks-historians.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0) (accessed December 4, 2012).

geographical and cultural implications of African Americans in border communities. Taylor does so in antebellum Cincinnati, Lang and K'Meyer in twentieth-century St. Louis and Louisville, respectively.<sup>26</sup> Not unlike these researchers, I agree with the contention that African American life in border communities was and is worth studying as a vital component of urban history despite the political and social cataclysms that occurred nationally between the 1830s and 1960s. Unlike some of their conclusions, especially those of Taylor, I find less division, class or otherwise, within antebellum Cincinnati's black community. While divisions existed in the black community when it came to self-policing in the face of external threats, it often acted as a united body during the period under review because the women there needed assistance, if not from the black elite, from each other and others in their lives.

Thus this investigation highlights gendered relations in a manner that most border city urban studies have not. The focus on ex-slave mistresses and their children complicates the slavery and freedom narrative because my emphasis on black-white intimacies requires that we keep the South, and specifically, southern white men, on our radar. In fact, the taboo nature of such intimacies—the ones that resulted in all those babies that just dropped “from the clouds”—further distinguishes this analysis from other urban studies. Such intimacies had a “behind closed doors” factor that was reflected in how one's past as either a mistresses or mixed race child of a slaveholder often shaped one's life on “free” soil. While slavery and racism are inextricably bound up in the entire history of the United States, they had an unusually immediate

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<sup>26</sup> The legal dynamics of such positioning dramatically influenced the lives of African American following the era of slavery. For example, African Americans in Louisville, a city also situated on the banks of the Ohio River, had unhampered access to the polls long before blacks in most other southern cities. Also, school integration in this city was fairly uneventful. By the 1960s, however, relying on tactics seen in both northern and southern cities, local blacks protested this community's segregated housing and busing. Lang also focuses on civic politics, but especially concentrates on black class dynamics. In its opposition to an urban renewal charter, as Lang argues, St. Louis' working class, acted on its own interests, not those of the black elite or city bureaucrats. Clarence Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway Class Politics and Black Freedom Struggle in St. Louis, 1936-75* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009) and Tracy E. K'Meyer, *Civil Rights in the Gateway to the South: Louisville, KY 1945-1990* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009).

and significant impact on the life of such a woman or child. In other words, the South and slavery literally color our understanding of a former slave mistress or her child's attempts to negotiate their lives as "free" persons in antebellum America.

My work also diverges from earlier scholarship because of the evidence on which it relies: first-hand accounts of people of color, or those composing letters and in one case, a book, on their behalf. Whether they wrote for private or public consumption, their intended audiences were invariably white and generally southern. What we have is admittedly a sometimes one-sided story, the sort that must often be analyzed using words like "possibly," "probably" and "in all likelihood." Such words will appear so often it might seem that we do not know what really happened. The speculation is so fraught with such uncertainty we may even wonder "what's really new here" were it not for the degree to which the commonalities of many fragmented stories clearly announces "something" worthy of discussion *did* happened. What occurred must be teased out with each new piece of evidence from ex-slave women and children.

This study dovetails with the scholarship of Judith Schafer, Peggy Pascoe, Jessica Millward, and Stephanie Li, researchers who acknowledge the degree to which female slaves' ties with white men, forced or not, and those of such women's children, were shaped by a bigoted and gendered system, whether or not they were slaves, and even after they were freed.<sup>27</sup> While announcing someone's legal status, manumission did not ensure the ability to take care of one's self and one's child, or to earn a decent living via respectable labor. As Li has argued, manumission was "something akin to freedom," not necessarily "freedom." Among those who

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<sup>27</sup> Jessica Millward "The Relics of Slavery and Interracial Sex and Manumission in the American South," *Frontiers: A Journal Of Women Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (2010), 22; Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press: 2009); Stephanie Li, *Something Akin to Freedom: The Choice of Bondage in Narratives by African American* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010); Judith Kelleher Schafer, *Becoming Free, Remaining Free: Manumission and Enslavement in New Orleans, 1846-1862* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003).

realized that freedom was not entirely what the law announced was the mulatto slave Harriet Jacobs, who upon her own escape, realized she could no longer “care or provide for” her still-enslaved children.<sup>28</sup>

However, there were women who made efforts to maximize the potential of their manumission by asking for assistance from the men responsible for their impoverished condition and that of their children. Such women acted coolly though forcefully within social structures in and outside slave territory that generally protected the interests of whites, white men in particular. Like the studies from Pascoe and Millward, and to some degree Schafer, this study is concerned with the law, but more concerned with how the law (i.e. legislation) said one thing and black and white bodies did something else. Even lawyers and judges, sometimes made decisions or performed acts that went unnoticed or were little discussed, that enabled slave mistresses and their children to better their position as freed people.<sup>29</sup>

In focusing on these women’s experiences with white men, and those of their children if they were mothers, these ex-slaves ultimately emerge as political beings worth incorporating into bigger narratives. In fact, because they do, attention to their lives answers William Freehling’s call to reintegrate the experiences of minority subjects into those of the dominant culture.<sup>30</sup> Doing so in this instance allows us to witness how these ex-slaves fall into both social and

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<sup>28</sup>Li, 17.

<sup>29</sup> But in its focus on manumission, this study thus concerns itself not just with the act of manumission, but what led to it and what happened after it. We are generally aware of how law, culture and religion affected the rate of manumission in and outside the so-called New World, and how being mulatto, female, or an urban resident seems to have increased the likelihood of being freed. This study touches on some of these issues, but does so by examining the ways in which certain individuals’ lives as free people reflected both privilege and, often, the ongoing poverty typically associated with African American life. Even though there has been a huge volume of scholarship on the institution of slavery in the last forty years, manumission, or the emancipation of African Americans and lingering ties between freed black women, their children and white men while slavery continued, needs more inspection. Rosemary Brana-Shute and Randy J. Sparks, eds., *Paths to Freedom: Manumission in the Atlantic World* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), vii.

<sup>30</sup> For more, see William H. Freehling, *The Reintegration of American History: Slavery and the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).



political historiographies, two historiographies that are rarely in conversation with each other, partly because the latter tends to downplay minority subjects.<sup>31</sup>

Like the freedwomen who formed bonds when they left work to attend political meetings during the Reconstruction era, these former slave mistresses in Cincinnati maneuvered strategically. Many got jobs and worked. Some demanded support from the white men who had once owned them.<sup>32</sup> While their demands should not be seen as political activism in the traditional sense, their sway with the men who once owned them is unmistakable.

Memoirs written by Levi Coffin, the abolitionist, and Eliza Potter, a mulatto hairdresser, two prominent Cincinnatians, confirm the settlement of mulattoes, women and children in particular in their city. Such women wore no labeling tags (although there was the matter of skin color, which was often an identifier, if not a badge), but their life circumstances suggested their earlier favored place in slave society. The same was true for their children.<sup>33</sup> If the arriving individual had been enslaved, “favor” in this instance was not necessarily the kind that figured into the “cardinal rule of slaving and slaveholding racism,” which is to say, the sort seen when slaveholders indulged cooperative bondsmen, women and children.<sup>34</sup> What Coffin and Potter saw, and what this study hopes to uncover, is the kind of “favor” reflecting the decisions white men made in consideration of a slave’s behavior. But such decisions were not based fully on a slave’s behavior. White men indeed extended their financial resources and emotional investment

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<sup>31</sup> Mia Bay, “In Search of Sally Hemings in the Post-DNA Era,” *Reviews in American History*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (December 2006): 407-426.

<sup>32</sup> Elsa Barkley Brown, “Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom,” *Public Culture* 1974, 7: 107-108.

<sup>33</sup> Levi Coffin, *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin, the Reputed President of the Underground Railroad: Being a Brief History of the Labors of a Lifetime in Behalf of the Slave, with the Stories of Numerous Fugitives, Who Gained Their Freedom through His Instrumentality, and Many Other Incidents* (Cincinnati: Robert Clark & Co., 1880), <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc> (accessed September 5, 2012); Eliza Potter, *A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1859 and 1991)

<sup>34</sup> Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders and Slaves in the Old South* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 203.

out of their regard for the mulatto women and children in question. But critical here is not what slaves did to garner such regard, but *what white men permitted from themselves* that produced this favor toward a person who initially was a mere commodity.

Some observers might call such ambiguous behavior “white hypocrisy.” But how black women and their children felt about it was probably shaped by other factors: the degree to which they understood not just master-slave relations, but male-female relations and even parent-child relations during the antebellum period. The same might be said about how whites themselves felt about such relations. Building on Ariela Gross’s explorations of unspoken agreements made between whites favoring at times people of color, Bernie Jones demonstrates that the nineteenth century American judicial system was generally prepared to support slaveholders’ efforts to leave some of their wealth to their mixed-race descendants. This was especially true if such arrangements were quietly done and did not involve enormous inheritances or the transfer of slaves, although she found evidence that some white men defied convention on both counts.<sup>35</sup> For example, Nathaniel Harrison, an unmarried white man living in Amelia County, Virginia, died in 1852, leaving tracts of land to three women of color. The land amounted to some twenty-five hundred acres, plus livestock, crops, perishables, and 84 slaves. Further, one woman received an annual \$600 annuity for life and the other two, \$250 annual annuities. His household furniture was also divided between these women. Harrison even made provisions for the women should they be required to leave the state. Fearing what might happen if slaves were owned by blacks, the court merely ordered their sale with the proceeds going to the women. The entire disposal of the estate took place against the wishes of Harrison’s white kin.<sup>36</sup> Clearly not all

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<sup>35</sup> Bernie D. Jones, *Fathers of Conscience: Mixed Race Inheritance in the Antebellum South* (Studies in the Legal History of the South) (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009).

<sup>36</sup> Jones, 26-27.

whites were in agreement about black-white encounters when they resulted in such a coup for individuals who were both black and female.

Amrita Chakrabarti Myers reaches similar conclusions regarding Charleston, South Carolina. In fact, as she observes, by the nineteenth century, the courts were often on the side of manumitted black women. For example, prior to 1800, just three out of forty-three deeds concerning the manumission of female slaves involved financial bequests.<sup>37</sup> Following the passage of an 1801 law requiring free people of color to be self-sufficient, such women were not only freed, but usually received money and property. Flora Filben, one manumitted woman, obtained, among other things, her master's furniture, his clothes, two houses, a lot, and twelve laborers. Missing from the court records and wills is any evidence of Filben's and other such women's relationships with men who freed them. Jones observes the same regarding Nathaniel Harrison: "missing...was an explanation of the relationship" he had with the women in question. She concludes that they were his "family" though "it was not openly stated."<sup>38</sup> Myers goes further, writing that observers could reasonably conclude that such women had been in intimate relationships with their former owners. As she states, "clearly sexual intimacy was one of the avenues by which enslaved female Charlestonians accessed emancipation for themselves and their children."<sup>39</sup>

These examples thus far offered from Jones' and Myers' research do not raise the issue of the complexion of the ex-slaves in question nor that of their children. Nonetheless, it appears to have been a factor in some of the cases they examine. Jones, for example, also presents the 1837 case of William Isaac Rawlings, the "mulatto" son of Isaac Rawlings, a white man and his

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<sup>37</sup> Amrita Chakrabarti Myers, *Forging Freedom: Black Women and the Pursuit of Liberty in Antebellum Charleston* (Gender and American Culture), Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 53-55.

<sup>38</sup> Jones, 28.

<sup>39</sup> Myers, 59.

enslaved woman. Questions were raised about whether the boy was in fact free, given his inability to support himself as required by state law. In the end, the court ruled in the child's favor. Not only did he remain free, he was the "only beneficiary" of his white father's property.<sup>40</sup>

Young William's windfall was made possible partly by the relations his mother had with his father. What his mother looked like, we do not know. However, as true with most births, which announced sexual contact between two people, his fair complexion announced the fact that she had been intimate with his father. Whether such intimacy was forced or voluntary has long been a matter of contention among modern researchers, many of whom assume that such relations constituted rape. The ruthlessness of slavery as a social and economic institution demands such an assumption. However, young William's case and those of others suggest some degree of consent and other scenarios.

That said, it should be emphasized in the strongest terms that highlighting any advantages such women or their children received should not be taken to suggest transgressions against them were not committed.<sup>41</sup> The uncertain nature of freedom for non-white bodies is explicitly recognized.<sup>42</sup> Critical here will be plotting the degree to which white domination remained and how slaves and ex-slaves maneuvered within it.

This study amplifies such discussions by noting exchanges between white men and the people of color in their charge, rather than dismissing them because they trouble the contemporary mind, or because of the frequent lack of explicit evidence. In her study of the

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<sup>40</sup> Jones, 28-29.

<sup>41</sup> As Saidiya Hartman has written, some of slavery's most invasive forms of violence occurred when a slave woman willfully entered into sexual relations with a white man to ensure her own safety and that of her child. I agree entirely that such interactions were indeed violent or at the very least implicitly coercive. Even if pleasure was part of the equation, such encounters were infused with subjection because racially gendered domination continued to exist between these people. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 42.

<sup>42</sup>Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 261 and Wilma King, *The Essence of Liberty: Free Black Women During the Slave Era* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006), 2.

everyday resistance of female slaves in the plantation south, Stephanie Camp tells us that many truths were unspoken and undocumented. In other words, there is more to be told than can be found in the archival record. Thus, Camp urges researchers to engage their imaginations by reading documents both creatively and critically in order to speculate more extensively on their meanings. To illustrate how such a process might work, Camp presents two bondswomen who displayed abolitionist propaganda in their homes and ruminated on whether other slave women elsewhere might have done the same. While the record does not confirm it, white southern patriarchy failed thoroughly to police teaching slaves how to read or write. Such a structure was also unsuccessful in fully preventing the distribution of abolitionist literature in slave society. These failings suggest some slaves may have seen, or more likely, heard about such propaganda.<sup>43</sup>

This study seeks to illuminate the outcome of possible conversations that led to changes in the quality of women and children's lives. It will explore black-white intimacies by carefully looking at ex-slaves' and Southern white men's interactions, the kind that are well in view with societal response to the "fancy girl," a select slave whose story has not been fully told.

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<sup>43</sup> Camp, 95-96.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Constructions of Identity and the Fancy Girl**

The fancy girl, a select slave, was a familiar figure during the antebellum period in American history. The same was true of her children - the ones who seemed to just “drop from the clouds” as one Southern woman infamously lamented. The reluctance of many from the past to recognize such children, and their mothers’ relationships with white men, poses tensions with the inability of those living today to fully understand these slaves’ experiences, specifically their decisive presence in revised accounts of Southern and urban history. Failure to understand this phenomenon derives largely from the fact that the story of the fancy girl has been difficult to tell.

This chapter has two parts. This first will pay close attention to the ways in which the “fancy,” a select slave, was recognizable to those around her before the Civil War. The second half of this chapter sheds even more light on the subject by presenting a methodology that permits us to look closely at the bonds between such women and their offspring and white men, the kind of bonds that resulted in these slaves being freed. This methodology will be implemented in three case studies presented in later chapters.

First, it is worth pausing to ponder why the life of the “fancy girl” has escaped notice by modern eyes. Her story has been difficult to tell for several reasons. First, sexual relations between female slaves and white men were so commonplace during the antebellum years that the fancy girl may appear to be of little consequence in the larger story about slavery in America. In this regard, she appears to lack qualities to distinguish her from other sexually exploited female slaves. There is also definitional confusion about what made a slave a fancy girl. Some scholars assume either that “fancy girl” or “prostitute” are synonyms while others regard prostitutes and fancies as separate beings. There was actually a distinct overlap. A female slave could have been

a prostitute and a fancy girl, but not all fancy girls were prostitutes. And not all prostitutes were slaves.<sup>1</sup>

As early as 1819, “fancy girl” was a vulgarism for a man’s sexual partner.<sup>2</sup> In this case, no racial distinction was made.<sup>3</sup> But the term had an additional meaning, one that was more market-driven, though still cultural. During the antebellum period, slave traders used it to refer to light-skinned female slaves, ones that typically cost more, sometimes much more, than the average adult slave.<sup>4</sup> Though considered choice stock, the allure of such a slave was built on the currency found in white skin, and also the near-universal image of African women as sexual and

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<sup>1</sup> This problem is evident in a book review in which New Orleans is mentioned as a place where “women were frequently enslaved to serve as fancy girls or prostitutes.” This sentence suggests that fancy girls and prostitutes were two different entities even though these categories could and did overlap. See Sonya Ramsey, review of *Raising Freedom’s Child: Black Children and Visions of the Future after Slavery* (American History and Culture) by Mary Niall Mitchell, in *The American Historical Review*, 114:1468, December 2009.

<sup>2</sup> “fancy, n. and adj.” OED Online. September 2012. Oxford University Press (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, 1993 and 1997), <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/68025?redirectedFrom=fancy+girl&> (accessed October 08, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> *Hang ‘Em High*, a 1968 Clint Eastwood motion picture, serves as an example of how the term “fancy” was used outside the slave market and without reference to race. In one scene, a cowboy refers to a particular white woman as “nuthin’ but a two-bit fancy.” Though an imagined work, this statement suggests that “fancy” was short-hand for a prostitute of any color during the nineteenth century. While Eastwood’s work does not constitute a historical source, it does demonstrate the cultural resonance of the term “fancy,” even to modern audiences, although the public is not fully aware of the term’s historical trajectory and complexity. Another example of such resonance is Bobbie Gentry’s 1969 song, “Fancy,” which tells the story of a poor white New Orleans girl who is encouraged to become a prostitute in order to enhance her life financially (“*Just be nice to the gentlemen, Fancy, and they’ll be nice to you*”).

Eastwood’s film and Gentry’s song are just two examples of the ways in which the artistic community is prepared to draw attention to the ways in which women across time and in different spaces have been coerced into sex work, something also seen in a more recent imagined work, *Django Unchained*. This 2012 Quentin Tarantino film hinges on a freed slave’s attempts to rescue his enslaved wife who is destined to be a sex worker. Interestingly, Tarantino uses “comfort woman” rather than “fancy” as a way to reference such an occupation. “Comfort woman” was the label used for forced Korean female sex partners to Japanese soldiers during the twentieth century. Tarantino’s use of this moniker rather than “fancy girl” is in keeping with his notoriety for deliberately disrupting time in his storytelling. Such an artistic approach also manifests in his choice of using hip hop and classic rock music in this film set in the antebellum era, and his use of brown-skinned, rather than fair-skinned, women in a brothel even though is generally known that fair-skinned, or mixed race women, were seen as being more beautiful, and thus more suitable for sex work. *Hang ‘Em High* (Dir. Ted Post), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0061747> (accessed September 24, 2012); Bobbie Gentry, “Fancy,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORfoK5Ap0FA> (accessed January 21, 2013); *Django Unchained*, (Dir. Quentin Tarantino), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1853728/>, (accessed January 21, 2013). For more on “comfort women” in the context of Korea, see Hirofumi Hayashi, “Disputes in Japan over the Japanese Military ‘Comfort Women’ System and Its Perception in History,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 617, *The Politics of History in Comparative Perspective* (May, 2008), pp. 123-132; Hyunah Young, “Re-memembering the Korean Military Comfort Women: Nationalism, Sexuality and Silencing,” in *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism*, eds. Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi, (New York: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Johnson, 113.

promiscuous creatures (the latter being ironic given the association of the color white with purity and virginity).<sup>5</sup>

Though white men's fantasies were projected onto this brand name slave, her "body" was recognizable to others in society including travelers, journalists, abolitionists, novelists, slave mistresses, and other slaves.<sup>6</sup> In fact, her "existence" reveals the degree to which Americans have historically placed value on such traits as whiteness, femininity, beauty, but above all, position or class. She had and continues to have such a poetic timbre, she almost arises as fiction. In fact, difficulties in relaying the fancy's story may also be attributed to her appearance as the quintessential tragic mulatto, someone better situated in creative work rather than serious academic study.<sup>7</sup> This is the case even though reproduction, an issue so critical to the ways in which women of African descent like her figured into the viability of the slave market, involves her, too.

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<sup>5</sup> Morgan, 44-45.

<sup>6</sup> Here, I am building on the ideas of post-structuralist philosopher Judith Butler who has argued that being "female" is not a biological fact, but rather a cultural performance. Though she has not fully probed the racial implications of such a position, Butler's thoughts have special resonance with reference to the fancy girl, a term utilized to mark a particular mixed race being presumed to be in a "female" body, one intended for exploitation. For more, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble (Feminism and the Subversion of Identity)*, (New York: Routledge, 1990). Among the works addressing white men's fantasies of female slaves are two exceptional scholarly writings by Monique Guillory and Edward Baptist. See Guillory, "Some Enchanted Evening on the Auction Block: The Cultural Legacy of the New Orleans Quadroon Balls" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1999) and Baptist, "'Cuffy,' 'Fancy Maids,' and 'One-Eyed Men': Commodification, and the Domestic Slave Trade in the United States."

<sup>7</sup> The "tragic mulatta" or mulatto as a cultural character can be traced to the mixed race American actress and poet Adah Isaac Menken, who was born outside New Orleans in 1835. Inspired by a British muse "immortalized" in the works of Benjamin Disraeli and Honore de Balzac, among others, Menken appropriated this "marketable identity" on a New Orleans stage in 1857. Since then, the "tragic mulatto" as a symbolic figure has entered the public imagination through creative works. Whether male or female, such a figure manifests suffering due to his or her mixed race. An example is the character evoked in "Cross," a Langston Hughes poem: "*My old man's a white old man/And my old mother's black/If ever I cursed my white old man/I take my curses back/If ever I cursed my black old mother/And wish she were in hell/I am sorry for that evil wish/And now I wish her well/My old man died in a big fine house/My old mother died in a shack/I wonder where I'm gonna die Being neither white or black?*" Arthur P. Davis, "The Tragic Mulatto Theme in Six Works of Langston Hughes," *Phylon* 9 (1940-1956), Vol. 16, No 2 (2<sup>nd</sup> Qtr. 1955), 196-197; and Kimberly Snyder Manganelli, *Transatlantic Spectacles of Race: The Tragic Mulatta and the Tragic Muse* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011) 1-6.



But the final and most cogent reason for failure fully to delve into the complexities of the fancy girl's life is evidence.<sup>8</sup> There was no column on the U.S. Census form to track how many slave women and girls were sold under this label. When the fancy girl turns up in the historical record, she does so principally in domestic slave traders' records, ledgers, and correspondence. She also appears via various reports from a diverse audience. In fact, one reason why their lives have been so difficult to recover is because bigger events like the Nat Turner rebellion are easier to remember. But as James Scott tells us in his study of Asian peasant resistance politics, one must not look at the big rebellions on which history seems to turn. We must look at a subordinate's everyday actions, the kind of actions that rarely make headlines.

Such actions must be seen against wider changes occurring in the United States.<sup>9</sup> Following the legal closure of the international slave market in 1808, the removal of indigenous groups from the west, and amid declining returns on crops in the Upper South states like Virginia during the 1820s and 1830s, domestic traders began transporting surplus slave labor to cotton planters in the Deep South.<sup>10</sup> Though New Orleans and other port cities populated by people of Caribbean, European and African ancestry, had long been home to women of mixed race, enslaved and free, this thriving domestic market, which would aid the country's growth as a global economic force, offered a new demand for such women who were believed to have been

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<sup>8</sup> Taylor, *Frontiers of Freedom*, 8 and 135.

<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the burden of Martha Hodes' important work on interracial encounters between white women and African American men is to investigate how the *perception* of such encounters changed after the Civil War. In other words, such perceptions were a historical development reflecting the ways in which black freedom and interracial encounters were mutually intertwined with the nineteenth century building of a "white" supremacist order in the South. For more, see Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth Century South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders and Slaves in the Old South* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 16.

“unfit for labor” and even “incapable of mothering.”<sup>11</sup> They were believed to be the counterparts to the often bulkier and darker-skinned female slaves.

Though they were purchased for pleasure, and not breeding, some men developed emotional attachments for such mixed race women and if, they became mothers, for their children. Such relations were not new in the Americas. From the earliest days of white settlement, miscegenation, or interracial sex, was seen initially as an inevitable consequence of the scarcity of white women. For example, throughout the seventeenth century free white men outnumbered free white women in Jamestown, the first settlement in the United States, by three or four to one. Not until the end of the seventeenth century did these numbers began evening out.<sup>12</sup> Still, as late as 1790, the sex ratio for free white Virginian men to women was 105.6 to 100, or 227,051 to 215,046.<sup>13</sup>

Throughout the New World, white female settlers were valued for their reproductive abilities.<sup>14</sup> Women of color were certainly valued for similar reasons, but white men also sought

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<sup>11</sup> Well into the nineteenth century, this kind of imagery generally characterized mixed race women. Such characterizations figured into how such women were objectified in Brazilian urban music. “*I am a vain mulata/Beautiful, coquettish, adorable/How many white women are not!*” went one popular song that revealed the gendered undercurrents around mixed race women in postemancipation societies. Walter Johnson, “The Slave Trader, the White Slave, and the Politics of Racial Determinism in the 1850s,” *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 87 No. 1 (June 2000), 18; David R. Roediger and Elizabeth D. Esch, *The Production of the Difference: Race and the Management of Labor in U.S. History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 35; Adrienne Davis, “Don’t Let Nobody Bother Yo’ Principle: The Sexual Economy of American Slavery,” Sharon Harley, ed., *Sister Circle: Black Women and Work* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 107; Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 18; Pamela Scully and Diana Paton, eds., *Gender and Slave Emancipation in the Atlantic World*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 25; Martha Abrue, translated from the Portuguese by Amy Chazkel and Junia Claudia Zaidan, “Mulatas, Crioulos, and Morenas: Racial Hierarchy, Gender Relations, and National Identity in Postabolition Popular Song (Southeastern Brazil, 1890-1920),” in Scully and Paton, eds., *Gender and Slave Emancipation in the Atlantic World*, 272; Joshua D. Rothman, *Flush Times and Fever Dreams: A Story of Capitalism and Slavery in the Age of Jackson* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 3; Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> Tim McNeese, *American Colonies* (St. Louis: Milliken Publishing Company, 2002), 12.

<sup>13</sup> Herbert Moller, “Sex Composition and Correlated Culture Patterns of Colonial America,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 2:2 (Apr., 1945 ), 128. For more on sex ratios in early America, see Edmund Morgan, “The Puritans and Sex,” *New England Quarterly* 15:4, (Dec., 1942), 591-607; and John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

<sup>14</sup> Morgan, 74.

them out for companionship and sexual relations.<sup>15</sup> In her study of the ways in which race and sex complicated New Orleans' social order during the colonial period, Jennifer Spear has written that interracial relationships were so pervasive there in early-1800s that visitors frequently commented on them. Among those commenting was a traveler who saw “a white man, and a bright quadroon woman” riding through town together.<sup>16</sup> However, by the late-eighteenth century, miscegenation was gradually being condemned as hypocrisy by slaveholders like Thomas Jefferson, who could vilify the slave trade in his draft of the Declaration of Independence as he himself made a slave his lover.<sup>17</sup> In the opening decades of the nineteenth century, such interracial liaisons, although still doubtless common, were less publicly acknowledged or displayed, much less flaunted.<sup>18</sup> By the 1830s, white men's growing criticism of interracial relationships figured into strained attempts to build a sense of white *Herrenvolk*. It was claimed that white “race” could never be pure if black and white unions continued.<sup>19</sup> The surveillance of interracial relationships increased along with growing anxieties over the mere

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<sup>15</sup> Enslaved men were also valued for their breeding abilities. See Tadman, 121-129; Johnson, 82-83.

<sup>16</sup> Jennifer M. Spear, *Race, Sex and the Social Order in Early New Orleans* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2009), 212.

<sup>17</sup> Bruce Levine, *Half Slave and Half Free: The Roots of the Civil War*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992) 6 and For more on the United States as a white supremacist project by the nineteenth century, see Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in the Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Verso, 1990), 32-33 and 123.

<sup>18</sup> Philip D. Morgan, “Interracial Sex in the Chesapeake and the British Atlantic World,” in Jan Ellen Lewis and Peter S. Onuf, eds., *Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson: History, Memory and Civic Culture* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 42-84; Joshua Rothman, “James Callender and Social Knowledge of Interracial Sex in Antebellum Virginia,” in Lewis and Onuf, eds., *Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson*, 96-97; Joshua D. Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families across the Color Line in Virginia, 1787-1861*; Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina: From 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), John W. Blassingame, *Black New Orleans, 1860-1880* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), and Walter Johnson, ed., *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> Building on the work of South African sociologist Pierre van den Berghe, George Fredrickson coined the *Herrenvolk* term in relation to America's “peculiar” racism. For more see, George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1987) and C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955, 1966, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev). Edmund Morgan, Oscar Handlin, Theodore Allen, Lerone Bennett, Nikhil Pal Singh, Kathleen M. Brown and Claire Robertson are among the researchers who have examined the issue of race as a social and gender construction. Two important works that bring these ideas together are David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, (Brooklyn: Verso, 1991) and Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*.

presence of African Americans following the 1831 Nat Turner rebellion. This uprising led to greater legal restrictions on people of color in the South, which in turn, led to their swelling migration to Midwestern and Northern destinations, especially Cincinnati.<sup>20</sup> Some such migrants were newly freed women and children, whose bonds with Southern white men were closer than generally acknowledged in their day, even today. Such silences persisted even though many different people were well aware that such relations existed and that a select slave figured into this development.

Before the Civil War, those who claimed to have seen a fancy girl described her in similar ways. Notice was often taken of her skin complexion or the texture of her hair. Observers did so even if the words “fancy girl” were never uttered or only “fancy” was said. Everyone knew the speaker was describing a first-rate slave who stood apart from other slaves because of her appearance, but also because of the things received as an outcome of her relations with white men.

While scholars have tackled how such female slaves were subjects onto whom white male fantasies were projected, it is worth noting that white men were not the only ones doing so. How did a certain “body” become known to many? Documents from the 1830s through the 1850s demonstrate that such slaves’ special status was a constructed and discursive identity. Because the domestic slave trader figures prominently into her creation, it is to his view of her that we turn first. Next, we will proceed to the perceptions of those more socially distant –

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<sup>20</sup> Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (The New Press, 1974 and 2007); Michael P. Johnson and James Roark, *Black Masters: A Free Family of Color in the Old South*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1976); Larry Koger, *Black Slaveowners: Free Black Slave Masters in South Carolina, 1790-1860* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995) ; Horton and Flaherty, “Black Leadership in Antebellum Cincinnati,” *Race and the City*, 81-84; Joel Williamson, *New People* (New York: Free Press, 1980); and David O. Whitten, *Andrew Durnford: Black Sugar Planter in Antebellum Louisiana* (Natchitoches: Northwestern State University of Louisiana Press, 1981).

journalists, travelers and abolitionists – only to return to those in closer proximity: prospective buyers, slave mistresses, free people of color, and finally, other slaves.

The letters between domestic slave trader Rice Ballard, and his business partners, are filled with details about women who were shaped as fancy girls. In one letter to Ballard, fellow slave trader Isaac Franklin, stated that he could have sold more slaves during a visit to New Orleans if he had had more in his possession. Franklin added that there was a “Great demand for fancy mai[d]s” in particular.<sup>21</sup> He meant “fancy girls,” but by using “maids,” he showed how the brand name could be modified, for even slaves sold as premium products never escaped the prejudice surrounding people of color. Hence, Franklin may have conflated a premier slave with the occupation to which women of color have across time been relegated: housework.<sup>22</sup>

Tying such a slave to housekeeping was also a way for the domestic trader to cater to prospective buyers who preferred discretion. In searching for concubines, prospective male buyers in the United States sometimes placed guardedly-worded advertisements in newspapers.<sup>23</sup> For example, one prospective slaveholder in Washington D.C. posted advertisements seeking “a handsome, intelligent mulatto; a good plain cook, waitress, seamstress and laundress, about 17 or 18 years old.”<sup>24</sup> Like slave traders, prospective buyers exaggerated the necessity for housekeeping abilities in the girl or woman for whom housekeeping would in many instances become a secondary matter, as the emphasis on appearance and youth made unmistakably clear.

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<sup>21</sup>In the early 1830s, Ballard partnered with Franklin, one of the most successful domestic traders in American history. These two men transported slaves from Virginia to the Deep South with the help of Franklin’s nephews, James Franklin and John Armfield. In 1833 alone, these men took in more than \$400,000. Isaac Franklin to Ballard, November 1, 1833, Folder 12, Ballard Papers; Baptist, 1628.

<sup>22</sup> Then again, Franklin may have been situating this fair slave as a first-rate commodity, one who might be thought of, even in a mocking way, as a “maiden.”

<sup>23</sup>Gross, 129.

<sup>24</sup> Bancroft, 50.

The practice of exploiting female domestics for sexual purposes has had an enduring history in the Old and New World.<sup>25</sup> In 1804, an English naval officer described one white female brothel owner who collected a “round sum” by trafficking young black women to Europeans and disguising them as housekeepers, or as she preferred to call it, “marrying them off for a certain time.”<sup>26</sup> Following the death of his wife Lucy in 1716, William Byrd II of Virginia hired a “woman to wash his linens and provide him with meals” with the understanding that she would also become his lover or at the very least, his sexual partner.<sup>27</sup>

The imagery surrounding the term fancy girl, one that conflated her personhood with being a source of both labor and pleasure, was not just a marketing campaign. It was her lived experience. Domestic traders routinely had relations with slaves marketed as fancy girls. In such bondswomen and girls, the domestic trader found a place to define his manhood, a subject that historian Edward Baptist has covered thoroughly. In his study of the slave market, Baptist maintains that fetishizing, or desiring the black woman’s body was so intertwined with the thirst for the commodified slave in particular, that “coerced sex was the secret meaning of the commerce in human beings.”<sup>28</sup> Confirming Baptist’s position are the words of James Franklin, Isaac’s nephew, who in one letter to Ballard described his plans for a female slave he called “fancy maid Martha.”<sup>29</sup> “I shall open my fancy stock of Wool and Ivory early in the morning,” he wrote. That James was describing a sex act that took place between him and Martha is gathered from his use of the word “open.” That Martha was a woman of African descent was discernible in his reference to ivory, a term that conjured up a traders’ inspection of a slave’s

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<sup>25</sup> Johnson, “The Slave Trader, the White Slave, and the Politics of Racial Determinism,” 16.

<sup>26</sup> Hilary McD Beckles, *Centering Woman: Gender Discourses in Caribbean Slave Society* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 1999), 31.

<sup>27</sup> Brown, 331.

<sup>28</sup> In this way, Baptist points out, as did Adrienne Davis later, that female slaves were an essential part of market relations during the antebellum period. Baptist, 1621; Adrienne Davis, 117.

<sup>29</sup> James Franklin to Ballard, March 27, 1832, Folder 5, Ballard Papers.

teeth, and the African continent itself.<sup>30</sup> Martha's blackness was also manifested in his mention of wool, which referred to the woolly quality of African hair. Finally, her blackness was evident, too, in his use of the word "maid," an occupation for which she was fitted because of her African ancestry.

Despite such negative exploitative connotations, Martha's standing as a first-class slave was nonetheless evident for James wrote the words "fancy maid Martha" considerably larger than others in his letter. Martha was seen as a valuable commodity. She was a slave who might possibly be groomed to lead a life approaching those of elite white women though her position as a slave remained. That she sometimes could sometimes materializes as being better than the average slave, traders found very useful. For example, Isaac Franklin once proudly described the sale of an enslaved woman he called "Yellow Girl Charlott." This slave had been purchased from "some Branch of the Barber [Barbour] family" he said, adding that "the respectability of that family will have great effect" on her sale.<sup>31</sup> In mentioning the Barbours, Franklin confirmed that an owner's social prestige could be mapped onto the body of a slave who was to be sold as a fancy.<sup>32</sup>

The public easily recognized fancy girls even while expressing shock that such slaves existed. Like domestic traders, casual observers focused on their appearance, their mannerisms and their breeding, all in an effort to shape them as an "other" in and outside of slave society. A *Chicago Times* correspondent visiting a Memphis slave market described young women wearing

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<sup>30</sup> Again, see Walter Johnson, "The Slave Trader, the White Slave and the Politics of Racial Determination."

<sup>31</sup> Isaac Franklin to Ballard 7 Co., September 27, 1834, Ballard Papers.

<sup>32</sup> Walter Johnson has addressed how designations of a slave's color were the slave trader's way of delineating not only their complexion, but also their lineage. Hence, the use of "mulatto," "quadroon," and "griffe," words routinely found in slave traders' own records. While mulatto and quadroon identified whether a slave was half-white or one-fourth white respectively, griffe referred to someone who was the offspring of one who was mulatto and "Negro." For more see Walter Johnson, "The Slave Trader, the White Slave and the Politics of Racial Determination in the 1850s," 16-17; Stephenson, 167-178; and Nell Irvin Painter, "Thinking about the Languages of Money and Race: A Response to Michael O'Malley, 'Specie and Species,'" *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 99, No. 2. (Apr. 1994), 398.

beautiful dresses made of fashionable light wool.<sup>33</sup> Confirming that these were no ordinary slaves, the writer noted how “the merely curious visitor was not allowed to inspect these slaves who were locked up at night.”<sup>34</sup>

The precautions taken to guard such bondswomen may have seemed extreme to the reporter, but not to slave traders, who carefully orchestrated the selling process. This was certainly the case in Lewis Robards’ operation in Lexington, Kentucky. While ordinary slaves were housed in the Lexington Theatre, where they were asked to walk across a stage, fancy girls were kept in well-furnished parlors on the second floor of a two-story brick townhouse. Robards’ office was on the first floor.

Robards first served potential customers a drink before taking them upstairs to see these special female slaves.<sup>35</sup> Robards’ fancies were “the talk and toast of steamboat barrooms, tipling houses and taverns,” some as far away as New Orleans. Over the mint julep, planter’s punch and other “potent beverages,” men exchanged stories about their “inspections” of Robards fancies.<sup>36</sup>

Illinois Senator Orville H. Browning visited Robards’ establishment and reported seeing slave women who were kept in rooms that were “not only comfortable, but in many respects[,] luxurious.” During Browning’s visit, Robards made the women get up and turn around to show their “finely developed and graceful forms.” Browning claimed to have been stunned that these slaves were “fine persons [with] easy genteel manners.” These women sat with “their needlework awaiting a purchaser,” something he found “shocking.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Bancroft, 251.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> John Hunt Morgan, *Rebel Raider: The Life of General John Hunt Morgan* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1986) 33.

<sup>36</sup> Coleman, 159.

<sup>37</sup> The behavior of the slaves in Robards’ showroom demonstrates that the word “fancy” as a modifier of “girl” referred as much to their appearance, manners and dress as to the projections of white men’s fantasies. Browning was shocked possibly because he believed people of African origins were not expected to have the comportment of the white elite. Orville Hickman Browning, *The Diary of Orville Hickman Browning, Vol. 1, 1850-1864*, (1861:



The practice of allowing men to examine, and even to have sexual relations with enslaved women and girls of color prior to purchasing them, was widespread. Though he was likely prone to embellishment given his position as an abolitionist, Philo Tower reported seeing one southern slave broker keep “whole barracoons of beautiful slave women” for use by “gentlemen” as “sleeping companions.”<sup>38</sup> Though empathetic about these slaves’ plight, Tower described as “gentlemen” the men pursuing relations with slaves deemed racially fit for such depravity. Not unlike Browning, implicit in Tower’s description was his conflating whiteness with goodness and blackness with inferiority. His use of the word “beautiful” suggests these were fair skin women as such women were thought to be more beautiful than dark-skinned ones. However, even such fair women were still women of African descent and thus lesser human beings. For proof, we may observe his usage of the word “barracoons,” a word associated with the enclosure in which slaves were temporarily placed.<sup>39</sup> Though beautiful, for Tower these women were mere slaves.

Other white visitors to slave trader showrooms were also unable to rid themselves of such biases. Fredrika Bremer, the Swedish writer and reformer, saw a girl in a Washington D.C. slave jail who appeared to have been raised to conduct herself “like a lady.” Her former owners had allowed her to learn how to embroider and play the piano. In fact, they had “treated her ... as if she had been their own.” Being allowed to partake in the pursuits of the well-bred enabled the girl to access something outside the norm for slaves. But the girl’s owners, as Bremer recounted, decided that exposure to such experiences had caused the girl’s mind to grow “too high for her.” To humble her, she was taken to jail to be sold. Her experiences were not unlike Lucy Delany’s,

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Springfield: Illinois State Historical Library, 2007), 139; and Johnson, “The Slave Trader, the White Slave and the Politics of Racial Determination,” 17.

<sup>38</sup> Philo Tower, *Slavery Unmasked* (New York, Negro Universities Press, 1969), 316.

<sup>39</sup> “barracoon, n.” OED Online. December 2012. Oxford University Press.

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/15708?redirectedFrom=barracoon> (accessed January 17, 2013).

whose mistress sold her because she believed Delany ‘was getting too proud and putting on ‘white airs’.’<sup>40</sup>

As had these female slaves’ owners, even Bremer was predisposed to believe that people of African descent should have only so much. As proof, consider her observations concerning inmates of another slave jail, this one in Augusta, Georgia. There, Bremer recalled seeing slaves from age 12 to 20, some of whom were “very pretty” mulatto girls. One, Bremer said, was twelve years old and “so white,” she “supposed her to belong to the white race.” As Bremer studied this girl, the slave trader who ran the jail shared details about another who was “still fairer and handsomer” who had been sold for \$1,500.

Aware that these girls would become sex slaves, Bremer lamented the fate of these “white children of slavery.”<sup>41</sup> But an enslaved girl or woman’s future as a sex worker did not appear unfortunate in and of itself. It was only thus when the slave looked white and because these did, Bremer believed they did not deserve to suffer such a fate. In taking this position, she was like white Americans throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who maintained that race could be generally discerned by engaging that which could be observed contextually in a person. Such assessments were made not only of African Americans, but Native Americans, Asians and Mexicans.<sup>42</sup>

Her compassion lessened when she detected that some such slaves willfully conspired to reap benefits of looking white. This much can be deduced from her report on yet another slave

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<sup>40</sup> Following British practice, nineteenth century white Americans encouraged their daughters to take music lessons and learn needlework and embroidery. Such pursuits were seen as both virtuous past-times and symbols of respectability. Bancroft, 57; Malavika Karlekar, “Education of a Civil Servant’s Daughter: Readings from Monica Chanda’s Memoirs,” *Feminist Review*, No. 65, *Reconstructing Femininities: Colonial Intersections of Gender, Race, Religion and Class* (Summer, 2000), 129-130; Marjoke Rietveld-van Wingerden and Nelleke Bakker, “Education and the Emancipation of Jewish Girls in the Nineteenth Century: The Case of the Netherlands,” *History of Education Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (Summer, 2004), 20; and Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 28.

<sup>41</sup> Bancroft, 328.

<sup>42</sup> Gross, 4-5.

jail, this one in Richmond. There, Bremer saw “the so-called ‘fancy girls’ for fancy purchasers.” Earlier, she had refrained from using the term “fancy” when referring to such women.

Frederick Olmsted, the renowned landscape architect who traveled throughout the South to document the evils of slavery, looked curiously at slaves who seemed to possess something – what exactly, he never said. He once saw a coffle containing a woman who did not wear “the usual plantation apparel” worn by other slaves. This woman, as he observed, also took “no part in the light chat” of the others. He noted, too, how she did not help them make a fire nor did she later stand with them around it. Instead, she stood alone like a statue, “bowed and gazing” into the flames.<sup>43</sup>

His account of this woman should leave us wondering. Did slavery or the incongruous presence of such women and girls prove most bothersome to whites? Although the worth of such a female slave might be debated by whites, her value in the public market remained high, so much so, that one Louisville slaveholder had a large plantation where he kept “vigorous young mulatto girls” to be used “for breeding purposes.”<sup>44</sup> The demand for such girls was not lost on Levi Coffin, the Cincinnati abolitionist, who helped rescue two girls “either of whom would soon be worth one thousand dollars” by dressing them in boys’ clothing. Amused by having duped their master, Coffin recalled how these girls during their escape laughed and giggled so much at the fuss they had created for white folks, his wife had to separate them lest they be discovered.<sup>45</sup>

The market for fancies was something of which others were well aware. The granddaughters of Shoebottom, a cherished member of the Cherokee nation, and his enslaved

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<sup>43</sup>Frederick Law Olmsted (Arthur M. Schlesinger, ed.), *The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveller’s Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States based upon three former volumes of journeys and investigations by the same author: Vol. 1* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), 60; and Eric Foner, *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 28.

