

## Slave Crucibles

*I began to introduce myself around among [the slaves], but as I came from Mississippi, they looked down on me.*

Slave migrant William Webb describing his experiences in Kentucky, 1873<sup>1</sup>

By the time William Grimes escaped bondage aboard a ship bound for New York, he had been owned by ten masters; performed both field work and skilled work; and been an interstate, local, and urban migrant to boot. Grimes' experiences, which he recorded in 1825, ran the full gamut of the trials and obstacles that confronted forced migrants in the antebellum South. Surprisingly, however, his narrative reveals that with each move, he found little support from new slave communities. Indeed, Grimes' frequent conflicts with his fellow bondsmen and constant feelings of alienation pervade his autobiographical account.<sup>2</sup>

When Grimes was first sold away at the age of ten from his native King George County, Virginia, and moved locally to a plantation in Culpeper, for example, he claimed to have felt "heart-broken" at the thought of leaving his home and family. Depressed and unsociable at his new destination, he not only failed to forge any meaningful relationships with the other slaves – describing himself as "a poor friendless boy, without any connexions" – but indeed managed to make enemies almost immediately. Grimes insisted that his hard work in the plantation household "made some of the other servants jealous," especially one Patty, whom he described as a dishonest "brute" with a "malicious temper." Patty seemed to go out of her way to get Grimes in trouble

<sup>1</sup> William Webb, *The History of William Webb, Composed by Himself* (Detroit: Egbert Hoekstra, 1873), 19.

<sup>2</sup> William Grimes, *Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave. Written by Himself* (New York: n.p., 1825). See also Susanna Ashton, "Slavery Imprinted: The Life and Narrative of William Grimes," in Lara Langer Cohen and Jordan Alexander Stein, eds., *Early African American Print Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 127–39.

for mistakes he did not commit, to such an extent that the newcomer requested to be transferred to the fields simply to get away from her. There he again made a poor impression on the other hands, regularly evoking the wrath of Voluntine, the black driver, who “punished me repeatedly to make me perform more labour than the rest of the boys.” Grimes’ only companion during his time in Culpeper was Jourdine, a girl who had originally been owned by his old master and with whom he had grown up back in King George County, and who had coincidentally been sold to a neighboring plantation. Although his master “did not like me to go” see her, Grimes illicitly slipped off to visit his friend whenever he could, grateful for the opportunity to communicate with somebody who had been through the same ordeal that he had.<sup>3</sup>

So it went throughout Grimes’ life in slavery: trying to forge new friendships but often getting into conflicts with local slaves and finding himself alone. When he was sold to Savannah, Georgia, for example, he complained that he was forced to work as a house servant with a superstitious lowcountry slave named Frankee, whom he “always believed to be a witch.” When Grimes was eventually sold to another Savannah slaveholder, he similarly “got a fighting” with one of his master’s other slaves named Cato; on one occasion, Grimes even “bit off his nose, just as my master was going to sell him, which injured the sale of Cato, very much.” On a nearby plantation with yet another master, Grimes again felt like “a stranger,” claiming that “not one negro on the plantation was friendly to me.” There he was also regularly flogged by the black driver, against whom he once retaliated “old Virginia stile (which generally consists in gouging, biting and butting).” During every move, during every conflict, Grimes continually expressed the desire to return to King George County, to familiar ground, to see his parents again.<sup>4</sup>

The experiences of William Grimes underscore the difficulties involved in the social assimilation of antebellum slave migrants. Cast into new slave communities, newcomers often felt – and were treated – like outsiders by their fellow bondspeople and were forced to use various strategies to effect their integration. How did migrants experience the transition to new slave communities? How did they forge new relationships, and what were the bases of these relationships? What institutions and strategies aided in their integration process? And to what extent do their experiences reveal a broad “slave identity” in the antebellum period? This chapter explores these questions for interstate, local, and urban newcomers, respectively.

## I.

Interstate newcomers severed all ties with family and community when they left their states of origin. Far from finding comfort in new slave communities,

<sup>3</sup> Grimes, *Life of William Grimes*, 8–9 (first quotes), 10 (second quote), 13 (third quote).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 23 (first quote), 28 (second quote), 30, 37–38 (third quotes).

however, their forced confrontations with complete strangers at their destinations often served to compound the trauma of removal and deportation, a fact that contradicts common assumptions regarding an intrinsic social cohesion or identity among slaves in the antebellum South. Such generalizations have a long history. Revisionist scholars in the 1970s and 1980s especially tended to celebrate an antebellum slave culture that was largely homogenous and that stood in stark contrast to the culture of white slaveholders. John Blassingame, for example, portrayed a singular “slave community,” with a unified culture consisting of “an emotional religion, folk songs and tales, dances, and superstitions.” Sterling Stuckey argued that the memory of “African ‘tribalism’” enabled slaves to experience a “sense of community in the traditional African setting and . . . include all Africans in their common experience of oppression in North America.” Even current scholarship tends to assume more cohesion among slaves than perhaps was the case. Ira Berlin, for one, recently argued that in the southern interior slaves from various regions “mixed easily” and that regional identities and even “regional chauvinism” had “no lasting effect on African-American life” in receiving societies.<sup>5</sup>

