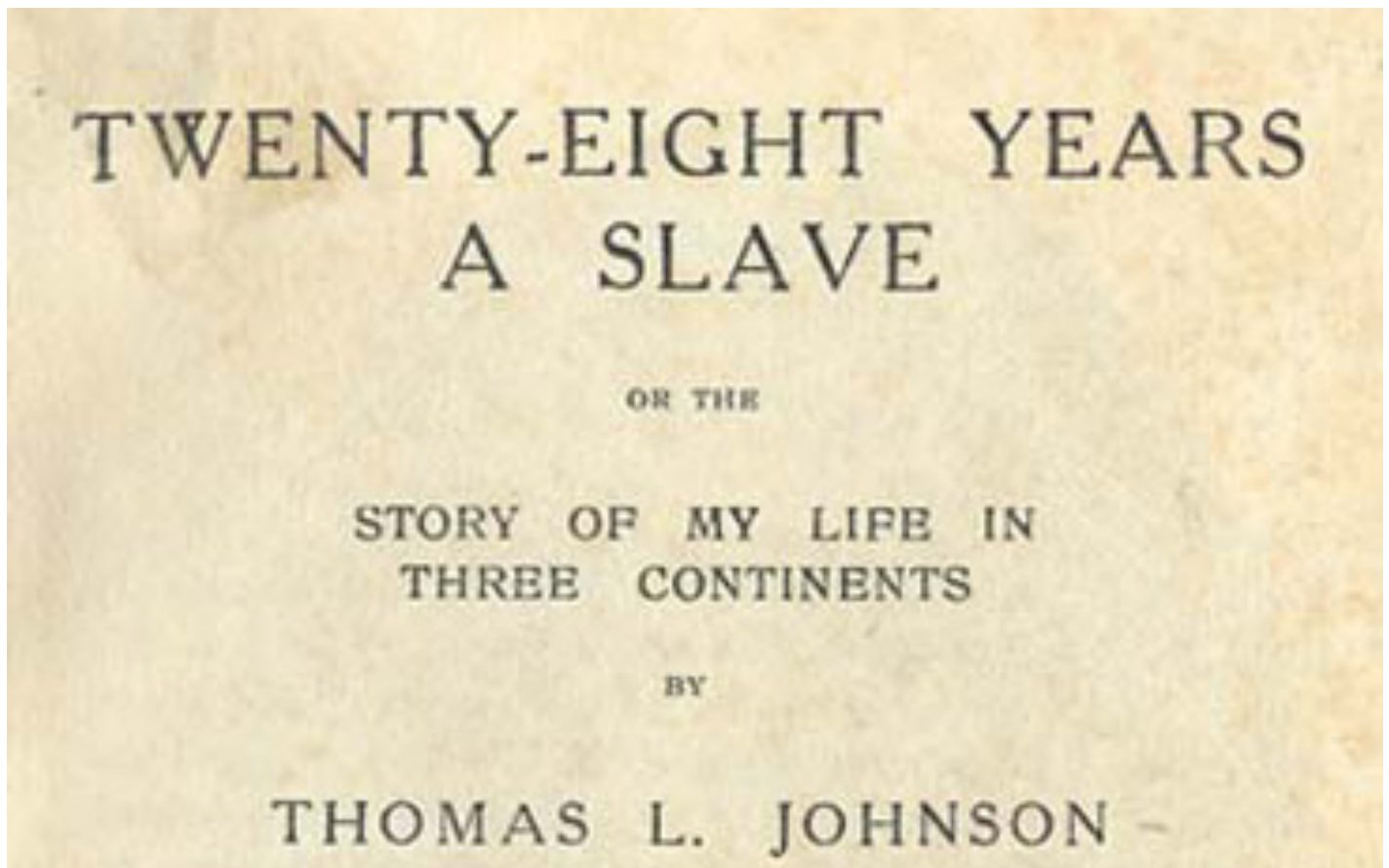


A HOUSE IS NOT A HOME

*Examining the Definition of Home for Nineteenth-Century
Enslaved Americans*



Title page of Thomas L. Johnson's *Twenty Eight Years a Slave, or the Story of My Life in Three Continents*. [1]

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HAT IS HOME? The place I was born? Where I grew up? Where my parents live? Where I live and work as an adult? Where I locate my community, my people? Who are ‘my people?’”¹ Philosopher and American immigrant Chandra Talpade Mohanty asks these questions in her 2003 book on feminist philosophy. She puts to words an enigma that has followed many Americans for centuries: what defines home? Home can be a house, but it does not need to be; it can also be a feeling, a country, or a group of people.

Sociologist Shelley Mallett attempts to answer these questions in a 2004 literature review in which she explores and defines “home.” To her, the definition of home depends on context; however, it can often be “a space inhabited by family, people, things and belongings – a familiar, if not comfortable space where particular activities and relationships are lived.”² She then expands on the relationship this concept has to security and freedom, and she cites the many sociologists who have linked these ideas.³ To Mallett, a home consists of comfort, security, and freedom.

These definitions and associations of home give new meaning to the injustices and trauma of enslavement in the United States. Enslavers systematically removed comfort, security, freedom, and individualism from slave homes through forcible separation of families, physical and sexual assault, and other traumatic events. Under these conditions, how did the generations of enslaved Africans and Black Americans define a home? While enslavers constantly repressed enslaved people’s comfort, security, and individuality, variations of these qualities still existed, albeit in different forms than those experienced by white Americans.

The definition of home for enslaved Americans changed with historical context. It adapted as Africans, kidnapped from their homeland, forced to suffer unspeakable trauma on the Middle Passage, and sold into enslavement, raised enslaved children who had only experienced life in the Americas. This generation and subsequent ones only knew the

United States as home. Communities of enslaved people created and sustained these American homes within the constant horror and injustice of enslavement. Modern Black American homes still suffer the consequences of these injustices through housing disparities, anti-Black violence, and other inequalities. Although it has taken different forms, systemic racism is still active in the United States and impacts the safety and security of Black Americans every day.

