Sarah's Song: How Folk Music Shattered Slaveholding Ideology in Antebellum Alabama

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APPROVAL PAGE

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This work conveys how historians can make use of a slave mistress’s musical expression to understand the compatibility of slaveholding ideology with her conception of the cosmos. For if we are to understand the most convoluted facet of Southern antebellum culture—the way bible-reading Southerners lived under the same roof with culturally divergent humans whom they battled daily to conceive of as property—we must look to mediums that transcend the shallow confines of verbal communication.

In April of 1827, Alabamian Sarah Haynsworth Gayle wrote in her journal that she found herself in a trance while “at my sewing.” She mourned for the presence of her traveling husband, Alabama lawyer and future governor John Gayle, and was driven to action: “with the tune ‘Robin Adair’ on my lips the lines below came into my head.” These lines describe the fear she often experienced when her husband departed and the cares that “flew away” when he returned. They paint images of the lonely nights she spent praying for him from a “sleepless bed,” with a heart “chill’d with dread.” She ended the song with a stanza positioned askew—flowing South/North rather than West/East—to her previous two, avowing that her heart would become a “sealed up sepulchre” if death ever took her husband.

Sarah’s lyrics summarize the chilling fears that she expressed in more than half of her journal entries. Haunting her bedside incessantly during her husband’s absences and latent in the sub-tropical environment that surrounded her, the fears largely came in three forms: sickness, death, and slave insurrection. Her construction of the last stanza says much of this latter fear; for even as she was being haunted by her slaves she was versifying in their language—the patois of those she called wretches. The stanza is not only askew to the common direction that Scots-Irish lyrics generally flow, but discordant to the very meter that the tune dictates. She phrased it through the use of an improvisational device—off-beat phrasing—that was known throughout the South to have been harnessed by black preachers for necromantic wiles, in dim-lit churches hidden in low country swamps and upcountry canebrakes.

Sarah’s song, like her journals, reveals convoluted truths. She perceived Alabama’s landscape—most commonly portrayed in lore as “bright and sunny”—as a gloomy and haunting domain of death, pestilence, and slave revolt. She did not take the institution of slavery to be normal or ordinary. To the contrary, she felt how her life flowed crooked because of its presence. The lyrics in the final stanza of her song are crooked similarly. Strikingly, they illuminate the extent to which she could not resist the songs of the servants who slept on the floor by her bedside. Written in an intimate moment of weak worry that gave rise to artistic expression, Sarah’s song ultimately reveals how the dehumanizing ideology of chattel slavery destabilized the aural universe she hoped to summon up with music. Such a revelation beckons historians toward searching for vanished motions behind dead symbols, motions that can sometimes be resurrected. Moreover, how many other fractured universes await discovery behind the symbols that hordes of antebellum masters and mistresses left us?
I wish to be unveiled, that if I possess anything worthy to be adopted you may do it, and if anything aught to be shunned, let it . . . —Sarah, 1828

Introduction

In April of 1827, Alabamian Sarah Haynsworth Gayle wrote in her journal that she found herself in a trance while “at my sewing.” Evoking a phrase made popular forty years earlier by Robert Burns, she mourned for the presence of her traveling husband, Alabama lawyer and future governor John Gayle, “him who was far awa’.” Sarah was then driven to action: “with the tune ‘Robin Adair’ on my lips the lines below came into my head.” These lines describe the fear she often experienced when her husband departed and the cares that “flew away” when he returned. They paint images of the lonely nights she spent praying for him from a “sleepless bed,” with a heart “chill’d with dread.” She ended the song with a stanza positioned askew—flowing South/North rather than West/East—to her previous two, avowing that her heart would become a “sealed up sepulchre” if death ever took her husband.

The tune that Sarah interacted with so intimately, which all of the sorrow, fear, and sentiment surrounding her loneliness called to her mind, likely originated in fifteenth-century Ireland and was popularized by Burns, who penned lyrics to it twice, creating the songs “Phillis the Fair” and “Had I a Cave.” The lyrics that Sarah penned to it illuminate in three stanzas a summary of the chilling fears that she expressed in more than half of her journal entries. These fears—haunting her bedside incessantly during her husband’s absences and latent in the sub-tropical environment that surrounded her—largely came in three forms: sickness, death, and slave
insurrection. Her fear of slaves was especially prevalent in her 1831 entries that followed news of Nat Turner.5

Her construction of the last stanza says much of this latter fear; for even as she was being haunted by her slaves she was versifying in their language—the patois of those she called wretches. The stanza is not only askew to the common direction that Scots-Irish lyrics generally flow, but discordant to the very meter that the tune dictates. Indeed, she phrased her lyrics through the use of an improvisational device—off-beat phrasing—that was known throughout the South to have been harnessed by black preachers for necromantic wiles, in dim-lit churches hidden in low country swamps and upcountry canebrakes.

Sarah’s song, like her journals, reveals convoluted truths. She perceived Alabama’s landscape—most commonly portrayed in lore as “bright and sunny”—as a gloomy and haunting domain of death, pestilence, and slave revolt. She did not take the institution of slavery to be normal or ordinary. To the contrary, she felt how her life flowed crooked because of its presence. The lyrics in the final stanza of her song are crooked similarly. Strikingly, they illuminate the extent to which she could not resist the songs of the servants who slept on the floor by her bedside, tended her personal spaces, and nursed her babes. Written in an intimate moment of weak worry that gave rise to artistic expression, Sarah’s song ultimately reveals how the dehumanizing ideology of chattel slavery destabilized the aural universe she hoped to summon up with music.

This work, then, conveys how historians can make use of a slave mistress’s musical expression to understand the compatibility of slaveholding ideology with her
conception of the cosmos. For if we are to understand the most convoluted facet of
Southern antebellum culture—the way bible-reading Southrons lived under the same
roof with culturally divergent humans whom they battled daily to conceive of as
property—we must look to mediums that transcend the shallow confines of verbal
communication. We must look to a new terrain, to the motion of crafted sounds that
were exchanged by masters and slaves in daily hums and sung whispers—the deep
expression that occurred more often among both cultures than the written journals and
narratives that were not disseminated among either.

When we understand the depth of Sarah’s summary song of fear, her journals
begin to read differently; they begin to trouble us in ways previously inaccessible.
We see, a woman who could not, even in her safe and intimate spaces, escape an
invisible anguish that was connected with the material of her everyday life—with
steel hoes, stagnant swamps, and human chattels. We realize that the seemingly
disconnected is in fact intertwined. Suddenly the still words in her journals are
contextualized by motions that have long ceased, invisible to even the careful reader,
like specters that escape the definitional capability of the words they surround.
African-American rhythms and Scots-Irish music (motions),* hidden behind a
mistress’s written expression of her slave-dread, show us that things on the page’s
surface are not always what they seem. Where her prose had portrayed a haunting,
her song—due the discovered motion behind it—reveals a destabilized universe.

*It should be noted here, that throughout this work, the terms “African-American” and “Scots-Irish”
are at times used interchangeably with the terms “black” and “white,” respectively. For instance, when
discussing the intricacies of musical nuances, “Scots-Irish” is used. When discussing those intricacies
in the context of intercultural animosity, however, “white” is used, as there are feelings and
descriptions associated with the latter that are dimmed when the former, a more technical term, is used.
The same goes for “African-American” and “black.”
Such a revelation beckons historians toward searching for vanished motions behind dead symbols, motions that can sometimes be *resurrected*. Moreover, how many other fractured universes await discovery behind the symbols that hordes of antebellum masters and mistresses left us?*

Given the new terrain, this work, after a brief historiographic analysis, consists of a description of my methodology for resurrecting motion (in this case, “music”) as an aid to answering historical problems, and then breaks down into two parts—“Her World” and “Her Room”†—so that the reader may perceive the methodology’s application. Using her dead words (journals), “Her World”—comprised of sections “The Countryside” and “A Window”—surveys the lay of early Alabama and shows a glimpse of the haunting, contextualizing the small space where Sarah’s deepest fears took song-form. Using her motion (song), “Her Room” analyzes the working-out of slaveholding ideology in just that, and shows the universe in disarray.

*We do know, for instance, that other mistresses at least tempted to harness black expression. Mary Boykin Chesnut remembered of a slave funeral:

“Jim Nelson, the driver . . . . was asked to lead in prayer. He became wildly excited, on his knees, facing us with his eyes shut. He clapped his hands at the end of every sentence, and his voice rose to the pitch of a shrill shriek, yet was strangely clear and musical, occasionally in a plaintive minor key that went to your heart. Sometimes it rained out like a trumpet. I wept bitterly . . . . The Negroes sobbed and shouted and swayed backward and forward, some with aprons to their eyes, most of them clapping their hands and responding in shrill tones: ‘Yes, God!’ ‘Jesus!’ ‘Savior!’ ‘Bless de Lord, amen,’ etc. It was a little too exciting for me I would very much have liked to shout, too . . . .” Whether they ever succumbed to the temptation is for future research to determine. It seems likely, however, in the face of what we are learning, that they sometimes did. See Mary Boykin Chesnut, *A Diary From Dixie*, edited by Ben Ames Williams (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1949), 148-149, quoted in Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South* (Oxford University Press, 1978, 2004), 221.

†The word “room” is here broadly defined as “her living quarter, or the intimate space from which she stepped back to analyze her world.”
Lastly, the sound of “Robin Adair” is harnessed in this work to reveal part of Sarah’s imagined world. For the tune’s melancholic sound reveals the phonetic “texture” and “motion” that she associated with her life as expressed through her lyrics. The attached CD features a production of the tune “Robin Adair” on the fiddle as Sarah may have heard it in early Alabama. The fiddle used is constructed out of the wooden materials of Sarah’s world, of Alabama pines resembling the ones that boarded her floors.

The position that folk music occupied in the Deep South’s antebellum cosmology worried Frederick Douglass in the 1850s. Douglass knew its ideological importance—slaves used it as a way to assuage the pains of slavery with hope; masters used it, along with whiskey, to keep slaves pacified in their chains. A half-century later, W.E.B. DuBois noted that this “double-consciousness” afflicted the African-American mind; a crisis of identity emerged when one contemplated the irony in the fact that his uprooted and enslaved African ancestors had forged part of their own identities through the lingo of their European enslavers (Southern folk music evolving as a mixture of European and African traditions).

By the 1950s, it had been hinted that this music must have haunted enslavers more than slaves. When slaves played it, culturally divergent tones of resistance potentially “troubled the sleep” of masters. However, few pre-Civil Rights Era historians—besides DuBois—thought long on why the African-American music heard in big houses, cotton fields, and slave quarters was troubling. Indeed, some saw its expression as passive, weak, and un-complicated.
This changed in the 1970s, as scholars grew concerned with tracing the African origins of Southern folk music and evaluating its force as a mode of resistance. Charles Joyner—along with a small number of folklorists—went further, arguing that European folk music was substantially altered in the antebellum South through its exposure to African-American aesthetics. Yet he was not haunted—as were Douglass and DuBois—by what this alteration meant.

Sarah Gayle’s biographer was not haunted either. In 1988, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese scoured Sarah’s journals to assess her troubled relations with her slaves, and found that the traumatic psychology conjured up by African-American sounds was dimmed by the strength of Sarah’s mindset—one that “took slavery for granted.” Making no attempt to harness the motion behind Sarah’s words, Fox-Genovese missed the harrowing ways that slaveholding could rupture a mistress’s mind. Intriguingly, while the missing was in the air, Grady McWhiney argued for the unbroken sustenance of “Cracker Culture” in the Deep South that same year. He, like Fox-Genovese, assumed that European folkways were virtually unaffected by their contact with African-American culture, and that whites were not scarred by black influence.

The air has thickened since. In 1992, Roger Abrahams recovered accounts of torch-illumined slaves “singing the master” as they shucked corn, damning him with cryptic chants—woven into folk songs—as he and his family looked on, watching the shucking harvest. More recently, in 2005, Shane and Graham White analyzed remembrances of slavery’s sounds—from the shrieks of slaves at executions to fiddle
tones produced by black fiddlers—and conveyed that the sounds were not passive noises, but *active* forces that often troubled masters.\(^\text{15}\)

Thus Douglass’s old worry, though it has often been ignored, still goes. Even those who have reckoned with it, however, have failed to ask the questions it provokes. What can we draw from the fact that Southern folk music has haunted its listeners so? What were the psychological effects of this haunting among Southerners of the antebellum period? Where among the warring throes of Postmodern and Darwinian theories—those two weighty philosophical and scientific constructs of the past two centuries—do the historical truths discovered through the analysis of this musical motion fall?\(^*\) Historiography’s answer has been silence, and it is my hope that this work, an analysis of a life, will begin the breaking of it.

**Methodology**

I.

Historian Carlo Ginzburg, musing on the evolution of historiography, traced the origins of its methodology to the ways ancient hunters “learned to reconstruct the appearance and movements of an unseen quarry” by keenly observing its tracks.\(^\text{16}\) Their skill was in their ability to discern the identity of whatever left its imprint in the dirt through sensory stimuli. If the warmth of a bear’s body had melted snow, hunters could feel with their hands how long the bear had been absent from its resting place.

\(^*\)The foreign (and near mythological) landscape that the past has embodied in the minds of philosophers like Jacques Derrida, troubles materialists like Richard Dawkins, who seek the origins of the past via the substance of the present. The fact that recovery of the music (resurrectable and emotionally-charged motion) that was once behind (now dead) words can dramatically alter our interpretation of a life (as in the case of Sarah’s song) bears large implications for the working out of the two theoretical schools. (Music as “resurrectable motion” is covered in the methodology section below).
They could hear the crackle of the branches it broke as it fled. I am hunting similarly, for the ideology of a woman one hundred and eighty years gone.

Resurrection

The music she wove with her fears can be harnessed to resurrect her. “Robin Adair” was her motion (she hummed it as she wrote); it is her motion. When sound waves are moved toward the cadenced pitches called “Robin Adair,” the motion she conjured to say her fears is present. More than this, since the words she left woven to the notes betray the emotion she tied to resurrectable motion, a dead woman can be emotionally engaged. Through the engagement, her fears, sorrows, and black expression are realized.

II.

