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Liberty without Love: An Investigation on the Humanity and Community of Freedom

By Hallie Rogers

Advised by Dr. Tristan Goldman

INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

The paper you are about to read is about 30 pages in length and barely even begins to scratch the surface of what I believe it could be. In order to properly illuminate the stories of antebellum slaves, it would take millions of pages, millions of hours, and a number of meetings between my mentors and me to even begin to parse what it all means.

The sources I investigated, which involve a series of interviews done in the 1920s with former slaves, work to puzzle and confuse us. From our modern lens, willingly choosing to stay with an oppressor appears as a choice to stay with the enemy. But there is something far more historically significant at play when we talk about the experience of former slaves. My essay works to conceptualize the political, economic, and social barriers that kept African Americans from demonstrating the “freedom” we know today. But what is that freedom? How do we define it? And how did former slaves redefine it in a way that is maybe better?

I wish I had all the time in the world to figure out just why some former slaves choose to stay with their enslavers after emancipation. I have some guesses, you will read those, but before I start there are many aspects of the situation that need to be contextualized. Why should you care? Simply put, these resources teach us that the notion of freedom is nothing if we do not truly care for people. And to fix this we must create systems in which we define liberty as indivisible from love.

I believe that to do this, we must all act like mothers. Not in a way where we suddenly embody the female form, give birth, and raise a literal baby, but in a more metaphorical sense. It

would do us good to think about the love a mother gives to her child. A good mother is one that by all accounts, does what they believe is best for their child. Often this is not the easiest choice, nor is it one that is focused on individualism. Simply put, a mother helps her child see beyond themselves and grounds them in the reality of the interdependent life that we live. And if the government can do that, we would all be better.

Beyond that, if you are still not interested there are surely other reasons you should care about antebellum slave narratives. The first and most important point is that these narratives contain memories from real people, with real stories that are certainly different from yours. I could not give a better reason to listen other than the fact that these people are humans. The abstract idea that someone must buy your time with an especially interesting story is inherently capitalistic, and selfish. Anyone with an earnest desire to share their pain and help you understand should be listened to, no matter how “boring” or irrelevant you may deem it.

Not to mention that the notion that a formerly enslaved black person must have an interesting enough story for you to listen to has some especially white supremacist undertones. On a personal level, I try to listen because if you’re a person with a beating heart, it would do me well to conceptualize the human experience in a different form. The human experience is called that not because it is just what you have been through, but the sum of everything we as a body have been through, you must see and hear others in order to do that.

Secondly, like any story, the theme and the heart of what these slaves are saying can certainly be extrapolated to our lives now, to our institutions now, how we perceive freedom, and why it matters. A culture shift begins with a group of a few, and maybe this paper and its readers are the start of one.

At the end of the day, these stories show us the inherent and persistent failings of America at every level of being. Through their bravery, former slaves have shown us the disease of racism growing through our politics, region, and economy throughout history. James Baldwin once said, "I love America more than any other country in the world and exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually." Whereas James loves this country, I have mixed feelings about her. But I think it's enough for me to see what America could and should be in order to criticize. I do not love America because of what is written in the Constitution or the Declaration of Independence, I love the idea of America because of the way a few brave people have chosen to conceptualize it. This essay is a love letter to that conception, and we only figure that out when we let go of our monolithic definitions of freedom and liberty. These words can hold a host of meanings, many being true at the same time, and beginning to understand the nuance of each definition would take our conceptualization of these former slaves to the next level. These definitions also change over time. What may be helpful to us one day, could be irrelevant the next, and right now I think America needs a lesson in unity, love, and political motherhood over individualism and autonomy.

Freedom, as it is defined by modernism, involves rugged individualism. To live in liberty, to be free, is to be able to do whatever one wants. It is the purest form of autonomy. On the surface level, this seems great, but having this kind of autonomy and freedom does not necessarily mean it is good for us. There was a type of liberty before modernism, that asserted that liberty should be defined as a system in which we are constantly looking towards what we owe to each other. Freedom was seeing others succeed, and they felt the same about your livelihood as well. This autonomy-based definition and this community-based definition do not mix well. These definitions stand in very stark opposition to each other. The thought of reverting

back to this community-based freedom sounds nice, but suffocating. At least for me, leaving the modernist autonomy I was raised with is very scary.

Why am I afraid of this? Why is the average American afraid of this? I mean is there not debate after debate in the House and the Senate and on the streets of every major city about what we can and cannot do with our autonomy? As Americans, we have been taught that freedom means autonomy, and autonomy is the cornerstone of our livelihood. We have been told that if we do not have the ability to care for ourselves, to exercise our freedom, then no one will. We will be thrown to the wolves of despotism only to never return. Some of us may survive, but as shells of our former victorious selves, stripped of our patriotism and lust for life.

The stories of Antebellum slaves tell us that this definition is not necessarily true. In a time where these people truly have been thrown to the wolves of despotism, they redefine autonomy on their own terms, in a way we do not understand. They lean on the community of others, and sometimes that means staying with or in the vicinity of someone who may have hurt them to their deepest core.

James Baldwin seems to understand this message of community in a very intimate and important way. Writing almost one hundred years after the emancipation of slaves, Baldwin understands the shared and lived oppression of black people that has continued at the hands of white people in America. Baldwin also knows that most of our questions about the issue boils down to a definition of freedom. At the birth of his nephew, James he states, “Here you were to be loved. To be loved, baby, hard at once and forever to strengthen you against the loveless world.”¹ For Baldwin, the meaning of life is love. He makes it clear that love will constantly be at

¹ Baldwin, James. “A Letter to My Nephew.” *The Progressive (Madison)*, vol. 63, no. 1, 1999, p. 2

battle with the society that America has created. As we read and repeat this quote, we begin to understand that to love is to join a community of those who love, against the loveless, and for Baldwin, that love is what gives him freedom.

In a modernist sense, we have been dispensing liberty without love, freedom without motherhood. When we forget about the livelihood of others, we also forget their humanity, and in a sense that is a stripping of their freedom. In pursuing the purest form of autonomy, we have dehumanized those around us. We must look up and question, “Is this the kind of freedom we truly yearn for?”

For Baldwin, this newly defined love and freedom crossover is different from the way that white people live their lives. He states that “There is no reason for you to try to become like white men and there is no bias whatsoever for their impertinent assumption that they must accept you.”² Here, Baldwin states that white people do not understand the freedom found within love and community. This is because white people are taught to find their freedom in what they can do for themselves, and not what they can do for others. The freedom white people know was not created by modernism, but out of the darkness it nurtures and sets aside in the name of autonomy. Freedom is community, and to find that out, we seemingly had to be stripped of it. And former slaves seem to agree. Some chose to stay with their enslavers. But more widely, these former slaves used their freedom to find community.

How do we get to this community-based freedom? How do we build it for ourselves? We have dug ourselves into a hole of individualism thinking it was freedom only to look side to side and realize we were alone in the dark. Now, it is our turn to dig ourselves out. My advisor on this

² Baldwin, James. “A Letter to My Nephew.” *The Progressive (Madison)*, vol. 63, no. 1, 1999, p. 3

project, Tristan Goldman, once helped me create this thought in which I conceptualized governance as a form of political motherhood. I characterized it as distinctly different from fatherhood. All of our systems are patriarchal. For thousands of years, men have been in charge, they tell you what to do and when to do it. A mother on the other hand, while also equal in power, helps and nurtures one to do the things that are expected of them. Growing up, my mother, and I am sure many of your mothers felt less like an authoritarian figure and more like a friend. Not a friend who would betray you, a friend with a sincere and deep love, who would never let you fail. My mother recently wrote to me that she would share her last dollar with me, to see me thrive. Men can certainly embody these qualities, but there is something to be noticed in the traditional organizational structure that makes fathers feared and listened to, and mothers to love, nurture, and teach, specifically in a way that we are not afraid.