To be sure, time and especially shared oppression helped dilute feelings of otherness and regional distinction among interstate migrants. Yet to underestimate the friction involved in their initial assimilation process risks oversimplifying the migration experience itself. Friendless, kinless, and carriers of regional cultures that sometimes appeared “foreign” to outsiders (both black and white), interstate migrants were burdened with the awkward task of carving out a new place for themselves within existing slave communities where they did not yet feel at home and where informal social hierarchies relegated them to the bottom of the ladder. Samuel Hall, sold from North Carolina to Tennessee as a young man, related a common story when he claimed that it was “three years before I ever attempted to get out among the young people” at his new destination, not feeling accepted or at home there until long after his arrival. The prospect of adapting to a strange new group was often experienced as daunting by interstate migrants.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 105 (first quote); Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 3 (second quote). Berlin goes on to argue that “one of the consequences of the Second Middle Passage was to attenuate the regional distinctions that had characterized slave life during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.” Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 170–71 (third quote).

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Hall and Orville Elder, *Samuel Hall, 47 Years a Slave; A Brief Story of His Life Before and After Freedom Came to Him* (Washington, Iowa: Journal Print, 1912), 30 (second quote). Different age cohorts also appear to have experienced different degrees of difficulty in adapting to new communities. Predictably, migrants who were small children readily made playmates among local slaves. Henry Bruce, a Virginia slave who was moved to Missouri as a small boy, claimed after emancipation that he remembered playing with seven or eight boys who lived on a

Indeed, for many migrants, social assimilation was hardly a priority at all upon arrival in new slave communities. Perhaps most telling is the overwhelming evidence of interregional newcomers fleeing new slave communities in desperate attempts to return to their old ones. Continuing to identify themselves with family, kin, and community in their places of origin, migrants often rejected new slave communities outright and bolted in the days, weeks, and even months subsequent to their arrival. Runaway slave advertisements often underscored the presumption that they were returning “home.” William, who fled his new plantation near Lexington, South Carolina, in 1830, was presumed to be “mak[ing] his way for North Carolina, as he was purchased . . . and brought from there.” A Virginia slave woman named Patsey absconded from her Georgia plantation and was suspected to have “endeavored to get back to Virginia.” Interstate migrant Nicholas left his South Carolina plantation in an attempt “to make his way to Maryland,” where he was originally from. And Sally, a slave from the estate of George Mason in northern Virginia and purchased by an Alabama slaveholder, ran away “a few days” after arriving in the Deep South, suspected of making her way back home. Southern newspapers from receiving societies are replete with similar ads.<sup>7</sup>

Some runaway slave ads even highlighted cultural differences that must have reinforced feelings of otherness and awkwardness among newcomers. In Louisiana, where local slaves were dubbed “Creoles” and French was widely spoken alongside English, ads frequently labeled interstate fugitives as “Americans” and commented on their accents or (lack of) language skills. In February 1845, one twenty-two-year-old slave woman named Susan absconded from her new plantation in Louisiana, her master describing her as “diffident when spoken to, and in speaking exhibits the broken English dialect of the African raised in Charleston, S.C. . . . from whence she was brought but a few months since.” In July of that same year, “the young negro BOSTON” took flight, who “answers briskly when spoken to . . . speaks English only [and] was brought three months ago from Mr. J. Hagan, negro dealer.” When Elick, age twenty-three, ran away from his new plantation in Plaquemines Parish, his master described him as an “American Negro boy [who] has great difficulty in speaking.”<sup>8</sup>

If newcomers’ accents, dialects, and even languages appeared that striking and rude to their new masters, who presumably had only limited contact with them, one can imagine how local Creole slave communities perceived them.

neighboring plantation after arrival at his new home, and that they were “the happiest days of my boyhood.” See Henry Clay Bruce, *The New Man. Twenty-Nine Years a Slave. Twenty-Nine Years a Free Man* (York, Pa.: P. Anstadt & Sons, 1895), 24.

<sup>7</sup> *Charleston Courier*, Nov. 2, 1830 (first quote); *Charleston Courier*, Mar. 7, 1835 (second quote); *Charleston Courier*, Oct. 29, 1830 (third quote); *Huntsville Democrat*, June 16, 1838 (fourth quote).

<sup>8</sup> *The Times Picayune*, Feb. 25, 1845 (first quote); *Ibid.*, July 2, 1845 (second quote); *Ibid.*, June 10, 1845 (third quote).