An analysis of over one hundred slave narratives reveals that while enslavers could successfully weaponize surveillance and confinement in a slave home, they could not fully control the social, physical, and environmental comfort enslaved Americans made for themselves and their community.⁴ Comfort overwhelmingly defined the ideal pre- and post-emancipation slave home in the nineteenth-century American South. Comfort was not just about physical relaxation; comfort pertained to the presence of and ability to maintain a family, material objects, and land. In a world where enslaved people could not control the physical comforts of their lives, these psychological comforts gave enslaved Americans a sense of security. This complex comfort formed the foundation of home as a place of resistance and ultimately contributed to the fight for freedom and security. Enslaved Americans persevered in creating this comfort for themselves despite the unending efforts of white Americans to limit any right to home. After emancipation in 1863 and the end of the Civil War in 1865, enslaved Americans won some degree of security and freedom but still not to the degree that legal, political, and social structures gave their white counterparts. Amidst the continued denial of home for Black Americans in the nineteenth century, psychological comfort continued to largely define home. As long as the legacy of slavery continues to exist through the legal, political, and social barriers erected by white Americans to institutionalize racism, Black Americans will not be granted the comfort sought in the nineteenth century and the security still denied to them.

1 Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Genealogies of Community, Home, and Nation,” in *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 126.

2 Shelley Mallett, “Understanding Home: A Critical Review of the Literature,” *The Sociological Review* 52, no. 1 (2004): 62–89.

3 Mallett, “Understanding Home,” 62–89.

4 Narratives published online by the University of North Carolina’s *Documenting the American South* project.

This essay will examine psychological comfort—drawn first from familial relations, then from material objects, and finally from land—before exploring the relationship between security and comfort in defining pre- and post-emancipation Black American homes in the nineteenth century. The overwhelming majority of slave narratives mention parent-child bonds as sources of social comfort. Enslaved mothers used the home as a place of resistance and a way to fight for freedom and security, although the government legally permitted neither. Material, creolized African American objects also represented resistance within slave homes, which provided physical comfort—also contributing to psychological comfort—and countered the control strategies of enslavers. While the surveyed narratives mention the importance of material objects several times, historians can also still see evidence of this material comfort in existing objects from slave homes. Finally, many slave narratives acknowledge environmental comfort from the physical land and the notion of a Black American home within the American South, especially post-emancipation. Emancipation gave more security, although not equality, to Black Americans; this increase in comfort and legal security strengthened the presence of Black homes in the South. However, the economic, social, and political status of inhabitants directly influences the level of comfort in a home. In the modern United States, non-Black Americans have continued to develop and reiterate the same anti-Black sentiments present since the formation of the United States and continue to challenge the social and legal existence of Black Americans within the United States. Orville Hubbard, the mayor of Dearborn, Michigan from 1941 until 1978, ran on the promise to “keep Dearborn clean,” which was well recognized as code to keep Dearborn white. Black Americans who moved to Dearborn were harassed until they moved out. Although Dearborn has made strides in confront-

ing and righting its racist past, it echoes the stories of cities across America.⁵ Black Americans’ homes have and will continue to be unequally and unfairly challenged until Black Americans attain the same level of security and freedom as white Americans.

Slave narrativees often describe and discuss home, making them an ideal source bank to explore various definitions of home. These nineteenth-century, antebellum and postbellum narratives are rich sources that give primary accounts of the trauma of slavery. However, they are limited by recollection in the inherent flaws of memory, dramatization, and hindsight bias.⁶ As historian John Sekora writes, “the slave narrative is born into a world of literary confinement - designated by others, plainness, facticity, and dictated forms.”⁷ All narratives must be critically examined for potential whitewashing and other biases; many of the less clearly biased sources were written for a white audience as part of the anti-slavery movement. This whitewashing may more heavily impact themes like incorporation of African American culture in the home, as such a theme would be less familiar to a white audience and white publishers; this form of whitewashing also potentially erases resistance that may have existed in the home. While these biases may affect specific memories, broad themes—such as defining home—remain accurate and may be even more accurate over time with more comparisons.⁸

The slave narratives used in this essay, like any other source, need to be cross-referenced and critically examined for bias and outward influence, especially by white people and enslavers.⁹ Key points brought up by multiple enslaved and formerly enslaved Americans will be especially valuable—this information is likely less whitewashed and more applicable to multiple experiences. Also, many self-emancipated Black Americans wrote narratives with significantly less influence from white publishers.¹⁰ However, there is still a bias that skews towards the upper South over

5 Jack Lessenberry, “The City of Dearborn Turns the Page on One of Its Racist Leaders,” *Jack’s Take* (Michigan Radio, September 30, 2015), <https://www.michiganradio.org/opinion/2015-09-30/the-city-of-dearborn-turns-the-page-on-one-of-its-racist-leaders>.

6 Donna Spindel, “Assessing Memory: Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives Reconsidered,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 27, no. 2 (Autumn 1996): 247–61.

7 John Sekora, “Black Message/White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative,” *Callaloo*, no. 32 (Summer 1987): 482–515, 488.

8 Spindel, “Assessing Memory,” 247–61.

9 C. Vann Woodward, “Review: History from Slave Sources,” *The American Historical Review* 79, no. 2 (1974): 470–81.

10 John W. Blassingame, “Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems,” *The Journal of Southern History* 41, no. 4 (November 1975):

the lower South; cross-referencing narratives from different regions helps identify common experiences and interregional themes. Additionally, women only wrote 12% of narratives, lending less information to potential gender differences in experiences. Similarly, 35% of narratives came from fugitives while only 5% of enslaved people were fugitives, and a disproportionate number of narratives came from whom historian John Blassingame calls the “most perceptive and gifted of the former slaves.”¹¹ None of these experiences take away from the value of the narratives of these enslaved Americans. However, specific details of their experiences may not carry over to other, less represented enslaved Americans. As the experience of each enslaved American is different, this is yet another factor to remember when analyzing language and source materials.