Sarah unfortunately did not include any musical notes to “Robin Adair;” she simply assumed that those who read her lines (her family, and possibly others) would

*Music is, essentially, motion: sound waves moving toward predetermined pitches. I invoke French philosophe Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s definition of musical “movement” as “the course or progress of sounds from flat to sharp, or from sharp to flat.” Rousseau keenly observed Jerome Mei’s distinction between “continued” and “intervallative” movement. The movement in the sound of the human “speaking” voice—continued movement—generally fluctuates through sharp and flat pitches randomly—not “fixed until we are silent,” whereas the human singing voice—intervallative movement—“moves by determined intervals.” It follows that since the musical note represents an intervallative pitch (a pitch reached by determined movement), one can determine the general motion needed to sustain it—i.e. pulling a bow across strings in a certain way and moving sound waves, by means of measurable intervals, toward the pitch the note represents. This is the resurrectable motion I am concerned with—the movement of sound waves toward the pitches that make up “Robin Adair’s” melody; there will always be that same progressive flow of motion, whether the exact pitches are hit perfectly or not. See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, A Complete Dictionary of Music (1779) (New York: AMS Press, 1975), 256. For an in-depth description of the physics of sound waves, see Perry R. Cook, ed., Music, Cognition, and Computerized Sound (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 37-56.

†It is intriguing to muse on the fact that music is, essentially, motion; the same kind of motion as the sun’s rising and setting, as a farmer’s scythe swinging through a wheat field, or as an ocean wave’s crashing onto a sea shore. The extent to which these (in some small way at least, resurrectable) motions, if hidden behind prose that makes no mention of their presence, could transform our interpretation of the prose is, I would imagine, dramatic. I hope in a future study to survey the implications of the possibility.
know its sound. Yet by comparing the cadence of her lyrics with the cadences of
those written by songwriters, like Robert Burns, who used the tune close to her
lifetime, we can be fairly certain that the structure and musical motion of her “Robin
Adair” was nearly identical to that of the earliest printed version (1793).17

Indeed, the way Sarah phrased her lyrics reveals how well acquainted with
this version she was. Her lyrics, at the beginning of the song, cling to the notes that
accentuate the tune’s rhythm to create a near monotonous effect (While listening to
track 1, see figure 1 and compare with figures 2 and 3—on next pages). Strikingly,
however, she abandoned the tune’s traditional meter altogether in her third and final
stanza, retaining bits and pieces of it where needed. Her abandonment is illuminated,
and seems to be calculated, due to the way her lyrics cling to the tune’s accented
beats in the first part of the stanza—“What state would I be in” metrically mirrors
“Welcome, welcome home to me”—stray off-beat in its mid-section; and then cling
back to the accented beats for the stanza’s finale—“buried in it” metrically mirrors
“While though wert near.”*

*The only existing copy of the lyrics is one she transferred to her journal in 1828, from a previous
copy she had tucked away in a drawer. One might argue that Sarah may have added this inverted
stanza after she had transferred the previous two stanzas to her journal. This is unlikely, however, as
she made no note of it being a later addition—and never made any “additions” to any of the other
poems included in her journal—but presented the song as a cohesive piece composed at one time.
What is more likely, is that Sarah positioned the stanza askew when she transferred the song because
she was aware of how much it strayed from the structure of her previous two, and was not confident
enough to make the stanza appear as if it were part of the song in its final and edited version. Most
tellingly, she placed the date “April 1827” directly under the inverted stanza, underlining it to
forcefully emphasize that she wrote the entire song then and not on the date when she was transferring
the lyrics to her journal, which was in 1828. This was evidently important to her because she took the
time to preface the lyrics with the scenario in which they were written—her husband’s absence.
Sitting at my sewing one day, my thoughts on him who was “far awa,” the tune of Robin Adair on my lips, the lines below came into my head.

I.
Welcome, welcome home to me
Thou who art dear
I’ve shed, since parted last from thee
Many a tear.

But now, while to thy bosom pressed
Care flies away, a banished guest
Thou ever thou hast made me blest

April 1927
While thou wert near.

II.

How my heart was chill'd with dread  
Lest harmed thou mightest be  
How started from my sleepless bed  
To offer prayer for thee.

Thy wanderings for a time are done  
We hold thee safe, thou cherished one  
Oh! Happier than thy wife is none  
Stay, stay with me.

III. (Inverted)

What state should I be in were it so that  
I dared not indulge in ideal welcomeings  
if he had gone the “way of all living?” My  
heart would be a sealed up sepulchre &  
hope, and love, and joy, would all be  
buried in it.
You're welcome to Pax-ton, Robin Adair:

How does Johnny Mackrill do? Aye, and Luke Gard'ner too? Why did they no come with you,

Robin Adair? Come, and sit down by me,

Robin Adair; And welcome you shall be To every thing that you see: Why did they not
Come with you, Robin Adair?

I will drink wine with you, Robin Adair,
I will drink wine with you, Robin Adair;
   Rum-punch, aye, or brandy to,
   By my soul I'll get drunk with you;
Why did they not come with you, Robin Adair?

Then let us drink about, Robin Adair,
Then let us drink about, Robin Adair,
   Till we've drank a Hogfhead out,
   Then we'll be fow nae doubt;
Why did they not come with you, Robin Adair?

The Edinburgh Musical Miscellany, Volume II (Edinburgh: 1793), 304.
Figure 3
Burns’s “Phillis the Fair”

PHILLIS THE FAIR

Phillis of the title was the younger daughter of John McMurdo of Drumlanrig and, like
the following, this song was set to Robin Adair, 'a crinkum-crunkum' Gaelic tune which
Burns got from a 'musical Highlander in Breadalbane's Fencibles,' quartered at
Dumfries in 1793.

While larks, with little wing, fann'd the pure air.
Viewing the breathing Spring, forth I did fare.
    Gay, the sun's golden eye
    Peep'd o'er the mountains high;
'Such thy bloom,' did I cry, 'Phillis the fair.'

In each bird's careless song, glad, I did share;
While yon wild flowers among, chance led me there.
    Sweet to the opening day,
    Rosebuds bent the dewy spray;
'Such thy bloom,' did I say - 'Phillis the fair!'

Down in the shady walk, doves cooing were;
I mark'd the cruel hawk caught in a snare.
    So kind may Fortune be!
    Such make his destiny,
He who would injure thee, Phillis the fair!

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Robert Burns, The Complete Poetical Works of Robert Burns, ed. James A. Mackay (Alloway,
Sarah's metrical abandonment strays widely from the tradition of Scots-Irish balladry that was popularized by two of her favorite poets, Sir Walter Scott and Robert Burns, the tradition musicologists have often defined by its meters of "regularly occurring accentuation." Sarah’s family must have been aware. They omitted her crooked stanza from a posthumous publication of her poem (1895), though they left the first two stanzas intact. The family’s removal of the stanza is intriguing . . . .

This abandonment of meter can be better appreciated if we consider another aesthetic available to Sarah. African-American music scholars Dena Epstein and Roger Abrahams (among many others) have written on the ways that African-Americans transformed European songs into instruments of their own expression, retaining European musical tradition only to create a safe skeleton—seemingly rigid outwardly, yet hollow on the inside—within which they could freely express their deepest emotions through the musical style of their ancestors in Africa. This style was strong around Greensboro, the town where Sarah lived when she penned her lyrics. In 1851, one of its citizens noted of African-Americans in the town:

They sing at their work, at their homes, on the highway, and in the streets; and in the large majority of cases, their songs have a decidedly religious character. How common to see an old woman at her work, "lining out" a hymn to herself, and then singing it in a spirit of rapt abstraction from earth and all earthly things.

The rapt abstraction occurred more dramatically in the sermons of antebellum black preachers. Historian Albert Raboteau has observed that their sermons often

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*"Lining Out" was a tactic often employed by missionaries to teach Africans European hymns in eighteenth-century America. It had great sway due to the way it mimicked the "call-and-response" tradition that Africans knew intimately, in which a chorus would recite a repetitive phrase so one good rhymer could creatively improvise off of it. See Dena Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 25, 202."
“began with normal conversational prose, then built to a rhythmic cadence, regularly marked by the exclamations of the congregation, and climaxed in a tonal chant accompanied by shouting, singing, and ecstatic behavior.” They attributed the rhythmic and improvisational climax to the power of the Holy Ghost.23 As we shall see, Sarah witnessed the power first-hand.

One might argue that Sarah’s improvisation was not necessarily derived from African-American influence, or that she was simply caught in a stream-of-consciousness at the point her lyrics skewed. The stream-of-consciousness seems unlikely.† None of the other poems she included in her journal exhibit a similar stream. Nor does the shift seem inadvertent. It is suggestive that the only song that alludes to slave dread is the song where she departs from meter.24 Sarah may have attempted to conceal this skeleton due to a deep-rooted conflict. Yet she was not, in the end, successful.25

Her World

Sarah lived in Greensboro when she wrote her song, an occult nook near the Black Warrior River in midwestern Alabama. The town bordered the northern edge of a sea of cane forebodingly called the Black Belt.26 Bald hills of sage strewn among dark thickets rolled north toward Tuscaloosa, a distance crisscrossed by dark red dirt roads. John, her husband, had grown cotton and corn in deep Alabama, but

†Whether Sarah positioned this final stanza askew because she (consciously) recognized that it was phrased through an African-American device we cannot tell. Yet it is important to note here that the conclusion of this study would be no different if her use of a black aesthetic was unconscious. Once we have grown intimate with her journals, we see that her use of the aesthetic speaks for itself. It reveals an acknowledgment—either in the depths of her soul or the front of her mind—of a universe destabilized.
mostly earned his money lawyering. Though Sarah did not consider him to be as wealthy as the planter nabobs they descended from,\textsuperscript{27} he could still afford one of the first Georgian homes in a town that was, in the 1820s, largely comprised of log cabins.\textsuperscript{28} He was fast on his way to becoming speaker of the state house (1829), and after that, the state’s seventh governor (1831).\textsuperscript{29}

Greensboro grew as cotton boomed in the Black Belt later in the decade, luring more planters and small vestiges of “society.” The boom also brought thousands of slaves.\textsuperscript{30} John acquired roughly twenty in a wedding gift; and when he and Sarah ran out of tasks for them around their large town lot (roughly five acres), they hired them out to bidders.\textsuperscript{31} There was, as Sarah saw them: the rogue Hampton, an oat grower, laborer, and the husband of ghost-like Hetty; the quasi-dependable servant Nanette; Mike, the prize of Sarah’s late father, who, much to her distress, grew uppity and had to be sold; the singing nurse Rose; the two-headed doctor Mary Ann; and others of whom even less is known.

Cotton was not the only thing booming amidst the dry grasses of Alabama’s southern frontier. From 1819, the year of their fall marriage, to 1835, Sarah bore eight children. Six of them survived—Matthew (“Matt”), Sarah, Amelia, Mary, Richard Haynsworth, and Anna Maria—though one was unnamed and stillborn, and another, Helen Louisa, blackened and died.\textsuperscript{32} Matt (1820-1875) would become a physician and first lieutenant in the Confederate Army. While practicing his trade in the dimming light of Selma in 1865, he would be captured by hordes of blue coats that stormed the city, and lose his mind forever. Haynsworth (1832-1873) would be imprisoned in Boston Harbor for running the blockade in 1864, caught up in the same
war that killed his brother’s mind and his sister Mary’s (1829-1911) husband.\textsuperscript{33} Amelia’s (1826-1913) time would be brighter. Her husband would survive the war to become president of the University of Alabama, and she would become its beloved librarian emerita, her name imprinted above its Ionic columns. Amelia’s son, William, would become a surgeon and link Yellow Fever with the \textit{Aedes aegypti} mosquito, gaining international renown for controlling its outbreaks.\textsuperscript{34}

Maria (1835-1879), Sarah’s youngest, would wed a New Orleanian lawyer and Civil War victim (wounded at Shiloh), and embrace Roman Catholicism and the French tongue.\textsuperscript{35} She would also fall victim to one of Sarah’s worst fears—conjure. But all that was yet to come.

The Countryside

Sarah was amazed to hear that he had done it again. “Stripping his clothes entirely off,” Michael Kinnard had sprinted down the steep banks of the Black-Warrior River for the purpose of sinking into its muddy waters. It was 1828, and he proclaimed himself to be the Archangel Michael, evidently his namesake, declaring that “it was revealed to him alone where the sepulchre of Moses was”—at the river’s bottom.

Strange as Kinnard was, Sarah could not muse long in her journal on his revelation before having to turn her attention to an impish girl, a friend’s child, then staying with her. Nannette was pestering the girl due to her insisting that “God did not make negroes, [because] they were so bad and trifling.” By the time she had gotten the girl tamed, the noise of another messenger of God distracted her. A Mr. Masfatt, termed by Sarah as “The Guardian Angel of the pulpit,” was generating
uproarious applause at the Methodist church just down the road from her house in Greensboro, as Andrew Jackson supporters railed with him in denouncing the administration of John Quincy Adams, abolitionist esquire. Such was a day in Sarah’s antebellum Alabama life.36

The river that Mr. Kinnard ran naked into was named after the Creek Indian chief who tussled with Spanish conquistador Hernando De Soto—the man whose soldiers had carried Old World boars into the New World, boars whose descendents roamed the untamed woods around Greensboro. De Soto pronounced the chief’s name “Tastaluca,” which became the name of one of Alabama’s future capitals, the place that would draw Sarah Gayle in 1833, after John was elected governor.37 The impish girl’s opinions about God and “negroes” were shared by the supporters of Jackson and his running mate, John Caldwell Calhoun. John Gayle was included in their ranks. John Quincy Adams had challenged those opinions in La Amistad case, a case that challenged an American jury to define explicitly what many Americans could not, just what a black person was.38

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*The Gayles, like Jackson, became enemies of Calhoun in 1832, by which time he had openly opposed his president, and kindled a doctrine that said it was acceptable for a state to nullify federal laws (especially if they were anti-slavery). During the nullification crisis, John Gayle aligned himself with Jackson and his unionists, meeting with some disapproval among Alabama cotton nabobs. Hence Sarah believed nullification to be a “scourge” like the cholera. See Sarah Gayle Diary, December (date unknown), 1832.