Some testimonies indeed suggest that Creole slaves looked down on American newcomers and vice versa. Melinda, a Louisiana ex-slave interviewed by the Federal Writers' Project, told interviewers that her Creole grandmother spoke only French and refused to associate with "Americans," slave or otherwise. "She hated the English language; said it was good only to speak to mules, and not to be heard in the mouth of folks, colored or white," the former bondswoman recalled. Over time, most American migrants did learn at least some French, and many fully mastered the language. James Lamar, a Mississippi slave sold to Iberville Parish, Louisiana, absconded in 1845 and was advertised as an American slave who "speaks English and French," for example. Another Virginia migrant claimed that after spending some time in Bayou Sara, he "made considerable progress in learning to speak the French language." Upon arrival, however, language differences surely made migrants feel that they had arrived in a foreign country.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, Louisiana was undoubtedly the most "foreign" destination possible for migrants from the eastern seaboard, not just because of the language but for other reasons as well. Even white visitors perceived intrinsic cultural differences between Creole slaves and imported newcomers that went beyond communication. Betraying an implicit and almost stereotypical admiration for the Protestant work ethic, for example, one European sojourner in Louisiana concluded that the slaves "who speak English and are Protestants, all work harder, and are less idle than the Frenchified negroes." But for newcomers, perceived differences in religious practices were perhaps most important. Consider the experiences of Charlotte Brooks, a Virginia slave who was sold to Louisiana as a young woman. Relating her experiences to interviewer Octavia Albert in 1890, Charlotte claimed that the first thing she noticed upon arrival in Louisiana, besides the language, was that "every body was Catholic . . . and I had never seen that sort of religion that has people praying on beads." For years she refused to worship with the other plantation slaves because she did not recognize the validity of their religion. Instead, she stayed home on Sundays and "thought of my mother's Virginia religion," often replaying in her mind "the old Virginia hymns" that her mother used to sing. Charlotte's isolation from any formal slave church continued for four years, until she learned that another slave woman "from my old State" named Jane Lee had been sold to a neighboring plantation. Perceiving the new arrival as "one of my folks," Charlotte sought out Jane and immediately developed a lasting friendship with her. Having shared the same fate and the same cultural background, the two Virginia migrants commenced to worship together on Sundays, singing

<sup>9</sup> Melinda, in Ronnie W. Clayton, ed., *Mother Wit: The Ex-Slave Narratives of the Louisiana Writers' Project* (New York, 1990), 166 (first quote); *Daily Picayune*, Nov. 2, 1845 (second quote); William Hayden, *Narrative of William Hayden, Containing a Faithful Account of His Travels for a Number of Years, Whilst a Slave, in the South* (Cincinnati: n.p., 1846), 57 (third quote); Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 170-71.

and praying in the Virginia style, and eventually even inviting other American migrants to join them. For Charlotte, Jane represented a sense of home, family, and community that she had lost in transit to Louisiana. "Aunt Jane was no kin to me" Charlotte related to Alberts. "But I felt that she was because she came from my old home." Jane was the key to Charlotte's acceptance of her fate, her "mak[ing] my peace with the Lord," and the slow reconstruction of a life she had left behind in Virginia.<sup>10</sup>

But even in other receiving societies of the antebellum South where local slaves were Protestant and spoke English, interstate newcomers often felt that they had entered a strange and inferior country. Consideration must be taken for changes over time because in the early nineteenth century, most newcomers on the frontier entered slave societies in which a majority of "local" slaves were in fact other migrants who had established themselves over a number of years. Yet as the antebellum period progressed and generations of bondsperson native to the Lower South were born, friction between "locals" and out-of-state newcomers become more and more evident. In interviews and conversations with travelers, migrants frequently manifested a sincere and even chauvinistic pride in their regions of origin, which they usually associated with better, more attractive, or more intelligent slaves than the "inferior" slaves born and raised in the Lower South. Indeed, interstate migrants – especially from the Upper South and eastern seaboard – often nostalgically insisted that slaves in their home regions were happier, had higher morals, were more assertive, acted more "free," and were less "cowed down" by the institution of slavery than those in their new destinations. Olmsted's travelogue from his journey through the South in the 1850s reveals several illuminating examples. One North Carolina slave whose master had sent him to South Carolina, for example, responded to the question how he liked being so far from home thusly: "Well, I likes my country better dan dis; must say dat, master, likes my country better dan dis. I'se [like] a free nigger in my country, master." He confessed to Olmsted his opinion that "the niggers did not look so well here as in North Carolina and Virginia" and even that "de niggers ain't so happy heah" and "don't appear so bright as they do there." Slave testimonies also underscore such chauvinism. William Webb, a Mississippi migrant to Kentucky (traveling against the stream), admitted that he found it difficult to make friends in the Upper South: "as I came from Mississippi," he related after emancipation, "they looked down on me." Another Virginia migrant who had been sold to Alabama but later escaped to England recalled to an interviewer his surprise that the local hands in Alabama "were so completely cowed, that they did not need to be tied at all when flogged," contrary to the resistance he had been used to in Virginia. Former slave William Anderson, who was sold from Virginia

<sup>10</sup> Francis and Theresa Pulszky, *White, Red, Black* (1853; New York: Johnson Reprint Co., 1970), 103 (first quote); Octavia V. Rogers Albert, *The House of Bondage, or Charlotte Brooks and Other Slaves* (1890; New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 4–13 (second quotes).

