

UNIVERSIDAD DE SALAMANCA

Facultad de Filología

Departamento de Filología Inglesa

---



*HARRIET JACOBS:  
FORERUNNER OF GENDER STUDIES IN SLAVE NARRATIVES  
AND AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S LITERATURE*

Sonia Sedano Vivanco

2009

UNIVERSIDAD DE SALAMANCA

Facultad de Filología

Departamento de Filología Inglesa

---



***HARRIET JACOBS:  
FORERUNNER OF GENDER STUDIES IN SLAVE NARRATIVES  
AND AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S LITERATURE***

Vº Bº  
LA DIRECTORA,

Tesis doctoral que presenta **SONIA  
SEDANO VIVANCO**, dirigida por la  
Dra. **OLGA BARRIOS HERRERO**

Salamanca 2009

UNIVERSIDAD DE SALAMANCA

Facultad de Filología

Departamento de Filología Inglesa

---



*HARRIET JACOBS:  
FORERUNNER OF GENDER STUDIES IN SLAVE NARRATIVES  
AND AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S LITERATURE*

Sonia Sedano Vivanco

2009

*a Manu  
por el presente*

*a Jimena, Valeria y Mencía  
por el futuro*

*People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did,  
but people will never forget how you made them feel.*  
(Maya Angelou)

*Keep in mind always the present you are constructing. It should be the future you want.*  
(Alice Walker)

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

---

When I decided to undertake this project, enthusiasm and passion filled my heart. I did not know then that this would be such a demanding, complex—but at the same time enjoyable and gratifying—enterprise. It has been a long journey in which I have found the support, encouragement and help of several people whom I must now show my gratitude.

First of all, I would like to thank Dr. Olga Barrios for all her support, zealously, and stimulus. The thorough revisions, sharp comments, endless interest, and continuous assistance of this indefatigable professor have been of invaluable help. Thank you also to well-known scholar of African American literature Frances Smith Foster, whose advice in the genesis of this dissertation served to establish a valid work hypothesis.

I would also like to thank my workmates, both in Salamanca and Madrid, since some in the origin and some in the conclusion of this project have provided me with unconditional support and encouragement. Thank you also to my friends for their understanding, optimism and infinite cheerfulness.

My family has played a crucial role in the realization of this dissertation because, from its outset to its final termination, they have not ceased to support—admonish when necessary—and comfort me. They have also endured my absenteeism, which this document would hopefully now compensate. Thank you, therefore, to my parents, Toñín and Mariasun, and to my brothers and sister, Óscar, Guillermo and Miryam. They all must be proud of this dissertation, for they are part of it. Thank you to

my nieces Jimena and Valeria—and the forthcoming Mencía—because they have awarded me with unforgettable fun moments that have procured great encouragement. My in-laws are also responsible for the termination of this document since they have endured comments about it for several years and have understood my necessary absence at important events. Thus, I must thank Manolo, Mari, Carlos, Marta and Rebeca.

Since the last shall be first, I would like to thank my husband, Manu, most especially. Not only is he an example of dedication and tenacity (an example I would like to mirror), but he has, more than anyone else, suffered the consequences of living with a Ph.D. candidate; he has, more than anyone else, given me the strength to accomplish this goal; he has, more than anyone else, made me laugh on difficult days with his fantastic sense of humor. Hence, my most sincere and profound gratitude to Manu.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	5
<b>CHAPTER 1. LIFE AS A SLAVE</b> .....	25
1. The Slave Codes: Their Impact on the Life of Slaves .....	29
2. Jobs Performed by Male and Female Slaves: From Childhood through Adulthood .....	58
3. Slaves' Means of Resistance to Slavery .....	86
<b>CHAPTER 2. SLAVE NARRATIVES: THEIR VALUE AS HISTORY AND AS LITERATURE</b> .....	113
1. Antebellum and Postbellum Slave Narratives: Their Value as History .....	118
2. Slave Narratives as Literature.....	126
2.1. Slave Narratives vs. Other Contemporary Literary Genres.....	127
Autobiography .....	129
Confessional Literature and Spiritual Biography .....	143
Sentimental Novel .....	149
Picaresque Novel and African Folktales .....	163
Criminal and Captivity Narratives.....	174
Novel of Ordeal .....	178
2.2. The Slave Narrative as a Literary Genre .....	185
<b>CHAPTER 3. GENDER AS DIFFERENCE: HARRIET JACOBS'S <i>INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL (1861)</i> AND THE LITERARY TRADITION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS</b> .....	226



1. African American Women Writers and Female Slave Narratives before the Civil War .....	229
1.1. African American Women Writers before the Civil War.....	230
African American Women Poets.....	230
African American Women Essayists .....	234
African American Women Novelists .....	239
African American Women Autobiographers.....	244
1.2. Female Slave Narratives before the Civil War .....	255
2. <i>Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: A Womanist Approach to Slave Narratives</i> .....	297
3. The Haunting Memory of <i>Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: From Postbellum Slave Narratives to Contemporary African American Women’s Writings</i> .....	335
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	353
<b>APPENDIXES</b> .....	366
- Appendix A: Illustrations .....	369
- Appendix B: Documents and Maps .....	383
- Appendix C: Slave Songs and Poems on Slavery .....	395
- Appendix D: Instruments of Torture Used by Slaveholders .....	409
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	423

## INTRODUCTION

---

See these poor souls from Africa  
Transported to America;  
We are stolen, and sold to Georgia,  
Will you go along with me?  
We are stolen, and sold to Georgia,  
Come sound the jubilee!

(Traditional slave song)<sup>1</sup>

Slavery still exists today. It might be called human trafficking, forced labor, sex trafficking, etc., but it is, nonetheless, slavery, and it is widespread all over the world. It is estimated that between twelve and twenty-seven million people are caught in one or another form of slavery, and that international trafficking involves between 600,000 and 800,000 slaves. Almost three out of every four victims are women, and half of modern slaves are children.<sup>2</sup> Nowadays, slave labor is used for a variety of purposes, among which are prostitution, pornography, domestic servitude, agriculture, construction, mining, sweatshops, and child soldiers.

Being a current-affairs issue, slavery is present in contemporary literature. It has been revisited in modern autobiographies, like *Slave* (2004), written by Mende Nazer with Damien Lewis,<sup>3</sup> and *Escape from Slavery* (2003), by Francis Bok with Edward Tivnan.<sup>4</sup> However, it is also persistently recurrent in works of fiction like *A Mercy*

---

<sup>1</sup> See "Appendix C: Slave Songs and Poems on Slavery," p. 395, for the complete lyrics of this song.

<sup>2</sup> This datum applies to the year 2009 according to the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center. See more information on its website <[www.freedomcenter.org/slavery-today/](http://www.freedomcenter.org/slavery-today/)>

<sup>3</sup> Mende Nazer is a Sudanese who was kidnapped and sold into slavery as a girl. She managed to escape to freedom in September 2000 during a stay in London. Damien Lewis is a British journalist and filmmaker.

<sup>4</sup> Francis Bok is a Sudanese who was kidnapped as a child and lived in slavery for ten years before escaping imprisonment in Kurdufan (Sudan) and traveling to freedom in the United States. Edward Tivnan is an American journalist and author of several books.

(2008), by Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison. Therefore, it seems that as long as slavery continues to be a problem in society, it will not cease to be present in black modern letters. This is why literary works like *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, by Harriet Jacobs are still relevant nowadays. In fact, as I will analyze in this dissertation, *Incidents* is one of the most significant slave narratives ever published because it is the only full-length autobiographical female slave narrative; because its author was one of the first to introduce womanist—black feminist—concerns in African American women’s literature; and because it discloses typical aspects of black women’s experience such as freedom, motherhood, and sexuality, which would be revisited by twentieth- and twenty-first-century black women writers in America.

In August 1619, a Dutch privateer brought the first Africans to the English colonies in North America. The ship arrived in Jamestown, Virginia, with 20 captives<sup>5</sup> who would become the first African slaves in British America. This was the beginning of the slave trade between Africa and the United States.<sup>6</sup> Plantation owners in North America needed abundant workers and they wanted them for a cheap price. Native Americans were their first choice, but they died from various diseases that Europeans introduced in the New World (smallpox, mumps, and measles among others) and to which Native Americans were not immune. Moreover, these workers could easily run away to their nearby homes—or their friends’ or relatives’ houses—because they were familiarized with the natural environment of the area and knew how to survive in it. Another source of workers came from Europe. On the one hand, criminals sentenced to labor were sometimes sent to North America to work. On the other hand, some people were forced to work at arrival in America in order to pay for their voyage. In any case, neither the European criminals nor these workers who paid for their voyage with their

---

<sup>5</sup> The ship had left the coast of Africa with about 100 Africans to be sold in North America, but many of them died during the journey due to extremely bad weather conditions.