For many enslaved Americans, familial comfort was one of the first foundations of comfort in a world of forced enslavement. This comfort created one of the earliest defining factors of “home.” It is also important to note that “family” has a flexible definition. Often family meant parents and children, but grandparents and other community members were integral parts of the family for enslaved Americans. One of the biggest methods of control for enslavers was to treat enslaved Americans as a collective group, taking away any sense of individuality and humanity.¹² Historian Herbert Gutman remarks that enslaved Americans’ families and communities clearly demonstrated to all people that enslaved Americans were not “non-men” and “non-women.”¹³ In this way, the familial ties counteracted the inhumanity with which enslavers treated enslaved Americans across the United States and was one of the strongest cornerstones defining home for the enslaved. The ability of the enslaved Americans not only to survive but also to resist enslavers by creating fami-

lies and homes demonstrates the incredible resilience of enslaved Americans in a system designed to dehumanize and destroy. The creation of a home for enslaved Americans was the antithesis of this system.

One of the main familial-derived comforts for enslaved Americans was the home as a place of presumed protection and happiness. Although these family homes were incredibly insecure, parents attempted to protect their children from the horrors of enslavement and, for the most part, were relatively successful.¹⁴ These efforts endured through adulthood, defining home for both enslaved children and adults. After the American government confirmed that it would not abolish slavery when the horrific stories of enslaved Americans were available to the public, an enslaved man called Aaron wrote in his narrative about what “a blessed thing it is for any one when they meet with sorrow and afflictions, to have a father’s home to go to.”¹⁵ Through different stages of his life, Aaron’s family home brought him relief from the distress of knowing there was no discernible end for enslavement—literally, his father’s home was a place of comfort from enslavement. Within this protection from enslavement, enslaved parents attempted to create a happy home. Harriet Jacobs, a formerly enslaved American from North Carolina, agreed that enslaved children in “pleasant homes... were happy.”¹⁶ However, she also believed that enslaved children “without father or mother, could not expect to be happy.”¹⁷ To Jacobs, “pleasant,” “happy,” “father or mother,” and “home” are all closely related concepts; while Aaron talked about the refuge his father’s home brought him, Jacobs identified happiness also in these homes and sadness as a consequence of being without a home. For Aaron and Jacobs, family created protection, happiness, and comfort, thereby defining their homes.

Just as Aaron spoke of the comfort of returning to his family home, so, too did enslaved people

473-92.

11 Blassingame, “Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves,” 473-92.

12 John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 184.

13 Herbert Gutman, “Taken From Us by Force,” in *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 357.

14 bell hooks, “Homeplace (A Site of Resistance),” in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990), 41-49; Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself*, ed. Lydia Child (Boston, MA: Published for the Author, 1861), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/jacobs/jacobs.html>.

15 Aaron, *The Light and Truth of Slavery. Aaron’s History*. (Worcester, MA, 1845), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/aaron/aaron.html>.

16 Jacobs. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

17 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

separated from their families speak of the sorrow of losing their homes. Enslavers tore enslaved men William Singleton, Thomas Jones, and Lewis Charlton from their homes as adolescents. In their narratives, they discuss similarly the dual pain of losing their families and losing their homes. In Singleton's memoir, he recall his enslaver, also his biological uncle, selling him away from his "home."¹⁸ He escaped after several years and, as a scared child, went back to the "only home [he] knew. It was where [his] mother was."¹⁹ Earlier, he also refers to his living space as a "house," only calling it a "home" when it was with his family. There are many factors that contribute to defining a home, but for Singleton, the presence of his mother and the familial comfort and protection she gave him changed a "house" to a "home."

Likewise, an enslaver sold Lewis Charlton, an enslaved American from Maryland, and his sister at the same time. He recalls that "the whole family were separated, and if we never meet again in this world we shall meet after the storms of life are over, in that beautiful home on high, to part no more forever."²⁰ After familial destruction, one of the only times Charlton mentions home in this entire narrative centers on home as a place of comfort and reunification with family after death. In his words, Charlton did not have a home, as he had no familial comfort; his family defined his home. However, during this period he had many "houses," which he defines as the place where he lived. For Charlton, his home was a place of comfort, closely intertwined with his family. In his narrative, he only refers to his home after death—his final home, with his family in heaven—because enslavement took away his family, his familial comfort, and ultimately his home. One of the long lasting and appalling consequences of enslavement was the simultaneous loss of family and home.

Tom Jones was another of the many enslaved Americans taken from his home as a young child. A

slave driver tore then 9-year-old Jones from his family to be sold to a new family forty-five miles away in early nineteenth-century North Carolina. Jones describes being "snatched" from his "only home," being "[torn] away from the dear mother who loved [him] as no other friend could," and then watching the slave driver "striking at [his mother] with his heavy cowhide, fiercely [ordering] her to stop bawling, and go back in the house."²¹ Within the same paragraph, he recalls this place as a "home" until he was forcibly taken from his mother and saw his mother beaten outside of it. After this traumatic event, his home lost its joint connotations of comfort, safety, and security. It became a "house." He characterizes this incident as being "snatched from [his] loving parents, and from the true affection of the dear ones of home."²² This trauma defined the loss of a home for Jones, an event that would shape the rest of his life. As an adult, all Jones wanted was for God to "guard and guide [him] soon to a free home with [his] beloved family."²³ Similar to Singleton and Charlton, Jones suffered the loss of home and family due to slavery. He hoped escaping to freedom would let him rebuild a home with his wife and children. He wrote of this escape in the winter of 1848-1849. A year later, Congress would pass the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, meaning any escaped formerly enslaved person in a free state could be recaptured and forcibly brought back to the South. After this legislation, Jones' freedom was precarious. He had to continue creating homes after slavery destroyed them, continuing to demonstrate both the inhumanity of enslavement and the resilience of Jones in a system designed to destroy him.

Aaron, Jacobs, Singleton, Charlton, and Jones wrote about familial comfort creating protection from the most horrific parts of enslavement and the irreparable trauma of losing it. This comfort differentiated a "house" from a "home." While the slave narratives can be unreliable sources, the

18 William Henry Singleton, *Recollections of My Slavery Days, 1922*, (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: 2000), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/singleton/singleton.html>.