to Mississippi, similarly insisted in his narrative that slaves in the Deep South were unusually docile toward whites, often seemed to be “great enemies of each other,” and were almost completely ignorant of the Bible, something that never ceased to baffle him. In his native Virginia, Anderson claimed, “the Sabbath was observed,” but when he got to his new plantation in Mississippi “where they work, curse, swear and dance on Sunday,” he felt “awfully” because there was “no preaching.” Indeed, shortly after arrival, the local slaves asked him to sing a hymn, “an old Virginia song,” but Anderson refused, feeling that he had entered a “strange land” that lacked all morals and spirituality. These very localized cultural differences were often merely *perceived* as regional characteristics – most Mississippi slaves *did* have prayer meetings, after all – but however exaggerated, such perceptions widened the gap between locals and interstate migrants and complicated social assimilation.<sup>11</sup>

## II.

Despite such chauvinism and friction, however, no migrant could afford to be an island for long. Although distance and a certain degree of tension sometimes existed between interstate newcomers and local slaves, it would be inaccurate to exaggerate their divisions and describe various groups of bondpeople as diametrically opposed to each other. True, when it came to defining “home” and measuring the merits and shortcomings of certain regions and cultural expressions, local slaves’ and newcomers’ opinions were often rooted in regional identities. But when it came to defying slavery as an institution, they more often than not shifted their identities along status and racial lines, aiding and assisting each other in their shared experience of slavery. Minor acts of resistance, for example, were often rooted in cooperation between locals and newcomers alike – or newcomers from different regions – revealing how thin the line was between local identities and a broader “slave identity.” This is an interesting example of what postmodern cultural studies scholars and social scientists have termed “fluid identities.” Current identity theory underscores that identities are not fixed but rather change according to circumstance. Slaves did not necessarily identify themselves broadly as “American slaves” all day every day; they did so when they were overtly confronted with their slave status in such a way that caused them to identify with each other. Virginia migrant Louis Hughes, for example, perceived many differences between slave communities

<sup>11</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *Journey in the Seaboard Slave States, with Remarks on their Economy* (New York: Dix & Edwards, 1856), 390–91 (first quote); Webb, *History of William Webb*, 19 (second quote); James W.C. Pennington, *A Narrative of Events of the Life of J.H. Banks, an Escaped Slave, from the Cotton State, Alabama, in America* (Liverpool: M. Rourke, 1861), 58–59 (third quote); William J. Anderson, *Life and Narrative of William J. Anderson, Twenty-Four Years a Slave* (Chicago: Daily Tribune Book and Job Printing Office, 1857), 18 (fourth quote), 8 (fifth quote), 16 (sixth quote), 29. See also Henry Watson, *Narrative of Henry Watson, a Fugitive Slave* (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1848), 17.

in his native state and those in Mississippi, to where he was transported as an adolescent. Indeed, in Mississippi, he identified most strongly with other interstate migrants – his best friend was Tom, “a Virginian, as I was,” and like Hughes had been “sold from his parents when a mere lad.” Yet witnessing a local bondsman receive a whipping one day made him feel solidarity for his fellow slaves in a more general sense, becoming so indignant about the institution of slavery as a whole that he “wish[ed] I were dead.” Other migrants actively aided their fellow slaves who were threatened with punishments, regardless of their regions of origin.<sup>12</sup>

Collective resistance took more indirect forms as well. Interestingly, many interstate migrants who fled their new communities shortly after arrival did so by building *local* networks that allowed them to escape – consorting with and relying on complete strangers with whom they broadly identified as fellow slaves. As Calvin Schermerhorn has argued, forging social relationships with local slaves allowed migrants to gain geographic knowledge that was crucial to their flight plans, but even while on the run, fugitives were forced to depend on strangers to provide them with food, shelter, and advice. And although slave testimonies contain several examples of slaves betraying other slaves, most fugitives could count on the support of the wider slave community, much to the consternation of slaveholders throughout the South. A Massachusetts minister who resided in Georgia for five years observed that his slaveholding neighbors often had great difficulty tracking down newly imported runaways because “the slaves assist one another usually when they can, and not be found out on it.” For slaves, assisting fugitives revealed a broader sympathy for a shared plight. Many slaves indeed took major risks by helping strangers. Kitty, a former Alabama slave, told an interviewer after emancipation that she risked a severe whipping one time for “feedin’ a runaway nigger!” She added that “dey’d ha’ killed me ef they’d ha’ found me out den.” Andrew Jackson, a Kentucky bondsman, related to interviewers in 1847 that whatever the risks, “it is a very rare thing that one slave ever becomes informer against his brother who intends to take the long walk.”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Hazel Rose Markus and Maryann G. Hamedani, “Sociocultural Psychology: The Dynamic Interdependence among Self Systems and Social Systems,” *Handbook of Cultural Psychology*, edited by Shinobu Kitayama and Dov Cohen (New York: Guilford Press, 2007), 7; Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean, *American Cultural Studies: An Introduction to American Culture* (London: Routledge, 2006), 22–23; Tom Postmes & Nyla Branscombe, eds., *Rediscovering Social Identity* (New York: Psychology Press, 2010), chs. 1 and 2; Louis Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave: From Bondage to Freedom. The Institution of Slavery as Seen on the Plantation and in the Home of the Planter* (Milwaukee: South Side Printing Co., 1896), 101 (first quote), 23 (second quote); William Webb, *The History of William Webb, Composed by Himself* (Detroit: Egbert Hoekstra, 1873), 4; Moses Roper, *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery* (Philadelphia: Merrihew & Gunn, 1838), 26–27.