South Carolinians had first nullified a federal mandate in 1822, when, in the wake of the Denmark Vessey Conspiracy and against a Federal Circuit Court decision, Charlestonians began jailing black sailors who ported in their city (regardless of nationality) for the duration of their stay, out of fear that they might pass revolutionary sentiments across the waters from places like Saint Domingue and abolition-bent England to the city’s blacks. In 1828, South Carolina secretly enlisted the Vice President, John C. Calhoun, to help develop nullification theory to be implemented in defying another mandate, this time a protective tariff that cotton planters believed to be a move from Northern politicians to decrease their output and incomes. See William Freehling, The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay, 1776-1854 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 254-286.
So it was that Alabamians saw some of their fellows as angels while wondering whether others were human. Even so, like their mother, Sarah’s own children sometimes found themselves speaking in black dialect, and itinerant Methodist circuit riders often stood up on crude stands lit by burning pine knobs in the middle of nowhere, beckoning—like drunken choir directors—crowds of blacks and whites, frantic and contorted amidst smoke and coarse hymns, to experience a holy ghost. They warned that the ghost would haunt those like Sarah, who danced to fiddle tunes that were often driven by the bowing of some of the same blacks who attended the camp meetings. Others felt haunted by witches, and looked timidly into the thickets for their moonlit images. Mulatto house servants—themselves haunting to a society that supposedly reviled miscegenation—were watched closely as they lurked intimately near the cribs of the white babes they tended for their mistresses, lest they taunt the babes with “bloodcurdling stories of ‘spirits an’ ghoses’” while threatening them with the prospect of moving their cribs to a graveyard should they not be able to quickly go to sleep among such tales.

Sarah blamed her own infatuation with the tales on a rustic frontier education, one that sent her toward Washington Irving instead of Augustine. Irving told of the

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1 In November of 1827 (Wednesday, no date given), Sarah wrote that Matt, yearning for an early Christmas present, cried out to his father “Christmas gift, pah.” We cannot know why she underlined the phrase; however, we do know that the phrase is known to have been one of African America. Historian Albert Raboteau has noted: “On Christmas day it was customary for slaves to greet the master’s family with cries of ‘Christmas gift, Christmas gift,’ to which whites were obliged to respond with a small gift . . .” See Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion* (Oxford University Press: 1978, 2004), 224.

2 Though black Methodists, like white ones, often saw fiddle tunes as ‘the devil’s music,’ some—especially those in attendance at rustic and wild camp meetings—rosined the bow during the meetings’ midst. Others gambled. See Raboteau, 222-226.
teaching master of a one-room schoolhouse like hers, Ichabod Crane, a “flogger of urchins” who stewed on Cotton Mather’s *History of New England Witchcraft* after he dazzled blacks who were watching his dancing through a frosty window at a harvest home, and was haunted by a headless horseman in a graveyard.* Alabamian floggers, Sarah among them, were haunted similarly, and driven by death, sub-tropical pestilences, and memories of the whippings they inflicted into such deep depression that they would “dash to the cemetery” and make their beds on top of graves.42

Alabama had only been transformed from the Mississippi Territory—a place of disjoined Euro-American settlers and Chickasaw, Choctaw, Cherokee, and Creek confederacies—into a state in 1819. Indeed, the vestiges of Native brush houses remained as African-American churches on numerous plantations across the state.43 Sarah remembered the “wild road” she traveled down with her family in 1810, on their journey from her birthplace at Sumter, South Carolina, to St. Stephens, Alabama, to make a home; she was seven, attended “by Indians, in whom we had no confidence,” and armed soldiers.44 The soldiers pulled cannons, and she began to hope that one day a son of hers would sleep “at the cannon’s mouth,” and be a brave warrior.45 Three years later, there were many of those. William Weatherford (known also as “Red Eagle”) and his Red Stick bands hiked the same roads, carrying poles

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*Ichabod Crane, schoolmaster and protagonist in Irving’s “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” (included in his work *The Sketch Book*), “ever bore in mind the golden maxim, ‘Spare the rod and spoil the child.’” When writing Ichabod’s last dance with the bewitching Katrina Van Tassel (before he would leave the harvest party and be witched away by the horseman on his way home), Irving sought to use blacks to convey the foreboding: “He was the admiration of all the Negroes, who, having gathered, of all ages and sizes, from the farm and from the neighborhood, stood forming a pyramid of shining black faces at every door and window, gazing with delight at the scene, rolling their white eyeballs, and showing grinning rows of ivory from ear to ear.” See Washington Irving, *The Sketch Book (1819-1820)* (New York: Penguin Books USA, Inc., 1981), 332, 335, 349.
topped by the scalps of some of the four hundred women and children they had massacred at Fort Mims. It was rumored that Ive, a slave belonging to Captain Zacaharia McGist, had counseled the Creeks in creeping into his master’s fort.46

Antebellum Alabamians would long be haunted by such history. Seven years after Fort Mims, in 1820, a train of carriages carrying white refugees from the Saint Domingue insurrections creaked up the Canebrake. One, Madame Fournier, was alive because she was hidden under a wash pot while slaves impaled her parents.47 The refugees whispered their tales along the way, and Greensborians received them like ghost stories.48

In the face of such horror, natives, slaves, and slave owners alike watched the night skies for signs of their world’s end. When stars fell like the bright autumn leaves in November of 1833, pent up expectation erupted into Dionysian fury.

Virginia Clay remembered:

People ran from their houses weeping and falling on their knees, praying for mercy and forgiveness. Everywhere the terrifying belief spread that the Day of Judgment was at hand; and nights were made vocal with the exhortations of the black preachers who now became numerous upon the plantation. To very recent days old Negroes have dated their calendar from ‘de year when de stars fell.’49

Sarah had long felt that the end of her time was coming, knowing that her environment predisposed her to affliction, and that many of her slaves prayed for it to come. It did. A beautiful fifteen-year-old bride over a decade earlier, her teeth were now rotten—and nearly filed to jagged nubs—when the stars fell.50 She believed that she looked like “something made to frighten folk with.”51 Two years later she died of lock-jaw, her mouth possibly fixed in the “sardonic grin” that comes with the muscular paroxysms of the body’s reaction to tetanus, often so severe that the victim
rocks on her head and heels as her abdominal muscles tear in two. Her daughter, Sarah, provided the only portrait we have of her mother’s image in a remembrance of her death:

With her raven hair falling around her, and her brilliant black eyes fixed in speechless agony upon the group of helpless little ones who surrounded her, she lay eagerly listening to every sound, hoping to hear the familiar step she had so often greeted with rapture [John]; until, as the hours went anxiously by, she realized that the shades of death were closing around her.52

It is from this portrait that we seek intimacy with Sarah, and the haunting she lived with.

Before we get close, however, let us first understand the two spiritual ways she tried—all of her adult life—to reconcile the haunting; for it is through their failure that we best comprehend it.

One way was through nature.53 Sarah was enticed by the way her favorite writers, Robert Burns and Sir Walter Scott, harnessed the dark Scottish landscape—with all of the depressed, deadly, and foreboding feelings that its experience could kindle—as an evocative conveyor of gothic beauty.54 She analyzed the characters of Scott’s Guy Mannering to the extent of identifying their characteristics in friends and enemies.55 She owned an edition of Burns’s poems, often borrowing his phrases—like “auld lang syne”—for her writing.56 Prideful of her Caledonian ancestry, she referred to herself more as “Scotch” than Southern in her journals. Like her fellow Scots, Sarah, in song and prose, spun the fears she experienced among antebellum Alabama’s landscape—with its potential to host outbreaks of cholera, the pox, and
slave insurrection—into a dark aesthetic; she hoped to calm her soul through the process.

The other was through the supernatural. Generally, Sarah crept on the outskirts of Christianity. She could dance to fiddle music one day, and attend church the next. She had an inconstant and conflicted soul, liking the solemn Presbyterians, but craving enthused Methodism (she interchangeably attended services of both); believing in atonement, but having trouble reckoning its implications in a place where whips—sometimes her own—broke backs for the black color of skin rather than sin. Nevertheless, her shadow darkened the doors of the churches that had captivated the Deep South since the awakenings earlier in the century. Her attendance was caused by an injustice—death drove her to seek reunion with those who had crossed over. In her mind’s eye, bleak graveyards were often juxtaposed to heaven’s green.

Sarah also engaged in a folk religion—perhaps an intertwining of pagan (European), Christian, and African cosmologies—that held “black books” to be potent in daily relationships, and conjuring to be effective practice.* When others despised her, she often employed it to understand their wickedness.

*By “folk religion,” I here mean: supernatural beliefs born out of a mixing of Christianity with African and European folk religions which, given the fact that Sarah was influenced by different combinations of all three, cannot be merely confined to one. For instance, European folk religion long held that black was an evil color, and, once Christianity was introduced, that the Devil brought a book with him when he rode at night looking for prospective witches, to place their names inside of. Similarly, Hoodoo priestesses prescribed this for bringing about someone’s death: “It is written that you will take of the Vinaigredes Four Volleurs, four hin, and you will dip into it a sheet of pure parchment paper, and on this sheet you will write the names of your enemies and send it to house of your enemies, tightly sealed with the wax of the Porcupine Plant.” That Sarah was the inheritress of such ideas is evident in her concept of the “black book,” a book in which her enemies kept her name (and crimes) for malevolent purposes. See Winthrop Jordan, White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812 (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1968); Mary Beth Norton, In the Devil’s Snare (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 65, 258-259; Zora Hurston, “Hoodoo in America,” The Journal of American Folklore, Vol. 44, No. 174, (Oct. - Dec., 1931), 334.
What follows is a triune window into Sarah’s world—cut into panes The Darkness, The Unspeakable, and The Reunion—that shows her two reconciliatory ways helping quell her fear of sickness and death, inflaming (rather than soothing) her fear of slave insurrection, and ultimately being ruptured by the practice that seemed to rupture everything—slavery. In doing so, the window portrays the worlds that Sarah tried to inhabit in order to live sane as a mistress in antebellum Alabama: a world of slavery, and one of spirituality. Sanity, for Sarah, depended upon their segregation.

A Window

The Darkness

It is seldom I [have] felt so cheerful, so much so, that one of the girls enquired if I ever were out of spirits. The question brought up the gloomy phantoms of which weeks [have] yielded up . . . I really have felt at times, as if it were sweet to be unhappy. —Sarah, 1832

Sarah thought her friend Sarah Carson should have stabbed a dagger into her breast before marrying the cruel man she did. He had gotten her pregnant quickly, and before the confinement was over, drove her to the “inhospitable damps of [the] river-swamp to seek refuge in its darkness amongst the beasts of prey with which it teemed from the cruelty [the “cruelty” being her husband] that sought her wherever she could fly, even with the gun in his hand!” Sarah visited Sarah years later, and “could only see the gleams of her former smiles.” She watched the woman in horror: “she lay upon the bed, from which I knew she could never rise in health . . . [her] pale and marbled features looking more deathfully in the light of the candles, burning
around her at noonday, and the straightened limbs were all that remained of the once lovely Sarah Carson.\footnote{59}

In the “bright sunny south,” Sarah saw darkness more than light. Rather than musing on the sun’s rays, she more often wrote of the cold—of snow showers so intense that they concealed objects “a few hundred yards distant.”\footnote{60} Frosts came and killed the pestilences that lurked in the dark woods of summer.\footnote{61} When fretting on a lonesome night, she grew cold and noted: “I am extremely susceptible to gloomy weather and I never have more serious thoughts than when a storm is in progress—the air darkening, the thunder muttering, lightening flashing with the mournful, complaining sort of sound which seems to pervade the universe.”\footnote{62} Visitors left her in “darkness” when they ended their visits; the darkness made everything appear to be “clothed in a gloom not its own.”\footnote{63} When she did mention the sun, it was usually in the context of the sinister: “I am sorry to give up the plan [of venturing out to mail gifts to friends], for it would result in improvement of my health . . . . The confinement on this horrid street abounding in dead rats, hot sun and dust, has been ruinous almost.”\footnote{64}

John Gayle traveled often, whether as governor or lawyer, and during the long hours that he traversed the frontier roads, Sarah twitched alone.\footnote{65} Standing on a high Indian mound amidst the hills of northern Alabama in 1826, he contrasted the clear air with that of where his wife was: “You will at once I know contrast the low and ugly, and I fear sickly situation where you now are, with the wild and romantic and
captivating appearance of this section of the country . . . .” He knew the place where he left her too well.

Sarah mused one sweltering July day: “How awful do I feel in contemplating the approach of cholera. Were the Destroying Angel to approach me visibly, my fears could not be more harrowing.” She braced for the “evil.” As leaves turned in November little had changed. She wrestled with “serious apprehensions” of becoming one of the “first victims” of the “scourge” of another cholera epidemic moving up the rivers from Mobile. Sometimes she was “bled” by her doctor to rid her body of its “fevish shadow;” other times she was given a “horrible potion” of pills to carry off the bile with which she was “loaded.” When she looked to these medieval practices to balance her humors, John was often gone, and “gloomy presentations haunted me, and [my] heart and soul went after my absent husband.”

Overcoming this “gloom” that such sickness and “solitariness” cast upon her was a daily struggle made worse by her fear of death. Sarah related well to one of her favorite Irving essays, “Rural Funerals”:

But funerals in the country are solemnly impressive. The stroke of death makes a wider space in the village circle, and it is an awful event in the tranquil uniformity of rural life. The passing bell tolls its knell in every year; it steals with its pervading melancholy over hill and vale, and saddens all the landscape.

Death permeated her life so that her “tenderest connections [became] sources of anxiety;” their presence was just a foreboding reminder that they would surely one day be gone. On a day when she had “the gloom most terribly” and was reflecting on life’s “treacheries” and its “hollowness,” Sarah claimed that the graveyard was the happiest place on earth for her, as so many of her loved ones rested there. By this
time in her life—1829—she had lost one child in childbirth and both of her beloved parents. Earlier that year, on a bleak January day, she had walked with John through briars and "rotting timber" to the "desolation of [her father's] grave." Her child's body was buried beside him. Sitting on a splintery wooden fence, she cried over their "mouldering" bodies. She had to leave the wake of a dead child, as the sight of people screwing the coffin together over the "dear babe," amidst the mournful music that those present hummed, was too much for her. She watched Miss Dearing suffer for two weeks in the final stages of lock-jaw: "the sight of an acquaintance, or one's walking over the floor, have been enough for many days, to throw her into spasms." Miss Dearing got lock-jaw the same way Sarah would, from a botched dental procedure.