<sup>44</sup> Coleman, *Slavery Times in Kentucky*, 149.

<sup>45</sup> Coffin, 175-176.

black wife, Doll, were kidnapped and about to be shipped to New Orleans, possibly to be sold as fancy girls, before being saved by their relatives.<sup>46</sup> Further confirming the predilection that many white men across the New World had for mixed-race people - women and girls in particular - was one white male visitor to the Caribbean. While there, he observed, the “stately and graceful demeanor” of fair-skinned Creole women. “I know no prettier scene than a group of young and handsome colored girls taking their evening walk,” this visitor said.<sup>47</sup> During his own visit to the Caribbean, Philo Tower, the American abolitionist, also took note of fair skinned women of color he saw as if he, too, was enchanted by their appearance. Tower described one in particular as a “light quadroon, having just enough African blood to wave the long black hair.” He bluntly stated that such slaves were “the most beautiful specimens of American women.”<sup>48</sup>

Even Coffin, the Cincinnati abolitionist, observed the physical attributes of mixed race women of color, though he saw them as being mostly a creation of the south. “Those who have seen quadroons and octoroons will remember their peculiar style of beauty, the rich olive tint of the complexion, the large bright eyes, the perfect features, and the long wavy black hair. A hundred romantic associations and mysterious fancies clustered around that class in the South.” Among the slaves and freedwomen Coffin encountered was the “nearly white” fugitive daughter of a free mulatto woman whom he aided in Cincinnati. He saw yet another girl with similar features who was to be sold “to the far South,” in all likelihood New Orleans, where he speculated she would sell for a high price.<sup>49</sup>

Not everyone regarded female slaves who appeared to be fancy girls in manner that Browning, Bremer, Olmsted, Tower, Coffin and others did. Perhaps because she was of African

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<sup>46</sup> Miles, 175.

<sup>47</sup> Beckles, 31.

<sup>48</sup> Tower, 82.

<sup>49</sup> *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin*, 202-203.

ancestry, Eliza Potter, the mulatto Cincinnati hairdresser, had a more tempered view. While traveling on a steamboat heading south on the Ohio River, Potter saw a “good-looking, well-formed” female slave in a cabin with a slave trader. Potter decided that the man only paid for her accommodation because he knew he would recoup the money when he sold her in the South. She was disgusted his possible motives because the other slaves in his charge were confined to another area of the boat “in chains in shackles.” So angry was Potter, she refused an invitation by him to sit with him and the girl. Potter refused not because she felt superior. She said no because, as she told the trader, she thought this slave’s darker companions “on the lower deck ought to have the same privilege.”<sup>50</sup>

The women seen by Potter and others captured the attention of writers who recast them as free or enslaved characters in nineteenth century fiction writings. Such women were often fictionally situated in urban areas. In fact, they were often featured during the mid-nineteenth century in a series of antebellum German “urban mystery” novels, set in major cities like New Orleans, Cincinnati and St. Louis.<sup>51</sup> These urban mysteries filled a gap left by American English-language mid-century novels, which generally focused on rural and frontier regions. The basic plot of these works was to present the urban space as something recognizable, but also a place “where events are steered by forces beyond the control of ordinary mortals.”<sup>52</sup> In short, the city was generally depicted as sinister. Witness the experiences of the young protagonist in one set in Cincinnati. While learning about the history of the Ohio Valley over seventy years, the reader meets Washington Filson, a man caught in the middle of a struggle between two wicked

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<sup>50</sup> Potter, 16.

<sup>51</sup> Ludwig von Reizenstein; Steven Rowan, trans. and ed., *The Mysteries of New Orleans* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 2002); Emil Klauprecht; Steven Rowan, trans.; Don Heinrich Tolzmann, ed., *Cincinnati, or The Mysteries of the West* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2006); Henry Boernstein; Friedrich Munch, trans., Elizabeth Sims, ed., *The Mysteries of St. Louis: A Novel* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, 1990).

<sup>52</sup> Reizenstein, xxv.

conspiracies, one led by Jesuits, the other by a state senator. Filson fled Cincinnati, escaping both groups. With his German love beside him, he settled with other German immigrants in quieter Davenport, Iowa.<sup>53</sup>

These urban mysteries revealed the dramatic impact of the New World generally, and urban life particularly, on German immigrants.<sup>54</sup> In fact, the German authors penning them appear better to have presented the rich ethnic diversity of the United States than did most American writers.<sup>55</sup> Such an outcome may initially appear surprising, but becomes less so on the realization that many German immigrants were highly educated and held liberal, even radical, views on issues of race and slavery. The failed Revolutions of 1848 led to an exodus of German intellectuals, many of whom became active in abolitionists circles and in educating African Americans, following their arrival in America.<sup>56</sup>

However, Germans shared with other Europeans and many white Americans a fascination with women of mixed race. This much is clear in the degree to which such women appeared in mid-century urban mysteries, including one set in New Orleans.<sup>57</sup> Whether intentional or not, some depictions of such women may have unintentionally reinforced the negativity associated with mixed race women and women of African descent in general. Bringing to mind the observations of Philo Tower, the abolitionist who once described having seen “whole barracoons

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., xxvi.

<sup>54</sup> Klauprecht, *Cincinnati, or The Mysteries of the West*; Abreu in Scully and Paton, eds., *Gender and Slave Emancipation in the Atlantic World*, 280.

<sup>55</sup> Reizenstein, xxvii.

<sup>56</sup> James Pennington, once a fugitive slave, received an honorary doctorate in Theology in 1840 from the University of Heidelberg. Leroy Hopkins, “‘Black Prussians’: Germany and African American Education from James W.C. Pennington to Angela Davis,” David McBride, Leroy Hopkins, and C. Aisha Blackshire-Belay, eds., *Cross Currents: African Americans, Africa, and Germany in the Modern World* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1998), 67-68.

<sup>57</sup> Ludwig von Reizenstein, the German author of the mystery set in New Orleans, was also obsessed with the “insects and plants of Louisiana,” so much so he received a “quiet sort of local scientific renown.” Reizenstein, xix.

of beautiful slave women” in a southern slave jail, the author of the book set in New Orleans described how:

The great hall on the ground floor... had been transformed by Madame Brulard into a sleeping hall, with hundreds of mattresses covering the floorboards... They were all young girls of eleven to fourteen years of age: Negresses, mulattoes, quadroons - in short, all the shadings of colored blood. Whoever might appear at this hour without knowing the reasons for these girls' gathering would have doubted his own sanity...<sup>58</sup>

Another passage in this novel, originally published between 1854 and 1855 in a New Orleans German-language newspaper, made more explicit the allure of women of mixed race, enslaved sex workers or not.<sup>59</sup> This one described the freed offspring of a white planter and his “favorite” slave:

The dazzling whiteness of her face would lead a superficial observer to conclude that she was of white ancestry, a fact that a finer connoisseur would doubt on seeing the dark cloudiness of her fingernails and the mother-of-pearl coloration at the corners of her eyes. And in fact Lucy Wilson-for that was the name of this beautiful woman-is the daughter of a planter on the Grand Bayou Caillon, a few miles from Lake Quitman...<sup>60</sup>

Though seductive, the persisting blackness, with its implications of inferiority and evil, in mixed race women was made clear in the Cincinnati-based mystery, which stressed the “the magic” of “the uncultured Zenobia.” Though Zenobia was not explicitly described as being of mixed race, the words “magic” and “uncultured” conjured up the exoticness and savagery typically assigned to such women. A mystery set in St. Louis contains a similar character, a “tawny girl” named Pepita who was elsewhere described as a “brown witch”.<sup>61</sup>

Literary descriptions of women of mixed race were not just the territory of German writers. In an 1856 novel, Captain Mayne Reid, a nineteenth century British writer, presented the

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 49-50.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., ix.

<sup>60</sup> Reizenstein, xxvii and 11.

<sup>61</sup> Klauprecht, 126; Boernstein, Munch; Rowan and Sims, *The Mysteries of St. Louis*, 195.

tragic mulatto archetype via a slave with “a noble forehead and finely-formed neck.” This woman was being pursued by a young Englishman attracted to “her golden tresses.”<sup>62</sup> In noting the physical features of this bondswoman, Reid, as did others in the United States and Europe, objectified her.

While many, including writers, were enchanted by women of mixed race, others, namely southern white mistresses, were less impressed. The diary of the childless Mary Chesnut, a Charleston woman, is famously known for making clear the degree to which white plantation mistresses struggled to contain their anger at their husbands’ dalliances with female slaves. Some such slaves were mixed race and produced the children who, as she caustically remarked, seemed to just drop “from the clouds,” and produced others who likewise seemed to drop from the clouds.

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese’s assessment of Chesnut’s diary aids our ability to see the degree to which mixed race slaves, ones who may have been fancies, may have bothered Chesnut. Though she never used the term fancy girl, Chesnut seemed to be describing such a slave in this bitter diary entry:

So I have seen a negro woman sold ...[She] ...overtopped the crowd... She was a bright mulatto with a pleasant face. She was magnificently gotten up in silks and satins. She seemed so delighted by it all - sometimes ogling the bidders, sometimes looking quite coy and modest, but her mouth never relaxed from its expanded grin of excitement. I daresay the poor thing knew who would buy her.

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese compares this published passage to the original version in which Chesnut wrote, "Mulatto woman" and not "negro woman." Like the slave trader who capitalized the letter “f” in fancy, Chesnut capitalized the letter “m” in mulatto, indicating her awareness of unspoken patriarchal attitudes about a particular type of slave woman, the one who “overtopped

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<sup>62</sup> Captain Mayne Reid, *The Quadroon: A Lover’s Adventures in Louisiana* (1856; New York: G.W. Dillingham Co., 1897), 47.



the crowd” while ogling male buyers.<sup>63</sup> For Chesnut, this enslaved girl was most disturbing because she appeared uplifted by such positioning. She believed the slave was well aware of men’s desires and how to play them to her advantage. Still, in this girl Chesnut saw something that reminded her of Nancy, her “good slave.”

Possibly even more than slave traders, prospective buyers, and others, white mistresses saw the evidence of the mingling of the races in this girl’s fair skin. Chesnut’s anger stemmed from not just from such mingling, but from her inability to combat it or her confinement to the home, where such mingling often took place, even as the home was the space where white mistress was expected to exert the power she lacked in the larger world.<sup>64</sup> As Thavolia Glymph has written, white mistresses contended with lives that were far different than the ones they had led as carefree southern belles. Such women ran households “for which most had no training.” Any power they exercised was “checked in part by” their white men’s patriarchal power. Susan Middletown, a South Carolina mistress, seemed to sum up the woes white mistresses experienced when she said,

The realities of my life and the situations in which I have been placed have been so strangely different from what my character and the early promise of my life would have led me to expect. Anxiety, responsibility and independence of thought or action are what are peculiarly abhorrent to my nature, and what nevertheless has so often been required of me.<sup>65</sup>

Though southern white mistresses doubtless worried about many things, the issue of white men’s relations with female slaves may have been uppermost in the minds of many. Another white mistress, one much older, sold a slave girl named Celestine because her son liked to “play

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<sup>63</sup> Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 348-349.

<sup>64</sup> Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Oxford: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

and fool about her.”<sup>66</sup> Such mingling challenged a white woman’s governance of her sphere of domesticity and authority: her house and *her* men, or at least her sons. Throwing dinner parties, raising respectful children and presenting her husband with shirts that had been ironed by his slaves were expected performances to which white women agreed.<sup>67</sup> But being agreeable toward white men and boys’ sexual attraction to female slaves was something with which such women struggled.

One factor at play in white women’s fears was the moral disruption to the household: the Victorian ideology of separate spheres celebrated the mother’s roles of protecting the domestic sphere from the moral taint of the public realm. Fornication of any sort, especially across the color line, would be an intolerable stain on the household. The mistress who was troubled by her son who appeared to be the instigator of such an act (he liked to “play and fool about her”) found it all doubly distressing for her son had fallen prey to the allure of women of color. He had once again made it all too clear where those babies who “dropped from the clouds” really came from: interracial encounters involving white males in the plantation South. It was one thing to observe it in other households, quite another to see it in one’s own.

As true of its depiction of white men’s fantasies of women of mixed race, nineteenth century literature addressed white women’s frustrations over the white male’s infidelity with female slaves. Such betrayals resulted in the fair-skinned population about which Chesnut raged. Kentucky-born river man, ex-slave and author William Wells Brown described such despair in his novel *Clotel: Or the President’s Daughter*. There he waxed on the experiences of a white mistress riding in a carriage with her husband. This couple passed a slave woman who turned away as the carriage approached. But upon seeing the passengers, the slave woman’s child cried

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<sup>66</sup> Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 28.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

at the top of her voice, “Papa, papa!” and “clapped her little hands for joy.” Seeing the child’s joy, the white mistress asked, “Who is that woman?” and “Why did that child call you papa?” Her husband remained silent.<sup>68</sup>

Like Brown’s fictional work, interviews with other ex-slaves reveal the degree to which they observed white men’s relations with slave women, including those of mixed race. Such women and sometimes their children were seen as being of a special class, even though the words “fancy girl,” “fancy,” “concubine,” “mulatto” and other market terms were never stated. For example, one enslaved woman named Winnifred was described as being “three-quarters negro and one quarter white.” According to her North Carolina-born son, Sella Martin, his mother “had a separate cabin set up for herself on her master’s estate, which was “very rare.” He added that his mother’s duties “around the house were merely nominal.”<sup>69</sup> This arrangement was not uncommon. An ex-slave from Tennessee recalled how men “will buy a sprightly, good-looking girl that they think will suit their fancy, and make use of them.”<sup>70</sup>

Like whites, African Americans, especially males, exhibited varying, though often hostile, attitudes towards liaisons between white men and enslaved (or free) women of color, toward the women who participated in such liaisons (whether voluntarily or otherwise), and even toward the consequences of such liaisons for their community. Dimmock Charlton, an ex-slave who worked as a stevedore in Georgia, recalled Ellen, a fair-skinned slave girl who was, in his mind, a “clever” servant like other fair-skinned slave girls. He was not being complimentary, as it is clear from his interview that clever meant “sly” or “conniving,” rather than “intelligent.” Rose, another slave was described as one who might be mistaken for “as haughty a dame as

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<sup>68</sup> William Wells Brown, *Clotel: Or the President’s Daughter* (Philadelphia: Albert Saifer Publisher, 1955), 31.

<sup>69</sup> Sella Martin, House servant and boatman, in John W. Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 703.

<sup>70</sup> Blassingame, 400.

South Carolina can produce.” So assertive was she that when her master’s instructions that she be freed upon his death were disregarded by his executors, she angrily proclaimed that she would “soon head North, where her children may have a chance in life.”<sup>71</sup>

These enslaved women in all likelihood had benefitted from an outsider-within position, a position that gave them a “distinct view of the contradictions between the dominant group’s actions and ideologies.”<sup>72</sup> Such female slaves capitalized on having seen such contradictions, becoming more clever, refined and assertive. But this coup was not recognized by other slaves and ex-slaves as something worth celebrating. Again, some resented African American women’s involvement with white men, some even blaming them for inviting white men’s overtures. Robert Smalls, an ex-slave from South Carolina who became a boat pilot for the United States Government and later Congressman, seemed to believe African American women were inherently immoral because they did not consider “intercourse an evil thing.” Smalls seemed to be referring to light-skinned ones in particular, the ones who seemed to attract the attention of white men for, as he said, they desired relations “principally with white men with whom they would rather have intercourse than with their own color.” Yet he admitted that African American men bore some responsibility for this situation for when married, slave women did not resort to interracial sex this “if their husbands can take care of them.”<sup>73</sup> At least one ex-slave lamented interracial relationships. Sarah Fitzpatrick, an ex-slave interviewed in Alabama, took a similarly jaundiced view of women of color engaging in interracial sex. “The reason our race is so mixed up,” she stated, “is by fooling with these white men.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> “South Carolina Slaves,” Interviewed 1861, Blassingame, 362.

<sup>72</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 11.

<sup>73</sup> Robert Smalls, Ex-slave and native of Beaufort, South Carolina; American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission Interview, 1863; Blassingame, 373.

<sup>74</sup> Sarah Fitzpatrick, former enslaved servant in Alabama, Interviewed in 1938, Blassingame, 639.

Smalls' and Fitzpatrick's perspectives are valuable partly because they permit us to historicize race-mixing beyond the slave market. Race-mixing was more than the outcome of the commodification of women of color which drove the demand for "fancy girls." It was also a cultural phenomenon in the New World, although it did not carry the same stigma in the Caribbean world that it did in the United States.<sup>75</sup> In 1814, an American visiting Barbados witnessed how some black parents raised their female children expressly to be concubines of white men. Some such girls and women were even "taught to believe that it was more honorable [and] virtuous, to be kept mistresses of white gentlemen, than the lawfully-wedded wives of coloured."<sup>76</sup> In southern cities, such as New Orleans, with large Caribbean, continental European, and free people of color populations, many parents of African ancestry welcomed white men's solicitation of young women of color as a means of ensuring their daughters' future financial stability. Such mixed-race free women of color became *placees*, or common law wives to white and Creole men, a practice that was also not unheard of in the Caribbean.<sup>77</sup>

However, some ex-slaves did not believe that women of color were actively capitalizing on white men's interest in them. Instead, these ex-slaves only detected white men's ongoing exploitation of women of color. Recounting such exploitation often involved gesturing toward the overall difficult and oppressive era of slavery. Ex-slave Jourdan Anderson, a resident of Dayton, Ohio, expressed such a fear in a letter to his former master, who wanted him to return to the south and work on his plantation after the Civil War. Anderson worried about the impact of such a move on his two daughters. Said Anderson via letter, "[Please] state if there would be any

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<sup>75</sup> For more, see Howard Bodenhorn, "The Mulatto Advantage: The Biological Consequences of Complexion in Rural Antebellum Virginia," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Summer, 2002), 24.

<sup>76</sup> Beckles, 33.

<sup>77</sup> The literature does not make clear exactly when and how such unions took place. *Placee* arrangements had origins in the early American quadroon balls. Although such arrangements continued well into the 1850s, public toleration of the practice waned with the growing restrictions on people of color by the 1830s. Stephanie Li, "Resistance, Silence, and *Placees*: Charles Bon's Octoroon Mistress and Louisa Picquet," *American Literature*, Vol. 79, No. 1 (March 2007), 87.

safety for my Milly and Jane...who are now grown up and both good looking girls. You know how it was with poor Matilda and Catherine. I would rather stay here and starve and die ... than have my girls brought to shame by the violence and wickedness of their young masters.”<sup>78</sup>

Having seen such wickedness first-hand, Lewis Clarke, another ex-slave, expressed his disdain for white men’s desire for bondswomen and girls when he shared the experiences of his “pretty sister [who] was whiter than [he was], for she took more after her father” (who, we can assume, was either white or of mixed race himself). According to Clarke, when his sister was sixteen, her master attempted to have sexual relations with her. When the girl refused, the master sold “her right off to Louisiana” where she “died there of hard usage.” The circumstances surrounding the life of Clarke’s sister were echoed in those of the mother of Lula Chambers, an ex-slave in St. Louis who was of “exceptionally fair complexion.” Chambers’ mother was “sold down de river” at a time when Chambers was too small even to remember her. Her mother’s sale may have been an outcome of her refusing to have relations with a white man, perhaps even Chambers’ own father, as Chambers said she did not know who her father was. Of her childhood without her mother, Chambers said, “I can’t tell you any pleasure I had in my early days[,] [H]oney.”<sup>79</sup>

The sad fates of Clarke’s sister and Chambers’ mother resemble that of yet another bondswoman, this one named Jane, who had a daughter almost as a white as her father, Jane’s master. Jane was spared from having to “work under the lash or toil in the fields, as many slave-women.” For a time, she was compliant with her master’s advances. Then Jane decided to live a “purer life,” offending her master who sold her and their child.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> “Letter from a Freedman to His Old Master,” *New York Daily Tribune*, August 22, 1865.

<sup>79</sup> Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States From Interviews with Former Slaves*; Volume: X; State: *Missouri*; Page Number: 79.

<sup>80</sup> Coffin, 328.

Richard Macks, yet another ex-slave, knew about “a mulatto of fine stature and good looks” and “determined disposition” whose resistance to her master’s overtures resulted in a death sentence. Interestingly, her fair skin, the very thing that had created her situation, allowed her to escape such punishment. After she was charged with murder for the fatal stabbing of the slave trader who wanted to take advantage of her, a white general who heard of her circumstance “sent troops to Charles County to protect her.” She was then taken to Baltimore and freed.<sup>81</sup> This ex-slave woman’s liberation was paralleled by that of an eighteen-year-old mulatto woman sold in Lexington, Kentucky and destined to work as a prostitute in a house of “ill fame.” Preferring death over such a life, she was rescued by members of a Wisconsin Union regiment, who whisked her away to their home state. So proud of their participation in freeing this mulatto that two of the soldiers had a daguerreotype made of her sitting in a chair with them flanking her on either side.<sup>82</sup>

This chapter has looked closely at the “fancy girl,” a select slave and has argued that she was familiar to those around her. The complexities of her life as seen in the favor she received while still facing oppression as a person of African descent is evident in the ways she was recognized by others. Even if it was impossible to confirm whether or not a female slave had been labeled a “fancy” in the slave market, those presented here appear to have been one based

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<sup>81</sup>It is unclear whether this event took place during the Civil War. According to Richard Macks, the ex-slave who shared this information, the general in question was named “Gen. Butler.” In all likelihood this was Massachusetts lawyer Benjamin Franklin Butler, who served as a Union general. Butler was notorious for challenging the Confederacy. He is particularly well known for questioning the virtue of the white women of New Orleans who chastised his soldiers during the Union’s occupation of that city. Chester G. Hearn, *When the Devil Came Down to Dixie: Ben Butler in New Orleans* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 103-139. For more on Butler’s life, see Hans Trefousse, *Ben Butler, The South Called Him Beast* (New York: Twayne Publishing, 1957). For Richard Macks’ interview, see George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, Volume 16: Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Ohio, Virginia, and Tennessee Narratives, Vol. 16* (Westport, Ct: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1972), 53.

<sup>82</sup>Leslie A. Schwalm, *Emancipation's Diaspora: Race and Reconstruction in the Upper Midwest* (John Hope Franklin Series in African American History) (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 70, and J.B. Rogers, *War Pictures: Experiences and Observations of a Chaplain in the U.S. Army, in the War of the Southern Rebellion* (Chicago: Church and Goodman, 1863), 126-129.

on several factors, including their fair-skin and/or beauty as determined by those who saw them. These women and girls described so far also appear to have been such a slave because of the circumstances in which they found themselves, chief among them, situations where they seemed to have had privileges denied to the average slave. The rest of this chapter will briefly address two matters: 1) how the observations made by a diverse audience pose tensions with my analysis of ex-slaves discussed in the coming three chapters, as well as with women of color in other situations in the New World and 2) present “pillow talk,” a methodology that permits us to theorize the “favor” such female slaves and the children they produced with white men received in the years leading up to and following the Civil War.

### **Analyzing the “Fancy” via Case Studies and “Pillow Talk”**

In the coming three case studies, we will focus on the experiences of former enslaved women and children whose lives reflect the discursive identity of privilege others witnessed. In other words, they seemed to be a special class of slave. Interestingly, when their experiences come forward through their own voice, their distinctive position is made less evident. Instead, these ex-slaves appear to have been more committed to surviving and in some cases, thriving, beyond what even their former masters may have intended for them.

Their stories take us to many cities, but one in particular: Cincinnati. There, many such ex-slaves seemed to have resided or passed through as freed people arriving from the Deep South. I will analyze the content of letters from ex-slaves and one ex-slave narrative to accomplish two aims. The first is to explore how these documents uncover, more information about a brand name slave, the fancy girl. That the record concedes that such a woman or girl often received privileged treatment that other slaves did not provides a cue to pursue a second



aim: looking more closely at her experiences, and those of the mixed race children of white men, particularly when they received what is generally considered the ultimate boon: being freed.

I will consider the genealogy of their favor, or where it originated. I am especially interested in illuminating the unspoken understandings that existed between them and the white man who once owned them. In order to get at this undocumented space, one I argue was real, I will employ a critical methodological apparatus that I call “pillow talk.” This process is a gendered and racial loop in the hidden “transcript” introduced in James Scott’s groundbreaking work. “Pillow talk” is shorthand for the influence that arises in a particular context, namely physical and sexual intimacy. It is a way to avoid over-assigning “power” to minority subjects in public and private spaces. In her study of the influence that Victorian-era clergy and middle class female writers had – whether conscious or not – on American readers’ tastes, Ann Douglas employs a similar methodology. As she writes, to say that these individuals had “power” over the readers and listeners of one of the world’s most influential industrializing societies would be overstating their impact. It is more accurate to state that they had a hand in making a leisure activity like reading a counterpoint to an increasingly busy society.<sup>83</sup>

While the influence of enslaved mistresses and children over southern white male partners was similarly situated and generally undocumented, Douglas’s approach provides a paradigm for informed speculation. To help us begin thinking critically about such ideas, which are admittedly amorphous, it may be helpful to consider a Jamaican mulatto woman. Just months before the start of the Civil War, Mary Seacole attempted to help a young man enlist in the Royal Navy. Having had much contact with British society because of her services as a nurse during the Crimean War, she sought an appointment with Alexander Milne, a senior naval officer, upon his arrival in Port Royal, Jamaica. What makes their meeting especially meaningful is how Milne

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<sup>83</sup> Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), 9-10.

took the time to record this event in a gossipy letter to one of his colleagues. “Mrs[.] Seacole is on board in high Crinoline,” he wrote, “She wants me to Enter [sic] a Boy but he is all head and no body.”<sup>84</sup>

As did others of his day, Milne objectified Seacole, a woman who was partly of African descent. He noted her crinoline dress, which was standard attire for middle and upper class white British women. He probably did so because the dress was at odds with the naval uniforms on the men around him and possibly because it went against the grain of what was expected on a woman of color. In noting her attire, Milne was suggesting that she was no ordinary “Negro.” She had a respectable occupation. She was mulatto. She had good breeding. These three facts were intricately connected.<sup>85</sup> Because she was all these things, she had Milne’s attention, so much so she was allowed on his quarterdeck or into his office, both of them male, professional spaces.

This meeting, one about which we have a few details, can be added as an example of pillow talk because it makes visible the unspoken understandings between two people of very different social statuses in a private space that offered one of them opportunity, the less powerful one, to capitalize on her position. Although Milne refused to recruit the young boy for whom Seacole had lobbied, he granted her an audience and heard her, and his failure to comply with her request was likely based on sound professional reasons, not on the basis of racial or gender prejudices.

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<sup>84</sup>Milne’s usage of “enter” meant “recruit,” or “enlist.” Alexander Milne to Charles Eden, 21 April 1860, National Maritime Museum UK: Milne Mss MLN/116/3 [2].

<sup>85</sup>Saying this is to suggest not all slaves were treated well simply because they were fair in complexion. As one former slave from Kentucky recalled, “I onced [sic] saw a light colored gal tied to the rafters of a barn, and her master whipped her until blood ran down her back and made a large pool on the ground...” Similarly, Mary A. Bell, an ex-slave in St Louis, who was “very light complexion” and had “very long and straight” hair said the two people to whom she was hired out were not nice to her. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States From Interviews with Former Slaves*; Volume: VII; State: Kentucky; Page Number: 23; and Ibid. Volume: X; State: Missouri; Page Number: 25.

The ex-slaves in the following case studies had similar influence with powerful white men. The men who made financial and legal provisions for them were essentially acknowledging their ties, however quietly, to these ex-slaves.<sup>86</sup> Pillow talk will be a critical way of speculating in a theoretically informed manner about these ex-slaves' experiences, which often take us to Cincinnati. To bear witness to such talk requires acknowledging how letters and "slave narratives" act as tools and performances. First, the written documents before us were tools. They were designed to achieve particular goals. But given the strategies required to write and to reap the benefits of a letter or a published work, they were also performances. One may even say their performances on paper were "encores," or reenactments of previously performed works. To highlight the ways in which these productions were performances is not to suggest disingenuousness as much as it is to allow us to concentrate on their rhetorical strategies and their successes and failures.<sup>87</sup>

We will see how this group's texts and actions ultimately provide what Scott called the "hidden transcript." The transcript uncovered how they navigated through and beyond their oppressed circumstances. Though we might not regard their drawing on white men's resources and emotions as being as heroic, as oppressed subjects in a hostile society – both South and North – the most fundamental act of resistance was survival (this has been true for other oppressed groups across time, among them, Holocaust victims). We will see how these ex-slaves challenged the dominant culture's efforts to situate them in ways that conformed to a white, patriarchal worldview.<sup>88</sup> Although we might take the position that providing for them was

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<sup>86</sup> For more on the impact of community agreement on race-mixing, see Ariela J. Gross, *Double Character: Slavery and Mastery in the Antebellum Southern Courtroom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 129.

<sup>87</sup> For more on the literacy of African American women in particular, see Jaqueline Jones Royster, *Traces Of A Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women* (Pitt Comp [sic] Literacy Culture) (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000).

<sup>88</sup> Again, see Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*; Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2006), xiii.

paternalism, at stake here will be seeing how paternalist acts did not originate solely from white men's own thoughts and actions, but those of ex-slaves as well. Adopting such a position requires thinking more critically about the pillow talk rubric.

First, the rubric emphasizes how particular women were initially selected for specific reasons, probably chief among them, for sexual partners. It emphasizes how such relationships involved emotional and material exchanges that continued once they had been freed. The rubric also allows us to legitimize undocumented conversations between slave mistresses and the men who owned or once owned them - no matter how long the relationship lasted. While precise agreements may be indecipherable, their overall import can be uncovered and theorized because of their *after-effects*, or outcomes.

This study locates such pillow talk, the sort that reveals that while patriarchy had "homosocial" tendencies that enabled white men to consolidate their power, such power was sometimes constrained when they addressed the entreaties of women and children of color.<sup>89</sup> We will observe how such people of color exercised their leverage with white men even while facing racial subjugation. These oppressed bodies knew full well that, not like the peasants in far-flung villages James Scott described, an "all-out confrontation" was rarely advisable in order for them to accomplish their goals. Ultimately, we will understand the degree to which their positions as "favored" slaves and ex-slaves were prone to shifting. Such shifts occurred as these slaves and ex-slaves assessed how to enhance their lives.<sup>90</sup>

While the phrase "pillow talk" presupposes sexual intimacy, it encompasses much more. In using this term, I am gesturing toward the ways in which white men demonstrated some measure of concern for African American women and their children. When they did, racial

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<sup>89</sup> For more on the hegemonic function of powerful men's emotional-based actions, see R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1995).

<sup>90</sup> Scott, 22-24.

hierarchies weakened, not only in private spaces, but ones with which the public imagination has fully been engaged.<sup>91</sup>

Pillow talk between black and white bodies has been presented across time in works for general audiences. A case in point is “In the Heat of the Night,” the 1980s television show. This drama was inspired by a 1960s movie involving a black Philadelphia cop and his encounters in a racist Southern town. During the “colorblind” moment in which the subsequent television series was made, the town’s police chief (Carroll O’Connor) eventually married a black woman, something unthinkable when the movie was made. Equally unthinkable, the Chief and his wife, Harriet, were married as Catholics, and ended up enforcing the law and running much of the city of Sparta, Mississippi. In one episode, a white man who had committed a crime sneeringly made mention of the “pillow talk,” or conversations, between Chief Gillespie and his “ole lady.”<sup>92</sup> This man’s candid way of speaking brings to mind the banter between slave traders and slaveholders, discussions in which female slaves were routinely sexually objectified. That kind of banter is commonplace in the papers these white men preserved.<sup>93</sup> What the historian has to conjure up is the “pillow talk” that these same men had with their female slaves and their half-black children. Some have, but not always with a view toward uncovering the political ramifications of such conversations.

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<sup>91</sup> Two asides are warranted at this juncture. First, before providing a few examples of the workings of “pillow talk” it should be said that so far I have fretted little over the use of “mulatto” and “black,” even while I am making a case that a particular female ex-slave had experiences distinctive from those of other slaves partly because of her mixed ancestry. From this point forward, when the sources make a distinction, I will do the same. Second, as earlier discussed, cultural familiarity with such relations can be traced more to the television, film and general arts community’s unflinching, even if imperfect way, of depicting such interactions, rather than to scholarly accounts.

<sup>92</sup> *In the Heat of the Night* (Dir. Norman Jewison), 1967, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0061811/> (accessed October 17, 2012) and *In the Heat of the Night* (television series) (1988-1995) <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0094484/> (accessed October 17, 2012). The episode cited aired April 16, 2011 on WGN America, a Chicago-based cable channel.

<sup>93</sup> For more, again, see Edward E. Baptist, “‘Cuffy,’ ‘Fancy Maids,’ and ‘One-Eyed Men:’ Commodification, and the Domestic Slave Trade in the United States,” *American Historical Review* 106: 1619-50.

Among the antebellum African American women and children who almost certainly had such conversations was Julia Chinn, a black “housekeeper” who had two daughters with Kentucky statesman Richard Johnson, a leading personality in the Democratic party and agricultural reformer during the 1820s and 1830s. Johnson faced public scorn for his open acknowledgement of Julia’s and his children. We may also consider Mary Lumpkin, the fair-skinned “widow” of Robert Lumpkin, a Richmond slave trader who owned a slave jail, a “holding pen” for slaves destined for the Deep South. Lumpkin sent the children he had with Mary to Philadelphia to be schooled at an early age. Two of their daughters attended finishing school and both learned French as a second language. Following his death, Mary relocated to New Richmond, Ohio, and once there, decided to rent the half-acre complex on which Lumpkin’s jail stood to a white anti-slavery supporter who built a Christian school for freed African Americans. There are also the cases of Fanny, “a mulatto woman of considerable wealth” who left Cincinnati in 1845 successfully to reclaim a house in Mississippi that was illegally snatched from her, and did so with the assistance of a white man who might have once been her lover. There is also the case of Doll, a black woman who dined with a white family while sitting beside Shoe Boots, a great Cherokee warrior who was her husband, and Bess, the slave mistress of a widowed French Huguenot, who, upon his death, left her some of his property, with the cooperation of a relative who was the executor of his estate.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Amrita Myers is presently recovering Julia Chinn’s life. Her introductory thoughts were presented in a paper titled, “Public Rhetoric, Private Realities: Julia Chinn, Richard Johnson, and Debates over Interracial Sex in Antebellum America” in 2011 at the 6<sup>th</sup> Biennial Conference of the Association for the Study of the Worldwide African Diaspora (ASWAD) in Pittsburgh. Also see Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 167-98; Cheryl Crowell, *Images of America: New Richmond* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2012), 1, 8-9, and 43; Charles S. Sydnor, “The Free Negro in Mississippi Before the Civil War,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (July 1927), 767-777; Tiya Miles, *Ties That Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom* (American Crossroads) (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2006), 57; Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman’s World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 215-217; Sterling Lecater Bland Jr. ed., *African American Slave Narratives, An Anthology*

There are many other examples, going back as far as the colonial era. In her exploration of the ways in which black women's sexual and reproductive abilities became central to the economy of New World mercantilism, Jennifer Morgan presents the experiences of Kate, a bondswoman who, along with another black woman, informed a South Carolina community about a coming slave revolt in 1749. Her actions possibly demonstrate, as mentioned in the Introduction, the degree to which certain women of color occupied an in-between space because of divided loyalties, owing to their intimate ties to a white man, though certainly not all white men. The announcement upset colonial authorities who were alarmed by the threat and another threat to the social order. The white man who subsequently tried to ensure Kate's personal safety was alleged to have cared for her more than "his own Wife and Children."<sup>95</sup> Perhaps outraged by such reports, the authorities took action. Kate appears to have been banished from the community for she never appears in any subsequent Carolina slave inventories.

While Morgan uses this story partly to delineate the ways in which Kate both resisted and accommodated the expectations of those around her, black and white, her account calls out for a deeper and broader examination of some black women's ability to engage white men's "emotional machinations," something Morgan calls "unusual." But was it?<sup>96</sup> A growing number of researchers, among them, Joshua Rothman and Bernie Jones, have urged scholars to take seriously the African American oral history tradition, which "has long realized the significance of white men as fathers of mixed-race enslaved children providing a foundation for a pre-Civil

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*Volume II*, (Westport, Ct: Greenwood Press, 2001), 310; Catherine Adams and Elizabeth Pleck, *Love of Freedom: Black Women In Colonial and Revolutionary England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 113.

<sup>95</sup>Morgan, 191-195.

<sup>96</sup> Jose Canizares-Esquerria and James Sidbury caution scholars to step back from generalizations about imperial and national ventures in the Atlantic World. For example, they point out that Spaniards were "more than willing to mix with natives than other Europeans." Jose Canizares-Esquerria and James Sidbury, "Mapping Ethnogenesis in the Early Modern Atlantic," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 68, No. 2 (April 2011), 183.

War black elite even though mainstream scholars are unwilling to do the same...”<sup>97</sup> I wish to build on and simultaneously modify that conclusion by pointing out that not all mixed-race ex-slave mistresses and children went on to live among the upper echelons of black society, even as their position resulting from their ties to white men continued to be visible to them and those around them. I want to reconceptualize what we see in the context of antebellum Cincinnati. What black women discussed behind closed doors with whites, especially white men, we cannot know, but we can see the outcomes of those conversations in many things including the manumission of such women and their children.

The sway such ex-slave mistresses possessed often becomes visible when they, as was true of many other minority subjects, relocated: migration figures greatly into their lives.<sup>98</sup> This is one reason why port cities as diverse as Mobile, Natchez, New Orleans and Cincinnati figure prominently in this study. These cities were vital not only because of their commercial importance, but because certain women of color during the era of slavery could be found in them. The “new start” slave mistresses experienced in cities and towns during the antebellum period presaged that which African Americans in general faced after the Civil War.<sup>99</sup> As is true

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<sup>97</sup> Jones, *Fathers of Conscience*, 185; Joshua D. Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families across the Color Line in Virginia, 1787-1861* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

<sup>98</sup> Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggle in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 3. Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004)181; Eileen J. Suarez Findlay, *Imposing Decency: The Politics of Sexuality and Race in Puerto Rico, 1870-1920* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

<sup>99</sup> Although not to the degree that it happened during the postbellum years, increasing mobility among African American slaves also occurred during the Civil War. As Yael Sternhell has written, even bondswomen, who had been less mobile than their male counterparts because they did not typically have occupations that took them beyond farms and plantations, were among the “southerners” who “practiced a new freedom of motion.” Many left their masters and fled to contraband camps. This increase in movement had a great impact on these migrating bodies, but also Confederacy society in general. The social order was being undermined. Not only slaves, but many white women, who were relegated to the home front, were on the run from the Union army, some finding themselves alone, seeking help from kinship networks. Whites, men and women alike, were upset to learn they needed traveling passes in order to move through Union-occupied territory. Said one white woman, “Passes! Passes for white folks! I ain’t never heard of such a thing. I ain’t got no pass...we ain’t no niggers to get passes.” Yael A. Sternhell, *Routes of*



across time for many oppressed bodies, these mistresses' power becomes evident in their ability to move from one place to another.<sup>100</sup> This was a dynamic often true throughout the New World. For example, in the seventeenth century, Flora, a slave woman in then-Charlestown, South Carolina, migrated to a Spanish Florida settlement where other women of color and their small children resided, as a means of ensuring her emotional and physical well-being. Similarly, countless poor women in late nineteenth century Puerto Rico left the countryside in huge numbers in search of better lives. Many headed for Ponce, Puerto Rico's second largest city. Despite harassment from local health and law enforcement officials who conflated blackness with immorality, these women established identities as strong and independent women in this seaside municipality.<sup>101</sup>

When the experiences of these colonial and late nineteenth century women of color are merged with those of the antebellum female ex-slaves in Cincinnati under review, we see the degree to which women of color posed problems for whites around them simply because they moved through space. We will ultimately see how the lives of such women furnish new insights about black-white intimacies.

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*War: The World of Movement in the Confederate South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 132 and 150-153.

<sup>100</sup> McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* and Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

<sup>101</sup> Morgan, 181; Findlay, *Imposing Decency*.

**Chapter Three**  
**“Mr Ballard, I am Compelled to Write Again”:**  
**Beyond Brothels and Bedrooms, A Fancy Speaks**

From the moment they were purchased, White and Johnson seemed to have had a place in Rice Ballard’s life. White’s name is the very first listed on a schedule of 262 slaves this slave trader purchased in 1832. Johnson’s is third.<sup>1</sup> Ballard did not resell these women like he did other slaves. Certainly their names do not appear among those of the 212 who were shipped from Virginia to the Deep South in 1832. Nor are they listed on his 1833 or 1834 shipment ledgers. Paternity may have been one of the reasons why he was holding on to them.

Sandwiched between White and Johnson’s names on the 1832 slave schedule is that of a boy named Preston. This child was probably White’s son because Preston’s name appears directly below hers. Slave agents and traders noted relatives of slaves this way.<sup>2</sup> Preston’s name also appears in other places in Ballard’s records. There is an entry in his 1833 expense book that shows five dollars were used to buy “a suit of clothes” for this child. This was no small amount of money to be spending on a single boy. Ballard also paid \$1.50 on a pair of shoes for Preston.<sup>3</sup> While slave traders routinely bought clothing for slaves they planned to sell, these entries for Preston appeared on lists in which Ballard recorded the purchase of household goods, something curious given that Preston was born before (exactly how long is unclear) Ballard bought him and his mother.

Preston appears to have fit into Ballard’s life in a special way, as did another male child. In Ballard’s slave schedule book there is a scribble on a blank page that reads “Susan Johnson was delivered a boy child 21 May 1833 4 o’clock in the morning.” No other births were recorded

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<sup>1</sup> List of Purchases for the Year 1832, Box Number 11, Folder 420, Ballard Papers.

<sup>2</sup> For an example of how slave dealers listed children in this manner, see Stephenson, 166-167.

<sup>3</sup> Expence [sic] Book, January 23, 1833, Box Number 11, Folder 425, Ballard Papers.

in this book, which suggests that this childbirth was special, like Ballard's relationship with his mother and Preston's mother, who seems to have been the one to whom Ballard was most drawn. The 1840 U.S. census lists White as being between the ages of 24 and 36, which means she could have been born as early as 1804. The family of Nathaniel White, an agent who helped Ballard gather slaves in Virginia, may have been White's first owners.<sup>4</sup> How Ballard met her is unknown. Perhaps as early as the 1820s, but certainly by 1831, he had settled on domestic slave trading as a career and set up an operation in Richmond. While out gathering slaves, White may have been spotted. She may have been the woman for whom a boy was hired to bring home.<sup>5</sup>

His records provide no clues about her physical features or those of Johnson. That these two women were possibly of mixed race is a reasonable conclusion in light of something one of his fellow slave traders once wrote. Isaac Franklin suggested that Ballard make "the Old Lady and Susan" "earn their keep" by running a brothel. Seeing as women of mixed race were seen as being desirable as sex workers or concubines, we might imagine White and Johnson were fair in complexion, like other women with whom these men had sexual relations.<sup>6</sup>

The record does not reveal how Ballard responded to Franklin's proposal to put them to work in a brothel. What we do know is that given the concern he later expressed for these two and their children, he kept them for himself. Two years after Franklin's proposition, Ballard moved to Natchez, Mississippi, apparently taking these two women and their children with him.