19 Singleton, *Recollections of My Slavery Days*.

20 Lewis Charlton, *Sketch of the Life of Mr. Lewis Charlton, and Reminiscences of Slavery*, ed. Edward Everett Brown (Portland, ME: Daily Press Print, n.d.), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/charlton/charlton.html>.

21 Thomas Jones, *Experience and Personal Narrative of Uncle Tom Jones; Who Was for Forty Years a Slave. Also the Surprising Adventures of Wild Tom, of the Island Retreat, a Fugitive Negro from South Carolina* (Boston, MA: HB Skinner, 1854), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/jonestom/jones.html>.

22 Jones, *Experience and Personal Narrative of Uncle Tom Jones*.

23 Jones, *Experience and Personal Narrative of Uncle Tom Jones*.

emotional component of home is one that remains relatively untouched and accurate, based on common themes through over one hundred narratives and especially prominent in these five. The emotional affect of home was also an element of the narratives that could be most easily understood by white publishers and white audiences. Every European immigrant family had its own story of finding home; they could see echoes of their own families in the Black American struggle. With poignant stories of enslavement, torture, and abuse fundamentally tied to homemaking, the concept of “home” became a salient emotional device in slave narratives and ultimately contributed to white American participation in the fight for emancipation.

Of course, there are many different instances and definitions of home; several enslaved Americans used “house” and “home” almost interchangeably in their narratives. Many of these enslaved Americans were brutally torn from their families at an extremely young age developmentally before creating “home.” Unlike Singleton, they never escaped to their families. Frederick Douglass, a famous formerly enslaved author born in Maryland, stated, “the ties that ordinarily bind children to their homes were all suspended in my case.”²⁴ The ties to which he referred are his family members; Douglass’ mother’s enslaver tore her from Douglass as an infant, and he was primarily raised by his grandmother, from whom his enslaver took him as a young child. He never developed this tie to home, and consequently, he speaks of “house” and “home” as almost the same concept. Douglass was also in an unusual position as the categorical exemplar of John Blassingame’s “one of the best and the brightest” of the enslaved Americans.²⁵ Out of an enhanced regard, white Americans may have treated

him differently, helping him find comfort in more places than other enslaved Americans. This increased comfort could have resulted in comparatively more “homes” for Douglass.

Formerly enslaved American William Hayden similarly does not differentiate between “house” and “home” until he speaks of family. Like Douglass, Hayden was taken from his family at a young age. When he was older, he said, “a choice of homes was again held out to me.”²⁶ The nonspecific nature of home here is contradictory to the majority of narratives, in which home includes a specific emotional component. However, Hayden changed his definition when he stated he wished to “clasp [his] mother” and give her “a happy home with me.”²⁷ Here, his definition of home is singular, specific, and clearly related to the emotional comfort provided by family to which Aaron, Jacobs, Charlton, Jones, and Singleton referred in their narratives.

One of the most significant feelings that enslaved parents gave their children was the feeling of freedom within a home. This feeling is potentially one of the several reasons family played such a formative role in the definition of home and contributed to the protection enslaved Americans often felt from familial comfort. Family could almost be analogous to freedom for a young child. In the case of Harriet Jacobs, she recalls how her family “fondly shielded” her from the horror of slavery in their “comfortable home.”²⁸ Frederick Douglass, after an enslaver took his mother from him, lived with his grandmother. When he learned his grandmother’s “home and the lot” and his “grandmother herself and all the little children around her” belonged to an enslaver, he referred to this place of residence as the “house of [his] childhood,” not home.²⁹ After learning he and his family were enslaved, he lost

24 Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself. His Early Life as a Slave, His Escape from Bondage, and His Complete History to the Present Time, Including His Connection with the Anti-Slavery Movement; His Labors in Great Britain as Well as in His Own Country; His Experience in the Conduct of an Influential Newspaper; His Connection with the Underground Railroad; His Relations with John Brown and the Harpers Ferry Raid; His Recruiting the 54th and 55th Mass. Colored Regiments; His Interviews with Presidents Lincoln and Johnson; His Appointment by Gen. Grant to Accompany the Santo Domingo Commission-- Also to a Seat in the Council of the District of Columbia; His Appointment as United States Marshal by President R. B. Hayes; Also His Appointment to Be Recorder of Deeds in Washington by President J. A. Garfield; with Many Other Interesting and Important Events of His Most Eventful Life; With an Introduction by Mr. George L. Ruffin, of Boston* (Boston, MA: De Wolfe & Fiske, 1892), [https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/douglass92/douglass92.html](https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/douglass/douglass92/douglass92.html).

25 Blassingame, “Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves.”

26 William Hayden, *Narrative of William Hayden, Containing a Faithful Account of His Travels for a Number of Years, Whilst a Slave, in the South. Written by Himself* (Cincinnati, OH: Published for the Author, 1846), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/hayden/hayden.html>.

27 Hayden, *Narrative of William Hayden*.

28 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

29 Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*.

much of the freedom he felt in this dwelling. This is when his use of “home” deviates from other narratives, compounded by the trauma of enslavers tearing his mother away and, as a direct result, losing the protection that his mother could have given from the early childhood trauma of enslavement.

Parents clearly defined home for their children, but children also shaped home for their parents. Tearing apart families destroys the home, which functioned as a control measure white enslavers used to control enslaved Americans.³⁰ Enslaved mother Bethany Veney expressed that white women “can never understand the slave mother's emotions as she clasps her new-born child, and knows that a master's word can at any moment take it from her embrace.”³¹ Freedom gave more security and certainty to a family, also giving comfort to a home that did not exist in enslavement. However, even after escape to the North, legislation like the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act undermined this comfort by allowing systemic re-enslavement of any escaped slave living in the United States and forcing families to travel outside of the United States to find true freedom.³² Trying to achieve this security and comfort—whether in the United States or Canada—motivated enslaved parents, like Bethany Veney, to escape enslavement despite the threat to their lives and likelihood of failure.