An acquaintance got his arm shattered by a cannon ball that was fired during a celebration. He suffered under infection's wrath for more than a month, with his mangled arm in "a little wooden box as if it were coffined already, and spasm after spasm distorting his face . . ." Sarah was requested to send sheets to shroud him when he died—going "down to corruption, earth, and worms." Never far from the violence that haunted early antebellum Alabama, Sarah witnessed a gunshot victim that was brought into her house; he was "writhing in unsupportable torments" as his wife was foaming at the mouth. On another
occasion, she watched a friend vomit blood, raving and screaming because her
brother had committed murder. As much as her own Matt loved to hunt, and the
bed she wanted him to make in the cannon aside, such stories made her worry that his
end might be brutal because “I never saw a child so devoted to his gun.”

It would be an injustice, however, to suggest that Sarah never basked in the
sunshine; she did. She was awed by walks through the sage fields, and never so at
peace as when surrounded with her family by the fire. John would take his fiddle out,
and Sarah would sing till hoarse. She longingly wrote in the fall of 1827, “How I
love to think of the sweet winter evenings when the doors are shut, and a fire burning
on a clean hearth, the little table drawn up, and we are all gathered, in a communion
of souls around it.” Yet the truth is that her life circumstances were incessantly
dimming the light. On a night near Christmas in 1831, she snuggled under the
blankets and, peering out fogged windows, watched sleds full of carolers fly by in the
moonlight. But John was not there. He was in the wintry distance, fretting that his
house might burn down while he was not there to protect it.

Though spinning darkness into beauty was cathartic for Sarah, there were
unforeseen tensions and deceptions attached to her Scottish notion that gloom made
beauty; or, more to the point, that the sunny slave South was beautiful because it was
gloomy.

Burns often cried out against “chains and slavery.” Strikingly, in his well-
known poem, “The Slave’s Lament,” he actually becomes the voice of an angry slave
in Virginia. He knew that Sarah’s warm fiddle—that instrument at Scottish music’s core—was a tool that could curse authority, and that it was often in the hands of (potentially angry) blacks at white dances in barns and plantation halls in the Deep South.

Scott’s Guy Mannering, the novel Sarah scoured to get nicknames for her friends, is about insurrectionary prophesy in eighteenth-century Scotland. Mannering, an Oxford scholar, colonel, and astrologer, is called by the Laird of Ellangowan to stand on his roof and see what the skies tell. He divines “violent death” awaiting someone in the household; it comes to a lawyer, Glossin, after he has usurped control of Ellangowan and trampled upon the ancient rights of a band of gypsies who dwelled there. It is a gypsy, Meg Merrilies, who provokes—by singing a Scottish folk song—the insurrection that undoes him.

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   It was in sweet Senegal that my foes did me enthrall
   For the lands of Virginia, ‘ginia, O!
   Torn from that lovely shore, and must never see it more,
   And alas! I am weary, weary, O! (1st verse)

2Robert Burns, “McPherson’s Farewell,” in Mackay, ed., 308. Burns reworded the traditional tune “McPherson’s Rant;” a man named McPherson, “the wretch that dared to die,” supposedly played the fiddle—out of prideful spite toward his prosecutors—before the gallows tree that he was to hang from.

   The dark shall be light,
   And the wrong made right,
   When Bertram’s right and Bertram’s might,
   Shall meet on Ellangowan height.

It is feared that the victim of the “violent death” will be Harry Bertram, the Laird of Ellangowan’s son and heir. However, though he is kidnapped and exiled for seventeen years (during which Glossin usurps), he, with the aid of Merrilies, makes his return. When he again sees his ancestral home, he meets Glossin, the pretending owner. Thinking that “He who takes it makes it,” Glossin is ignorant of the folk song above, which states (conversely) that “right makes might.” Bertram quotes the song to Glossin who, inflamed, jails Bertram, igniting a long process that ironically illuminates Glossin’s
Suffice it to say that the mimicked sometimes condemned the mimicker, and some kinds of darkness were not reconcilable through the literary stratagems of the Scottish Enlightenment. With this in mind, Sarah’s meteorological eye takes on a new significance. As we shall see, strange weather—perhaps a peculiar frost or an awkward planetary alignment—could have insurrectionary consequences, as could the passionate sounds of angry black musicians. Scottish folk music, despite its healing capability, could not cure the fears of a trampler of rights. Thus her slave-dread raged.

_The Unspeakable_

_I am unluckily given to the habit of clothing in light words, feelings that are quivering thro’ my whole heart, and it takes a knowledge of my disposition, to discover my meaning. Indeed, it would seldom do to judge me by my expressions_.

—Sarah, 1833

On a brisk fall day in 1828, Sarah’s slaves provoked her especially hard. Her temper raged, and her eyes grew so “inflamed” that she had to call the doctor. She despised herself for the things that their rebelliousness made her do, and anguished even more over the way her punishments made them hate her. She longed: “I would be willing to spend the rest of my life at the north, where I never should see the face of another negro. Perhaps it is my cross—as such I will try to bear it as well as I can, and that is bad enough.”

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fraudulent usurpation. Merrilies is instrumental in this by singing the folk song in the backcountry, which notifies authorities of Harry Bertram’s legitimacy (“right”). The news lands Glossin in jail, where he meets his violent death, his neck broken against a rail.
Though separation, sickness, and death darkened Sarah’s days, more unspeakable fears haunted her nights. Sarah called them wretches and rogues. “What is the use of one’s fretting one’s self to death with ungrateful and insensible wretches, whom it only gratifies to disturb our quiet?” When they resisted her, sometimes she would threaten to burn them. Such was her rage over these nightmares.

On July 4, 1828, Sarah was shocked to see slaves parading through the streets, “drunk as beasts” and “feasting riotously,” while hoisting “the Goddess of Liberty (slaves as they were).” She feigned to think of the “frightful consequences” of such a wild occurrence and was told “their numbers exceeded the whites.” She had long feared slaves who were “tale-bearers,” able to “poison her happiness” by cruelly using charms “as powerful as that employed by the rattle-snake,” and which could proved “equally fatal.” In the corners of her eyes these conjurers cupped their hands over their mouths, whispering that her husband was a profligate who ‘hurried to the beds’ of his slaves.

Sarah was uneasy the ensuing fall, when a black man was hanged for murder: “He professed himself innocent of the crime, declared he did not fear to meet his God, but that it was a terrible thing for a man in health to die. . . .” The man’s statement was both a lament and condemnation, as Alabamians knew too well why restless haints haunted people’s homes at night.*

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*Alabamians have long understood the implications of killing an innocent slave. Famed Alabama ghost storyteller, Kathryn Tucker Windham, told a folk story involving a similar case. An innocent
Three years later Sarah was similarly frightened when, in the wake of Nat Turner's Rebellion, a friend of hers believed that Turner's brutal rage was "natural, and if she were them she would act as they had done." Sarah further said of Nat: "I am kept in a constant state of excitement to say alarm, in consequence of the numerous rumors concerning the slaves. The horrific scenes in Virginia are not to be forgotten." At this time (September), Nat was not captured, and Sarah had not heard too many details. She had not read his confession—how he entered his master's house like a malevolent Kris Kringle, climbing up the chimney and entering the bedroom window with hatchets in his bag. She had not been haunted by how the Holy Ghost signaled to him that the murdering time was right by "drops of blood on the corn" and a black hand cupping the sun, or by how, when he found her slave is executed for burning down the courthouse in Carrolton, Alabama (sixty miles from Greensboro), and hanged. When he was held in the courthouse attic for the trial, he reportedly screamed to a crowd on the courthouse green from the window: "I am innocent. If you kill me, I am going to haunt you for the rest of your lives!" As he was yelling, a thunderstorm came, and his face "caught the lightening," and "has remained imprinted on the garret window of the Carrolton courthouse from that day to this." You can still go to Carrolton today and observe the face in the window. See Kathryn Tucker Windham and Margaret Gillis Figh, 13 Alabama Ghosts and Jeffrey (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1987), 62-69.

^Early on the morning of August 22, 1831, Nat and six followers killed his master, mistress, and their children—the Travis family in Southampton Country, Virginia. Nat recalled, "It being dark I could not give a death blow [to Mr. Travis, with a hatchet], the hatchet glanced from his head, he sprang from the bed and called his wife, it was his last word, Will [a follower] laid him dead, with a blow of his axe, and Mr.s Travis shared the same fate, as she lay in bed . . . . There was a little infant sleeping in a cradle, that was forgotten, until we had left the house and gone some distance, when Henry and Will returned and killed it . . . ." They then proceeded to other plantations. By August 23, fifty-five men, women, and children would be dead. See The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Va. As fully and voluntarily made to Thomas R. Gray . . . (Baltimore, 1831), in Nat Turner, Eric Foner ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), 44-54.

^Nat was waiting for a sign from the Holy Ghost before he could be sure that it was near time to strike. It came in February of 1831; he noted: "And on the appearance of the sign (the eclipse of the sun last February) I should arise and prepare myself, and slay my enemies with their own weapons." However, Turner became ill, and had to postpone plans. Then, on August 13, 1831, he saw another sign on the sun. See The Confessions of Nat Turner, in Foner ed., 45. Historian Stephen Oates has noted how Nat took this latter sign to be a reaffirmation: "For Nat Turner, watching transfixed on the
“frightened to death” in the middle of a dark room, “I took Mrs. Newsome by the hand and with the sword I had . . . I struck her several blows over the head, but not being able to kill her, as the sword was dull” (she was later killed with an axe). Yet Sarah acted like she had been, like she knew what could happen, that an angry slave could seek out mistresses so.

On Halloween, the day Turner was captured, Sarah acted like she knew that there had long been potential for such terror “in our town.” Just as Nat had gazed the skies, seeking the right time, Sarah worriedly cast her eyes up: “Never has such weather been known here—an incessant fall of rain, cold driving winds, and besides a strange remarkable appearance of the sun, for which no philosophical reason has yet been given.”

Yet, intriguingly, she could never profess exactly why she feared slaves. This fact stands out in context of the way she could vividly describe the deaths of friends and family—even children. She just could not come right out and proclaim that she was afraid slaves wanted to slaughter her.

Sarah could, however, cite the ways her “troubled servants” made “my temper rebel against me.” She could express her joy at the fact that a friend sold “a dangerous negro” and note how her slaves could “take offense at the slightest admonition which they frequently merit.” She could, in the wake of Nat’s rebellion, acknowledge how she dreaded the winter, “spending [it], as I shall without

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protection . . . ."101 She could note that people "felt sorry to see me so often alone with rude children and servants . . . ."102

Sarah’s inability to clearly articulate her fear of the slave’s hatchet while she was awake makes one wonder whether her dreams were filled with its cuts. When her husband was away, she often mentioned "gloomy forebodings" that haunted her.103 Unlike the times she vividly described her fears of sickness, and death via sickness, however, she did not offer any clue as to what these forebodings were. John had suspicions. He often comforted Sarah by suggesting that most of what we worry over never occurs, and feared that she chronically mistook the depression the forebodings provoked for contagious fevers. In an 1826 letter, she cleverly attempted to refute him, but ended up illustrating his point:

I was sick one day, with, I thought, every symptom of approaching fever. Your theory of the influence of imagination in producing real disease, is at an end. I could not imagine myself in a fever. The horses are nearly done plowing, one of the carriage horses is lamed, whether badly or not Hampton can tell. Hampton and I have fallen out worse than ever. He says I am the first mistress he ever failed pleasing and I really feel so mortified that I have a great mind to imagine, I am in the wrong, and he in the right.104

There is a connection between Hampton’s rebellion and her supposed fever, and it illustrates John’s claim—the rebellion caused her to imagine herself condemned.

In July of 1831, during another one of John’s absences, Sarah had “allowed dreams to affect me lately, and beg Edward to sleep here, that I may wake in the night without being alone in the house.”105 On a frostbitten December night later that year, chewing tobacco and staring into the fire, John feared for his waking wife: “It is now I suppose one o’clock at night, and tired of bed, I have risen to chew tobacco and set by the fire . . . . If anything is wrong tell me and tell me all—I dare say you are
annoyed and perplexed by the rascally black gang around you." Sarah saw the terror of another rascally gang the next October, when an acquaintance had “17 buck shot” fired into his side by one of his slaves while he sat at the dinner table with his family. He died quickly.

Three years later, in April of 1835, the terror visited her baby Maria’s cradle. A slave knocked on Sarah’s door holding a trembling and screaming Maria. They took her clothes off, shook her, and called a doctor; he found nothing. Maria was worse by midnight, and Sarah grew desperate. She sent for her slave Lucinda, “who made her [Maria] drink freely of her famous remedy for colic—soot-tea.” At that witching hour, as “Lucinda raised her [Maria] up to hush and sooth her—something pricked her chin, and she examined the little night cap,” and her blood turned cold. Sarah was shocked to see Lucinda pull a “long, strangely headed pin, driven to the very point,” out of Maria’s ear. Pins were often harnessed in Hoodoo rites for “crossing” one’s enemies—to “cause confusion” in their house.* Amidst the “horror and excitement of the moment,” Sarah had her slave Mary Ann questioned. Though it could never be proven beyond doubt, Sarah had good reason for the suspicion: “her [Mary Ann’s] conduct is such as to weaken my confidence in her, in every way. A week or two back, money was missed from my work bag . . . .” Mary Ann “looked guilty,” and “confessed she had taken it.”

It is no wonder that John, later that dismal April, would say what he always knew: “You know, when from home, I am frequently made uneasy by dreams and for the last two nights those ugly devils have been at me again.” The dream was about

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*They certainly caused it in this case. See Hurston, 334.
Sarah being stolen away by another man. Psychoanalytic theory aside, whites in Gayle house had long felt like they were on the verge of being stolen away.

The use of conjure against her daughter, and certainly Nat Turner’s Rebellion, exacerbated Sarah’s slave fears. The prior dreams, forebodings, and conflict only made this the climax of a history of worries about slave insurrection.