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<sup>4</sup> Ballard paid \$237 for Avenia White, \$425 for Susan Johnson and \$425 for Preston, the slave boy. The purchase price for Avenia was curiously low, suggesting Nathaniel White gave Ballard a deal that was recouped, perhaps, on the purchase price of other slaves. List of Purchases for the Year 1832, Box Number 11, Folder 420, Ballard Papers.

<sup>5</sup> His expense book for the year 1831 records that \$6 was paid to a "boy for bringing home woman." Given that respectable white women did not travel unaccompanied by a male relative or an appropriate stand-in, the women being brought to Ballard were in all likelihood female slaves hired to cook and clean, maybe to do more. R.C. Ballard and Co. Expence [sic] Book, 1831, Box Number 11, Folder 425, Ballard Papers.

<sup>6</sup> That said, the record does show slave traders sometimes preferred dark-skinned blacks because they were assumed to be freer from disease than fair-skinned ones who were believed to have been handled more. In fact, dark-skinned female slaves might have even been marketed as fancy girls. In November 1836, Ballard sold a "black complexion" female slave named Louisa Long for \$1250. The price paid for her was larger than usual for an adult female slave. Tadman, 125; November 2, 1836 receipt, Folder 17, Ballard Papers.

Leaving them with his kin or friends in Virginia would have been unthinkable given the slump in agriculture in the area at the time. Few wanted extra mouths to feed, even ones that could cook and clean. If he did take them first to Natchez, they probably traveled with him on one of the three sailing ships Isaac Franklin and his nephew, James Armfield owned.<sup>7</sup>

With these slaves perhaps beside him, he made his gradual transition into the planter class.<sup>8</sup> After possibly arriving in Natchez, White and Johnson and their children were not the slaves kept inside a “squatty frame building” where three roads met just east of the town. They escaped being among the men dressed in navy blue suits with brass buttons and plug hats who “marched beside another, sometimes two others, in a circle” for prospective buyers. They also escaped being among the women who were dressed in calico with white aprons, ones who had pink ribbons on their carefully braided hair.<sup>9</sup> Rather than stay at this slave market, they arrived at the waterfront and probably followed Ballard to a long, two-story frame building on the right side of Kingston Road. Here, several traders had temporary lodgings.<sup>10</sup> While Ballard tended to both trading and planting, the women and children probably bided their time with him on a plantation near or in Natchez. On occasion, they may have gone into town with their master and seen free people of color.

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<sup>7</sup> Stephenson, 35-36 and 44; and Shipment record, Franklin and Ballard Company, Box Number 11, Folder 421, Ballard Papers.

<sup>8</sup> Ballard’s business records reveal that he was shipping cotton to Liverpool and Manchester as early as March of 1836 and by fall of that year, had moved to Natchez to become a planter. Ballard had been following in the footsteps of Isaac Franklin, who, too, had retired from slave trading in this year to become a planter. Franklin’s transition into planting was not without problems. The son of a Tennessee long hunter, he had been selling slaves shortly after Mississippi became a state in 1817. Franklin would be plagued by outstanding debts and other unsettled business from his slave dealing until his death in 1846. Regarding such a career transition for these two traders, Harold Woodman said, “If this was not typical of the careers of plantation owners, it was not unique.” Personal communication, Harold D. Woodman, July 5, 2010; Creecy Smith to Ballard, March 7, 1838, Folder 22, Ballard Papers and N.J. Duke to Ballard, March 17, 1838, Folder 22, Ballard Papers; Stephenson, 53; and Johnson, 55.

<sup>9</sup> This observation was made in 1901 by Felix Houston Hadsell, a resident of the Fork of the Roads area in 1850. See *Fork of the Roads: A Major Southwest Hub of America’s Domestic Slave Trade*, (Natchez, MS Friends of the Fork of the Roads Society) 7. See also the public history exhibit on Fork of the Roads Site at Washington Natchez Trace (now D’Evereaux) and Old Courthouse roads (now Liberty and St. Catherine St., one mile east of downtown Natchez, MS).

<sup>10</sup> *Fork of the Roads*, 6.

But being a proper planter required a man to have a wife. In the summer of 1838, on the eve of his marriage to a woman from Natchez, Ballard transported these slaves and their offspring to Cincinnati where he freed them and what by now were four children. This Southern white man and his ex-slaves might have moved with a bit of urgency. Indeed, in October of 1838, shortly after he settled White, Johnson and their children in Cincinnati, Ballard received a letter from a Louisville man, announcing that he found a “very fitting little” buggy and harness for \$280. Ballard was apparently setting up a home in Louisville for his bride.<sup>11</sup> In a little over a year later, Ballard also paid the bill for several household items ordered from New Orleans including an opaque enameled dining service that had twenty-four plates and fifty-one piece set of cutlery.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps his bride-to-be had selected these items when visiting the city. She was from nearby Natchez, making such a shopping trip easy to accomplish.<sup>13</sup> Her presence furnished one more reason why White and Johnson had to be removed from Natchez. Having them too close could result in his future wife learning about his mistresses and their children - maybe even from White and Johnson themselves. It is even possible that one of the women threatened to expose his relations with them to his bride-to-be, with the promise that they would stay quiet if he manumitted them and set them up right.

White, Johnson and their children traveled in all likelihood by boat to Ohio with Ballard. They probably saw from afar men sitting in the cabin, discussing politics while other passengers, among them women, sat in the galley where passing scenery could be taken in as long as the

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<sup>11</sup> Joseph F. Pierce to Rice Ballard, October 7, 1838, Folder 25, Ballard Papers.

<sup>12</sup> Receipt from Henderson and Gaines, New Orleans, January 9, 1841, Folder 352, Ballard Papers.

<sup>13</sup> Louise Bertha Cabois, the woman Ballard married, is listed as being born in Natchez on the death record of Annie Carter Ballard Trigg, one of Ballard’s three daughters. See Annie Carter Ballard Trigg, Ancestry.com, Kentucky Death Records, 1852-1953 (accessed October 23, 2012).

weather permitted. They also saw other people of color, including men who worked as waiters and slaves who dashed ashore to gather wood for the ship's engine.<sup>14</sup>

Because Ballard would not have wanted to answer questions the women and children would have spent time in his stateroom during the journey. It was not an unusual practice for white men to place women of color in their rooms, though most were traveling with slave traders in the opposite direction, above all, to the market in New Orleans. Ex-slave and boat worker William Wells Brown once noticed a trader who kept a particular slave girl beside him while his other slaves were stowed elsewhere. Brown remembered that the girl was “was not in chains.” She was beautiful and “had been on the boat but a short time before the attention of all the passengers, including the ladies, had been called to her.”<sup>15</sup> Brown also recalled a slave trader placing a quadroon woman named Cynthia in his stateroom. The trader promised Cynthia that he would take her back to her St. Louis home if she would give in to his “vile proposals.” She gave in and he took her back, only later to sell her.<sup>16</sup>

Unlike the women Brown observed, Avenia White and Susan Johnson and their children were traveling to free territory. Both doubtless had their own fears about the future. It must not have been easy for either to know that both were probably sleeping with the same white man. What they told the children about this arrangement we do not know. However, their days in Virginia and Natchez had probably produced a bond, as they shared similar tribulations.<sup>17</sup> Then again, one may have suffered more than the other. From the tone of the letters she later sent Ballard, White certainly seems to have had an emotional connection to him. Such a connection should not be unexpected for slavery had not necessarily defined their lives in a way that

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<sup>14</sup> Coffin, 519-520.

<sup>15</sup> *African American Slave Narratives, An Anthology Volume II*, ed. Sterling Lecater Bland Jr., (Westport, Ct: Greenwood Press, 2001), 310.

<sup>16</sup> Buchanan, 88.

<sup>17</sup> Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 180.

progressed “singularly and steadily toward racism.”<sup>18</sup> The record shows that there was often reciprocal regard, warmth, and even caring in settings where whites and blacks became trading partners, shipmates, servants, allies, or lovers. Indeed, that something of considerable import existed between Ballard and White, and the others he freed is strongly suggested by the fact that he freed them.

Before the Civil War, a white Southern man’s pending marriage, as was the case with Ballard, an aging body, looming death, or the growing scrutiny of other whites around him could compel him quietly to do something that went little discussed: free his slave mistress and the children he had with her. By the time the war began, Cincinnati was home to hundreds of slaves who had been manumitted under these circumstances. Such slave mistresses and their children departed from cities such as New Orleans and Charleston South Carolina, places that had a three-tiered social order of whites, free people of color, or *libres*, and slaves. Upon arriving in Cincinnati, they discovered a new social order, one consisting of whites, mulattoes and dark-skinned blacks. But whereas in the South mulattoes often made economic inroads, taking some of the better jobs (partly because as slaves, they had been given the chance learn a trade), in northern cities they and blacks were generally discriminated against by local whites.<sup>19</sup>

Certainly, Cincinnati was inhabited by white bigots almost from the moment a group of Revolutionary War veterans took advantage of the federal government’s offer to develop western land. Naming themselves the Ohio Company, these men headed west from Boston. Under the leadership of General Rufus Putnam by 1788, a company of about forty-six set up tents and made the first permanent settlement on a watercourse the French called *La Belle Riviere*. In 1800, another group met in the settlement to consider the virtues of a contraption that could

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<sup>18</sup> Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 2.

<sup>19</sup> Horton and Flaherty in Taylor Jr., ed., *Race and the City*, 81 and 85.

propel a boat using steam. Twenty-six years later, one-third of the 148 steamboats running on the Ohio and Mississippi rivers bore a “Made in Cincinnati” plate. Though it was far from the seacoast, Congress made Cincinnati a port of entry. This decision and the growing use of steamboats brought the west closer to south and east.<sup>20</sup> During the 1830s, Cincinnati embodied all the promises beckoning in the new urban centers in America’s west. By that decade it also reflected the end of Ohio’s frontier era. Migrants hurried to Cincinnati, among them members of the South’s leading families. Irish and German immigrants, the latter often Jews, also flocked there, their numbers increasing in the 1840s preceding and following revolutions in the latter and potato famine in the former.<sup>21</sup> British visitors of note included Charles Dickens and Frances Trollope. By the 1850s, what had been a modest river town had become a bustling city. Between 1840 and 1850, Cincinnati’s population increased from 46,338 to 115,434. As the century approached the halfway mark, it was third behind only New York and New Orleans in volume of commerce.<sup>22</sup>

Other new arrivals included Quakers and African Americans fleeing persecution in the South.<sup>23</sup> White Cincinnatians, including German and Irish ones, were rarely fond of either

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<sup>20</sup> Taylor, 11; Trollope, vii and 32; Tucker, 8; Kenny, 1; Bigham, 6; William Dabney, *Cincinnati’s Colored Citizens: Historical, Sociological & Biographical* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1926), 20, and *Greater Cincinnati and Its People: A History, Vol. 1* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1927), 390. Louis C. Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers: An Economic and Technological History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), 25-27; For more on early Cincinnati, James Hall, *The West: Its Commerce and Navigation* (New York: H.W. Derby, 1848); Darrel Bigham, *Towns and Villages of the Lower Ohio* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), and Richard Wade, *The Urban Frontier: The Rise of Western Cities, 1790-1830* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959).

<sup>21</sup> James Oliver Horton and Hartmut Keil, “African Americans and Germans in Mid-Nineteenth Century Buffalo,” James Oliver Horton, ed., *Free People of Color: Inside the African American Community* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 170; Steven J. Ross, *Workers on the Edge: Work, Leisure, and Politics in Industrializing Cincinnati, 1788-1890* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 72.

<sup>22</sup> *The WPA Guide to Cincinnati*, (Cincinnati: The Cincinnati Historical Society, 1987), 59; Taylor, 4; Shevitz, 24 and 35.

<sup>23</sup> For more on the experiences of Quakers in the South following the American Revolution, see Stephen B. Weeks, *Southern Quakers and Slavery: An Institutional History* (New York: Bergman Publishers, 1968), Levi Coffin, *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin*, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/coffin.html> (accessed September 5, 2012).



group.<sup>24</sup> As early as 1804, laws were passed to limit black settlement.<sup>25</sup> Still, the city's black population grew from 700 in 1826 to more than 2000 in 1829.<sup>26</sup> But threatened by the "black laws" and two mob attacks, attendees at the National Convention of Colored Citizens considered the emigration of blacks from Cincinnati to Canada. By 1840, the growth of the city's black population was stunted. In that year, blacks numbered 2,240, or 4.8 percent of the total population. By the time of a third mob attack in 1841, one that nearly shattered Cincinnati's black community, local African Americans resolved to demand better treatment, expand the building of schools and other institutions to serve them and above all, to remain for the long haul.<sup>27</sup> In emphasizing that Cincinnati was important for its location at the meeting of three borders, the North, South and West, Nikki Taylor highlights this collective consciousness of black Cincinnatians.<sup>28</sup>

However, it has been suggested that blacks who stayed in Cincinnati needlessly faced more racial hostility than those living in other parts of Ohio, such as Xenia and Wilberforce, communities where liberal whites were waiting to provide aid. But people of color continued trickling into the "Queen of the West" - probably because there were more jobs there than in Xenia or Wilberforce.<sup>29</sup>

Whether black Cincinnatians saw this metropolis on America's frontier in the manner that many whites did is not clear, though we can assume that those who spent considerable time in close proximity to whites heard and saw much and probably adopted such a view.<sup>30</sup> At the

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<sup>24</sup> Bigham, 8.

<sup>25</sup> The laws were strengthened in 1807. Taylor in *Frontiers of Freedom*, 2-3.

<sup>26</sup> *The WPA Guide to Cincinnati*, 30.

<sup>27</sup> Taylor, *Frontiers of Freedom*, 9; and Howard Holman Bell, *Minutes of the Proceedings of the National Negro Conventions, 1830-1864* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1963), i and 16.

<sup>28</sup> Taylor, *Frontiers of Freedom*, 6.

<sup>29</sup> For more, see David Gerber, *Black Ohio and the Color Line, 1860-1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976).

<sup>30</sup> Taylor, 6.

very least, African Americans understood that living in this city could be advantageous. Here, those who could break through the color line earned wages not easily demanded in slave society. Living in a city that bordered the south was also attractive to those seeking to stay in touch with or waiting for the arrival of their still-enslaved kin. In fact, one slave sent word to his wife that she should tell those she trusted that if they could just get to Cincinnati, “they can get liberty” for “the colored in the boats will whisper in their ears where to find abolitionists.”<sup>31</sup>

Before the Civil War, and prior to the formation of ghettos, African Americans were by and large dispersed throughout Cincinnati’s white residents, among them, Irish and German immigrants.<sup>32</sup> However, blacks still congregated in certain areas more than others. Many could be found in the East End Factory and Central Waterfront districts, which were called “Little Africa” and “Bucktown” respectively.<sup>33</sup>

Henry Louis Taylor Jr. and Vicky Dula have mapped the city’s antebellum black population in geographical clusters to understand better their residential experiences. Using data from the 1850 Census, Taylor and Dula created a representative sample of 106 African American residential clusters. In this representative sample, they discovered 231 African American males and 307 African American females. Not only were there more women, there were a considerable number of young women and children aged 10 years or younger. Taylor and Dula also noticed that black women headed a third of the households, which contained only themselves, their

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<sup>31</sup> William Cheek and Aimee Lee Cheek, “John Mercer Langston and the Cincinnati Riot of 1841,” in Taylor Jr., ed., *Race in the City*, 44.

<sup>32</sup> For more on the transformation of the geographic distribution of urban African Americans in the north during the nineteenth century, see Henry Louis Taylor, Jr., “City Building, Public Policy, the Rise of the Industrial City, and Black Ghetto-Slum Formation in Cincinnati, 1850-1940,” in Henry Louis Taylor Jr., ed., *Race and the City: Work, Community, and Protest in Cincinnati, 1820-1970* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 156-192; David Katzman, *Before the Ghetto: Black Detroit in the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975); Henry Louis Taylor Jr. and Vicky Dula, “Black Residential Experience” in Taylor, ed., in *Race and the City*, 99; and Taylor, *Frontiers of Freedom*, 12.

<sup>33</sup> Taylor and Dula in Taylor, ed., in *Race and the City*, 100.

children, and relatives and/or boarders. The average age of these females was 24.<sup>34</sup> Though black women were not the most numerous heads of African American households in antebellum Cincinnati, their numbers there exceeded those in other cities located along the Ohio River, among them, Pittsburgh and Louisville.<sup>35</sup>

The cluster analyzed by Taylor and Dula was in the middle of the white-dominated central business district.<sup>36</sup> We may ask ourselves, “Why did they live there?” The answer should be fairly obvious. It was where they could find employment. At the time, urban women of color were generally permitted to pursue two avenues of employment, domestic work or prostitution. Given that prostitutes tended to live in boarding houses closer to the riverfront where they could benefit from the presence of transient boat and businessmen, it is likely the women in question were employed as servants, cooks and washerwomen.<sup>37</sup> And given the large presence of mulattoes in antebellum Cincinnati, it is safe to assume some of them were mulattoes.<sup>38</sup>

On the whole, these unmarried women had limited capital and resources. As Elizabeth Pleck noted in her analysis of late nineteenth century black families in Boston, “a family dependent on a woman’s wages almost always lived in poverty.”<sup>39</sup> Indeed, some of the African American women in Cincinnati resembled those in early nineteenth century northeastern communities who worked as indentured servants and, once freed, typically as domestics for the

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid. 105.

<sup>35</sup> Indeed, while 15.2 percent and 22.6 percent, respectively, of Pittsburgh and Louisville’s black women headed households between 1850 and 1880, 22.8 percent did so in Cincinnati. Stating that women were “heads of household” is done in this study with the acknowledgement that census takers did not formally report such status until the 1860 Census. Still, they were able earlier to observe this trend. Taylor, *Frontiers of Freedom*, 9.

<sup>36</sup>In other words, here resided 100 women compared to 68 men whereas in three other residential areas the gap between men and women was as little as between 8 and 14. Ibid. 122-123.

<sup>37</sup> Taylor, 196.

<sup>38</sup> In 1850, 3,172 African Americans resided in Cincinnati. Of these, 54 percent were mulatto, a figure much higher than the North’s regional average of 31 percent. Only the Deep South had a higher percentage of mulattoes, 76%, among its free African American population. James Oliver Horton and Stacy Flaherty, “Black Leadership in Antebellum Cincinnati” in Taylor Jr., ed., *Race and the City*, 81.

<sup>39</sup> This observation generally holds across space and time in nineteenth century urban America. Elizabeth H. Pleck, “The Two-parent Household: Black Family Structure in Late Nineteenth-Century Boston,” *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Fall 1972), 17.

rest of their lives. These Cincinnati women of color also resembled poor and unskilled free people of color in southern settings who, because of their own poverty, often bonded with enslaved blacks.<sup>40</sup>

After arriving in Cincinnati, White, Johnson and their children were representative of a growing population in the city: unmarried mothers of color. Not all local whites were in agreement on what precise threat such new arrivals posed. African Americans in general and European immigrants from Germany and later, Ireland, were all the targets of native white hostility. Just months before White, Johnson and their children arrived, the editor of the *Daily Gazette*, a local newspaper, said that immigrating Germans and African Americans should be considered equal since both competed with locally-born whites for the same jobs.<sup>41</sup> An angry German reader denounced the editor, who shifted his position, announcing that African Americans were in fact far inferior and if employed at all, should be confined to the lowest paying menial jobs.<sup>42</sup>

That job competition existed between African Americans and local whites, natives and Europeans alike, can be partly discerned in the city's African American residential patterns. By 1830, 80 percent of the city's African Americans resided in their own households compared to 65 percent a decade earlier, suggesting many, among them former live-in domestics, had

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<sup>40</sup> Wilma King, "Out of Bounds: Emancipated and Enslaved Women in Antebellum America," in David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, *Beyond Bondage: Free Women of Color in the Americas* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004) 139; Stevenson, 259; Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), xiii; Kimberly S. Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places: Free Black Society in Colonial New Orleans, 1769-1803* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 2 and 26; Michael P. Johnson and James L. Roark, *Black Masters: A Free Family of Color in the Old South* (New York: W.W. Norton), 141; Larry Koger, *Black Slaveowners: Free Black Slave Masters in South Carolina, 1790-1860*, 110; Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom: African American Women and Emancipation in the Antebellum City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

<sup>41</sup> *Cincinnati Daily, Gazette*, March 31, 1838, p. 3; Trotter, *River Jordan*, 67.

<sup>42</sup> As an aside, though Cincinnati's German population secured jobs denied to people of color, the German community had conflicting views on the race issue up until the Civil War. By the 1850s, the question of slavery divided even German Protestants who left the Democrat party for the Republican Party. Ross, 188.

obtained the financial means to live on their own.<sup>43</sup> The existence of job competition, especially on the domestic front, can also be attributed to local whites' preferences. Late into the century, many white Cincinnatians continued to prefer African Americans as service employees in their homes and in area restaurants and hotels, some believing a lack of employment alternatives might make workers of African descent more loyal than Irish and German domestics, who found service work demeaning in a (white) democracy. Some Irish workers in particular disdained service work associated with African Americans.<sup>44</sup> Racial tension was indeed ever-present, confirming the degree to which race and labor were mutually intertwined in Cincinnati as they were elsewhere in the United States.<sup>45</sup>

White Cincinnatians were not only anxious about race. They were also anxious about the growing presence of women in public spaces, especially those who frequented the city's riverfront, where prostitution was unbridled (notably, sex work even in a racially tensed northern city such as Cincinnati did not entirely carry the same ideological taint that it would for enslaved "fancy" sex workers in the South).<sup>46</sup> In the North, moral crusaders of all races called upon the most upright among the female population to curb wicked conduct, if not in this setting, in others. For example, a new race course had a ladies' stands for the "belles of Cincinnati and Kentucky" whose presence was intended to "check immorality" there.<sup>47</sup> Not all white women behaved as expected or described. One local placed an advertisement in one of the city's more conservative papers announcing that he would no longer be supporting his wife, who had refused

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<sup>43</sup> Taylor, *Frontiers of Freedom*, 37-38.

<sup>44</sup> Gerber, 69-71.

<sup>45</sup> Roediger and Esch, 11.

<sup>46</sup> Taylor, 196.

<sup>47</sup> *Cincinnati Republican*, September 29, 1838.

to follow him to an unnamed location where his business affairs required his attention. He warned “all persons not to give her credit” as he had no plans to pay her debts.<sup>48</sup>

White women were not the only defiant ones. Women of color also acted in recalcitrant ways even while appearing to be subservient to whites with competing ideological positions. When a white antislavery lobbyist approached one Cincinnati household in search of signatures for a petition, the lady of the house and a female guest refused to sign it, one of them on the grounds that she never signed anything without her husband’s consent. The abolitionist noticed a black female housekeeper in the home and approached her. “But receiving no encouragement” from this housekeeper, the female petitioner departed.<sup>49</sup>

A conservative newspaper shared this incident in order to belittle the efforts of abolitionists, who seemed to be having a difficult time acquiring support in the area. However, the newspaper editors inadvertently confirmed the gradual reshuffling of racial roles in this city and elsewhere. An African American housekeeper had been unwilling to lose her job by acting in defiance of her employer’s views, even though they did not have her own unfortunate condition in mind.

However, African Americans in Cincinnati, and throughout the state and nationally, participated in their own community building efforts. Cincinnati’s respectable free black community policed itself, frowning on black men openly imbibing alcohol and discouraging black women from wearing flashy clothing. The immorality on their city’s levee possibly contributed to one-fourth of the city’s black population joining temperance organizations (this

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<sup>48</sup> Married women and men, black and white alike, had long taken private matters into public spaces such as newspapers. After the Revolutionary War, even free men of color in New England regularly took out advertisements, announcing their refusal to pay the debts of their “errant wives”. In one such advertisement, one black husband called his mate a “bad woman” who did not know her place.” Adams and Pleck, 118.

<sup>49</sup> *Cincinnati Republican*, December 24, 1838.

percentage far surpassed that of whites, of whom only one in ten joined such groups).<sup>50</sup> Such vigilance figured into the major social upheavals and dislocations occurring in the early stages of urbanization and industrialization in the United States. As early as the 1820s, and lasting well into the early twentieth century, Americans, both black and white, were concerned about the conduct of young working women. Taking cues from the far-reaching Protestant evangelical spirit of the day, antebellum moral reformers roamed working class neighborhoods, surveying and attempting to regulate the behavior of female wage-earners.<sup>51</sup>

Foreshadowing the scrutiny of urban blacks in the early twentieth century, who responded similarly toward newly arrived southern women of color, respectable antebellum African Americans also urged their brethren to behave in an upright manner. But these black elites were inspired by a different political calculus from their white counterparts, one involving not just moral, but racial, uplift. They made appeals to the African American community at large even though it was difficult to convince an unmarried black woman with a child to stop selling her body solely “for the good of the race.”<sup>52</sup>

However, Cincinnati’s black community behaved not solely on the basis of moral considerations. A number of researchers studying antebellum Cincinnati have demonstrated that this community’s emotional bonding was “marked by mutuality” of circumstance and the most critical situation blacks generally faced collectively was racism.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, the women of color who pursued sex work on the city’s waterfront faced bigotry like other African Americans in this city. The very fact that sex work was one of a limited number of employment options for women

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<sup>50</sup> Dabney, 39.

<sup>51</sup> Though she focuses on the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Mary Oden’s exploration of the ways in which young female wage-earners were scrutinized makes references to such surveillance in earlier periods. Mary Oden, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 1.

<sup>52</sup> Taylor in *Frontiers of Freedom*, 131; Hazel Carby V., “Policing the Black Woman’s Body in an Urban Context,” *Critical Inquiry*, 18:4 (Summer 1992), 738–755.

<sup>53</sup> Taylor and Dula, in Taylor, ed., *Race and the City*, 96-97.

of color suggests racial prejudice and exclusion existed in Cincinnati as they did throughout the country.

In this way, these sex workers' condition was often like that of local black boatmen. It was charged that upon their arrival in Cincinnati, African American river men invariably headed for Little Africa, the black community near the levee where gambling and prostitution were rampant, and to Bucktown, the city's African American business district that was developing several blocks away by the 1850s.<sup>54</sup> Though these two neighborhoods seemed isolated from one another and from black populations across the United States, they were in fact joined because of mutual oppression. They were inhabited by individuals sharing a mutual past. Indeed, black steamboat workers often brought local blacks news from still enslaved relatives. Many such conversations took place at Bucktown's black-owned Dumas Hotel, an Underground railroad depot, which also acted as a sort of black post office because of the amount of information exchanged there between local African Americans and those in slave states.<sup>55</sup>

Further demonstrating the extent of African American bonding in Cincinnati through not only dire circumstances, but also family ties, is the well-documented life of John Mercer Langston, a mixed-race, Virginia-born man. During the 1841 mob attack on local blacks, Langston, then a boy, ran from the east side of the city to the south central business district to "warn the one person he could claim as his family" - his brother, Gideon. Schooled in the importance of helping others, Langston had earlier witnessed Gideon helping blacks via the

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<sup>54</sup> Bigham, 35.

<sup>55</sup> The information in this paragraph concerning African American boatmen draws on Thomas Buchanan's study of antebellum African Americans' ties to rivers. While this investigation's framing hinges on the Mississippi, Buchanan addresses the experiences of black boatmen who worked on boats that also traveled to and from Cincinnati. Thomas C. Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi: Slaves, Free Blacks, and the Western Steamboat World* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 6, 20 and 97; "Maintaining Communication," The Northern Migration, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at <http://www.inmotionaame.org/migrations/topic.cfm;jsessionid=f8302581701349793746932?migration=7&topic=8&bhpc=1> (accessed October 9, 2012).



Underground Railroad, and as vice president of the Iron Chest Company, an African American cooperative.<sup>56</sup> Cincinnatians of color demonstrated that kinship and family were important aspects of African American life, as they had been and would continue to be. As Ira Berlin has written, blacks “were different people in 1650 than they would be in 1750 or 1850, but they always carried something of their forebears into their future.”<sup>57</sup> What they carried was their ability to see each other as kin.

Following a race-related mob attack in 1829, Cincinnatians of color formed coalitions not only with abolitionists, but other African Americans around the state and elsewhere. In 1831, free people of color discussed that riot and the general condition of African Americans at the first national convention meeting for people of color in Philadelphia. Though the targets of yet another mob attack in Cincinnati in 1836, black Ohioans established a fund a year later to open schools for children of color in Ohio. This development was among many demonstrating that the black community had moved from merely seeking out the support of local whites to actively responding to racial hostility with its own interests in mind.<sup>58</sup>

Such was the strained environment that White and Johnson entered as they and their four children moved into a boarding house on Elm between Fifth and Sixth Streets. From the start, their bodies in Cincinnati’s Second Ward were part of a gathering borne of mutual need.<sup>59</sup>

Frances Bruster, a black woman, held the mortgage on the house in which they lived.<sup>60</sup> How

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<sup>56</sup> Cheek and Cheek, “John Mercer Langston and the Cincinnati Riot of 1841,” in Taylor Jr., ed., *Race and the City*, 29-125.

<sup>57</sup> Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African American Slaves*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 8 and 235.

<sup>58</sup> Taylor, *Frontiers of Freedom*, 106-115.

<sup>59</sup> When the city’s wards were redrawn – as they often were in the nineteenth century - the house was in the 14<sup>th</sup> ward, in which Eliza Potter, the well-known mulatto hairdresser and author, also lived by 1860. 1840 Federal Census, Hamilton County, Ohio; and Chris Winter, Bibliographer for Anthropology, Geography, and Maps, University of Chicago Library, Email to Sharony Green, October 1, 2012.

<sup>60</sup> In White’s September 13, 1838 letter to Ballard, she describes having paid rent and board to Frances Bruster, establishing that she, Susan and their four children lived in this house. The 1840 Census spells Bruster’s name

White and Johnson and their offspring ended up in this dwelling might have been an outcome of their former master's earlier acquaintance with Bruster. In May of 1838, shortly before they were freed, Bruster wrote Ballard in Natchez to remind him that when they first met in New Orleans, he said he wished to make a friend of her.<sup>61</sup> Maybe he had reason to. Perhaps Bruster had then announced her plans to open a boarding house in Cincinnati. Maybe after learning about his situation, it was she who told him that he could settle slaves he wanted to free in the city. He may have decided he could place White, Johnson and their children, who were in all likelihood his progeny, in her care. She might have added that she could benefit from his patronage. Though we will never know all that passed between Ballard and Bruster, the five letters White later sent her former master suggest Bruster indeed discerned Ballard had some measure of concern for these six slaves. His concern, like that of other Southern white men who had relations with female slaves that produced children, typically manifests as a silence in the historical record. But there is no silence here, or no complete silence at any rate. His desire to make Bruster a friend announced his future plans. In fact, his stated wish to make a friend of her concealed his ulterior motive. Ballard sought a safe haven for six favored slaves. And he sought Bruster's help in securing such a haven. This was the case even though he remained part of the hidden tapestry of these ex-slaves' enhanced position, a position that likely involved some earlier undocumented conversation or influence directed toward him by at least one, possibly more, of his former slaves.

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"Brewster," even though White's letter spells it otherwise. Bruster, who was born in Virginia, may have been married to Thomas Brewster, an African American barber and hairdresser in Cincinnati. David Henry Shaffer, *The Cincinnati, Covington, Newport and Fulton Directory for 1840* (Cincinnati: J.B. & R.P. Donogh, 1839), 468, and *Cincinnati Directory Advertiser for the Years 1836-7* (Cincinnati: J.H. Woodruff, 1836), 25.

<sup>61</sup>Bruster appears to have met Ballard in New Orleans, a city he likely visited for reasons having to do with his interest in selling either slaves or cotton. Frances M. Bruster to Ballard, May 14, 1838, Folder 24, Ballard Papers.

After Ballard departed from Cincinnati, room was made for one of his ex-slave mistresses to take on a leadership role. White almost immediately wanted to leave Bruster's house. She found another a house that would soon be vacant. It rented for \$13 a month, vastly more affordable than boarding with Bruster, which cost about ten times that amount. White and Johnson likely realized that if they found employment, they could afford it. There were many obstacles before them, however. All of this news as shared in White's first letter, which contains information that must be teased out. That it does illuminates the degree to which white authority persisted despite manumission and geographical distance, and how slaves and ex-slaves finessed it.

Rather than dismissing the letter's contents because her prose often lacks clarity, we must understand this historical actor within the confines of her experience. Indeed, her compositional obscurity might have been a manifestation of her everyday resistance toward the patriarchal structure that loomed over her even after her manumission. However, this structure was prone to bending, if not buckling, as is made evident by the very fact that a letter from an ex-slave could be sent to her former master because he had possibly provided an address where he could be reached. Indeed, Ballard seems to have intended to remain in contact with her and Johnson. That he did strongly suggests that these two had earlier reached some understanding about their futures. The letter was made possible by their "pillow talk," a mechanism by which White resisted the larger forces of white oppression by engaging the interest of a Southern white man, her former master.

While the law had relegated her and the others to an inferior position, the law had limits. Behind closed doors and in other more private spaces, among them, a sealed letter, a Southern white man and one of his female slaves could maintain their relationship despite her ongoing

oppression, the distance between them, and the obstacles she faced as a newly freed person in an alien and often hostile environment.

In a letter dated September 13, 1838, White wrote to the man who once owned her. “Mr[.] Ballard, Sir, I write you a few lines,” she began before reporting that she, Johnson, and the children were in good health, but “somewhat depressed in spirits.”<sup>62</sup> He had moved them to Cincinnati during the summer, an unfortunate time.<sup>63</sup> Regional droughts created problems for the city during this time of year, causing the depth of water in the Ohio, Mississippi and Missouri rivers to fall as low as eleven inches, so low that all but a few shallow-draft steamboats were idled.<sup>64</sup> This bottleneck caused severe disruptions to the movement of goods and people and wrought major damage to the economy of a city like Cincinnati, which was dependent on waterborne commerce.<sup>65</sup>

Because of the reduction in the city’s waterborne traffic, local businesses were reluctant to hire additional workers. With job prospects dim, White asked Ballard for additional monetary assistance. She never stated how much money or for how long. There may have been a reason for her vagueness. She may have wanted to give him leeway to act in the manner in which he felt most comfortable for he had relocated them during a time that was generally difficult across the country. The Panic of 1837, a recession that would last for five years, was well underway. He had freed them when a less caring man would have sold them.

But if times were hard for a rich white man, they were harder for a poor black woman.

As she announced in her letter, Bruster’s boarding house was not close to “business.” The kind

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<sup>62</sup> Avenia White to Rice Ballard, September 13, 1838, Folder 24, Ballard Papers.

<sup>63</sup> Ballard may have wanted to move them sooner, but was stricken with yellow fever in early 1838. Joseph Alsop to Ballard, January 30, 1838, Folder 20, Ballard Papers.

<sup>64</sup> The low water season on the Ohio typically began in late June and continued through late September although the “fall rise” was dependent on arrival of heavy rains, which varied from year to year. Even then, unrestricted movement lasted just a few weeks because of either low water or ice between late November and early January. Five to six feet depth of water was necessary if a captain wanted to carry a full load. Hunter, 219-223, 251 and 255.

<sup>65</sup> *Cincinnati Republican*, September 19, 1838.

of business she referred to is unclear. Bruster's house was located in the city's central core, just north of the busy central waterfront district. As was true of other sections of the city, blacks were spatially integrated here. In other words, their immediate environment was not a ghetto. It was one where social interactions were complex because people lived and worked beside each other across racial, ethnic and class lines. In fact, one might think Bruster's home offered greater opportunities for domestic work, because there were many more whites there than in the largely African-American neighborhoods of Little Africa or Bucktown. Assuming it did, White's desire to leave this area is puzzling.

Then again, she might have desired to be closer to the waterfront in order to earn more money than could be made as a domestic. Though practiced in an unseemly neighborhood and condemned by many, prostitution provided alternative and possibly more lucrative employment. But unless Ballard had earlier put her and Johnson to work as prostitutes in Virginia – and that remains a possibility - White certainly wanted to avoid that area because, as shall be shortly demonstrated, she wanted to stay in his good graces. If he had intended for her and Johnson to be prostitutes, why settle them in Cincinnati? Why not put them to work in, say, New Orleans, or another river town in the south like Louisville, where prostitution was ever-present as it was an occupation that depended on male traffic? Further, if he had wanted them to work in such a capacity, he would have probably left them in a living situation on the waterfront and not in Bruster's home, which was further away and in a more respectable neighborhood, unless Bruster herself was a madam. But Bruster was probably not a madam; if she had been, she would have likely purchased a boarding house closer to the riverfront where transient boatmen were more easily found.

All that said, White might have meant “Bucktown,” a community on the city’s east end. Here, on McAlister Street, north of Fourth, a collection of black-owned homes and businesses neighbored the black-owned Dumas House, a three-story boarding house, which also had ballrooms.<sup>66</sup> This community was the center of Cincinnati’s black middle class, a place she might have desired to live, but not necessarily work.<sup>67</sup> There were vacant dwellings in the area, among them by the end of the year, a brick house on McAlister near Fourth Street. This property was advertised as being “suitable for a small family.”<sup>68</sup> This house or something like it in this neighborhood would have been ideal. If taking in sewing or laundry from white and black clients patronizing this area, White and Johnson would not have had as much difficulty carrying a bundle of clothing while holding the hands of young children as they would have if walking to and from Bruster’s home, which was farther away. But Bruster’s home was in an integrated neighborhood, one where white residents doubtless needed domestic help. Why was this area not good enough?

While we shall never know White’s rationale in wanting to find a different home (other than the likelihood that she wanted less expensive lodgings) we can be sure that she and Johnson knew they might have to support themselves as Bruster could not bear the expense of taking care of them if Ballard’s assistance ended. There might have been even more at stake. Perhaps White, Johnson and Bruster all intended to capitalize on Ballard’s generosity. Maybe Bruster got White to ask for more money simply because they knew he had it.

Then again, since White was the one for whom he seemed to have the most regard, she might not have agreed to such a course. She might have suspected that her landlady’s allegiances were divided. She may have sensed that Ballard had placed them under Bruster’s

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<sup>66</sup> Taylor Jr. and Dula in Taylor Jr., ed., *Race in the City*, 115 and Taylor, 195.

<sup>67</sup> Dabney, 13; Miller, 5; and *Cincinnati Herald*, September 6, 1975.

<sup>68</sup> *Cincinnati Republican*, December 11, 1838.

surveillance. Perhaps bothered by Bruster's earlier friendliness with Ballard and unsure of exactly where their landlady fit into his life, she simply wanted to leave this house. Having a third woman around might make things more complicated, especially if she and Ballard had continued to be lovers.

Based on the contents of a letter sent one month after her first, Ballard did not reply to White's first letter. He might have balked at her complaints, as money was tight not just because of the recession. He had just purchased a new home, one curiously, not in the Deep South, but in Louisville, only about 100 miles away from Cincinnati.

In her second letter, one dated October 25, 1838, White said: "Mr[.] Ballard I am compelled to write you again." Her use of the word "compel" told him something of significance was at stake that necessitated her writing again so quickly. Perhaps Bruster had indeed expressed her unwillingness to shoulder the responsibility for her, Johnson and the children. White went on next to share that the river was still low. However, she was now taking in sewing and laundry, presumably in order to be at home with the children while Johnson was working as a live-in domestic by the week. Their earnings were not, however, enough to meet their needs. They needed beds, she said. They also needed funds to buy wood for fuel because the nights had grown cooler, a problem as Bruster's house was "uncomfortable" in cold weather.

She went on to say that their funds were so limited they had to borrow eight dollars from Bruster, who was sending a hello. White, herself, sent "love." She ended the letter with a postscript: "PS Harvey has been very sick. He is now recovering."<sup>69</sup> Mention of Harvey - presumably one of Johnson's children if we are to rely on the 1840 Census, which lists White as having only one child - was done in a clever manner: at the end of her letter. Assuming the

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<sup>69</sup> Avenia White to Rice Ballard, October 25, 1838, Folder 25, Ballard Papers.

last idea mentioned is the one most remembered, putting Harvey's name here was strategic. White was using the children to get Ballard's attention. Harvey and the other children had changed the terms for her and Johnson's encounters with Ballard. White could now risk referring on paper to what she could have never said in slave territory: her former master's regard for his own progeny.<sup>70</sup> That she did points to her growing authority as a freedwoman.

For six years, Ballard had been instigator when it came to these women's and children's lives. When they moved, it was because he wanted them to do so. When they ate, it was at a time he decided. And when there was sex between him and either woman, it was presumably on his timetable. In sending two letters, White was taking the lead. She pursued him, if only for reasons related to her survival and that of the others around her.

Still, Ballard apparently did not respond to this letter either. Perhaps he was in Louisville when she had sent the letters to Natchez. She grew desperate. So did someone else - Bruster. On November 29, 1838, within a month of White's second letter, the latter wrote a letter to Ballard. Her penmanship resembles that of White's two earlier letters and one White would send the following month, suggesting Bruster had offered her literacy skills to Ballard's ex-slaves. In her own letter, Bruster made a plea on behalf of the women and children. Bruster informed Ballard that she lacked \$300 to make the final payment on her mortgage, adding that she would be "under ten thousand obligations to" him and "anything that concerns" him if he would lend her \$100. If he did not, she said, the "children will be deprived of a home." She asked him to send the money in care of a local white man, ending the letter with, "Avenia and the little boy are well[.] She has written you twice[, ] once to Louisville. The last letter she directed to Natchez."<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Gross, 129.

<sup>71</sup> It is unclear if Bruster was referring to Preston, Harvey or another child when she mentioned a "little boy." Frances M. Bruster to Rice Ballard, November 29, 1838, Folder 25, Ballard Papers.



This letter is significant for three reasons. First, Bruster was indeed capitalizing on Ballard's evident sense of obligation to the women and children boarding with her, especially White and the "little boy." Second, both women had the addresses of both his Natchez and Louisville homes. Ballard seems to have made it possible to contact him should they need him. He had even created an opportunity for them to reach him via a prominent local. Calvin Fletcher, the white man Bruster mentioned in her letter, was a merchant from Massachusetts and former Cincinnati city councilman, who could be found "engaged in his counting room" receiving returns from his New Orleans shippers.<sup>72</sup> With the connection to Fletcher, White and Johnson's community went beyond Cincinnati's African American population. They were now two degrees away from an important white man.

We might wonder how Ballard met Fletcher and why he allowed Fletcher to be in the women's circle. Apparently, he knew Fletcher before relocating White, Johnson and their children to Cincinnati. For clues, we have a letter Ballard also received in October of 1838. In it, the letter-writer, a Virginia man, referred to Fletcher as "our friend."<sup>73</sup> He also used the word "thyself." This word, as well as "friend" was commonly used by Quakers, a religious group whose membership included many antislavery proponents.<sup>74</sup> The letter raises questions about possible links between Ballard and the Quakers and further, his personal beliefs on slavery. Did

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<sup>72</sup> David Henry Shaffer, *The Cincinnati, Covington, Newport and Fulton Directory for 1840* (Cincinnati: J.B. & R.P. Donogh, 1839), 181; Gayle Thornbrough and Dorothy L. Riker, eds., *Diary and Letters of Calvin Fletcher, Vol. I (1838-1843)* (Indianapolis: Indianapolis Historical Society, 1973), 210. See also clipping of Fletcher's obituary in an unidentified newspaper, which was placed in a November 17, 1860 diary entry of his cousin, Calvin Fletcher who lived in Indianapolis. Filson Historical Society, Special Collections.