<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, what was termed the *Atlantic Slave Trade* (the transportation of captives from Africa to destinations in Europe and the Americas) had already begun in the fifteenth century, and it would continue through the nineteenth century.

labor proved to be a good choice either: some of them died of tropical diseases such as malaria and yellow fever, and other escaped without being noticed since they were mistaken for white European planters. Africans, then, became the best option for labor force for several reasons: first, they came from an environment in which most of them had developed some immunity to both European and tropical diseases; secondly, African captives could not escape and go home—as many Native Americans did—because an ocean separated them from it, and it was very difficult for them to obtain the means to travel back to Africa; third, they could not be mistaken for other European planters because of their skin color; and finally, they made really good workers because they were used to farming in Africa:

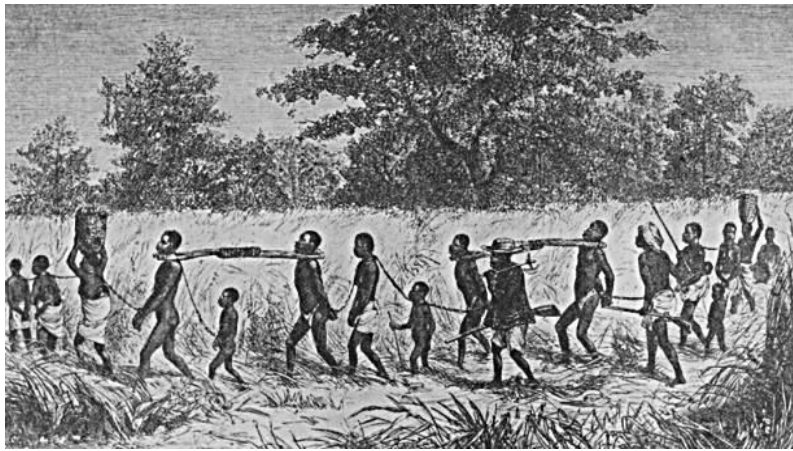
Faced with the problem of [needing cheap and steady] labor, [the colonizers] attempted the use of Indian and white indentured servants. They soon found that the Indians did not make satisfactory slaves because the Indian men had left that work to the women, while they concentrated on hunting and warfare. . . . So that slavery developed only gradually, and as a substitute, as they learned that the black slaves, who had been accustomed to farming in Africa, made more useful workers around farms and plantations (Clarke and Harding 34).

Therefore, slave traders traveled to Africa to kidnap or buy black slaves,<sup>7</sup> and take them to the Americas. The voyage from Africa to the Americas across the Atlantic Ocean was called the *Middle Passage* because it was the middle leg of a three-part voyage that began and ended in Europe. The first part of the voyage carried a cargo—usually of iron, cloth, brandy, firearms, and gunpowder—from Europe to Africa. There, the cargo was exchanged for Africans. The ship then sailed to the Americas fully loaded with African captives, and it was in the Americas where the slaves were exchanged for sugar, tobacco, or some other products. The vast majority of African captives were then taken to Brazil, the Caribbean, and Spanish-speaking areas of South and Central America;

---

<sup>7</sup> Slavery was not rare in Africa, since most African communities used captives to work the land. Most of these slaves became so by being taken prisoners in wars between different tribes; others were enslaved as punishment for their crimes or religious offenses; finally, a few became slaves voluntarily because it was the only means by which they could maintain and care for themselves or their families. The slave trade was also a common practice in African societies even before the Atlantic Slave Trade started. In western Africa captives were sold across the Sahara to North Africa, and central Africans sold slaves eastward to the Indian Ocean before AD 700, continuing to do so till the beginning of the twentieth century.

fewer captives were transported to the Atlantic islands, continental Europe, and English-speaking areas of North America.<sup>8</sup> The final leg brought the ship back to Europe.



*Captives in central Africa. From <www.encarta.msn.com>*

The Middle Passage took place on specially constructed ships with platforms below deck designed to maximize the number of slaves on board. There were about 300 to 400 slaves packed in an area with little ventilation—they had less than half the space given to convicts or soldiers transported by ship at the same time—and, in some cases, not even enough space to place buckets for human waste, shipboard hygiene being primitive.<sup>9</sup> It was a long voyage (between five and twelve weeks average) and the conditions in which the captives traveled were very harsh. They were branded with hot irons and restrained with shackles.<sup>10</sup> Men remained chained, but women—who were often raped by members of the crew—and children were usually a bit freer. These African captives had a meager diet based on rice, yams and beans (usually, two meals were given per day, and each person received about a pint of water with a meal). Olaudah Equiano—born in what is now southeastern Nigeria, kidnapped when still a child, taken to the West Indies for a few days, and from there brought into Virginia to be sold to a local planter—describes the conditions under which his voyage to Barbados took place in the following terms:

---

<sup>8</sup> See “Appendix B: Documents and Maps,” pp. 392-393, for maps on the African Diaspora and slave destinations.

<sup>9</sup> See “Appendix A: Illustrations,” p. 378, for a detailed drawing of a slave ship.

<sup>10</sup> Despite the shackles, crews used to encourage movement and activity on board so that the captives would keep in good shape until being sold.

The stench of the hold while we were on the coast was . . . intolerably loathsome . . . but now that the whole ship's cargo were confined together, it became absolutely pestilential. The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died . . . This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, . . . and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable (58).<sup>11</sup>

Thus, it is not surprising that many ships reached their destination with barely half the amount of Africans still alive to be sold as slaves.<sup>12</sup>

There were two main causes of death among the captives: disease and suicide. In the fragment above, Olaudah Equiano comments on the fact that some of the captives died due to illnesses derived from the unhealthy conditions in which they were kept and transported. Captains tried to keep food and water from contamination and to isolate sick slaves, but sanitary facilities were deficient and slave ships nurtured diseases such as dysentery, which killed many captives. Other slaves, however, committed suicide during the voyage—sometimes starving themselves to death but, most frequently, throwing themselves overboard. Equiano was also witness to one of these suicides on his voyage from Africa to North America, and describes this episode in the following terms:

One day, when we had a smooth sea, and moderate wind, two of my wearied countrymen, who were chained together (I was near them at the time), preferring death to such a life of misery, somehow made through the nettings, and jumped into the sea: immediately another quite dejected fellow, who, on account of his illness, was suffered to be out of irons, also followed their example; and I believe many more would very soon have done the same, if they had not been prevented by the ship's crew, who were instantly alarmed . . . two

---

<sup>11</sup> In *The Child's Anti-Slavery Book* (1859), written by various authors and distributed by the Sunday School Union to instruct young free white children against slavery, there is an explanation about the conditions under which many Africans traveled on slave ships: "[T]he ship was crowded with negro men, women, and children. The poor things were packed like spoons below the deck. . . . I cannot tell you how horribly the poor negroes suffered. Bad air, poor food, close confinement, and cruel treatment killed them off by scores. When they died their bodies were pitched into the sea, without pity or remorse" (3).

<sup>12</sup> It is estimated that more than sixty million of Africans died in captivity before reaching the New World and during the Middle Passage. Toni Morrison, who dedicates *Beloved* to these "Sixty Million and more," states in an interview that "one account describes the Congo as so clogged with bodies that the boat couldn't pass . . . They packed eight hundred into a ship if they'd promised to deliver four hundred. They assumed that half would die. And half did" (Clemons 75).

of the wretches were drowned, but they got the other, and afterwards flogged him unmercifully, for thus attempting to *prefer death to slavery* (59; emphasis added).

Nevertheless, it was not easy for African slaves to kill themselves because the captains of slave ships considered their human cargo very valuable and did whatever they could to prevent these captives from committing suicide.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, this preference of death over slavery was not exclusive of the slaves brought from Africa into the New World. North American slaves also preferred to die rather than live in bondage, and many former slaves often expressed this fact in their personal histories, as it will be seen in the following pages.