This patriarchal structure is not just present in families but in every system. Any important leadership role is reliant on being the father, on being large and in charge. Leadership requires manly qualities that are also usually cold, calloused, and lacking empathy towards others. Even our politics are infused with this. Just look at the line of Presidents who are also former war heroes. People who have perfected the art of fighting and killing are also deemed fit to be America's babysitter every four years. None of that sits particularly right with me. How are our institutions supposed to care for others if our leaders are not taught to value those qualities? Our first step in freeing our communities is to act more like how our mothers raised us.

If we create families that are based on love, we will soon create communities, cities, towns, and political institutions that are based on the freedom of holding others accountable. And maybe we can create communities in which these former slaves would feel comfortable enough to be welcomed.

“I wanted to stay in the only home that I had never known. . .” A Slave’s Choice to Stay and the

Life of Adeline Blakely

Gone with the Wind is the hit Oscar-winning film from 1939. Directed by Victor Fleming, the story depicts Scarlett O’Hara, in her attempt to revive the ravaged South after the Civil War. Working alongside Scarlett is her Mammy, a woman who remained loyal to the O’Hara family even after her emancipation. This depiction of Mammy by Hattie McDaniel is award winning, but also deeply controversial. The Mammy character is often reliant on the stereotype of the faithful slave. In his book, *Race and Reunion*, David Blight speaks directly to the portrayal of Mammy, stating that, “Loyal slaves, who never really wanted their freedom, were far more prominent in the Southern imagination in 1915 than they had ever been in 1865.”³ The character of Mammy and others like her have permeated into American consciousness and prevailed as a legitimate character in the landscape of the Civil War South. Mammy chose to stay with Scarlett, for reasons the audience has to guess. Is the illusion of this choice historically accurate? Or is it just as fictional as the character herself? Even still, there remains the question of what freedom looked and felt like to formerly enslaved people. We will never know if Mammy truly *felt* free, but we can begin to investigate this question in the real stories of freed slaves.

The WPA Slave Narrative Collection makes quick work of this question. Collected between 1936 and 1938, hundreds of slaves recount their lives in slavery, their relationship to their former enslavers and their lives after emancipation. These interviews contextualize the

³ David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 287.

Civil War era and provide readers with answers they cannot gather in a textbook. Of the interviews reviewed, one stands out as shockingly similar to the beloved Mammy viewers see portrayed in *Gone with the Wind*. Adeline Blakely was born into slavery in 1848 in Hickmon County, Tennessee. Blakely was a “slave and a servant in five generations of the Parks family.”⁴ Blakely was highly aware of her status as a slave, stating that she had “always been told from the time I was a small child that I was a Negro of African stock. That it was no disgrace to be a Negro and had it not been for the white folks who brought us over here from Africa as slaves, we would have never been here.”⁵ This awareness of her status as a slave makes Blakely’s loyalty to her former enslavers even more puzzling for modern readers. When she was five years old, Blakely developed a strong bond with her enslaver’s daughter, Elizabeth Blakely. After the war, Blakely worked for Elizabeth’s daughter and then her children. In her old age, she was taken care of by the family, being provided food, water, and free rent. Blakely states that, “I wanted to stay in the only home that I had ever known. . .” and stay she did.

This order of events appears so shocking to readers because Blakely’s decision to stay seems like a voluntary continuation of her own bondage. The choice for Blakely to stay was the result of years of decisions, only a few being her own. Blakely was also a product of the historical context in which she lived, and the choices made on the part of her enslaver. Blakely’s life is rich with answers and investigations about the push and pull of freed people’s autonomy and the suffocating climate of post-war life.

⁴ Interview with Adeline Blakely, in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938*, Digital Collection, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division at <https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/about-this-collection/> vol. 2, Arkansas Narratives, 18.

⁵ Adeline Blakely, in *BS*, vol. 2, Arkansas Narratives, 17.

Through careful examination, it becomes clear that the choice to stay with one's enslaver was far more than a voluntary continuation of bondage. Slaves who chose to stay with their enslavers show that there is agency in choices that often seem binding. Walter Johnson speaks on the pattern in social historians to discount experiences in slavery that diverge from the usual. In his article "On Agency." Johnson explains that social historians have "shoved to the side. . . a consideration of human-ness lived outside the conventions of liberal agency, a consideration that is, of the condition of enslaved humanity. . . in which the bare fact of enslaved "humanity" has come to be seen as "resistance to slavery." ⁶ While many secondary works focus on the resistance of slaves in order to give them a voice, the focus here relies on analyzing the factors in which a slave may make a rational choice that does not line up to modern day's conception of what a freed person *should* do. It is important to understand that staying with a former enslaver was a real and legitimate choice, even though they are not conceptualized as a form of resistance. At the same time, the decision to stay, while legitimate, also relies on the oppression of former slaves. The decision to stay also shows the legitimacy of human choice, emotion, and the human habit of creating emotional ties. The investigation of the people who elected to stay with their enslavers is an attempt to add back in the "personal meaning, political meaning, and cultural meaning"⁷ that is often stripped when speaking of slave agency and lacking by the sheer nature of secondary sources. The continual focus on the atrocities done to slaves begins to discount the complicated feelings many had surrounding their bondage. Painting slavery solely as a negative experience lacks nuance and is unproductive for further historical investigation. It is now the job

⁶ Johnson Walter, "On Agency." *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1 (2003): 114.

⁷ Johnson, *Agency*, 114.

of the historian to push the envelope of what slavery looked and felt like beyond the secondary sources already written.

Not only do we overlook slave's feelings around their enslavement, but also their freedom. In his WPA interview, Peter Brown describes internalizing his own freedom. He says, "We didn't think much of such freedom. Had to take it. . . We never seen free times and didn't know what to look for nohow."⁸ The feelings described by former slaves demonstrate what secondary literature fails to capture. Secondary sources often examine the choices of freed people after emancipation but fail to consider the internal feelings of the slaves themselves. An investigation of internal feelings allows the illumination of a personal emancipation experience. Thus, to examine firsthand experiences in tandem with the proper historical context provides clarity.

Instead of brushing Blakely's story off as one that is not useful to the study of the period, or as merely the basis for characters like Mammy, Blakely's life, and other slaves like her, are a subsection of society that point to the vast political, social, and economic changes present in the post-war era. These characters and their lives show the impactful change the Emancipation Proclamation and Thirteenth Amendment brought, but also its limitations; its inability to clearly define what freedom meant, but its power in giving slaves the *choice* to stay or go.

Many slaves in the WPA archives describe choosing to stay with their former enslavers, either for a few additional years or for the rest of their lives. The decision to stay is connected deeply to a slave's external landscape, the historical events surrounding their livelihood and decisions of others outside their control. At the same time, the internal landscape is also a large factor: the thoughts and feelings about the events taking place around a slave. Internal and

⁸ Interview with Peter Brown, in *BS* vol. 2, Arkansas Narratives, 318.

external forces worked together to dictate how slaves demonstrated a personal sense of freedom. External forces include economic status, opportunity, and the ongoing question of freed people's citizenship and emancipation on a national level. Internal forces include aspects of a freed person's specific circumstances and feelings about their freedom. This may include treatment while in bondage, varying emotional ties to their enslavers, and existing family connections. A former slave's feelings surrounding their safety would dictate their movement after emancipation. The unknown and undefined status of freedom and post-emancipation life would create an ever-changing landscape for freed people to navigate. Often a slave felt most safe and supported remaining at their former enslaver's. However, this decision should never be discounted as one lacking agency or meant to assert that a slave did not have an intimate understanding of their own freedom.

External forces are highly examined in secondary literature, and thus easier to parse and analyze. An external force can be defined as an event that acts upon an individual out of their control. Such forces can also include consequences of greater historical events that fall upon a former slave. Overall, these forces dictate the well-being and potential movement of a free person. External forces worked to keep slaves on the plantation and away from the outside world. This included the manner that emancipation, the US Military, and the political and economic landscape of the post-war era presented itself.