Other Alabamians worried as well. They felt the animosity, and remembered the stories of refugees from the slave insurrection in Saint Domingue. Frederick Law Olmstead interviewed an Alabama white who observed in the 1830s:

I remember when I was a boy—must ha’ been about twenty years ago—folks was dreadful frightened about the nigger. I remember they built pens in the woods where they could hide and Christmas time they went and got into pens, fraid the nigger was risin’.110

The Reunion

Religion brings back to man’s degraded nature, all it has lost . . . it brings the blessed hope which is born of the grave, and the faith which takes the terror from death. —Sarah, 1833

Sarah did not know that she was watching her own death when she watched Rose contort in the final stages of lock-jaw: “her countenance had a peculiar expression . . . It was the sardonic grin.” When her doctor refused to see her black slave, Sarah did all she could, spooning her laudanum to take away the grin. Rose “was frequently rubbed violently with spirits of turpentine—her spine was blistered . . .” Sarah was shocked as Rose, still smiling in pain, and in her last motion, stretched out her hands to rip away Haynsworth into the spirit world with her; Sarah blocked her hands. Despite the offense, Sarah, John, and her children followed the coffin to
the fields, and heard the slave funeral.* Sarah "prayed that God would cause us to meet in happiness in another world." She hoped that heaven might forge reunion.

When Sarah was weaving through gray tombstones, making her way towards her loved ones' bones, and when she was passing glaring slaves in her carriage, she sought to dull the pointy reckoning by denying its ultimate reality. She included this poem by Thomas Moore amidst one of her typical journal entries on loss:

The world is all a fleeting show
For Man's illusion given—
The smiles of joy, the tears of woe,
Deceitful shine, deceitful flow—
There's nothing true but—Heaven.\(^1\)

While remembering a dead friend, she wrote: "The separations of Death cannot, must not, shall not be final. If I thought they were I should be tempted to curse the hour of my birth." In a similar way, she remarked on another occasion: "I earnestly believe there is no other way to live calmly under the endurance of this world's evils and happily in the hope of another world's blessings, but in . . . the Christian religion."\(^1\)

*Raboteau has described the ambiance of a slave funeral well: "Frequently slave funerals were held at night, when work stoppage was no problem. According to witnesses, these night funerals were impressive, solemn, and eerie ceremonies. The procession from the quarters to the grave site lit by pin-knot torches, the "wild" mournful strains of the hymns, the prayers of the slave preacher, the graves marked with posts and, as in Africa, decorated with broken belonging of the deceased, all formed a dramatic backdrop for the slave community's farewell to one of its members." See Raboteau, 230. Few details are known of Rose's, but the eeriness can be imagined.

*One of Miller's most haunting lines from *The Crucible*, spoken by Abigail Williams, the scorned witch [warning those she participated in a death-rite with]: "Let either of you breathe a word, or the edge of a word about [the rite], and I will come to you in the black of some terrible night and I will bring a pointy reckoning that will shudder you. And you know I can do it; I saw Indians smash my dear parents' heads on the pillow next to mine, and I have seen some reddish work done at night, and I can make you wish you had never seen the sun go down!" See Arthur Miller, *The Crucible (1952)* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 20.
Whatever happened on earth, whatever way death came, “There is but one consolation . . . [:] the hope of reunion.”

The Presbyterian and Methodist ministers she listened to told that after his crucifixion, Jesus had left to go prepare a place for those who believed in him, that they could be where he was. And though their ecstasy scared her, Sarah was particularly soothed by the way Methodists, confident in their eventual union at the Lord’s Table, lived in death’s shadow as if it were illusory: “I would give worlds to possess that [Methodist] faith which triumphed over the fear of death, and looked with hope and confidence beyond the grave.” Presbyterian determinism (predestination)—which held that humans were damned or saved before they were born—was less enticing for this mistress surrounded by death in its many forms. Christianity, for Sarah, was not much without blessed assurance.

Yet the Methodist ministers also stressed that her slaves’ souls were worth saving, and that they would be at the heavenly table too (though the preachers differed about what this meant for one’s earthly activities). As Rose’s case

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*The Methodists were the most successful evangelicals in antebellum America for a multiplicity of reasons, one important one being the ferocity of their circuit-riding preachers like Francis Asbury. Willing to brave the Southern backwoods, through snow and rain, they often succeeded at embodying the Apostle Paul’s reiteration of the verse from Hosea, “O death, where is your sting?” (1 Corinthians 15: 54-55). See W. M. Gewehr, “Some Factors in the Expansion of Frontier Methodism, 1800-1811,” The Journal of Religion, Vol. 8, No. 1. (Jan., 1928), 113-116.

†The theology of John Knox and John Wesley, known as the founders of the Presbyterian and Methodist churches respectively, differed on the power of human will. Wesley believed that human will could resist God’s—that is, that humans could decide whether to accept God’s grace or not. Knox, however, believed that humans could not—that if God chose them as his own, they had no choice in the matter. It is debatable, however, how much this high theological belief affected the everyday practice of these two evangelical denominations. See David Hempton, Methodism: Empire of the Spirit (Yale University Press, 2005).

‡Historian Donald Mathews has noted that, before 1830, “the Methodist Episcopal church in most southern cities was a black society with a few white members who held power and protected
demonstrates, Sarah took this to mean that the eternal meeting would be happier than temporal life. Aware of the tragic divide, Sarah expressed her remorse over it at Rose’s funeral: “I knew, at that solemn moment, that color made no difference, but that her life would have been as precious, if I could have saved it, as if she had been white as snow.” If Jesus could reconcile death, however, surely he would tidily fix the scars slaves’ bodies took while doing the work of their mistress, or any guilt the mistress may have had for causing them; no need to stop it while on earth.

Besides viewing Jesus as a reconciling savior, Sarah also saw him as a magistrate. Slaves who slept in their masters’ beds would have to give account of their evils before the judgment throne of Christ. When a cruel man was murdered, Sarah mused: “without an instant’s preparation he stood before his maker to answer for the ‘deeds done in the body.’” To the master whose “beastly passions hurry to the bed of the slave,” Sarah said “no shape of light will conceal the young profligate” in heaven.

*Sarah said as much in a stanza of one of her last poems—
From higher sources comes this purer light,
Which throws within, its radiance keenly bright,
And shows that guilt is weighing on the soul—
That stone which Heavenly hands away must roll.

worshippers from hostile authorities.” He has also observed that, in the 1830s, Methodists “continued to bring slaves into Christian fellowship, arguing that civil and social condition affected neither the need for salvation nor the responsibility to provide it.” Too be sure, a riff over slavery occurred within the Methodist Church in 1844, but this was after Sarah’s time. Furthermore, some historians believe that even this latter riff did not segregate antebellum (and even many Deep Southern post-bellum) churches in the nineteenth century to the extent that it has been believed. See Donald G. Mathews, Religion in the Old South (University of Chicago Press, 1977), 136-137, 164. See also Charles F. Irons, The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).
Yet there was something she did not understand about Christianity. She did not feel “awakened,”* and honestly confided: “I feel none of the humility, the adoration of a Christian. I wish I did but I do not.” She was bothered by the fact that the sacrament—the ceremony that symbolized Christ’s sacrificial atonement—“strikes me with none of the solemnity and tenderness which others feel.” She had trouble understanding the necessity of atonement. Why did the first man sin? Why was it predetermined that all of the generations that followed him would sin similarly? Why did an omnipotent and omniscient God set up the world in a way that demanded bloody sacrifice and suffering?† If He did set it up, why were humans to blame? She wrote: “If indeed it be true as it must be that of every misspent moment we are to render strict account, there will be thronging Demons [awaiting me] at the Judgment Day.”

Due the horrible thought of her own judgment, Sarah sometimes turned to folk religion to understand why others condemned her misspent moments. Indeed, many

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*The notion of “awakening” gained popularity in America in the 1740s, when ministers like Jonathan Edwards began reacting to the spiritual wane that followed the seventeenth-century Protestant legacy in America, prompting parishioners to wake up from their spiritual deadness, and see themselves as God’s children again (presumably they had forgotten). The awakening involved various levels of emotion and enthusiasm, the depth and height of which would splinter ministers within the awakening movement for years. See Thomas Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 1-13.

†The Holy Bible, Romans 3:23. Christian theology has it that “all [presumably anyone who is born and able to read the verse] have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Furthermore, it asserts that Jesus, the Son of God, came into the world as a sacrifice, to abolish the shortcoming. Augustine developed from this the concept of “original sin,” which puts it that, because of Adam’s first sin, all who follow are, in a sense, condemned to commit sin. Children are born into a “fallen” world, their sins predetermined before they are born to commit them. Since, writer-theologians like John Milton have developed the term “felix culpa” (fortunate fall), as man’s first fall allowed him to experience the transformative grace of Jesus, the savior.
an orthodox Methodist did similarly.* When her best friend, Swep, severed the ties of their friendship, Sarah believed that they could not be mended due to the "black book she has secretly kept against me for the last two years . . ." Within the book† —a folkloric relic of fourteenth-century inquisition mythology—lied "all I said and did . . . carefully registered, and thought over with bitterness."¹²⁴ When her slaves toyed with her mind (as through their adulterous insinuations), or stuck pins through her daughter, she understood their belligerent motivation as a result of their dabbling in conjure—snake charms and tales.

As we have seen, Sarah—like Nat—also used folk religion to account for meteorological occurrences that post-Enlightenment Christian orthodoxy ducked. When an acquaintance "came home and with dreadful oaths, wished that 'God Almighty would send a [lightning] bolt to destroy every one' in his house," Sarah feared the game he played with fate. She was not surprised at all when "there was a severe thunder storm that evening and his infant really died that night, I should have feared the curse was coming upon the house."¹²⁵ Medieval European lore long held

*Jon Butler, a scholar of American Religion, has noted how antebellum Methodist itinerants like Lorenzo Dow and Benjamin Abbott bridged the gap between folk spirituality and Methodism in their religious forays. Their listeners bridged similar gaps. See Jon Butler, Awash in a Sea of Faith (Harvard University Press, 1990), 236-242.

†The black book had become well-known in early antebellum America, and was known in New England in the 1690s. The devil—sometimes seen as a "black man"—purportedly brought the book with him when he sought to convert one to a witch via a blood signature. Salem magistrates heard many tales of it in 1692. The notion of a black book, one in which wrongdoings—such as signing your name to the devil's service—probably dates to medieval Europe, to the witchcraft mythology that emerged during the inquisition. See Robin Briggs, Witches & Neighbors (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 25-38. However, a similar notion also appears in Hoodoo; see folk religion footnote on page 18.
that “curses” could befall homes, especially if their dwellers had dark hearts or teased the supernatural.5

Sarah used these folk and Christian religious cosmologies to make things right. Injustices were avenged (in the case of cruel others), and justice was restored (in the case of the unfortunate circumstances surrounding the lives of her slaves). Where one way failed, the other was there to bridge the gap, usually.

Horrifically for Sarah, her religious way, like her Scottish one, came with strings attached. In 1830, she read the thoughts of the Member of Parliament and Christian theologian, William Wilberforce, and lamented: “he occasionally bared my own heart to me, and convinced me it was indeed ‘deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.’”126 Wilberforce was a condemner of slavery, and defined the gospel message this way: Christ died that all may live full lives on earth and forever.127 Thus when contemplating the equality of souls in her journals, the best Sarah could do was employ hypnosis: “I would not, for the World, believe that the souls of all men are not of equal value, as they are bought with the same price [Christ’s blood], but while here, the man of cultivated intellect must possess an influence, which the ignorant one, cannot exercise.”128

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5There are generally identified three categories of curses among Anglo-Saxon lore—Warnings (God’s disapproval), Voodoo curses (“I curse” this or that), and Ludic curses (cursing through Demons). The curses were illuminated during the sixth through seventh centuries, when Catholic Christianity was coming into contact with—and deciding what to make of—pagan Celtic religion; intermingling went on, and some curses were deemed apostasies, while others were incorporated into Catholic orthodoxy, albeit in transformed and altered forms. See Brenda Danet and Bryna Bogoch, “‘Whoever Alters This, May God Turn His Face from Him on the Day of Judgment’: Curses in Anglo-Saxon Legal Documents,” The Journal of American Folklore, Vol. 105, No. 416, (Spring, 1992): 132-145.
Indeed, Sarah could not take comfort in the logic that came to be espoused by Thomas Dew and followers—that Christ somehow saw African slavery as acceptable.* As a result, she was awkward.† When one of her slaves died after an abused life of toil (Sarah failed to mention a name), she was conflicted: “I hope it was no degradation to rain tears over this faithful young creature, whom I had raised from the time I had carried her in my arms a child myself.” Sarah even had to justify the tears she shed over her beloved Rose: “Why not? She was raised at my feet, and was my child’s nurse . . . .” When she was bent with heart-piercing human compassion for her slaves, she looked over her shoulders before crying.

Their cries, however, could turn Sarah rabid. A watcher of Methodist camp meetings, she was troubled by the black musical expression that was often a part of them, the sensuous tonalities accentuated by high-pitched “screams.” Two years after the Turner Rebellion, in 1833, she wrote that her “good feelings vanished” as:

A Negro in the gallery raised the yell, to which a dozen in a moment responded, sobbing and inarticulate exclamations, and then a general chorus of shouts, and cries followed, and I rose to leave the confusion, which in spite of my disapprobation, was rapidly sending the blood upon my heart, and taking the sight from my eyes.†

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*To be sure, a conflict over the Christian acceptability of African slavery had been ongoing among theologians and philosophers—across certain dormant spaces—since the first Portuguese caravels sailed slaves away from West Africa in the fifteenth century. Wilberforce’s awakening was but a new manifestation of an old debate. In the same sense, an abolitionist awakening occurred in America in the 1830s—as those like William Lloyd Garrison took to the printing press—and provoked tweaked justifications for slavery among thinkers like Dew. For an overview of the old conflict, see Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery* (New York: Verso, 1997).

Despite her yearning to escape death like a Methodist, Sarah had to quench the spirit that, according to a good Methodist, made the escape possible: “All is vain unless the spirit of the Holy One comes down...” She confided to a friend in 1834:

I love thé Methodist preaching, when it is quiet and reasonable. But I confess, I take a seat near the door, that when some weak minded or hypocritical brother or sister of either color begins to rave, and stamp and shout, I may leave the place, as I always do, without scruple, for when that begins, the good is ended with me. According to Sarah, even a white person who shouted like a black person was a rogue with corrupt intentions.