Although the enslavement of blacks of African origin was practical and profitable, slaveholders and proslavery agents had to rationalize it because they faced the strong opposition of abolitionist agents. One of the most frequently-repeated arguments in favor of the enslavement of black people was developed during the Enlightenment. During this period it was believed that human beings were superior to other animals and vegetal beings because they had intelligence, intellect, reason. Eighteenth century philosophers provided arguments to justify the inferiority of black people on the grounds that they were denied the capacity to reason. Among those who defended the natural inferiority of Africans were the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, the French philosopher Voltaire, the Scottish philosopher and historian David

---

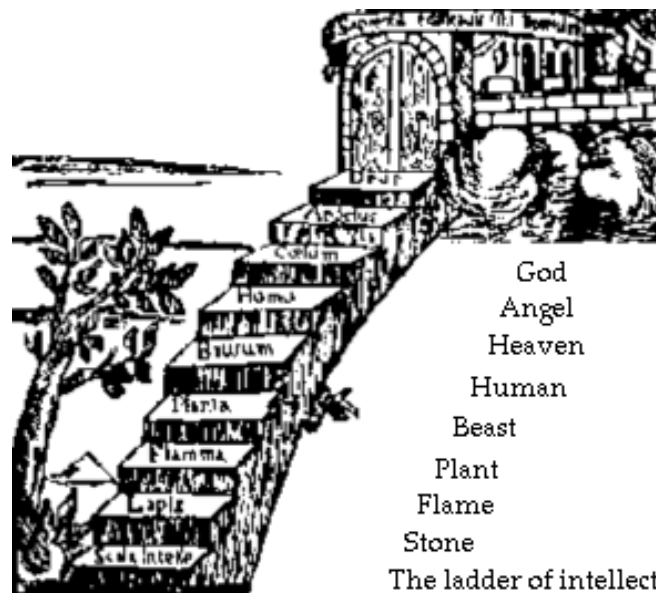
<sup>13</sup> Apart from the opposition found in the captains of slave ships, Africans had a moral and/or religious constraint that prevented them from committing suicide. Many Africans “believed that to take one’s own life was both daring and an ontological abomination. Although they were diverse in their tribal backgrounds, they had similar ontological beliefs. One of their central tenets regarding life was that it was sacred and that individuals did not have the authority to commit suicide” (Reyes 38). Thus, although suicide was something like a crime for African peoples, many slaves to-be used it as a means of resistance, a source of empowerment and counterattack to the evil that was being caused to them. In order to eliminate the negative aspect of suicide, African slaves invented the myth of “the Flying African.” Instead of admitting that their relatives or friends had jumped off slave ships, slaves preferred explaining their disappearance by arguing that they had flown back to their native land, to Africa. In this line, Angelita Dianne Reyes argues that

“to fly” was a euphemism for suicide during the days of slavery; it was a private transcript for covering up sudden escape and denying resistance that took the form of self-chosen death. It meant leaving one kind of material existence, the life that is known, and crossing the river over to the next world of the spirit. . . . At that first moment of slavery in the Americas, most New World Africans would have seen suicide as a violation against the cosmos. The act, therefore, had to be cleansed and wiped from collective memory by the community of kin left behind (39-40).

Hume, and the American political philosopher Thomas Jefferson. These writers expressed negative opinions about Africans and other *savages* or *primitives* on account of the impressions or materials gained from travelers, missionaries and explorers. African American scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. summarizes the theory that described racial superiority and inferiority as follows:

[T]he Enlightenment . . . used the absence and presence of reason to delimit and circumscribe the very humanity of the cultures and people of color which Europeans had been “discovering” since the Renaissance. The urge toward the systematization of all human knowledge, by which we characterize the Enlightenment, in other words led directly to the relegation of black people to a lower rung on the Great Chain of Being, an eighteenth century metaphor that arranged all of creation on the vertical scale from animals and plants and insects through man to the angels and God himself. By 1750, the chain had become individualized; the human scale rose from “the lowliest Hottentot” (black South Africans) to “glorious Milton and Newton” (*The Signifying Monkey* 129-130).

The idea of the existence of a Great Chain of Being or *Scala Naturae* was based on two main points: (i) all beings created below man are created for his use, and (ii) *reason* is the only dividing line between man and beast.<sup>14</sup>



The “ladder of intellect” from *Shakespearean times* by Michael Best, *Shakespeare’s Life and Times*.

<sup>14</sup> The concept is grounded on ideas about the nature of God, or the first cause, found in Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus, and was developed by later thinkers into an inclusive worldview. This view was already prevalent in the Renaissance, but was given further philosophical refinement by Leibniz early in the eighteenth century, and was adopted by many thinkers of the Enlightenment. The Chain of Being is composed of a great number of hierarchal links, from the most base and foundational elements up to the very highest perfection—in other words, God, or the Prime Mover. “Appendix A: Illustrations” (pp. 376-377) includes two representations and a brief explanation of the Great Chain of Being that can clarify the construction of this philosophical principle.



People of African descent such as the Hottentots were considered to be on the lowest rung of mankind—close to animals—and not endowed with intellect or reason. This idea seemed to justify the enslavement of this race, for it was believed that all beings created below man had been created for his use: “If the Negro was, as strongly suspected, a form of being mediate between the higher animals and man, his enslavement was justified and the social order of the South was the only social order in which was shown the will of the Divine Creator” (Erno 62). Furthermore, if, according to Erlene Stetson, “[w]hite women were assigned a position inferior to that of white men on the Chain, with the white man asserting his intellectual superiority” (76),<sup>15</sup> black women would be in an even lower position than black men. Thus, both the racism and sexism of the time would be justified on philosophical grounds.

In this light, white planters could use black African slaves to farm their lands having a clear conscience. They simply used the beings at a lower rank in the Chain for their profit, something which they were supposed to do naturally. Moreover, black women, who were at an even lower rung, could be used by any being at a higher level, thus, becoming subject to the whims of both white and black men.

Keeping slaves was good business, for not only did they work hard (they were encouraged to do so by the whip), were well adapted to the natural environment of North America, and were immune to some diseases, but also increased in number in a natural manner. As it will be examined in the first chapter, legislation established that the child of a slave mother would become, automatically, a slave. As a consequence, slaveholders promoted and encouraged *marital unions* among their slaves so that they would have children to increase their working force, production, and possessions. This explains why, although the slave trade was outlawed in the United States in 1808,<sup>16</sup> the amount of slaves in this country did not diminish. On the contrary, the number of slaves grew every year. By 1750, there were almost 240,000 people of African descent in

---

<sup>15</sup> For instance, (white) women were denied the right to vote on the basis of their alleged intellectual inferiority.

<sup>16</sup> Britain abolished the slave trade in 1807, the Netherlands in 1814, France in 1815, and Spain in 1820.

British North America (20% of the population), most of whom lived in Virginia, Maryland and South Carolina—large plantations were concentrated on the South and most slaves worked there.<sup>17</sup> In 1790 there were less than 700,000 slaves in the Old South, but almost 4,000,000 slaves in 1860. Only a small percentage of these slaves was the product of the slave trade since most of them had been born in slavery in the United States.

This slave population was concentrated in the hands of a few owners: three fourths of the white people in the South did not hold slaves and 88% of the slaveholders in 1860 had less than twenty slaves.<sup>18</sup> Despite the fact that many white people did not hold slaves, the institution<sup>19</sup> of slavery was maintained for two main reasons: first, the great majority of the staple crops were produced on plantations that used slaves as working force; second, many non-slaveholders hoped to become slaveowners one day and to enjoy the privileges of this favored social class.

The fact that the great majority of slaves were in the hands of a few owners meant that those slaveholders exerted an enormous influence on the political and economic life of the South. By the 1850s, there were more millionaires in the plantations from Natchez, Mississippi, to New Orleans, Louisiana, than in all other areas of the nation combined. By 1860, the twelve richest counties in the nation were located in the Southern States. Consequently, since the economy of the United States

---

<sup>17</sup> Blacks constituted over 60% of the population in South Carolina, over 43% in Virginia, and over 30% in Maryland, but only about 2% in Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire.

<sup>18</sup> It was generally agreed that thirty to sixty slaves constituted a profitable working force. Thus, twenty slaves were usually employed on smaller plantations by not-so-great planters or slaveholders.

<sup>19</sup> The word *slavery* was frequently substituted by euphemisms like *peculiar institution* or *domestic institution*. About the use of the term *domestic institution* to refer to the enslavement of human beings, the historian Willie Lee Rose writes:

Proslavery philosophers intended to suggest a benign institution that encouraged between masters and slaves the qualities so much admired in the Victorian family: cheerful obedience and gratitude on the part of the children (read slaves), and paternalistic wisdom, protection, and discipline on the part of the father (read master). . . . So, in the nineteenth century, the phrase “domestic institution” came to mean slavery idealized, slavery translated into a fundamental and idealized Victorian institution, the family (21).

depended on the economy of the South,<sup>20</sup> the economy of the whole country depended on the work of slaves.

Given that slaves were so important for the economic life of North America, their position in society had to be regulated. Thus, there existed a body of slave laws in every state that controlled and gave legal status to all the aspects related to slave life. These slave codes, which will be more thoroughly examined in following pages, varied in content from state to state but the main principles that inspired all of them were similar. They included lots of restrictions for slaves and a detailed account of the punishments that should be inflicted upon them on account of disobedience, misbehavior, robbery, etc.