<sup>13</sup> Calvin Schermerhorn, *Money over Mastery, Family over Freedom: Slavery in the Antebellum Upper South* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 46–47; Testimony of Rev.



Sometimes migrants even absconded in the company of local slaves who also sought to flee. In Louisiana in 1836, a reward of 75 dollars was offered for the apprehension of three runaway slaves: Jack Hodges, an American slave age twenty-seven; Joseph, “a creole negro [who] speaks but little English;” and Corbon, “an American negro, aged about 30 years.” All three had fled together. A Florida slaveholder also advertised for five runaway slaves from his plantation in 1847: four men and one woman. All were local slaves except one Tom, who was suspected of “intend[ing] to make his way to Augusta, Ga., as in that section I purchased him of Mr. Henry B. Ware.” In a similar case, two slaves named July and Rhoda absconded together in a skiff from their plantation at Bayou Sara in Louisiana in 1850, July being described as “a small South Carolina negro and lame in one of his hips or leg,” and Rhoda was a local woman, “about 45, [and] speaks French.” In Orangeburg District, South Carolina, two “Negro Women, both named NANCY,” fled a plantation together, one of them purchased in Richmond, Virginia, “where perhaps she may bend her course,” and the other aiming “at getting back to the city” of Charleston, where she was originally from. On many occasions, interstate migrants cooperated with fellow interstate migrants – not always from the same state – to flee back to their places of origin. In 1845 one thirty-five-year-old man named Phil, originally from Florence, Alabama, absconded from a Louisiana plantation with another interstate migrant named Jim, twenty-six years old and purchased from a slaveholder living on the South Carolina–Georgia border. Both were presumed to be traveling together and attempting to return to their respective home regions.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, interstate migrants tended to bond with other interstate migrants in much more intimate ways, outside of the realm of resistance. Sharing a common experience – the trauma of being uprooted and deported – helped to forge bonds of love and affection among victims of the domestic slave trade, even to the extent of establishing new family ties to make up for those lost in removal. This was already evident during removal, as discussed in Chapter 3, but after arrival, it developed even further. A perusal of marriage certificates of emancipated slaves in Louisiana (where records are most detailed and complete) issued by officers of the Freedmen’s Bureau during and shortly after the Civil War, for example, reveals how prevalent marriages were between interstate newcomers. Sandy Alexander, a thirty-year-old freedman from North Carolina, formalized his marriage to Malvina Phillip, from Virginia, before a Union chaplain in

Horace Moulton, in: Thomas Weld, *American Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1839), 21 (first quote); Kitty, in Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony*, 536 (third quote); Andrew Jackson, *Narrative and Writings of Andrew Jackson, of Kentucky* (Syracuse: Daily and Weekly Star Office, 1847), 9 (fourth quote).

<sup>14</sup> *New Orleans Commercial Bulletin*, Jan. 5, 1836 (first quote); *Tri-Weekly & Advertiser* (Montgomery, Ala.), Mar. 23, 1847 (first quote); *Daily Picayune*, June 30, 1850 (second quote); *Charleston Courier*, May 27, 1840 (third quote); *Daily Picayune*, Oct. 26, 1845; William Henry Singleton, *Recollections of My Slavery Days* (n.p., 1922), 3.

Concordia Parish, Louisiana, on January 12, 1865. Both had been married before in their home states – Sandy for ten years and Malvina for four – and both had been separated from their original spouses “by slave despotism” (in other words, the slave trade). Peter Bumper, of Tennessee, similarly formalized his marriage to Kentucky-born Lucinda Nelson in Louisiana in 1864. Peter had been married before in Tennessee but had been separated from his first wife when “a white man tuk her.” Maryland-born Basil Chapman formalized his marriage to thirty-year-old Hariette McKell, of “Eastern Shore, Md.,” the mother of seven of his children, when he entered the Union army in 1864. Basil, age forty-four, had been married in Maryland but was separated from his first wife and two children by “being Sold away.” The marriage records are replete with similar examples, especially from interstate migrants from the Upper South, who tended to marry each other with striking prevalence. But there are also examples of marriages between migrants from states as far apart as Maryland and Mississippi: Billy Moore of Mississippi married Maria Louisa Bond of Virginia; Edmund Key of Missouri married Patsey Rose of Virginia. In all of these cases, interstate migrants established new families with other interstate migrants in Louisiana, seeking comfort in others who had experienced the same loss and fear and filling the void of the families and spouses they had left behind. Local slaves, on the other hand, tended to marry other local slaves. Slave testimonies reveal a similar picture in other receiving societies of the South.<sup>15</sup>

Marriages between local slaves and interstate migrants also occurred, of course, an indication that some migrants were better able to find acceptance within new slave communities than others. It is important to remember that much depended on the attitude and hospitality of the slaves in the receiving society. Although migrants often reported feeling rejected by local slaves, many

