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'Every Child Rises Early on Christmas Morning to See the Johnkannaus' [Harriet Jacobs]: The Competing Meanings of Christmas for the Enslaved in North Carolina

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on archival material from slaveholding families in North Carolina and the narratives of formerly enslaved in the State, the John Kooner parades and other Christmas festivities are employed in this article as a lens to consider what meanings Christmas might have held for some members of the enslaved within this State. Such celebrations were arguably used by enslavers to demonstrate their good will and benevolence by allowing some of the enslaved to engage in carnivalesque behaviour–costuming, dancing, drinking, and feasting–for a brief period of time over the festive season. Such activity allowed some of the enslaved in the state to temporarily upend the social and racial hierarchies of the antebellum south, locating themselves in physical and psychical spaces they were usually not permitted access to. Others however were not permitted to enjoy the festivities at all. The analysis therefore will explore the varying experiences of Christmas in North Carolina for the enslaved and the wider meanings we might draw from this. The article concludes by reflecting on how this period of brief respite for the enslaved was brought to an abrupt end by New Year's Day, often the date set for the hiring and selling of the enslaved. It will consider the repercussions of these moments of departure and family fragmentation, especially in the wake of the Christmastide celebrations.

KEYWORDS

Slave experience; John Kooner; North Carolina; slave hiring; slave family separation

Formerly[1] enslaved Harriet Jacobs, author of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave* Girl (1861), recalled the delight that enslaved children in Edenton, North Carolina, took in the enslaved Christmas festivities there, central to which were the John Kooner parades. A John Kooner saw enslaved men organize themselves into a parade, dress themselves in oftentimes garish and animalistic garb and process to enslavers' houses within the local vicinity, where they would perform a dance and then expect victuals, liquor and money in return. Jacobs' recounting of the John Kooner in North Carolina is one of the only extant accounts from the enslaved on the North American mainland describing this event, which formed part of the enslaved Christmas festivities in the region. Her description is worth citing at length because of this:

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> They consist of companies of slaves from the plantations, generally of the lower class. Two athletic men, in calico wrappers, have a net thrown over them, covered with all manner of bright-colored stripes. Cows' tails are fastened to their backs, and their heads are decorated with horns. A box, covered with sheepskin, is called the gumbo box. A dozen beat on this, while others strike triangles and jawbones, to which bands of dancers keep time. For a month previous they are composing songs, which are sung on this occasion. These companies, of a hundred each, turn out early in the morning, and are allowed to go round till twelve o'clock, begging for contributions. Not a door is left unvisited where there is the least chance of obtaining a penny or a glass of rum. They do not drink while they are out, but carry the rum home in jugs, to have a carousal. (Jacobs 1861, 179–80)

Jacobs depicted the annual John Kooner parades in terms that suggested much about the inversion of racial power and privilege in the slaveholding South at Christmas time. Yet, not all enslaved people in the region engaged in these parades, and although several among the enslaved in the state recalled off time, feasting and gift giving at Christmas, others were excluded from enjoying the brief privileges that were expected during the festive period. This article will explore then the experiences of the enslaved in North Carolina over the Christmas period, being attentive to the varied and occasionally punitive measures taken by enslavers during the festive season to ensure order and ultimately control over the enslaved. It will first consider the perceived performances of the Christmas John Kooners by white observers, and the assumed value that enslavers received from this upending of the social order. It will then reflect on the meanings that the enslaved themselves drew from this particular Christmas tradition in the state. Building on this, however, this article will also explore the varying experiences of Christmas for the enslaved within the region. Employing testimony from the enslaved themselves, through slave narratives and interviews with formerly enslaved people and their descendants in the 1930s as part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) project, this article will offer a more nuanced representation of the meanings that enslaved people in North Carolina held about Christmas and its expected privileges, which on occasion were denied or ignored. The final sections of the article will then compare the Christmas-time festivities enjoyed by some among the enslaved to the New Year's Day practice among enslavers of hiring enslaved laborers out for the coming year or selling them. The illusions of the intimacies of the Christmas festivities, for several, were often shattered by the inevitable grieving over separation of family members through this annual routine of labor requirements and pursuit of profit. This served as a stark reminder that the enslaved were ultimately subject to the enslaver's power and purse, no matter the freedoms extended to them over Christmas.

The History and Context of John Kooner: Serving Both Enslaver and Enslaved Alike?

Jacobs' John Kooners were an enslaved Christmas tradition in parts of the Caribbean and North America, specifically North Carolina. While scholars have argued over its origins as either being African or akin to the English tradition of wassailing, historian Stephen Nissenbaum has argued that it represented a syncretic blend of both African and European traditions that were creatively adapted by the enslaved in some parts of the Americas. Accordingly, he argues that 'At the very least there was a convergence of

African and European traditions, and the John Canoers understood this convergence and exploited it' (Nissenbaum 1996, 289). The practice had certainly become established in the British slaveholding colony of Jamaica by the 1770s (Fenn 1988, 128–29). Spreading through the Caribbean to places such as Barbados as the use of racial slavery expanded in the region, it is however curious that this custom was largely unique in North America to the coastal region of North Carolina from Edenton in the north of the state to Wilmington in the south. The John Kooner parade was, wherever it occurred, evidently part of the ritualistic turning of the tables between enslaver and enslaved over the Christmas period, where a certain extent of largesse from enslavers was expected. Scholars, such as Wayne K. Durrill, Elizabeth Fenn, Robert E. May and Stephen Nissenbaum, have all, respectively, argued that the John Kooner parades in North Carolina functioned as something of a cathartic safety valve, benefitting the enslaver by ensuring the labor commitments of the enslaved for the ensuing year through a few days of off-time and allowing an inversion – albeit brief – of the power dynamics that governed everyday life in the Slaveholding South (Durrill 1995; Fenn 1988; May 2019; Nissenbaum 1996).