<sup>73</sup> Henry Clark to Ballard, October 10, 1835, Folder 18, Ballard Papers.

<sup>74</sup> For more on the history of the Quakers in Europe and the United States, see Arnold Lloyd, Herbert G. Wood, ed., *Quaker Social History, 1669-1738* (London, New York: Longmans, Green, 1950); William C. Braithwaite, *The Second Period of Quakerism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961); J. William Frost and John M. Moore, *Seeking the Light: Essays in Quaker History in honor of Edwin B. Bronner* (Wallingford, Pa.: Pendle Hill Publications; Haverford, Pa.: Friends Historical Association, 1986); and Margaret Abruzzo, *Polemical Pain: Slavery, Cruelty, and the Rise of Humanitarianism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 16-48.

he act one way publicly while maintaining another position privately?<sup>75</sup> Or had he merely befriended someone to see to the well-being of his two ex-slave mistresses and the women's children because he was unsure about his own level of commitment? If he did, maybe he did so because he knew that Fletcher, like Coffin and other abolitionists, might aid them.

There is no surviving evidence of Ballard's reply to White or Bruster's letters until this point.<sup>76</sup> A more anxious letter, this one by White, or her and Bruster, was addressed to him on December 30th, 1838. In it, she or they repeated the news that Harvey had been sick and that Johnson was now ill. The cold weather was the likely cause of their sickness. Upset over this and more, White told Ballard, "I am sorry to have to trouble you so much but my present necessities are so great at this time that I am compelled... to get Mr[.] Fletcher to advance me ten dollars to get me some wood" for heating.<sup>77</sup>

Perhaps moved by her pleas, or ashamed of how Fletcher might regard his silence, Ballard finally replied. In a letter dated January 28th, 1839, Fletcher acknowledged the receipt of \$150 from Ballard, \$50 of which was immediately delivered to White. Fletcher assured Ballard that "the wom[e]n and children appear to be getting along very comfortably."<sup>78</sup>

Grateful for his assistance, however delayed, on January 20, 1839, White sent her former master a letter of thanks. She also used this opportunity to tell him again that business was "dull." She added that Harvey was "mending slowly" under a doctor's care. In the postscript, she

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<sup>75</sup> If he did, it would have been something his Quaker friends admired though not for reasons one might immediately expect. Quakers were not against slavery as much as they were against the ostentatious wealth it afforded white Americans at the expense of African Americans. In fact, Levi Coffin, although an abolitionist, did not believe in racial mixing. "We of the North are opposed to amalgamation," Coffin said on the subject after meeting two white southerners and their two mulatto women at the Dumas House, a boarding house in Cincinnati's black business district that was also a depot on the Underground Railroad. The men announced their plans to settle in the area because they could not marry in Mississippi, though he did not approve, Coffin told them Ohio's law did not prevent such marriages. He advised the men to marry their women, and they did. Coffin took this position even as he believed himself to be free of bigotry. Said Coffin on another occasion, "I had been favored to overcome prejudice against color or caste." Coffin, 287 and 481; Taylor, 196.

<sup>76</sup> Again, it is possible that Ballard failed to receive both women's letters owing to his travels.

<sup>77</sup> Avenia White to Rice Ballard, December 30, 1838, Folder 25, Ballard Papers.

<sup>78</sup> Calvin Fletcher to Rice Ballard, January 28, 1839, Folder 26, Ballard Papers.

stated that Bruster had also received a letter from him and was waiting on Fletcher to attend to some business that went unnamed. “When you write you can mention it to him,” White said.<sup>79</sup>

One suspects that she was referring to the \$100 loan Bruster had requested.

White’s letters reveal as much as they hide about six bodies on Elm St., ones for whom Ballard had ambivalent, but ongoing feelings. These ex-slaves were obviously people that he cared for, though he did so uneasily. After all, they were women and they were people of color. In his letter to Ballard, Fletcher revealed that the former had asked him to verify the women’s status and Bruster’s need for \$100. He also inquired about the African American man to whom the \$100 draft should be written. He was William Stewart, a mulatto who was a local pattern maker. Fletcher told Ballard that Stewart appeared to be reliable. But Stewart’s presence in Bruster’s life is yet another curious matter. Maybe Bruster was purchasing her boarding house with Stewart’s assistance and that of other local African Americans. Given the degree to which black Cincinnatians during this era needed and depended on each other, Stewart might have been furnishing such help.

White appears to have not written Ballard again for another year and a half, or her silence may simply be a gap in the surviving correspondence. It may also be possible that she in fact did not write for a longer period because Ballard visited Cincinnati on occasion, allowing her to communicate with him in person. She might have been silent because she knew his capacity to care had limits.<sup>80</sup> And Ballard was getting married. Thus, it must have taken something momentous for White to contact him again.

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<sup>79</sup> Avenia White to Rice Ballard, January 20, 1839, Folder 26, Ballard Papers.

<sup>80</sup> Indeed, the concessions southern white male slaveholders made for their slave mistresses had limits, as can be gathered from court records in New Orleans where such slaves lived in large numbers during the antebellum period. Helene, one slave mistress who lived so much like a free woman in France that she demanded her freedom upon her return to the United States, serves as an example. Helene apparently not only made many demands, she withheld sex from her owner. Tired of her presence, her master called her “a drunken, worthless wench” who was “unwilling or unable to render any valuable services” that would warrant his continued support. Helene “might go away for what

On February 2nd, 1840, White sent Ballard the final letter that he preserved. In it, she announced that the house in which she and Johnson had lived, presumably the one Bruster had tried to pay off, had been sold from underneath them. This distressed her, but something else did even more. A local woman named Mary January was trying to destroy her reputation. White maintained that she was “innocent of everything” that this woman had “so maliciously reported.” She went on to say that January herself was the shameful one. Said White, “I never condesend [sic] to associate with a woman like Mary January’s character.”

It is worth it to speculate on the accusations that alarmed White. While it is uncertain whether Mary January was white or black, she was probably a woman of color, as is suggested by a letter Ballard received nearly fifteen years later.<sup>81</sup> A man named P.B. January wrote him to request information on a “yellow woman” earlier purchased from Ballard by his uncle. A court determined that this woman was born free, kidnapped and sold into slavery and should thus be manumitted. The letter writer may have been the former owner, or knew the former owner, of Mary January, who likewise might have been or been related to the woman.<sup>82</sup>

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she is worth,” for he had no objection, he added and indeed, Helene was freed. Helene’s case bears some resemblance to that of Delphine, another New Orleans slave. Delphine’s owner left instructions that she be set free upon his death, but his wife refused to carry out this wish because Delphine was rumored to be carrying her owner’s child when he died. Delphine was put on trial in an attempt to prove that she did not deserve to be free. Witnesses characterized her as woman who frequented one apothecary so often that men patronizing this shop were well acquainted with her. One customer was in the habit of joking with Delphine, something she did not welcome. Unhappy over this man’s attention, Delphine touched his face in a threatening manner and laughed. Outraged, the proprietor told her owner if he did not whip her, he would report her behavior to local authorities. Her master reminded the proprietor of his patrons’ participation the ordeal. This story was retold in court and proved so persuasive in presenting her unfavorably, Delphine lost the case. Judith Kelleher Schafer, *Becoming Free, Remaining Free: Manumission and Enslavement in New Orleans, 1846-1862* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 25 and 67.

<sup>81</sup> The Census offers no clear answers. There were several women named Mary January, but none living in Cincinnati in 1840. A 60-year-old Virginia-born white housekeeper bearing this name lived in Greene, Ohio, about 60 miles north of Cincinnati, in 1880; a Virginia-born black woman bearing this name lived in Claiborne County, MS, in 1870; a widowed 60-year-old Tennessee-born white woman with this name lived in Saint Mary, Louisiana, in 1901; U.S. Bureau of the Census 1870; 1880 and 1901; P.B. January to Rice Ballard, November 29, 1854, Folder 207, Ballard Papers.

<sup>82</sup> The Census and city directories provide nothing that makes her identity firm.

What had Mary January said to make White so upset? Where had she met January? Had it been on the riverfront? Certainly White referred to January's character and the city's riverfront, which was filled with men and women, among them prostitutes, notorious for having questionable character. If White had met January there, what was White doing there? This line of questions underscores the fact that we will never be sure the exact nature of White's employment in Cincinnati. She may have told her former master she and Johnson were taking in washing and sewing or going out to work by the week as domestics. But there remains the possibility, however slim, that at least one of them, White, earned her living in an occupation that was considered less respectable, even if she was, say, a waitress in a waterfront tavern. It is also possible that she had, while working as a domestic, engaged in a relationship with a local man – an African American butler or white business owner - whom she had met in such a setting. If she had done so while also maintaining a relationship with her former master, she had good reason to worry. If there continued to be an attachment on his part, and the fact that he saved her letters, suggests that he did, he may well have been angered enough to, as January suggested, end his financial support.

White obviously found herself in a difficult position. Let us presume that she committed the wrong of which she was accused. She may have decided that seeking local support by whatever means was necessary, given the uncertainty of Ballard's assistance. Relying on another man (or men) may have been nothing less than a survival strategy: a means of meeting the challenges in which she found herself as an unmarried mother of color. Yet her entreaty to Ballard not to give credence to January's accusations also suggests that if she did, she had not succeeded in securing an alternative source of help. Certainly the odds of attaining a secure, affluent life were stacked against her, and her compulsion to remain in Ballard's good graces, as

well as her anger toward January, clearly demonstrate awareness of the perilousness of her situation.

She was particularly angry at January, who evidently knew Ballard herself, and who apparently made her accusations regarding White's behavior directly to him. January further claimed to White that Ballard had told her that he would no longer support White, Johnson, and the children. Under these circumstances, and given that January was probably of equal or lesser social standing, White must have felt few qualms about trying to tarnish January's name. Besides, there was little to lose in making counter-accusations against her accuser, and much to be gained if Ballard believed her rather than January. If he, as January claimed, planned to end his support, the prospects were dire because White and Johnson's earnings were still inadequate to meet their living costs. White told Ballard that she (and we can assume Johnson and the children) had found themselves "almost destitute in a strange land."<sup>83</sup> Indeed, White's ongoing fears about losing his support were encapsulated in her characterization of Cincinnati as a "strange land." The use of the words "strange" and "stranger" was not uncommon in her day. Levi Coffin's memoir is peppered with those two words. For example, he described a fellow abolitionist who helped slaves escape by entering "a neighborhood where he was an entire stranger...and gain[ing] knowledge of the slaves he wished to take away."<sup>84</sup> While use of the word "stranger" in this instance seems appropriate because the man was in fact unknown in the community, it also appears as a commentary on the unsettled atmosphere of a still young nation in the mid-nineteenth century. The same may have been true of other parts of the Western world. "I reflected that I was a stranger in the great city of London," Coffin said of a visit to meet other

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<sup>83</sup> Avenia White to Rice Ballard, February 2, 1840, Folder 31, Ballard Papers.

<sup>84</sup> Coffin, 434.

abolitionists in England.<sup>85</sup> In both instances, he appears to have been remarking on the ways in which “Americans” felt geographically “outside” and perhaps politically “outside” as well.

Such readings take on additional meanings, when the word was used by a racialized body that was also female, one like White who was plagued with worries that white men like Coffin and his fellow abolitionists never had to consider. In calling Cincinnati a “strange land,” White suggested many fears, among them, those of being molested or of being sold back into slavery. She laid bare, too, her political marginalization, one that made clear the inequities suffered by people of color, especially women of color, who were relegated to the lowest occupational positions in Cincinnati. The same was true in other northern urban areas before the Civil War.<sup>86</sup> Even though she was a free woman, as an African American she could not hold office, pay a poll tax, or testify against a white person. Though African American men could vote in 1800, when the city’s black population was a mere 337, that right was rescinded in 1802 when the first of Ohio’s “black” laws were passed.<sup>87</sup> All African Americans were thus outside of the body politic, and this was doubly true of women of color. Though White never said as much in direct terms, her use of the words “strange land” could have expressed such a sentiment. She was saying that she was truly an outsider.

Her inability to exercise the rights of citizenship was due to the denial of freedom to all but white males – and not even all of them – in nineteenth century America, Cincinnati included. The founding male settlers of Ohio (and America for that matter), established laws constraining the participation of women, non-whites, of non-Christians, of non-Protestants, often of non-native born white English-speaking Protestants, in the body politic leaving native-born WASP

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 658.

<sup>86</sup> Leon F. Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 4 and 69.

<sup>87</sup> *Journal of the Convention of the Territory of the United States North-West of the Ohio* (Chillicothe, OH: N. Willis, 1802), 30-32.

males to reap the rewards of the deck they had stacked in their own favor. In this context the tensions between native whites and foreign-born whites in antebellum Cincinnati is worth recalling. One newspaper editor lumped together both German and African American immigrants to the city as “undesirables.” But even non-English speaking, non-Protestant foreigners were more tolerated by native born whites, and thus enjoyed greater “freedom.” For instance, moral reformers in New York City knew how far to push its German immigrants because this supposed “proverbially stolid and law-abiding” group could “react violently” if anyone “tampered” with their Sunday family tradition of visiting the neighborhood beer garden.<sup>88</sup> Germans received something from native whites that African Americans, especially unmarried African American mothers, even ones who had earlier enjoyed the favor of white masters, generally could not expect in the urban north: charity.

White’s difficulties in Cincinnati also resonate with Benedict Anderson’s argument that no borders should be presumed for minority subjects who developed different affinities to a space than did dominant groups. Those who felt this way did so to the point that even a country, much less a city, was construed as an “imagined” community to which some residents, but by no means all, “belonged.”<sup>89</sup> Certainly, White did not understand Cincinnati in the manner that Eliza Potter, the mulatto hairdresser, did. Though a single mother of two with two marriages behind her, Potter’s more cosmopolitan outlook was partly an outcome of her having served well-to-do Americans and foreigners.<sup>90</sup> Relocating to Cincinnati from Buffalo in 1840, by 1860 Potter

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<sup>88</sup> Stevenson, 3-4 and 261.

<sup>89</sup> For more, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities, (Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism)* (New York: Verso, 1983, 1991).

<sup>90</sup> Potter, li; Year:1860;Census Place: Cincinnati Ward 14, Hamilton, Ohio; Roll: M653\_976, Page:373, Image:282, Family History Library Film: 803976.



owned a \$2,000 house in the “heart” of the city. The house in the city’s 14<sup>th</sup> ward, was, as she shared, a dwelling “under my own vine and fig tree.”<sup>91</sup>

Potter’s earnings from having done the hair of whites in and outside Cincinnati, sometimes in “seasonal retreats” like Saratoga Springs, NY, accrued in such a manner that she was able to see the world.<sup>92</sup> Said Potter in her self-authored 1859 narrative, “I [was] determined to travel, and to gratify my long-cherished desire to see the world – and especially the *Western* world.”<sup>93</sup> Here she italicized the word “Western,” indicating her awareness of its significance to American culture, although its significance to her personally is less clear. Perhaps Western for her meant that which stemmed from Europe, namely England and France, and the continental United States, for these were the places she visited. Given her ability to comprehend her world in this geographical manner, Potter probably understood the earlier frontier aspect of Cincinnati. But White’s worldview was probably narrower. Her relocation to Cincinnati had been the decision of her white master. Once there, she saw the bustling aspect of the city, the German immigrants whose language she did not know, and myriad other things that made her realize it was very different from all that she had known previously.

It is hardly surprising that White felt like an outsider in this new space. Interestingly, though their social and economic positions in the United States were very different, Potter, too, felt like an alien when she left the States. After traveling in Europe, though she had met whites who seemed to welcome her into their world, the astute Potter realized that their demeanor would change if they knew she had only ten dollars. As long as she had ready money, their friendship was everywhere to be had. Once it was gone, she was friendless. Said Potter, “I felt like a stranger in a strange land.” Like White (but not Coffin), Potter linked destitution to not

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<sup>91</sup> Potter, 18.

<sup>92</sup> Potter, xxxv.

<sup>93</sup> Potter, 11.

belonging. She equated her outsider status to her financial status. She undoubtedly also felt different because she was a woman of color from the United States though what that meant for her as an “American” traveler is unclear. Though independent and well-traveled, she may not have felt safe simply because she was alone without a partner and without community. Certainly while on the “rolling waters” of a Canadian lake, one that carried the Governor General of Canada and other passengers of note, Potter wrote of such isolation:

I sat upon the deck, surrounded by people of color; but being a stranger among strangers, I had no claim upon the notice of any one; and I gazed out, with somewhat saddened feelings, upon the waste of waters before me.<sup>94</sup>

Another African American woman, this one much more famous, shared Potter and White’s loneliness. Upon reaching Philadelphia in 1849 as a runaway slave, Harriet Tubman, too, said she, felt like “a stranger in a strange land.”<sup>95</sup> Her angst may have been a consequence of poverty, but it was also attributable to isolation. Overwhelmed by being away from her friends and family, Tubman returned to Maryland to aid in their escape.

White’s uneasiness might have also been an outcome of simply being in Cincinnati, a city that bordered Kentucky, a slave state. That proximity carried with it the constant threat that catchers might kidnap and resell her, Johnson, or their children into slavery. Many white northerners, some aided by black spies situated along the Ohio River, were eager to re-enslave free people of color.<sup>96</sup> Suggestive of the swiftness of slave catchers was the case of Margaret Garner a few years later after White’s 1838 arrival. No sooner had this mulatto woman arrived as a fugitive in Cincinnati with her husband, children and eleven other slaves than she was

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<sup>94</sup> At least one nineteenth century writer has hinted that Potter was so lonely, she placed an ad in the February 1, 1850 issue of the Cincinnati *Daily Commercial* announcing her availability for marriage. Potter, lii and 12.

<sup>95</sup> Sarah Bradford, *Harriet Tubman: The Moses of Her People*. (New York: Corinth Books, 1971), 20.

<sup>96</sup> Bigham, 23.

discovered in the home of one of her relatives and returned to bondage. So dramatic was Garner's story, it was chronicled in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.<sup>97</sup>

White's loneliness may also have stemmed from Cincinnati being very different from the rural environment to which she was accustomed. Moving from an agricultural environment to an urban one like Cincinnati probably required as much adjustment for her as it did for countless freed people of color (and others) who migrated from rural areas into towns and cities after the Civil War. Seeing a large number of whites was doubtless a first for most rural and southern blacks who made the journey.<sup>98</sup> In 1830, 52,317 people lived in Hamilton County, Ohio, which included Cincinnati, almost double the 28,797 who lived in Henrico County, Virginia, which included Richmond, and more than three times the 14,937 who lived in Adams County, Mississippi, which included Natchez. Even more telling of how different these cities' populations were is that 6,055 people lived in Richmond proper and just 2,789 in Natchez, compared to almost 25,000 in Cincinnati. The last was home to 46,338 people by 1840.<sup>99</sup> Given the population density, one can easily see why she might have been overwhelmed by Cincinnati.

Still, Cincinnati had as many redeeming qualities as it had unpleasant ones, though the former were likely ones she did not directly experience. While Lexington, Kentucky, had been the intellectual center of the Ohio Valley in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, Cincinnati had taken that position in 1830, becoming the valley's cultural, scientific and intellectual hub. Because the city was compact, White might have seen the white families

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<sup>97</sup> For more, see Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987); "Stampede of Slaves: A Tale of Horror" *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, January 29, 1856; Steven Weisenburger, *Modern Medea: A Family Story of Slavery and Child Murder from the Old South* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), and Coffin, *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin*, 542-547.

<sup>98</sup> Bigham, 7 and 299.

<sup>99</sup> U.S. 1830 Census at <http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/1830a-01.pdf> (accessed October 24, 2012); Historical, Demographic, Economic, and Social Data: The United States, 1790-1970 (Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research) at <http://www.virginiaplaces.org/population/pop1830numbers.html> (accessed October 24, 2012); Taylor, *Frontiers of Freedom*, 19-20.

accumulating wealth on the sweat of slaughterhouse and foundry laborers. This monied population lived in lavishly decorated townhouses, some listening to essays by Harriet Beecher, others to poetry. Still others were enthralled with James E. Murdoch's delivery of Shakespearean sonnets at the John Bates National Theatre. The city was so vibrant that one newspaper boasted of its medical college, hospital, circulating library, reading-rooms, churches, and schools. It even had an Academy of Fine Arts.

If the grimier aspects of the city bothered her, White unknowingly shared such a sentiment with Frances Trollope, one British entrepreneur and author who years earlier complained that Cincinnati wanted for "domes, towers, and steeples." Trollope complained, too, of the pigs that ran wild, eating waste that residents had dumped into the middle of streets. She was also bothered by a poor drainage system that was overwhelmed by rain showers washing rubbish downhill from higher streets.<sup>100</sup>

These drainage and debris issues so besieged the city, local leaders introduced proposals to clean Cincinnati.<sup>101</sup> Perhaps White knew of the city officials' efforts, even if she only heard of them second-hand via other African American domestics whose outsider-within status permitted them to hear and see much in white homes and businesses.<sup>102</sup> But that which seemed urgent for more powerful whites possibly shored up the degree to which she was outside their world. While they concerned themselves with drains and the lack of a steeple on a city skyline, she worried about more practical things like finding suitable shelter, owning a bed, and one Southern white man's support for herself and her child. Such worries were in all likelihood compounded by her realization that he was getting married and probably needing every cent for his "white" family.

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<sup>100</sup> Tucker, 10-11; Trollope, 36 and 39-40.

<sup>101</sup> *Cincinnati Republican*, June 15, 1838; *Cincinnati Republican*, October 19, 1838; *Cincinnati: A Student's Guide to Localized History* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1969), 8-11.

<sup>102</sup> Collins, 11.

Ballard's new life was an entirely different world from the one she had occupied, one that she might have glimpsed from greater proximity had he kept her and the others in the South. Before she signed off in this final surviving letter to Ballard, she wished him success, "and all the happiness in this world," adding, "[If] you have forgotten me[,] I hope you have not forgotten the children." Then, she stated that he should write her in care of "Mr. Dennis Hill. She ended her letter, "Your most humble [servant] A. White PS Elizabeth is well and going to school."<sup>103</sup>

This letter, like her earlier ones, raises many significant issues. First, White was addressing her former master in a commanding way. In her earlier letters, she had never revealed her self-image. Now she had. She said she was upright. She stated that she had conducted herself in a way that garnered the respect of others. And she felt compelled to state this again in order to stay in his good graces and continue to receive financial support. Her ability to state such things allows us to see how the successful workings of pillow talk, or the influence she had on her former master, required her to be engaged. She could not merely be a passive individual who only asked for financial support. She needed to also be a woman who was aware of her place in a society where appearances mattered. She needed to convey such attentiveness in public, but also in a private space like a letter to a man who was well aware of the judgments of others. After all, he had been a domestic slave trader, an individual who sat on one of the lowest rungs of the social ladder in white society.

Slave dealing was considered an undignified occupation for a number of reasons. Many people on both sides of the Atlantic detested slave traders on the grounds that slavery was immoral. Slave trading was also condemned because many regarded slave dealers as ill-bred, uncouth people. In fact, the brutish side of their occupation was considered indicative of their low character. The experiences of a British geologist who visited the United States in 1834 speak

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<sup>103</sup> Avenia White to Rice Ballard, February 2, 1840, Folder 31, Ballard Papers.

to this point. During his stay, he shared a stagecoach with another man who used the foulest language, and thus was depicted as “a compound of everything vulgar and revolting.” After the passenger stepped down from the stagecoach, the Englishman asked the driver for his name and was told that he was a slave trader.<sup>104</sup>

Condemnation of slave traders was nuanced by class and race interests. The white elite’s deliberate distancing from domestic slave traders can be attributed to traders flaunting that which others preferred leaving unsaid: white men’s desire for black women. The business records of slave traders are especially helpful in documenting such lust. Domestic slave dealers were also condemned by many whites for allegedly transporting ill or unruly slaves from the Upper South to the Deep South.<sup>105</sup> Deep South states had nervously watched the arrival of slaves from Upper South states.<sup>106</sup> Local authorities in the lower region increasingly took this position following the 1831 Nat Turner revolt. By the late 1830s, such white panic was especially pronounced in Mississippi, where lynchings increased because of fear of a slave revolt.<sup>107</sup> As he moved into the planting class, Ballard’s dealings in domestic slave trading might have had an impact on how he dealt with other whites who saw him uneasily. Even though he had authority as a white man over his ex-slave mistresses, he was doubtless still cautious, which compelled White to be thoughtful

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<sup>104</sup> That said, abolitionists’ earliest antislavery efforts in the late 1830s relied on publicizing human cruelty such as rape and maiming on plantations, not by traders inside the slave market. Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 24-25, 54-55, 217 and Tadman, 3.

<sup>105</sup> Telling of the general concern prospective slave buyers had over slave dealers’ dishonesty are the many lawsuits filed against Lexington, Kentucky, slave dealer Louis Robards during the 1850s. Prospective buyers “declared [Robards] had sold them defective slaves, most of them consumptive victims.” Robards was also accused of failing to honor other contracts. In January 1855, Isaac Shelby petitioned the Fayette Circuit Court to order Robards to give him \$102.75 because Robards allegedly failed to pay him for the delivery of wood. “Privately Operated ‘Slave Jail’ stood on West Short Street 100 Years Ago,” *Lexington Leader*, September 19, 1952; J. Winston Coleman scrapbook, v. 28, p. 34; J. Winston Coleman, 1799-1983, 1799, Transylvania University; *Shelby v. Robards*, 1288 (E.D. Ky. 1855).

<sup>106</sup> Ballard was so worried over the state of Mississippi challenging his own sale of slaves going back to 1833 that he contacted Kentucky statesman and confidante Henry Clay. Clay predicted a state ruling favoring slave dealers. Indeed, the state’s Supreme Court made slaveholders the responsible parties in such sales. Henry Clay to Rice Ballard, June 23, 1841, Folder 42, Ballard Papers.

<sup>107</sup> For more, see Rothman, *Flush Times and Fever Dreams: A Story of Capitalism and Slavery in the Age of Jackson*.

about her demeanor lest she upset him. Indeed, in order to lend weight to her claims of respectability in her final surviving letter to Ballard, White invoked the name of someone whose prominence in Cincinnati's black community marked him as a man of moral stature: Dennis Hill, a local black porter.<sup>108</sup> Though this was a relatively humble position in the big scheme of things, it was among the most prestigious occupations open to African American men in mid-nineteenth century America and made Hill a member of the city's black middle class. That he was possibly willing to provide a fixed address for White to receive letters was significant, for doing so put her and Johnson within his circle of association. It should be noted that the handwriting in this letter is different from that of White's earlier letters. Hill not only provided a fixed address, but may have written this fifth letter. We can envision how she sat beside him as she had once sat beside Bruster, dictating her words.

Hill was not merely a porter. During the 1830s, he helped slaves escape via the Underground Railroad as president of the Cincinnati Union Society of Colored Persons. In fact, his presence at this juncture of White's life and, for that matter, White's connection with Bruster is noteworthy because the latter's boarding house was on Elm Street between Fifth and Sixth Streets, within steps of the house on the corner of Elm and Sixth Street that abolitionist Levi Coffin would buy nine years later. Coffin's house was also a key depot on the Underground Railroad.<sup>109</sup> Bruster might have been in the forefront of the city's antislavery community. Certainly other black-owned boarding houses in the city often provided refuge for escaped slaves. Perhaps hers did, too.<sup>110</sup> Her home in relation to Coffin's eventual home, and the

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<sup>108</sup> Hill lived on Race between Court and Canal. He worked as a porter for W. R. Foster, a domestic dry goods merchant whose business was located at No. 56 Main Street. *The Cincinnati Directory Advertiser for the Years 1836-7*, (Cincinnati: J.H. Woodruff, 1836), 82, and David Henry Shaffer, *The Cincinnati, Covington, Newport and Fulton Directory for 1840* (Cincinnati: J.B. & R.P. Donogh, 1839), 182 and 472.

<sup>109</sup> Taylor, *Frontiers of Freedom*, 152.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

connections to Fletcher and Hill, invites further speculation about Ballard's relationship to these six ex-slaves. Did he deliberately surround them with people sympathetic to the antislavery cause, whose sympathy would presumably extend to individual ex-slaves? If he did, it is further suggestive that White and Johnson had not been prostitutes (or if they were, they were very discreet about it).

If Ballard did see to their safety in this way, though he had engaged in a reprehensible profession, he seems to have been able to separate his business affairs from his emotional ones. Consider his early days as a slave trader. In 1832, a cholera epidemic in Natchez threatened to wipe out the slaves he and his business partners shipped from Virginia. He urged Isaac Franklin, one of his associates, to abandon these slaves. "We had better loose [sic] them all and begin again than loose ourselves," Ballard wrote in one of the few letters he copied for his own records.<sup>111</sup> What did he mean when he wrote "abandon"? He might have meant exactly what he said. Franklin should leave the slaves to their fates and save himself. This decision does not suggest his sympathy for these slaves' plight.

When Ballard's suggestion to abandon the slaves under his and Franklin's care are juxtaposed against his regard for the slaves he freed in Cincinnati, a duality appears. It was possible, maybe even easy, for him to be callous regarding the fate of slaves he did not know. These people were nothing more than statistics on a business ledger. It was impossible, however, to be similarly indifferent, much less callous, regarding the fate of two individuals he had known intimately for years, who had shared his bed, and who had born his children. And even though he may not have had anti-slavery sympathies, he may have decided, on purely pragmatic grounds, that abolitionists were the most trustworthy people to see to the welfare of two women and four children that he genuinely cared about. Through him, these ex-slaves had acquired some measure

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<sup>111</sup> Ballard to Isaac Franklin, December 2, 1832, Folder 8, Ballard Papers.



of power even in the face of their ongoing racial oppression. Their hidden intimate moments with him had resulted in his emotional and indeed financial investment in their future. Such was the nature of the pillow talk between some Southern white men and certain slaves. Such talk enabled certain ex-slaves to enhance their position when white men discreetly offered specific security of which others were well aware.

For more proof, we may consider the fact that White expressed in her final letter her concern that he would no longer “support” them. It appears that Ballard had continued to send aid to her, Johnson and their children for more than a year and a half after he freed them. That he did carries large implications about sexual relations across the color line in antebellum America. Though society dictated one behavior publicly, white and black bodies often interacted differently in private. Ballard and his mistresses, White in particular, had reached an unrecorded and perhaps unstated agreement concerning his financial support. Like whites and blacks in early America, Ballard, White, and Johnson, had bonded in ways that troubled their contemporaries. Certainly Isaac Franklin was troubled. Perhaps this was why he suggested that White and Johnson “earn their keep” by running a brothel. He was reminding Ballard, in case he forgot, that women of color were sexual partners, not legitimate mates.<sup>112</sup>

Even if he agreed with Franklin, his freeing and supporting them suggest Ballard’s convictions that they and their (and his) children deserved his philanthropy. White signaled as much again in the post-script of her final surviving letter when she mentioned that Elizabeth, one of the children, was in school. In dictating this sentence, White understood, as most aspiring to a higher position did, that education was one of the routes to a better and more respectable life. Even if Ballard had not allowed her and Johnson to learn how to read and write while they were

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<sup>112</sup>Franklin in this instance may have been invoking the twisted logic of paternalism in which slaveholders believed they were demonstrating care by providing shelter and meals in exchange for a slave’s labor when in actuality slaveholders were being coercive in setting up such an arrangement. For more, see Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 22-23.

in the South, and in close proximity of other whites with whom he had to live and conduct business, their (and his) children could because he had set them free.

That said, letter writing is a type of performance. The reader has only to note how White always addressed Ballard in a business-like way, as was the case when she used the phrase “humble servant” in the closing of this final letter. This phrase and variants such as “your most obedient servant” frequently appeared in antebellum business correspondence. But in her case, this sign-off conjured imagery of her former status as a slave. Even if it had been added at the urging of those who wrote her letters, she needed to include such a closing. She needed to invoke his dominant position, especially if she hoped for his support in the future.

There is a final point of huge import in this letter that is less easy to articulate, but warrants attention. It concerns relations between women of color in Cincinnati. White had expressed concern about a local woman who was attacking her reputation, a woman who appears to have been a person of color. No matter who she was, she and White were certainly at odds with one another. Their feud demonstrates that some women of color during this period behaved as rivals or competitors (or worse) even though they suffered from shared prejudices, discrimination, and hostility from society at large. Their willingness to exhibit solidarity in the face of those external challenges should not be assumed.

Like other Americans in adverse circumstances, these black women’s commitment to each other waxed and waned depending on the dilemma before them. Bruster needed Ballard’s assistance and in order to get it, she helped his ex-slaves. Johnson endured White’s obviously closer tie to Ballard because she, too, needed his assistance. January needed nothing from White. If anything, she evidently needed Ballard’s help herself although the reasons are obscure, and set out to damage White’s standing with him. She may not have been deliberately devious in doing

so. She, like White may have decided that she deserved better from a society that had helped others, namely whites, at the expense of African Americans. If she did, her position in this regard is reminiscent of Sethe, the ex-slave woman character on which Toni Morrison painted the life of Margaret Garner. Said Sethe to a potential love interest on the issue of her flight to the city, she was “trying to put my babies where they would be safe.”<sup>113</sup> White and perhaps and January, too, were trying to do the same: keep their children safe in Cincinnati.

White and Johnson relied on each other and Ballard, almost certainly the father of one, if not all, of the four children. But these women probably relied on him with greater urgency than they had earlier as time passed. By the time White wrote her last surviving letter, she and Johnson were no longer living together under the same roof. In fact, only White remained with Bruster in 1840, at least according to that year’s Census. But although Johnson was gone, she and White either stayed in touch, or at the very least, were aware of each other’s circumstances. We know this because White was aware that Elizabeth, Johnson’s daughter, was in school. In light of the established bond between these two, White and Johnson probably stayed in touch to continue providing child care for each other during a time when both knew Ballard’s support might end.

Given the familiar way White addressed her former master, she had long discovered ways to deal with such a difficulty and others ones, perhaps among them, his decision to become a planter and get married. It is likely that he initiated and she acquiesced to their relocation to Cincinnati. First, she, Johnson and their children would be free, and second, she seems to have had faith that she could rely on him, though for reasons we will never know. If she did, she was not alone. Levi Coffin recounted his dealings with a 21-year-old mulatto woman who had been

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<sup>113</sup> Morrison, 10.

freed by a white uncle and sent to Oberlin College for schooling.<sup>114</sup> She soon asked to be sent back to Louisiana. It appears she had been the mistress of a New Orleans merchant who had given her dresses and jewelry. Her white beau also sent money to Ohio, which distracted her further.<sup>115</sup> She eventually left for New Orleans and her benefactor. White, in time, appears to have done the same, which is to say, returned to the South. And there, it seems, she died.

On May 19, 1851, R.F. Morgan, the manager of a plantation in which Ballard had a financial interest, wrote him a letter announcing the death of a woman. This news was at the beginning of the letter, suggesting its importance to Ballard, who evidently had asked to be filled in on the woman's condition because she had been ill for a while. Ballard's plantation managers and overseers tended to begin their letters with news about the status of crops and the weather before moving on to information about the health and condition of his slaves.<sup>116</sup> Morgan relayed that the deceased had experienced "bloody flux which she was unprepared to stand."<sup>117</sup>

The woman appears to have been White for two reasons. First, she is not listed in subsequent Censuses or Cincinnati directories. Second, she may be the woman mentioned in the letter Ballard received from Morgan. While the letter is in worse condition than most in the Ballard papers, the name of the deceased began with a capital "A." The following two letters are more indistinct. These appear as "rv..." or "ve..."

White may have found living in Cincinnati to be so stressful that she returned to the South to be closer to Ballard. If she did, she proved freedom was never a "philosophical

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<sup>114</sup> In 1834, Oberlin College, which was located just outside Cleveland, became the first institution of higher learning in the United States to extend an education to students of color. Cally L. White, *Permission to Remain Among Us: Education for Blacks in Oberlin, Ohio, 1880-1914* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2002) xii.

<sup>115</sup> Coffin, 479.

<sup>116</sup> Ballard had an interest in several cotton plantations in Louisiana, Arkansas, and Mississippi. Among his Mississippi holdings were properties in Warrenton, Claiborne, Adams and Madison counties, near the Mississippi River. A representative sample of letters in his business correspondence may be found in Folder 61, Box 2; Folder 110, Box 3; Folder 113, Box 3; Folder 401, Box 11, Ballard Papers. Also see, "Collection Overview," Ballard Papers; 1850 U.S. Federal Census; 1860 U.S. Federal Census.

<sup>117</sup> R.F. Morgan to Ballard, May 19, 1851, Folder 177, Ballard Papers.

absolute,” but rather something that could be seen as “locally and ideologically conceived,” a position that even Harriet Jacobs, another ex-slave mistress, understood when she refused to leave her relatives in the South. Instead, she hid in grandmother’s attic. It was uncomfortable, but she could hear relatives and look out a window, hoping things would someday change.<sup>118</sup>

Reservations over this guesswork concerning White’s return to the South, which is based largely on a letter in poor condition, are in order. Maybe White did stay in Cincinnati and found a way to survive as a seamstress or as a domestic worker. Though the odds against her were high, she might have even made it into the African American middle class. Perhaps she married a local man – one of wealth or otherwise - and lived a “respectable” life. If she did, she would presumably have changed her surname. She might also have remained unattached, cutting ties even to Ballard. Perhaps she adopted the independent though lonely life led by Eliza Potter, the hairdresser. If not a seamstress or employed in another “respectable” profession, White might have turned to prostitution.

As white settlement spread across the Appalachians into the Ohio River valley, prostitution accompanied it. Certainly from Cincinnati’s earliest days, prostitution was ever-present. Among those engaging in it were “ruined tramps from New York,” who allegedly entertained men awaiting boats arriving at unpredictable hours. By the 1830s, two African American pimps, Luke Cord and Richard Gatewood, worked the area with their own women, although by 1861, participants in interracial sex faced one hundred dollar fines and possible jail terms. In the postbellum period, Mary Pearl and Mary Herron, two white madams, cornered the Cincinnati market, demonstrating that regardless of the law, prostitution was inevitable wherever men and money were found together.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Li, 4 and 6.

<sup>119</sup> Taylor, *Frontiers of Freedom*, 196; Kenny, 295.

The nineteenth century sex trade was equally ubiquitous in Louisville, another populous Ohio Valley community. As early as 1832, a Louisville councilman complained of local robbers, felons, pickpockets, swindlers, vagrants who consorted with the *Femmes de Pave* who were “nightly to be seen on Main” and neighboring cross streets. Prostitution flourished in Louisville by the time of the Civil War owing to the large military presence in the city. One Louisville madam, Lizzie Manning was so successful that she invested in Florida orange groves and by 1886, relocated to Chicago.<sup>120</sup> Not only rivers, but horseracing drew men, money, and prostitution, to the Ohio River valley. In Lexington during the late nineteenth century Madame Belle Breezing owned an elegant three-story brick brothel in which she evidently catered to patrons in search of interracial sex. She reportedly “collected” her girls from all over the country, even from abroad.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> John E. Kleber, ed., “Prostitution,” *The Encyclopedia of Louisville* (Louisville: The University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 31-31.

<sup>121</sup> Breezing is said to have been the inspiration for Bell Watling, a character in Margaret Mitchell’s novel “Gone with the Wind.”

The continuous presence of men and money contributed to the growth of the sex trade in the lower south as well. In the years surrounding the Civil War, four Tennessee urban areas – Chattanooga, Knoxville, Nashville and Memphis – experienced an increase in prostitution. After the war, Chattanooga, in particular, witnessed the arrival of “sporting” white women eager to cater to railroad workers. Later, soldiers training at nearby Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia before and after the Spanish-American War were frequent customers. There prostitutes formed “known,” but unacknowledged communities, which “under the right conditions” allowed them to create a “surrogate family life” reminiscent of unmarried women of color boarding together with their children in antebellum Cincinnati.

During the postbellum period, iron ore deposits in Birmingham, Alabama, and newly built rail lines drew wealthy men desiring to open businesses and poor ones looking for work. Many of them were doubtless patrons of Louise Wooster, a local madam whose “great love” was John Wilkes Booth, the actor who assassinated Abraham Lincoln. Here, as elsewhere, white feminists led the charge against the sex trade, some of them driven by the memory of white men’s relations with slave women prior to the Civil War.

The most well-known red light district in the nation was inarguably New Orleans’ Storyville, whose existence between the years 1898 and 1917 continues to fascinate writers and readers alike. The city’s origins as a site for prostitution can be traced to the French Kings Louis XIV and XV who were said to have transported to Louisiana, their new colony, hundreds of “disreputable” women. By the first decade of the twentieth century, arriving single men were handed tiny guidebooks, directing them to local prostitutes, among them, Lula White, “Queen of the Octoroons.” Both in and outside New Orleans, however, lax or non-enforcement or the outright legalization of prostitution during the postbellum years created favorable conditions, allowing madams to earn enough money to purchase homes until 1920 when the “Golden Age of the Brothel in America,” as researchers have called it, ended. J. Winston Coleman, *Belle Breezing: A Famous Lexington Bawd* (Lexington: Winburn Press, 1966 and 1980), 8-9 and 112-120; James L. Baggett, *The Autobiography of a Magdalen* (1911; Birmingham: Birmingham Public Library Press, 2005), 11-12; Ellin Sterne, “Prostitution in Birmingham, Alabama, 1890-1925,” Unpublished MA thesis, Samford University, Birmingham, 1977; Al Rose, Storyville, *New Orleans: Being an Authentic*,

Had Avenia White been a prostitute, she obviously figured into an occupation with a long history. Then again, as her final letter suggests, perhaps White had tried to live an upright life. Finding survival difficult in Cincinnati, she left for the South sometime in the 1840s. If she returned to slave territory, she appears to figure into the southern defense of slavery as a superior system because slaves seemed to live more securely in the South than wage-earners in the North. But applying such a logic to women of color like White may be short-sighted. In saying this, I wish to highlight the fragile nature and highly variable concepts like “freedom.” White may have felt more “free” in a place where she might more easily secure financial support and a more stable life. She might have felt more “free” in a place where she could maintain a way of life that differed from other slaves, even other blacks, because she could use her former master’s personal interest in her to her advantage. While many bondsmen and bondwomen around her engaged in everyday resistance that may have netted them only stolen food or late-night flights to a nearby plantation to see a loved one, White took a little more before and possibly after her time in Cincinnati. We may recall again the words of Isaac Franklin, Ballard’s old slave trading crony, who wanted her and Johnson to “earn their keep” running a brothel in Richmond. That he did served as testimony to the ways in which women of African descent were seen as being promiscuous and thus most fit for such a profession. This was not his worst crime. A far bigger one was his inability to see how White or Johnson could ever be worthy of being Ballard’s mistresses in the way that a white woman could be. He, as had others, denied these women virtue and any significant claim on white wealth. But in possibly returning to the South, even if she could never see her virtue restored, White claimed some of the security and stability that Ballard’s wealth provided.

If she did return to the South and died there, it is worth reviewing Ballard's actions following her death. Proceeding in this manner is useful because they suggest that her death did not occur in a vacuum, which is to say, it figured into his later conduct. White's life was enmeshed with a white man who had been both a slave trader and planter, one who was a member of the Whig party and counted among his acquaintances Henry Clay as well as Mississippi governor Anthony Quitman, and Mississippi Judge Samuel Boyd (the latter with whom he had a partnership in cotton planting). Keeping him in view allows us to further see how racial and gendered hierarchies can buckle when black and white bodies come together.