Emancipation and its Shortcomings for Slaves

The implications of emancipation policies for freed slaves were vast. To understand the consequences of emancipation, one must first have an in-depth understanding of the policies themselves. The Emancipation Proclamation, published on January 1st of 1863, "freed all those bondspersons in Confederate-held states, cities, and counties as a war measure. It did not touch

the enslaved people in the Union or Union-held areas, in effect freeing solely those bondspersons beyond the reach of the government.”⁹ In short, the Proclamation was merely a statement of freedom but helped little without the power of the U.S. Military. The slow pace of emancipation was intentional. In fact, it was deliberate on the part of the Lincoln Administration to appease a large majority and subdue infighting. Schermerhorn states that, “After 1862, a return to chattel slavery was not an option. But the Lincoln administration was not prepared to push for citizenship rights for formerly enslaved people either. That ambiguous policy set the tone for Reconstruction, giving victories to white supremacist Unionists and betraying the promises of emancipation.”¹⁰ And though the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment may seem like the end to such ambiguities, it was only the start. By only distinctly defining freedom, and not citizenship, slaves could be emancipated but held few other liberties. That is not even mentioning the sheer amount of time the amendment took to pass. Schermerhorn continues stating that, “Passing the Thirteenth Amendment took nearly eleven months and involved a series of compromises, including outright bribes.”¹¹ As a result of this emancipation policy, the future of civil rights was unclear, and created confusion on the next steps for slaves after emancipation.

While the Lincoln administration’s middle of the road policy allowed for quick reunification of North and South, what resulted was a continued pattern of undefined political rights for freed slaves. In fact, “Under such policies African Americans gained nothing by freedom. And even that legal freedom was often a mask for coercive labor practices.”¹² In his book *After Appomattox*, Gregory P. Downs states that, “the end of slavery depended on force. . .

⁹ Calvin Schermerhorn, *Unrequited Toil: A History of United States Slavery* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 210.

¹⁰ Schermerhorn, *Unrequited Toil*, 210.

¹¹ Schermerhorn, *Unrequited Toil*, 215.

¹² Schermerhorn, *Unrequited Toil*, 212.

soldiers discovered the difference between announcing the end of slavery and actually destroying the institution.”¹³ Here, Downs asserts that the Emancipation Proclamation itself did not dispense freedom to slaves, but that it had to be dismantled one slaveowner at a time. The true harbingers of emancipation would be wartime military efforts, and the 13th amendment, both of which came with their own sets of issues and existed on long timelines. The strongarming of freedom by the United States military created chaos and struggle. And while all these initiatives were transformative in their own rights, none created a clear or concise future for former slaves, merely that they would no longer be subjected to the forces of chattel slavery. As to what exactly this freedom meant, was left to each slave’s interpretation. The ambiguous definition of emancipation and freedom interacted intimately with fears and logical thinking on the part of former slaves. For many, without knowing where else to go, work for a former enslaver appeared safe and dependable in a time when little was known about a slave’s future.

News of freedom varied widely depending on who a slave heard it from. Enslavers occasionally put in caveats or pleaded for slaves to stay directly after their liberation. Slaves never describe news of emancipation as being a robust, lengthy conversation; merely a statement of their freedom, which lacked specificity or a discussion of the consequences thereafter. Laura Abromson describes the experience as “a white man. . . tole mama and papa and a heap others out in the field working.”¹⁴ Like Abromson’s experience many slaves, gained knowledge of their emancipation through word of mouth or in a large crowd. Lucretia Alexander states that “A man named Captain Barkus who had his arm off at the elbow called for three near-by plantations to meet at our place. Then he got up on a platform with another man beside him and declared

¹³ Gregory P. Downs, *After Appomattox: Military Occupation and the Ends of the War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 42.

¹⁴ Interview with Laura Abromson, in *BS* vol. 2, Arkansas Narratives, 14.

peace and freedom.”¹⁵ Based on these descriptions, emancipation was not made to be an extended conversation discussing the nuances of freedom. In such large crowds, who is to say if slaves could hear their own emancipation properly? Discussion of rights, freedoms, or independent autonomy were nonexistent and added to the unclear nature of emancipation. The lack of clarity in delivering emancipation contributed to conceptual issues and misunderstandings surrounding a former slave’s freedom and what that meant for their future.

If this was not confusing enough there were also reports of slaves having their emancipation explained to them in two separate ways. For example, Malindy Maxwell states that, “Mars Sam Shan come home, went down to the cabins. . . and told them War was over, they was free but that they could stay. Then come some runners, white men. They was Yankee men. I know that now. They say you must get pay or go off. We stayed that year.”¹⁶ Of course, receiving conflicting messages from the Union army and from an enslaver would work to continually confuse freed slaves. How can one make an autonomous choice when they do not have the informed details to make that choice?

A former slave needed to understand their own freedom clearly to initiate movement with confidence. If the status of freedom was unclear, some slaves felt safer in remaining with their former enslavers rather than entering a new life where their political identity was shaky and subject to debate. Many interviewees speak on their lack of mobility while in bondage. Lillie Baccus states of her time in slavery that, “I remember the time when I couldn’t go nowhere without asking the ‘white folks’”¹⁷ After emancipation, these same interviewees often state that they found their newly found mobility confusing and unclear. Lina Hunter describes that,

¹⁵ Interview with Lucretia Alexander, in *BS* vol. 2, Arkansas Narratives, 43.

¹⁶ Interview with Malindy Maxwell, in *BS* vol. 2, Arkansas Narratives, 65.

¹⁷ Interview with Lillie Baccus, in *BS*, vol. 2, Arkansas Narratives, 85.

“Freedom didn’t make so many changed on our place right at fust, ‘cause most of de slaves stayed right on dar, and things went on jus’ lak dey had ‘fore dere was any war.”¹⁸ These reactions seem logical, how are people who have spent their whole lives learning to devalue their own freedom and autonomy meant to one day, have a perfect conceptual understanding of the concept? This was also true for Charles Anderson who also cited troubles conceptualizing his freedom. He said relating to the matter that, “Freedom was something mysterious. Colored folks didn’t talk it. White folks didn’t talk it.”¹⁹ Many slaves found a unique sense of freedom upon emancipation, but for some that was not the case. A gap in the conceptualization of freedom often meant that slaves were not sure what to do after emancipation and thus were vulnerable to pleas from their former enslavers to remain.

While conceptual issues surrounding emancipation and freedom are a main cause of confusion surrounding the choice to leave, many slaves were often blocked from hearing about the news of their freedom. Many slaves took months or years to hear about their emancipation. Often, former slaves were made to continue working. Sarah Gray’s interviewer states that her and other slaves on the plantation were “not told of their freedom immediately on the termination of the war but learned it a little later. As compensation, Mr. Nesbit promised them money for education. She declares, however, that this promise was never fulfilled.”²⁰ Heard Griffin shared a similar story, stating that, “We continued to work long after freedom was declared, not knowing that we were free.”²¹ For slaves, the most obvious block to leaving would be never attaining the knowledge that they were in fact free. Enslavers worked to externally keep slaves

¹⁸ Interview with Lina Hunter, in *BS* vol. Georgia Narratives, 265.

¹⁹ Interview with Charles Anderson, in *BS* vol. 2, Arkansas Narratives, 52.

²⁰ Interview with Sarah Gray, in *BS* vol. 4, Georgia Narratives, 32.

²¹ Interview with Heard Griffin, in *BS* vol. 4, Georgia Narratives, 77.

on their plantations long after emancipation by withholding information that would allow autonomous decision making.