Yet, as all of these scholars also concede, this particular tradition, in addition to enslaved participation in other Christmas festivities, was also valued by the enslaved themselves, as they occupied rival geographies of space and place, tested the master's sincerity through acts that bordered on ridicule and overturned (albeit temporarily) the rigid social order and racial hierarchies of the Old South. Historian Stephanie Camp defined rival geographies for the enslaved in the Old South as one which pivoted around movement within and around plantation space, 'alternative ways of knowing and using plantation and southern space that conflicted with planters' ideals and demands' (Camp 2004, 7). As Camp pointed out though, and as was the case with the John Kooners and Christmas festivities enjoyed by the enslaved in North Carolina, such spaces of rival geography, 'did not threaten to overthrow American slavery, nor did it provide slaves with autonomous space' (Camp 2004, 7). That enslavers knew about and authorized events like the John Kooner parades and that of other Christmas festivities that the enslaved engaged in may suggest that these were a further means of control, under the eye and thus, authority, of the enslaver and ultimately governed by white power. Yet, in many ways, this does not diminish the meaning of resistance contained in these rival geographies, both physical and psychical, within both the physical spaces of the plantation and beyond. What such opportunities did provide and how the rival geographies of enslaved Christmases should be seen in North Carolina was as, 'space for private and public creative expression, rest, and recreation, alternative communication, and importantly, resistance to planters' domination of slaves' every move' (Camp 2004, 7). However, the histories of the Old South, enslaver and enslaved relations, and acts of resistance and agency by the enslaved in the context of their lives and labor are never straightforward. It remains a complex, complicated and messy history as we explore and seek to understand the lived experience of the past, with historical actors who were shaped by the everyday realities of their own existence. As the analysis below explores, several enslaved people in North Carolina did receive certain privileges at Christmas time, such as a number of days off work, gift giving by their enslaver, and marking the Christmas period through parties, get-togethers and perhaps a John Kooner. These moments of respite, self-care and black joy during Christmastide can all be framed within a concept of rival geography and

modes of resistance. Yet, as this article will also explore, enslavers were fickle, and acted on capricious whims sanctioned by mechanisms of white supremacy that permitted gratuitous and systemic violence on enslaved people, both physically and emotionally. Some enslavers chose not to allow their enslaved laborers to engage in any festive merriment during the Christmas period at all. Others decided that in a particular year Christmas privileges would be denied, as a punishment perhaps, or to remind enslaved people where power resided. These were demonstration by the enslaver of their mastery and power, and it is vital to be mindful that the creation of rival geographies, while demonstrating meaningful acts of resistance by the enslaved, was never easily won, if at all, even in the supposed season of good will.

Recollections of Enslaved John Kooners by Southern White Elites : Cultivating an Image

Cameron's (1891) account of the John Kooner festivities on her grandfather's plantation in the Cape Fear region of North Carolina provides an insightful narrative of the ways in which enslavers and their descendants depicted this event and the wider enslaved celebrations of Christmas there. Cameron's family were one of the wealthiest in the region. Her grandfather, Duncan Cameron, built his mansion home 'Fairntosh' in Durham County in 1802, soon after his marriage to Rebecca Bennehan, the daughter of one of the wealthiest men in the county. His land holdings grew to vast proportions, and so too did his enslaved labor force (see Cameron Family Papers 1757–1978, U.S. Federal Census Slave schedules 1840 & 1850). In an account of Duncan Cameron and his plantation at Fairntosh, historian Samuel A. Ashe assessed the size of the holdings as akin to a self-sufficient mini-village with enslaved weavers, seamstresses and artisans:

> Cameron adorned his fine plantation at Fairntosh with a residence that has ever been the admiration of his friends, and he conducted the operation of his great estate with sagacity and a strict adherence to the principles of sound political economy. His own looms converted his wool and cotton into clothing for his slaves, and his shoemakers, carpenters, blacksmiths and other artisans combined to make the diversified work on the plantation a development of practical industry that was no less profitable than interesting. (Ashe et al. 1906, 45)

Duncan Cameron died in 1853 and his second eldest son and Rebecca Cameron's father, Paul Carrington Cameron, inherited his father's estate, including Fairntosh. He subsequently continued to extend the acreage of the estate and property holdings, including slaves. By 1850, Paul Cameron held 218 enslaved people in Orange County alone, a good many of these presumably at Fairntosh. In the same year, he totalled his holdings of real estate at $25,000. Ten years later in 1860, this number had increased substantially to $72,000 with 113 enslaved people listed in his census slave schedule for the same year on his estate in Person County, one of several he had inherited from his father (United States Federal Census 1850 & 1860; United States Federal Census Slave schedules 1860).

Rebecca Cameron's description of the John Kooner parades reflected several elements of the privileged viewpoint from which she observed this element of festive participation of the enslaved at Fairntosh. She recounted that it was a few days after Christmas that the John Kooners made their arrival. Similarly to Harriet Jacobs, although from very

different perspectives and position of power, she noted the involvement of enslaved children in announcing the presence of the parade: 'Sometime in the course of the morning an ebony herald, breathless with excitement, would project the announcement: "De John Coonah's comin!" and away flew every pair of feet within nursey precincts' (Cameron 1891, 5). Cameron went on to describe the John Kooners in stark racialized terms, recounting the 'long *grotesque* procession, *winding slowly* over the hill from the quarters, a *dense body* of men . . . dressed in the *oddest*, most *fantastic* garb, representing birds, and beast and men' (Cameron 1891, 5, emphasis added). As she continued to describe the performance, her words must have sent a chill up the spine of her white Southern female readers. She recounted that the Kooners made their way to the hall-door, and then 'the leader snapped his whip with a crack like a pistol shot. Everybody stood still for an instant; we dared not draw breath, and could hear the tumultuous beatings of our hearts'. Following the tension of this moment for white observers, the leader cracked his whip again, the instruments started up, and the performance began. Cameron then describes a 'hideous travesty of a bear' borrowing a hat from the head of an enslaved child and passing it around the crowd of '"white folks" to gather the harvest of pennies with which everyone is provided' (Cameron 1891, 5).

In her recounting of the John Kooner parade, Cameron invokes racialized discourses of black masculinity undergirded by notions of the potential threat and intimidation of the enslaved black man, and their capacity for insurrection. As historian Robert E. May points out, 'Cameron's account . . . hinted at the intimidating and extortionist elements of John Canoe' (May 2019, 117). Yet, Cameron soothes her reader's concerns with the element of 'play' that some enslavers temporarily permitted their enslaved workforce to engage in during the festive season. In doing so, she instils a characterization of the enslaved at Fairntosh as childlike and naïve, the enslaver 'permitting' them to have their fun, all in the knowledge that this was temporary and part of the enslaver's generosity and kindness. Similar tones of enslaved guilelessness and enslaver benevolence as regard the John Kooner parades were written into other white Southern elite reports of the practice. For example, Dr Edward C. Warren provided another such example in his description of the Kooner parade he witnessed on Josiah Collins' plantation, Somerset Place, on Lake Scuppernong, Washington County, near to Edenton, in the 1850s. In his account of this event, Warren employed racial tropes of 'African otherness' to define enslaved people Collins held as laborers. Warren decried them as 'a peculiar type', who because of their African descent had 'retained many of the ideas and traditions of their native land . . . they still had faith in evil genii, charms, philters, metempsychosis etc., and they habitually indulged in an infinitude of ca[na]balistic rites and ceremonies'[2] (Warren 1885, 200). He described the John Kooner parades as an example of 'playing' at 'one of their customs. He also ascertained that while it was performed on Christmas and therefore must have "some connection with *their* religion" this was more of a "fantasia than a religious demonstration"' (Warren 1885, 201, emphasis added). Warren described the John Kooners in very similar ways to Rebecca Cameron's recollections of this event, with enslaved men dressing in costumes depicting animals, musicians with an array of instruments, and what he described as 'grotesque' dancing that included a mix of 'bodily contortions flings, kicks and antics of every imaginable proportion'. Leading the parade were two characters who Warren terms 'the ragman' and 'the best looking darkey in the place', respectively (Warren 1885, 201–02).