In this restrictive and racist context, many ex slaves who had escaped from slavery—or bought their freedom—managed to write and publish their autobiographies. These ex slaves, who had previously been victims of the slave system, fought actively against this institution by writing their personal experiences of slavery. In this way, they contributed to the creation of a new literary genre that would become the origin of African American literature: the slave narrative. The importance of slave narratives in modern African American letters is such that the latter could not be understood without a previous analysis of the literature written by ex slaves.<sup>21</sup>

It was the influence and the status of slave narratives as genesis of African American literature that most attracted my attention and made me feel deeply interested in these documents. One of the issues that particularly fascinated me was the difference between slave narratives written by men and slave narratives written by women. It was interesting to see how bondwomen depicted the two-fold submission they endured, for they were not only subjected to white men as slaves, but also as women. Added to the

---

<sup>20</sup> Southern cotton accounted for almost 60% of the value of all the national exports.

<sup>21</sup> For further information on the influence of slave narratives on African American literature, see, for example, “Introduction: The Language of Slavery,” by Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., published in their book *The Slave’s Narrative* (1985).

hardships that derived from their condition as slaves, which their male counterparts also endured, they had to suffer the consequences of being slave *women*, which involved experiences that were specific of their kind. What I wanted to analyze was how their sociological background—the different position and roles of (black) men and women in society—influenced their literary production. I wanted to examine whether the double discrimination these female slaves endured influenced the way in which their narratives of bondage were written, and whether male and female slave narrators described their experiences in slavery in significantly different ways due to the different nature of male and female bondage.

Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) particularly attracted my attention since her personal history differed greatly from *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself* (1845), which has traditionally been considered the greatest slave narrative. In *Incidents*, Harriet Jacobs discloses aspects that were specific of female slaves' experiences, aspects that were unveiled in most narratives of bondage by male authors. I wanted to examine the extent to which Harriet Jacobs's is an unusual case within the slave narrative genre—especially within the slave narratives written by or about black women—as well as the influence she has exerted on ulterior African American women's writings. Such was the genesis of the present document, a document that will analyze the way in which Harriet Jacobs managed to adapt the conventions of slave narrative as written by men in order to elaborate a unique personal history of bondage, a history of female bondage written from a womanist perspective. Furthermore, this dissertation will demonstrate that *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is the only full-length autobiographical account of a female slave ever published. Finally, the analysis to be developed in the following pages will also show that Harriet Jacobs and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* have conditioned modern African American women's writings in the sense that topics already present in *Incidents*, like freedom, motherhood, and sexuality, constitute the main axis of present-day black women's letters.

In order to carry out this task, this dissertation has been divided into three chapters, to which four appendixes have been added. The first chapter, entitled “Life as a Slave,” will deal with a sociological and historical analysis of slave life. Since the historical and social context in which slaves lived was a factor that powerfully conditioned the way in which they approached their accounts of bondage,<sup>22</sup> the examination of these issues will serve as background for the subsequent literary analysis of the narratives by ex slaves. Thus, this chapter will begin with the section “The Slave Codes: Their Impact on the Life of Slaves,” which will summarize the most important laws included in these bodies of legislation that regulated the life of slaves. One of these laws affected more specifically the lives of slave women. It established that the children should follow the condition of the mother and become slaves if their mother was so. As a consequence of this regulation, many female slaves were raped by their masters, who would thus obtain both sexual pleasure and economic profit from these sexual encounters. Others were treated as *breeders* and forced to marry other slaves on the plantation so as to have children to increase their master’s stock.

The second part of this chapter, entitled “Jobs Performed by Slaves: From Childhood Through Adulthood,” will include an analysis of the different issues that conditioned the life of slaves, placing special emphasis on the differences between the roles that slave men and women played on the plantation. This analysis of slave life will also focus on the relationship between slaveholders and slaves, especially between masters and bondwomen. The aim of this section is to present one of the topics around which Harriet Jacobs constructed *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: sexual harassment, rape, and appropriation of sexuality, which, as stated above, slave women had to endure.

---

<sup>22</sup> According to Gay Wilentz, “we cannot separate the [oppressed peoples’] literature from the historical or cultural context in which it was written” (xiii). Wilentz further argues that “the task of exploring works of cultures suppressed by the dominant culture needs an interdisciplinary approach to criticism, an examination of the literature’s historicity and social significance, attention to its oral/folkloric inheritance, and an understanding of the writer’s commitment to reflect and often reform the culture that the literature represents” (xiii).

Since slaves rejected and condemned the conditions under which they had to live and the treatment they were enduring, they carried out an active fight against slavery in general, and their owners in particular. Hence, this first chapter will conclude with an analysis of “Slaves’ Means of Resistance to Slavery.” Among the *weapons* that slaves used to fight against their situation were talking back, physical fight, robbery, murder, and infanticide. These—and other—resistance instruments will be discussed in this section, examining the differences between the ways in which male and female slaves used their wit and courage to defeat the slavery system and its agents, for they will provide some clues about the methods Harriet Jacobs employed to defeat her master. The differences between the way in which slave men and women reacted against their situation, and between the roles slave men and slave women played on the plantation would constitute an essential and differentiating element in the narratives of bondage written by former slaves.

These narratives of bondage constitute the axis around which the second chapter of this dissertation, entitled “Slave Narratives: Their Value as History and as Literature,” is constructed. This second chapter will begin with a revision of the definition of the term *slave narratives*, used to refer to the narratives of bondage written by former slaves in America. Furthermore, the distinction between the slave narratives written before and after the Civil war will be briefly considered. This distinction is crucial because, although the slave narrative genre follows a very strict pattern, the narratives written before and after the Emancipation have a significantly different (historical rather than literary) relevance. This issue will be further discussed in the third chapter in relation to Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

Despite the alleged historical value of these writings, the use of these biographies for historical purposes has been a question of great controversy. Thus, this chapter will begin with the section entitled “Antebellum and Postbellum Slave Narratives: Their Value as History,” which will examine why slave sources must also be taken into account in any historical study of the slavery period in the United States.

However, no matter whether the historical value of slave narratives is controversial or not, it is obvious that these accounts of slave life have an enormous value as literature. They set the basis of African American literature and, therefore, the analysis of the language and literary conventions used by former slaves in their personal histories will be very useful for the examination of ulterior writings by African American authors. Thus, after defining the slave narrative genre and discussing the relevance of these writings for historical purposes, the second part of this chapter, entitled “Slave Narratives as Literature,” will examine the stylistic characteristics of slave narratives. For this purpose, in the section entitled “Slave Narratives vs. Other Contemporary Literary Genres,” I will examine the way in which other existent literary genres—the autobiography, confessional literature and the spiritual autobiography, the sentimental novel, the picaresque novel and African folktales, criminal and captivity narratives, and the novel of ordeal—influenced the way in which slave narratives were written. All the above-listed genres will be analyzed with special emphasis on the influence they might have exerted on Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. This literary work will prove to have a special connection with the sentimental novel, though the author’s experiences and womanist concerns prevented its complete adherence to this genre.

Most of the above-mentioned genres to be discussed in relation to the slave narrative were originally created by white writers. This imitation of the literature of the oppressors led to the belief that slave authors were doing what some postcolonial critics have called *mimicry*, that is, the (parodical) imitation of the colonizers—in this case, of their literary forms. Nevertheless, this dissertation will show that although slave narrators imitated white people’s literature they, nonetheless, added their own genuine set of cultural aspects and used them to fight against their fate.

Once the generic influences on slave narratives and the use of mimicry by slave narrators have been studied, I will examine some other formal conventions present in this type of writings in the section entitled “The Slave Narrative as a Literary Genre.” These conventions were so precise that they contributed to the creation of what North

American critic James Olney has termed “master outline.” As Olney states, “[t]he conventions for slave narratives were so early and so firmly established that one can imagine a sort of *master outline* drawn from the great narratives and guiding the lesser ones” (“I Was Born” 152; emphasis added). Olney enumerates the items that constituted this “master outline”—a title page that included the words “Written by Himself” (or some close variant), authenticating testimonials, the words “I was born...” at the beginning of the narrative, accounts of several whippings, etc.—in his essay entitled “‘I Was Born’: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature.” These conventions of the narratives of bondage will be disclosed in this chapter with examples from various slave narratives. The recurrent topics repeated and revisited in many slave narratives—the comparison between black slaves and Israelites, the unity of the black family, the cruel whippings suffered by (especially female) slaves, the manner in which a few strong slaves resisted to being whipped, and the opposition slaves found to their learning to read and write—will also be analyzed.