*The United States Military: Delivering “Heartbreak as well as liberation”*²²

The United States military was instrumental in emancipating thousands of slaves. In fact, “Although it is natural to think of the Emancipation Proclamation as the end of slavery, its impact was limited to slaves who could reach U.S. forces. While the Thirteenth Amendment . . . had not yet been ratified by a sufficient number of states to join it to the Constitution”²³ Thus, in the slow-going periods between the Proclamation and the 13th Amendment, of which Chandra Manning terms a “liminal space” the U.S. Military was the primary tool of emancipation and “key institution involved.”²⁴ The way emancipation was delivered by U.S. forces existed on a sliding scale of violence and confusion, as well as being routinely unclear. These forces worked together to complicate the process of emancipation, making the decision to stay with their former enslavers far more attractive in certain cases. Military emancipation was also extremely time consuming. These issues often left slaves in vulnerable positions in which they decided to stay with their enslavers.

Former slaves often describe the violence they witnessed at the hands of the Union army before and after the war. In the archives, Union forces are cited as violent and untrustworthy. Across, many interviews there is also a consistent linkage between the arrival of Union forces and feelings of fear. Anxieties tended to persist even if slaves were aware of the emancipation goals held by the military. When slaves witnessed violence against a location they considered

²² Chandra Manning, *Troubled Refuge: Struggling for Freedom in the Civil War* (New York, NY: Knopf, 2016), 12.

²³ Schermerhorn, *Unrequited Toil*, 219.

²⁴ Manning, *Troubled Refuge*, 17.

home, the Union army appeared untrustworthy which consequently muddled the way slaves perceived their emancipation. In her interview, Josephine Ann Barnett states that, “The slaves hated the Yankees. They [the Yankees] treated them mean. They was having a big time. They didn’t like the slaves. They steal from the slaves too.”²⁵ Lizzie Barnett says the same stating that, “Dey had us [n words] scared to death of the Bluejackets.”²⁶ This dangerous “war time” behavior translated into a poor image of Union forces from many slave perspectives. Frank Larkin states that, “Them Yankees sure did bad– burned up the cotton and the corn. . . Oh, yes ma’am they burned up everything.”²⁷ Even though the ravaging of plantations was a war time strategy aimed at rich plantation owners, many slaves felt personal ownership over these items, and thus the violence shown to the objects was translated as violence towards slaves. This dangerous and off-putting behavior made it hard for the U.S. Military to be both “war time perpetrators” and “protectors and enforcers of freedom.” Without the ability to make former slaves feel safe, the known world of working for their former enslavers seemed far more comfortable for freedmen.

Adeline Blakely had vivid memories of the military trying to force her away from her former enslavers. She says that the soldiers “accused her [former mistress] of keeping me against my will. I told them that I stayed because I wanted, the Blakely’s were my people.”²⁸ Blakely’s example shows the military had zero interest in honoring black autonomy, but instead valued the order to emancipate slaves at any cost. This divergence was enough to sow distrust between certain slaves and Union forces. Other slaves describe their fear surrounding the Union army as well. Lizzie McCloud describes her terrifying encounter with Union forces, stating that, “Oh

²⁵ Interview with Josephine Ann Barnett, in *BS* vol. 2, Arkansas Narratives, 115.

²⁶ Interview with Lizzie Barnett, in *BS* vol. 2, Arkansas Narratives, 120.

²⁷ Interview with Frank Larkin, in *BS* vol. 4, Georgia Narratives, 243.

²⁸ Interview with Adeline Blakely, in *BS* vol. 2, Arkansas Narratives, 194.

God, I seed the Yankees. I saw it all. We was so scared we run under the house and the Yankees called ‘Come out Dinah.’ They said ‘Dinah, we’re fightin’ to free you and get you out from under bondage.’ I sure understood that but I didn’t have no better sense than to go back to mistress.”²⁹

With this contextualization, it becomes clear that not only was the U.S. Military viewed as dangerous and violent, but far too pernicious of figures to deliver emancipation, pushing slaves closer to their former enslavers as a result. Within this context, leaving a former enslaver was often a far more difficult decision than may appear.

Citizenship: Waiting for Clarity

Not only was the delivery of emancipation unclear, but the slow-moving, and ongoing, status of citizenship for freed slaves created confusion and kept slaves in the social and economic circles to which they already belonged. Ambiguity of what would take place after emancipation had its base in the work of Congress and the Lincoln administration. Schermerhorn states that, “After the presidential election, the political question shifted from whether emancipation was final to what kind of freedom African Americans would enjoy.”³⁰ Almost two years lie between the emancipation proclamation and the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, which banned chattel slavery. Another year and a half lie between the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, and the Fourteenth Amendment, which naturalized former slaves as citizens. This also means that for two to three years, there was an undefined, and constantly debated picture of what life in America would be like for freedmen. The Thirteenth Amendment did little to answer the question of citizenship and left the door open for civil rights, making the process extremely ambiguous for former slaves. Thus, at the time of their emancipation, former slaves had to decide

²⁹ Interview with Lizzie McCloud, in *BS* vol. 2, Arkansas Narratives, 10.

³⁰ Schermerhorn, *Unrequited Toil*, 215.

to either stay in the perceived safety of their plantation or to leave and enter a world of freedom that could fall apart at any moment.

The disparity and confusion of former slaves that took place in this period is evident within the archives. Many interviewees state that the freedom they encountered was vague and confusing. Emmet Augusta Byrd frames the feeling, stating that, “Mr. Spence told me I was free. I didn’t leave. I didn’t have sense to know where to go. I didn’t know what freedom was.”³¹ With questions of freedom undefined, leaving a space that continually clothed, fed, and sheltered a former slave would be difficult. Confusion after freedom is also discussed by Easter Jackson who states that, “Den de word spread lak wild fire: The [N words] wuz free. That night all the slaves went up to the “Big House,” wurried an’ askin’ ‘Young Marster Tom, where is we goin’? What is we goin’ to do? Young Marster Tom said, “Go on back to your cabins and go to bed, dey are your homes and you can stay on here as long as you want to.”³² Here, it is evident that former slaves were both worried about their future and had no idea what freedom meant. Slaves who did not consider the concept of freedom, either because they simply did not want to, or they could not, struggled to define freedom for themselves after emancipation. Thus, many slaves felt comfortable staying as they saw no meaningful change offered by emancipation or the Thirteenth Amendment. Freedmen’s confusion and fears coupled with a lack of knowledge surrounding what it meant to be free kept them from exercising autonomous decision making. Thus, it becomes increasingly clear why freed people would find safety in remaining with their former enslavers. The external force of undefined freedom and citizenship often encouraged many former slaves to stay put after emancipation.

³¹ Interview with Emmet Augusta Byrd, in *BS* vol. 2, Arkansas Narratives, 354.

³² Interview with Aunt Easter Jackson, in *BS* vol. 4, Georgia Narratives, 305.

Federal debates over citizenship were interdependent with the status of economic independence. Without both, slaves may never have felt comfortable enough to consider leaving the plantations to which they belonged. Often, slaves would be in the best financial situation when staying with their former enslavers, which in turn allowed them to avoid the hostility and discrimination of the outside world. For many slaves, staying with a former enslaver was also more economically viable than a freed person owning their own land. Schermerhorn agrees, he states that the ownership of land, resources, and freedom “were intimately connected since most freed people were mainly farmers who needed land in order to support economic independence. Freedom and resources could establish the basis for citizenship, strengthening their claim to equal rights.”³³ A sense of freedom and economic independence were all intimately connected and thus important in establishing an economic system that was viable for former slaves to navigate. When this was restricted on the grounds of not being a citizen, former slaves were left with few choices other than to return to their enslavers.

Sharecropping: Old Structures Creating New Autonomy

The emergence of sharecropping developed from a desire to retain some of the former structures of slavery but allowed a new world of autonomy for former slaves. Because of the mutual benefits, both for former employers and employees, staying with a former enslaver became even more desirable. The sharecropping system did demonstrate forms of continuity for former slaves. Eric Foner recognizes this, stating that “A way station between independent farming and wage labor, sharecropping would later become associated with a credit system that reduced many tenants to semi peonage.”³⁴ This coupled with the hostility and discrimination

³³ Schermerhorn, *Unrequited Toil*, 217.