Not long after the 1851 letter announcing her death, Ballard began to spend more time in his Louisville home. But that did not last. As late as 1857, three years before his death, he visited the Deep South so often that at least one Kentucky acquaintance asked him to return to Louisville because his wife was associating with a questionable crowd. In a letter written on March 1, 1857, W.A. Ellis, Louisville pork merchant and family friend, said, "Your dear children I feel for very much... the older they get the worse it is for them as they are more liable to be injured by the wickedness of an unnatural Mother."<sup>122</sup> Two months later, Ellis wrote Ballard again, saying, "I fully believe if you will come up soon...the influences can be broken off and much good done."<sup>123</sup>

Ellis' letters seem to suggest Ballard preferred White's (or Johnson's) company to his wife. Louise seemed to be so resigned to raising their three girls on her own, that she once stated to him, "I must not look for you until I see you."<sup>124</sup> Louise's woes were especially evident when

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<sup>122</sup> W.A. Ellis to Rice Ballard, March 1, 1857, Folder 176, Ballard Papers.

<sup>123</sup> W.A. Ellis to Rice Ballard, May 18, 1857, Folder 177, Ballard Papers.

<sup>124</sup> Louise Ballard to Ballard, November 14, 1847, Folder 120, Ballard Papers. For more on Louise Ballard's suit against the U.S. government, see Rice C. Ballard Papers, Natchez Small Manuscript Collection, Box 2E549, Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas-Austin. Louise appears to have remarried soon after Ballard's death in 1860. In fact, during the Civil War, she and her new husband sued the United States to reclaim Ballard's Mississippi holdings.



we see her response to Ballard having mailed “Little Lessons for Little Learners,” a book to his eldest daughter, Ella when she was still a little girl. In giving Ella a book, and not a doll, Ballard may have been displaying his appreciation for education (something certainly not lost on his ex-slave mistress White, who cleverly mentioned how Elizabeth, Johnson’s daughter, was in school, perhaps in order to further demonstrate her and Johnson’s attempts to lead respectable lives in Cincinnati with their children). Ballard was ensuring that Ella, who later had the privilege of attending a boarding school, understood that luxuries were not the end-all. Louise may not have been in full agreement with him because one of her letters mentioned her hope that Ella would someday take dance lessons. She also mentioned the book.<sup>125</sup> It was as if receiving it had given her joy, for it assured her that Ballard cared for the children, if not her. She was not alone in feeling this. White experienced similar angst, as her letters from Cincinnati demonstrate.

It is unknown if Louise was aware of Ballard’s relations with White. If she expressed her suspicions in writing, Ballard failed to preserve them. Even if she did, Louise likely did not press the issue. As a married woman, she was more protected financially than women, black and white ones, who were living without a male head of household, something she dared not risk losing, even if her husband was often absent (or unfaithful).

At least one more African American woman in addition to White and Johnson seemed to have competed for Louise’s husband’s attention. During the summer of 1847, a slave woman named Lucile Tucker sent Ballard a letter from Bainbridge, Georgia. In her letter, Tucker indicated that she was earning good money in an unstated profession. Instead of seeking financial assistance, Tucker asked to be freed. With beautiful penmanship and perfectly spelled words in a letter that was possibly dictated, Tucker wrote, “I wish you could have emancipated me when you was last in New Orleans for that is a matter I deserve to have arranged as early as

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<sup>125</sup> Louise Ballard to Rice Ballard, December 11, 1848, Folder 135.

possible and if you could do it without putting me to the expense of returning to New Orleans, I should much prefer it for life you know is very uncertain and you might die before I can see you.”<sup>126</sup>

When and where Ballard purchased Tucker is unknown. She was, however, clearly doing better financially than White and Johnson had years earlier. There is a likely reason for this prosperity. By the time Tucker wrote her letter, Ballard’s career as a planter was well underway. His portfolio was spread broad and the economy had improved, so much so, he had allowed a slave to earn money independent of his direct supervision, giving us reason again to wonder about his motives for settling White and Johnson in Cincinnati. Or his placing Tucker in Georgia.

As was true of these two women, Tucker’s livelihood was tied to waterborne commerce. Bainbridge was a former Indian trading post. Situated in the southwestern corner of Georgia, it sits beside the Flint and Chattahoochee Rivers, two streams that flow into the Apalachicola River, which in turn empties into the Gulf of Mexico. These rivers were important thoroughfares for travelers seeking to avoid the mountains when heading west to and beyond New Orleans, and sitting astride them, Bainbridge seems to have reaped the economic benefits. Tucker likely prospered from the incoming traffic. She may have been a domestic worker. She may have been among the numerous women entrepreneurs who capitalized on the many “unattached” male travelers. One such entrepreneur was “Old Rachel,” a black woman who owned a cake shop in

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<sup>126</sup> Ballard had apparently left Lucile in the care of a man named R.W. Hanson, who had left for Mexico. Georgia, like other slave states, required enslaved people working independently to have guardians. The 1830 Census lists a Reubin Hanson in Coweta County, Georgia. The 1840 census lists a Reubin Hanson in Carroll County, Georgia. The 1850 census lists a Robert Hanson in Morgan County, Georgia. Either man’s proximity to Atlanta, a growing commercial center, could have led him to become one of Ballard’s business associates. U.S. Bureau of the Census 1830, 1840 and 1850. Lucile Tucker to R.C. Ballard, June 25, 1847, Folder 113, Ballard Papers.

Bainbridge. She also operated a dance house on Saturdays for the “Kulud ladies,” probably a prime spot for prostitution.<sup>127</sup>

Whether Tucker was a prostitute and allowed to keep her earnings, the record does not say. If she did, it was a not unheard of practice, for some white slaveholders allowed their slaves to enhance their lives by independently earning money. “Hiring out” was a practice that could be traced to the colonial era. In fact, the custom was so embedded in the southern economy that as much as ten percent of the slave population worked in hiring out situations in cities and towns across the south by the late antebellum period. Such a dynamic was sometimes an outcome of planters having surplus hands during non-planting seasons. Hiring out slaves was also not unusual for a slaveholder short on cash, or one who had recently relocated and did not need a large work force on a new plantation.<sup>128</sup> It is possible that Tucker, the Bainbridge bondswoman, hired herself out not only as domestic, but as a sex worker.

Though bondsmen and women and children risked being mistreated by their new employers, those who were permitted to keep some or all of their earnings doubtless appreciated the opportunity granted them. Some even earned enough to purchase their or their family members’ freedom.<sup>129</sup> Many - though not all - slaves also appreciated their increased mobility when hired out. Some took more risks, speaking up when they had earlier stayed quiet. Walter

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<sup>127</sup> Frank S. Jones, *History of Decatur County, Georgia* (Spartanburg: The Reprint Company, 1996), 210.

<sup>128</sup> Genovese, 290-2; Spear, 54. While some researchers have argued the enhanced agency of hired out-slaves, John Zaborney offers another position. Using Virginia as a case study, he argues that hired experiences did not differ much from non-hiring out ones. “Hiring out” was a mechanism Virginia slaveholders and white hirers used to maintain white solidarity during the antebellum period. In fact, the growing market for slave hires prompted some slaveholders to keep rather than sell their slaves south. John J. Zaborney, *Slaves for Hire: Renting Enslaved Laborers in Antebellum Virginia* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 2012), 3-8.

<sup>129</sup> Speaking to the fears slaveholders had that others might physically harm their slaves are the words of Carrie Hudson, an ex-slave in Athens, Georgia. Said 75-year-old Hudson to a WPA interview, her master did not allow “nobody to lay hands on his n----- but his own self. If any whuppin’ had to be done, he done it.” Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States From Interviews with Former Slaves*; Volume: IV; State: Georgia; Part: 2; Page Number 217, at <http://search.ancestrylibrary.com/Browse/view.aspx?dbid=1944&path=Georgia.Garey%2c+Elisha+Doc++Jones%2c+Rastus.217&sid=&gskw=Carrie+Hudson> (accessed September 25, 2012).

Johnson's study of the interactions between purchasers and slaves in the New Orleans slave market illuminates this dynamic. He recounts the story of a Mississippi physician who had plans to leave his rural community for New Orleans. In the process of moving, the physician hired out some of his slaves in Baton Rouge. His actions upset one slave, who, like many others, understood that hiring out could destabilize the black family.<sup>130</sup> This slave did not want to be separated from his wife, and told the agent orchestrating his master's move as much. In fact, the slave said he would rather die. Even though the slave was eventually sent on to Baton Rouge, he was permitted to remain with his wife for an additional six months.<sup>131</sup>

Judging by the tone of her letter, Ballard and Tucker seem to have had an understanding, the kind that might be chalked up to "pillow talk." By allowing her to work and live independently in Bainbridge, he had positioned her to earn more than enough money to live on her own. Such an existence emboldened her to request something more critical: her freedom. In fact, in this letter, she also stated that being free was "a matter I deserve to have arranged as soon as possible..." Her words suggest that Tucker regarded her manumission not as a privilege but as a right because she was perhaps remitting money to Ballard (for all we know, White and Johnson acted in a similar manner). One might infer from Tucker's own words that she was reminding him of a commitment made earlier. If he was renegeing on a stated promise, he may have done so because, while she was one of White and Johnson's successors in his bed, she had not been so in his affections.

Another slave woman, this one named Virginia, also had Ballard's attention. A pregnant Virginia wrote him from a Texas jail on May 6, 1853, pleading for his help in preventing her

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<sup>130</sup> Bigham, 20.

<sup>131</sup> Johnson, 34-35.

sale.<sup>132</sup> Virginia denounced an unnamed man who was trying to sell her and her children. Ballard must have been concerned about her plight and asked someone near her to keep him apprised of her situation. Indeed, C.M. Rutherford, a slave trader in the area sent a letter to Ballard on August 8 announcing that Virginia and one of her children had been sold, but the oldest child had not. It is unclear why Ballard preserved the letter. We may guess the slave or her owner was someone with whom he was well acquainted.

Delia, yet another woman of color, also sought Ballard's attention, but there is no evidence of relations between the two. She asked him to buy her husband.<sup>133</sup> We do not know how Ballard responded to her. We can be fairly certain, however, that she, like Virginia, Tucker, White and Johnson, observed something unusual in a man from whom we instinctively recoil. It is clear from nine letters from women of color – five of them from White - that they saw something in him that suggested he was receptive to their appeals. That he preserved their entreaties and sometimes responded is evidence that they read him correctly.

If he even raped one or all, his actions were ones with which women of color routinely wrestled while trying to survive. In spite of such brutality, certain nineteenth century black women appear strongly positioned to have led productive lives. Some did so because of their outside-within status, which enabled them to exploit the weakness of the white patriarch and by extension the entire white patriarchal structure.<sup>134</sup> While they had encountered the marketplace carrying liabilities based on their African ancestry and their gender, such positioning permitted them to maneuver strategically in order to enhance the quality of their lives. In White's case, such maneuvering may have contributed to the restlessness of a man who never seemed to stay in

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<sup>132</sup> Virginia to Ballard, May 6, 1853, Folder 192, Ballard Papers.

<sup>133</sup> Delia to Ballard, October 22, 1854, Folder 217, Ballard Papers.

<sup>134</sup> Collins, 11.

one place long.<sup>135</sup> “In any one [city] we cannot [e]specially place him,” wrote a Natchez reporter about Ballard’s wanderings between the Deep South, Lower Midwest and Midwest. The occasion for the story was a portrait commissioned in Ballard’s honor following his large 1848 donation to a local orphanage.<sup>136</sup> Ballard’s decisions clearly affected many. In this case, one monetary decision aided white children doubtlessly left orphaned by the many cholera and yellow fever outbreaks in the South during the mid-1800s.

When we put the black woman at the center of his story, we must interrogate Ballard’s authority. For a while, six slaves were on the receiving end of his rising wealth. While the hundreds, maybe thousands, more he did not free should never be far from our thoughts, we must remember these six and how their lives expand our knowledge of master-slave relationships, black-white intimacies, and a particular brand name slave. We turn now to a second case suggesting as much.

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<sup>135</sup> Davis, 7.

<sup>136</sup> “Colonel R.C. Ballard,” *Mississippi Free Trader and Natchez Gazette* (Natchez, MS), December 21, 1848, Issue 54; Col. D; John Wesley Monette, *Observations on the Epidemic Yellow Fever of Natchez, and of the South-west* (Louisville: Prentice and Weissinger, 1842).

**Chapter Four**  
**“I went to Mobile...New Orleans...up to Cincinnati”:**  
**Movement, Kinship and an “Octoroon”**

More than any other in this study, Louisa Picquet’s story reflects the milieu in which a “fancy girl” found herself, even though “fancy girl” does not appear in any surviving record concerning her life. She was sold as a teenager for a price that far exceeded that of most female slaves in her age group. She became the mistress of a white southern man who fathered her four children. And she resided for a time in New Orleans, a city where fancies existed in great numbers. As did many other slave mistresses of mixed race, when freed, she moved to Cincinnati. In this chapter, we will explore her experiences as revealed in *Louisa Picquet, The Octoroon: Or Views of Southern Domestic Life*, the 1861 narrative recounting her life, in order to expand the discussion of black kinship and the “messiness” of black-white sexual relationships during the antebellum period.<sup>1</sup>

Before tracing Picquet’s life, the circumstances involving the publication of her memoir warrant discussion. Picquet consented to revealing details about her life in order to raise the funds to purchase her mother. Her concern for her mother serves as yet another example of the importance of kinship in the black community, particularly when migration was part of the equation.<sup>2</sup> As was true of other people of color in the late nineteenth and early twentieth

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter engages the edited version of Louisa Picquet’s book published in DoVeanna S. Fulton Minor and Reginald H. Pitts, *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts: Three African American Women’s Oral Slave Narratives*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010). The original text was published in 1861 by Reverend Hiram Mattison, a Buffalo minister. See Rev. Hiram Mattison, *Louisa Picquet, The Octoroon, A Tale of Southern Slave Life* (The Author: New York, 1861).

<sup>2</sup> Urban historians have focused on race relations, class formation and southern kinship better to understand the movement of early twentieth century African American southerners to northern cities. Some key works addressing this topic include Joe Trotter Jr. ed., *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class, and Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Peter Gottlieb, *Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks’ Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916-30* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Victoria W. Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001); and Joe William Trotter, *Black Milwaukee: The Making of An Industrial Proletariat, 1915-45* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1985).

centuries, a migrating woman of color like Picquet rarely forgot those who had been left behind. One might even say her success as a freedwoman was informed by her determination to see the emancipation of a cherished family member.

Reverend Hiram Mattison, a Buffalo, New York minister and abolitionist, was technically the author of Picquet's book, which at first glance, appears to position her memoir at odds with the letters from the ex-slave mistress Avenia White in the previous chapter and those written by ex-slave siblings in the next chapter. As shall be shown Picquet's strong presence in this published work put on display the power she could not easily show under ordinary circumstances as a woman and a person of color.

Mattison's participation was driven by desire to draw attention to his antislavery and religious views. So ardently did he hold these that he published Picquet's story himself.<sup>3</sup> Picquet had a similar interest in sharing her story. Not only would it help her raise the funds to purchase her mother, it would also bring greater public awareness to the evils of slavery. As was true of Avenia White, Picquet strategically maneuvered to gain the assistance of a white man who showed some measure of concern for her. Moreover, while her memoir was intended for the public, the interview and writing processes took place in a private, though orchestrated space, meaning one in which a white man, in this case, a Northern one, and a woman of mixed race from the South had conversations that went unrecorded. There, several difficult topics concerning her racialized oppression were breached, among them, her sexual exploitation. But Picquet was either made to "feel" secure enough to share her experiences, or was able to put aside emotional obstacles in order to speak confidently to Mattison. Such a task was not easy for her, as did many others, objectified women of color.

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<sup>3</sup> DoVeanna S. Fulton, "Speak, Sister, Speak: Oral Empowerment in Louisa Picquet: The Octoroon," *Legacy*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (1998), 99 and Mattison in Minor and Pitts, *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts*, 78.



Mattison's introductory remarks in the memoir concern Picquet's appearance. He noted that she was a "a little above the medium height, easy and graceful in her manners." He noted, too, that she was a woman "of fair complexion" with "rosy cheeks" and "a flowing head of hair with no perceptible inclination to curl." Further, he stated that she appeared to be "an accomplished white lady."<sup>4</sup> Mattison's description of Picquet's appearance accomplished three goals. He engaged the fantasies of readers who were intrigued by her physical appearance.<sup>5</sup> But he also engaged society's general interest in mixed race people and in doing so, indirectly revealed the premiums placed on whiteness and class position. In noting that on initial scrutiny she appeared to be an "accomplished white lady," he was showcasing the degree to which she appeared to have no African ancestry because such people had dark skin, but also that she seemed refined, a quality many believed could not be true of people with such ancestry. Altogether, he announced she was an alluring find, something that could not be fully conveyed in the illustration of Picquet on the book's cover. Here, she looked like an ordinary white woman. A matronly one in fact.

In describing Picquet, Mattison not only announced that her memoir was about a person of mixed race. He accomplished a third goal: highlighting the mingling of white and black bodies. Indeed, because Picquet herself was of mixed race, one could see on her body evidence of an act that many found both intriguing and objectionable. Thus, descriptions of Picquet attracted the interest of anti-slavery supporters and readers, and titillated those curious about sexual relations between white and black Americans. That Picquet was a woman was a further

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<sup>4</sup> Mattison in Minor and Pitts, *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts*, 45.

<sup>5</sup> Stephanie Li used Picquet's narrative and William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* to discuss the discursive violence of male narrators in nineteenth century New Orleans. For more, see Li, "Resistance, Silence, and *Placees*: Charles Bon's Octoroon Mistress and Louisa Picquet," *American Literature*, Vol. 79, No. 1, March 2007, 87.

boon to Mattison as the public was very interested in females of mixed race who were considered not only sensual, like women of color in general, but beautiful.

But Mattison depicted himself as one truly empathetic about the trials she had faced as a woman of color. Though he deployed familiar imagery concerning women of mixed race, he simultaneously presented her as an upright woman, a victim of others' debauched morals rather than debauched herself. After all, he called her an "accomplished white lady." He did so partly because he was well aware that readers, even progressive ones, needed reassurance as to the heroine's respectability. Once reassured, they could approach a taboo subject, interracial sex, with a New York Methodist minister there properly to narrate it all.<sup>6</sup>

However he unveiled his authority as a white man, Mattison's sometimes charitable, but steady barrage of questions kept his authoritative figure in view.<sup>7</sup> First, he stated that her tale was true. Should anyone doubt it, he declared that he himself was "fully convinced" that the narrative revealed Picquet as "truthful." He stated this several times, suggesting perhaps even his own doubt. Mattison also drew attention to where she had come from: the South. To him, this was a region filled with ignorant and backwards people, both black and white. For proof, he noted that although graceful, Picquet had a "certain menial-like diffidence," a "plantation expression and pronunciation" and "artless simplicity." He observed, too, her inability to read and write.<sup>8</sup> These unfortunate traits, he concluded, were largely owed to the brutalizing influence of a backward region that steadfastly refused to see the moral and economic advantages of doing without slave

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<sup>6</sup> Tonya Bolden, "Biographies," Digital Schomburg, African American Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century, [http://digital.nypl.org/schomburg/writers\\_aa19/bio2.html](http://digital.nypl.org/schomburg/writers_aa19/bio2.html) (accessed October 25, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Mattison in Minor and Pitts, *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts*, 45.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

labor, like people in the wiser North.<sup>9</sup> In criticizing the South, he was by extension criticizing its role in the creation of a woman like Picquet.

But Mattison's critiques were tempered because he needed Picquet in order fully to attain his goals. She was a slave and a woman of mixed race, someone that others found compelling. Her first-hand account meshed with his anti-slavery agenda. Including Picquet allowed him to accomplish far more than he could have ever achieved on his own. And therein, lay her leverage. Though its origins were different than that of slave mistresses in whom white men made emotional and financial investments, it was leverage nonetheless.

In fact, Picquet's voice in this project mitigated the memoir's sometimes negative tone. The book was structured in a question and answer format with Mattison asking the questions and thus narrating Picquet's life. But because she provided answers to Mattison's questions, the narration became a shared act. The question and answer format allowed others to see how Mattison and Picquet forcefully encountered each other. And as they did, they revealed themselves more transparently than either probably intended.

Because she had some measure of influence in this book, Picquet was not unlike Eliza Potter, the Cincinnati hairdresser whose life experiences were published two years before Picquet's. In her self-penned book, Potter not only shared her experiences, she challenged stereotypes about women and African Americans.<sup>10</sup> Recall her thirst for travel to see not just the world, but specifically a *Western* world. In doing so, she showcased her intellectual prowess and her knowledge of world culture, something she had probably acquired from serving a well-to-do

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<sup>9</sup> Bigham, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Eliza Potter's authorial power is among the topics discussed by Sharon G. Dean in the introduction to her narrative. Dean writes that Potter's book "presents the African-American woman as an astute observer and chronicler, a maker of history and full participant in her century, thus confirming absolutely her central status in the life of the nation." Potter, lvii.

clientele in the United States and abroad. Potter seems to have sought to demonstrate her own accomplishments, attainments, and learning, thus challenging contemporary stereotypes.

It is unclear if Picquet had a similar mission to dispel stereotypes about African Americans and women. Mattison called her “graceful,” something she may have pretended to be or in fact was; either way, he possibly pointed out such a trait because she was fair in complexion and thus, resembled elite white women who might have been described in a similar manner. But what he saw and what readers heard were not always consistent. While he saw a graceful woman, readers heard the voice of a woman possessing a particular kind of strength, maybe even someone who was forceful. For example, at one point Mattison asked for details concerning how she was once marketed as a unique slave:

Q: “You say the gentleman told them to ‘take you out.’ What did he mean by that?”

A: “Why, take me out of the room where the women and girls were kept; where they examine them-out where the auctioneer sold us.”

Q: “Where was that? [Was it in] the street..or in the yard?”

A: “At the market...where the block is[.]”

Q: “What block?”

A: “My! Don’t you know? [It is the] stand...where [slaves] get up[.]”<sup>11</sup>

Even if this exchange was done for narrative effect, Picquet’s energetic answers strongly suggest that she had a role in the book’s storytelling, but also that she was not necessarily graceful, or always decorous. In fact, she depicted herself as more knowing about slavery than a prominent white abolitionist.

Then again, perhaps Mattison had deliberately feigned ignorance to uncover a particular detail about slavery about which a northern audience probably knew little. Mattison might have been also been invested in depicting Picquet as being forceful, a trait associated with African American women. Though she looked white, she was in fact a woman of African descent, the

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<sup>11</sup> Mattison in Minor and Pitts, *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts*, 62-63. Cheryl I. Harris, “Finding Sojourner’s Truth: Race, Gender, and the Institution of Property,” *Cardozo Law Review* Vol. 18:309, 362.

kind often seen as dominating. Suggesting the assertive qualities of such women was the bondswoman who chastised a Union soldier for stealing her quilts. She asked him why he did it if he were fighting for “niggers.”<sup>12</sup> Not unlike Picquet and Mattison, there was a pronounced difference in the distribution of power between this woman and soldier, even though they were also aligned in the broadest terms around the issue of slavery. They had different positions – he was earning a wage and protecting, rather than stealing, from her - but were on the same side. Mattison and Picquet also had different positions. He was carrying the anti-slavery torch and condemning sinners; she was carrying a similar torch, sometimes inspired by her own Christian faith, but was above all seeking to raise money to free her enslaved mother.

The issue of representation as it relates to how Picquet presented herself in her memoir has parallels with scholarly discourse concerning Sojourner Truth, the nineteenth century abolitionist and women’s rights activist. In recent years, historians have questioned the authenticity of Truth’s speeches including the renowned one in which she was said to have asked, “and ar’n’t I a woman?”<sup>13</sup> Some argue that the illiterate Truth allowed others to misrepresent what she said because she, too, had an agenda. She sought to use others to draw attention to slavery and women’s suffrage. At least one scholar has argued that Truth also deliberately invented her own persona as a means of confronting prevailing ideas about African Americans in general and black womanhood in particular. Black women, Truth believed, deserved the same honor and respect bestowed on white women.

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<sup>12</sup> The soldier replied, “You’re a goddamned liar. I’m fighting for \$14 a month and the Union.” White, 164.

<sup>13</sup> There is now general scholarly agreement that Truth never uttered her “Ar’n’t I a Woman” declaration during her historic speech at an 1851 women’s rights convention in Akron, Ohio. Deborah Gray White has written that she herself used this phrase “as theoretical grounding” in her discussions concerning antebellum African American women. White, 4-5. Cheryl Harris, “Finding Sojourner’s Truth: Race, Gender, and the Institution of Property,” *Cardozo Law Review* Vol. 18:309, 362.

Looking to the geographic and social theories of Katherine McKittrick, we might say Truth like Picquet (and Potter), thus, participated in the creation of a “black woman’s geography.” In other ways they manipulated spaces - in their case, print culture - to resist their exploitation.<sup>14</sup> These women’s actions in this regard allow us further to see the workings of pillow talk between black women and white men during the antebellum period. In writings intended for public consumption, Truth, Picquet and Potter revealed the complicated nature of black-white power relations when women of color possessed something some whites - though not all and not necessarily Mattison - found desirable: the black female body.

But because her book was written by a white man - though with her participation - Picquet’s case is especially compelling because some of Mattison’s and her efforts went unrecorded. For example, Mattison eventually abandoned the question and answer format in order to speak in his own voice. Though he did not need Picquet’s permission to do this, given his authoritative position, he probably announced his change of plans because he did not want to surprise or offend her. After all, he needed her. He had no story without her. But because she was illiterate, she needed him, too. Though she might have found another abolitionist to record her story, she might have encountered similar conflicts between her agenda and that of her collaborators. So she worked with Mattison to tell the story that follows.

She was born in Columbia, South Carolina in 1828, the daughter of Elizabeth, an enslaved seamstress. Speaking to the ways in which the abuse of female slaves could occur generationally, Elizabeth, herself a mixed race woman, was said to have been “pretty white.” She had hair that was long and “kinda wavy.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Harriet Jacobs, the enslaved mulatto author, used another kind of space, in her case her grandmother’s attic where she hid to escape her master’s sexual advances and to resist white oppression. McKittrick, 18.

<sup>15</sup> Mattison in Minor and Pitts, *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts*, 47.

“Mr. Randolph,” Elizabeth’s owner, was Picquet’s father. That fact led to problems in his household. Two months after she was born, Mrs. Randolph noticed that Picquet bore an uncanny resemblance to the child she had given birth to two weeks earlier. She ordered her husband to remove Elizabeth and her young child from their home. “Then I was sold to Georgia,” Picquet told Mattison.<sup>16</sup>

Though she did not realize it because she was just an infant, in moving to Georgia, Picquet’s experience was generally representative of a slave’s lives. In other words, an enslaved person knew their life could at any moment be disrupted, depending on their owners’ whims. But because their fair skin announced the possible infidelity of a white man, mixed race slaves, and female ones in particular, were probably more susceptible than dark-skinned ones to having their lives disrupted under a cloud of domestic tension.

The new home for Picquet and her mother was a cotton plantation in Monticello, Georgia, 60 miles south east of Atlanta. The property was owned by a white man named “Mr. Cook,” their new owner. For a time, while nursing Picquet, Elizabeth also nursed the child to whom Cook’s wife had given birth. Then Elizabeth went on to work as a cook. As she grew older, Picquet tended to the Cook’s children.<sup>17</sup>

According to Picquet, while living in Georgia, her mother became pregnant again, this time to Cook. Mr. Cook apparently not only sexually abused Elizabeth, but whipped Picquet. His difficult disposition was obvious on other fronts. He liked to throw lavish parties, but did not like to pay his bills. By 1841, creditors arrived and claimed his plantation. They also took the warehouse he owned. Cook sent his wife to live with her sister in another part of the state. With

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 39 and 46.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 46.

Picquet, her mother and five other slaves, including another fair-skinned woman named Lucy. Cook fled to Mobile, Alabama.<sup>18</sup>

Before the Civil War, Mobile was the largest city in Alabama, which like all Southern states, was mostly rural. Notably, this city contained a large number of free people of color that included Afro-Creole residents of French, Spanish and African descent. Like New Orleans, Mobile had a three-tier society of whites, free blacks, and enslaved blacks. The Afro-Creole population there had a formidable presence though. For example, in 1848, when the state banned free people of color and unsupervised slaves from the cotton sampling trade, this group's outcry forced the legislature to exempt Mobile County. Such diversity played a role in the conflict that developed within the black community during the Reconstruction era.<sup>19</sup>

Because of his obvious attraction to women of color, especially mixed race ones, Cook may have been drawn to Mobile's diversity. He might have decided that in such a setting he could make Picquet's mother and Lucy his concubines with fewer social repercussions than as a married man in rural Georgia. Certainly, while living in Mobile, Picquet's mother became pregnant again. She lost this baby, too. There would be yet another pregnancy, and this time, Elizabeth gave birth to a boy she named John. Though Picquet does not say so directly, the reader is led to believe that Cook was the father of both.<sup>20</sup>

Cook was not the only white man that Picquet observed having relations with his slaves. She learned of another such man after Cook hired her and the other slaves out - the hope being they were more anonymous when working for different people rather than for just him - in order to make it difficult for his creditors to find him and his slaves. Picquet was hired out to a couple

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>19</sup> Michael W. Fitzgerald, *Urban Emancipation: Popular Politics in Reconstruction Mobile, 1860-1890* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 3-4 and 11-12.

<sup>20</sup> Mattison in Minor and Pitts, *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts*, 47.



named Mr. and Mrs. English.<sup>21</sup> While working for them, Picquet observed a man, who often came to visit Mr. English. This man owned a “very light” girl that he had brought to Mobile from Charleston. Picquet learned that this girl’s master did not allow her to stay with him, but rather “kept her boarding out.”<sup>22</sup> Perhaps he did so in order to adhere to the mores of the local white community.

Picquet discovered their living arrangement from an interesting source: a fair-skinned male slave who was about “nineteen or twenty” years of age. She often saw this young bondsman because he was the driver for the man who owned a girl from Charleston. Upon learning that Picquet, who appeared white, was in fact “colored,” the young man took an interest in her. He began to visit on Sundays and soon asked her to marry him. His feelings were reciprocated. Picquet said, “I liked him very well.”<sup>23</sup> But a white servant who also worked for her beau’s master decided to cause trouble as he was jealous of her beau. He told their master that Picquet’s young man was also interested in the girl from Charleston. Their owner became upset, and whipped the girl, and then sent her to New Orleans where she almost certainly was marketed as a “fancy girl.”<sup>24</sup> Picquet’s beau was also whipped.

At the urging of an “Englishman, or Scotchman,” who knew his owner, Picquet’s beau decided to run away. This foreigner told him that given that his complexion, he could easily travel to free territory and that he should take Picquet with him. Picquet refused because her beau could not read or write. She was afraid that they would be discovered to be people of color because of his illiteracy. She talked to him for two hours before bidding him farewell.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> To Picquet, Mr. English was a “real good man,” one she would not have minded being her master, as he and his wife never whipped her. Mattison in Minor and Pitts, *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts*, 45-46 and 54.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*.

In the description of this particular part of Picquet's life, the reader can glimpse Picquet and Mattison exerting their individual and shared interests. While she may have welcomed a walk down memory lane in remembering this old love, or conversely, been saddened by this loss, Mattison possibly engaged the audience's desire to read about a romance by asking Picquet about her old beau. That he may have is evident in the chapter title, "A White Slave Love Adventure." Whose decision this was can only be surmised, but its titillation is unmistakable and suggests that it was Mattison's. Mattison may have included this anecdote to demonstrate that African Americans were capable of real affection, a portrayal that went against stereotypical depictions of them as animated by animal instincts and lust. In this way, he once again demonstrated that his approach to telling her story was sometimes contradictory. Even as he relied on stereotypes to present Picquet, he wanted the reader to also see people of African descent outside of other stereotypes. In this case, he sought to show that although the uncertain nature of slave marriages and the constant threat of sales and broken families had hampered the building of black unions, love existed among people of color.<sup>26</sup> He used Picquet's life to illustrate this fact.

Picquet might have cooperated in sharing this anecdote in order to confront another stereotype: that women of color desired white men's attention. Though her first love had been of mixed race, his African ancestry and her emotional attachment announced the kind of man she preferred. As a matter of fact, at the time of her memoir's composition, she was married to a man of mixed race. If she took this position, which is to say, desired to let readers know that she preferred black men, she and possibly Mattison did so for narrative effect, because readers soon learned about a white man who pursued her: her owner, Cook.

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<sup>26</sup> Adams and Pleck, 104.

It had not been enough that he had impregnated her mother and became the father of her brother. Cook wanted Picquet, too. In order to enhance his access to her, she was hired out to Mr. and Mrs. Bachelor, the couple who ran the boarding house in which he resided. That he did illustrates that female slaves who were hired out were often subjected to more scrutiny than male slaves because they tended to work in domestic capacities, which brought them into closer proximity to whites.<sup>27</sup> In Picquet's case, however, it was her master, rather than the couple that owned her, who brought her the most grief. "One day Mr. Cook told me I must come to his room...and take care of him," she told Mattison. Without offering details, it was understood that "take care of him" meant more than attending to Mr. Cook's feigned illness. He wanted her to have sex with him.

Picquet expressed her suspicions to Mrs. Bachelor who conspired to help Picquet, now fourteen-years-old, avoid Mr. Cook. When he called for Picquet, Mrs. Bachelor sent one of the male children in the home (likely one of those he had brought from Georgia). Upon seeing this, Cook asked the boy to send Picquet up instead. She went to see him, but only during the daylight, and managed to avoid his advances for a while.<sup>28</sup> Aware of her tactics, Picquet's master soon reminded her that she "belonged[ed]" to him and "not Mrs. Bachelor." He then whipped her with a cowhide. "Around your shoulders, or how," Mattison asked, not passing on the chance to demonstrate how female slaves were physically violated by white southern men in numerous ways. Picquet replied that he had whipped her around her shoulders while she wore a "very thin" and "low-neck'd dress."

Continuing her story, Picquet related that Cook eventually grew desperate. After a night of drinking with male friends, he gave her "a whole handful of half-dollars" if she promised to

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<sup>27</sup> For more on the experiences of female slaves who were hired out, see Zaborney, 28-45.

<sup>28</sup> Mattison in Minor and Pitts, *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts*, 48-49.

visit him later. Though she (and Mattison) never said as much, she must have promised to do just that. She admitted that she wanted to purchase some muslin cloth with a floral pattern and use it to make a dress.<sup>29</sup>

After she failed to come to his room as promised, Mr. Cook beat her once more. Again, Mattison emphasized her beating, even injecting his own words into her memoir to emphasize how repugnant Cook's actions were to Northern sensibilities: "Here Mrs. P. declines explaining further how he whipped her...it is too horrible and indelicate to be read in a civilized country."<sup>30</sup> Picquet's troubles in Mobile with Mr. Cook ended when a sheriff apprehended him on behalf of his creditors. Picquet, her mother, her brother, who was then just two months old, and Cook's other slaves, were put up for sale in order to help meet his debts. They had been in Mobile not even a year.

At this point in the narrative, Mattison asked Picquet to share details about what it was like to be sold. She explained that the male slaves were put in one room and the women were placed in another. Revealing how she was regarded as a special class of slave because of her fair skin, she recounted that she shared a room with other female slaves as fair-skinned as she. When queried on the number of other such women and girls present, she answered, "Plenty of them" as if to make a commentary about the demand for such girls.

She was almost immediately instructed to undress until a "gentleman" said that would not be necessary. "He'd buy me, anyhow," Picquet said, repeating the words of her soon-to-be

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 49-51.

<sup>30</sup> Again, Picquet's experiences have resonance with that of ex-slave and author Harriet Jacobs, who, too, ran from a white man's overtures. Like Picquet, Jacobs even relied on a white woman, in her case, her master's wife, to protect her. Pretending to provide help, her mistress asked Jacobs to sleep in a room "adjoining her own." There, her mistress sometimes approached a sleeping Jacobs and whispered in Jacobs' ear, pretending to be her master. Her mistress then "listened to hear what I would answer," Jacobs said. Overwhelmed, Jacobs stated that she became "fearful" for her own life. Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, With an Introduction by Valerie Smith*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 54; Mattison in Minor and Pitts, *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts*, 53.

master.<sup>31</sup> She and the other slaves were taken to a stand where bids were made. Her mother was sold to Albert Clinton Horton, a man who within five years would become the first Lieutenant Governor of Texas. Horton also purchased Picquet's little brother, John, and three others including a male carriage driver who would become her mother's husband.<sup>32</sup> When it was Picquet's turn to be sold, the auctioneer told prospective buyers how her hair had been cut, but it was a "good quality" so it would "grow out again" (apparently, before he left, an angry Cook had cut Picquet's hair). The auctioneer also assured would-be purchasers that she was not only "good-looking," but a "good nurse" who was "kind and affectionate to children" and "never used to any hard work."<sup>33</sup>

Horton tried to purchase Picquet, for whom the opening bid of six hundred dollars quickly rose. Horton bid \$1400 on her, but the man who had earlier seen her bid \$1500. She was sold to the latter, whose name was John Williams.<sup>34</sup> As she left the auction area with Williams, Picquet asked if she could fetch her floral muslin dress.<sup>35</sup> But her new master said no. As Picquet recalled, he told her he would get her "plenty of nice dresses." Picquet then decided her mother could make dresses of her floral garment for her baby brother, and perhaps, also use those garments to remember her.

As she walked away, Picquet could hear mother crying and praying that "the Lord" would go "with her only daughter."<sup>36</sup> At this juncture, Mattison asked Picquet if her being sold

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 54.

<sup>H</sup> Horton had earlier served in the Alabama legislature. See <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fho62>, (accessed August 11, 2012); Matthew Ellenberger, "Illuminating the Lesser Lights: Notes on the Life of Albert Clinton Horton," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 88 (April 1985) and Ralph A. Wooster, "Early Texas Politics: The Henderson Administration," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 73 (October 1969); Minor and Pitts, 55.

<sup>33</sup> Mattison in Minor and Pitts, *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts*, 55.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 56.

to Mr. Williams felt like a dream. Picquet replied evenly, “No.” She added that it was still “fresh” in her memory and as if it was “no longer [ago] than yesterday.”<sup>37</sup>

Picquet said she and Williams traveled by boat to New Orleans. Along the way, he admitted that he was “getting old” and after seeing her, decided he would spend his final days with her. Her “gray-headed” owner, who was “near fifty,” also needed her to tend to his three children, all boys, the youngest of whom was nine.<sup>38</sup> His wife had left, abandoning them all. Perhaps still angered over his wife’s flight, Williams told Picquet that if she behaved herself he would treat her well. If she did not, she said he told her, “he’d whip me almost to death.”

She lived in New Orleans with Williams from 1841 to 1847. During this period, she was known as “Louisa Williams.” She gave birth to four children. Williams was the father of them all. Of these births, Picquet said, “[H]e never let on that he was the father.” To locals, she was just his “housekeeper.”<sup>39</sup> As did many other slave mistresses, she participated in the charade. Perhaps because he knew readers would want to know as much, Mattison asked if he children were mulattoes to which Picquet replied, maybe even proudly, “No, sir! They were all white. They look just like him.”<sup>40</sup> Apparently accepting the idea that there was currency in whiteness, she said her children showed no hint of being of African descent.<sup>41</sup>

It is unclear how Picquet fit into New Orleans, a city inhabited, like Charleston and like Mobile, by the descendants of European colonizers and African slaves, residents who modified

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid..

<sup>38</sup> U.S Bureau of the Census, 1840.

<sup>39</sup> Mattison in Minor and Pitts, *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts*, 40 and 56-57.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>41</sup> Her “color consciousness” was not unusual among Africans Americans, and certainly not those in antebellum Cincinnati, the city she would one day call home. There, fair-skinned people of color married those who looked like themselves. By 1850, 93% of male mulattoes chose a mulatto spouse and 84% of mulatto women married someone “of their approximate hue.” This was the case even though Cincinnatians of color - though largely southern-born - did not distance themselves from dark-skinned blacks. Away from their home states, such people of color bonded in the face of racism. Horton and Flaherty in Taylor Jr. ed., in *Race and the City*, 84.

or discarded cultures from their homelands.<sup>42</sup> As the German novels made clear, mixed race bodies had an alluring mystique in urban areas where they seemed especially visible. One can speculate that since she gave no hint of whether she had Spanish, French or African blood, Picquet physically fit into New Orleans just fine.<sup>43</sup> In fact, a generation earlier, her relationship with Williams would not have been seen as unusual even in South Carolina, her home state. But such liaisons were especially tolerated in Louisiana. When under Spanish or French control (from the seventeenth through early nineteenth centuries), local *libres*, or free people of color, whites and slaves could and did marry there. In fact, such marriages took place so often one religious official believed one Spaniard and free woman of color were married even though she had “merely” been his concubine for four years.<sup>44</sup>

In Louisiana, Picquet was seen as a natural part of a landscape, in which women like her were a familiar presence. As was also true in South Carolina at the beginning of the nineteenth century, race-based restrictions on intimate relations arrived in Louisiana with the influx of African and African American laborers following Louisiana’s purchase by the United States. Fearing unrest from a growing black population, in 1806, white Louisianans, restricted manumission of slaves and the movement of free people of color, insisting that they provide proof at all times of their status. State leaders also forbade the latter from marrying both whites and slaves.<sup>45</sup>

And perhaps speaking partly to the fears such leaders had, Mattison addressed the issue of fornication and adultery, two topics he believed were significant to Picquet’s life story. But to get at this issue without offending her, he brought up the subject of her Christian faith first, a

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<sup>42</sup> Midlo Hall, xiv-xv.

<sup>43</sup> Wood, 8 and 13-34.

<sup>44</sup> Kimberly S. Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places: Free Black Society in Colonial New Orleans, 1769-1803* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 93.

<sup>45</sup> Hanger, 164-165.

subject in which he also had a stake. Picquet replied by mentioning Williams' jealous tendencies. She shared that she began to pray that he would die. Mattison asked when and where she learned how to pray. She replied that, ironically, Mrs. Cook, her former mistress in Georgia, read the Bible to her and other slaves when Picquet lived in Georgia. In reading to her slaves, Cook had exercised some authority as the mistress of her household. However, such an act was what Thavolia Glymph, building on the work of labor historian E.P. Thompson, calls a ritual, one in which the mistress's authority briefly united with that of the master.<sup>46</sup> As Glymph writes, even the white supremacist historian U.B. Phillips was right when he noted that these moments of shared power acted as a plantation's "double head." The mistress functioned, too, as a "critical agent" of "southern civilization," something made evident in Mrs. Cook reading the Bible to the slaves, probably unaware that at least one, the young Picquet, was internalizing what she heard.<sup>47</sup> Picquet added that at this the time, she learned then that if she prayed, the beatings she received from Cook would not feel as unpleasant.<sup>48</sup>

Mattison decided at last to address the topics of fornication and adultery. "Did you feel that you were doing right in living, as you did, with Mr. Williams?" he asked, though failing to mention that Louisiana's legal codes barred interracial marriages. Picquet, too, remained silent on the legal issue and replied that she detested their living arrangement. Notably, neither she nor Mattison described her relations with Cook and Williams as rape (although Mattison often alluded to it in his concluding thoughts at the end of her memoir. There he repeatedly mocked every southern "gentleman" mentioned in her memoir and condemned "the moral atmosphere in which such monsters can live and breathe").<sup>49</sup> At this point, Picquet steered the conversation

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<sup>46</sup> Glymph, 89.

<sup>47</sup> Mattison in Minor and Pitts, *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts*, 89.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.



back to Biblical teaching, sharing that she detested her living arrangement with Williams because Mrs. Cook had once explained adultery to her. Interestingly, her mistress pointed to Lucy, a fair-skinned female slave with blue eyes, who lived on their plantation, as an example of an adulteress, suggesting that the four boy slaves who had accompanied them to Mobile were Lucy's children.