In contrast to Cameron's moments of anxiety at the leading man's crack of the whip and the large number of enslaved men filing up to the plantation, Warren's recollections suggest amusement at this curious practice rather than fear. Perhaps underscoring the privileges of his race, gender and status as an elite white Southern man with power and authority in this piece, Warren would have also been well aware of Josiah Collins' presence at the John Kooner parade and his mastery over his enslaved laborers. Somerset Place had passed down three generations of Collins' men: from grandfather, Josiah Collins snr; to father, Josiah Collins II; to son, Josiah Collins III. By 1860, he held over 4000 acres, valued his real estate at $200,000 and held a personal estate valued at $250,000. Collins also held 328 enslaved people in the year of the 1860 census, making him one of the three largest slaveholders in North Carolina (Powell 1979, 405; United States Federal Census 1860; United States Federal Census Slave Schedules 1860). Collins had thus been born into a life of mastery and so used his extensive land holdings and enslaved laborers at this time to ensure continued wealth, power and privilege. Warren depicted Josiah Collins' style of mastery as well attuned to the demands and expectations of a large enslaved labor force, having models of authority from immediate ancestors from which he could base his own mastery upon. Collins had evidently learned to balance his own labor demands of the enslaved with an image of the benevolent master, performing the role of paternalistic caretaker who cared deeply for and ministered to the needs of his 'slave dependents': 'the greatest attention was paid to their comfort, health and general welfare, including their spiritual condition, for their owner was a staunch churchman, and maintained a chapel and chaplain at his own expense' (Warren 1885, 199–200). Much like Rebecca Cameron's illustration of her grandfather as the altruistic master who allowed Christmas festivities such as the John Kooner to take place among the enslaved, so too did Warren paint a similar picture of Collins' treatment of his enslaved laborers.

It is evident that Warren was eager to separate the curious practices of enslaved Christmas festivities with that of Josiah Collins, their 'good' Christian master. The Collins family are removed from any specific mention in the activities of the Christmas festivities for the enslaved at Somerset place. In contrast, if we return to Rebecca Cameron's description of the Christmas period on Fairntosh, it is evident that she offers a romanticized version of enslaved participation in the Cameron family Christmas festivities. Cameron begins her piece by painting her grandfather – Duncan Cameron – as 'an aimable easy going master, much more interested in literature than in rice planting, and preserving in his daily life many of the habits of his English ancestors' (Cameron 1891, 5). Yet, we know from the Cameron family archive and descriptions of Fairntosh under her grandfather's mastery that her illustration of the benevolent and paternalistic gentleman who was more interested in hospitality and culture than amassing his property holdings, including slaves, and growing wealthy off his investments, represented a perversion of the realities of mastery and power in the old South. This was a moonlights-and-magnolia depiction of the old South and the supposedly paternalistic relations that existed between masters and slaves that were typical of Lost Cause ideology in the post-Civil War era (see Baker 2007; Blight 2001; Foster 1988; Whites 2005). In addition, the evident delight she expressed in her piece about the busyness of the week before Christmas, in preparation for the holiday season, demonstrates no acknowledgment of the extra labor demanded of the enslaved during this time. Unsurprisingly,

Rebecca Cameron does not consider the concomitant extensions of power on the enslavers' part as they hurried their enslaved labor force to complete the work required in preparation for the Christmas period. As Cameron's piece confirms, the volume of labor required was extensive as she recounted holly and mistletoe being wreathed for the main rooms; glass, silver and china washed and polished; linen, including bedding and table dressings, prepared in readiness of the guests; and of course, the preparation and cooking of the lavish amount of Christmas food (Cameron 1891, 5). Much, if not all, of this labor would have fallen to enslaved people at Fairntosh, many of whom would have labored in the domestic quarters of the household. These extra demands on them would have been extensive and all consuming, leaving little time to spend with their own families or engage in emotional labor for their own or their families' care and nurturance.

Other narratives written by the descendants of enslavers in North Carolina recalled the delight of the Christmas labors in remarkably similar ways to Rebecca Cameron. For example, Army chaplain for the Confederacy, James Battle Avirett, had grown up on the Avirett-Stephens' plantation, in Onslow County, North Carolina. His father, John, had amassed a small fortune through this turpentine producing plantation, which, as historian David S. Cecelski has noted, was a 'turpentining empire that included a twenty-thousand-acre long leaf orchard, 125 slaves, and a magnificent three-story manor house graced with the finest furnishings from New York and London' (Cecelski 1997, 10; also see United States Federal Census 1850; United States Federal Census Slave Schedules 1850). In 1901, James published a nostalgic reminiscence of the Old South, drenched in Lost Cause ideology. His *The Old Plantation: How We Lived in Great House and Cabin before the War* presented a sentimentalized image of the Avirett family's relations with their enslaved labor force, narrating the harmonious and settled order of Southern slaveholding and the master/slave dynamic (Avirett 1901). Regarding Christmas time on the plantation, Avirett claimed in his recollections that, 'in great house and cabin, for generations … [Christmas] has been the season above all others full of mirth and good cheer. Resting from labor, the planter and his servants have ever enjoyed it' (Avirett 1901, 172). Yet, while Avirett recalled that he 'delights … to go back in memory and bring back the joyous scenes enacted during the blessed hours of absorbing labor of Christmas preparation', the physical and mental exhaustions of the extra and excessive labor demands on the enslaved at the Avirett-Stephen's plantation would not have felt anything like '*blessed hours*' (Avirett 1901, 175 emphasis added). For example, Christmas Eve, as he notes, 'was one of special activity. Everybody was busy' (Avirett 1901, 175). Yet, Avirett's meaning of 'everybody' here can be interpreted as the enslaved laborers. As he unconsciously reveals, the busyness of preparation for Christmas on this turpentine plantation of one of the wealthiest men in the state fell fully on the enslaved:

> How busy was old Uncle Shadrac in barbecuing five or six whole hogs and halves of young bullocks … Uncle Amos was very busy in his daily hunts for game – wild turkeys, ducks, squirrels, partridges and pheasants … Handy was careful to feed the young gobblers very heavily on broken rice and peanuts, while the several cooks were as busy as they could well be in preparing a bountiful supply of bread (corn and wheat), with cakes, pies and all sorts of good things for the servants' Christmas dinner. Virgil and George had erected long tables in the back yard, while Buck and Cain had gathered quantities of evergreen from the woods, including basketsful of fresh fragrant wintergreen and the delicate mistletoe, with which to dress the pictures and paintings in the great house. (Avirett 1901, 175)

These accounts of Christmas on the plantations of North Carolina however were written by descendants of wealthy enslavers, years after the Civil War, and evidently couched in romanticized reminiscences of the slaveholding South. Yet, enslavers themselves employed the language of paternalism to describe their so-called indulgence of the enslaved during the Christmas period. They employed sentiments that were widely used in the antebellum era in broader justifications for slavery from proslavery thinkers (see, e.g. Calhoun 1837; Colfax 1833; Fitzhugh 1854, 1857). For example, in 1824, Dr James Norcom, Harriet Jacobs' enslaver and sexual abuser, and a prominent member of the intellectual elite in Edenton society, wrote about the practice of the John Kooner among the enslaved in Edenton. He described the custom as an example of 'our slaves … enjoying a state of *comparative freedom*; of having dances & entertainments among themselves; & of celebrating the season in a manner almost peculiar to this part of the world' (Johnson 1937, 552, emphasis added). Much like Rebecca Cameron had described her grandfather's model of governance, Norcom too embraced an ideal of the 'paternalistic master' in his view of why enslavers allowed these festivities to occur. Congratulating himself and his fellow enslavers on this act of benevolent duty, he remarked that:

> These festivities are not only tolerated by the whites, but are virtually created by them; for without the aid voluntarily contributed by their masters, their servants would be destitute of the means of making or enjoying them. At such a season, instead of driving these wretched creatures, with cold and unfeeling sensibility from our doors, the heart of charity dilates towards them, & the angel of humanity whispers in our ears that they are entitled to a part of those blessings which their labour has procured us. (Johnson 1937, 552)

A fellow enslaver, only named as Foby in his piece, and from the lower south rather than North Carolina, used a similar language of paternalism in 1853 to frame his reasoning for allowing his enslaved laborers (or 'servants' as he named them) to partake in Christmas holidays. He published his advice in a rather lengthy overview of the rules and regulations for 'management of the plantation … which works … entirely to my satisfaction', with the ambition that it might provide a model for others, convinced 'they will be equally gratified' (Breeden 1980, 306). He began by declaring that the 'fundamental principles upon which the system is based are … that all living on the plantation, whether enslaved or not, are members of the same family and to be treated as such'. Defining himself 'as the patriarch (not tyrant) of the family my laws … must be obeyed … [but]as patriarch, it is my duty to protect their rights, to feed, clothe, and house them properly' (ibid). In return however for this *duty* 'the servants are distinctly informed that they have to work and obey my laws, or suffer the penalty. (Breeden 1980, 306). The *laws* of this plantation were detailed with coverage of every aspect of labor and life of the enslaved who lived there. Treating his *servants* like family though meant Foby had to provide not just care and attention, but a reprieve from labor and an opportunity for 'play'. When it came to holidays, Folby named Christmas as one of the two provided – the other being 4 July – and claimed the festive season as one where his slaves 'were allowed the greatest liberty'. Lasting for nearly a week, the Christmas holiday was described by Folby as a '*jubilee* [where] it is difficult to say who is master' (Breeden 1980, 309). Despite Foby's assertion,

however, it is unlikely that his enslaved laborers ever forgot who had the power in this relationship.

John Kooner and Christmastide Celebrations as Enslaved Resistance

These accounts of the John Kooners and the Christmas festivities that enslavers permitted their enslaved labor force to participate in, were written in sentimentalized terms by members of the white Southern elite and their descendants. If, however, we read these accounts against the grain, they also indicate something about the ways in which enslaved people in certain parts of North Carolina might have taken the opportunities presented to them at Christmas and used them to their own advantage. For example, in Rebecca Cameron's piece, she describes the length of time the Christmas holidays lasted, as 'from Christmas Eve – always a half holiday – until the Yule log burnt in two after New Year's day' (Cameron 1891, 5). As she recollected, it was always the first job of the New Year for the slave driver and his 'gang of best axe hands' to select the 'biggest, knottiest, most indestructible cypress tree that could be found', which they would fell and haul down to the canal where it would be left in the water for the next twelve months. The idea was that enslaved Christmas holidays on Fairntosh would last until the Yule log burnt out – the wetter it could be on hauling it back to the plantation mansion a day or two before Christmas the longer the holiday – and off-time – would last 'for as long as the Yule log burned the whole plantation force had holiday' (Cameron 1891, 5). Enslaved people on Fairntosh then were evidently forward thinking, strategically engineering the means to ensure the longest possible time off during the Christmas period.

Similarly, James Norcom commended himself and his fellow North Carolinian enslavers again on their toleration of 'these extraordinary indulgences' of enslaved practices over the Christmas season. He acknowledged that 'drunkenness is too common on these occasions' among those partaking in the festivities. However, with what we can imagine as a mock bow of gracious gentility, he opined that 'this is habitually overlooked and never punished, unless it becomes outrageous or grossly offensive' (Johnson 1937, 553). One might well question the criteria that Norcom and other enslavers had of 'outrageous' behavior that enslaved people were measured by on these occasions. Yet, it is clear there was a certain level of permissiveness when it came to enslaved people's celebrations of Christmas and the 'indulgences' they took at this time of year, including dancing and drinking. In a case that came before the Supreme Court of North Carolina in December 1849, the defendant, Jacob Boyce, was charged with 'keep[ing] and maintain-[ing] a certain common, ill-governed and disorderly house'. Evidence to prove this charge was submitted testifying that at Christmas in 1846, the patrollers had visited Boyce's plantation after hearing 'much noise in that direction'. Upon entering they found a party in the slave quarters and another in Boyce's house, where Boyce and his children, including a married daughter and her husband, and his brother, were engaged in festivities with 'twelve or fifteen negroes, of whom one was fiddling, and the others dancing and talking loud; and that some of them acted as if they were drunk, and he smelt spirits' (Catterall 1929, 140). While the jury found Boyce guilty, this decision was overturned on appeal at the Supreme Court. With Chief Justice Thomas Ruffin, a fellow enslaver and partner in a slave-trading venture presiding, he commented that, 'It would really be a source of regret, if contrary to common custom it were to be denied to slaves,

in the interval between their toils, to indulge in mirthful pastimes' (Catterall 1929, 140). Continuing in the same performative paternalistic language as Norcom, Ruffin further advised that 'there was nothing contrary to morals or law in all that – adding, as it did, to human enjoyment, without hurt to any one, unless it be that one feels aggrieved that these poor people should for a short space be happy at finding the authority of the master give place to his benignity' (Catterall 1929, 140).