Nevertheless, the literary pattern of the slave narrative genre was firmly constructed on the basis of slave narratives written or narrated by ex slave *men*. Very few slave narratives (around twelve percent, according to Mary Helen Washington<sup>23</sup>) focused on the experiences of female slaves. Thus, the above-listed characteristics of the slave narrative genre, elaborated using the most well-known and significant narratives, fit the personal histories of bondmen, but had to be transformed in the narratives of bondwomen’s lives. When slave women attempted to publish their personal histories, the literary pattern used to narrate the experiences of former slave men was found not to fully meet their narrative expectations, and these women would therefore have to adapt it to relate their unique experiences as female slaves—experiences that male authors had neglected in their writings. These women found it hard to ascertain an appropriate and decorous way of disclosing these experiences in their personal histories due to the sexist—apart from racist—attitudes of the time, and consequently relied on other black

---

<sup>23</sup> Mary Helen Washington refers thus to the total number of extant slave narratives in *Invented Lives*.



and white, male and female authors to narrate their experiences in bondage. It is in this context that Harriet Jacobs emerges as the first African American woman to put into writing the experiences of a female slave providing a first-hand account of her sufferings in the first person. It is this context that serves as background for the third chapter of this dissertation, entitled “Gender as Difference: Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and the Literary Tradition of African American Women Writers.”

Since Harriet Jacobs had managed to learn to read and write despite the prohibition to provide slaves with literacy skills, she could have found the inspiration to write her autobiography in different sources. On the one hand, in the slave narratives published before hers; on the other, in African American women’s writings. Since Jacobs prided herself on her condition as black and female, she would have probably been more influenced by African American women authors, whose hardships and problems were more similar to hers than those of black men writers. Thus, this third chapter will begin with a section entitled “African American Women Writers and Female Slave Narratives before the Civil War,” which will include an analysis of the most important writings by African American women before the publication of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* so as to determine the influence they might have had on Jacobs’s slave narrative. Hence, the writings by poets such as Phillis Wheatley and Sarah Louise Forten, essayists like Mary Ann Shadd Cary, and Ann Plato, novelists like Harriet Wilson and Frances E. W. Harper will be examined in relation to *Incidents*. As this analysis will conclude, although there are similarities in the concerns expressed in *Incidents* and in the poems, articles, essays, and novels of these African American women authors, these similarities emerge from the condition of these women in society, rather than from purely literary aspects. These women’s writings did not provide Harriet Jacobs with an adequate model to narrate her experiences of bondage since none of them had written an autobiography, and none of them, except for Phillis Wheatley, had lived as a slave.

However, there were some African American women who *did* write their autobiographies before the publication of *Incidents*. Some of these autobiographies have been often included in bibliographical accounts of slave narratives but are, nevertheless, more alike to spiritual autobiographies (though not completely fitting in this category either). These are the cases of Maria W. Stewart's *Productions of Mrs. Maria Stewart* (1835), and Jarena Lee's *The Life and Religious Experiences of Jarena Lee, A Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel. Revised and Corrected from the Original Manuscript, Written by Herself* (1836), among others. There were, nevertheless, female slave narratives written before the publication of *Incidents* and which could diminish Jacobs's pioneering enterprise within this genre. However, none of them were written by the female ex slaves themselves but by some amanuensis, black and white men and women who wanted to help the former slave woman to put her experiences into writing. Among these works are *The History of Mary Prince* (1831) by Susanna Strickland, *Memoir of Mrs. Chloe Spear* (1832), by Rebecca Warren Brown, *Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge* (1838), by Frances Harriet Green, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (1850), by Olive Gilbert, *Narrative of Joanna* (1796), by John Gabriel Stedman, *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon* (1861), by Hiram Mattison, *Aunt Sally; or The Cross the Way to Freedom* (1858), written by her son Isaac Williams, and *Narrative of the Life of Jane Brown*, written by Reverend G. W. Offley. The analysis of these works will demonstrate that *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was the first female slave narrative written by the former bondswoman herself. The first part of the third chapter will conclude with an analysis of the other antebellum female slave narratives published after Jacobs's autobiography—*Memoir of Old Elizabeth, a Coloured Woman* (1863), written anonymously, and *The Story of Dinah* (1863), written by John Hawkins Simpson, an analysis that will demonstrate that not only was *Incidents* the first autobiographical account of a female slave, but also the only one written and published before the American Civil War.

Having examined the originality and relevance of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* within African American (women's) literature, an analysis of the stylistic and thematic characteristics of this literary work will be carried out in the second section of the third chapter. In this section, entitled "*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: A Womanist Approach to Slave Narratives*," emphasis will be placed on Harriet Jacobs's adaptations of the conventions of the slave narrative genre, for, although Harriet Jacobs follows most of the conventions of the genre, she adapts them so as to conform to her womanist concerns. Jacobs provides, thus, a new perspective to thematic issues already present in slave narratives like the turning point in the ex slave's life, the quest for literacy, and the means of resistance employed against slavery and the enslavers.

Having analyzed the significant contribution of Harriet Jacobs to the slave narrative genre, her contribution to African American women's writings will also be discussed in the third section of this final chapter. This section, entitled "*The Haunting Memory of Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: From Postbellum Slave Narratives to Contemporary African American Women's Writings*," will examine the female slave narratives published after the Civil War, to conclude that none of them—*The Story of Mattie J. Jackson*, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*, *The Story of the Lord's Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith*, *A Slave Girl's Story*, *Memories of Childhood's Slavery Days*, and *Behind the Scenes*, to name some—can be equated with *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, for *Incidents* is the only *full-length* autobiographical slave narrative by an African American woman written and published either before or after the Civil War.

My analysis will conclude with an overview of the influence exerted by Harriet Jacobs and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* on twentieth and twenty-first African American women's literature. This influence shows three main dimensions. First, modern black women authors have revisited the experiences of female slaves in the so-called liberatory narratives such as Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Secondly, contemporary African American women writers like Ida B. Wells

and Maya Angelou have continued using the autobiographical mode of narration as sense of identity. Finally, topics like freedom, sexuality, and motherhood, already discussed in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* are still present in the writings by black women writers such as Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker.

In this light, this dissertation will not only highlight the originality of Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* within the slave narrative genre, but will furthermore reveal the influence that this slave narrative has exerted on contemporary African American women's literature, a body of writings that continues using the autobiographical mode of narration as identity sign, and which continues revisiting topics like freedom, sexuality, and motherhood previously examined by Harriet Jacobs in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

These conclusions, which emerge from the analysis that will be developed in the three chapters of this survey, will be followed by four appendixes. These appendixes clarify and depict aspects that will be previously examined in this document. Thus, "Appendix A: Illustrations" provides a series of portraits of slave authors whose life and work are disclosed in the three preceding chapters. A photograph of Harriet Jacobs is, for obvious reasons, the first to be found in this appendix. Other pictures related to slave life, such as the dwellings used by bondmen and women, are also included in this section to illustrate aspects that are discussed in the first chapter. In "Appendix B: Documents and Maps" I have compiled interesting documents like *The Declaration of Independence* and *The Fugitive Slave Act*, which are briefly examined—especially in the first chapter—in relation to their impact on the lives of slaves. This appendix also includes some authenticating documents included in slave narratives and discussed in the second chapter, as well as maps representing, for instance, the African diaspora, shortly described in this introduction. "Appendix C: Slave Songs and Poems on Slavery" includes a collection of songs sung by slaves, many of which had the purpose of complaining about slavery and the treatment bondmen were receiving from their masters. The lyrics of these songs clarify specific points that are previously stated in the

first chapter as regards the importance religion had for slaves, and the use of signifying. I have also incorporated in this section several poems written by well-known white and black authors to complain about the system that regulated human bondage, and which—as examined in chapter two—were frequently quoted in slave narratives. Finally, “Appendix D: “Instruments of Torture Used by Slaveholders” presents different tools used by slaveowners to punish slaves. These instruments of torture portray the kind of physical suffering bondmen and women had to endure during their enslavement. However, the psychological torment they had to bear cannot be depicted in a few illustrations.

## CHAPTER 1

### LIFE AS A SLAVE

---

We raise de wheat,  
Dey gib us de corn:  
We bake de bread,  
Dey gib us de cruss;  
We sif de meal,  
Dey gib us de huss;  
We peal de meat,  
Dey gib us de skin;  
And dat's de way  
Dey takes us in;  
We skim de pot,  
Dey gib us de liquor,  
And say dat's good enough for nigger.

(Traditional slave rhyme)

Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is the autobiography of an African American woman who spent many years in bondage. Her work is included in the literary tradition of slave narratives, that is, the personal histories of former slaves. The experiences that these ex slave narrators compile in their biographies or autobiographies were strongly influenced by the socio-historical context in which these African Americans lived. Consequently, it is indispensable to analyze this sociological and historical background so as to have a clear understanding of the oppression slaves endured. This oppression would be one of the axes around which slave narratives were constructed, and the following socio-historical analysis will provide this dissertation with the necessary framework for the ulterior analysis of these writings.