Picquet shared that Lucy and her children changed drastically when the sheriff arrived and placed them all up for sale. The white men with whom Lucy had had her children before their arrival in Mobile purchased "their progeny." Said Picquet, "Mr. Moore bought his, and Mr. Hale bought his." The rest were purchased by a man who had kept two of Lucy's sisters as concubines. The first, Elcy, had been taught how to read and write. She was even allowed to "learn music" before her death, at which point her master made another sister, this one named Judy, his concubine. Judy and Lucy's other siblings purchased Lucy and "set her free."<sup>50</sup>

Picquet would soon address the status of someone who was not yet free: her mother. Indeed, while living in New Orleans, Picquet heard from Elizabeth, who was still owned by the Texas Lieutenant Governor. Williams, her master, even read the letter her mother had sent. In it, her mother requested for sugar and tea.<sup>51</sup> Why she made such a request is unclear. Perhaps she had learned that her daughter was a kept woman and could therefore presumably provide such things. That Picquet's mother made this request possibly reflects her awareness that goods were frequently pay-offs for female slaves who engaged, willfully or not, in relations with white men. We may recall the money Cook, Picquet's second master, offered her, and the dresses Williams,

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<sup>50</sup> Though Mattison did not broach the subject, one wonders if Lucy's relatives, or at the very least, the father of her children, led the sheriff to Mr. Cook. Lucy's siblings might have been among the mulatto slaveholding class of South Carolina. As was true in Louisiana, some South Carolinians of color owned slaves, some as capital investments, but others purchased and then freed their relatives. Mattison in Minor and Pitts, *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts*, 58; and Curry, 45-46.

<sup>51</sup> Mattison in Minor and Pitts, *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts*, 61.

her third owner, promised. Perhaps because of her youth, her mother figured Picquet could still get “something” from such men.

It is worth pausing to think more deeply about Elizabeth’s request for tea, a product that along with sugar had greatly figured into world trade. Tea in particular was associated with the highly cultured Westerner.<sup>52</sup> Such an indulgence might have been a way for an aging, once desirable slave, to connect to the kind of life for which she longed, one that she might have felt she deserved. If she felt this way, she warranted empathy, or so Picquet might have believed in deciding to share this detail. From a plantation in Texas, her mother thirsted for this small luxury, one she might have once obtained on her own because as Picquet told Mattison, “She could always get it in Georgia, if she had to take in workin’ and do it at night. But I had no money, and could not send her anything.”<sup>53</sup>

Though there is little evidence, we may wonder why Picquet did not do as her mother had. Why did she not take in laundry or sewing herself in order to earn money to purchase tea and sugar for her mother? For clues, we may recall that her master’s possessiveness (he once told her “nothin’ but death” would separate him from her). Perhaps she remembered the Charleston slave girl who had been sent to New Orleans because she had angered her master. Such incidents might well have made her wary of any undertaking that that gave her a bit of independence, something her master had seen in the wife who left him. So acting in a strategic, though seemingly pathetic, way, she did not upset him.

Picquet did act in her own best interests in less confrontational ways. Relying on her Christian faith, she prayed that her master would die. Williams indeed grew ill. He got so sick,

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<sup>52</sup> For more on the rise in the tea trade and its impact on global culture, see John Keay, *The Honourable Company: A History of the English East India Company* (New York: Scribner, 1994) and Sarah Rose, *For All the Tea in China: How England Stole the World's Favorite Drink and Changed History* (New York: Penguin, 2011).

<sup>53</sup> Mattison in Minor and Pitts, *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts*, 61.

that she also prayed that he would “get religion before he died.” Her prayers may have been heard. Williams became more compassionate. As Picquet recalled, he told her that if he recovered, he would purchase her mother and “set us all free.”<sup>54</sup>

Realizing his likely readers, though empathetic, would have wanted to know if Picquet would financially benefit from his death, Mattison inquired about her master’s financial status. Though some slave mistresses had relations with wealthy white Southern men, Picquet revealed she was not one of them. In fact, the money her master used to purchase Picquet had not even belonged to him, but to his brother. She shared that even the house in which he, she and their children lived was rented.<sup>55</sup>

However, during their time together, Picquet did live with some measure of material comfort. On his death bed, Williams told her that after he died, he would leave her “the things in the house, the beds, and tables, and such.” And, again, he pledged to free her and her children. By this time she had just two as the other two had died. But he had one condition. He wanted her to go to New York. He figured that if she told no one she was of mixed race, she could easily find a white mate. Though he had been abusive, he was clearly concerned about her well-being and that of their two children. He was essentially asking her to marry someone who would not hurt her or their children. He asked her to not marry just anyone “but a mechanic-someone who had a trade, and was able to take care of [her] and the children.”<sup>56</sup>

Like Picquet’s own interaction with Mattison, Williams’ exchanges with Picquet, this one in particular, might be regarded as pillow talk. This was the case even though what had been said in private between Williams and Picquet was now being shared with Mattison and her memoir’s audience. Critical here is not the initial hidden nature of their conversation, but how Picquet had

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 60.

strategically stayed in Williams' good graces, a course that permitted her to gain something: her freedom. Like Rice Ballard, the slaveholder discussed in the previous chapter, even as Williams was partly responsible for her unfortunate position, he was critical to the ways in which Picquet coped. The hushed agreement between these two provided a way for her to improve her situation, and to improve his as well. After all, he was a divorced father when he bought her. Through unrecorded agreements, he acquired someone to look after him and his children, and she acquired various things - a nicer home, healthier meals and fine clothing - that made her oppression more bearable. Had she been with Cook, her second master, longer, a similar agreement might have been reached, one preceded by an earlier one. We might question exactly how she came to own that floral muslin dress she owned when she was Cook's slave. It is possible that it had been paid for with his money. If so, in both instances, Picquet's leverage was derived from something these men wanted. In Cook's case, she offered, but then withdrew, her body. In Williams' case, she offered her body, but also her constant presence, until he died.

Williams perished in 1847.<sup>57</sup> "I was left free, and that made me so glad I could hardly believe it myself," Picquet told Mattison. To celebrate, she got dressed and went to church, a place she had not been since she lived in Georgia. She headed to a Methodist church where a minister who had known about her status as a concubine presided. At one point, this minister even called Williams "her husband." Picquet quietly refused this man's attempts to narrate her life. "He wan't [sic] my husband," she said to herself then and later to Mattison.<sup>58</sup> She was right. Williams had not given her the legal protection of matrimony, a fact borne out when his brother soon arrived, ordering Picquet out of the house in which she lived. He said he would not pay the

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<sup>57</sup> *Vital Records Indices; Orleans Death Indices 1804-1876*; Volume: 11; Page: 370 (Baton Rouge, LA: State of Louisiana, Secretary of State, Division of Archives, Records Management, and History).

<sup>58</sup> Li, 105.

rent.<sup>59</sup> Picquet moved with her two children into the home of a female friend. “She was very kind to me, and used to give me victuals when I did not know where to get it,” said Picquet of Helene Hopkins, a “colored” laundress.<sup>60</sup>

That the fair-skinned Picquet called Hopkins “colored” possibly affirmed again her awareness of the currency in white skin. But as was true in Cincinnati, any such awareness and the gradations of status it implied did not prevent people of color in New Orleans from bonding, even though given the larger population of free people of color, fair-skinned residents were more inclined to separate themselves from dark-skinned blacks. But the compassion her friend showed Picquet also sheds light on the gendered experiences of women of color in New Orleans, which was filled with women in her circumstance. As L. Virginia Gould has written, women of color there sometimes presented a united front, forging “real and fictive kinship networks that ... reached into the plantation region and around the city.”<sup>61</sup>

But Helene Hopkins did more than feed Picquet. She gave her solid advice that would have a profound impact on her future. When Williams’ brother encountered Picquet following John William’s death, he announced that “by rights,” she “belonged to him” as his brother had never repaid the loan he took out to purchase her, Hopkins told Picquet to leave New Orleans as soon as possible.

Picquet’s decision to leave was likely propelled by Williams’ brother having seized the furniture his brother had given her. He sold it to a secondhand store. But being generous in this regard, he gave her the proceeds. One former slave mistress in New Orleans was not so lucky

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<sup>59</sup> Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 231-232 and 260-261.

<sup>60</sup> Mattison in Minor and Pitts, *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts*, 60.

<sup>61</sup> L. Virginia Gould, “Urban Slavery, Urban Freedom: The Manumission of Jacqueline Lemelle,” in David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, eds., *More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 208.

with her furniture. Ann Marie Barclay, a mulatto woman, had lived with her slave-dealer master for seventeen years. In light of crackdowns on local free people of color, her master freed her in 1839 and sent her to Cincinnati. They lived apart for years, perhaps seeing each other only when he traveled north. When he finally died in 1856, he left his piano and furniture to Barclay. But she encountered difficulties claiming them. In fact, when she went to claim them Barclay found not only her inheritance in jeopardy, but also her freedom. Some questioned whether she was really free. In the end, a judge decided she should have the items and that she should remain free.<sup>62</sup>

In 1847, Picquet left New Orleans for the city in which Barclay lived. In all likelihood, she took a steamer heading north on the Mississippi and Ohio rivers. “I had just enough money to get there, and a little bit over,” Picquet said.<sup>63</sup>

Communal ties and poverty figured into Picquet’s departure for Cincinnati. When asked why she chose this city instead of New York, the site her master had suggested, Picquet said she “had no money to go further.” She also went there because it was there that she had “friends” from the time she was “small, in Georgia.”<sup>64</sup> Indeed, like Avenia White and Susan Johnson, Picquet, an unmarried mother, needed others to survive. And as White discovered, it was not enough simply to be free. In order to achieve the possibilities of her new life as a free woman, Picquet realized she needed a support system. Shortly after her arrival, her baby, a boy died.<sup>65</sup> Only a four-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, remained.<sup>66</sup>

By the time Picquet entered Cincinnati, the city’s black community had opened schools and formed several benevolent associations to help their own. In 1848, fifty African American

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<sup>62</sup> Schafer, 111.

<sup>63</sup> Mattison in Minor and Pitts, *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts*, 61.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 62; Crowell, 42.

<sup>66</sup> Mattison in Minor and Pitts, *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts*, 62.

women of the city even formed the Female American Association to care for invalid and sick people of color.<sup>67</sup> A year later, the state's legislature repealed many of the city's black codes.<sup>68</sup> A new law was passed allowing the opening of black schools.<sup>69</sup> Such advances were possible even though racism remained endemic there as it did throughout antebellum America.<sup>70</sup>

Three years passed. Picquet met and married Henry Picquet, a mulatto man from Augusta, Georgia. His last name became the surname by which she is remembered.<sup>71</sup> Henry's father was a Frenchman. His mother, a dark-skinned woman, had been the Frenchman's slave mistress. But after his marriage to a white woman, presumably to quiet those who might be unhappy with his common law marriage to a slave, the Frenchman sent Henry, his mother and her four siblings to Cincinnati.<sup>72</sup> Though free, Henry returned to the South and married a slave woman. There, he watched her become the concubine of a white man, this one from Macon, Georgia. To ease Henry's pain, Henry's father helped him purchase his daughter from his wife's new owner. Henry went on to raise the child. Said Picquet, he worked all day "and then [worried with] the child all night."<sup>73</sup> Henry's child was not as fair as Picquet and her young Elizabeth. It is worth stressing how the fair-skinned Picquet remained hyper-alert to complexion. In fact, she

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<sup>67</sup> Francis J. Mastrogiovanni, "Cincinnati's Black Community, 1840-1850," Master's thesis, University of Cincinnati, 1972.

<sup>68</sup> Bigham, 37.

<sup>69</sup> Bigham, 38; Thomas Paul Kessen, "Segregation in Cincinnati Public Education: The Nineteenth Century Experience" Ph.D. thesis, University of Cincinnati, 1973.

<sup>70</sup> Bigham, 8.

<sup>71</sup> Mattison in Minor and Pitts, *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts*, 40; and National Archives and Records Administration (NARA); Washington, D.C.; Compiled Military Service Records of Volunteer Union Soldiers who Served with the United States Colored Troops: Infantry Organizations, 41st through 46th; Microfilm Serial: M1994; Microfilm Roll: 27.

<sup>72</sup> 1850 U.S. Federal Census, Cincinnati Ward 6, Hamilton, Ohio; Roll: M432\_689; Page: 99B; Image: 106.

<sup>73</sup> Mattison in Minor and Pitts, *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts*, 62-63.

stated that Henry's child was "the darkest one in the house...[but] her hair is straight, only little bit wavy."<sup>74</sup>

Given her attitudes concerning skin color, it is reasonable to wonder whether Picquet would have been less compassionate toward others, had she not suffered in the manner that she had. In other words, it is reasonable to ask, "What would she have been like if she had possessed all of the advantages some women of mixed race had?" Certainly there were female slave concubines who helped define the social system of slavery by maximizing the returns on their relations with white men. One such individual was Jacqueline Lemelle, a woman who had a *de-facto* marriage with a white man and found a way to continue to living with him in Louisiana even after being manumitted. Lemelle's daughter followed in her mother's footsteps by entering into a relationship with a prominent white New Orleans man that lasted her lifetime. The relationship resulted in several children, one of whom lived as a white woman in Natchez.<sup>75</sup>

But some such women did not try to hide their racial identity even in interracial relationships. Speaking to this point in Cincinnati was Eliza Potter, the mulatto hairdresser: "in our Queen City of the West, I know of hundreds of mulattoes who are married to white men, and some...are so independent they will be thought nothing but what they are."<sup>76</sup> She was shedding light on the ways in which some women of color's relations with powerful white men materialized confidently. That they appeared to be "independent" suggests these women were possibly partners to Southern white men who resided elsewhere. While the money of these men afforded financial security, their absence afforded women of color a unique sort of freedom, the kind that even the average white woman did not possess in or outside of slave territory. Such

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<sup>74</sup> Mattison also inquired about the appearance of Elizabeth, the child she had borne with Williams, her New Orleans master. He asked whether she appeared as "white" as Picquet. Picquet replied, "Oh yes; and a great deal whiter." Ibid., 62-63.

<sup>75</sup> Gould, 298-310.

<sup>76</sup> Potter, 155.



freedom was possible even though white society had unspoken agreements about the illicit nature of white men's ties to women of African descent, ones who chose not to pass possibly because their "husband's" absence might raise enough eyebrows to make others wonder anyway.

Picquet never lived as though she were white. However, her sensitivity to complexion suggests, she did recognize the advantages in being of mixed race, even while showing her appreciation and sense of gratitude to dark-skinned individuals like her friend, Helene Hopkins. That said, in order fully to understand Picquet's personality, it is necessary to know more about her life in Cincinnati.

She and her husband initially lived on Third Street, near Race Street, in the Fourth Ward, which comprised the city's busy Central Waterfront District. This area had the second highest concentration of mulattoes in Cincinnati, behind only the Ninth Ward in the East End Factory District, which was the heart of the black business community. Picquet and Henry shared their home with her daughter, Elizabeth, and his daughter, Harriet. Sarah, another daughter, was born in 1852, and Thomas, a son, in 1856.

Picquet worked as a laundress, Henry as a janitor in the Carlisle Building on Fourth and Walnut Streets, two blocks east and one block north of their home.<sup>77</sup> Both served of examples of how recent immigrants (even white ones) were associated with certain occupations. For example, by the 1850s, the city's garment trade was dominated by German Jewish immigrants, so much so that, Cincinnati was the leading producer of ready-made men's clothing in the western United States. Jewish garment wholesalers owned sixty-five of the city's seventy such firms.<sup>78</sup> While African Americans made inroads as businesspeople – for example, the black-owned Iron Chest Company owned three brick buildings leased to whites - most were confined to menial positions,

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<sup>77</sup> Mattison in Minor and Pitts, *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts*, 40 and 86 and *Cincinnati Daily Gazette*, October 15, 1860.

<sup>78</sup> Shevitz, 35.

a situation that worsened following industrialization.<sup>79</sup> In the process of substituting machines for men, there was a loss of jobs among skilled artisans, some of whom were African Americans. Whites received the good factory jobs, relegating blacks to low-paying, unskilled occupations.

Still a committed Christian, Picquet became a member of Cincinnati's Zion Baptist Church, a fact of which she was proud. As she told Mattison, her church did not welcome slaveholders as had others. In fact, her pastor once announced from the pulpit that slave catchers were in the area looking for a runaway named Mary White. As it turned out, Picquet and Henry had taken in White, who was a "real genteel" woman. Almost-gossipy, Picquet shared with Mattison how White "tried to make me believe she was free." But Picquet, who had lived in New Orleans and seen many like her, knew otherwise because the woman only went out on Sunday evenings, which suggested she was hiding from someone or something. With the assistance of a Quaker, the Picquets disguised White and sent her onward to Canada. Others like White also found refuge in their home. Picquet said she helped them all when she could.<sup>80</sup>

Seeing their escapes, and reflecting on her freedom, made Picquet long for her mother. In 1859, more than a decade after her arrival in Cincinnati, she decided to find her mother. She did so via a local man who sent his shirts to her for washing. He had announced that he was going to Texas. Picquet and her husband discovered that her customer knew Horton, her mother's master. With this man's assistance, Picquet sent a letter to her mother. She had a response within three weeks.<sup>81</sup> She learned that her mother still lived on Horton's Sycamore Grove Plantation in

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<sup>79</sup> Taylor, *Frontiers of Freedom*, 133.

<sup>80</sup> Mattison in Minor and Pitts in *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts*, 65.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-66.

Wharton County, Texas.<sup>82</sup> Here, her master, and his family resided during the winter months, spending their summer months on the coast in Matagorda.<sup>83</sup>

Specific details about her mother's living arrangements with the Hortons were shared by Mattison, possibly because he thought that readers should know about the varied experiences of slaves, that is to say that not all worked year-round in fields. Some traveled with their well-heeled masters to more pleasant environments. And here, the tone of Picquet's memoir changed abruptly.<sup>84</sup> Almost entirely abandoning the question and answer format, Mattison carefully presented Picquet's fundraising efforts to purchase the mother who had suffered "the barbarism of slavery."<sup>85</sup> First, he described how Picquet brought him the first letter she ever received from her mother. The letter, dated March 8, 1859, was on "tough blue paper." In it, her mother wasted little time in suggesting that an attempt be made to purchase her. She announced that "Col. Horton" said she could be bought for \$1000, or she could be swapped for another slave woman. Picquet's brother, John, who was now a boy of fifteen years, could be purchased for \$1500.

Perhaps Horton himself had urged her mother to share the information that she was for sale. After all, she was aging and he may have wanted a younger woman to work for him. He could be confident that such a woman would provide faster service than the aging Elizabeth. Maybe he wrote the letter himself. Like the letters from Avenia White in the previous chapter, we cannot be entirely sure where Elizabeth's voice begins and ends. No matter, the affection a mother had for her "only daughter" was on display. Elizabeth sent love from Picquet's brother and a "100 kisses" to Picquet's own young Thomas.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 66.

Not even a week after this letter's composition, another one, this one written on March 13, was sent. Someone was desperate. Again, perhaps it was Horton. The purchase prices for Elizabeth and John were repeated. By June 17, Horton himself wrote a letter, stating that Elizabeth was "as fine a washer, cook and ironer as there is in the United States" and though she was "getting old," he wanted the amount requested as she carried "her age well." In this letter, he also sent a daguerreotype of her and John. They were apparently well-dressed. Mattison noted as much to the reader, but only in order to charge that the image was Horton's attempt to demonstrate to Northerners the supposed "superior condition of the slave."<sup>87</sup>

The rest of Picquet's memoir described her attempts in 1860 to raise the funds to purchase her mother. She traveled first throughout Ohio, finding subscribers in churches and other communal settings. Her efforts were aided by her having obtained a letter of support from Levi Coffin, the eminent abolitionist, who, as had Mattison, attested to her good character.<sup>88</sup> As she traveled, her past caught up with her twice in surprising ways. On a train from Xenia to Springfield, Ohio, she met a man whose race was not revealed though he was possibly of African descent given his ease in approaching her in a public space. A white man might have been more cautious lest those around him think he was soliciting her company for unsavory reasons. Doing such a thing on a levee where prostitution was rampant was one thing. Doing it on a train was something else entirely. The man who approached her asked, "Were you ever in Mobile?" This fellow traveler apparently knew her from the days when she was hired out to Mr. English in Mobile.<sup>89</sup> Picquet subsequently traveled east, to Brooklyn. There another man took notice of her as she sat on a bus. When she got off, he walked with her for a while and finally also asked whether she had ever lived in Mobile. To her surprise, he turned out to be her first love, whom

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 73-74.

she had not seen since their parting twenty years earlier. He was now the married father of two children and “passing” as white. Excited to share details about his new life, he asked her to wait in a park so as to not provoke the suspicions of his wife. He returned with his two children. One of them, a boy, was darker than the other. “That one has the stain on it,” Picquet said of this child. She and her old love shared a laugh and then parted again.<sup>90</sup>

Though she faced difficulties with her fundraising efforts, Picquet was eventually able to purchase her mother. She publicly thanked her supporters via a letter published in the *Cincinnati Daily Gazette* on October 13, 1860. Said Picquet, “[Y]our kindness... will be engraved on my heart until death.”<sup>91</sup> However, as she expressed her gratitude she simultaneously felt sorrow, for she had been unable to purchase her brother. Horton had decided he wanted John to run one of his plantations.<sup>92</sup> In 1860, unmoved by the ongoing sectional tensions between the North and South, Horton purchased 58 slaves in Columbia, South Carolina.<sup>93</sup>

The Civil War began in 1861. Henry Picquet became a private in the 42<sup>nd</sup> United States Colored Troops.<sup>94</sup> Meanwhile, African Americans like Picquet’s mother continued to migrate to Cincinnati, though in fewer numbers. Black women, however, continued to outnumber, though not by much, black men, 1,900 to 1,831 in the Census of 1860.<sup>95</sup> Fearing that the war might cause these numbers to rise, in 1862 the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, a newspaper with Democratic leanings, uttered a sentiment with which many white Cincinnatians probably agreed: “Hundreds

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<sup>90</sup> Minor and Pitts, 76.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 86, and *Cincinnati Daily Gazette*, October 15, 1860.

<sup>92</sup> Her mother also left behind her husband, the coachman who had been sold with her years earlier in Mobile. Mattison in Minor and Pitts in *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts*, 79-80.

<sup>93</sup> See receipt for 58 slaves, Albert Clinton Horton Papers, Box Number 2E249, The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>94</sup> Mattison in Minor and Pitts in *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts*, 41; and National Archives and Records Administration (NARA); Washington, D.C.; Compiled Military Service Records of Volunteer Union Soldiers who Served with the United States Colored Troops: Infantry Organizations, 41st through 46th; Microfilm Serial: M1994; Microfilm Roll: 27.

<sup>95</sup> Lyle Koehler, *Cincinnati’s Black Peoples: A Chronology and Bibliography, 1787-1982*, (Cincinnati: University of Cincinnati, 1986), 52; and U.S. Census, 1860.

of thousands, if not millions of slaves. . . . will come North and West and will either be competitors with our white mechanics and laborers, degrading them by competition, or they will have to be supported as paupers and criminals at the public expense.”<sup>96</sup>

The ongoing racial tension probably contributed to the Picquets leaving the city. In 1865, Henry received a medical discharge, temporarily forcing his wife to become the sole supporter of the household. Two years later, they moved to New Richmond, Ohio, a river town about twenty miles south of Cincinnati, a bastion for white liberals from New England, New York and Pennsylvania, and thus, a seemingly more hospitable place for people of color.<sup>97</sup>

Like many others in New Richmond, whose economy relied on river commerce, Henry went on to work on a steamboat. After several unsuccessful attempts to claim his service pension, he began receiving six dollars per month in 1885.<sup>98</sup> Following his death in 1889, Picquet received a widow’s pension of \$12 a month. At the time of her death five years later, she owned her own home at 125 Center Street in New Richmond.<sup>99</sup>

Though she had supported her family as a laundress for several difficult years, even purchasing her mother from slavery with a memoir she participated in producing, Picquet is remembered most for having once been a white’s man mistress. However, her experiences demonstrate the ways in which the distribution of power between antebellum whites and blacks

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<sup>96</sup> Williston H. Lofton, “Northern Labor and the Negro During the Civil War,” *Journal of Negro History* XXXII (1949), 251-273.

<sup>97</sup> 1870 U.S. Federal Census; Clermont, Ohio; Roll: M593\_1181; Page: 218A; Image: 442; Family History Library Film: 552680; and 1890 Veterans Schedule, New Richmond, Clermont, Ohio; Roll: 65; Page: 4; Enumeration District: 252; Bigham, 8; Crowell, 31.

<sup>98</sup> For more on African American soldiers during the Civil War, see Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007) and Drew Gilpin Faust, *The Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008).

<sup>99</sup> Drew Gilpin Faust has addressed the difficulties northern and southerners had in compiling records related to the Civil War. The War Department acknowledged that its records were deficient and relied on data from applicants seeking back pay. Though the war had been an “instrument of liberation” for some African American men, this population and their survivors, struggled during the pension claim process. Faust, 55 and 255-260; U.S. Census, 1880; Special Schedule for Surviving Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, Widows, Etc. Minor Civil Division, New Richmond, OH; Mattison in Minor and Pitts, *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts*, 41; Crowell, 42.

was in constant negotiation. This dynamic had deep implications in situations involving slave women who had more influence over their future than most bondswomen because of their intimate ties to white men, however trying. The next chapter expands on the consequences of lives of such intimacy by focusing on the lives and views of mixed race children in the years leading up to and following the Civil War. It shall be made clear that even when mixed race offspring of slave mistresses were concerned, there was much room for negotiation between them and white male authority figures.

**Chapter Five**  
**“Has Anyone Heard from Willis?”**  
**The Centrality of Kin and a Father’s Will**  
**for one Alabama Family**

Before his death in 1852, Samuel Townsend fathered ten children with five slave women. Their names were Wesley, Willis, Osborne, Parthenia, Caroline, Elvira, Thomas, Bradford, Susanna, and Milcha. Townsend not only wanted to see these children freed, he sought to leave them the bulk of the proceeds from the sale of his estate. In 1856, Townsend called on Septimus Cabaniss a Huntsville lawyer, to revise an earlier drafted will, expressing this wish.<sup>1</sup> At the time, Townsend’s property was worth approximately \$200,000.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter examines the Townsend children’s lives, paying special attention to the way their social position differed from that of other African Americans, because their father was a wealthy white southern planter. Approaching their lives in this manner is useful because it expands upon this study’s focus on the lives of slave mistresses who benefitted from their proximity to similar men. In the two previous chapters, we focused on the perspectives of two ex-slave mistresses whose children were the progeny of white southern men. The Townsends allow us to see the point of view of the children resulting from such relationships.

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter draws on letters and documents consulted by the late Frances Cabaniss Roberts for her 1940 dissertation on the Townsends’ inheritance. Roberts was a graduate student at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. She went on to become a Professor of History at the university’s Huntsville campus. In her dissertation, Roberts concludes that Townsend’s plans to provide for his children were hampered by the start of the Civil War, but also his offspring’s excessive dependency on their inheritance. Roberts was the great-granddaughter of Septimus Cabaniss, Townsend’s lawyer. She donated her great-grandfather’s papers to the University of Alabama in 1952. In the intervening years since her dissertation’s completion, many of the letters and documents she quoted were recatalogued. As a result, they are no longer easily traced in the collection. I will, thus, occasionally quote them from her thesis, but also from the accessible recatalogued documents. As an aside, Susanna’s name is also spelled “Susannah” and “Susan” in drafts of Samuel Townsend’s will and other documents in the Cabaniss Papers. See Frances Cabaniss Roberts, “An Experiment in Emancipation of Slaves by an Alabama Planter (unpublished Masters dissertation, University of Alabama, 1940), 8-10, and 108-109; and Deposition of S.D. Cabaniss, Box Number 251.056, Folder 04, Cabaniss Papers.

<sup>2</sup> That amount in today’s currency terms is worth about five and a half million dollars, <http://futureboy.us/fsp/dollar.fsp?quantity=200000&currency=dollars&fromYear=1856> (accessed September 20, 2012); and Roberts, 105.



However, there was one crucial difference between the Townsends and the subjects in the two prior case studies. The Townsends as freed people were materially better off than Avenia White, Susan Johnson, Louisa Picquet, and their children.<sup>3</sup> They remain worthy of inclusion, however, due not to the degree to which their wealth compared to those of the ex-slaves earlier discussed, but *the degree to which the circumstances of their lives as slaves and ex-slaves mirrored them*. Despite their more comfortable material situation, they endured racial discrimination not unlike the women discussed in the two previous chapters. They endured partly because they looked to one another for strength. That they did proves once more, as Herbert Gutman has written, that kinship was vital, even for the best-positioned African Americans, to survive white supremacist subjugation.<sup>4</sup>

As was also true of the subjects in the two previous chapters, Cincinnati figures into the Townsends' lives, though in a more peripheral way. As their father's lawyer attempted to settle matters pertaining to their inheritance, one brother initially settled in Athens, Ohio, a little over 150 miles east of Cincinnati. Here, he oversaw his siblings' eventual settlement in Xenia, Ohio, about 55 miles northeast of Cincinnati. There, some attended nearby Wilberforce University, at that time just a boarding school. After the Civil War began, the Townsends separated and scattered to places as diverse as Kansas, Colorado, Mexico and Mississippi. Some returned to Huntsville. But one brother went to Cincinnati, where he worked as a waiter on a steamboat.

While constructing their lives as freed people, the Townsends remained in touch. In fact, the several dozen surviving letters they sent to either each other or whites interested in their

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<sup>3</sup> Despite his wealth, Samuel Townsend lived simply. An inventory and appraisal of his home furnishings following his death revealed he made very inexpensive purchases. Roberts, 7.

<sup>4</sup> Gutman, 463.

affairs serve as proof that they were the children of a white man that one called “father.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Samuel Townsend, as was true of Rice Ballard and John Williams, the slaveholders in the two previous case studies, had a particular function in these siblings’ lives that helped them confront the difficulties resulting from being African Americans, an oppressed group. His wealth and emotional investment in their lives aided their efforts to improve their position. This study uses some of these letters in order to accomplish three goals: 1) to study the lives of a mixed race family in the years surrounding the Civil War; 2) to uncover how “privilege” had an incongruous presence in their sometimes difficult lives; and 3) to establish how their worldviews as mixed race children compare to those of slave mistresses who settled in Ohio, particularly in Cincinnati. What is most at stake here is demonstrating the degree to which their cases, like the previous two, reveal the complexities of black-white intimate encounters during the nineteenth century.

Before focusing on about the Townsends, it is useful to know more about the man who freed them. Like Rice Ballard, the slave trader-turned-planter in the first case study, Samuel Townsend was from Virginia. And like Ballard, Townsend and his brother, Edmund, amassed considerable wealth in the Deep South as planters after cotton became the premier crop in this region.<sup>6</sup> While Ballard’s land holdings were spread primarily across Louisiana and Mississippi, Townsend’s fortune was largely built on land in North Alabama, specifically in Huntsville.

Huntsville’s beginnings can be traced to the arrival of Captain John Hunt, a Revolutionary War veteran, in the foothills of the Cumberland Mountains. In 1806, Hunt built a log cabin in this area, which was part of the Tennessee Valley. Five years later, the land surrounding his dwelling would become the city of Huntsville. In the early days, Madison County, where Huntsville sits, was populated by “improper women,” small farmers, card-playing

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<sup>5</sup> Osborne Townsend to Thomas Townsend, December 12, 1882, Item 25, Box Number 252.054, Folder 01, Cabaniss Papers.

<sup>6</sup> Roberts, 6.

hunters and race-horsing fans. The presence of the last group owed largely to a local man setting up race-track beside his hostel. The race-track drew the likes of Andrew Jackson, an “avid follower” of the sport. By 1825, locals sought to move cotton, a lucrative crop increasingly harvested in their small town, to New Orleans, already a major commercial hub. Efforts were made to build a canal between Huntsville and New Orleans, but the project failed. Another canal was commenced a year later, this one more successful. Huntsville then began its initial serious growth.<sup>7</sup> The area was soon peopled by farmers fleeing failing farms in Upper South states. To them, the fertile land of Huntsville held great promise. That it did was reflected in the rising population of the town’s main labor source: slaves. In 1816, some 4,200 slaves made up about a third of the 14,200 residents of Madison County. By 1850, 14,765 slaves comprised more than half of the county’s total population of 26,451.<sup>8</sup>

Among those arriving in the 1820s were Samuel and Edmund Townsend, two brothers from Lunenburg County, Virginia.<sup>9</sup> The Townsends initially settled in Hazel Green, Alabama, just outside of Huntsville. In 1829 and 1832, Samuel Townsend purchased 305 acres of land in Huntsville proper and continued over subsequent years to buy additional tracts, some as big as 600 acres. His property holdings increased following the 1852 death of Edmund, who himself had owned two plantations in Madison County and another in Jackson County, Alabama. By the time of his own death in 1856, Samuel owned eight plantations, seven in Madison and one in Jackson, totaling some 7,560 acres.<sup>10</sup> Samuel Townsend remained unmarried, but fathered ten

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<sup>7</sup> *Williams’ Huntsville Directory, City Guide, and Business Mirror, Vol. 1 – 1859-60* (Huntsville: Coltart & Sons, No. 10 Commercial Row, 1859) 1-2, 10; and Victor B. Haagen, *The Pictorial History of Huntsville, 1805-1865* (Huntsville, AL: Victor B. Haagen, 1963), 37.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas W. Owen, *History of Alabama and Dictionary of Alabama Biography* (Chicago: S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1921), Vol. II, 926.

<sup>9</sup> Roberts, 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 5.

children with five female slaves. Years later, a white real estate agent described one of his daughters as “nearly white[.] [W]ould hardly be taken for an African away from them.”<sup>11</sup>

Had they not been identified as people of mixed race, the Townsend children might have been shielded from the widespread prejudices evident in the United States at the time of their father’s death. Such prejudices were so virulent, Harriet Beecher Stowe was compelled to depict them in her 1852 book *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.<sup>12</sup> By 1854, the Republican Party was created by whites protesting the admission of Kansas and Nebraska as territories to be settled on the basis of popular sovereignty.<sup>13</sup> The 1857 Dred Scott decision reflected the intensification of white hostility.<sup>14</sup> Before he died, Samuel Townsend might have watched such developments with anxiety. After all, his wealth was built on slave labor, but this white southern man also had enslaved children for whom he cared. Prior to his own death in 1852, his brother probably found himself in a similar predicament.

Like Samuel, Edmund never married. Like Samuel, Edmund fathered enslaved children with his slave women, in his case, two daughters. Their names were Elizabeth and Virginia. Upon his death, Edmund left instructions to give his estate, which was worth approximately a half million dollars, to these two girls.<sup>15</sup> Though Edmund had made arrangements to manumit Elizabeth and Virginia and took legal precautions before his death to ensure that they received their inheritance, a court voided his will and divided his estate among his white relatives, who

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<sup>11</sup> Deposition for Milcha Townsend, September 17, 1867, Item 17, Box Number 252.054, Folder 01, Cabaniss Papers.

<sup>12</sup> Anti-black sentiment continued in the United States during the 1850s as evident in the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act. Anti-immigrant, especially anti-Irish sentiment, was endemic, and manifested itself in “nativist” political politics such as the “Know Nothings.” For more, see Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, (New York: Routledge, 1995), 157-162; James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 138-158; Bigham, 44.

<sup>13</sup> For a concise summary of these events, see Michael F. Holt, *The Fate of Their Country: Politicians, Slavery Extension and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> McPherson, 167-188.

<sup>15</sup> Roberts, 9.

distributed the proceeds amongst themselves. They then made Elizabeth and Virginia the joint property of Samuel, and John E. Townsend, another relative.<sup>16</sup>

After witnessing this proceeding, Samuel had “a great dread of his children [also] becoming the slaves” of his relatives.<sup>17</sup> In 1854, he secured the services of Septimus Cabaniss, a local attorney. By the time of his death on November 29, 1856, Samuel had Cabaniss draft not one, but two wills, to ensure that his ten enslaved children, who he wanted manumitted, received his wealth. But his white relatives’ opposition created so much turmoil that Cabaniss left his practice in 1858 to attend to Samuel’s case full-time. After a four-year battle, Cabaniss successfully blocked these relatives’ claims, but his efforts to carry out Samuel’s wishes were delayed by the Civil War. In June of 1861, a chancery court ruled that the children, who were now manumitted and living outside the state, could not make further claims on their father’s property because they were residents of the United States, which the Confederacy regarded as a foreign country.<sup>18</sup>

After the war, Cabaniss spent five years paying Townsend’s debts, suing his debtors, foreclosing mortgages, and finally, liquidating the estate. During this period and well into the late nineteenth century, he periodically disbursed funds to Townsend’s offspring. While the estate was “significantly diminished by 1870,” he was able to pay not only Townsend’s children, who were called the “first class” of slaves in Townsend’s will, but others, among them, the children’s mothers, who constituted the “second class.” By the time the estate was finally settled

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 9.

<sup>17</sup> Edmund and Samuel Townsend were not unusual. Other southern men, particularly during the colonial era, made arrangements to leave property to their mixed race offspring. This practice was particularly prevalent in states with large free people of color populations like Louisiana. Before the Louisiana Supreme Court outlawed such bequests in 1840, many southern men in this made such arrangements. Spear, 210; and Deposition of S.D. Cabaniss, Box Number 251.056, Folder 04, Cabaniss Papers.

<sup>18</sup> Roberts, 38; S.D. Cabaniss to Thomas Townsend, September 14, 1865, S.D. Cabaniss Letter book, Outgoing Legal Correspondence, 1845-1865, Box Number 0252.022, Folder 13, Cabaniss Papers.

in 1896, the children had received \$33,719.57, less than a quarter of the intended amount. Some died before “reaping the full benefit from their inheritance.”<sup>19</sup>

Prior to Townsend’s death and the provisions made for these ex-slaves, he lived on 1,700-acre property called the “Home Plantation.”<sup>20</sup> Here, sixty-three slaves resided with him, some probably his children. But his children received more than other slaves who already benefitted from being the offspring of a wealthy slaveholder. While these slaves received housing, food and maybe even the occasional opportunity to earn money by, say, growing their own food, the Townsend children received his attention and certain privileges. Such things were quietly observed by others.

The “Home Plantation” was the center of Townsend’s agricultural operations. There stood barns, tools, a blacksmith’s shop and a cotton gin, the latter two used by Townsend and his neighbors. Among the slaves who learned how to shoe horses and sharpen hoes on this property was Wesley, Townsend’s eldest child.<sup>21</sup> Wesley’s education in this regard was not unusual for fair-skinned African Americans in and outside slave societies. Color distinction prejudices in the United States privileged fair-skinned blacks rather than dark-skinned when learning skilled trades.<sup>22</sup> Blacksmithing was an especially important trade. Even as the nineteenth century was increasingly industrialized, a growing turnpike system carrying horse-drawn buggies and wagons still existed. If a man of color was a blacksmith, and had not been relegated to unskilled or low skilled work, he stood to do well.<sup>23</sup> Though a slave, Wesley was well positioned on his white

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<sup>19</sup> Cabaniss died in 1889 before the Townsend case was fully settled. *Ibid.*, 11, 102 and 105-106; and Septimus Cabaniss Biography, ([http://acumen.lib.ua.edu/u0003\\_0000252/](http://acumen.lib.ua.edu/u0003_0000252/), (accessed on October 8, 2012).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 7.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 7.

<sup>22</sup> Horton and Flaherty in Taylor Jr., ed., *Race and the City*, 82.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 81 and 87.

father's plantation, a place for which some of the Townsend siblings retained warm memories. This much can be gathered in the letters they and their relatives sent each over the years.

In one letter, one child reflected on their former days in the "old home."<sup>24</sup> In another, one sibling mentioned the time one of them got into trouble on the property adjoining one of their father's plantations. The land was owned by the Tate family. This child had jumped over a fence presumably onto the Townsend land to escape Mr. Tate's wrath. The commotion got so out of hand, Mrs. Tate intervened. The mischievous child "hollered so [much] that ole Mrs[.] Tate made old Mr[.] Tate leave [them] alone."<sup>25</sup>

Mrs. Tate's response might have been an outcome of her more charitable disposition. It might have also stemmed from her ability to see that these children were no ordinary slaves. Perhaps they resembled their father. Perhaps she had seen them get away with things other slaves could not. Because they looked mixed race, it probably did not take much for her to put two and two together. These were Samuel Townsend's children.

Speaking to these children's privilege and similarly privileged slave children elsewhere in the South were the observations of a visitor to a Hilton Head, South Carolina plantation. There, he saw a group of "six straight-haired, bright-looking mulatto children" ravenously eating boiled sweet potatoes while sitting on the porch of one plantation dwelling. The old black man who fed them said these were his master's children.<sup>26</sup> Observant slaves and local whites with divided loyalties shared quiet understandings about such children. Even powerless and compliant white women were unwilling to disturb this not to be mentioned aspect of southern life. To do so

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<sup>24</sup> Mary Townsend, February 20, 1901, Item 45, Box Number 252.054, Folder 01, Cabaniss Papers.

<sup>25</sup> Though this story was recounted in an undated and unsigned letter mailed to Thomas Townsend, it was likely written by Osborne as it was typewritten, like most of Osborne's letters. Item 37, Box Number 252.054, Folder 01, Cabaniss Papers. There is contemporary irony in this "jump the fence" phrase, which was once a common euphemism for interracial sexual relations. For more on this phrase and other colloquialisms involving interracial interactions, see Richard Iton, *Solidarity Blues: Race, Culture, and the American Left* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

<sup>26</sup> Blassingame, 361.

would be to break the rules. It was recognized that these things happened. Mixed race children happened. And white men were often not without shame concerning this. However, because these men gave meaning to it all (such children, these men said, were to be cared for though in discreet ways), the less powerful did not generally complain openly. If there were disagreements, lawyers, judges and others complicit in such arrangements were there to referee.

Like the potato eating children witnessed by a Hilton Head visitor, the Townsends were among the children who had not just dropped from the clouds. They were the master's children, ones he quietly recognized. And because they were, Mrs. Tate, their neighbor, may well have decided it was wiser to be nice to the offspring of a wealthy neighbor who permitted others to use his gin and blacksmith shop. If she had proceeded upon this rationale, she was like Frances Bruster, the Cincinnati landlady in this study's first case study. Mrs. Tate, like Bruster, saw the benefits of staying on the good side of a powerful man. Mrs. Tate probably decided her husband should do the same and told him as much.

Samuel Townsend was well regarded by some of his neighbors, and also by his children. The words of Osborne, one of Townsend's children, serve as an example of such regard. Years after their father's death, Osborne chastised his brother Thomas what was probably an unintended oversight. "You did not send me the inscription on our father's tombstone and also on Uncle Edmonds [sic]," Osborne said in a letter that puts on display his affection for the man who had fathered and owned them.<sup>27</sup>

But having the financial resources and emotional investment of a white man never ensured that Osborne or his siblings led trouble-free lives. In fact, we may wonder why, if he cared so much, their father did not free and settle them outside slave society before his death. A

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<sup>27</sup> Osborne Townsend to Thomas Townsend, December 12, 1882, Item 25, Box Number 252.054, Folder 01, Cabaniss Papers.



couple of possibilities suggest themselves. First, given his thrifty ways, Samuel Townsend may have been concerned about the expenses that would be incurred by having his offspring reside in another state. Then again, he may have wanted them near him because he, like many other southerners, did not believe the North was without its own problems. It, too, was filled with racial bigotry and strife.