While some enslavers sought to play into the illusory fiction of benevolent and caring masters who advocated that at Christmas rules should be temporarily abandoned, the use of alcohol by the enslaved still remained a point of contention among some. Laws had existed in the state since the late eighteenth century that prohibited anybody to 'sell a slave intoxicating liquors', and this was sharpened in various acts passed prior to 1833 (Johnson 1937, 558). The fear for many among the white communities of North Carolina was that consumption of alcohol by the enslaved could lead to a loosening of inhibitions and a disregard for the racialized structures of the slaveholding South, where white men held power and black people were submissive and deferential. Heightened tensions between the enslaved themselves or between the enslaved and members of the white communities that lived and labored in North Carolina could become more volatile in the celebratory atmosphere of Christmas. This was evidenced in the criminal case against George, an enslaved man from Chowan County, near Edenton, and whose altercation with a poor white elderly man, Jesse Hassell, on Christmas Eve in 1823, resulted in Hassell's death and the subsequent charge of murder for George. According to witness reports of the evening, George had spent the night of Christmas Eve at a party with other enslaved people, engaged in a John Kooner: 'Slave witnesses recalled George "wishing to beat the box they carried with them" that night, and by the time George came "staggering along the road" near Hassells, his intoxication likely was complete' (Forret 2006, 177). Hassell owned a 'grog shop in his dwelling house', which George reportedly frequented and previous to the fateful night, the two men had made a deal regarding swapping shoes and a small amount of money for George to make the exchange fair. Stopping at Hassell's on his drunken journey home, George demanded that the white man see good on their deal that night. He requested however that he be able to replace the money with rum. Hassell refused and a fight ensued resulting in Hassell's death a few days later from his injuries. After the case was brought to trial, George was convicted and sentenced to be executed in May 1824 (Forret 2006, 176–178).

As historian Jeff Forret explains, the response to George's sentence divided the community, and several prominent citizens signed petitions against his execution, defending George's character and requesting that he be sold out the state instead, so that his enslaver, John W. Littlejohn, would minimize the financial loss of his 'property'. As for the victim, Jesse Hassell, neither side of the debate on George's conviction had anything good to say about him as poor, elderly, infirm white man of little circumstance. As Forret notes, 'As one report to the governor explained, the chronically ill Hassell "was the keeper of a dram shop, which was accessible to slaves at all times of the day and night and had thus accustomed them to a familiarity which was inconsistent with the respect and deference due from a slave to a Freeman"' (Forret 2006, 179). This petitioner's tone suggested that Jesse Hassell was the creator of his own problems given his familiarities with the local enslaved populations of Chowan County. He therefore should not have been surprised when trouble came to his door and he invited it in. This was, especially so

in the context of the Christmas period when enslaved people could potentially exploit their temporary privileges to capitalize on their albeit limited and fleeting freedoms, particularly with others of a similar status, black and white. While members of the North Carolinian slaveholding elite such as James Norcom and Thomas Ruffin defended enslaved people's carousing at Christmas time, a more complex picture emerges in this case of the social interactions in the festive season of enslaved people and poor whites. In particular, it serves to remind us of the fragility of the ideals of white male superiority in the Old South that cannot be properly understood without considering the intersections of both class and age too. Indeed, Jesse Hassell and other members of the poor white laboring community of Chowan County would no doubt have felt resentment toward enslaved men like George at Christmas who were given temporary license to act with a certain degree of freedom. This would doubtless increase tensions between these two cohorts of the laboring population in the season of good will.

While George's case ended in tragedy for both himself, and Jesse Hassell, his investment in the Christmastide celebrations prior to the murder suggests that George was in many ways demonstrating challenges to the systems of slavery in the Old South. In their assessment of the John Kooners and what they represented, enslavers such as James Norcom and Thomas Ruffin, and those descended from slaveholding families like Rebecca Cameron, overlooked the vital element of resistance – the carnival atmosphere, gleeful laughter and mock ridicule – so central to the meaning of the John Kooner. Indeed, scholar of English, Anne Bradford Warner employs Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnival and carnivalesque to Harriet Jacob's description of the John Kooners. Warner argues that the language used by Jacobs in her account of those performing at the Kooner parade invokes a literature of parody, where 'forms of folk humor . . . mock the civil and social ceremonies of the authoritarian culture' (Warner 1996, 217). Take, for example, the verbal roasting that the John Kooners regaled their white audience with, should they refuse to make a payment for the performance. Jacobs recollected that if any master refused to donate 'a penny or a glass of rum', the Kooners would regale him with a song that accentuated his proclaimed poverty in the face of their enslavement and his evident wealth: 'Poor massa, so dey say/Down in de heel, so dey say/Got no money, so dey say' (Jacobs 1861, 180–181). It was hardly likely anyone would refuse in the face of such ridicule and thus, for the briefest of moments, power structures are destabilized and reversals of authority are witnessed. As Bradford Warner argues: 'The briefly empowered folk of Jacobs's description, in their huge plantation bands, express their resistance to American slavery with their African survivals and parody the oppressive institutions of the South' (Warner 1996, 218).

If we reflect back on Rebecca Cameron's and Edward Warren's descriptions of the spectacle of the John Kooner parades at Fairntosh and Somerset Place, respectively, it is evident that they were invested with both hilarity and mock ritual at the expense of these white observers integral to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque. Indeed, as Bakhtin has noted, one of the most essential elements of the carnival 'is the "unmasking" and disclosing of the unvarnished truths under the veil of false claims and arbitrary ranks' (Bakhtin 1984, x). Certainly, the Christmas John Kooner parades sought to provide a glimpse under the emperor's new clothes, exposing the hypocrisy of the Southern slaveholding system and the façade of white supremacy that underwrote it. Cameron's tense depiction of the lead John Kooner man, who 'snapped his whip with a crack', it is

evident that these parades did intend to invoke anxiety among white observers and challenged (albeit knowingly temporary and brief) to the existing status quo. As Harriet Jacobs' detailed account of the Kooner parades cited in the introduction makes clear, these men, and the wider community of enslaved people that later joined them in their carousing, offered up an alternative version of the power structures of the Old South. Scholar Peter Reed has argued that the John Kooner men that Jacobs' describes take liberties and privileges in the parade and over the Christmas period that can only be defined within the context of resistance to the existing racial order. Indeed, he argues that 'Jonkonnu transforms the powerless, disposable bodies of black slaves, even if only momentarily, into unique, powerful, and even indispensable characters' (Reed 2007, 74).