³⁴ Foner, *Freedom*, 45.

present in the world outside of the plantation both significantly impacted a slave's ability to find work outside of their former enslavers. Waters McIntosh describes how similar sharecropping was to his enslavement in his interview stating that his master told him "You are all free, free as I am . . . want you to stay. If you will stay, I will give you half the crop." In response McIntosh stated "that was the beginning of the sharecropping system."³⁵ When presented in this way, the decision of a slave to stay on as a sharecropper makes little sense to modern readers.

However, there were many aspects to sharecropping that demonstrated the gained autonomy and decision making of slaves after emancipation. Eric Foner explains this transition of plantation to sharecropping, stating that, "Every plantation society undergoing emancipation experienced a bitter conflict over labor control or, as it might be better described, class formation- that is, the definition of rights, privileges, and social role of a new class, the freedmen. In most cases, some form of coercion was employed in an attempt to force former slaves back to work on plantations"³⁶ Despite this exploitation, there was some mutual benefit for former slaves as well. Foner expands on this stating that, "Lacking political power, freedmen employed the labor shortage as their principal weapon- a weapon inconceivable apart from emancipation."³⁷ In working the power of the labor shortage, the ability to negotiate with a former enslaver reveals a significant use of autonomy not present in the system of chattel slavery. Foner doubles down on the benefits of sharecropping for former slaves, stating that, "sharecropping afforded agricultural laborers more control over their own time, labor, and family arrangements, and more hope of economic advancement, than many other modes of labor

³⁵ Interview with Waters McIntosh, in *BS* vol. 2, Arkansas Narratives, 23.

³⁶ Eric Foner, *Nothing But Freedom: Emancipation and its Legacy*: (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 10.

³⁷ Foner, *Freedom*, 37.

organization.”³⁸ Here, it becomes clear that while staying with a former enslaver looks like a continuation of a system already in place, it had significant changes colored by the nuances of a quickly changing social and economic sphere. It becomes important then to nuance the changes of emancipation as both lacking transformation and creating notable change within historical context.

Archival interviews cite economic status as a reason for physical movement often. Often, slaves describe moving away from opportunities lacking in financial success and moving to locations that potentially offered more. Lewis Brown states that, “After the war we went to Texas and I ‘member my old mistress come down there to get colored folks to come back to Arkansas. Lots of ‘em went back with her. She called herself given ‘em a home. I don’t know what she paid- I never heard a breath of that.”³⁹ Rachel Bradley’s interviewer shares a similar story sharing that, “After the war Rachel’s white folks moved to Texas and Rachel went to live with her mistress’ married daughter Martha. For her work she was paid six dollars a month.”⁴⁰ Lucretia Alexander cites economic reasons for staying and *leaving* her enslaver. She states that, “Right after freedom I stayed with that white woman I told you about. I was with her about four years. I worked for twelve dollars a month with my food and clothes. Then I figured that twelve dollars a month wasn’t enough and I went to work in the field.”⁴¹ Here, Alexander makes it starkly clear that her mobility rested solely on her financial independence. Adeline Blakely, while never mentioning her financial situation specifically, does indicate she was taken care of

³⁸ Foner, *Freedom*, 45.

³⁹ Interview with Lewis Brown, in *BS* vol. 2, Arkansas Narratives, 292.

⁴⁰ Interview with Rachel Bradley, in *BS* vol. 2, Arkansas Narratives, 239.

⁴¹ Interview with Lucretia Alexander, in *BS* vol. 2, Arkansas Narratives, 43.

by the family, including rent and food. Thus, Blakely's financial backing by the family allowed her to feel safe, contributing to her decision to stay.

Other former slaves were not given the same economic opportunity. Some enslavers did not offer work or money and thus the landscape of opportunity was increasingly small. Campbell Armstrong states that in his experience, "They never give you a thing when they freed you. They give you some work to do. They never looked for nothin' only to go to work."⁴² Ultimately, Armstrong's and other slave's decision to leave rests on the opportunity for freed people to gain greater autonomy than they had under slavery. Economic independence often was a form of autonomy newly available and thus a large factor in decision making. Georgia Johnson expands on financial decision making in her own interview, stating that, "Pa and Marster had a fallin' out, 'cause Marster wouldn't have no settlement wid 'im. He just wouldn't give my Pa no money. Master said us youguns still belonged to 'im and dat us had everything us needed. . . But my Pa said he didn't wanter take up evvything he wukked for in trade, 'cause he would lak to have some money too."⁴³ As a result of this interaction, Georgia and her family left their former enslavers to find work elsewhere.

In retrospect, the choice to leave a former enslaver after emancipation seems simple, but for many, leaving involved a host of other issues that were not present on the plantation. Leaving not only meant disowning the potential comforts of the plantation, but also entering the discomforts of the outside world as well. The status of a former slave outside of a plantation was delicate and often unknown. This was especially true in the South where "The business of reconstructing the former Confederate states was safely in the hands of former Confederate

⁴² Interview with Campbell Armstrong, in *BS* vol. 2, Arkansas Narratives, 76.

⁴³ Interview with Georgia Johnson, in *BS* vol. 4, Georgia Narratives, 333.

leaders in the fall of 1865.”⁴⁴ As a result, the political climate was hostile to newly freed slaves; actively working on keeping them dependent on systems meant to retain the old structures of slavery. Confederate leaders worked politically to ensure life for freedmen was increasingly difficult, hopefully sending them back to work at the plantations they came from. In his other book, *Reconstruction*, Eric Foner asserts this phenomenon as well saying that many slaves chose to stay at the end of the war. “In fact, a majority of freedmen did not abandon their home plantations in 1865, and those who did generally traveled only a few miles. Those blacks who did move usually had specific reasons for doing so”⁴⁵ The following paragraphs outline the climate created by lawmakers outside of a plantation that worked to ensure freedmen remained where they were.

Black Codes: The True Limits of Freedom

Some of this discrimination manifested itself in Black codes or harmful political policies towards freedmen. Mississippi was known for instituting an especially harsh code. The code targeted labor practices and “required all blacks to possess, each January, written evidence of employment for the coming year. . . . Finally, to ensure that no economic opportunities apart from plantation labor remained for the freedmen, they were forbidden to rent land in rural areas.”⁴⁶ By making it increasingly difficult for freedman to become independent agriculturalists, many were forced to continue working for their former enslavers. Franklin agrees, stating that for Southern policy makers, “of post-Reconstruction South, black poverty was a small price to pay for

⁴⁴ John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction: After the Civil War* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), 44.

⁴⁵ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution*, (New York, NY: Harper and Row Publishers, 1988), 81.

⁴⁶ Foner, *Freedom*, 49.

political peace and labor discipline.”⁴⁷ For many former slaves the choices after emancipation were either poverty or sharecropping. Ultimately, because of focuses on reunification instead of civil rights as well on rejuvenating the economy, for Reconstruction the “centerpiece was the attempt to stabilize the black workforce and limit its economic options apart from plantation labor.”⁴⁸

Black codes also worked to limit economic and leisure access to activities like hunting and fishing outside the sharecropping or plantation system. Eric Foner states that, “Southern lawmakers moved to limit blacks’ independent access to economic resources. Rights such hunting, fishing, and the free grazing of livestock, which whites took for granted and many blacks had enjoyed as slaves, were now, in some areas, transformed into crimes.”⁴⁹ Restrictions placed on hunting and fishing limited the scope of freedom placed onto former slaves. Estella Jones describes that hunting and fishing used to be a form of leisure for slaves while in bondage. She states that, “Sometimes de grown folks all went huntin for fun. At dem times, de women had on pants and tied dey heads up wid colored cloths.”⁵⁰ By restricting an activity that both had the potential for pleasure and economic profit, lawmakers worked to make the post-war South increasingly hostile for freed slaves. As the scope of liberties dwindled, the emancipation of slaves cemented itself as a political move that lacked in its ability to give former slaves genuine and meaningful freedom. Without the ability to live a functional and economically sufficient life, many former slaves turned to their enslavers to find economic safety.