This analysis of the socio-historical background of slavery has the purpose of answering the question *what it meant to be a slave* in nineteenth-century America. For

this purpose, the first part of this chapter will be devoted to a scrutiny of the slave codes, the body of legislation that regulated the situation of slaves in society as well as the treatment they were to receive from their masters. As previously mentioned, this set of laws ruled the management of slaves by slaveholders, placed restrictions in the life of slaves, and comprised the slaves' obligations and duties. Slaves were very aware of the existence of this body of laws and, after obtaining their freedom and with the encouragement and support of abolitionists, these former bondmen expressed the unfairness of the slave codes not only in their autobiographies of bondage, but also in public speeches. This section of the dissertation will examine both the regulations included in these legal documents, and the perception that bondmen had of this legislation. For this purpose, two different types of sources have been used: on the one hand, the slave codes themselves; on the other, an ample selection of slave narratives. Within the analysis of the regulations included in the slave codes, I will examine other aspects that contributed to determine the circumstances under which slaves lived and labored, such as their access to religion, the type of housing they were given, the amount and kind of food and clothing they were allowed, and the construction and disruption of the slave family.

In the second part of this chapter, the different roles of slave men and women on both plantations and urban areas will be examined. The masculine and feminine roles were clearly delimited in white society, for, whereas men's roles were mainly public, women occupied a more domestic position. Men performed physical jobs (they were carpenters, mechanics, blacksmiths, etc.) or were involved in politics, and women were in charge of the household. Slaveholders applied this organization on the plantation and, thus, slave men carried out the hardest tasks on the plantation field or were employed in skilled jobs, whereas women were more frequently found carrying out domestic tasks at the slaveholder's home, usually called the Big House. As it will be seen in the following pages, this division of roles would continue after slaves obtained their freedom: whereas ex slave men were engaged in public speeches and political action, ex slave women

occupied more discrete positions in society, their voice remaining more silent than that of their male counterparts;<sup>1</sup> whereas former bondmen found it relatively easy to have their autobiographies published, few ex slave women managed to do so, especially before the American Civil War (1861-1865). Hence, once black slaves obtained their freedom, they perfectly integrated in American society, complying with the roles they were supposed to play. However, racism will not facilitate this integration and former slaves found it really hard to lead an ordinary life as free men and women.

In this discussion of the different roles played by slave men and slave women on the plantation field and in urban areas, the relationship between masters and slaves, especially between female slaves and white slaveholders will also be considered. The aim is to present one of the main issues discussed in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents*: the sexual harassment and rape bondwomen were subject to during slavery times. Other issues related to these sexual abuses will also be examined, such as the jealous mistress's cruel attitude towards her husband's favorite slave woman, and slave men's feelings of desperation and powerlessness at being unable to protect their wives, sisters, and daughters.

This chapter will conclude with an analysis of the different methods used by both slave men and women to react against slavery in general, and against their masters in particular. This analysis will demonstrate that slaves were not—as proslavery agents

---

<sup>1</sup> African American women had to overcome great opposition to their public function even from black men. This opposition contrasts, surprisingly, with the public function black women played in Africa. Though the roles played by men and women in Africa were also very differentiated, women held a more public position than in the United States:

Within an African community, even after European intervention, men and women have had strictly defined roles in both public and private life, whereas in Western countries the society emphasizes mainly the male role in public life and the female role in private life. Notwithstanding some earlier Western scholarship on African societies which defined a dual sex role system as antithetical to women's rights, this kind of societal organization produced a more independent woman than did the male-dominated system in the West. For example, in precolonial West Africa, women had their own native courts and were often in charge of the domestic affairs of all the villagers, both male and female. In Western countries, there is only one legal system, presumably for all the citizens of a community, but that system is totally male-oriented (Wilentz xviii-xix).

Thus, although many Africans maintained many of their traditions in America, it seems clear that free blacks tended to integrate within American society by adopting the male and female roles that dominated western civilizations.



argued—simple, meek, and happy with the conditions under which they lived and labored. Moreover, it will constitute the basis for the discussion of one of the most interesting topics in slave narratives: slaves' resistance and ultimate victory over their oppressors. Emphasis will be placed on the differences between the methods of resistance used by male and female slaves, for it will provide some clues as regards the means by which Harriet Jacobs reacted against her master's harassment and pursuit, until she finally defeated him.

**1****THE SLAVE CODES:  
THEIR IMPACT ON THE LIFE OF SLAVES**

As previously stated, slave life was regulated by the slave codes. They comprised all the laws that ruled the possession and management of slaves. These regulations have their origin in the mid-1650s, in Virginia, where the first recorded civil case establishing a black person as a slave for life can be found. By 1661, according to Erlene Stetson, “there were provisions in the statutes concerning ‘Negroes’ (no longer called Africans) which led to the establishment of Black slavery within Virginia. . . . By 1662, the Virginia colony had passed nine laws determining the status of newborn children.” (72). The legislation that regulated slave society developed progressively, not only in Virginia, but also in other southern states like Maryland, Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina. This legislation was important because, as historian Eugene D. Genovese states, it “constituted a principal vehicle for the hegemony of the ruling class” (26). It was designed and compiled by powerful white men in their best socio-economic interest. The slave codes were different in every state, but the principles that inspired them all were basically the same everywhere:

There were variations from state to state, but the general point of view expressed in most of them was the same; that is, slaves are not persons but property, and laws should protect the ownership of such property, should protect the whites against any dangers that might arise from the presence of large numbers of Negroes. It was also felt that slaves should be maintained in a

position of due subordination in order that the optimum of discipline and work could be achieved (Franklin 134).

As seen in this extract, the first principle that emanated from the slave codes was the fact that slaves were property, not people.<sup>2</sup> Once this fact was established, subsequent implications followed. If slaves were not human beings, they did not have any rights—at least not the same rights as white people: they could own nothing, they could not complain of abuses, etc. This principle was the key to the enslavement of blacks and constituted the foundations of the slavery system.

The second principle focused on the idea that whites had to be protected from black slaves at all costs. Black slaves should be kept under control, and obedience should be encouraged. Bondmen were considered dangerous, unreliable, and capable of committing all sorts of crimes against whites. Therefore, white people needed legal protection from slaves. Slaves, on the other hand, did not have anything to fear from white people, for they were the civilized ones. Thus, the slave codes focused on the punishments slaves should receive for different crimes against slaveholders, but not vice versa. Legal actions against slaveholders—or white people in general—for committing a crime against a black person would only be taken if a master killed a slave but, even in these cases, it was quite difficult to convict the murderer, as it will be seen later on.

Slaves knew the laws established in the slave codes—at least those that most affected their daily lives, such as the ones that banned their access to education, religion, and property—and the majority of them expressed their disagreement with this body of laws. It is obvious, though, that they could not disagree openly. Criticizing slavery in front of white people would cause them to be punished. Therefore, slaves

---

<sup>2</sup> In 1705, Virginia singled out people of African descent and Native Americans as slaves in “An act declaring the Negro, Mulatto, and Indian slaves within this dominion, to be real estate” included in *Virginia Slavery Act*:

II. Be it enacted, by the governor, council and burgesses of this present general assembly, and it is hereby enacted by the authority of the same, That from and after the passing of this act, *all negro, mulatto, and Indian slaves, in all courts of judicature, and other places, within this dominion, shall be held, taken, and adjudged, to be real estate* (and not chattels;) and shall descend unto the heirs and widows of persons departing this life, according to the manner and custom of land of inheritance, held in fee simple (Virginia General Assembly 333; emphasis added).

expressed their opinions (more) freely to members of their family and to their friends in private gatherings. Nevertheless, once slaves had obtained their freedom, they were able to give public voice to their opinions both in speeches at antislavery meetings and in various writings about their experiences of slavery. In John Brown's narrative<sup>3</sup> *Slave Life in Georgia* (1855), for example, we find the following criticism on the laws that ruled slave life:

I could say a good deal, too, about the laws, but I should have to write a large book if I did. One thing I know, and that includes all. The laws are made for the master, not for the slave. How should it be otherwise, when, in the eye of the law, the slave is only a "chattel?" It is all nonsense to say that the law protects the slave. It does no such thing for the slave; indeed, even a coloured free man cannot give evidence against a white man, so that even murder on the person of a slave cannot be brought home to the man who commits it. The law says you may give a man thirty-nine lashes if he is found roaming about without a pass. . . . There is no cruelty under the sun that hard-hearted men can devise, that has not been employed to bring "niggers" into subjection. The masters call the slave a "chattel," but they know and feel he is a man, and they try all they can to tame him, and break down his spirit, and the law supports him in it (389).