Forms of Exchange and the Meanings of Christmas Gift Giving

Building on this concept of resistance, it also bears emphasizing that celebrations of Christmas by the enslaved in North Carolina – in the form of drinking, feasting and going off the plantation to visit loved ones – provided alternative physical and psychical spaces in which they could also resist enslavers' racialized characterizations of their own meaningful understandings of family, friends and home. As Jacobs underlines in her narrative, the John Kooners did not drink the donations of alcohol while they were engaged in the parade. Instead, they carried the alcohol home to enjoy with kith and kin at their own Christmas parties (Jacobs 1861, 180). She also noted that this was 'a day of feasting, both with white and colored people', and that for those among the enslaved that could, they captured pigs and turkeys to cook, evidently taking them from the enslaver's holdings 'without a By your leave, sir'. If this was not possible they made do with raccoons or possums to cook up for their Christmas meals (Ibid). Other formerly enslaved people also recollected this element of enslaved Christmases. Emma Blalock, enslaved to John Griffith of Wake County, recalled that enslaved men on Griffith's plantation, 'hunted and caught plenty game', at Christmas time. The Christmas holidays, for Emma and her family meant that intimate familial and social ties could be rekindled, with male kith and kin engaging in the gendered emotional labor of providing food via hunting possums and rabbits. In turn, her mother and grandmother engaged in their own gendered form of emotional labor through the preparation and cooking of the catch on the fire: 'dey would turn an turn 'em till dey wus done' (Blalock 1936, 105–6). Between them then, the enslaved men and women enslaved by Griffith and Norcom ensured that, at Christmas at least, their immediate family and friends were nourished and felt cared for.

The concept of 'care' here, however, needs to be put into the context of enslavers driving motivations of enslaving people: maximizing profit through exploitative labor and reproduction of that labor force, often through the rape of enslaved women and girls by enslavers, their make relatives and overseers. James Norcom had assumed mastery of Harriet Jacobs when she was twelve and entered his Edenton household, enslaved to his three-year-old daughter, Matilda. He subsequently subjected Harriet to years of psychological and sexual abuse before she feigned running away, hiding in her free black grandmother's, Molly Horniblow, crawl space for seven years before finally making her escape to freedom in 1842 via a boat to Philadelphia (see Yellin 2004). It was from this cramped hiding place she witnessed the annual John Kooner parades and

festivities, grieving the countless Christmases her presence had to be kept secret from her two young children, Joseph and Louisa. In telling remarks, however, Jacobs accentuated the importance of Christmas gift giving to her children, recollecting that, 'Grandmother brought me materials, and I busied myself making some new garments and little play-things for my children' (Jacobs 1861, 179). As her whereabouts could not be revealed, however, her son, Joseph, assumed that these presents must have been bought by Santa Claus, although he does not elaborate on whether he thought Santa might be black or white. A young playmate had countered this opinion, suggested that Santa Claus was a fiction and that 'it was the children's mothers that put things in their stockings'. Yet, Joseph could not accept this, given that his mother, as he explained, 'has been gone this long time'. The only explanation was that 'Santa Claus brought me and Ellen [Louisa] these new clothes'. Observing her children covertly from the peep hole in her crawl space on Christmas morning as they received these presents, Harriet expressed the lamentable realities of Christmas season for many among the enslaved across the slaveholding South, who may not have been able to share this time with loved ones: 'How I longed to tell him that mother had made these garments, and that many a tear had fell on them while she worked' (Jacobs 1861, 179).

Christmas gift giving and allowing the enslaved to engage in parties during the festive period was mentioned in the accounts of the enslavers and their descendants discussed above, yet in very different terms to Jacobs. Rebecca Cameron regaled her readers with the generosity of her grandfather who 'invariably gave money' to the enslaved as Christmas gifts: 'fifty cents in silver for the men, a quarter to the women, and a shilling and sixpence respectively to the "chaps" (half-grown boys), and the little children, who, in plantation parlance, were called "the trash gang"' (Cameron 1891, 5). Not only money, but a range of gifts were distributed among the enslaved at Fairntosh, including 'handkerchiefs, balls, tops, knives, pipes, shawls, aprons, cravats, caps, hoods, all sorts of things that experience had taught their owners the negroes most delighted in' (ibid). Enslaved women who were wives and had families on Cameron's plantation could get an extra allowance on Christmas morning, as they 'draw Christmas' as Cameron called it, allowing them extra provisioning of food supplies such as meat, rice, molasses and flour, to 'make their holiday feasting' (Camaron 1891, 5). Needless to say, these wives and mothers shared this extra allowance with others in the quarters, presumably combining their victuals with other households and engaging in a celebration of their own. As well as Christmas gifts of handkerchiefs and pocket knives for the enslaved, James Battle Avirett recollected that, at Christmas there was always 'a full issue of clothing, including hats and shoes, so that every servant on the estate would be well dressed "fo Crismus"' (Avirett 1901, 175). John Avirett, James' father and enslaver of the labor force on the Avirett-Stephens plantation, would have wanted his enslaved people looking their best at Christmas, given it was a time when his paternalism was on show for his extended family, friends, and neighbors to see.

Some enslaved people in North Carolina recollected that they received gifts from the enslaver at Christmas. Charlie Barbour, enslaved to Bob Lunsford in Johnston County, recalled that not only did the enslaved enjoy time off to feast and celebrate at Christmas, having, 'a big dinner, an' from den through New Year's day, we feast, an we dance, an we sing', but also participated in gift giving. He explained that, 'De fust one what said Christmas gift ter anybody else got a gif', so of co'use we all try to ketch de marster'

(Barbour 1936, 74). Historian Katherine M. Hilliard cautions against seeing this gift giving at Christmas by the enslaver as truly altruistic, however, pointing out that the 'boundary between gift and commodity was maddingly fuzzy, subject to both sleight of hand and masquerade' (Hilliard 2014, 133). Indeed, the reminiscences of Rebecca Cameron and James B. Avirett regarding their memories of loving gift giving to the enslaved can more sensibly be seen as another way in which these enslavers sought confirmation of their benevolence. As Hillard further argues, 'For the masters, it was that moment of conjured propinquity – the fleeting and thankful gaze, the particular word of gratitude – in which slavery was most splendidly affirmed' (ibid, 138). Enslavers might have also used Christmas as a convenient time to provide their enslaved work force with 'gifts' that were in actuality their annual provision of clothing and shoes. Jane Lassiter, who was enslaved by Kit Council and lived on his plantation with her mother in Chatham County, in the Piedmont area of the state, recalled that 'our shoes wus given out at Christmas'. She went on to explain that, 'We got one pair a year an' when dey wore out we got no more an' had to go barefooted de rest of the time' (Lassiter 1936, 39). Similarly, John C. Bectom recalled that his mother and father, enslaved in Cumberland and Wayne County, respectively, had told him that although they received plenty of clothes during their enslavement, they would take care of their shoes as they only received one pair annually: 'They were given at Christmas every year' (Bectom 1936, 93).