<sup>15</sup> Marriage Certificate of Sandy Alexander to Malvina Phillip, Jan. 12, 1865, Marriage Records of the Office of the Commissioner, Washington Headquarters of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1861–1869 (hereafter “Marriage Records BRFAL”), microfilm 1875, roll 1, National Archives and Records Administration (hereafter NARA), Washington, DC (first quote); Marriage Certificate of Peter Bumper to Lucinda Nelson, Nov. 6, 1864, *ibid.* (second quote); Marriage Certificate of Basil Chapman to Harriette McKell, Dec. 22, 1864, *ibid.* (third quote); Marriage Certificate of Billy Moore to Maria Louisa Bond, Jan. 8, 1865, *ibid.*; Marriage Certificate of Edmund Key to Patsey Rose, Jan. 12, 1865, *ibid.* Virginia slave Louis Hughes ended up marrying a Kentucky woman in Mississippi, for example, with whom he shared the common experience of deportation. He even recalled that his wife, Matilda, was “a sad picture to look at” when she arrived in Mississippi, as she “was almost heart-broken” about leaving her friends and family behind. Hughes was able to comfort her in a way that local slaves could not because he had experienced the same forced separation from loved ones as Matilda. Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 91. James Nichols, a Missouri slave who was sold down the river to Mississippi, married a woman who was on the same boat that transported him to Natchez and who was sold to the same plantation. James Nichols, in Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony*, 504–505. Slave testimonies are replete with similar stories of interstate migrants marrying each other.

locals in fact sympathized with the plight of newcomers or simply welcomed the arrival of new faces on the plantation or in the neighborhood. Interestingly, various sources suggest that marriages between *male* interstate migrants and *female* local slaves were common, perhaps because local women made more of an effort to comfort newcomers on arrival. One Mississippi slaveholder related to a family member in 1845 that his slave Adam, whom he had recently purchased from Maryland, was “getting on very well,” having married one of his other slave women on Christmas Day. A Louisiana plantation mistress wrote to a relative in 1856 that her newly purchased Virginia slave had “tak[en] a wife from the next plantation.” The Louisiana marriage certificates issued by the Freedmen’s Bureau also contain some illuminating examples. William Lewis, of Georgia, formalized his marriage to Melissa Collins, of Louisiana, in January 1865. Lewis had been married before when he lived in Georgia, but he had been separated from his first wife by the slave trade. Daniel Mines, from Fauquier County, Virginia, similarly married a Louisiana woman named Martha Breskin in 1865. The marriage certificates from other states reveal similar trends (albeit with less prevalence than marriage certificates among interstate migrants). The records for Mississippi, for example, contain several marriage certificates such as that of South Carolina bondsman William Alexander, who legalized his marriage to Mississippi slave Elmira Robinson in September 1865.<sup>16</sup>

Yet however assimilated or settled migrants felt when they established new families at their new destinations, they often continued to identify strongly with their regions of origin. Indeed, similar to migrants of all times and places, antebellum slave migrants often exhibited a “dual orientation” that manifested itself in a wide variety of subtle ways. Naming patterns provide one interesting example. The children of interstate migrant parents were not only often named after family members left behind upon removal, but many were indeed named after the very states, cities, counties, regions, or plantations their parents had come from. When perusing slave inventories from the Lower South, it is striking how many children were named Virginia, Caroline or Carolina, Kentuck, Richmond, Washington, Charlotte, and other references to the sending societies of the domestic slave trade. On one Mississippi plantation that contained several interstate migrants from all over the South, for example, children’s names in 1857 included Missouri Ann, Virginia, Breckenridge (a county in Kentucky), Huston (a town in Kentucky), and Caroline. The children on a Georgia

<sup>16</sup> John Knight to William Beall, Feb. 1, 1845, John Knight Papers, RASP, Series F, Part 1 (microfilm), JFK Institut für Nordamerikaatuden, Freie Universität, Berlin (first quote); Tryphena Blanche Holder Fox to mother, Aug. 31, 1856, in Wilma King, ed., *A Northern Woman in the Plantation South: Letters of Tryphena Blanche Holder Fox* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 61 (second quote); Marriage Certificate of Wm. Lewis and Melissa Collins, Jan. 14, 1865, Marriage Records BRFAL, microfilm 1875, roll 1, NARA; Marriage Certificate of Daniel Mines and Martha Breskin, Jan. 4, 1865, *ibid.*; Marriage Certificate of William Alexander and Elmira Robinson, Sept. 28, 1865, Marriage Records BRFAL, microfilm 1875, roll 2, NARA.

plantation in 1859 included two Virginias, one Richmond, and a Caroline. Although it is virtually impossible to confirm the reasons such names were given, surely such patterns cannot all be coincidence.<sup>17</sup>