Slave cries had been sending chills down Deep Southern mistresses’ backs since the Stono Rebellion of 1739, when angered slaves marched and danced down low country roads of South Carolina, “calling out Liberty... killing Man Woman and Child when they could come up to them... singing and beating drums, to draw more Negroes to them.” In October of 1831, their cries scared more men than women at a camp meeting outside of Greensboro. A citizen remembered:

a mischievous White Boy frightened a negro boy so much that he bellowed out right... as soon as his cries were heard... all religious proceedings was instantly stopt and a general running commenced—some left... without their clothes all on—some with[out] boots or shoes—some without their wives—turning neither to the right or left—over and through the fires—over girls and children—such, Sir, is the conduct of a number of our Green County Men, a [more damnable] set of cowards never breathed... As soon as this news spread—some in the neighborhood [censored?—word indecipherable] everything that would shout, and took a sentinel all nights.

Sarah heard such cries more often in the back yard, where she, using a switch to break skin, “force[d] them to do right.” Once when her slave children were not sweeping to her desire, she wrote John: “Scolding delightfully, I may be taking a twig
from the brooms to show the little wretches how to use the rest to advantage.”138 Her parents had been kinder to theirs, but when her slaves murmured, giving her “sour looks” and “surly language” as they drudgingly did their tasks, it often “put me beside myself,” and demanded a crueler route than “the course pursued by my mother and father.”139

Little did Sarah know it, but by dragging the cowhide through the house, she exposed herself to a harrowing triumvirate: slaves cried when they rebelled, when they were whipped, and when they called on the Holy Ghost. It is no wonder that their cry made her run from the sanctuary.

Her slaves did not follow her, but stayed to interact with the Spirit. Over two October days in 1828, Sarah attended a Methodist Camp Meeting. Enter a Mr. Clinton, who may have been a black preacher.* Sarah saw Clinton those October days, waving his hands, conjure-like, in “gross vulgarity and low sarcasm. . . . The altar was crowded with screaming, laughing, shouting, sprawling creatures [blacks and whites]. . . .” Besides him, “the pulpit was filled with the most ignorant and abusive kind of preachers.”140 It being a local practice among Methodists to employ blacks as lay exhorters, likely some of these preachers were also black.141 Therefore,

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*Sarah's description of him—given before she saw his more riling antics—hints at this:

“I am pleased with Mr. Clinton's simple, earnest, frank and unaffected way of preaching. One at once perceives, he is a man regardless of self, having the honor of his Master [this could, of course, denote his "heavenly" master; however, Sarah often capitalized references to earthly ones], and the good of his auditors love at heart. His language is free, at times almost polished, and I never heard anyone use comparisons more apropos—often beautiful; but rarely allowing them to sink. I fear there is frequently more affectation of humility than they really feel amongst many of his Methodist brothers--of this he has none--I am glad of it, for otherwise I should have no patience with him. It is no matter of regret that he did not have the advantages of a liberal education.”
though Sarah had sung Clinton’s praises after hearing him in 1827, enough was enough: “He will never have me a patient hearer as I have been.”

Still, she could never be through with the memories, whether it be of Clinton, his comrade preachers, or others. She could not forget “Old Granddaddy,” a black man whose “remarks [on Christianity] were always spirited. . . .” She could not forget Rose’s funeral, when, after the preacher’s words, “Amelia’s grief was grave,” and Haynsworth cried out, singing “snatches of the songs his nurse [Rose] taught him . . .”

If Sarah was undone by the things Christianity was intertwined with, it was equally so with folk religion. She had long held to the Judeo-Christian/European folk conception that evil was represented in dark hues*—enemies kept black books against her, black slaves were wretches and rogues, and masters who slept with slaves were “blackened by infidelities.” Yet the concept proved problematic when it came dying time. It seemed suiting that a white murderer named Mr. Erwin’s corpse was “black” when he died, presumably on his way to Hell. After birthing her daughter Helen Louisa in 1828, however, it did not seem as appropriate; Sarah lay beside her, when Helen became “black in convulsions.” Just when she held and nursed her, and thought she might live, hope faded: “but while I endeavored to give it [the baby] the

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*Winthrop Jordan has noted, that “In England perhaps more than in southern Europe, the concept of blackness was loaded with intense meaning. Long before they found that some men were black, Englishmen found in the idea of blackness a way of expressing some of their most ingrained values . . . As described by the Oxford English Dictionary, the meaning of black before the sixteenth century included, ‘Deeply stained with dirt; soiled, dirty, foul . . . Having dark or deadly purposes, malignant; pertaining to or involving death, deadly; baneful, disastrous, sinister . . . Foul, iniquitous, atrocious, horrible, wicked . . . Indicating disgrace, censure, liability to punishment, etc.’ Black was an emotionally partisan color, the handmaid and symbol of baseness and evil, a sign of danger and repulsion.” See Winthrop Jordan, White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812 (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1968), 6-10.
breast, it blackened," dying moments later. With a lump in her throat, Sarah reassured herself that God “took it to himself.”

Besides this, there was the cosmology of those conjurer-Christians like Gullah Jack, the suspected instigator of the alleged Denmark Vessey plot that rocked Charleston in 1822, a cosmology that many of Sarah’s slaves likely lived underneath.* When Sarah ascribed dark insinuations and prickings to slave conjurers, she was faced with the possibility that they might be Christians also. The potential duality begged a troubling question: was it witch-doctors or Christian prophets who condemned her? After Nat Turner portrayed himself as a Christian warrior who butchered his kind owners on principle, Sarah, in her weaker moments, may have been certain of the answer.

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Though Sarah did not feel metaphysically awakened by religion, she laid awake nights, tossing and turning in an un-reconciled world. After exhausting her journals, we know these facts. She was influenced by Scotland’s bard, Robert Burns, who rhymed in the voice of an angry slave. Her neighbors sometimes empathized with slaves. Over the years, she confessed that slaveholding ideology clashed with her notion of true Christianity, and contemplated the implications of the equality of

*Raboteau has emphasized that antebellum slave religion was an “invisible institution” to white eyes; though Christianity’s “doctrines, symbols, and vision of life... were familiar to most... the religious experience of the slaves was by no means fully contained in the visible structures of the institutional church.” What masters took (or deluded themselves into taking) to be their version of Christianity expressed in the lives of their slaves, was actually often something different.

Denmark Vessey’s plot is illustrative. After Vessey, a slave, learned to read the Bible, he began to see slavery as an evil, and used its pages to attract participants in a planned insurrection. One of these participants was Gullah Jack Pritchard, a known conjurer who handed out charms to those that joined the plot, claiming the charms would make their bearers invincible. They failed their test, however, as Vessey was apprehended and hanged. See Raboteau, 163, 212.
souls. Furthermore, the churches to which she looked in order to escape Hell often allowed blacks to make a joyful noise, even to preach. We know, in the end, that the two ways she harnessed to reconcile her world would be haunted by those she claimed to own, and prevent reconciliation. Her world of slavery was threatening to enter her spiritual one, and the prospect crazed her.

It is at this point, when we come back to that lonely eve in 1827, that analysis of Sarah's musical motion takes us steps beyond the conclusion reached through these documental limits.

**Her Room**

When Sarah saw her white reflection as she looked out the window, she was gazing into a dusky place that was half black, and whose blackness spooked her. Whether blacks danced in the street on holidays or shouted in church, Sarah somehow felt condemned by their expression.

It was alone in this room that she was most witched during John’s absences, when the dark thoughts she housed in her mind reflected back at her from the journal pages. It had been the same a different night in 1826, when Sarah wrote John:

Never, never leave me again, while situated so that I can go to no one, and none will come to me, no matter what happens. The most appalling storm I ever witnessed has barely passed and there was none until after it began except Hetty, who looked like a ghost, and the room full of terrified children. My own sick one was holding to my arm with a tight grasp. She had too high fever. Altogether I never felt so desolate and miserable in my life. Mike was unable to run, but started through the storm to me to see how I stood it, and seemed much frightened when he found me crying bitterly on the bed. God help you...
Now, like then, sitting and sewing in silence, listening to the pine floor boards creak as her slaves crept down the dark and candlelit halls to serve her, she could only wonder what evil—fever or insurrection—might come while John was away. This is why she often wrote verses—declaring her love—in the lining of his coat, in case she was ripped away while he was gone. He knew that her fears were flaring this month, and wrote her:

I have been frequently running to the post office, with the hope of hearing from you, but have as often been disappointed. I begin again to be in the dumps, and shall remain so till I hear from my wife and children. I am becoming somewhat childish on this subject, for I am a good deal annoyed by the apprehension that some of you may be sick, or that something may have happened.

Like the mistress in Foster’s lament “Willie, We Have Missed You,” Sarah “listened all evening for his horse’s feet; but he has not come”:

The fire was blazing brightly and lights were in the hall.
The little ones were up
Till ’twas ten o’clock and past,
Then their eyes began to twinkle,
And they’ve gone to sleep at last;
But they listened for your voice
Till they thought you’d never come;
Oh! Willie, we have missed you;
Welcome, welcome home!*

Nannette and Rose would have been near her, sleeping on the floor and waiting to take care of her babes if she could not handle the stress. Mike or another male slave may have been sleeping there as well, by the fire. These slaves saw

*This is the second verse of a song Stephen Foster penned in 1854, one of the most haunting folk songs of the antebellum period. A mistress and her children await her lover who never comes, though they try to deceive themselves. For a well-done version, see Grey De Lisle’s version of “Willie, We Have Missed You” on the CD Beautiful Dreamer: The Songs of Stephen Foster (Produced by Steve Fishell, American Roots Publishing, 2004).
first-hand the signs of Sarah’s fear in the candles’ glare, surely feeling some of the reasons for it. Rose’s voice may have been breaking through the silence, a room away, teaching Haynsworth songs. Was it anger or sorrow in her voice? A bible lay on a coarse wooden table, barely visible in the flickering light. What would its pages inspire tonight? Sarah worried—tormented by the awkward way she had to live among those she knew should hate her.

Then she hummed a mournful melody, her voice hoarse in the damp night, as she began the process of turning her thoughts into lyrics, giving her deepest fears the beautiful “witchery” she so admired in Burns’s and Scott’s works; and, in the last stanza, crying out the way the slaves around her would have, the way they did when she hurt them . . . .

Conclusion

We cannot know exactly what drove Sarah to use black aesthetics in 1827, or whether she (sub)consciously chose them. However, the clear truths we can derive from her black expression are these. She could not keep her world of slavery from her world of spirits. In that moment in 1827, she found that slavery was spiritual; it was intertwined with—and, in many ways, it provoked—the soul-catharsis her song was made to achieve. Furthermore, her body—her writing hand, vocal chords, and lips—was testifying to the fact that there was no natural dichotomy between slave and free, or black and white, in the Deep Southern universe that she heard; and that if there was an arbitrary divide, it could be, as the conjurers said, crossed. Like they would in the summer of 1829, when a severe thunderstorm rained down on her, the elements had conspired against this mistress, rendering her helplessly at the mercy of
hard facts that were stunning as lightning. Her white body was, at this instant, incapable of denying its common humanity with those around the room, of a darker hue. In this sense, slavery was not only haunting Sarah Haynsworth Gayle, it was twisting the empirical facts of her universe into lies.

Afterward

On a cold November day in 1828, Sarah mused over warmth: “Dear music—will the time ever come when it will not touch a corresponding chord in every bosom? If the Angel Gabriel would use a band, instead of his terrible trumpet, I think half the horrors of the resurrection would be forgotten.” She was probably aware that trumpets, or “horns,” were the instruments overseers used to disturb the sleep of slaves at the break of day, harkening them with “terrible” noise to work the grim landscape that they were chained to. Unlike Gabriel, Sarah tried to reconcile all that haunted her world through soothing Scots-Irish music and black expression on that April 1827 eve.

It is likely that it worked in the moment; for, as we have seen, the absence of such empathy is what would ruin her two reconciliatory designs throughout the remainder of her curt life. Indeed, this is the sorrow at Sarah’s center. She rarely* mourned like a slave after 1827, and spent the last year of her life pulling pins from her daughter’s body and calling slaves wretches.† Still, her song conveys how, for

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*If she did, we have no record of it.

†The pinning occurred in February of 1835. During the coming May (specific date unknown), Sarah observed a black woman dying, writing: “To the case of that poor wretch, have we all to come at last.” Sarah did, at least, acknowledge that she would eventually die like her slaves. Indeed, it was during the coming July that she scheduled her death appointment, a tooth filing. She watched the dentist’s “flashing eye” as he filed down her teeth, and died of lock-jaw soon thereafter.
some Southerners, slave owning was not something their bodies, nay, their universe, let them get away with unscathed and unmoved. Ultimately, it shows the power of everyday music in a life.

When Ruby Pickens Tartt interviewed Ank Bishop of Livingston, Alabama—a town thirty miles from Greensboro—in the 1930s, she heard the same story Sarah told about Gabriel’s trumpet. Ank, born in 1848, lived seventeen years as a slave. He, like Sarah, hoped that the angel would play a soft melody on the day that his soul would be judged: “When Gabriel take his silver trump, he is going to blow soft for the saved . . . .” Yet he knew God would tell Gabriel, “Blow hit as loud as seben claps of thunder all added into one echo . . . to wake up dem damnable sperits sleepin’ in de graveyards what ain’t never made no peace wid dey God . . . .” And so some mistresses and slaves shared similar strategies for reconciliation.
Notes


2 Sarah Haynsworth Gayle Diary, April 1827, William Stanley Hoole Special Collections, University of Alabama, Gayle and Gorgas Family Papers.

3 University Musical Encyclopedia, Vol. VI, "Robin Adair," or "Eileen Aroon," Mathilde Marchesi and others, editors (New York: The University Society, 1912), 213. The tune was originally named "Eileen Aroon," and its melancholy sound reveals the supposed tearful tale that inspired it. Carol O'Daly, of Connought, Ireland, was spurned by his love Eileen's family. They coerced her to marry his rival one sad day while he was away. Thus O'Daly disguised himself as a harper at the wedding. Eileen (ignorant of who he was) called on him to play a tune. He consented and played "Eileen Aroon," a mournful melody he had previously composed when he heard of his loss. Eileen then recognized him, and due the tune's haunting power, left her new husband for O'Daly that very night. They prospered forever. For an analysis of how the tune became known as "Robin Adair," see section II of the methodology section.