Although Charlie Barbour's enslaver, Bob Lunsford, noted above, seemingly illustrated the benevolent and caring master, Christmas privileges for Lunsford's enslaved laborers undoubtedly had an ulterior motive. Charlie recounted that on New Year's Eve, Lunsford would throw an all-night dance for his enslaved laborers. As Charlie explained, however, as midnight came around, 'marster makes a speech an' we is happy dat he thank us fer our year's wuck an' says dat we is good, smart slaves' (Barbour 1936, 74). Lunsford had thus granted the authorized privilege of some leisure time at Christmas for his enslaved laborers, only after the annual crops had been harvested and the heavy work of winter had been done. It was under *his* observation that they feasted and danced. Furthermore, Lunsford speech at midnight reminded them of the power he retained and that tomorrow the temporary relaxation of the rules of the plantation would be over and they would once again be subject to working 'from daylight to dark' (Barbour 1936, 74).

Time off from the regimes of enslaved labor was an expected concession from the enslaver at Christmas time. Isaac Johnson was formerly enslaved while a child to Jack Johnson, on a plantation that was '"bout four thousand acres . . . an" bout 25 slaves', in Lillington on the north side of the Cape Fear River. He recalled that 'we played during the Christmas holidays', indicating that the enslaved on Johnson's plantation got at least some time off during the festive season. Isaac's mother, Tilla, admitted that in comparison to other enslavers though, Jack Johnson 'wus better den other folks', signifying that others were not as fortunate to have such off time at Christmas and at other days of the year (Johnson 1936, 15). Alice Baugh, enslaved in Wake County, remembered that on her enslaver's, Charlie Hinnat's, plantation they got holiday from 'Christmas till de second day o January' (Baugh 1936, 83). Alice further commented that Hinnant gave them permission to dress 'in dere Sunday clothes' and wrote them a pass to go off the plantation and visit loved ones during this time. As she explained, 'De Marster always gib 'em paper so's de paterollers [patrol gangs] won't git em' (Baugh 1936, 83). Dressed in

their best clothes and carrying a note according them the liberty to be off the plantation, Hinnant's enslaved laborers must have revelled in this freedom, however, short-lived.

However, not every enslaver was willing to concede Christmas as a holiday period for the enslaved to engage in gift giving, parties and visiting off the plantation. Louisa Adams, enslaved to Tom Covington on a plantation in Richmond, Rockingham County, remembered that he would not permit them to have days off for the festive season or any other event: 'They did not gib us Christmas or any other holidays' (Adams 1936, 5). While some enslavers may not have provided off time at Christmas, others restricted the mobility of the enslaved and thus potentially prevented them from spending time with family and friends. Enslaver William Pettigrew limited the movement of his enslaved population during the Christmas holidays on his two plantations, Belgrade and Magnolia in Washington County. Owing to an occurrence of troubling incidences among the enslaved when Pettigrew had last visited in winter 1857, he advised his two enslaved drivers, Moses and Henry, that it would be a good idea for them not to visit Lake Phelps, where a John Kooner took place each Christmas on the neighboring plantation of Josiah Collins' Somerset Place:

> I do not give a positive order but I think the people had better stay at home during Christmas holydays; no good can result from their going to the lake & it might be that some evil would. If no more, it might bring about a quarrel among my people and some of those at the lake . . . [m]y idea is stay at home & mind your business & let other people mind theirs. (Pettigrew 1857)

This would have been sorely felt among the enslaved at Pettigrew's Belgrade and Magnolia plantations and Collins's Somerset Place too. As Elizabeth A. Fenn has pointed out, 'The Pettigrew slaves had strong ties to the slave community at Somerset place. They intermarried and even shared the same graveyard' (Fenn 1988, 141). The strong imposition of such a suggestion from their enslaver presented Pettigrew's enslaved people with a Christmas period shorn of the opportunity to spend valuable time in the company of loved ones who may have resided on Somerset Place. It also denied them the chance to revel in the festival atmosphere that the annual John Kooner at the Lake provided.

The Bleakness of New Years Day: Hiring or Sale, and Family Separation

No matter the Christmas privileges that were allowed or not for the enslaved in North Carolina, the New Year could bring potential heartache for the enslaved as 1 January meant hiring day in the South. Harriet Jacobs noted the contradictions between the two events, pointing out that 'were it not that hiring day is near at hand and many families are fearfully looking forward to the probability of separation in a few days, Christmas might be a happy season for the poor slave' (Jacobs 1861, 179). Historian Jonathan D. Martin whose research has focused on slave hiring in the Old South notes that slave hiring in the Chesapeake region became an essential part of the region's economy by the early nineteenth century (Martin 2004). The area, from the Bay of the same name stretching across Maryland at the north and Virginia to the South extending all the way down to Cape Fear region of North Carolina, saw a diversification in terms of its industries in the 50 years after the American Revolution. In addition to this, farmers and planters in the Chesapeake gradually expanded their crop choices over this time to cater to growing

export markets (ibid, 33). As Martin notes, the practice of hiring slaves in the region 'had [then] become a substantial element in the daily economic strategies of Chesapeake farmers', even as early as the Revolutionary period (ibid).

This traffic of hired slaves in the region resulted in family fragmentation for the enslaved and seemingly none were exempt, 'including the very young or the old' (ibid, 34). North Carolinian born Moses Grandy, recalled how his mother was separated from several of her children, not only through their sales, but also due to the practice of slave hiring. As Moses explained, his yearly process of hire began, 'when he became old enough to be taken away from his mother and put to field work' (Grandy 1843, 9). He remembered that this annual practice occurred each January, and went on for several years, beginning as a young boy and lasting into his early twenties. He had a variety of different enslavers during this time, each varying in character and temperament and consequently their treatment of their enslaved hires. Recalling his feelings about the system, Grandy remarked that 'In being hired out, sometimes the slave gets a good home, and sometimes a bad one: when he gets a good one, he dreads to see January come; when he has a bad one, the year seems five times as long as it is' (Grandy 1843, 10). Similar to Moses Grandy's recollections of the traumas of hiring day for those enslaved families subject to this system, Lizzie Baker remembered that her mother, Teeny, who was enslaved in Duplin County, told her that although 'they gave de slaves on de plantation one day at Christmas', that 'New Years wus when dey sold 'em an' hired 'em out'. Teeny recalled the intense panic this caused among them all, 'cause dey didn't know who would have to go off to be sold or to work in a strange place' (Baker 1936, 68).