The testimonies of the children of interstate migrants provide another indication that migrants continued to identify with their regions of origin long after they had assimilated and established new family ties. Migrants passed on stories about their roots, origins, and migration experiences to their children. In countless ex-slave interviews from the Federal Writers' Project, for example, former bondpeople related to interviewers that one or both of their parents had come from another state and talked openly about how their parents had been forced against their will to move – information that was passed down to them by their migrant parents. Indeed, this was often the first piece of information that ex-slaves provided during interviews. One Alabama woman told interviewers: “My name is Amy Chapman. My mother was Clary Chapman an’ my pappy was Bob Chapman. Dey both come from Virginny; my mammy from Petersburg an’ my pappy f’um Richmond. Dey was driv’ down to Alabamy lak cattle.” Arkansas slave Laura Abromsom similarly began her interview by stating: “My mama was named Eloise Rogers. She was born in Missouri. She was sold and brought to three or four miles from Brownsville, Tennessee. Alex Rogers bought her and my papa. . . . Rogers got my papa in Richmond, Virginia. He was took out a gang.” The details of such stories and their prominent place at the very beginning of African Americans’ life stories, suggest that they were spoken of often in slave households and thus became engrained in the minds of migrants’ children. Indeed, one interviewed woman, an Arkansas ex-slave named Betty Curlett, whose mother came from Virginia and paternal grandmother from North Carolina, told interviewers that she could talk “all about my kin folks” because her “Grandma used to set and tell us” all about how the family had ended up in Arkansas.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, interstate migrants continued to manifest a dual orientation between their two “homes” by actively attempting to restore contact – often across truly vast distances – with friends and family that they had lost. Slaves who were moved by their masters or bequeathed to distant family members were in the best position to do this. Many dictated or wrote letters back to their home communities, for example, which were usually sent via their owners. Virginia slave George Pleasant, separated from his wife Agnes and their children when his master migrated to Tennessee, wrote his “biloved wife” a letter in 1833, which he sent by his mistress, “who ar now about starting to virginia” to visit

<sup>17</sup> Slave Inventory 1857, Joseph Jaynes Plantation Journals, Rankin County, Mississippi, RASP, Series F, Part 1 (microfilm), JFK Institut; Duncan Clinch Slave List, 1859, Camden County, Georgia, RASP, Series C, Part 2 (microfilm), JFK Institut.

<sup>18</sup> Amy Chapman, *Slave Narratives of the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938* (typescript), Library of Congress, Washington, DC, vol. I, 58 (first quote); Laura Abromsom, *Slave Narratives*, vol. II, pt. 1, 160 (second quote); Betty Curlett, *Slave Narratives*, vol. II, pt. 2, 72 (third quote).

family members. In it he beseeched his wife to rekindle their contact and send him a letter back, and he expressed his hope that “with gods helpe that I may be able to rejoyes with you on the earth[.]” He added that if contact in this life was not possible that they would be reunited in the afterlife: “I am determind to nuber stope praying, not in this earth and I hope to praise god. In glory there weel meet to part no more forever.” Indeed, some interstate migrants continued to negotiate to be physically reunited with spouses long after they had been deported. Appealing to the moral conscience of his new owner in 1841, one Virginia slave named Reuben, who had been sold to his master’s brother in Alabama, convinced his new master to attempt to purchase his wife several months after he had arrived at his new destination. His new master wrote to his brother: “Reuben is very anxious to hear from you respecting the purchase of his wife, the poor fellow is really distressed.” Sometimes such negotiations were successful. Charles, a Maryland slave who was given to his master’s son-in-law and moved to Mississippi, successfully negotiated with his new master in 1837 to have his wife sent along about a year after arrival in the Deep South. His wife arrived in Mississippi “under very great obligations” to both slaveholders for allowing her to be reunited with her husband, whom she feared she had lost forever when he left Maryland. As this case illustrates, attempts to restore contact came not only from the migrants themselves but from their home communities as well. Some slaves in home communities resorted to drastic measures to be reunited with loved ones. George Ramsey, a Kentucky-born refugee in Canada whose wife and children were carried away from him when his wife’s master emigrated to Arkansas Territory, told government interviewers that he “went after her once, and got her, but they took her away from me,” adding that it was only after he had “lost her completely [that] I thought I would go to Canada.”<sup>19</sup>

Marriage and family formation, whether with local slaves or other newcomers, often facilitated the integration of interstate migrants into new slave communities and helped them establish roots. Religious worship played a similar role. Although the importance of religious *differences* among slaves from various parts of the South have already been discussed, it is crucial to note that religion more often than not served as a vehicle for social cohesion and assimilation among locals and newcomers alike. Sometimes it took several years for newcomers to seek out religious experiences with other slaves, but most eventually did. Emperor Williams, originally from Tennessee, was sold to Louisiana in 1839 but eventually “joined the Church in 1845,” for example. Curiosity

<sup>19</sup> George Pleasant to Agnes Hobbs, Sept. 6, 1833, in Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* (New York: G.W. Carleton & Co., 1868), 26–27 (first quote); Henry A. Tayloe to Benjamin Ogle Tayloe, May 25, 1841, Tayloe Family Papers (microfilm), RASP, Series E, Part 1, JFK Institut (second quote); John Knight to Wm. M. Beall, Dec. 28, 1837, in John Knight Papers, RASP, Series F, Part 1, JFK Institut (third quote); George Ramsey, in Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony*, 440 (fourth quote).