If he took the latter position, he was prudent. Though he had permitted them certain leeway, his children's lives were not without problems. They were slaves, but enjoyed some of the privileges of freed people during their early years. But as freed people, they encountered hardships that doubtless made them feel as if they were not fully free, like other blacks - even after the Civil War. To be sure, the Freedmen's Bureau, the federal organization charged with aiding poorer Southern ex-slaves' transition to freedom, was never effective despite the efforts of men like Levi Coffin, one of the organization's "prime movers" from the day it was founded in 1865.<sup>28</sup> As was true in prior decades, tensions between white northerners and southerners often left poor whites as the ultimate arbitrators, and the black laborer marginalized.<sup>29</sup> As will be shown, following their father's death, the Townsends confronted, albeit respectfully, the whites surrounding them, who struggled as many whites would during the postbellum period over what to do with bodies no longer enslaved.

Indeed, even those charged with overseeing the manumission of certain slaves before the war had conflicted feelings about helping them realize the promise of freedom. The political ambitions of Cabaniss, the Townsends' lawyer, led him to serve in the Alabama legislature from 1861-1863.<sup>30</sup> But no matter his own political views, Cabaniss' willingness to fulfill his dead

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<sup>28</sup> Bigham, 95.

<sup>29</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1935, 1963, 1976), 352-353 and 531.

<sup>30</sup> Ironically, he was said to have been the "inspector of conscription" whose "contrary influence" prevented the reinforcement of some 1500 soldiers to General Nathan Bedford Forrest's army (this was not a help to the

client's wishes was evident in his continuing to work on behalf of the Townsends though he, as perhaps many in the legal profession, probably did so quietly.

Cabaniss was part of a profession prepared to act on behalf of white men's mixed race descendants. Judges in particular had an "unusual view of mixed-race sexual relations." White slaveholders left money to their black mistresses and children so frequently that judges affirmed such transfers and property, "especially when precedents under the common law could be easily used to do so."<sup>31</sup> In some instances, the judges, holding "liberal, matter-of-fact" attitudes, regarded such inheritances positively because these men had demonstrated their willingness to fulfill "moral obligations of care."<sup>32</sup> In light of this situation, other white males in and outside of slave territory cooperated with legal professionals.

In his search for the best place to settle the Townsend children, Cabaniss contacted Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois, to ask whether settling them there would violate state law. Not only had Douglas, a proslavery politician, orchestrated the Compromise of 1850, which attempted unsuccessfully fully to settle the issue of slavery expansion, he stirred debate over the topic four years later with the Kansas-Nebraska Act. He also initially backed the 1857 Dred Scott Supreme Court decision and went on to become the 1860 Democratic contender for the highest position in the land, President of the United States on a "popular sovereignty" platform. Cabaniss also reached out to others including C.C. Clay, an Alabama senator, who himself, consulted with William Seward, a New York senator who was fervently anti-slavery. With these men's input, Cabaniss crafted a plan.

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Confederacy). Septimus Cabaniss Biography, ([http://acumen.lib.ua.edu/u0003\\_0000252](http://acumen.lib.ua.edu/u0003_0000252), (accessed October 8, 2012).

<sup>31</sup> Jones, *Fathers of Conscience*, 22.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 24 and 42.

A year and a half after his client's death, Cabaniss sent W. D. Chadick, a white Huntsville minister, on a fact-finding trip. The mission: to locate a home for Samuel Townsend's children. While Liberia, the African settlement where many free people of color had been resettled was considered, Chadick's destination was Ohio. Chadick took with him Wesley, who was at that point 27-years-old. Their journey required rail travel through Tennessee and a ride on a steamer.<sup>33</sup>

Other enslaved children of white men had made similar trips, some with fewer resources. Their guardians also desired to settle them in Ohio and often in Cincinnati. Levi Coffin, the abolitionist, recalled the arrival of such individuals. Of them, he said, "My attention was often called to ... cases of emancipated slaves... [who were] frequently brought to Cincinnati by their white fathers who wished to emancipate them ... somewhere in Ohio." The southern white men Coffin met wanted their offspring to live in Ohio because they believed those children could lead better lives there. One such man, a Tennessee lawyer, arrived in Cincinnati with two slave boys who were his sons. With the help of a local agent, perhaps one familiar with such situations, the man was directed to Coffin, who was frequently a facilitator for such resettlement efforts. The boys' father asked that his children be put in the care of someone who would place them in a "good school and look after their interests." Coffin declined to assume such a responsibility. While admitting he had done as much before, he was overwhelmed with his business and abolition efforts. He also found such chores "troublesome." Coffin suggested that the boys be taken instead to the Union Literary Institute, an inexpensive boarding school opened in Indiana to aid people of color. The institution was ninety miles from Cincinnati. But the man begged Coffin to take the children himself. Coffin acquiesced only because the lawyer left enough money to defray expenses for their first term and promised to send more. However, the man

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<sup>33</sup> "Report of Mission to Ohio, 1858," Box Number 0252.0050, Folder 6, Cabaniss Papers.

failed to send additional funds and Coffin ended up having to advance the money to cover the boys' future expenses. Coffin said he "never succeeded in getting [the money he had spent] refunded" either.<sup>34</sup>

Coffin also aided a "handsome" sixteen-year-old slave girl who, in his opinion, was as "white" in appearance as any of his own children. She had come from Mississippi and her father wanted to have her educated. Because this man had also left funds, and had also plead for assistance, Coffin and his wife enrolled the girl in a local public school, one that she could attend because she looked so "white." But the \$75 her father gave Coffin soon ran out, who grew frustrated, but not just because of the girl's dwindling funds. She was also unruly, something Coffin attributed to the pernicious effects of slavery on her life.

Coffin wrote her father, asking for more money, and received a reply, though not the one he wanted. Her father said if "abolitionists were too mean to school the girl, they could send her back to slavery, where she would be better cared for [as] he would be at no further expense on her account." Coffin and his wife were only freed from the responsibility of caring for the girl when she "fell into bad company among the colored people," although her story did have a happy ending. According to Coffin, she eventually married a "respectable colored man" and ended her "improper associations."<sup>35</sup>

As Samuel Townsend's case suggests, not all southern white men so carelessly disposed of their half-black children. Coffin recalled a wealthy judge who lived outside New Orleans. The judge's brother, who owned a mercantile business, had kept a mulatto woman as his common-law wife. The couple had eight children. Privilege abounded in this family, so much so that

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<sup>34</sup> Coffin, 475.

<sup>35</sup> Coffin, 476-477.

slaves waited on this man's mixed race children. The three eldest were sent east to be educated. They were fortunate. The five youngest were still at home when their father died without a will.

Having inherited his four nieces and a nephew as his own property, the judge tried to raise them in the manner his brother would have. Because Cincinnati was well known destination for mulattoes, one of the children, a boy in his early teens, requested that he be sent there to be educated. His uncle contacted Coffin, who sent the youngster to the Indiana boarding school. The child's bills were paid in a timely manner. Coffin also helped the judge bring the other four, all females, to Ohio. "On the arrival of the boat I met the girls at the river, and conveyed them to our house," Coffin remembered.

Using \$500 their uncle had sent, Coffin saw to it that the girls enrolled at Oberlin College, which had been founded by abolitionists. The college was in a suburb of Cleveland, about two hundred miles northeast of Cincinnati. It sat on Lake Erie, a body of water many slaves crossed to make their way to Canada.<sup>36</sup> But one of the four girls, as mentioned in chapter two, returned to Louisiana to be with her white lover. Her three sisters went on to receive their education at Oberlin, which was disrupted by the war. Coffin and his wife reluctantly took them in. The couple grew frustrated because the girls were unaccustomed to housework, the kind of work the Coffins knew they could easily find for them to earn their keep. As well-to-do African Americans, these young women from Louisiana might have thought such work beneath them, but it was the kind of employment they should have expected if they had no other skills and no other source of income. Coffin noted that "they could they could needle pretty well" and presumably found work for them in this capacity. He was delighted when they eventually found

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<sup>36</sup> Coffin, 479.

mates and got married. Enchanted, as others had been, with their fair skin, Coffin recalled these three as “amiable and beautiful young women” and even “fair scholars.”<sup>37</sup>

Other whites also, sometimes reluctantly, aided the manumitted and affluent children of southern white men. Chadick, the white minister, and other such whites sometimes displayed racial biases in their dealings with the Townsend children. During his visit to Cincinnati, Chadick was made aware of the city’s abolitionist presence likely by whites empathetic to the proslavery cause. He was told that these liberals “stripped” any money arriving freed people had. But Chadick noticed, too, the general hostility in the city toward free people of color.<sup>38</sup> He moved on, taking Wesley with him.

Chadick and Wesley visited several other Ohio cities. Chadick ultimately found Albany, a town in Athens County, about 160 miles east of Cincinnati, more suitable than Cincinnati. He heard that free people of color encountered less racism here because “tolerant” Virginians and Marylanders populated the area. But in his report to Cabaniss, Chadick also mentioned that he found the town’s pastoral atmosphere, which probably reminded him of the south, agreeable.<sup>39</sup>

Chadick saw to it that Wesley, who was married and had a child, settled there and received training in order that he might immediately provide for himself, his family and his siblings. Chadick enrolled Wesley, who was illiterate, in an industrial school in Albany,

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<sup>37</sup> Coffin, 480-481.

<sup>38</sup> “Report of Mission to Ohio, 1858,” Box Number 0252.0050, Folder 6, Cabaniss Papers.

<sup>39</sup> Being a woman of her time, Frances Cabaniss Roberts did not interrogate Chadick’s description of Athens County as “one of the districts in which a negro with no more than common sense could do well.” He reached this conclusion because the county had fertile soil and a climate that was said to be favorable to “negroes.” His mention of climate and land was in line with white southern beliefs that people of African descent were better fit to be agricultural laborers in the South’s generally warmer climate than workers in other occupations and settings. Roberts’ oversight is notable partly because she does not cite W.E.B. Du Bois’ 1935 important study, *Black Reconstruction*, which argued that African Americans were more intelligent than southerners and historians have portrayed them. Though published five years before Roberts’ dissertation, the book was generally ignored by historians and the public alike. Roberts, 14-16.

presumably so he could obtain the skills that would allow him to manage his and his younger siblings' business affairs once they arrived.

In June of 1858, Wesley wrote a letter to Cabaniss, expressing a longing for his wife and children who remained in Huntsville. He also inquired about his father's estate and announced plans to search for a job in a blacksmith's shop once the school term ended. While he waited for an answer, his father's white relatives continued to make claims on his father's estate, delaying the arrival of his siblings. Not until January 1860 were the following were manumitted: Carolina and her infant child Elizabeth, Elvira and her infant child, Thomas, Willis, Osborne, Parthenia, Joseph, Bradford, Susanna, Milcha, and Elizabeth, daughter of their Uncle Edmund, who had earlier been manumitted. Wesley's wife, Jane, and his two children, Elizabeth, and Wesley, were also freed.<sup>40</sup>

These slaves were all sent to Xenia, Ohio, 100 miles northwest of Albany. Wesley relocated there and saw to it that his siblings were enrolled at Wilberforce four days after their arrival.<sup>41</sup> Founded in 1856 in tribute to the British abolitionist William Wilberforce, this Methodist-based institution of higher learning extended an education to African Americans.<sup>42</sup> Wilberforce, as had Oberlin College started doing nearly twenty years earlier, even educated

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<sup>40</sup> The fathers of the young women's children are unknown. It is quite possible that they were male slaves on the Townsend plantation. Roberts 19-20.

<sup>41</sup> Why Wesley had not been initially settled in Xenia is unclear. During their initial fact finding trip, Chadick and Wesley had visited the school, which had sixty pupils "representing many southern states." Though he could see the importance of education to the Townsend children's future, perhaps Chadick was more interested in seeing them become farmers, a profession for which, as he thought, the inferior African American was better suited, and thus set Wesley up in Albany. Ibid. 20.

<sup>42</sup> For more, see Frederick McGinnis, *A History and an Interpretation of Wilberforce University* (Blanchester, OH, The Brown Publishing Co., 1941); Wanda M. Davis, "First Foundations: An Enquiry into the Founding of Three Selected African American Institutions of Higher Learning," Ed. D. dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, (Ann Arbor: UMI Dissertation Services, 1994); Eric Metaxas, *Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery* (New York: HarperOne, 2007); William Wilberforce, Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce, eds., *The Life of William Wilberforce, Cambridge Library Collection – Slavery and Abolition (Volume 1)*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). Though its chief focus is southern institutions of higher learning, for more on the history of higher education for African Americans during the bellum and postwar years, see James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

freed slaves.<sup>43</sup> In fact, both colleges were generally known for initially enrolling students who were the mixed race descendants of Southern white men and women of African descent.

Speaking to this phenomenon, Eliza Potter, the mulatto hair-dresser, said, “[A]ll our institutions are filled with gentlemen’s children sent from the South.”. During a visit to Oberlin, she reported having seen “between three and four hundred children...two-thirds of them being gentleman’s children from the South.”<sup>44</sup>

Shortly after his siblings arrived at Wilberforce, Wesley encountered conflict with both them and whites who attempted to manage their lives. In a letter filled with misspelled, but legible words, Wesley told Chadick, “Dear friend Mr Chadick I will write you a few lines to give you som [sic] information how we are geting [sic] along.” Though his writing was child-like, his mind was that of an astute young man. He went on to express his unhappiness about paying \$800 a month for the property in which they lived in Xenia (The amount quoted is suspiciously high, suggesting that Wesley may have mistakenly added an extra zero. To add perspective, White located a house for \$13 a month in cramped Cincinnati). Wesley suggested that purchasing a house would be a better way to use their stipend.<sup>45</sup>

Wesley had other worries. Elvira and Jane wanted money and when Wesley refused their request, they demanded to be returned to Alabama. In a separate letter, R.S. Rust, the director of Wilberforce, informed Cabaniss that Willis had also demanded money from Wesley, who feared

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<sup>43</sup> White, xii.

<sup>44</sup> Cora Gillam, an ex-slave from Arkansas, attested to Potter’s report. Because their “white father claimed them,” Gillam’s half-sister was sent to Ohio to attend Oberlin and her brother to a school in Cincinnati. Gillam, whose white father was an overseer and presumably of more modest means, attended neither. But as if to align herself with her siblings in any manner she knew how, Gillam announced, “my father was not a slave. Can’t you tell by me that he was white?” Cora Gillam, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States From Interviews with Former Slaves*; Volume: II; State: Arkansas; Part: 3; Page Number: 27; Potter, 171.

<sup>45</sup> Roberts’ review of her great grandfather’s records reveals that the Townsends were in fact paying \$96.44 for rent. The amount of their stipend is unknown. Wesley Townsend to Chadick, January 27, 1860, Item 6, Box Number 252.054 Folder 01, Cabaniss Papers, and Roberts, 22.



they would soon have nothing. Wesley might have particularly displeased with Willis because he had lost his clothes on the train during their trip to Ohio, and \$21.20 had been spent on replacing his wardrobe.<sup>46</sup>

While these Townsends settled in at Wilberforce, Cabaniss decided that Kansas would be ideal for the remaining slaves Samuel Townsend wanted to manumit (these were the immediate relatives of the children who lived in Xenia). The land in Kansas was cheap and those with a small inheritance could maximize their money in this area.<sup>47</sup> On February 25, 1860, barely a month after Wesley's siblings had been settled in Xenia, twenty-nine more of Townsend's slaves left Huntsville by train for America's heartland.<sup>48</sup> As these ex-slaves settled in Kansas, they encountered racism there, too. White Kansans increasingly feared the presence of blacks would shift white migration from their state to Nebraska and Minnesota. One white Kansas land agent questioned whether it was even true that the Townsends he met had enough money to buy land. "There is a colored man in this place, named Woodson Townsend...who calls on us frequently," the agent said in a letter to Cabaniss. He added that Woodson had given him copies of the probate court papers concerning his father's will. "He is anxious to purchase land here and

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<sup>46</sup> Roberts, 22-23.

<sup>47</sup> The relocation of Townsend's slaves in Leavenworth, Kansas, presaged the movement of thousands of other rural African Americans from the south in 1879 and 1880. The "Exodusters," as these free people called themselves, were the "first, massive repudiation" of southern racism. In connecting their struggles to Jews during the biblical times, these migrants' relocation was the beginning of a social, if not economic, "reordering of Southern life." The loss of these laborers was so tremendous, white landholders often begged steamboat captains not to pick up black migrants. Roberts 23-24; Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), 4 and Buchanan, 177-178.

<sup>48</sup> These ex-slaves included the mothers of Townsend's ten children, except for Winney, who had died. Townsend also freed one of the Townsend siblings' aunts, their half-siblings from other men, and the husband of one sibling's mother. He also freed Woodson, a "man of light complexion" who belonged to Townsend's brother, Edmund. This number of slaves, which exceeded those mentioned in Townsend's will, was an outcome of the arrival of newborn children. Samuel Townsend Will, Box Number 0252.0050, Folder 5, Cabaniss Papers; and Roberts, 24.

commence farming,” the man said.<sup>49</sup> Cabaniss aided Woodson and the others who were manumitted in making their land purchases.

Meanwhile, over the next year, Wesley, who was in Ohio, tended the needs of his siblings, who were apparently joined by their cousins, Elizabeth and Virginia. In one letter to Cabaniss, Elizabeth described an event she and the others attended: “[T]he young men and the young lad[ies] had a social and we enjoyed ourselves.” Next, she proceeded to relay a bit of gossip related to the evangelical impulse known as the Second Great Awakening which swept the United States during the late antebellum period.<sup>50</sup> Elizabeth announced that some of her cousins had become religious. “[A] few weeks ago we had a r[e]viv[a]l here[.] [A] good many of my schoolmat[es] profess religion. Sister has profess[ed] religion. Thomas and Milcha [and] Bradford all these have profess[ed] religion,” she said. By not mentioning herself among the converts, she signaled her refusal to follow the crowd.<sup>51</sup>

While the Townsends confronted the biases of whites in Kansas and Ohio, the Civil War began, disrupting their lives as it did those of other Americans. Wilberforce was forced temporarily to close. The Townsend males who were of age served in a “colored” unit fighting on behalf of the Union, and the Townsend females left Xenia to live with their relatives in locations outside the south. Regardless of their activities or locations, the Townsend children continued to attract the attention of whites around them. In May of 1861, a month after the attack on Fort Sumter the beginning of the war, Wesley received a letter from John Duer, an abolitionist, who asked about their well-being after seeing an advertisement in an antislavery

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<sup>49</sup> Brewer and Pierce Realty Company possibly to S.D. Cabaniss, November 5, 1860, Item 9, Box Number 252.054, Folder 01, Cabaniss Papers.

<sup>50</sup> Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 12.

<sup>51</sup> Elizabeth Townsend to unknown recipient, possibly her brother Wesley, May 18, 1861, Item 12, Box Number 252.054, Folder 01, Cabaniss Papers.

newspaper “inquiring after the former slaves of Samuel Townsend.” Duer asked Wesley to “keep quiet” on an unnamed matter (doubtless related to their inheritance) until he heard from “a gentleman who is a ‘friend’ of colored people.” Duer presumably meant a member of the Quaker community. He added that he hoped the Townsends would “reap substantial benefit” from their father’s estate, but warned that doing so “will require great care and energy.”<sup>52</sup>

Some of the siblings returned to Wilberforce even before the war ended, doubtless creating new problems for Wesley who had earlier found R.S. Rust, the director of the school, disagreeable. “I think that our money is all that Mr[.] Russ [sic] wants and is all the use he has for us,” Wesley once said in a letter to Chadick, adding, “That made me right mad with him.”<sup>53</sup> Wesley next reported that his siblings were enrolled, but some had colds. Speaking in place of the father who was no longer there, he requested additional funds to purchase “bed clothes,” beds, stoves, chairs, a table and house utensils.

In response, Chadick appears to have consulted Rust to learn about the children’s situation. The outcome was not one Wesley had intended. Rust asked J.K. Parker, a local white man, to monitor them. Parker hesitated, suggesting that such a task was inappropriate because he hardly knew the Townsends. “Being an entire stranger I felt embarrassed [to do this],” he stated in a letter to Rust.<sup>54</sup> Parker added that the Townsends had told them that they were accustomed to managing their own money. Perhaps under pressure from Rust, Parker eventually agreed to monitor the children’s expenditures. His report on the expenses of Susanna, one of the Townsend girls, illustrates his oversight. He noted every penny that had been spent on her in this manner:

“1 circular	\$10
1 hat	\$6
Gloves	70 cents

<sup>52</sup> John Duer to Wesley Townsend, May 22, 1861, Item 1, Box Number 252.054, Folder 01, Cabaniss Papers.

<sup>53</sup> Wesley Townsend to Chadick, January 27, 1860, Item 6, Box Number 252.054 Folder 01, Cabaniss Papers.

<sup>54</sup> J.K. Parker to R.S. Rust, January 5, 1865, Item 14, Box Number 252.054, Folder Number 01, Cabaniss Papers.

Shoes	\$2 .00
Calico .28 yards x 28 cts	2.24
Stockings 60 x 50	\$1.10
10 yds muslin 37 1/2	\$3.75
Hoops	\$1.00

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\$26.69

He added that a doctor's bill needed to be paid, but that the children "had no money."

Parker's announcement raises questions about the circumstances surrounding the Townsend children's experiences in Xenia. Had they misspent their funds? Had they been given too little on which to survive? Had someone taken some of it? We have no concrete answers to these questions. It is possible that the Townsends had not managed their funds well, or that Rust took advantage of them, especially if he was aware of their inheritance. What cannot be doubted is that whites, even presumably sympathetic ones like Rust, did not appear friendly when viewed through the eyes of people of color. Even relatively privileged mixed race individuals like the Townsends experienced surveillance by whites whose prejudices and bigotry were, as this incident suggests, on clear display, even though they were clearly a special class of African Americans.

Such was also true of ex-slave George Davis, the son of his "master and a black servant girl" residing in Boyd County, Kentucky. Shortly before the Civil War, Davis refused an offer by two white abolitionists to escape Kentucky for Canada.<sup>55</sup> A WPA interviewer speculated that Davis remained because Kentucky, unlike most other southern states, had not seceded from the Union. The interviewer also believed he remained because Kentucky was on the northern border

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<sup>55</sup> Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States From Interviews with Former Slaves*; Volume: VII; State: Kentucky; 70.

of the south, where the slaves were reputedly better treated than further south. Such a belief was so widespread that whites in lower south states looked at Kentucky with alarm. It and Arkansas were the only southern states not to prohibit teaching slaves to read and write. Moreover, although Kentucky was a slave state, African Americans could not be charged for crimes without a trial by jury.<sup>56</sup> Davis possibly considered these laws and his status as the “well treated” and “trusted servant” of his white father as reasons for remaining. He, too, benefited from his proximity, both genetically and spatially, to the dominant group.

Similar was the case of ex-slave Edd [sic] Shirley, a former resident of Monroe County, Kentucky. Shirley’s father was white and his mother was “a colored woman.” That Shirley was sold twice before his father purchased him implies that the intimacy between the two occurred when she was owned by another slaveholder. But his eventual purchase of Shirley demonstrates concern for a child he fathered with a female slave. Like the Townsend children and Davis, having intimate ties to a white man positioned Shirley in a different space from other African Americans, slaves or not.<sup>57</sup>

But after the war, the Townsends confronted obstacles, as seen in the letters they sent to each other. When their correspondence is considered collectively, one senses a family attempting to find its way and relying on kinship as a source of support in a generally hostile environment as a new century approached. They were not alone. Historian Martha Sandweiss documents a similar quest in her study of the nineteenth century romance between noted white geologist Clarence King and Ada Coleman, an African American woman born as a Georgia slave. After meeting Coleman, a nursemaid, in New York, where she had relocated after the Civil War, King, who had long been drawn to women of color, married her in 1882, “passing” as African

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<sup>56</sup> Bigham, 14.

<sup>57</sup> Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States From Interviews with Former Slaves*; Volume: VII; State: Kentucky; 23.

American himself.<sup>58</sup> For decades, “James Todd,” as King renamed himself, explained his long absences from their Brooklyn and later, Flushing, Queens, homes, first, by pretending to be a Pullman porter and later, a clerk for a steel company. Not like the antebellum women under review here and Townsend’s own children, Ada’s ties to a prominent white man, as Sandweiss has written, permitted her greater opportunities to assert “her place in the world, her independence, her ability to make her own choices.” No matter the emotional toll his absences took on her and their children, as Sandweiss further writes, over thirteen years, King “remained devoted to” her “and their children, at no small cost to his own financial and emotional wellbeing.”<sup>59</sup>

King’s devotion to Ada was made clear in letters he sent her over the years, letters that document a deep and genuine emotional bond between two such unlikely bodies. Indeed, when Ada made claims on King’s estate per his wishes after his death, she shared the letters with his white male friends, who kept them with the plan that they never again see the light of day. But, perhaps knowing the issue could end up in court, they did not destroy them. In time, Ada would learn that the money he used to support her before and after his death often came via the eminent statesman John Hay, Abraham Lincoln’s private secretary and later, U.S. Secretary of State. Two of the Kings’ daughters were so fair that they passed as whites and married white men.

Following King’s death in 1901, his and Ada’s family saga, which spanned from the late nineteenth century to the Civil Rights era, was the subject of scandalous news reports. Though King was the subject of several subsequent works in the twentieth century, not until Sandweiss’

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<sup>58</sup> Sandweiss writes that King “seemed most attracted to those women whose race and class and educational background rendered them most unlike” his “needy” white mother. Remarking on the indifference one white male acquaintance displayed toward women of color during a trip to Tahiti and Samoa, King half-joked, “I love primal women so madly...” Speaking further of his attraction for women of color, perhaps for fair-skinned ones in particular (even though Ada was dark-skinned), King mentioned the woman as “lovely as mulatto lilies” he saw in Santiago de Cuba. Martha A. Sandweiss, *Passing Strange: A Gilded Age Tale of Love and Deception Across the Color Line* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2009), 2, 125, 128, 173 and 196.

<sup>59</sup> Sandweiss, 156-157.

recent publication did Ada Copeland Todd King emerge as more than Clarence King's "kept mistress." As Sandweiss boldly concludes, she was his "wife."<sup>60</sup>

Speaking to the difficulties historians have had in analyzing the genuineness of emotional exchanges between interracial couples of the past, Sandweiss writes, "Public documents record the story that James and Ada Todd told the world, but they did not reveal what they said to each other."<sup>61</sup> For example, while Ada had earlier told census-takers that her husband was a Pullman porter from Baltimore, by 1900 she told one that he was a "black man born in the West Indies."<sup>62</sup> Perhaps it was the only way she could explain the comfortable life he had given her in a mixed race neighborhood on North Prince Street in Queens. But Sandweiss was curious about Ada's announcement. She ponders whether King told her to say this, or whether she surmised on her own that not all was "as it seemed" with her "husband," and offered this explanation to spare her family unwanted scrutiny.<sup>63</sup>

King's letters provide insight about her motives. In fact, his letters reveal unheard conversations between him and his black wife (they also reveal parallels between her situation and that of Avenia White and Rice Ballard). In a letter that began with "My darling," he told her to expect a gentleman visitor who would soon bring her money. "I don't care for him to see the children. Always have the parlor looking nice, and when he comes put on a nice dress or a nice wrapper."<sup>64</sup> King acted as had Ballard, the Virginia slave trader turned planter, who years earlier used an intermediary, a local white businessman, to deliver money to his ex-slave mistresses Avenia White and her African American landlady, Frances Bruster. Like Ballard, King was

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<sup>60</sup> Sandweiss, 288, 296-297.

<sup>61</sup> Sandweiss, to employ this study's terminology, has uncovered James and Ada Todd's "pillow talk." Sandweiss, 215.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>64</sup> Sandweiss, 222.

certainly concerned about appearances.<sup>65</sup> Notably, eager to possibly counter myths concerning the promiscuity of black women, or displaying class-based motives, King asked his black wife to dress in a respectable manner. In doing so, he demonstrated that even people of color with ties to men like him continued to face white hostility. The same was certainly true for Samuel Townsend's children.

Like the Kings' five children, even the ones who passed as white, Samuel Townsend's offspring suffered systemic discrimination in a society that was generally antagonistic toward African Americans. It was something from which they could not escape, no matter how much money they inherited from their white father. But their determination to move forward in spite of the obstacles before them was sustained not just by their awareness of their promised wealth, but by reaching out to each other. Osborne Townsend, Samuel's fourth eldest son, seems to have written most frequently. Maybe it was because he had a typewriter he wished to show off. Whatever the reason, his letters reveal the kinship that existed in this family. They, too, reveal the loneliness many postbellum African Americans doubtless felt, even when "privileged." That he was privileged was seen in how he was able to pursue a career as a barber, a profession generally restricted to fair-skinned blacks in his day. This was certainly true in Cincinnati, a city where he did not settle.<sup>66</sup> Perhaps because he had the financial means, he traveled farther from Ohio. He pursued his trade in Georgetown, Colorado, a place where he could join others, mostly whites, hoping to make a fortune in Colorado's oldest silver mining community.

Tucked at the eastern base of the "Snowy Range, Georgetown is 52 miles west of Denver. Here, at an altitude of some 8,530 feet, locals boasted about their pure mountain air and the area's generally mild climate. The town was named for George Griffith. Griffith, and his

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<sup>65</sup> Avenia White to Rice Ballard, February 2, 1840, Folder 31, Ballard Papers.

<sup>66</sup> Nancy Bertaux, "Structural Economic Change and Occupational Decline among Black Workers in Nineteenth Century Cincinnati," in Taylor Jr., ed., *Race and the City*, 136.



brother, David, were two adventurous Kentuckians, who made the “white man’s” first discovery of silver in the region in 1859. As the prospectors flocked to the town, gamblers, “shady ladies” gamblers and other fortune-hunters arrived.<sup>67</sup> Migrants came from states as diverse as Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, and Maryland, and even the Deep South.

Doubtless Osborne saw and felt much while living in Colorado. He may have compared the hills of Huntsville to the mountains in Georgetown, a place he studied carefully. In one letter to his brother Thomas, the brother to whom he wrote the most, Osborne described the dwindling presence of Native Americans in the area.<sup>68</sup> The initial topic opening the door for such a discussion was Thomas’ desire for a robe made of buffalo hide. He noted that had “not seen an Indian in six years” though he had once traded with members of the Ute tribe who had been “moved several hundred miles southwest” of Georgetown. However, Osborne said he believed he could find such a robe in Denver.

That these two siblings could speak so easily about a buffalo robe suggests that their everyday concerns departed from the basic material comforts on the minds of many, if not most, people of African descent in the United States during the nineteenth century (and years later). Certainly they did not merely long as had Avenia White, the woman in the first case study, for a bed. But other worries remained. Osborne asked Thomas about the whereabouts of another sibling, Willis, who, last he knew, lived in Ohio. Osborne might have been especially concerned about Willis, who worked as a waiter on a Cincinnati-based steamboat, because he and Willis shared a mother as well as a father.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> *Historic Georgetown: Centennial Gazette, 1866-1968* (Georgetown, Co: Georgetown Society, 1968), 3, 9, and 21.

<sup>68</sup> Roberts, 99; Osborne Townsend to Thomas Townsend, December 12, 1882, Item 25, Box Number 252.054, Folder 01, Cabaniss Papers. Thomas had moved to Huntsville where he worked as a teacher; he also farmed land in nearby Hazel Green.

<sup>69</sup> Osborne Townsend to Wesley and Thomas Townsend, December 3, 1872, Georgetown CO, Item 19, Box Number 252.05, Folder 01, Cabaniss Papers.

Apparently Osborne rarely received news about Willis. In 1876, Osborne wrote Thomas and Wesley, saying, “Wish you could let me know if Willis is in New Richmond.” Evidently he knew that his brother lived in a river town south of Cincinnati.<sup>70</sup> Osborne eventually ascertained more about Willis via news relayed by a member of their eldest brother’s household. In a letter to her “Uncle Thomas,” Carrie Leonteen Townsend, Wesley’s daughter, mentioned how “Cousin Alice Townsend from New Richmond is visiting us now.” Alice was probably Willis’ daughter.<sup>71</sup> But Carrie had equally important news to convey concerning herself. “I am not braging [sic] but you ought to see me play piano. I tell you I make ours sing.”

Carrie’s upward mobility had doubtless been an outcome of her white grandfather’s generosity (however sporadically money arrived from his attorney). But Carrie’s status as a cultured young woman may also be attributed to her father’s own efforts.<sup>72</sup> After the war, Wesley lived briefly Kansas and while there, not only borrowed money from his relatives, but deserted his wife, Jane, when he relocated to New Richmond, Ohio. While there, he remarried and purchased a house, only to lose it. Strangely, Wesley attributed his inability to pay the mortgage on his house to locals not liking him. He had been called a “butternut,” a colloquialism

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<sup>70</sup> Osborne’s yearning to learn more about Willis might have been an outcome of Osborne recently losing his wife during childbirth. He described himself as being “distraught.” Osborne Townsend to Thomas and Wesley Townsend, January 19, 1876, Georgetown, CO., Item 21, Box Number 252.054, Folder 01, Cabaniss Papers.

<sup>71</sup> Willis’ eldest child was named Alice. He also had a son named Harry and a daughter named Perlie. His wife was named Eliza. 1880 U.S. Census; Carrie Leonteen Townsend to Thomas Townsend, August 19, 1870, Item 42, Box Number 252.054, Folder 01, Cabaniss Papers.

<sup>72</sup> Carrie’s experiences stand in stark contrast to those of her aunt Susannah, one of the ten manumitted children of Samuel Townsend. After Susannah and her siblings left Wilberforce in the wake of the Civil War, she relocated to New Richmond where she resided with the family of her older brother, Wesley. While there, she attended a school for free people of color and later, Clermont Academy. Though still a teenager, she reportedly got pregnant with a child that died at birth, after having dated a young white man who she desired to marry. She asked Cabaniss for permission to marry her beau because Wesley, her older half-brother, was apparently angered that she had disgraced herself and the family. Susannah died at age sixteen in 1869. Roberts, 48-50; Susanna Townsend to Cabaniss, June 4, 1868, Item 64, Box Number 252.009, Folder 5, Cabaniss Papers.; Adelaide Townsend to Cabaniss, May 10, 1869, Item 1, Box 252.009, Folder 05, Cabaniss Papers; For more, see R. Isabela Morales, “Letters from a Planter’s Daughter: Understanding Freedom and Independence in the Life of Susanna Townsend (1853-1869),” BA Thesis, Department of History, University of Alabama and “Letters from a Planter’s Daughter: Understanding Freedom and Independence in the Life of Susanna Townsend (1853-1869),” *The University of Alabama McNair Journal*, Vol. 12, March 2012.

for people with a “Southern” disposition. Such people, largely of Southern origin, settled in southern Midwest communities of Ohio, Illinois and Indiana. The “butternut’s” appreciation for rural-based economy distinguished him from the more “modern” and eastern “Yankee.” The term “butternut” originates from a dye made from the oil of butternuts and walnuts that was used in homespun clothing by this population, but also in Confederate army uniforms. Hence, in the case of the latter, the term was also a synonym for a Confederate soldier.<sup>73</sup> Though he was clearly of African descent, perhaps locals regarded Wesley as an outsider with more conservative leanings typical of people living in or near the South. No matter the reason, unhappy in Ohio, he returned “home” to Huntsville where he got a teaching job at Huntsville Institute. Still restless, Wesley subsequently relocated to Brookhaven, Mississippi, where he farmed land, earning enough money, it seems, to afford a piano in his house and to pay for Carrie’s piano lessons.<sup>74</sup>

Before closing her letter, Carrie mentioned that she was attending New Orleans University. She wondered if her Uncle Thomas could send her something. “A nice winter dress would be accepted,” she wrote, and in doing so signaled, again, that her tastes reflected those of the respectable bourgeoisie in late nineteenth century America. Her mention of music, higher education and a seasonable garment were all suggestive of Carrie’s social and cultural status, so distant from that of Avenia White and Susan Johnson, who toiled in menial jobs, or even of Louisa Picquet, who lived a married life of modest comfort. Carrie, thanks to the prosperity of her white grandfather and to a lesser degree, her mixed race father, was a member of an emerging African American upper middle class, with access to the best jobs available to people

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<sup>73</sup> Roberts, 51-52; McPherson, 31; James M. McPherson and James K. Hogue, *Ordeal By Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction, 4th ed.* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 19, 101; and Wisconsin Historical Society, Dictionary of Wisconsin History, [http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/dictionary/index.asp?action=view&term\\_id=15292&term\\_type\\_id=3&term\\_type\\_ext=things&letter=B](http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/dictionary/index.asp?action=view&term_id=15292&term_type_id=3&term_type_ext=things&letter=B) (accessed February 5, 2013).

<sup>74</sup> Roberts, 94- 97.

of color and to travel. Other Townsend offspring would pursue educations at institutions of higher learning. Thomas Jr., the son of Thomas, attended Fisk University before getting homesick. He transferred to Howard University.<sup>75</sup>

Cousin Alice was not the only one on the move. In another letter to his brother, Thomas, Osborne mentioned that members of the Townsend family had visited him in Colorado. “Wade and Austin and I sit around on Sundays and talk over things that happened twenty years ago in the South,” he said about two relatives, one who owned land in Kansas. Osborne next inquired about Thomas’ crops and wondered whether Thomas was overworking himself in Huntsville, farming and teaching. “It is no use to kill yourself trying to get rich,” said Osborne, apparently unaware of the irony of such a comment from one who was barbering and mining silver. Before he signed off, Osborne inquired again about Willis, saying, “I have not heard from [him] in years.”<sup>76</sup>

Why Osborne had such difficulties in learning about Willis is unclear. Had Willis deliberately distanced himself from his family? Or did Willis not want to communicate with Osborne? Whatever the answers, Osborne finally did hear from Willis and what he learned was not good. The decline of Cincinnati’s steamboat industry and the city’s arrival as a leading manufacturing center, both during the 1850s, created trouble for Willis, who was probably encountering job competition from local whites, a good many of whom scrambled for the best factory positions.<sup>77</sup> From the 1860s onward, the former “walking city” of Cincinnati, which had been hemmed in by a waterfront on one side and hills on the others, mushroomed into an

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<sup>75</sup> For more, see short letter from Osborne Townsend possibly to his brother Thomas, December 29, 1908, Item 46, Box Number 252.054, Folder 01, Cabaniss Papers; and Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 9.

<sup>76</sup> Osborne Townsend to Thomas Townsend, November 16, 1883, Item 28, Box Number 252.054, Cabaniss Papers. Details about Wade are in a later letter from Osborne. See Osborne Townsend to Thomas Townsend, July 17, 1889, Item 41, Folder 01, Cabaniss Papers.

<sup>77</sup> Bertaux, 127.

expansive manufacturing center. People of color who had worked in the better professions - boatmen, barbers and teachers among them - suffered. Domestic work and manual laborer were now the dominant occupations for African Americans. While the city's black labor force participation was higher than that of whites, 54.8%, compared to 47.2%, this number reflected the growing number of black women in menial positions. In 1890, African American women made up as much as 28% of the city's labor force.<sup>78</sup>

The difficulties African Americans and other Cincinnatians faced can partly be attributed to the city's leaders, who unlike those in Chicago and St. Louis, failed to make their city part of the country's expanding east-west railroad network. This lack of foresight, along with declining traffic on the Ohio River, particularly harmed Willis and other African American men who "bore a disproportionate amount of the burden resulting" from ongoing economic changes in the area.<sup>79</sup>

But even as Cincinnati's infrastructure lagged because of its poor weak rail system, its position as a leader in manufacturing led to tremendous growth. By 1850, there were 29,401 workers in the city's shops and factories, almost as many as the 30,147 individuals working in St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Louisville and Chicago combined. In fact, not until the late 1860s, did Chicago strip Cincinnati of its title as the biggest Midwestern employer in the industrial sector.<sup>80</sup> Still, between 1851 and 1910, the value of products made Cincinnati increased from \$54 million to \$262 million. But such growth occurred in a space that was more congested than it had been during the antebellum period. Only New York City was more cramped by 1870. As land was increasingly separated by function, the competition for space from factories and expanding rail

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<sup>78</sup> Bertaux, 127-140.

<sup>79</sup> The steamboat's decline can be partly attributed to the arrival of railroads. During the 1850s, no rail line offered competition to the Ohio and Mississippi rivers or other tributary stream. The low water seasons permitted developing railroads to gain a foothold in the steamboat market by the mid-1850s (two rail lines crossing the Appalachians to the Ohio River were completed in 1852 and 1853). As an outcome of Emancipation and industrialization, the racial composition of steamboat crews changed from 1860-1870. African Americans displaced unskilled Irish and German immigrant laborers. Hunter, 450 and 484-485, 494; Bertaux, 142-143.

<sup>80</sup> Ross, 72-73.

lines made the city's center undesirable. The rise of the industrial city also led to the growth of black ghettos across the country. Indeed, a once racially-integrated Cincinnati now segregated its residents by race and class.<sup>81</sup> The geographic and economic expansion of the city led to the creation of street lines and cable railways, which enabled whites to flee to valley and hilltop communities, while people of color continued settling in the city's basin.<sup>82</sup>

African Americans migrated not only into Cincinnati, but the state as a whole. Ohio's black population grew from 36,673 in 1860 to 80,000 in 1880. This steady increase contributed to ongoing white hostility that was less prevalent during the postbellum period in states like Indiana, where fewer blacks settled.<sup>83</sup> For example, Cincinnati's white printers ignored requests by skilled black printers for admission into their union. Such exclusions also applied to women.<sup>84</sup> As the century progressed, the "small, but significant number" of African American workers who worked in semi-skilled positions were also ostracized by the city's "better class" of white working men.<sup>85</sup>

But such racial strife had long been nuanced by ethnic loyalties. As James Oliver Horton and Hartman Keil have made clear, nineteenth century clashes between African Americans and immigrants were often a manifestation of black-Irish relations, a fact borne out by Cincinnati's 1841 mob attack, which largely involved Irishmen. The marked distinction in behavior among European immigrants may be attributed to the Irish population's background. While arriving

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<sup>81</sup> Though this book focuses on Cleveland, it mentions other Ohio cities including Cincinnati. Kenneth L. Kusmer, *A Ghetto Takes Shape: Black Cleveland, 1870-1930 (Blacks in the New World)* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 22-24.

<sup>82</sup> Between 1870 and 1910, Cincinnati's immigrant population declined as it did in other Midwestern cities. Only New York City, Boston and San Francisco continued to draw large numbers of new immigrants. However, despite the immigrant population decline in Cincinnati, white immigrants and their native-born descendants continued to make up more than half of Cincinnati's population in the 1850s. Henry Louis Taylor Jr., "City Building, Public Policy, and the Rise of the Industrial City, and Black Ghetto-Slum Formation in Cincinnati, 1850-1860" in Taylor Jr. ed., *Race and the City*, 159-163 and David Ward, *Cities and Immigrants: A Geography of Change in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 20 and 77; Ross, 72.

<sup>83</sup> 11,428 African Americans lived in Indiana in 1860. There were just under 40,000 in 1880. Bigham, 140.

<sup>84</sup> Ross, 212.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

Irish and Germans often fled economic hardship in their native countries, the former typically came from rural areas, thus, bringing fewer skills to urban economies. Employment advertisements in cities such as Boston, New York and Philadelphia often stated that “No Irish Need Apply.”<sup>86</sup> Thus they found themselves in competition with African Americans for less-skilled, often menial work.