The trade in slaves that were either hired out or sold in the New Year made an indelible mark on the memories of those who experienced this firsthand, or witnessed it at the time or through family lore. It also provided the lie to the images of the paternalistic and benevolent 'master' represented by North Carolinian enslavers such as James Norcom or romanticized Lost Cause narratives such as Rebecca Cameron's and James B. Avirett. Yet, while slave hiring would have had an impact on the already fragile intimacies between enslaved families throughout North Carolina, this was doubtless a system that operated at the local level, affording opportunities to go off the plantation and visit loved ones, either with a permission from their hirer or leaving in secret under the cover of darkness (see Emily 1999; Fraser 2007). As Wayne K. Durrill has argued, North Carolinian enslavers who held a large number of enslaved laborers in Washington County, like Josiah Collins and William Pettigrew, used certain social events in the local Wwhite neighborhood like court week and 4 July picnics which included yeoman farmers and landless laborers 'to re-establish the social bonds which were the bone and sinew of their local power' (Durrill 1995, 175). He argues that these occasions 'served much the same function that the John Kuner festival had for planters and their slaves', in this state by relieving social tensions and permitting, albeit temporarily, the middling stratums of Washington County's white society to feel a modicum of equality with their more wealthy and privileged community members (Durrill 1995, 175). Although not explicitly specified in Durrill's analysis, no doubt there would have been conversations about labor needs and the potential hire of members of their enslaved labor force in the New Year between the white enslaving elite and yeoman farmers at these kinds of events. These discussions were vital in demonstrating the duties of patronage that enslavers were

obliged to perform to ensure continued power and privilege among their white neighbors. They were also fundamental for enslaved people to ensure that separation from their loved ones could be mitigated to an extent through limiting the distance of separation.

Yet, it was the ominous threat of sale that really troubled the enslaved, especially if that sale was to a trader whose travel plans involved the slave auctions of Charleston, South Carolina or further south-west to New Orleans, Louisiana, or Vicksburg, Mississippi (see Deyle 2006; Johnson 2001; Tadman 1989; Williams 2012). Moses Grandy's mother went to great lengths to prevent their enslaver, Bill Grandy, from selling her remaining eight children, hiding them in the woods until those seeking to purchase had left the plantation. Grandy's mother's fears were not without real justification, as she had children born before Moses could remember who 'were dead or [already] sold away' (Grandy 1843, 8). Her attempts however were in vain as Bill Grandy sold two more of her sons, each to different buyers. Moses recalled that one of the brothers who was sold was just a 'little boy' and would have surely been traumatized at being separated at such a young age from all he knew and loved. Moses's mother, who he describes as 'frantic with grief', tried to resist this sale. As Moses recalled however 'she was beaten and held down: she fainted; and when she came to herself, her boy was gone' (Grandy 1843, 8).

While Moses Grandy does not specify the time of year these sales took place, there is ample evidence that they typically occurred at the start of the year in January, often following John Kooners or Christmas celebrations, so as to ensure labor needs were met in the most productive parts of the year. Formerly enslaved W. L. Bost recalled that when he was a little boy, the slave traders regularly came through Newton, North Carolina, on the last few days of December, with a number of enslaved people to sell. As he recalled, 'They always come long on the last day of December so that the[y] . . . would be ready for sale on the first day of January' (Yetman 2000, 35). His enslaver, Jonas Bost owned two plantations a few miles from Newton and a hotel in the town. Bost explained that while the traders stopped at his master's hotel, the enslaved people intended for sale were kept in the quarters on one of the plantations. Winter months can be cold in upper-Southern states like North Carolina, and Bost recalled that the enslaved intended for sale, 'never had enough clothes to keep a cat warm. The women never wore anything but a thin dress and a petticoat and one underwear. I've seen the ice balls hangin on to the bottom of their dresses as they ran along, just like sheep in a pasture before they are sheared'. (Yetman 2000, 35–36). Sorrowfully recounting that '[a]ll through the night I could hear them mournin' and prayin'', his outrage at the way these enslaved people were treated 'just like droves of hogs' was palpable (Yetman 2000, 36). Such scenes of despair, especially in what was supposedly a season of high celebration among the enslavers and a time for relaxation among some of the enslaved, seemingly haunted Bost's memories of the systems of power and privilege that were integral to the structures of the slaveholding South. As he remarked, 'I didn't know the Lord would let people live who were so cruel' (Yetman 2000, 36).

Conclusion

W. L. Bost's overriding memories of the Christmas period then were not of the time off or festivities, which he never mentioned in his harrowing account, but the traffic of enslaved

people who came through Newton for sale and his sorrow for those experiencing such trauma. The Christmas period was never a consistent experience for the enslaved in North Carolina. As this article makes clear, different enslavers had various responses to the Christmastide celebrations, and even this could depend on differing circumstance each year. While descendants of enslavers wrote in romanticized tones about their forefathers' understanding of the need to treat their slaves with charity and benevolence the reality was self-serving for these men and their families. The performances of Christmas gift giving and the relaxation of restrictions on the enslaved around holidays, visiting rights, food & drink and parties was something that the enslaver bestowed as a privilege rather than something enslaved people could demand as their right as workers. The tradition of the John Kooner at Christmas time operated in the same way, allowing the enslaved the opportunity to invert the usual racial power relations of the system, and for the briefest of moments, engage in the mirth and merriment of the carnivalesque. Yet, with the knowledge that this was only ever temporary and could, if the enslaver wanted, be denied in subsequent years. Nevertheless, several of the enslaved in the North Carolina did take advantage of all that Christmas might afford them in the way of an increase in their limited freedoms. In taking these opportunities, they demonstrated their resistance to a system that turned people into products and sold them for a profit. Through their Christmas carousing, some enslaved people in the state sought to reclaim their sense of self as part of a larger community of people, descended from the African continent, who in the atmosphere of the Christmas festivities managed to create physical and psychical spaces – rival geographies – albeit for the briefest of moments. Within these spaces, they celebrated the joy of family and friends, the temporary respite from labor and momentary freedoms from the constraints of the contained spaces associated with enslavers' authority and power. Come New Year it would all revert to business-as-usual, as starkly highlighted through the exploration of hiring day on 1 January. Yet, for the briefest of moments, the enslaved who participated in the Christmastide celebrations in North Carolina could claim freedoms and privilege that were, to many, unknown.

Notes

1. There are varied spellings of this enslaved Christmas ritual including 'John Kooner', 'John Canoe', and Johnkannu". This article will use 'John Kooner' in the rest of the analysis aside from when quoting from others who use a different spelling.
2. Philters are a drink supposed to induce love and desire in the drinker or a love potion. Metempsychosis meaning reincarnation.

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