led many migrants to church meetings with local slaves. Francis Fedric, a Virginia slave who was moved to Kentucky by his master, related in 1863 that upon arrival, he went “to see several persons baptized,” adding that the “social affections” among the slaves during religious ceremonies were so strong that “no hard usage can weaken them.” Another Virginia migrant recalled after emancipation that on his new plantation in Mississippi, he regularly attended the Sunday prayer meetings, during which all of the slaves (regardless of their origin) gathered to sing and pray, relate the story of Moses, and urge each other to endure bondage “as good soldiers.” Indeed, interstate migrants often initiated collective religious worship themselves. Eli Johnson, a Virginia slave sold to Mississippi, claimed that at his new destination, he “used to hold prayer-meetings Saturday night.” Coming together as spiritual brothers and sisters who shared the yoke of oppression, antebellum slaves turned religious worship into the cornerstone of community building. And migrants, who had lost their families and communities in transit, appeared to need religion in their lives to help them cope with their loss.<sup>20</sup>

Collective living conditions and work also served as vehicles to integration over time, as newcomers and locals interacted in their daily lives. Maryland slave Charles Ball related that on arrival in South Carolina, he was assigned to live in the cabin of a young family, whom he described as “companions” who “gave me a part of their boiled greens, and we all sat down together to my first meal in my new habitation.” The father of the family made earnest attempts to make the newcomer feel comfortable, making conversation with him and even encouraging him to open up and talk about the wife and children he had left behind in Maryland. Despite insisting that he had arrived in a “land of strangers,” Ball referred to his host as “my new friend.” Many slave migrants undoubtedly had similar experiences, becoming fictive kin within the slave households in which they were forced to reside. Others forged bonds of friendship in the workplace. John Brown, who was sold from Virginia to Georgia, related in his narrative that on arrival in Georgia, he “used to feel very bad, and wish to die” but that he was comforted by another slave named John Glasgow, who worked in the same field gang and whom he described as one of his only friends. Glasgow took Brown under his wing and “used to tell me not to cry after my father and mother, and relatives. . . . He encouraged me to try and forget them, for my own sake, and to do what I was bidden.” Gradually, his network was expanded as he encountered difficulties in the workplace. When Brown was beaten for work-related mistakes, for instance, another local slave

<sup>20</sup> Emperor Williams, in Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony*, 621 (first quote); Francis Fedric, *Slave Life in Virginia and Kentucky*; or, *Fifty Years of Slavery in the Southern States of America* (London: Wertheim, MacIntosh, and Hunt, 1863), 25 (second quote); Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 52–54 (third quote); Webb, *History of William Webb*, 19–29, 19; Eli Johnson, in Drew, ed., *North-Side View*, 383 (fourth quote); Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The ‘Invisible Institution’ in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

named Uncle Billy “came running up” and beseeched his master: “don’t kill the poor boy.” Other local bondspople – whom Brown tellingly referred to as his “fellow-slaves” – even helped wash the blood from his face after the incident. Such situations helped forge bonds of friendship and unity between local slaves and interstate newcomers and encouraged the development of broader slave identities.<sup>21</sup>

### III.

Local migrants in the antebellum South manifested a similar dual orientation as their interstate counterparts, but the nature of their dual orientation often differed in a number of important ways. First, local migrants grappled less strongly with regional identities because they usually remained within the same general region and were thus not often confronted with major cultural differences. Although rural slave cultures did vary within southern states, seldom were contrasts perceived as so different that local migrants felt they had arrived at a foreign destination. Regional chauvinism features rarely in the testimonies of local migrants and is usually limited to the testimonies of slaves from communities near urban areas or major thoroughfares (which were often perceived as more cosmopolitan), who were sent to “backwards” slave communities in isolated rural areas. Alexander Kenner, a Louisiana slave interviewed by the American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission in 1863, for example, insisted to government officials that “the negroes on the [Mississippi] river,” where he was originally from, “are intelligent, and certainly take care of themselves. Those in the interior, away from the river, are stupid; they see nothing, know nothing, and are very like cattle.” Sometimes variations in slave culture within certain states were more pronounced, however, and in such cases, local newcomers did sometimes stand out. Slaves from the lowcountry of South Carolina and Georgia, for example, were perceived as “different” from both black and white residents of the upcountry. Their strange dialects were frequently remarked on. Hercules, a runaway slave from his plantation in the cotton upcountry of Georgia, was advertised in a local newspaper as having “the peculiar brogue of the low country negroes,” to give one example.<sup>22</sup>

Second, the dual orientation of local migrants was often more than just a nostalgic mind-set; rather, it was a daily reality because local migrants were better able than their interstate counterparts to actually retain contact with their home communities. As Anthony Kaye has argued, local migration and

<sup>21</sup> Charles Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains; or, The Life of an American Slave* (New York: H. Dayton, 1859), 113–15 (first quotes); John Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia: A Narrative of the Life, Sufferings, and Escape of John Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Now in England*, edited by Louis Alexis Chamerovzow (London: L.A. Chamerovzow, 1855), 23–24 (second quote), 26 (third quote), 29, 62–68.

<sup>22</sup> Alexander Kenner, in Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony*, 393 (first quote); *Greenville Mountaineer*, Aug. 17, 1849 (second quote).