In this extract John Brown does something more than criticize the laws; he also gives examples of the existent laws that regulated slave life (such as the prohibition of using slaves' testimonies in court unless it was against another black person, or the prohibition to be outside the plantation without a document—slave pass—written by bondman's master enabling him to do so). By doing this, Brown lets the reader know that he is acquainted with the body of laws designed to keep black slaves under oppression and subjugation.

The fact that John Brown explicitly criticized the existing legislation was very important at the time, for it proved that black people were endowed with intelligence, with reason, unlike what proslavery agents affirmed. Both the expression of opinions and the ability to read and write were indicators of human intelligence. Thus, ex slaves' testimonies showed the world that black people should take some steps up the Great Chain of Being and not be regarded either "as the lowest of the human races or as first

---

<sup>3</sup> John Brown was illiterate. His narrative was written by Louis A. Chamerovzow, a British abolitionist editor.

cousin to the ape” (Gates, *The Signifying Monkey* 167).<sup>4</sup> If they could put together the words to construct arguments to criticize slavery, they would prove that they *were* endowed with reason, and that they had to be placed in the same rank of the Great Chain of Being as whites. Thus, the consideration of blacks as mere items of property in the slave codes would not be justified, for a human being cannot be the property of another. A human being can only possess that which is at a lower rank in the Great Chain of Being. Consequently, the publication of slave narratives—in which former bondmen explained their tribulations under slavery and criticized the system of human bondage, thus demonstrating their intellect—demolished the main principle and basis of the slavery system, which deemed slaves property.

As stated above, and despite the fact that the principles underlying the slave codes were similar in all states, there were variations of the same laws in different states. Nevertheless, the law that established that slaves were items of property was common in all American states. The abolitionist reverend William Goodell quotes the slave code for South Carolina on this issue: “Slaves shall be deemed, sold, taken, reputed and adjudged in law to be *chattels personal*, in the hands of their owners and possessors, and their executors, administrators and assigns, *to all intents, constructions, and purposes whatsoever*” (*The American Slave Code* 23; emphasis in original). Slaves were very much aware of their status as white people’s property, and expressed their disgust at this situation in their personal histories. In this line, the ex bondman Solomon

---

<sup>4</sup> See pages 10-12. The former bondman Thomas Smallwood explains in his autobiography entitled *A Narrative of Thomas Smallwood* (1851) the astonishment encountered when people learned he was literate:

When that became known to his neighbours they were amazed at the fact that a black or coloured person could learn the Alphabet, yea, learn to spell in two syllables. I appeared to be a walking curiosity in the village where I then lived, and when passing about the village I would be called into houses, and the neighbours collected around to hear me say the Alphabet and to spell baker and cider, to their great surprise, (which were the first two words in the two syllables of Webster’s Spelling Book.) (14).

Other black authors of the period argue that blacks are able to reason, that they have intellect and that they should be therefore regarded as human beings. Maria Stewart, for example, asks black people to write their testimonies to prove that they are in the same rank of the Great Chain of Being: “Prove to the world that you are neither ourang-outangs, nor a species of mere animals, but that you possess the same powers of intellect as those of the proud-boasting American” (*Productions* 21).

Northup,<sup>5</sup> writes the following about a slaveholder's opinion of black people in his autobiography called *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853): "He looked upon a colored man, not as a human being, responsible to his Creator for the small talent entrusted to him, but as a 'chattel personal,' as mere live property, no better, except in value, than his mule or dog" (245). Unfortunately for slaves, this slaveholder's opinion was not an exception to the rule, but represented a common belief among slaveowners.

The law that established that slaves were property created some conflicts. For example, if a slave committed a crime, should he be judged in court? Slaves were deemed property, like cattle, houses, etc., items all that could not be judged because they did not have any mental capacity. If a slave *was* judged, it meant that he was human, for only human beings could be tried in court. If the slave's humanity was thus recognized, could he still be held in bondage? Eugene D. Genovese discusses this issue in the following fragment:

The slave, being neither a wagon nor a horse, had to be dealt with as a man, but the law dared not address itself direct to the point. Had the law declared the slave a person in a specific class relationship to another person, two unpleasant consequences would have followed. First, the demand that such elementary rights as those of the family be respected would have become irresistible in a commercialized society that required the opposite in order to guarantee an adequate mobility of capital and labor. Second, the slaveholders would have had to surrender in principle, much as they often had to do in practice, their insistence that a slave was morally obligated to function as an extension of his master's will. However much the law generally seeks to adjust conflicting principles in society, in this case it risked undermining the one principle the slaveholders viewed as *sine qua non* (28-29).

The South finally discovered that it could not deny the slave's humanity, and slaves took advantage of this fact by adding their own "customary rights" (Genovese 30) to the law and having them respected by their masters. Hence, though slaves had no rights in the eyes of the law, they succeeded in obtaining some privileges from their masters, especially from *kind* masters. These privileges included the possession of property.

---

<sup>5</sup> Solomon Northup was a free black man from New York, who was kidnapped, sold and held as a slave in the South for twelve years. His narrative was written by David Wilson, a lawyer, newly elected member of the state legislature, a former superintendent of public schools, and the author of some poetry and local history.

The fact that slaves were considered property implied that they could not have property: “He can do nothing, *possess nothing, nor acquire* any thing, but what must belong; to his master” (Goodell, *The American Slave Code* 23; emphasis in original). Slaves were acquainted with this law as well, as Frederick Douglass demonstrates when he writes: “There are no conflicting rights of property, for all the people are owned by one man; and they can themselves own no property” (*My Bondage* 160); or, as Harriet Jacobs puts it “a slave, *being* property, can *hold* no property” (*Incidents* 13; emphasis in original). Nevertheless, some states allowed slaves to have some kind of personal property: “All that a slave possesses belongs to his master, he possesses nothing of his own except his *peculium*, that is to say, the sum of money or movable estate, *which his master chooses he should possess*” (Goodell, *The American Slave Code* 90; emphasis in original). In some cases, slaves even managed to convince their masters into allowing them to have a small private garden where they could grow some groceries.<sup>6</sup> This would become a local custom in some areas, and many slaves succeeded in turning this privilege into a *right*. However, it was slaveholders who obviously had the last word.

Like the ban on slaves’ ownership, most of the laws in the slave codes were restrictive for these people in bondage. Another restriction included in the slave codes was related to the application of the law itself. Slaves—and free blacks—were forbidden to offer testimony in court. Their word had the same value in court as an animal’s since they were not considered better or more intelligent than animals. They were simply regarded as beasts of burden that worked for their owners’ profit. The only exception was when the defendant was black. In this case, if a black person was witness to the crime, his testimony was not only accepted but also required in court. This regulation was applied to Native Americans in similar terms, as it can be seen, for example, in *The Slavery Code of the District of Columbia*:

---

<sup>6</sup> An example is found in Henry Bibb’s personal history entitled *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave* (1849). Bibb presents his master, Mr. Young as a kind master because “[h]e allowed each family a small house to themselves with a little garden spot, whereon to raise their own vegetables; and a part of the day on Saturdays was allowed them to cultivate it (96).”

Where other sufficient evidence is wanting against any negro or mulatto slaves, free negro, or mulatto born of a white woman, during their servitude by law, or against any Indian native of this or the neighboring provinces, in such a case the testimony of any negro or mulatto slave, free negro, mulatto born of a white woman, or Indian native of this or the neighboring provinces, may be heard and received as evidence, according to the discretion of the several courts of record, or magistrate, before whom such a matter or thing against such negro, mulatto slave, &c., shall depend, provided such evidence or testimony do not extend to the depriving them, or any of them, of life or member (Section II, Sec. 68).

There were other reasons why white people did not want black people to testify in a trial. On the one hand, black people were thought to be irresponsible and unreliable and, therefore, their testimony would not have much value in court. On the other hand, white people held the belief that if blacks' testimony served as evidence against whites those of the oppressed race could try to revenge for any previous harm caused to them, especially in the case of a slave testifying against his master or overseer. Slaves were very aware of their word not having any value in court and this issue was a common complaint in slave narratives. John Brown, for example, writes the following with reference to this law: "[A]s I was a slave, my evidence would not be received in the Courts" (344).<sup>7</sup> Slaves could thus be killed by their owners—or other white people—and the murderers would escape punishment if the only witnesses of the crime were colored people.

Nevertheless, the slave codes *did* punish the killing of slaves with the paying of a fine or even with death penalty in cases other than self-defense, or if the murder took place in the presence of white witnesses. Experience and reality proved otherwise, however. In nineteenth-century America it was very hard to find evidence of a white man killing a slave or any other black person. This fact is clearly explained by William Goodell in *The American Slave Code*:

---

<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Solomon Northup complains about slaves' impossibility of giving evidence against a white murderer: "[Had my master] stabbed me to the heart in the presence of a hundred slaves, not one of them, by the laws of Louisiana, could have given evidence against him" (219). Frederick Douglass also writes about the prohibition of slaves to testify against white people in court while relating in *My Bondage and My Freedom* the case of Mr. Austin Gore, an overseer, who killed a slave called Denby and was not even put on trial because the murder had only been witnessed by slaves, who could not be heard in court: "The murder was committed in the presence of slaves, and they, of course, could neither institute a suit, nor testify against the murderer. His bare word would go further in a court of law, than the united testimony of ten thousand black witnesses (202)."