5 Sarah Gayle Diary, Wednesday, September 14, 1831.

6 Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave (1845) and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (New York: Random House, 2000), 75. He wrote: "But by far the larger part engaged in such sports and merriments as playing ball, wrestling, running foot-races, fiddling, dancing, and drinking whisky; and this latter mode of spending the time was by far the most agreeable to the feelings of our masters."

7 W. E. B. Dubois, The Souls of Black Folk (1903) (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 182, 189. When musing over the evolutionary stages of what became perceived as African-American music, he wrote: "The first is African music, the second Afro-American, while the third is a blending of Negro music with the music heard in the foster land... the elements are both Negro and Caucasian." Dubois worried more over the implications of his "fourth" stage: that describing the music played by whites that supposedly spoke for African-Americans—like minstrel music and Stephen Foster's songs. And though he believed that African-Americans invented spirituals, he recognized that they were rooted in the language of European Christianity.

8 Kenneth Stampp, The Peculiar Institution (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), 136, 376, 87. Stampp observed how religious musical interaction between whites and blacks served a submerged and yet dual-purpose. Since a "wise master did not take seriously the belief that negroes were natural-born slaves," it followed that he was ideologically forced to allow slaves to contribute—through monitored expressions of their own sounds—to sacred music.

It should be noted that, by the 1930s, Carter G. Woodson had founded the Journal of Negro History (1916) and James Weldon Johnson had compiled Books of American Negro Spirituals (1925-1926), two vessels that sought to instill in Americans the truth that Africa was capable of producing musical brilliance. But all of this was primarily said in a way that flattered mainstream white America, merely communicating that seeds had existed in Africa—rudimentary and backward as they were—that were capable of being nourished by Western culture into civilized beings. The latter synopsis was

John Blassingame, *The Slave Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 39, 137. Blassingame noted that “white hymns were too cold and static” to be capable of fully expressing African-Americans’ “sentiments,” which were conversely conveyed through slaves’ use of African instruments like the banjo. Eugene Genovese did argue in his *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (New York: Random House, 1974), 254, 572, that slaves transformed Christianity into a “religion of resistance,” singing “whenever possible,” “in ways derived from Africa;” yet he did not discover the psychological ways that this troubled slave owners.

Dena Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 241, 331-341. Epstein masterfully analyzed the ways African-American musical expression was sustained under the most dehumanizing conditions, from eighteenth-century slave ships to nineteenth-century slave quarters. Yet by locating the birth of mass white interest in African-American music at the minstrel explosion of the 1840s and 1850s, she did not consider the extent to which African-American music could have already been subtly infused into traditional, largely Scots-Irish, song forms claimed exclusively by whites at the beginning of the antebellum period.


Charles Joyner, *Folk Song in South Carolina* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1971), 1-7, 9. Joyner scolded scholars for too often focusing on “polarized” Southern musical traditions, on either African or European cultural vestiges expressed in isolated highland or lowland areas, which subsequently allowed the musical expression that occurred in culturally and racially intermixed areas of the South to go unanalyzed. Folklorists such as Alan Lomax paved the way for this type of study in the 1960s, as they promoted the idea that African-American music deserved a spot next to Scots-Irish ballads in books of American music canon. For more information on the latter, see James Porter, “Convergence, Divergence, and Dialectic in Folksong Paradigms: Critical Directions for Transatlantic Scholarship,” *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 106, No. 419. (Winter, 1993), 76.

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 26-27, 22, 31. Fox-Genovese could not analyze the extent to which the songs Sarah’s slave Rose taught her son influenced his own idea of how music should “sound” because, in the end, Sarah’s “perceptions as a woman dependent upon the social system in which she lived”—one that supposedly discarded African-American artistic expression as unimportant.

Catherine Clinton made the same general assumption in her earlier work *The Plantation Mistress* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982). Focusing on plantation mistresses, a group who arguably spent more time surrounded by the sounds of slaves than did their husbands, Clinton spent little time analyzing the ways that African-American culture influenced that of antebellum slave owning whites.

Grady McWhiney, *Cracker Culture* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1988), 21. McWhiney was influenced by the research of Forrest McDonald. Though both believed that Celtic music influenced—and was appealing to—African-Americans, they did not muse on the converse.
Roger Abrahams, *Singing the Master* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), xxv. Abrahams analyzed the "complex cultural exchange" that occurred when masters and mistresses watched slave dancing, fiddling, and singing at the "corn-shucking"—a harvest holiday in which slaves were allowed to drink, sing, and dance as they shucked corn. The slaves would often sing songs that would outwardly flatter their master, but were actually satires and condemnations of him.

Shane White and Graham White, *The Sounds of Slavery* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005), xvii, xx, 168-171, 176-177. Their work included an eighteen-track CD featuring recordings of ex-slaves and their children. Though White and White did not analyze the ways the sounds of slavery transformed traditional modes of white musical expression, or haunted masters' ideologies, their research inspires deeper inquiry and implies that a potential for such influence and haunting existed. Importantly, they showed that fear was the context in which antebellum whites paid African-American music the most attention; mistresses walked the streets of cities like Charleston and Savannah in trepidation of hearing a male slave whistle at them—an insinuation that he was worthy of casting an opinion of their looks, or worse. White and White also analyzed the "black ball" case of Richmond in 1852—in which an African-American dance, organized in the cellar of a prominent Richmond hotel, was shut down by city police before it was set to begin due the public's fear of the music enticing a slave revolt.


Francis Collinson, "Scottish Folk Music: An Historical Survey," *Yearbook of the International Folk Music Council*, Vol. 3. (1971): 38. There was a time in the history of Gaelic music in Scotland that accentuation was not as emphasized. For the "Court poetry" of Ancient Scotland and Ireland was communicated via "syllabic" rather than "stressed" meter—the syllables being stressed irregularly and to various degrees. However, this ancient style had long vanished by the time Scotland's folk renaissance took place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Also, none of this is to say that Scots-Irish tunes were not improvised upon by the Scots-Irish themselves; for they did improvise rhythmically via syncopation. It is just to say that the improvisation Sarah used—abandoning the meter entirely at the climax of the song—was not done in Scots-Irish music. If it was, it was not done commonly; nor was it a common trait of that music.

*Extracts from the Journal of Sarah Haynsworth Gayle* (New Rochelle, New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1895), 36-37. The book is available at William Stanley Hoole Special Collections, University of Alabama, Gayle and Gorgas Family Papers. No title for the poem was given.
Epstein noted how white reverends like Charles Colcock Jones often attempted to diminish the religious expression of African Americans by teaching European hymn-singing styles. Yet African Americans were able to resist this by embracing white practices like "lining out"—a pedagogical practice developed for Europeans in colonial America, in which a minister would read out the hymn line before it was sung so that the illiterate could learn hymns, only to transform them into avenues of divergence and improvisation.

Abrahams analyzed the complex social discourse that went on when white masters would watch their slaves' "corn-shucking" ceremonies. "Improvisation abounded as the shucking grew more intense—they improvised words and music to a wild 'recitative' . . . This description came from Letitia M. Burwell's *A Girl's Life in Virginia Before the War* (New York: Stokes, 1895), 131-132, quoted in Abrahams, 92.

Ethnomusicologist Christopher Alan Waterman has noted a similar potential in twentieth century West-African musicians; their performances tended to "temporally displace" the phrasing of European melodies. Waterman located this displacement in the West-African tendency to implement "off-beat phrasing." He noted: "The displacement is usually ahead [of the beat], so that the melodic beat anticipates the percussion stroke, although on occasion the percussion accent is allowed to anticipate the melodic beat. The entire rhythmic configuration is always held together, and the displacement given meaning, by strategically placed melodic accents which coincide with the percussion accents." See Richard Alan Waterman, "'Hot' Rhythm in Negro Music," *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 1, No. 1. (Spring, 1948): 25.

Martin (a musicologist) has noted that "the presence of recurrent matrixes of accentuation"—or the "metres of regular occurring accentuation" that Collinson described in Scots-Irish music—were "unknown" in West-African music. Martin has also argued that Africans and Europeans influenced each other to a higher degree than is usually assumed in the formative years of the South and thereafter; yet she also analyzed the aesthetic differences between the two cultures at the onset of this cultural interaction. Also, saying that Africans have no "regularly occurring matrixes of accentuation" in their music is not to say that they do not have "base" or foundation-laying rhythms. Indeed, African rhythms are often much more complex than those of traditional European composition. Richard Alan Waterman described how African "accents" (with regards to music) cannot be said to be regularly occurring due the places that their accents sometimes fall: "Whereas the accents of European melodies tend to fall either on the thesis or the arsis of the rhythmic foot, the main accents of African melodies - especially those of "hot" music—fall between the down- and the up-beats." This latter phrase is from Waterman, 25.

Many whites were not successful. Norton's work analyzes the ways European hymns were canonized and filled with African- and Native American influences.

The soil of the Black Belt was dark and among the most fertile in the Deep South due the limestone beneath it, prime cotton land; the slaves forced to clear and populate it (an especially cruel business, even among chattel slavery standards) were also included in the nomenclature.
Both sets of parents were planters who had, like many, come to the Deep South from the over-used soil of South Carolina, seeking fertile prospects. Sarah’s father (through his mother) was related to the illustrious Furman family of Sumter, South Carolina.

Hubbs, 9-10.

Hugh Charles Haynsworth, *Haynsworth-Furman and Allied Families* (Sumter, SC: Osteen Publishing Co., 1942), 76. John was fresh from his degree at South Carolina College (1813) when he became a member of the Territorial Legislature of Alabama in 1817.

Hubbs, 12-13. Sarah and John moved to Tuscaloosa in 1833, living also in the town.

Sarah Gayle Diary, March 9, 1828.

The Journals of Josiah Gorgas 1857-1878, Sarah Woolfolk Wiggins ed. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995), 266. In September of 1828, Sarah lost a child, seeing her “little one black in convulsions.” The latter is from Sarah’s journal entry for September 15, 1828. For more detailed information on all of the Gayle children, see Wiggins’s book.

Ibid., 266-268. Matt never married. He studied medicine at the Jefferson Medical School in Philadelphia, and was left in the care of his stepmother, Clarissa Gayle (John married Clarissa after Sarah’s death), for the remainder of his life.

Haynsworth was made midshipman at the US Naval Academy in 1851, and took his degree from Spring Hill College in Mobile in 1853. Prior to the war, he had sailed around Cape Horn to Genoa, Italy, and was friends with Julia Gardiner Tyler, John Tyler’s widow. A blockade runner during the war, his ship (the one captured) was called the Stag. He married Flora Levy after the war, but was destroyed by his imprisonment and never quite recovered, leaving her widowed in 1873.

Ibid., 274-276. Amelia’s husband was Josiah Gorgas (1818-1888), a Philadelphian and West Pointer who, after serving in the Mexican War, was stationed at Mt. Vernon, Alabama (among other places), where he met Amelia. This Northerner quickly came under the South’s “spell,” and, when civil war broke out, went to Montgomery to serve as Chief of Ordinance for the Confederacy. After the war, before becoming president of Alabama’s University, he served as vice-chancellor of the University of the South (1869-1877).

Amelia and Josiah’s son (one of their six children) William Crawford Gorgas (1854-1920) took his degree from the University of the South, and then studied medicine at Bellevue Hospital Medical College (New York). He married Marie Doughty in 1885. It was after this, and while serving as Chief Sanitary Officer in Havana, Cuba during the Spanish-American War, that he left his mark on Yellow Fever. He was later appointed surgeon general of the United States Army, and held this post through World War I. Shortly before his death, the International Health Board asked him to contribute his expertise to Yellow Fever epidemics in West Africa.

Maria married Thomas Levingston Bayne (1824-1891), a Yale-educated lawyer, who became one of New Orleans’s most prominent. She learned to exhibit a perfect French accent while learning at a Mobile school from a French count and countess. In the process, she developed an affinity for Roman Catholicism, and made sure to raise her children Catholic. She died young like her mother, in a Chicago Hotel that she was visiting. She was returned deep south, however, and buried in Magnolia Cemetery in Mobile.

Sarah Gayle Diary, Wednesday, 1828, date unknown.


39 Sarah Gayle Diary, October 28, 1832. Sarah remembered such meetings as “noisy and sometimes to me, terrific.” In the black of the woods, the fires only illuminated more darkness for God’s mysterious ghost to hide in.


41 Sarah wrote of her scholastic tastes in her entry for July 14, 1828: “I was a wild and happy being, whose dreams of the world were awakened by the reading of novels and poetry—I was left to select books for myself and no wonder I lost myself in [the] delicious mazes romances spread around me. My taste has never been reclaimed—it is impossible to apply myself now to useful reading.” After reading his *Sketch Book*, she wrote in her January 3, 1829 entry of Washington Irving: “He touches so many feelings and he his master of all of the melancholy melting tenderness of the human heart—that all I can do is read, and then weep over it as I did tonight.”

42 Clay-Clopton, 6-7, 15. These “memoirs were published originally in 1905, and edited—or “transcribed”—by Ada Sterling. Unfortunately, her memoirs had trouble competing with the likes of Mary Boykin Chesnut’s, and were largely overlooked. Virginia lived in Tuscaloosa with her aunt (her mother died young), in what is now known as “the Battle-Freedman Home,” from ages 6-12; though her infant days were spent in North Carolina, her birthplace. She, like Sarah, would eventually marry an Alabama politician—Clement Claiborne Clay.


44 Thomas Perkins Abernethy, *The Formative Period in Alabama, 1815-1828* (Tuscaloosa, AL: UA Press, 1963), 18. Sarah and her family came to the Mississippi Territory—part of which eventually became Alabama—from Sumter, South Carolina in 1810, settling first in St. Stephens, the “village of log cabins” on the Tombigbee River. The same sandy soil confronted them both places, but the Old Southwest was strewn with wilderness, a canebrake, and thousands of Creek, Chickasaw, and Choctaw Indians (the information on Sarah came from her July 14, 1828 diary entry).