German immigrants, on the other hand, often came from towns and arrived with marketable skills. As a consequence, they were able to obtain more skilled jobs and to open businesses in the East and Midwest. Their advantageous circumstances contributed to their less hostile relations with African Americans in many urban areas.<sup>87</sup> Some Germans doubtless arrived during a period when African Americans and Germans were mutually inspired by the other’s struggle and when anti-slavery campaigns in the United States converged with upheaval in revolutionary Germany.<sup>88</sup> In Buffalo, blacks and Germans lived side by side, sometimes even under the same roof. In some cases, Germans’ residential patterns for unmarried women bore resemblance to Cincinnati’s antebellum African American community. In one household, two widowed German mothers lived with a black widow and her children.<sup>89</sup> As was also true in Cincinnati, Irishmen, not German, figured prominently in anti-black violence in Buffalo, particularly during the war years.<sup>90</sup>

While Willis Townsend was not shielded from race-based hostility in Cincinnati on the job front, he was shielded from it on the residential one. As mentioned, he, as did Louisa Picquet, lived in New Richmond, a river town in Cincinnati’s suburbs. That said, during the 1870s Willis

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<sup>86</sup> Reports that “No Irish Need Apply” signs actually existed is now the subject of a controversy concerning whether such signs were just legend. See Kerby Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (Oxford Paperbacks) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985, 1988), and Richard Jensen, “No Irish Need Apply”: A Myth of Victimization, <http://tigger.uic.edu/~rjensen/no-irish.htm> (accessed March 3, 2013).

<sup>87</sup> Horton and Keil, 170-171.

<sup>88</sup> Hopkins in *Cross Currents: African Americans, Africa, and Germany in the Modern World*, 69.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 174-175.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

had been earning \$30 a month, or \$360 annually, a solid salary considering the typical American mechanic earned \$10 a week for an average of seven months a year between 1873 and 1877, the most severe period of a global financial crisis, the world's first, which was occurring at the time. This crisis followed several major military conflicts and economic upheaval and preceded a new wave of imperialism.<sup>91</sup> The depression which began in 1873 and ended in 1879 (though deflation continued through the early 1890s), was characteristic of the boom or bust times associated with the nineteenth century.<sup>92</sup>

In the unstable economic atmosphere, it was not uncommon for Cincinnati workers to experience lengthy episodes of unemployment or part-time work.<sup>93</sup> Amid such social and economic uncertainty, men of color like Willis Townsend in particular struggled. Either he had not managed his income well, or his salary had not been enough to meet the needs of his family in a city that was rapidly changing. His brother, Osborne, also felt financially strained as the federal government attempted to manage the nation's economy and money supply.<sup>94</sup> "If I had any money I would send some[,] but declare I haven't." Osborne told Willis, "We produce two million of silver each year but the government takes" any profit in it.<sup>95</sup> Willis may have related to Osborne's comment, but his woes were an outcome of other factors. "Willis seems to sail under difficulties," Osborne shared in a letter to their brother Thomas, possibly referring to the

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<sup>91</sup> Willis' employment on the river may have always been tenuous. The 1880 Census lists his occupation as a porter. Roberts, 55; 1880 U.S. Census; Ross, 241;

<sup>92</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002), xxvii; Rothman, 5 and 300; Ross, 241. For more, see C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951); Heather Cox Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Civil War South, 1865-1901* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Jonathan Levy, *Freaks of Fortune: The Emerging World of Capitalism and Risk in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

<sup>93</sup> Ross, 241.

<sup>94</sup> As early as the 1850s, the country was becoming a more structured society with "new hierarchies of control." Such change blossomed in the 1870s with westward expansion, the birth of industrial corporations, the rise of the metropolis, and revolutions in transportation, communications, and bureaucracy. Few areas of American life went untouched. Tractenberg, 4-6.

<sup>95</sup> Osborne Townsend to Willis Townsend, July 8, 1889, Item 39, Box Number 252.054, Folder 01, Cabaniss Papers.



hurdles Willis encountered owing to ongoing discrimination against African Americans in Cincinnati during the mid-1880s and beyond.<sup>96</sup>

While contending with an evolving economy, he and his siblings inquired about their father's estate. Said Osborne in another letter to Thomas, "[I]f there is anything coming to me out of that wreck[,] I want it!"<sup>97</sup> Four years later Osborne sent another letter to Thomas who was now a Huntsville city alderman and a claims lawyer for African American soldiers seeking war pensions.<sup>98</sup> In this letter, Osborne said he missed their "schoolmates at Wilberforce" and a "good many of the old times live[d] there."<sup>99</sup> Osborne was not the only one thinking of the past in a wistful manner. In 1901, Mary Townsend, another Townsend descendant residing in San Pedro, an agricultural colony founded in 1870 in northeast Mexico, sent a letter to someone in Huntsville whose identity is uncertain. Mary was in search of a physician. Apparently her daughter was ill. Before she signed off, she said, "I often long for news of my old home and friends."<sup>100</sup>

While filled with warmth, the Townsends' letters should be read with caution. These siblings may have written to each other in order to stay abreast of the events in their lives while

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<sup>96</sup> Osborne Townsend to Thomas Townsend, March 21, 1884, Item 29, Box Number 252.054 Folder 01, Cabaniss Papers; Bigham, 299.

<sup>97</sup> Osborne Townsend to Thomas Townsend, August 5, 1890, Item 41, Box Number 252.054 Folder 01, Cabaniss Papers.

<sup>98</sup> Thomas Townsend handled pension applications for himself and Wesley and perhaps Willis and Thomas. Wesley Townsend to Thomas Townsend, July 5, 1888, Item 38, Box Number 252.054, Folder 01, Cabaniss Papers.

<sup>99</sup> Cabaniss Roberts conducted a personal interview with Thomas Townsend. Pleased by his accomplishments and his demeanor, she wrote the following in the closing pages of her dissertation, "In all of his public life he conducted himself in such a way as to command the respect of both white and colored citizens of Huntsville." Osborne Townsend to Thomas Townsend, August 5, 1890, Item 41, Box Number 252.054, Folder 01, Cabaniss Papers and Cabaniss Roberts, 101.

<sup>100</sup> It is unclear why Mary settled in San Pedro, a refuge for African Americans, among them railroad workers, agricultural laborers, farmers, businessmen and professionals, who had been displeased with the color line and outraged over the growing number lynchings in the United States. Mary Townsend, February 20, 1901, Item 45, Box Number 252.054, Folder 01, Cabaniss Papers. William Schell Jr., *Integral Outsiders: The American Colony in Mexico City, 1876-1911* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2000), 24.

waiting for news concerning their father's estate. Had another relative's condition improved in a way that had not been shared? They would not know if they did not stay in regular contact.

Some stayed in touch not only with each other, but with the lawyer Samuel Townsend had hired to see to their financial well-being. In 1884, Nettie Caldwell, a descendant of daughter Milcha, wrote a letter to Cabaniss to remind him that he promised her that he would send her an unspecified amount of money when she was old enough to select her own guardian. Wrote Caldwell, "I am old enough now to choose one. Please let me know if I choose one, will you send me some money? I don't want to choose a guardian unless you send some money." Caldwell also appears to have been in enrolled school because she went on to share, "my books this session cost me eight dollars." If Cabaniss had "any feeling for a motherless and fatherless child," he should respond, she wrote.<sup>101</sup>

The direct, even manipulative tone in Nettie's letter cannot be missed. One may chalk her impoliteness up to youth or to something or someone else. Whether she received assistance remains unknown. At the time, she was living with her grandmother, Lucy, in Louisville, Kentucky. Lucy was the mother of Milcha.<sup>102</sup>

It may be difficult for the contemporary reader to have empathy for a child who seems to have been somewhat spoiled. We may remember the position taken by Fredericka Bremer and Frederick Olmsted, two whites mentioned in chapter two. Both had little regard for enslaved females who appeared to be ungrateful for their privileged position among the slave population. Such judgments resonate against Caldwell, who at a young age, seems to have had considerable self-esteem. She was the granddaughter of a white man, and a rich one. And like many other

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<sup>101</sup> Nettie Caldwell to S.D. Cabaniss, October 11, 1884, Louisville, KY, Item 30, Box Number 252.054, Folder 01, Cabaniss Papers; Lucy Townsend to S.D. Cabaniss, August 3, 1880, Louisville, KY, Item 24, Box Number 252.054, Folder 01, Cabaniss Papers.

<sup>102</sup> Future research may reveal the circumstances under which Nettie was given to her grandmother. Milcha, Nettie's mother, was actually alive, making Nettie's claim of being an orphan misleading.

African American females, she could make a point forcefully.<sup>103</sup> This self-assertiveness (“I don’t want to choose a guardian unless you send some money”) has earlier been seen in Carrie, the Townsend child who asked her uncle for a winter dress.

The younger Townsends permit us to try something risky, which is to position them against whites in America, who, too, acted with their own self interests in mind. Though people of different racial groups routinely act with their own interests in mind, the actions of African Americans were seen differently because of negative stereotypes of being, among other things, dishonest and lazy. Because of such typecasting, even the most privileged African Americans were hyper-alert about their own position and the image they conveyed to others.

For example, though privileged, Osborne, the barber and sometimes miner in Colorado, was powerless to resist the government’s growing ability to control how much he made. But he was also not fully protected because he was a man of color, something he was reminded of, surprisingly, by the growing presence of African Americans in Georgetown. This much can be gathered from his sharing with his brother Thomas his plans to organize a new mining company for the “loose negroes” in Georgetown.<sup>104</sup> Why Osborne referred to other African Americans in his community in this manner, we can only speculate. Maybe as a light-skinned man, he felt superior to them and wanted to distance himself from them, as many whites did. In this way, he was like some people of color in Cincinnati before the war, who policed their own in the face of anger from white Americans who resented their presence.<sup>105</sup>

But even he knew that whites resented him, too. Certainly mulatto and mulatta blacks were increasingly under surveillance as the century progressed, as evident in the growing appearance of such characters in literary works by the late nineteenth century. Pauline Hopkins,

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<sup>103</sup> Fulton Minor and Pitts, 3.

<sup>104</sup> Osborne Townsend reportedly made this comment in a letter written on February 19, 1873. Roberts, 97.

<sup>105</sup> Dabney, 39, and Carby, 739.

an African American female author, received her share of criticism for presenting mulatta characters in her fiction during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Among her critics was a white female subscriber to *Colored American* magazine. This woman had noticed that with few exceptions, the serial stories Hopkins wrote involved “love between colored and whites.” Puzzled and angered, this reader asked the magazine’s editors, “Does that mean your novelists can imagine no love and sublime within the range of the colored race, for each other?”

The editors allowed Hopkins to respond to this reader:

My stories are definitely planned to show the obstacles persistently placed in our paths by the dominant race to subjugate us spiritually. Marriage is made illegal between the races and yet the mulattoes increase. Thus the shadow of corruption falls on the blacks and whites, without whose aid the mulattoes would not exist. And then the hue and cry goes abroad of the immorality of the Negro and the disgrace that mulattoes are to this nation.”<sup>106</sup>

In responding, Hopkins announced the degree to which the mulatta as an imagined character was based on a lived experience recognizable to Americans and foreigners. Building on the work of Hazel Carby, Siobhan Somerville uses this exchange to highlight the historical implications of the use of mulatta and mulatto characters during the late nineteenth century, a period when, as Somerville argues, race and sexuality were being policed in “deeply intertwined” ways. Jim Crow laws sought to separate white and black bodies. But at the same time mixed race characters in literature gestured toward long-established and ongoing relations between black and white bodies.<sup>107</sup>

But in reply to the angry reader, Hopkins suggested the political possibilities of black-white intimacies, even ones that predated the era on which she focused. Wrote Hopkins, “Amalgamation is an institution designed by God for some wise purpose, and mixed bloods have

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<sup>106</sup> Siobhan B. Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 3 and 78-79.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

always exercised a great influence on the progress of human affairs.”<sup>108</sup> We may ask to which affairs Hopkins was alluding. Was she speaking of those concerning all human affairs or just American ones, and further, was it really progress? If so, for whom? Americans or only African Americans? For possible answers to such questions we may return to the requests for a winter dress by the forceful Carrie and money by the forceful Nettie. These Townsends represent progress in human affairs by those who, in making such requests, resisted racial ideology, which insisted they deserved neither a winter dress nor money, because they were partly of African descent.

Still, we might ask whether their requests made them appear to be self-seeking young women of color, or self-seeking young *American* women of color. In sorting through possible answers we may consider the observations made years earlier by Frances Trollope, the antebellum British travel writer. Upon visiting New Orleans for the very first time, Trollope wrote:

On first touching the soil of a new land, of a new continent, of a new world, it is impossible not to feel considerable excitement and deep interest in almost every object that meets us. New Orleans presents very little that can gratify the eye of taste, but nevertheless there is much of novelty and interest for a newly arrived European. The large proportion of blacks seen in the streets, all labour being performed by them; the grace and beauty of the elegant Quadroons, the occasional groups of wild and savage Indians, the unwonted aspect of the vegetation, the huge and turbid river, with its low and slimy shore, all help to afford that species of amusement which proceeds from looking at what we never saw before.”<sup>109</sup>

When Trollope arrived in New Orleans, she saw people of mixed race, females in particular, as being a unique part of an American landscape about which she had many critical observations. She took note of such women in order to stress their novelty, but perhaps also because their elegance might be chalked up to their access to money. Though she wrote these

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid. 78.

<sup>109</sup> Trollope, 7.

words in the 1830s, she pointed to that with which Americans have long been identified: ostentatious and excess. But what excess meant for African Americans in the 1830s and well into the Reconstruction-era were complex. For Carrie and Nettie were among those of mixed race who likely grappled not only with *how* to obtain things, but also their favored position when compared to other people of color.

Though he could condemn “loose Negroes” entering Colorado, even Osborne Townsend was well aware that whites might have seen him in the same manner. After all, he subscribed to the *Huntsville Gazette*, which was filled with stories concerning both the triumphs and expanding trials facing people of color and especially in a now Jim Crow South. In one letter to his brother Thomas, Osborne wrote, “I read gloomy reports of the condition of the colored man in the South.” In another letter, this one bearing the words “C.O. Townsend [T]onsorial Artist,” Osborne wrote, “I never expect to come South again until I can travel like other people.”<sup>110</sup>

Osborne wrote this even as he, like Samuel Townsend’s other children and grandchildren, was well aware of the safety net beneath them as the mixed race descendants of a white man. But such a space did not provide full protection from discriminatory practices, the kind that resulted in the Townsend children fighting for their father’s bequest almost to the end of the nineteenth century. They encountered such a challenge even though they, like the ex-slaves whose lives were examined in the two previous chapters, were one or two degrees away from prominent whites who had demonstrated concern for their well-being.<sup>111</sup> Indeed, with the aid of a

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<sup>110</sup> Osborne Townsend to Thomas Townsend, February 14, 1888, Item, 36, Box Number 252.054, Folder 01, Cabaniss Papers and Osborne Townsend to Thomas Townsend, July 27, 1889, Item 41, Box Number 252.054, Folder 01, Cabaniss Papers.

<sup>111</sup> As noted in earlier chapters, Rice Ballard, the former owner of Avenia White and Susan Johnson, corresponded with Henry Clay, among others. The master of Elizabeth Ramsey, the mother of Louisa Picquet, was Albert Horton, Texas’s first Lieutenant Governor.

second lawyer that they themselves hired in 1870, some of the Townsends offspring actively pursued their father's money without Cabaniss' help.<sup>112</sup>

In order to flourish as free people, the Townsends realized the importance of staying in touch while making concessions to and demands on whites who moved with more or less reluctance to aid or provide for them. Altogether, their story helps us learn more about black-white encounters during the nineteenth century, and the ways in which self-determination and kinship figured into the lives of even the most "privileged" slaves. Ultimately, their head start as free people helped enable several of them to become members of the country's black middle and upper middle class (though apparently not in Cincinnati). Still, their individual actions and other factors, among them, where they settled, community attitudes, and even luck, determined the degree to which they would stay in such positions. Some of their actions might have been the kind for which their mothers hoped while acquiescing or being forced to share a bed with their white father years earlier. Though we will never know what precisely was said between Samuel Townsend and the five black women with whom we know he had relations, and their children, we can be confident that promises were made, ones that figured into the resolve his half-black children and their descendants displayed. When settling outside the south in cities like Cincinnati, these migrants of color learned that they had merely crossed a legal boundary. They would have to personally strive to attain that for which their parents had hoped.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Cabaniss Roberts, 91-92.

<sup>113</sup> Scott Hancock, "From No Country?" to "Our Country!" Living Out Manumission and the Boundaries of Rights and Citizenship, 1773-1855," in Brana-Shute and Sparks, 265-266.

## Conclusion

This study has argued that manumitted slave mistresses and their children strategically led their lives as freed people by taking advantage of earlier, sometimes ongoing, ties to white men. They also strove to construct a solid personal existence in a still-young nation by depending on themselves and other women sharing their condition. This investigation finds meaning in some of them having been “fancy girls.” Because of the evidence on which it relies, special attention has been paid to fancies that appeared to have been concubines, or slave mistresses.

The central theme running through these case studies is the “favor” that such women and their children received from white men who once owned them. Despite their ongoing oppression as both people of color and women, favor was often manifested in their material comfort while enslaved and, sometimes, after they were freed. However, legal codes in existence in many states by the 1830s required free people of color to relocate outside the south. This dynamic led to the migration of many African Americans, including women and children, to cities like Cincinnati, which was a favored destination partly because of ease of access via the important Mississippi-Ohio river network, its position on the southern border, and the abolitionist presence there.

While some former slave mistresses and their offspring went on to live in Cincinnati with the same measure of security they had in the lower South because of their continuing ties to white men, as Nikki Taylor argues, the cases presented here suggest that some, perhaps many, struggled. Those who had long depended on their masters now found themselves forced to rely largely on their own wit and on each other. This phenomenon was partly an outcome of the increasing opposition white southern men faced when bestowing their wealth on their slave mistresses and half-black children.

These relocated women and children faced other racially-based obstacles. Though it was on free soil, Cincinnati was filled with whites, natives and European immigrants, many of whom



feared job competition from people of color who discovered soon after arriving that freedom was a narrow legal idea. Indeed, white supremacist attitudes on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line limited the promise of their emancipation. Ultimately, Cincinnati was a city where African Americans experienced an “incomplete integration” into mainstream society due to racist attitudes there.<sup>1</sup> However, the city’s swelling antebellum African American population ultimately made it preferable to many smaller communities on free soil along the Ohio, which, as Darrel Bigham argues, were more hostile to blacks (one of the few exceptions was New Richmond).<sup>2</sup> By mid-century, Cincinnati had the highest population of mulattoes outside the south.<sup>3</sup>

This investigation reveals via three case studies how freed women and their children made great efforts to rebuild their lives following their manumission. In the first study, we saw how over the course of five letters sent to her former master, Avenia White, one slave mistress freed in Cincinnati in 1838, mentioned the difficult time she and another ex-slave mistress faced while attempting to earn enough money adequately to care for themselves and their children. She took in sewing and laundry while the other woman hired herself out by the week as a domestic worker. These two demonstrated, if only for the short term, not only their own self-determination, but also the gendered nature of kinship in antebellum Cincinnati, a city that contained many young unmarried mothers of color like themselves.

White’s letters, though detailed, said little about how white men’s desire for their female slaves contributed to her own ordeal. Filling in the gap in this regard is the testimony of Louisa Picquet, the ex-slave mistress in the second case study. In a memoir dictated to a white abolitionist, Picquet described her early life as the daughter of a South Carolina white man and a

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>2</sup> Bigham, 8.

<sup>3</sup> Horton and Flaherty in Taylor, ed., *Race and the City*, 81.

fair-skinned slave woman. She and her mother's forced migration first, to a Georgia town outside of Atlanta, next, to the urban environs of Mobile, Alabama, where they were separated. Picquet going to New Orleans and her mother, to Texas uncovers the degree to which migration marked the life of light-skinned female slaves whose presence disrupted white households. White men's pursuit of such women and girls aroused understandable, if often misplaced, anger in white mistresses. As Picquet's narrative reveals, such men's pursuit also fostered growing resolve in black mistresses patiently to await an opening that would permit them to escape their circumstances and to enable liberation or amelioration for kin.

However, Picquet's life and those of the women in the first case study reveal little about the viewpoints of slave mistresses' children. At best, small, if significant details about the children's lives were gleaned from their mothers' writings. For example, we learned that Harvey, one of five other slaves freed with Avenia White, grew ill shortly after they arrived in Cincinnati. He appears to have been the son of the second slave mistress also freed. We also learned about Elizabeth, one of the other three children freed. Within a year of their manumission, Elizabeth was attending school, something she would not have been allowed to do had she remained in slave territory.

Picquet also shared details about her children in her memoir. She, too, had a daughter named Elizabeth. Elizabeth was one of four children to whom Picquet gave birth; the others died, one of them shortly after Picquet arrived in Cincinnati in 1847. This young girl had other siblings following her mother's marriage to a mulatto man in the city. But how Harvey or both girls named Elizabeth responded to their freedom or even their ties to prominent white men cannot be discerned. The third case study is critical in this regard. It concerns one Alabama planter's decision to free ten slave children who were the offspring of five slave women he owned. Before

Samuel Townsend died in 1856, he made provisions to manumit and leave these children more than \$200,000, the equivalent of five million dollars in today's currency. By 1860, his mixed race offspring had relocated to Ohio while his lawyer fought off claims on their inheritance by their white relatives.

Reading letters this planter's children wrote to each other or whites charged with their care into the war years and beyond makes it possible to see how, again, kinship was a critical source of strength, even though they fought with each other and even though they settled in places as diverse as Cincinnati, a mining town in Colorado, and Huntsville, Alabama, their hometown. Though the Townsends were more educated than the slave mistresses discussed in the first two case studies, and though we clearly see, unlike the other cases, that some of the Townsends made it into the black upper middle class, their African ancestry placed limits on their ability to realize all that their white father desired for them. Such limitation is clearly revealed in the obstacles thrown up by their white relatives, and by the hostility and prejudice formally instituted after Reconstruction in the legal framework colloquially known as Jim Crow.

The Townsends' lives and those of the ex-slave mistresses detailed in the preceding chapters, while not fully representative, are probably as close to the truth as the record permits concerning the experiences of antebellum African Americans who found themselves on the receiving end of white men's money and affection, however oppressed their lives were as slaves and continued to be following manumission. In fact, these nineteenth century women of color and their children uncover the ways in which certain African Americans disrupted the social order around them when they were relocated into new spaces by white men. However, these case studies reveal that material and psychological security were never foregone conclusions for "favored" ex-slaves such as them. The experiences of Avenia White may be most illustrative in

this regard. She appears to have suffered so much hardship as a freed woman that she returned to the South to live closer to her former master, suggesting these two possibly had an ongoing relationship, one from which she gained some measure of security. That such a relationship existed is a plausible idea because he married a white woman (whom he conveniently placed in Louisville, 100 miles downriver from Cincinnati presumably so he could have both a black and white “families” within easy traveling distance). White’s intimate ties to Ballard are made evident in words she appears to have said to him after her initial freedom: “[If] you have forgotten me[,] I hope you have not forgotten the children.”<sup>4</sup> Her use of the word “forgotten” and even her sending him her “love” suggests something intimate had occurred between her and her former master. Otherwise, why would a woman hope to be remembered by a white man who had kept her as a slave and probably raped her?

Had White been a fictional person, she would certainly fall into the tragic mulatta trope prevalent in late nineteenth century literature, one in which writers depicted the sufferings of mulatto women who desired white lovers, or barring that, were forced to “return to the black community.”<sup>5</sup> For this study’s purposes, she may have been that. Certainly her apparent travails in Cincinnati seem to shore up the complexities of black-white intimate encounters during the antebellum era and perhaps across time.

While it is true throughout the Western world that men and women have not been equal no matter their race, the effects of such inequity has been especially pronounced within social relations of white men with women of color. Observers of Southern white men’s encounters with their female slaves have argued that no genuine warmth can ever exist between two unequal bodies. Annette Gordon-Reed, a scholar whose work concerning Thomas Jefferson’s relationship

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<sup>4</sup> Avenia White to Rice Ballard, February 2, 1840, Folder 31, Ballard Papers.

<sup>5</sup> Somerville, 84.

with his slave Sally Hemings, the most well-known case of a white slaveholder and his slave mistress, has heard such comments. Indeed, she tells us that being a slave was being forced into a legal arrangement that has been said to have excluded the possibility for expressive moments.<sup>6</sup> I maintain that such beliefs were and continue to be so widespread that Jefferson's "relationship" with Hemings is sometimes dismissed as fiction. That their relationship is disputed in this manner doubtlessly persists partly because Hemings was never freed. Had there been any genuine attachment between Jefferson and Hemings, many argue, surely he would have freed her.

The race-based difficulties White faced even after being freed offer an opportunity to rethink such logic. In some ways, the lives of manumitted mistresses of color parallel that of another "favored" slave: the eunuch, an ancient and elite slave dating back before Biblical times.<sup>7</sup> When freed, the eunuch also realized the limitations of his manumission. He often discovered that he had lived better and with greater security as a slave. Indeed, White possibly realized that while being freed was important, in the end it was outweighed by despair, insecurity and discomfort. Her experiences ultimately demonstrate that the narrow, legalistic, Anglo-American conception of freedom – self-ownership, freedom of speech, association, press, owning property and weapons – obscures more fundamental freedoms that are rarely addressed in current American political or social discourse: freedom from want, from hunger, from fear, from poverty, and from discrimination.

Still, if she in fact left Cincinnati, we might consider her departure as another manifestation of her "everyday resistance" against the racial hostility she faced in a city that, among other things, relegated women of color to the lowliest of occupations. Even though she

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<sup>6</sup> Annette Gordon-Reed, "Engaging Jefferson: Blacks and the Founding Father," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, Vol. 57, No. 1 (Jan. 2000), 178.

<sup>7</sup> Patterson, 299 and 315-325.

was sure to encounter the same hostility in the South, the effects of that antagonism might have been mitigated by any material and emotional comforts that her former master provided (or at least by the security furnished by his proximity). Returning to the south would have revealed her desire to have what the white mistress wanted: security.

She, thus, reveals herself as having been brave. So does Louisa Picquet. This was the case even though Picquet, whose biography was published in her lifetime, is most known for having been a “quadroon.” That she is does her profound injustice, for she was among those many women who tried to live in a self-possessed manner despite the hostility of a racist society that was indifferent to her oppression and sexual exploitation. Although her last master and the white minister who penned her memoir showed some measure of concern, the former never followed through on his pledges and the later acted chiefly out of self-interest. Picquet was left largely to her own resources, and those of friends, to ensure her own well-being and that of others in her circumstances. That she succeeded in doing so constitutes her real legacy.

In the end, evaluating these women’s lives and those of their children is the work of the modern researcher. We have no proof that these ex-slaves reflected on their experiences with the same kind of energy. Some may have been more detachment. Many did what had been needed to survive. As best we can tell, White in particular knew the shifts in how her former master revealed his authority, which possibly created space for her to depend more confidently on him. But she appears to have never “known [such] dependence on a husband.”<sup>8</sup> This dichotomy helps explain why she maneuvered strategically, appropriating specific tactics for her own purposes. The same might be said of her child of whose later years we know little. I never found a Preston White, Negro or mulatto, in any census. However, there is a chance that he passed as a white

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<sup>8</sup> Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 33.

man, something that might not have been difficult to do if he was a fair-skinned individual of mixed race. Two Preston Whites are listed in the 1860 Census, both identified as white men. One, a schoolteacher, boarded with a Kentucky family; the other, a laborer, boarded with a family in Virginia. The former was born in 1836, the latter in 1838. Unless these men were unaware of their true age, neither was the boy who appeared beneath White's name on Ballard's 1832 slave invoice. Still, it is intriguing that they lived in Kentucky and Virginia, two states to which his mother and her former owner had ties.

If either person was Preston, his growing position, authority, education, and even prosperity can be traced to an intimate encounter between an antebellum white man and his female slave. Such encounters often netted something - precisely what varied - that a favored slave or ex-slave secured from the white men who owned them. Their leverage to make such requests, as I earlier explained, possibly stemmed from pillow talk, or unrecorded conversations and agreements between these men and the children's mothers. Consider Lucy, one of the at least five slave women with whom Samuel Townsend had children. At the beginning of this study, I maintained that women like her, White, Picquet, and others heard and saw much in the company of white men. What they heard and saw gave them a bit of the perspective that whites around them possessed and their particular double consciousness.

The inside-outsider status of such women was in all likelihood passed on to their children. Certainly the Townsends' experiences put in plain view their attempts to make claims on their white father's wealth, wealth that was made evident in a will that now sits in a folder in Hoole Library at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. The documents in this folder and others in an archive named for their father's lawyer offer new avenues of research for historians particularly because many of the papers were written by ex-slaves, closing gaps in an otherwise

sparse record. As American society's obsession with genealogy continues, other newly-found records will doubtless reveal more individuals, whose fears, self-interests and triumphs, will tell us more not only about a brand name slave, but the complexities and indeed "messiness" of black-white encounters during the nineteenth century and afterward. Their proximity to white men and access to such men's influence and wealth better situates such ex-slaves' experiences during a critical time in an industrializing America, and within the larger whole of American history.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Collins, 11; and Freehling, *The Reintegration of American History: Slavery and the Civil War*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).



### Coda

*Silk stockings an purple dresses – course I don't believe what some folks been whisperin as to how y gets them things now. White folks always did do for niggers what they likes. An they jest cant help alikin you, Louisa.*

-Cane, Jean Toomer

Though I did not know it consciously, when I first undertook this study, I was very interested in exploring the particular pain of light-skinned African Americans. My curiosity is driven by family history. Years before I was born, my maternal great grandmother was the mistress of a white man. His name was Mister Ray. My mother said she and her sister could charge whatever they wanted at the local general store in their Mississippi Delta town because Mister Ray paid the bill. And whenever my mother and my auntie passed the local dress shop, they were summoned by Miss Diamond, a Jewish shopkeeper, who would say, “Hello, girls! Tell Louella I got some pretty dresses. Mister Ray said y’all can have any you want. Just come on by.” But my mom and auntie had been given strict orders to never enter this or any store without my great grandma’s permission. In their town, Jim Crow “whites only” signs served as a constant reminder that though my family had access to the white man’s money, they were not white.<sup>1</sup>

There were many little-discussed costs Lou paid in maintaining her ties to Mister Ray. It may have been worth it for she was driven by poverty. Mister Ray could provide things that she and other family members needed. My great grandmother’s actions thus may be thought of as an everyday form of resistance many African American women took against a dominant culture that would rather not see them and their families obtain certain items or experiences because they

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<sup>1</sup> Estella Andrews Myers to Sharony Green, May 15, 2012.

were people of color.<sup>2</sup> The gains were not just dresses and other material items, but something really important like food.

As a historian in training, I am aware of the ways in which historical actors' discourses and tactics shift across time, and believe contextualizing and delineating shifts is worthwhile and necessary, but I believe in some ways, though not all, my great grandmother's life had parallels with other oppressed individuals who also enacted a form of a resistance, among them Jewish women who bartered sex for food during the Holocaust. Many such "privileged" prisoners worked in Nazi-run brothels. These women used sex to save their lives.<sup>3</sup>

My great grandmother's life also has parallels with the people of color in this study, especially the women who received favor other people of color in and outside slave society did

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<sup>2</sup> Here I look, again, to Stephanie Camp's study of the everyday resistance of enslaved women in the plantation south. Bondswomen's hidden culture of opposition to white supremacy was seen in everything from sneaking off to parties to displaying anti-slavery literature in their sleeping quarters. Taking cues from political scientist and anthropologist James C. Scott, Camp is also attentive to when such resistance is no longer hidden because of political breakthroughs. For example, after the Civil War began, one bondswoman displayed a picture of Abraham Lincoln in her sleeping quarters. Notably, the segregationist practices during the Jim Crow era never permitted Mister Ray fully to flaunt his relationship with my great grandmother. Their "visible" relationship occurred in an environment in which interracial unions were acknowledged at the community level like they had been since the colonial era. Camp, 115 and 119. For more on neighborhood understandings of race and interracial unions, see Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families across the Color Line in Virginia, 1787-1861*, Gross, *Double Character: Slavery and Mastery in the Antebellum Southern Courtroom* and Jones, *Fathers of Conscience: Mixed Race Inheritance in the Antebellum South*.

<sup>3</sup> I write this even as I am well aware of scholars who urge researchers to be cautious when making comparisons between American slavery and the Holocaust. I have found Neil Levi's "No Sensible Comparison: The Place of the Holocaust in Australia's History Wars" to be especially helpful in simply exploring how horrific events bubble up as being similar in memory. Writes Levi, "A narrative of the nation is supposed to be a story of a singular people, the story of what makes one nation different from all other nations. Yet stories follow a certain pattern, obey certain genres. If you know stories about other nations, the story of one will inevitably remind you of the story of another. Stories of national singularity rarely sound as singular as those who tell would wish." Nomi Levenkron, "Death and the Maidens: 'Prostitution,' Rape and Sexual Slavery During World War II," Robert Sommer, "Sexual Exploitation of Women in Nazi Concentration Camp Brothels," and Kirsty Chatwood, "Schilling and the Dancer: Representing Agency and Sexual Violence in Nazi Holocaust Testimonies," Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel, eds., *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust (HBI Series on Jewish Women)*, (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2010); Rochelle G. Saidel, *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006); Esther Fuchs, ed., *Women and the Holocaust*, (Lanham, MD: University Press Of America: 1999); and Lenore J. Weitzman and Dalia Ofer, eds., *Women in the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999). For more on Jewish resistance in general during the Holocaust, see Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2002); Emil Fackenheim, "The Spectrum of Resistance During the Holocaust: An Essay in Description and Definition." *Modern Judaica*, 2:2 (1982): 113-30; Michael Marrus, "Jewish Resistance to the Holocaust," *Journal of Contemporary History* 30:1 (January 1995): 83-110; Neil Levi, "No Sensible Comparison? The Place of the Holocaust in Australia's History Wars," *History and Memory*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Spring/Summer 2007), pp. 124-156.

not because of their relations, coerced or not, with white men. Across time, women of noticeably mixed race attracted notice from whites, and above all, it seems, white men. Of course, not just fair women of color received such men's attention. Even the antebellum Cincinnati mulatto hairdresser Eliza Potter wrote, "Have I not seen as fine a gentleman as can be found in North, South, East or West, dance with ladies from snow white to jet black, and think nothing of it?"<sup>4</sup>

But fair-skinned women of color were especially alluring, perhaps because they epitomized the mixing of white and black bodies. In other words, they announced what the white men's gaze and his money could not utter. Think through some episodes of the life of Diane Nash, a leader of the influential Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). She was a student at Fisk University, a school that for many years admitted only light-skinned black Americans like her. While Nash's political leanings did not conform to the norm at this then-conservative school, her appearance contributed to some black Americans being receptive to SNCC's mission. In her, the beauty standards of white Americans (e.g. straight hair, thin nose and fair skin) blurred into black militancy. Many African Americans who had been leery of the movement were encouraged by the arrival of a woman who could have easily married a doctor or lawyer, one who might have settled into a respectable life away from the fray of the black struggle, but did not. Moreover, the light-skinned female, as embodied by Nash, disarmed Benjamin West, Nashville's white mayor. When asked by Nash if he felt it was wrong "to discriminate against a person solely on the basis of their race or color?" the mayor admitted that he did. A week had not passed following their encounter before six lunch counters in Nashville were desegregated.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Potter, 175.

<sup>5</sup> Wesley C. Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 34.

Such women's influence on white men has a long history. Even Cincinnati's Potter had a way with men. Upon being accused of aiding a fugitive slave and asked to accompany authorities to a Kentucky jail, she refused until she could find a caretaker for her child. Said Potter,

When the officers came for me, I was alone with the baby, and refused accompanying them until Mrs. W's return, to which determination they reluctantly assented. I also refused riding to the place of justice in a carriage which they had provided for the purpose, which very much disconcerted plans on foot in my behalf, as they intended, doubtless, conveying me to Kentucky, where I should, probably, in the excitement of the moment, have been severely handled...Thousands of persons followed me to the ferry-boat, which was to convey me across the Ohio River-some in sorrow and some in joy; all believing that I had made my final exit from Cincinnati....<sup>6</sup>

After being in a Covington jail for three days, and a Louisville one for three months, Potter convinced a judge she had committed no wrong. We might ask why she was pardoned when many were not. Her story and that of Nash are the kinds about which many think, but few speak for fear of offending others' sensibilities. This is true for both black and white sensibilities, the former because many do not want to acknowledge, much less confront and address the "color struck" behavior of African Americans who buy into white Americans' normative standards of beauty, and the accompanying myth that light-skinned people are not only more beautiful (and have "better" hair), but are smarter, too; and the latter, who in many cases do not want to be confronted with evidence that confirms race-mixing.

Nash's and Potter's experiences, when joined with that of my great grandmother, seem to coalesce into a single story about light-skinned black women and the power dynamics of black-white relations in the United States. But Chimamanda Adiche, the Nigerian novelist, has spoken about the danger of telling a single story. She has written that when we do so, we are actually

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<sup>6</sup> Potter, 17-18.

making a comment on someone's power.<sup>7</sup> Her words are obviously borne out when considering the population under review. In them we do see a bit of power *vis a vis* whites. What is less easily discussed is how their power sometimes emerges in intragroup conflict among African Americans. Indeed, the little discussed costs some such women paid included loss of autonomy and control over one's own body, but also ostracism within one's community. It is possible that the fancies that Frederick Law Olmsted and others saw as arrogant and standoffish were in fact being ostracized by other slaves and kept their distance because they knew they were not welcome. While such a dynamic affirms the "tragic mulatto" trope (i.e. such women, when fair-skinned, suffered), there may be a kernel of truth beneath the stereotype. Such women and even girls were ostracized by other people of color and continued to be across time.

While African Americans have been able to unite on the basis of kinship bonds, such bonds should never be assumed. While growing up I had several light-skinned African American female friends who encountered hostility from other African American girls who were darker in complexion. One in particular seemed to keep by her side at least one dark-skinned buddy as a show of apology for her appearance. Certainly, she was not afraid to beat up anyone who challenged her. I share what has been shared thus far with the full understanding that some might see parts of it as the "old American tradition of seizing on black people's disputes with each other to put down blacks as a people."<sup>8</sup> African Americans can tip-toe about conflict in their own community.<sup>9</sup> Such tip-toeing is understandable because it is not easy to discuss how "we"

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<sup>7</sup> Chimamanda Adiche, "The danger of a single story," at [http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html) (accessed April 23, 2012)

<sup>8</sup>In his study of how kinship and property claims figure into African Americans' survival tactics during the nineteenth century, Dylan C. Penningroth is not silent about how blacks argued amongst themselves even though he says as much with great caution, knowing a similar charge can be leveled against him. Dylan C. Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 12.

<sup>9</sup> This is not to say scholars have not addressed intragroup conflict on a range of topics, and among them the multi-layered differences between the approach of black radicals and conservatives during the black freedom movement.

oppress one another. This study presented an example of such conflict. Avenia White, the freedwoman discussed in chapter three was disheartened when another woman (probably one of color) attempted to damage her reputation. The woman's personal attacks posed a grave threat because White's respectability was something on which she depended to build her life as a free person. White was so upset she expressed her dismay to the man at whom the attack on her character was directed: her former master. Though he was on the eve of marrying a white woman, Rice Ballard remained in White's life, providing financial assistance to her and her child and another woman and her three children he had earlier freed. White could not afford to lose his help given the racist climate in which she and the woman creating grief for her lived.

One scholar, Marisa J. Fuentes, has been sensitive to the efforts of intragroup competition and conflict between women of color, and to the ways in which the victors often prosper from pain inflicted on the losers. Fuentes presents Rachel Polgreen, a mixed race hotelier who lived in late eighteenth century Bridgetown, Barbados. As Fuentes has written, few researchers have acknowledged how Polgreen's success came at great cost to other black women.<sup>10</sup> The cost for one woman in Polgreen's care was merciless beatings.<sup>11</sup>

Fuentes' position is well-taken. But knowing of the ongoing indignities and hostility Polgreen encountered as a woman and person of color, it should not come as a shock that her employees sometimes found themselves on the receiving end of similar treatment by her.<sup>12</sup> The pain such division created and continues to create for oppressed bodies warrants attention if for no other reason than our being able to state that those creating pain for others were often hurting

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Among recent studies examining the implications of such divisions are Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America*, and Yohuru Williams and Jama Lazerow, eds., *Liberated Territory: Untold Local Perspectives on the Black Panther Party* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Ileana Rodriguez-Silva, "Libertos and Libertas in the Construction of the Free Worker in Postemancipation Puerto Rico," in Scully and Paton, eds., *Gender and Slave Emancipation in the Atlantic World*, 229.

<sup>11</sup> Marisa J. Fuentes, "Power and Historical Figuring: Rachel Pringle Polgreen's Troubled Archive," *Gender and History*, Vol. 22 No. 3, November 2010, 564-584.

<sup>12</sup> Walter Johnson, "On Agency," *Journal of Social History*, 37:1, Special Issue (Autumn 2003), p. 114.

themselves. More than twenty years ago, Audre Lorde took up some of the issues Fuentes raises, challenging women to see their “heelprint” on the face of other women.<sup>13</sup> She urged women of different racial and sexualities to see each other as “faces” of themselves lest they contribute not only to each other’s oppression, but their own. She invites women to first embrace their anger, but to also replace it with something “at least as powerful on the road to clarity.”

When we focus on this strategy of women of color who had been slave mistresses in the south, we permit a more rigorous examination of a group that might link arms, if given the chance, with the black female domestics Tera W. Hunter powerfully described, who developed political strategies to fight frightful working conditions in the postwar South. Such women of color in Cincinnati, walk, too, beside antebellum women, both black and white, who displayed awareness of self so compelling they created the gendered confusion about which Laura F. Edwards wrote that was well in view by the postbellum era. Avenia White, in particular, demanded more from a white man who had probably hoped and expected she would start anew without him. In confronting him, however carefully, she was not unlike the women in an earlier time who had challenged men’s patriarchal perceptions of themselves, which had been built on an English template, as Kathleen Brown has written. This template was flawed, for though “racialized patriarchy and sexualized concepts of race created new ways for white men to consolidate their power in a slave society,” they “did not suppress individual negotiations of behavior and identity” for marginal actors including women of color who had willfully or reluctantly been the mistresses of white men.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Audre Lorde, “The Uses of Anger,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. ½, Looking Back, Moving Forward: 25 Years of Women’s Studies History (Spring-Summer 1997), 284-285.

<sup>14</sup> Tera W. Hunter, *To ‘Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Laura F. Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction (Women in American History)* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1997); Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches and Anxious Patriarchs* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 211.

Using a historical actor, the “fancy girl,” as a starting point, I have tried to illuminate the pain and privilege some African American women, including my great grandmother, experienced. Though she had once been Mister Ray’s woman in Mississippi, she knew that all was not well between the races, and later said as much. Moreover, she revealed that she had always been not Mister Ray’s woman, but her own. This side of her may not have been seen in Mississippi, but I became personally aware of it in Florida, the state to which she and some of my maternal relatives had migrated by the late 1950s and in which I was born. There, in an efficiency apartment on the top floor of a boarding house she ran in the Coconut Grove section of Miami, she tacked a fraying poster of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King and the two Kennedy brothers on a wall. The only men I saw around her were the black men who lived in the building, which was made of pine wood, had a verandah circling the second floor and mango trees out back. I can still smell the scrambled eggs she made in a cast-iron skillet for me, a child who often spent the night with her. She took me on bus rides downtown to Woolworth’s where we shared a burger “just because” such activities were still “new” for African Americans in many parts of the United States in the early 1970s. The fancy girl gives me room to keep thinking about the ways in which she and other women of color complicate discussions of race, gender and culture then, now, and perhaps always, and how their strategies of survival brought and bring benefits to themselves and, more importantly, to their families even as they exacted and continue to exact costs.



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