After self-emancipation, formerly enslaved parents continued to define home through children. Similar to Veney, Harriet Jacobs was a well-known escaped enslaved mother who suffered many injustices and traumas from slavery. However, in her narrative, she says one of the hardest experiences for her was allowing her daughter to attend boarding school after escaping enslavement, because “it was her presence that made [her] two little rooms seem home-like.”³³ The presence of her daughter changed her “two little rooms” to a “home.” White enslavers used

these tactics to destroy the home for both parents and children by way of destroying the family itself. James Watkins, a formerly enslaved American who escaped from Maryland, similarly said that he “had not... what makes a home comfortable—a partner of my joys and sorrows; [he] had not the responsibilities and pleasures of a parent.”³⁴ For both Jacobs and Watkins, home, comfort, and children were closely intertwined. Children, and the familial comfort they brought, defined a home for their parents. This insecurity and lack of control over family motivated these parents to escape the injustices of enslavement to freedom, no matter how far they had to run to create a secure home.

Enslaved mothers faced a different stress than other enslaved people due to their cultural and social position as caretakers of children, a position derived primarily from white Southern American gender roles. Traditionally, in African societies, the community as a whole plays a part in raising a child.³⁵ However, Southern society believed in letting enslaved mothers play a role in raising the child, at least initially. Historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese attributes this practice to the white Southern cultural belief in “women's special capacities for gentleness and nurture, about the sanctity of the family circle, and about the comforts of home.”³⁶ Harriet Jacobs mocked this idea of the “southern home,” with families created from sexual assault; white women see “children of every shade of complexion play with [their] own fair babies” and know “they are born unto him of his own household.”³⁷ For Jacobs, the southern home mocks the very idea of home; it is stained and sustained by sexual assault and violence from white enslavers towards the enslaved women. A “southern home” as described here by Jacobs was a place for performance, full of trauma and secrets and false family. In comparison, the home of an enslaved American was much more authentic, despite

30 Gwendolyn Wright, “The ‘Big House’ and the Slave Quarters,” in *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 47.

31 Bethany Veney, *The Narrative of Bethany Veney, A Slave Woman* (Worcester, MA, 1889), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/veney/veney.html>.

32 “Fugitive Slave Act of 1850,” in *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*, 2018.

33 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

34 James Watkins, *Narrative of the Life of James Watkins, Formerly a “Chattel” in Maryland, U. S.; Containing an Account of His Escape from Slavery, Together with an Appeal on Behalf of Three Millions of Such “Pieces of Property,” Still Held Under the Standard of the Eagle* (Bolton: Kenyon and Abbott, 1852), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/watkin52/watkin52.html>.

35 Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/utd/detail.action?docID=880143>.

36 Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*.

37 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

its precarity and close acquaintance with insecurity and trauma.

By the early nineteenth century, the role of enslaved women had expanded to include homemaker within enslaved American communities. These roles represented additional duties on top of required work on a plantation. Josiah Henson, a formerly enslaved man, said of his wife when he suggested escaping, “with a woman's instinct she clung to hearth and home.”³⁸ The enslaved mother was both homemaker and enslaved person, making her role harder than either alone. An enslaved mother was responsible for creating the home, keeping the home, running the home, and raising the children, on top of her labor performed for her enslaver.

Sojourner Truth, another well-known enslaved mother, said an enslaved mother did not have the “power to make herself a home.”³⁹ She viewed the role of a mother as to “cultivate [her children's] affection, administer to their wants, and instill into the opening minds of her children those principles of virtue, and that love of purity, truth and benevolence, which must ever form the foundation of a life of usefulness and happiness.”⁴⁰ For Truth, enslavement took away her ability to do any of these things, as she could not accomplish her goals without a home. In this way, enslavement's impact on home creation and definition clearly affected not just enslaved mothers, but the next generation as well.

The lasting impact of enslavement deeply contributes to the generational trauma still prevalent in Black American communities and society into the twenty first-century. Despite the difficulties Truth outlined in creating homes, many enslaved women did create and nurture homes, which their children discussed in their narratives as adults. Moreover, within these homes, they nurtured a “culture of opposi-

tion” and used their homes as “key locations” in the South to fight slavery and ultimately played a crucial role in abolishing slavery and maintaining these homes.⁴¹ Social activist and writer bell hooks refers to this in her work “Homeplace (A Site of Resistance)”; hooks discusses the experiences of her mother and grandmother in choosing to create a homeplace where Black children could feel safe and loved and where they could heal from the wounds white dominion inflicted.⁴² hooks was born almost a century after the Emancipation Proclamation, further demonstrating how the legacy of enslavement created permanent scars for the Black American community. Healing from this white American-inflicted trauma is the resistance to which hooks refers, rooted in the same resistance in which enslaved mothers engaged and continuing to occur in different forms post-emancipation. Even with the multitude of strenuous challenges enslaved American and Black American mothers faced, they continued to fight for their families, their homes, and their freedom.

Several other factors also influenced home creation. Comfort from material culture, specifically non-essential objects, helped form a sense of home for many enslaved American families. Historian Dr. Martha Katz-Hyman writes that, especially in the latter part of slavery, the actual living conditions of slave homes were not always “abject physical misery” and often included possessions from enslaved Americans.⁴³ Objects became a way to add to the physical, material comfort of living quarters and transform them into a home while contributing to a creolized African American identity and psychological comfort. These creolized objects, which were made by enslaved Americans to feature both culturally African and American traits, physically represented the African American culture born from the trauma

38 Josiah Henson and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *An Autobiography of the Rev. Josiah Henson (“Uncle Tom”). From 1789 to 1881. With a Preface by Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Introductory Notes by George Sturge, S. Morley, Esq., M. P., Wendell Phillips, and John G. Whittier. Edited by John Lobb, F.R.G.S. Revised and Enlarged*, ed. John Lobb (London, ON, CA: Schyler, Smith, & Co, 1881), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/henson81/henson81.html>.