45 Sarah Gayle Diary, August 10, 1827; July 14, 1828.

46 Dr. Thomas G. Holmes, “Account of Fort Mims Massacre,” in Griffith, 107-111. Holmes, one of roughly fifteen survivors out of five hundred and fifty-three soldiers and civilians (four hundred fifty-three of them women and children), gave his account of the happening to A. J. Pickett June 3, 1847.

47 Winston Smith, *Days of Exile: The Vine and Olive Colony in Alabama* (Tuscaloosa, AL: W.B. Drake and Son, Printers, 1967), 24-25, 69-71. After Bonaparte’s defeat in 1815, King Louis XVIII dealt heavy blows to the emperor’s supporters. Many fled to America (Philadelphia and Charleston) and appealed to Congress for land grants in 1816. They won the grants in 1817, moving toward four townships of land (92,160 acres) on the Alabama canebrake, between the Tombigbee and Black Warrior rivers (due to the proximity to French ties in Mobile and New Orleans). They attempted to grow the vine and the olive in cities they founded like Demopolis (“city of the people”), but ultimately failed
due the misfortunes of practicing agriculture in a foreign land. By the late 1820s, they had dispersed to the surrounding country, many to Greensboro. It is to this band that the exiles from the French Caribbean fled in 1820, and dispersed with thereafter.

48 Hubbs, 58-60. Hubbs noted that “their [the refugees’] stories carried disproportionate weight among the locals [Greensborians], convincing them to remain ever vigilant. . . . From time to time they gathered at the Eagle Hotel in Greensboro to . . . remember.”

49 Clay-Clopton, 7. Clay was in Tuscaloosa at the time.

50 Haynsworth, 76-77. Sarah was a “little brunette” when she married John—eleven years her senior—at barely sixteen years old, in 1819, the year Alabama joined the Union.

51 Sarah Gayle Diary, June 11, 1834.

52 Haynsworth, 76-77. The death quote came from the diary of Sarah’s daughter, Sarah Crawford Gorgas.

53 Ibid., August 28, 1828.

54 Robert Burns, “Winter: A Dirge,” in The Complete Poetical Works of Robert Burns, in Mackay ed., 50-51. For instance, Burns wrote in his song “Winter: A Dirge” (a song about dying) that the cold winds and overcast skies of winter were dearer to him than “all the pride o’ May.”

Walter Scott, Guy Mannering (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 285-286. Arguably the most evocative scene in Guy Mannering is that portraying the gypsy, Meg Merrilies, standing high on an embankment surrounded by Scottish dusk, speaking of flashing guns and glittering swords under the “braw moon.”

55 Ibid., April, 1830.

56 Ibid., May 13, 1828; and October 25, 1828.

57 Since circuit riders like Francis Asbury had sowed gospel seeds in its backwoods in the early nineteenth century, awakening blacks and whites alike, evangelical Christianity had been sweeping the Deep South. See Donald G. Mathews, Religion in the Old South (University of Chicago Press, 1977).

58 Sarah Gayle Diary, November 17, 1832.

59 Ibid., (no date given), 1828.

60 Ibid., March 22, 1829.

61 Ibid., October 2, 1832.

62 Ibid., July 15, 1829.

63 Ibid., March 4, 1830.

64 Ibid., July 30, 1833.

65 Ibid., June 13, 1831.
Letter from John to Sarah, April 2, 1826, William Stanley Hoole Special Collections, University of Alabama, Gayle and Gorgas Family Papers.

Sarah Gayle Diary, July 6, 1832.

Ibid., November 4, 1832.

Rhys Isaac, The Transformation of Virginia (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 1982), 47. Isaac provided a wonderful description of the “four humors” of medieval medicine that corresponded to the elements: air, water, earth, and fire. Medieval doctors tried to keep these balanced.

Sarah Gayle Diary, April 9, 1831.

Irving, “Rural Funerals,” in The Sketch Book, 144-145. Irving also noted how, in the country, graves are often in the outlying fields that the family works in daily, “more in the immediate sight of the survivors”; whereas, in large cities, graveyards are further from the daily routines of the inhabitants.

Sarah Gayle Diary, September 4, 1829.

Ibid., May 10, 1829.

Ibid., January 3, 1829.

Ibid., April 5, 1833.

Ibid., August 28, 1828.

Ibid., March 5, 1834.

Ibid., March 19-20, 1830.

Ibid., date unknown. The causes and other circumstances of the incident are not mentioned.

Ibid., October 5, 1834.

Ibid., November 17, 1832.

Ibid., November 14, 1828; January 2, 1833.

Letter from Sarah to John, September 21, 1827.

Ibid., December 17, 1831. Apparently John worried of a burning often, though the reason is unclear. Perhaps he simply worried of an accidental fire (too common given the cooking and heating needs of antebellum America), or perhaps he worried of malicious arson.

Epstein, 149-150. Some blacks, like Solomon Northup, became quite famous for it.

Letter from Sarah to Mrs. Peck, May 17, 1833, William Stanley Hoole Special Collections, University of Alabama, Gayle and Gorgas Family Papers.

Sarah Gayle Diary, Thursday, sometime in the fall (no date given) of 1828.
88Ibid., August 10, 1833; October 5, 1834. Other notable comments include: “Rachel is believed . . . to be a complete rogue and beside, they really look as if they would never pay for themselves, they are such a poor, little, bandy-legged set.”

89Ibid., July 21, 1828. When brooding over the back-talk Mike—a slave she often smiled on—gave her, she gloated over past punishments: “The day has been that he would as willingly put his hand in the fire, as use such an expression where it might chance to come to my ears.”

90Ibid., July 9, 1828. She was reflecting back on the Fourth of July.

91Ibid., March 6, 1828.

92Ibid., March 8, 1828. Rosanha Frazier, an ex-slave from Mississippi, remembered such charms: “Dey powder up de rattle offen de snake and tie it up in de little old rag bag and dey do devilment with it . . .” For the full quotation, see Raboteau, 277.

93Ibid., November 10, 1828.

94Ibid., September 14, 1831.

95The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Va. As fully and voluntarily made to Thomas R. Gray . . . (Baltimore, 1831), in Nat Turner, Eric Foner ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), 44-47. Turner purportedly gave Gray this confession November 1, 1831, the day after he was captured. A dog had sniffed out the hole Nat was dwelling in, three months after the bloody acts.

96Sarah Gayle Diary, October 30, 1831.

97Ibid., August 30, 1831. Fascinatingly, it is unlikely that Sarah knew of Turner’s killings at this time—only nine days since they had begun.

98Ibid., March 10, 1828.

99Ibid., April 22, 1828.

100Ibid., July 21, 1828.

101Ibid., October 31, 1828.

102Ibid., May, 1832.

103Ibid., January 2, 1831.

104Ibid., June 11, 1826.

105Ibid., July 17, 1831.

106Letter from John to Sarah, Saturday, December 17, 1831.

107Sarah Gayle Diary, October 23, 1832.

108Ibid., April 7, 1835.
Letter from John to Sarah, April 24, 1835.


Sarah Gayle Diary, May 4, 1834. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese was equally fascinated by the resemblance of Rose's and Sarah's deaths (pg. 26); however, my take on the relationship disagrees. Genovese argued: "She [Sarah] saw nothing contradictory between her deep affection for—and emotional dependence on—people whom she proposed to hold in perpetual slavery and her acknowledgment of their ability to take care of themselves as well as her."

Ibid., September 4, 1829. The poem is entitled "The World is All a Fleeting Show." Sarah punctuated it to her taste. An Irishmen, Moore (1779-1852) was an avid folk musician and tune collector.

Ibid., May 18, 1828.

Ibid., June 12, 1830. She added, "I am in the situation of one who has some place in view which he (she used "he" rather than "she"—thus were the days of patriarchy) wishes to reach, but has the misfortune to see a thousand differing roads, and to meet some person to recommend each, while he has only time to travel one."

Ibid., 1828 (date unknown).

*The Holy Bible*, John 14: 2-3. "In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also"—Jesus' words to his disciples, a Protestant's bedrock.

Sarah Gayle Diary, October 28, 1832.

Ibid., April 18, 1834.

Ibid., January (date unknown), 1830.

Ibid., March 8, 1828.

Ibid., February 1, 1830.

Ibid., February 21, 1834.

Ibid., February 1, 1830.

Ibid., March 6, 1828.

Ibid., August 3, 1829. True, Cotton Mather, that prolific seventeenth-century theologian, had found the orthodox God's hand in New England thunderstorms; as had many orthodox theologians before the enlightenment.
Sarah referenced the work as "Wilberforce on Christianity," yet it was likely Real Christianity (1829), a work in which he celebrated the life-transforming power of Christ's gospel message and, in doing so, condemned the slave trade that he devoted his adult life to ending.


Sarah Gayle Diary, December (date unknown), 1833.

Ibid., June 24, 1829.

Ibid., May 4, 1834.

Ibid., (no date given).

Ibid., May 2, 1833.

John Irving Erickson, Sing It Again! (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1985). George Atkins, a Methodist preacher of Knoxville, Tennessee, penned these lyrics in 1819 for his hymn "Brethren We Have Met to Worship." It is typical of camp meeting hymnody, a plain and coarse affirmation of the Wesleyan dictate: the Holy Ghost must stir the people in order for true religion to take place. The stirring often involved contortions, yelling, and enthusiasm.

Letter from Sarah Gayle to Mrs. Peck, April 28, 1834.

"Account of the Negroe Insurrection in South Carolina," in Mark Smith, ed., Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 14-15. The author of this account is unknown; some historians attribute it to James Oglethorpe. It dates to October 1739.


Sarah Gayle Diary, Monday (no date given), October 1834.

Letter from Sarah to John, April 18, 1828.

Sarah Gayle Diary, July 21, 1828.

Ibid., October 17, 1828. Regarding Clinton, Sarah gave no first name. There were two Clinton's preaching at Methodist revivals during the late 1820s near Greensboro—Thomas, and a mysterious "J. Clinton." J. may have eluded the histories of Alabama Methodism, most of which were written after segregation seemed like a constant in the Southern universe. Indeed, James Benson Sellers noted of the Methodist Church in Tuscaloosa (forty miles from Greensboro): "Segregation was unknown in most of the ante-bellum Methodist churches, except for the fact that separate seating was usually provided for the Negro communicants . . . There were many of these semi-official Methodist preachers and exhorters . . . Sometimes these Negro lay preachers and exhorters built up for themselves reputations for eloquence which won them a place in the regular prayer services of the church." See James Benson Sellers, The First Methodist Church of Tuscaloosa, Alabama 1818-1968 (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: Weatherford Printing Company, Inc., 1968), 78-79.

He could have also been Thomas Clinton, an orphaned Irishman who headed south to ride circuits in the bayous of Louisiana and along the Tombigbee River in Alabama, and became well-
known by—and had an affinity for—the slaves. See Anson West, Methodism in Alabama (Nashville, TN: Publishing House Methodist Episcopal Church, South. Barbee & Smith, Agents, 1893), 149-151. West included a passage on Clinton (the only one known) that has long intrigued me, as Sarah’s above description seems to be painting a different man:

“Perhaps no man ever had a harder life that had Thomas Clinton, and yet, perhaps, no man was ever more religious, devoted, and happy than he through his whole Christian career. Ere he had passed five summers the dark shadow of orphanage fell upon him, his father and mother dying of yellow fever and being buried in the same grave, and he was brought up from his infancy without a known living kinsman in the world . . . Clinton, like Zaccheus of New Testament fame, was little of stature, weighing usually one hundred and ten pounds. He had the complexion and the features characteristic of the Irish nation, and yet his features were sufficiently unique to be peculiarly his own. He had a fair complexion, cheek bones sufficiently prominent to give his face in the general outline an oval form, and a nose of sufficient dimensions to prevent its being lost sight of, if not of sufficient length to create wonder and merriment. He was of an earnest nature and of an indomitable courage, and, notwithstanding he was physically small, he was capable of untold endurance, and was a man of commanding personal influence. . . During his active ministry he served Circuits, Districts, and Missions—Missions to the colored people.”


142 Sarah Gayle Diary, July 29, 1827. This is the first journal entry in which she mentioned Mr. Clinton; however, she likely had heard him before (Her journal entries for the year 1827 are sparse).

143 Ibid., March 8, 1828.

144 Ibid., May 4, 1834.

145 Ibid., Sunday, December 2, 1827.

146 Ibid., Sunday, January 24, 1830.

147 Ibid., September 15, 1828.

148 Hubbs, 12-13. Greene County (which surrounded Greensboro) was half African-American, some districts in it being three percent white.

149 Letter from Sarah to John Gayle, 1826 (date unknown).

150 Letter from John to Sarah, April 6, 1825.

151 Ibid., April 4, 1827.

152 Sarah Gayle Diary, July 5, 1831.

153 In the aftermath of another such haunting night, Sarah wrote John again: “My silly crying spell is over, but I feel very glum yet . . . I stay entirely in my room, which is my world, with Harriet and Nanette as subjects. . .” —Letter from Sarah to John Gayle, 1826 (date unknown).
There were often many bedtime inhabitants of Sarah’s room. She wrote on August 22, 1829: “Often, as I did last night, do I sit upon my bed and bury my face in the pillow to smother the sobs that would disturb those who are quietly sleeping around me.”

Furthermore, as we have seen, Mike’s role during the thunderstorm that terrified her conveys that he had easy access to her room. There may have been arrangements and times when trusted male servants slept in it. In a letter to her friend Mrs. Peck in 1834, Sarah was in her room, a fire was going, and she wrote: “I owe a good deal of that [a bath drawn up for her in a wash tub] to the kind fellow who is sleeping away on the cot before the fire, (always give the devil his due) . . .” His identity is not known, but it does not fit her typical descriptions of John or her children. Until we have certainty, the possibility of a black male presence in her room some nights, though extremely counterintuitive, must remain an open question.

Sarah Gayle Diary, July 28, 1829. Sarah remarked how she loved the “witchery, the fire and nerve” in Scott’s writings.

Ibid., July 15, 1829. Upon experiencing the storm, Sarah remembered how she felt when it began: “I turn cold and some time when the elements are turned loose and man’s power is taken from him and he is given over to his own native, unassisted helplessness that useful hour [the hour where one depends on God, defacto] irresistibly presents itself.”

Ibid., November, 1828.

Rawick, 35, 37.