⁴⁷ Franklin, *Reconstruction*, 71.

⁴⁸ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 199.

⁴⁹ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 203.

⁵⁰ Interview with Estella Jones, in *BS* vol. 4, Georgia Narratives, 351.

Restrictions on freedmen did not stop at hunting and fishing. Certain Black codes also restricted the ownership of firearms. This presented a large issue for former slaves contributing to the inability to hunt, fish and provide for themselves. The restriction on firearms also negated a way for former slaves to defend themselves. Without firearms, some slaves felt unsafe off the plantation due to looming threats like the Ku Klux Klan or other violent offenders. When slaves felt unsafe, they indicated moving to a new location that brought increased physical or emotional safety. In his interview Jeff Burgess expands on the power of the courts and their ability to make former slaves think carefully about their movement. He states that, “My folks wasn’t very anxious to leave the white owners because times was so funny and they didn’t have nowhere to go. The courts was torn up powerful here in Arkansas.”⁵¹ The political power of Reconstruction, going all the way up to the courts, thus resulted in an inhospitable and dangerous environment for many former slaves who wished to live on their own.

It is worth noting that many of these Black codes were often repealed. However, the persistence of lawmakers to introduce such restrictions was more than enough to show the hostilities of the outside world and push some slaves to stay with their enslavers.

Refugee Camps: Emancipation at a Price

An alternative to staying with one’s former enslaver was traveling with the Union Army in refugee camps. It was not uncommon to end up in a refugee camp after emancipation. In her book, *Embattled Freedom*, Amy Taylor states that often freedmen “went wherever the Union army went and wherever they could find a military commander willing to let them stay.”⁵² While being rescued by the Union Army may seem like the best viable option for a slave, the conditions

⁵¹ Interview with Jeff Burgess in *BS* vol. 2, Arkansas Narratives, 339.

⁵² Amy Taylor Murrell *Embattled Freedom: Journeys through the Civil War’s Slave and Refugee Camps*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press), 5.

in these camps were brutal. Refugee camps were filled with disease and poverty. Taylor even goes on to state that disease among black people was often ignored “by a white medical establishment that at times neglected, and thus worsened their plight.”⁵³ Refugee camps acted as a physical embodiment of the in-between nature of citizenship for former slaves. After emancipation, slaves were not citizens and did not gain freedom in the way it is easy to conceptualize when looking back on such events. In fact, “The men, women, and children moving into these military-sponsored camps experienced their emancipation in slow motion. None of them became instantly and securely free upon setting foot inside Union lines, either because Union policies did not explicitly guarantee it. . . or because little about daily life in the camps looked like freedom in any sort of meaningful way.”⁵⁴ The hostility of refugee camps makes it clear that life outside of a former enslaver was not necessarily better for former slaves. Also, military emancipation had its own problems that resulted in slaves feeling increasingly unsafe. Some freed people found more meaning in remaining where they were instead of using their newfound autonomy to leave their enslaver. This is in part because of the tumultuous conditions found outside of the plantation and in places like refugee camps.

The Freedman’s Bureau: The Limitation of Aid

The Freedman’s Bureau was an agency formed to help newly freed slaves. The organization was “Created by Congress just before the end of the war, it was to aid refugees and freedmen by furnishing supplies and medical services, establishing schools, supervising contracts between freedman and their employers and managing confiscated or abandoned lands.”⁵⁵ In particular, “The Bureau was especially active in the field of labor. It sought to protect to

⁵³ Taylor, *Embattled*, 15.

⁵⁴ Taylor, *Embattled*, 8.

⁵⁵ Franklin, *Reconstruction*, 36-37.

freedman's right to choose his own employer and to work at a fair wage.”⁵⁶ However, many slaves describe receiving little to no help from the Bureau. In one case, a former slave describes an enslaver using the Bureau to continue to hold authority over him. In his recollection, he states that his master “went to the free men’s bureau and had me bound to him till I was twenty-one years old”⁵⁷ The failure of the Bureau for many slaves is attributed to large scale political factors. Franklin explains, stating “As the President’s hostility became more pronounced in 1866, it became increasingly difficult for the Bureau to function effectively.”⁵⁸ The lack of help outside of the plantation both worked to make the outside world unappealing, and limit slaves, often to the work negotiated by their former enslavers.

Internal forces are less examined in historical literature. Internal feelings of solace or nostalgia found in former slave's experience in bondage is uncomfortable to speak and write about. This comfortability is often attached to the positive way many former slaves speak of their experiences. As a form of bondage, it is tempting to portray every aspect of slavery as both horrific and unimaginable as not to justify the abuse of human rights that took place over hundreds of years. However, the positive and lived experiences of slaves during this time is important to acknowledge, especially when considering how these moments factored into choices made after their time in slavery was over. The feelings of former slaves are real and influential in contextualizing post-Civil War America. Internal forces can be defined as the reactions and personal feelings surrounding the historical context former slaves lived in. Internal forces often boil down to a former slave’s feelings of safety, both physically and emotionally.

⁵⁶ Franklin, *Reconstruction*, 37.

⁵⁷ Interview with Emmet Augusta Byrd in *BS* vol. 2, Arkansas Narratives, 354.

⁵⁸ Franklin, *Reconstruction*, 39.

These feelings of personal safety were imperative factors in potentially staying with a former enslaver.

Perception is paramount. In *After Appomattox*, Downs argues the Union forces worked to help facilitate emancipation. But Blakely recalls her interactions with Union forces as violent and scary. “After the War, many soldiers came to my mistress, Mrs. Blakely, trying to make her free me. I told them I was free, but I did not want to go anywhere, that I wanted to stay in the only home that I had never known. . . Sometimes I was threatened for not leaving but I stayed on”⁵⁹Blakely perceiving her potential liberation as threatening, goes to show how personal experience can negate common historical narratives. External forces that historians portray as helpful, sometimes made freed people fear life outside of their former enslaver’s influence. What secondary literature writes as an overarching theme will prove untrue in a personal anecdote. These misalignments are important to acknowledge and analyze as a part of history and allow readers to see the autonomy demonstrated by freed slaves.

Economic Value: Comfort in Desirability

The economic value masters placed on slaves affected the way they viewed themselves. Feeling valued by former enslavers was both a comfort and had lasting impact on the psyche of slaves. Masters often had great investment in their slaves' safety, partly because healthy slaves were more efficient. While this is extremely exploitative, as a result, many slaves felt both taken care of and valued. In his interview, S.S. Taylor describes this sense of value in slavery stating that, “The last time I was sold, I sold for 2,300- more than I’m worth now.”⁶⁰ These complicated feelings around value and slavery result in a complicated master and slave relationship, even

⁵⁹ Interview with Adeline Blakely in *BS* vol. 2, Arkansas Narratives, 18.

⁶⁰ Interview with S.S. Taylor in *BS* vol. 2, Arkansas Narratives, 109.

after the institution of slavery had ended. This appraisal of humans as a commodity did not go away immediately after slavery. Eric Foner expands on this, saying that “A rigid social and political dichotomy between former master and former slave, an ideology of racism, a dependent labor force with limited economic opportunities- these and other patterns seem always to survive the end of slavery, leaving some theorists to minimize the consequences of emancipation all together.”⁶¹ The continued treatment of freed people as commodities worked in harmful ways and ultimately made some slaves feel more valued by their enslavers than the outside world after emancipation.

Treatment: The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly

Physical and psychological treatment of slaves while in bondage significantly impacted their decision to leave. Humane treatment during slavery often meant a higher chance of slaves internalizing this as feelings of care, resulting in the decision to stay with their enslavers after emancipation.