39 Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern Slave, Emancipated from Bodily Servitude by the State of New York, in 1828* (Boston, MA: J. B. Yerrinton and Son, 1850), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/truth50/truth50.html>.

40 Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*.

41 Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), <https://search-ebscohost-com.libproxy.utdallas.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=137897&site=ehost-live>.

42 hooks, “Homeplace (A Site of Resistance).”

43 Martha B Katz-Hyman, “In the Middle of This Poverty Some Cups and a Teapot: The Furnishing of Slave Quarters at Colonial Williamsburg,” in *The American Home: Material Culture, Domestic Space, and Family Life*, ed. Eleanor Thompson (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998), 197-216, 211.



Gourd Folk Fiddle, 1800s,
Smithsonian National Museum of American History [2]

and enslavement of Africans in the United States.⁴⁴ The addition of these uniquely African American, non-essential material objects contributed to both enslaved Americans' physical and psychological comfort and thus their conception of home.

Although these objects increased physical comfort, enslaved living quarters were fundamentally uncomfortable places.⁴⁵ Common descriptors for living quarters were negative qualifiers, such as "cramped," "dirty," or "lonely," combined with an actual descriptor of the building, like "cabin" or "hut."⁴⁶ In very similar circumstances, enslaved men John Brown and Thomas Jones described their respective "dirty log hut" and "poor hut." However, to Jones, his

hut was also a "home" after the addition of "simple furniture"; this small difference added to the creation of a home, as the furniture marked a transition from simply surviving within the vicious cycle of enslavement to also having material comfort.⁴⁷ This material comfort, similar to familial comfort, helped create a sense of home—yet it was often simultaneously a physical manifestation of the forced assimilation of enslaved Black Americans.

Similarly to Jones, enslaved man William Craft noted the difference material comforts make in a home. In his narrative, he described first "the house where [his] wife resided," then described a chest of drawers he made for her, and then refers to it as "home."⁴⁸ Historian John Michael Vlach believes that because of the comfort which enslaved American-made, creolized African American objects brought to harsh living quarters, historians should consider these objects an integral strategy enslaved Americans utilized to cope with the trauma of slavery; enslaved Americans created material objects, rather than merely receiving them from enslavers.⁴⁹ Following Vlach's ideas, these objects helped provide material comfort to a living space. This material comfort is what both Jones and Craft identified as their home.

Material objects also functioned as a mode of resistance. Historian Gwendolyn Wright suggests creolized African American influence in the home offered an independent culture, separate from white American culture, to these living spaces. This distinct culture also contributed to the undercurrent of resistance to white dominion within slave homes.⁵⁰ White editors may have obscured these second meanings in slave narratives. Wright further explains that while early enslavement may have normalized enslaved Africans bringing African objects into their home, by the nineteenth century, enslavers considered bringing creolized African American objects into the home a "potentially dangerous act."⁵¹ However, several objects

44 Melville J Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1941).

45 Katz-Hyman, "In the Middle of This Poverty Some Cups and a Teapot."

46 John Brown and L. A. Chamerovsow, *Slave Life in Georgia: A Narrative of the Life, Sufferings, and Escape of John Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Now in England* (London, England: W. M. Watts, Crown Court, Temple Bar., 1855). Jones, *Experience and Personal Narrative of Uncle Tom Jones*.

47 Jones, *Experience and Personal Narrative of Uncle Tom Jones*.

48 William Craft and Ellen Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (London, England: William Tweedie, 1860), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/craft/craft.html>.

49 Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery*, 167.

50 Wright, "The 'Big House' and the Slave Quarters," 48.

51 Wright, "The 'Big House' and the Slave Quarters," 46.

still exist in which this creolization is clearly evident.

One common creolized object was the musical instrument, most commonly fiddles or banjos.⁵² Enslaved Americans created a chordophone⁵³ (Fig. 2) similar to the American fiddle and West African nyanyeru (Fig. 3), used for playing music in a home.

The African American “fiddle” is a chordophone with the body of a gourd with a stretched hide top and neck and fingerboard made from wood. The instrument has four tuning pegs at the end of the fingerboard; this implies there were four strings, likely tuned in fifths. There is an endpin for the strings to create tension for sound, and holes in the resonator body for sound to escape, similar to the f-holes on top of a modern fiddle.

The West African nyanyeru is a similar instrument, made of a hide top, gourd bottom, and wood fingerboard. It also has holes cut in the gourd resonator. However, the nyanyeru only has one string and no pegbox, making chords impossible to play and limiting the fine-tuning possible.

Both instruments are made of gourds with animal skin stretched over and a wooden fingerboard. Similarly, both instruments have holes cut into the resonator. The nyanyeru was a likely inspiration or precursor to the chordophone found in the Americas; however, there are differences in the number of strings and design of the pegbox. The chordophone has four strings and a pegbox, similar to a fiddle; the nyanyeru has one string and no pegbox. This chordophone is a creolized African American instrument, with materials and some structural features similar to a West African nyanyeru and other structural features taken from the American fiddle. Created by enslaved Americans, it reflected and respected their creolized culture.

Objects like the chordophone had several lasting impacts in slave homes. First, the physical comfort provided by these belongings helped create a more comfortable living space for enslaved Americans. Additionally, the emotional comfort from the unique belongings in homes helped promote individuality, countering the collective lens enslavers used



Karim Dembele, Nyanyeru, 2013, Musical Instruments Museum [3]

to control enslaved Americans. As enslavement became more embedded within American society, these objects themselves became a symbol of defiance, one more contributing to the definition of home both as a place of comfort and as resistance against enslavement. In doing so, these objects, created and forced by the realities of enslavement to be a creolization of African and American culture, helped define a distinct African American culture. This culture honored both the endurance of the original enslaved Africans in keeping their culture alive, despite the constant and unending trauma of enslavement, in addition the creation of an American home by the later generations of American-born enslaved Black Americans.