In secondary literature, the focus remains on the harsh treatment of former slaves. In his article “Negroes. . . and All Other Animals: Slaves and Masters in Antebellum Madison County” Gary T. Edwards describes the tendency of masters to treat their slaves in congruence with other beasts of burden. This perception of the African race on the part of slave owners dictated their harsh treatment. Edwards states that “Violence remained a constant but unpredictable variable in their lives. Master's and overseers expected bondmen not only to provide labor but also to offer proper deference to their master's race. When they did not receive both in anticipated proportions, the result could be savage. . . Occasionally slaves received exceptionally vicious

⁶¹ Foner, *Freedom*, 37.

beatings.”⁶² In her interview, Maggie Bond speaks to the dehumanization that Edwards writes about. She states that her former enslavers “had a rabbit they called Bunny. It died, they started calling me Bunny.”⁶³ Though Bunny does not speak much more on this level of dehumanization, it shows the general idea that slaves were seen as animals and products to be used, a commodity. Lizzie McCloud, who was very outspoken in her interview, stating several times she didn’t care who saw what she said, stated that, “We was treated just like dogs and hogs. We‘ed a hard time- I know what I'm talkin about.”⁶⁴ Slaves who received especially rough or animal like treatment often did not speak well of their former enslavers and did not choose to stay with them after emancipation.

On the contrary, the proportion of slaves that described positive experiences around their enslavement can be shocking for modern day readers. This “positive treatment” was often a precursor to a slave feeling safe enough to stay after their emancipation. Some slaves merely describe the absence of poor treatment, while others praise their enslavers' character. Both kinds of treatments have nuances to them and are factors in why a former slave may choose to stay. Mandy Johnson speaks directly to her enslaver's kind demeanor, stating that, “Yes ma’m I had a good master. I ain’t got a scratch on me.”⁶⁵ The lack of harm afforded to slaves was often a result of the value placed on slaves as a commodity. Despite this, treatment that avoided physical and psychological damage had the overarching consequence of allowing a slave to feel safe and cared for.

⁶² Gary T. Edwards, ““Negroes. . . and All Other Animals”: Slaves and Masters in Antebellum Madison County” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, vol, 57, no. 1 (1998), 6.

⁶³ Interview with Maggie (Bunny) Bond, in *BS* vol. 2, Arkansas Narratives, 202.

⁶⁴ Interview with Lizzie McCloud, in *BS* vol. 2, Arkansas Narratives, 10.

⁶⁵ Interview with Mandy Johnson, in *BS* vol. 2, Arkansas Narratives, 115.

On the other hand, many slaves describe praiseworthy treatment. Adeline Blakely stated that, “I remember the days of slavery as happy ones.”⁶⁶ Adeline Burris states that, “I can remember how our old mistress would come ever day to see about dem and my mammy. She’d bring us things to eat, clothes for the baby and everything else.”⁶⁷ In this way, safety is felt through a genuine connection with an enslaver or when they show protection or caretaking responsibilities. In both cases, this perception of safety allowed former slaves to feel comfortable in their location and was a contributing factor in some of their decisions to stay. One slave even describes wishing they had not left, describing their experience in the outside world as a “leap from the frying pan into the fire.”⁶⁸ Working for a former enslaver was dehumanizing, but sometimes it carried with it a base level of safety not afforded elsewhere.

It is also of note that there are hundreds of interviews where slaves state they were treated well, but still chose to leave after emancipation. Thus, positive treatment while in bondage was in many cases less of a deciding force. However, the presence of a positive experience with a former enslaver was often a prerequisite to even consider staying. Dangerous treatment often meant leaving a location directly after emancipation.

Emotional Ties: Location Based Memories and Nostalgia

Emotional ties also impacted a slave’s internal feelings about their surroundings and dictated their choice to stay. Many of the slaves who describe choosing to stay after emancipation also describe strong positive, emotional ties to people or experiences on their plantation. The human nature of emotions cannot be parsed through in secondary sources, but they overflow in the character of the WPA interviews. The work done here will always be

⁶⁶ Interview with Adeline Blakely, in *BS* vol. 2, Arkansas Narratives, 20.

⁶⁷ Interview with Adeline Burris, in *BS* vol. 2, Arkansas Narratives, 345.

⁶⁸ Interview with Bryant Huff in *BS* vol. 4, Georgia Narratives, 245.

incomplete as it attempts to break down the emotions and lived experiences of former slaves into specific groupings and categories. For many of these slaves their life and feelings surrounding their time in slavery is a nuanced experience that is difficult to untangle. Despite this, recognizing the complexity of these emotions humanizes decisions that do not distinctly fall into a common definition of “resistance.” Sometimes, life in slavery meant slaves developed many emotional ties to former enslavers, including fond ones. Georgia Johnson states a specific emotional connection with the white children on the plantation. This paired with the various emotional connections of her parents meant they stayed. She states that, “After de War was over, us all stayed on wid Marster for a long time. Mist’ess was moughty good to us chillun. Us played wid de white chillun.”⁶⁹ Emotional and social ties forged on plantations were often location specific and leaving also meant giving up the safety found within them. Adeline Blakely speaks of this phenomenon stating that, “I told them that I stayed because I wanted to, the Blakelys were my people.”⁷⁰ Here the same is true for Adeline, leaving the plantation also means leaving the emotional tie of the Blakely’s, at this point whether she likes the plantation or hardly matters, she is staying because of the emotional tie that has been created.

Social Ties: Connections and Lack Thereof

Fondness towards enslavers could also permeate due to the lack of one’s own family. Many former slaves describe being separated from their families after being sold or following emancipation. Blakely herself states that she and her mother were estranged. She says, “My mother did not return to Arkansas but went on to Joplin Missouri, and for more than fifty years, neither one of us knew where the other one was.”⁷¹ Without significant social ties outside of

⁶⁹ Interview with Georgia Johnson, in *BS* vol. 4, Georgia Narratives, 333.

⁷⁰ Interview with Adeline Blakely, in *BS* vol. 2, Arkansas Narratives, 194.

⁷¹ Interview with Adeline Blakely, in *BS* vol. 2, Arkansas Narratives, 18.

their former enslavers, freed people like Blakely may have felt more comfortable remaining with the only people they may have known. Interactions were a huge part of the feeling at home for former slaves. Eric Foner agrees, stating that often slaves who did leave, many were looking to reassemble their families. He states that, “Of all the motivations for black mobility, none was more poignant than the effort to reunite families during slavery.”⁷² However, those without significant family often describe feeling the strongest sense of stability and connection to those at the plantation they worked for, attributing to their own sense of freedom in remaining where they were.

Emotional and social ties were altered by the presence of chattel slavery. The complex and frequent trade of family members would contribute to a system of broken emotional and social connections. These broken links often resulted in slaves relying on their enslavers after emancipation. Often, enslavers used each slave’s social ties against them to keep them subservient. In his book, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, Eugene D. Genovese describes this relationship, “The masters understood the strength of the marital and family ties among their slaves well enough to see in them a powerful means of social control . . . No threat carried such force as a threat to sell the children, except the threat to separate a husband and wife”⁷³ Yet many slaves describe being split up from their families, and thus, new social ties had to be formed, sometimes this included a connection to one’s enslaver. Many slaves describe this too, stating that their lack of family led to the decision to stay or go. Genovese states that, “Of course Virginia was a slave breedin’ state, and [n words] was sold off jes’ like stock. Families was all broke up and never seed one ‘nother no mo. I don’t even know who my mother and father was. I never knowed what

⁷² Foner, *Reconstruction*, 82.

⁷³ Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1974), 452.

‘come of ‘em. Me and my two little brothers was lef’ in Virginia.”⁷⁴ The structure and historical context of chattel slavery affected how slaves viewed social ties, creating their own chosen families, which sometimes consisted of former enslavers.