Because of the United States’ legacy of enslavement and systemic racial oppression, enslaved and

52 Dell Upton, “White and Black Landscapes in 18th Century Virginia,” in *Cabin, Quarter, Plantation: Architecture and Landscape of North American Slavery*, ed. Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsburg (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

53 A stringed instrument, such as a fiddle.

free Black Americans have faced different dilemmas than other populations within the United States. From the first time seventeenth-century European slave traders kidnapped Africans to brutally bring them to the United States until Congress passed the 13th Amendment in 1865, the majority of Black Americans were born in enslavement. As a result, the United States was the only home they had ever experienced, yet, formally and informally, white society denied any claim Black Americans may have had to the land. The role that the land played in defining home changed pre- and post-emancipation—this change was due to the changing legal status of Black Americans and the growth and development of ties to the American South after generations of Black Americans were forced into enslavement on plantations.

Pre-emancipation, the land played a role in distancing enslaved Americans from white control. The outdoors were as important as the indoors for enslaved Americans—respect for the outdoors was both a belief passed down from African culture and a necessity of living in the hot, humid South.⁵⁴ This importance likely formed the foundation of the association of “home” with the outdoors. Additionally, this land was a communal area—the community they lived in was as much part of “home” as was anything else.⁵⁵ Historian Dell Upton says that the separation from white society and control allowed enslaved Americans to have communities connected to and built on knowledge and familiarity with the outdoors.⁵⁶ These communal areas served as a form of resistance to the white enslavers by contributing to individuality. Per Herbert Gutman’s analysis, communal spaces capitalized on the idea that, despite their marginalized legal status, enslaved Americans were people with distinct communities and ties.⁵⁷ In this way, the land strengthened the home by encouraging and facilitating these community ties, thus also building and contributing to existing familial comfort.

In the nineteenth century, this definition of land changed from outdoors to specifically land within the United States. When Kentucky Senator Henry Clay suggested making a colony for free Black Americans in Africa, Levin Tilmon, a free Black man, wrote in an 1848 letter that the United States “is our country, the soil on which we were born. Here are our homes. Let us build ourselves up by all righteous means. Let us cherish no divisions among ourselves. United we stand, divided we fall.”⁵⁸ For Tilmon, even 15 years before emancipation, the United States was his home. While many early captured and enslaved Africans considered Africa their geographic home, later generations clearly felt more at home in the United States, the country in which they were born and raised.

Formerly enslaved American Thomas Johnson agreed with Tilmon. He believed “there are millions [of Black Americans] who are at ‘home as much as the white man’ in America. Brought to the country against his will, the Negro has helped to make the country what it is.”⁵⁹ For white Americans of European descent who had immigrated at the same time as slave traders had forced Africans across the Atlantic Ocean into enslavement in the United States, the idea that they were more European than American would have been absurd. However, the deep history of racism throughout America and continued lack of equal rights for Black Americans allowed white Americans to consider Black Americans un-American and ignore their contributions and ties to the United States. Enslaved American Moses Grandy stated that for Black Americans, “America is their home: if their forefathers lived in Africa, they themselves know nothing of that country.”⁶⁰ While fighting for emancipation in the United States, Black Americans also fought for recognition of the United States as their home in the present and in the future.

54 Garrett Fesler, “Excavating the Spaces and Interpreting the Places,” in *Cabin, Quarter, Plantation: Architecture and Landscape of North American Slavery*, ed. Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsburg (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 31.

55 Fesler, “Excavating the Spaces and Interpreting the Places,” 31.

56 Upton, “White and Black Landscapes in 18th Century Virginia.”

57 Gutman, “Taken From Us by Force.”

58 Levin Tilmon, *Levin Tilmon, 1807-1863 A Brief Miscellaneous Narrative of the More Early Part of the Life of L. Tilmon: Pastor of a Colored Methodist Congregational Church in the City of New York* (Jersey City: WW & LA Pratt, 1853), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/tilmon/tilmon.html>.

59 Thomas L Johnson, *Twenty-Eight Years a Slave, or the Story of My Life in Three Continents* (Bournemouth: W. Mate and Son, 1909), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/johnson1/johnson.html>.

60 Moses Grandy, *Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy; Late a Slave in the United States of America* (London, England: C. Gilpin, 1843), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/grandy/grandy.html>.

They fought in order not to be forced across an ocean to a foreign country once more. For free and enslaved Black Americans alike, the United States was home. The ignorance of white Americans in recognizing Black Americans' connections to America as a home gave rise to governmental, systemic ideas like Clay's colony in Africa, and continues to form the foundation for everyday, contemporary anti-Black racism.

These assumptions continued to dominate conversations about the home of Black Americans and their role in Southern American society post-emancipation. Booker T. Washington said about this role that "the Negro's home is permanently in the South, for, coming to the bread and meat side of the question, the white man needs the Negro and the Negro needs the white man."⁶¹ While systemic, legalized racism and anti-Black violence would continue, emancipation did give formerly enslaved Americans greater security in the South. For Frederick Douglass, freedom meant all formerly enslaved Black Americans would not "be leaving the South as from a doomed city, and seeking a home in the uncongenial North, but tilling [their] native soil in comparative independence."⁶² Despite the history of racism and trauma in the South, and the knowledge that racism would likely continue even after emancipation, many formerly enslaved Black Americans did not want to leave their homes for the North. Formerly enslaved American Elijah Marris recalled that during that during the Civil War, "we had just left our homes, and though out of slavery we loved the place of our birth; and while we could not help thinking of home, sweet home... the Civil War between the North and South had separated us from home."⁶³ By the time of emancipation, many Black Americans from different states had created a clear definition of home that in-

cluded comfort, resilience, and resistance, as well as a clear geographic tie to the American South.