Conclusion

When in bondage, enslaved people were stripped of their physical mobility, family connections, and control of their bodily autonomy. Working in the interest of their own safety was a key tactic and such efforts continued even after Emancipation Day. Historical context worked to create a stacked deck, loosely defining slavery, and creating a dangerous landscape to navigate after the war was over. This coupled with a lack of importance placed on freedom allowed some former slaves to perceive that their best shot at safety was to remain with their former enslavers. Adeline Blakeley has no regrets about her choice. At the end of her interview, she states, “My life’s been a full one, Honey, and an interesting one. I can’t really say which part of it is best. I’ve had lots of hard work, and lots of friends, lots of fun and I’ve gone lots of places. Life is interesting.”⁷⁵

What this essay has aimed to prove is that a slave’s choice to remain with their enslaver is a nuanced mix of historical context, and self-perceptions of safety and success. By investigating the events inside and outside of a slave’s perspective, the inability of the federal government to create a transformative and practical definition of freedom becomes apparent. While some former slaves were able to define their own version of freedom, Blakely and others had to use their authority to dictate what situations they could navigate safely. For many, this meant maneuvering the social structures they already knew: a life with their former enslavers or

⁷⁴ Interview with Snovey Jackson, in *BS* vol. 2, Arkansas Narratives, 308.

⁷⁵ Interview with Adeline Blakely, in *BS* vol. 2, Arkansas Narratives, 198.

within the plantation system. Instead of looking at such a decision as one merely held constant with an oppressive white regime, it can be colored with the impact of a new agency brought on by the distinct cultural, political, and social changes created by the Civil War. Experiencing freedom and emancipation in real time often meant that decisions were made that do not make sense to readers and students of history after the fact. However, in analyzing the nuances of the uncertainty of life for newly freed slaves can we find clarity in their decisions to prioritize safety, structure, and their own ever-changing and self-defining sense of freedom.

CONCLUSION ESSAY

This essay was the culmination of my History and Social Studies degree, with 30 pages dedicated to thinking strongly about historical phenomena. I am proud of my work, and I am proud of my ability to understand the story of antebellum slavery and emancipation differently than what is present in the academic literature today. The stories of freed slaves are important, even the ones you may not understand at first look. When I began this project, I surprised myself by choosing to write what I did. I, for one, did not expect in any way to be writing about why a slave may choose to stay with their former enslaver. But the topic was rich and nuanced, steeped in layers of misunderstanding. As I continued to investigate, all I could see on the pages and pages of interviews I read were hundreds of slaves whose stories had been discounted. Stories that I have never heard of in my 15 years of education. These Americans were written off merely because their autonomy did not seem strong, nor free enough, but what history tells us is that these choices were a reflection of the time period and not an accurate reflection of the strength of those brave enough to live it. I am extremely thankful for all this project has made me think about, and the new layer of nuance it has added to my perception of the Antebellum period.

A former slave is only free when they feel free, and for many, as James Baldwin admits, this means a search for community. How would these experiences of former slaves change had they been respected by the community around them? If the economic conditions accounted for these slaves' livelihoods? Had their social circles not been ripped apart at the seams? Had their political status not been constantly questioned by those around them? We cannot possibly know where America would be now, had we done right by these former slaves. But we can begin to think about where we are still lacking today. We must look out and consider what is next when we see just how little we gave when it came to the freedom of former slaves.

I wrote the second half of this essay a long time ago. And some parts, very much conform to the ideas of rigid autonomy and individualism I go against in the introduction of this essay. Even in my argumentation of the autonomy of former slaves, I find ways to make their decisions align with the kind of freedom that we know. I reason that because a former slave made an autonomous choice to stay, they are thus free. Their freedom relies on their ability to do something for themselves. And ultimately that is where I end the conversation. What I fail to consider is that I saw autonomy in a choice that many made in the name of the community, in the name of love. Again, we are able to see in real-time our failings in our current definition of freedom, as it skews the way we view historical events from a modern lens. There is freedom in safety too. In being safe, in being cared for, and in being loved. Had I had the chance to rewrite the essay completely, I would have emphasized this point more. Thankfully, I have these 10 pages now to say what needs to be said about love, safety, and liberty.

The beautiful part of this experience, and of academia in general. Is that there are both many drafts, and that I can continue to argue with myself for however long I please. The honors program taught me that thought is never "done". I can always pick it up, in a different way and a

different sense, and that is what I have attempted to do here as well. Grapple with these thoughts for six months and see where I land with them. My mistakes in the 30 pages I wrote 3 months ago are one part of a lengthy draft in my thoughts. However, these thoughts are important, they show just how long it may take to settle your thoughts. It also proves that a thought may never be settled. I know now that this is one topic I could write about ad nauseam and still feel I have plenty more to say.

That being said, I have decided not to remove these portions of these parts of my essay. Not because I do not disagree with them now, and I will not attempt to change this piece of writing when I disagree with it a few months later either. This decision is for a couple of reasons. First, the assertion of rugged individualism, and a former slave's role in this is a pivotal argument in the essay. The essay simply would not exist if I remove these sections. Secondly, this was just an avenue of exploration I had and investigated through the only lens I knew, and the only lens in which I was thinking about. Everyone is entitled to think what they would like about freedom, individualism, and liberty, and my perpetuation of it in this specific essay should be included in that, no matter how much my mind has changed.

Thirdly, people should be brave with the fact that their minds change. As much as I would write that essay differently, or more over create an additional layer of nuance, there was no way I could have made that decision then.

My friend Warren once asked me what advice I would give to someone about life if I could only tell them one thing. And I told him, "Be prepared and ready to change your mind." And that is the one thing I will, ironically, not change my mind about. So, that being said. The essay is slightly different from what I am saying now, and that is okay. This work remains an

outgrowth of what I created. Growth is not just deepening. And these former slaves have given me an ever-changing version of liberty that changes and deepens as I continue to investigate.

To begin to conclude this whole experience is a sad endeavor for me. Something I have worked and thought about for many months is now ending its time as a professional endeavor for me. Now is also the time where I have to find what it all means for me. And this is where I returned to Baldwin and his words about life and community.

I found this statement by Baldwin deep into an essay where he very loudly critiques the work of *Little Women* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The essay did not necessarily have a lot to do with my work at the time, but this quote continued to resonate with me as I finished this whole project. Here, Baldwin states that "Truth, having made its appearance here, confronts one immediately with a series of riddles. . . Truth, as used here, is meant to imply a devotion to the human being, his freedom, and fulfillment; freedom which cannot be legislated, fulfillment that cannot be charted."⁷⁶ This quote resonates so strongly with me because Baldwin cuts to the core of what I have learned. The freedom we deserve is not one that can be written into our laws, it is one that expects more of us, mentally and socially. It cannot be legislated because laws imply that there is something one cannot do, and the freedom that we deserve relies on a love that we *can give*. We must continue to dedicate ourselves to truth, to each other, and to the human being. Look beyond ourselves and ask what we can do instead of what we must do. And I greatly enjoy how Baldwin summarizes this as a devotion to the human being, a dedication to living.

I hope this reading has enriched you in the way it has enriched me, but I know that simply is not possible. The hours of reading, writing, and thinking it took to get here have

⁷⁶ Baldwin, James. 2017. *Notes of a Native Son*. Penguin Modern Classics. London, England: Penguin Classics.

changed the course of my actions, thoughts, and habits. I hope that everyone on this planet experiences a project that requires this much of their time, it is truly unique and once in a lifetime. In essence, this essay has become a mantra of mine. When I consider how and why I act the way I do, I think of modernity, I think of the hundreds of antebellum slave narratives I have read, and I think about James Baldwin. I think about how I no longer see freedom as individualism but I find freedom in taking care of others, in using the autonomy the government thinks I deserve and turning it back to community. I hope that those who disagree with me have at least been challenged in their notion of freedom and liberty as a monolith. At the very least, I hope they can see the benefit of providing kindness to those who may need it, and I hope they find their devotion to the human being in freedom that cannot be legislated; a freedom full of love and hope.