Though overall racism was still deeply interwoven into American society, emancipation changed the definition of a Southern home. Emancipation offered security and freedom, the pursuit of which had driven Black Americans to make the perilous escape to Canada after the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act had taken away that possibility in Northern states. Emancipation granted this freedom in the South, the land Washington, Douglass, and Marris all hailed as the home of Black Americans. Such freedom was the ultimate goal for almost all enslaved Americans in the narratives under discussion. Enslaved men Lunsford Lane and Henry Parker, pre-emancipation, wrote that they so desired freedom they, respectively, would seek "a more friendly home" and "a home where [his family] would be free" in Canada.⁶⁴ Harriet Jacobs also noted her desire for "a home shielded by the laws," just as every white woman could have.⁶⁵ Tom Jones agreed with this, stating, "it seems to me that no one can have such fondness of love, and such intensity of desire for home and home affections, as the poor slave."⁶⁶ Pre-emancipation, many enslaved people simply wanted a secure, comfortable home in freedom, wherever that may be. Post-emancipation, this distinction was not as clear; while many Southerners feared "...all the slaves will run up North, if they are ever free," enslaved American Lewis Clarke instead "[assured white Southerners] that [enslaved Americans] will run back [to the South] again if they do."⁶⁷ Clarke was right; many formerly enslaved Americans stayed in the South, facing institutionalized discrimination and racism but remaining connected to their homes and the homes of their enslaved ancestors.

61 Booker T Washington, *An Autobiography. The Story of My Life and Work* (Toronto, ON, CA; Naperville, IL; Atlanta, GA: J. L. Nichols & Company, 1900), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/washstory/washin.html>.

62 Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself*.

63 Elijah Marris, *Life and History of the Rev. Elijah P. Marris, First Pastor of Beargrass Baptist Church, and Author* (Louisville, KY: The Bradley & Gilbert Co., 1885), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/marris/marris.html>.

64 Lunsford Lane, *The Narrative of Lunsford Lane, Formerly of Raleigh, N.C. Embracing an Account of His Early Life, the Redemption by Purchase of Himself and Family from Slavery, and His Banishment from the Place of His Birth for the Crime of Wearing a Colored Skin. Published by Himself* (Boston, MA: Printed for the Publisher, 1842), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/lanelunsford/lane.html>. Henry Parker, *Autobiography of Henry Parker, 186AD*, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/parkerh/parkerh.html>.

65 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

66 Jones, *Experience and Personal Narrative of Uncle Tom Jones*.

67 Lewis Garrard Clarke, *Narrative of the Sufferings of Lewis Clarke, During a Captivity of More Than Twenty-Five Years, Among the Algerines of Kentucky, One of the So Called Christian States of America. Dictated by Himself* (Boston, MA: David H. Ela, 1845), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/clarke/clarke.html>.

This association between home and freedom is common throughout the slave narratives as a wish of many enslaved Americans. However, it could also be less evidently tied with resistance, seen under the guise of religion. Throughout the narratives, there were many instances of dying and going to heaven as finally “being free” and “going home.” There are many parallels between enslaved Americans and Israelites in the Bible. Historian Charshee Lawrence-McIntyre says enslaved Americans “easily identified themselves with the situation of the Israelites in Egypt.”⁶⁸ She goes on to explain that while enslavers would interpret spirituals about Moses and Joshua as being about escape from earth to heaven, in reality enslaved Americans were referencing escape from their very real enslavement.⁶⁹ Similar to the spirituals Lawrence-McIntyre discusses, it stands to reason that references to “going home to heaven” to find freedom after death could very well reference desire for escape and freedom during life. Within this context, many of the homemaking strategies already discussed—for example, the love of music in the home for enslaved Americans to sing “so much about ‘heaven’ and ‘home,’ and ‘rest’ and ‘freedom,’”—take on a double meaning that may have been hidden by the whitewashing of slave narratives.⁷⁰

The definition of home for enslaved Americans was unique to each person, but home ultimately was a place defined by familiarly, materially and environmentally derived psychological comfort. Throughout slave narratives from different states, many people refer to their family as the first community that ultimately gave this comfort. Many enslaved women also created this home as a site of resistance to enslavement, demonstrating another level of comfort and leading to the individuality and eventually security of slave homes. Also contributing to psychological comfort was physical comfort; to this end, material objects created a more comfortable home for many enslaved Americans. Material objects also held aspects of resistance against the whitewas-

hing and erasure of African and Black culture, while simultaneously creating a unique African American creolized culture. For later generations, this creolized culture contributed to an identity that incorporated both aspects of African origins and an American home. Finally, these aspects led to a concept of home closely tied to the American South, especially after emancipation. Even post-emancipation, racism remained prevalent in the South. Nevertheless, Black Americans continued to call the South their home. They found ties to the land from the homes of many generations of ancestors and enslaved Americans, ties which had been formed while white enslavers forced them to live there for centuries.

The definition of these homes has changed; while comfort has always been the primary defining feature of a home, security has played a large role in creating that comfort. Emancipation gave much more security to formerly enslaved Black Americans. However, Black American homes will never have as much comfort or security as white American homes while the United States retains aspects of institutionalized racism, which was born in enslavement and is systemically dedicated to preserving aspects of inequality in a country that prides itself on freedom. In Detroit, Michigan, city officials have exploited aspects of Black culture for the last century, lauding Motown music and the Wright African American History Museum as milestones for equity and inclusivity. Yet these same officials have enforced housing discrimination, anti-Black violence, and disparities in health care.⁷¹ As a result of the unending effort and resilience of Black Americans, Black American homes have survived and endured in the United States for hundreds of years despite extreme trauma, violence, and inequality. It is time for the United States to acknowledge these homes and help continue to build them, rather than systematically destroy them. ♦

68 Charshee Charlotte Lawrence-McIntyre, “The Double Meanings of the Spirituals,” *Journal of Black Studies* 17, no. 4 (June 1, 1987): 379–401.

69 Lawrence-McIntyre, “The Double Meanings of the Spirituals,” 379–401.

70 Johnson, *Twenty-Eight Years a Slave, or the Story of My Life in Three Continents*.

71 Roshanak Mehdipanah et al., “Residential Racial and Socioeconomic Segregation as Predictors of Housing Discrimination in Detroit Metropolitan Area,” *Sustainability* 12, no. 24 (2020): 104–29. “Health Disparities/Health Inequalities,” *Critical Health Indicators* (Lansing, MI: Michigan Department of Community Health, April 2009), https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mdch/44_HlthDispar_198947_7.pdf.

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