In former times, the murder of a slave in most, if not all the slaveholding regions of this country, was, by law, punishable by a pecuniary fine only. At present, the wilful, malicious, and deliberate murder of a slave, by whomsoever perpetrated, is declared to be punishable with death, in every State. . . . The exclusion of all testimony of *colored* persons, bond or free, is a feature sufficient, of itself, to render these laws nugatory. The “owner” or “overseer” may command the slave to attend him to any secret spot, and there murder him with impunity. Or he may do it openly, (it has often been done,) in the sight of many colored persons, with equal impunity (178; emphasis in original).

As Goodell rightly observes, and as slaves themselves knew, no matter what the law said against the murdering of slaves, a white man was rarely punished for the killing of a slave if it depended upon the testimony of black people.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately for the murdered and his family, this was very often the case. This legal situation created serious discomfort on the part of slaves and other black people, who felt that their lives were worthless unless their work provided white people with substantial profit.

Nonetheless, the fact that blacks could not testify against whites was, sometimes, a disadvantage to slaveholders themselves. For example, if a white person killed another planter’s slave in the presence of black people, the murderer would go unpunished because the black witnesses could not testify against the killer. However, as Eugene D. Genovese states, “[planters] regarded these expensive inconveniences as necessary evils and bore them doggedly” (40). In any case, even if blacks had been able to testify against whites, many of them would not have done so for fear of reprisals.

The slave codes were concerned with white people’s welfare and protection, and thus included a detailed account of the punishments that would be inflicted on slaves if they dared to strike a white person. For example, *The Slavery Code of the District of Columbia* stated that “if it shall so happen at any time that any negro or other slave shall strike any white person, it shall and may be lawful, upon proof made thereof, either by the oath of the party so struck or otherwise, before any justice of the peace, for such

---

<sup>8</sup> Eugene D. Genovese equally states: “During the nineteenth century, despite state-by-state variations, slaveholders *theoretically* faced murder charges for wantonly killing a slave or for causing his death by excessive punishment” (37; emphasis added). However, he goes on to explain the fact that white people were hardly ever convicted for killing a slave because blacks could not testify against whites in court (38-39).

justice to cause of the negro's or other slave's ears so offending to be cropt" (Section II, Sec. 76). Goodell examines the same law in different states:

In Georgia it is enacted, that "If any slave shall *presume* to strike *any white person*, such slave, upon trial and conviction before the Justice or Justices, according to the directions of this Act, shall, for the first offense, suffer such punishment as the said Justice or Justices shall, in his or their discretion, think fit, not extending to life or limb; and for the *second* offense, suffer DEATH." "Provided always, that such striking, &c., be not done by the command and in the defense of the OWNER or OTHER PERSON having the care and government of such slave, in which case the slave shall be wholly excused, and the owner or other person, &c., shall be answerable, as if the act had been committed by himself." . . . South Carolina has an Act in the same words, except that death is the penalty of the *third* offense, instead of the *second*. . . . In Maryland, for this offense, the offender's ears may be cropped, though he be a *free* black. . . . In Kentucky there is the same prohibition; and, as in Maryland, *free* colored persons are included. Penalty, "thirty lashes on his or *her* bare back, well laid on" (*The American Slave Code* 305-306; emphasis in original).

However, slaves could avoid being convicted for beating or killing a white person if they proved that the crime had been committed in self-defense. The problem for the slave was, consequently, to find clear evidence to prove that the murder had been committed under these circumstances. In this respect, and unlike what happened when a white man killed a slave (or another black person), there were plenty of white people who would be ready to offer testimony against a slave who had dared to strike a white person. Some would even have offered false testimony if necessary, for slaveholders felt that they had to protect each other from slaves' violent acts.

Despite the punishment and conviction that awaited them, there were quite a lot of slaves in America who attacked and even killed white people during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Eugene D. Genovese analyzes the figures:

From colonial times to the end of the regime murders of whites by slaves, whatever the proportion of overseers to masters, made everyone thoughtful. . . . Slaves especially challenged overseers and, less readily, masters who were trying to whip or abuse them. These cases occurred much more often than generally believed, and sometimes they ended in death, by no means always the slave's. The frequency and numbers remain elusive, but the ubiquity of the reports from so many different sources suggest that life in the fields as well as in the Big House was often lived on the edge of violence (616-617).

Many North Americans believed that black people were mentally unstable and capable of committing all sorts of crimes and that, because of this, any slave might attack and even kill his master—or overseer—on any given day for no particular reason. The cases of murder that white people feared most were those in which the so-considered *good slaves* or *good Negroes* murdered their masters. Planters were conscious that any black slave could attempt to kill them, but did not expect such a brutal act from their closest, their kindest, their most obedient, and their best-behaved slaves. Thus, if the rest of slaves witnessed kind and obedient slaves with quite a favorable position on the plantation murder their masters or overseers, those slaves who were more cruelly abused could be tempted to follow their example:

The plantations contained many slaves who gave little or no indication of rebelliousness and dutifully accepted their subservient roles but who nonetheless did not surrender their will or their honor—who stayed in place so long as their expectations did not suffer a severe jolt and so long as they did not feel betrayed. These slaves made a contradictory impact on the quarters. Their day-to-day behavior taught manly self-discipline to others, but it also taught acquiescence in the status quo. And their sudden explosion taught the same lesson at a higher level, for their protest, as an individual reaction to individual abuses, set a model that reinforced the regime (Genovese 617).

Moreover, when an act of violence of this kind happened slaveholders panicked because if murders were committed by obedient slaves, nothing better could be expected from those considered violent and rebellious slaves.

On the other hand, manslaughter and murder were also common in the slave quarters. Jealousy was the most frequent cause of murder amongst slaves, although other killings were the result of stealing and gambling. The punishments for slaves who killed other slaves varied: capital punishment, twenty years at hard labor, short prison terms, branding, whipping, and transportation were some possibilities. If a slave killed another slave from a different plantation, the master of the murdered slave would respond with a sense of duty and honor to this barbarous act—after all, the loss of a slave implied a loss of benefit and property. If a slave killed another slave on the same plantation, his master would respond more aggressively: on the one hand, a loss of a

slave meant a decrease in the planter's production and property; on the other hand, slaveholders, who tried to instill a sense of unity and family in all the inhabitants—black and white—of the plantation felt that his ideal *family* had rebelled against him.

The slave codes also regulated rape, but in a very *peculiar* manner. Rape was understood *only* as the rape of a white woman,<sup>9</sup> and was usually punished with death. It is true that there were other punishments, like castration, but they were less popular. Examples of this crime—the rape of a white woman by a black man—are not normally included in slave narratives first, because they were not very common,<sup>10</sup> and secondly, because this would put the slave authors in an uncomfortable situation. Ex slaves write their personal histories in order to bring about the abolition of slavery. Writing about the crimes committed by slaves would only justify white people's arguments in favor of keeping blacks under subordination and enslavement. What slave narratives *do* describe are the frequent and continuous rapes and sexual harassment of female slaves by their masters. In these accounts, no details of the abuse are given in order not to distress female readers.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, slave narratives explain that these forced relationships

---

<sup>9</sup> The rape of a black woman by either a white or a black man was not recognized as a crime by law. Frequent were the rapes of female slaves by their masters, but there were also cases in which black men raped black women. If these occurred in the slave quarters, only the slaves' master could punish the rapist—without taking the case to court—if he considered it necessary. If rapes occurred among the free black population, no measures would be taken, for, as stated above, the rape of black women was not a crime in the eyes of the law.

<sup>10</sup> It is interesting to note how a crime that did not occur very often—the rape of a white woman by a black man—was fully regulated in the slave codes, whereas a crime of a similar nature that would become a common practice amongst white people—the rape of a black woman by a white man—was not even regarded as a crime.

<sup>11</sup> However, this decorum disappears somehow in the twentieth century, and African American writer Margaret Walker details the sexual assault on a female slave named Hetta by a white man called John Morris Dutton in *Jubilee* (1966). This account is narrated in the third person from the point of view of an older Mr. Dutton, who recalls the events that had taken place years ago justifying his brutal act:

Her small young breasts tilted up, and even her slight hips and little buttocks were set high on her body. When she moved lightly and they switched lazily and delicately, they titillated him and his furious excitement grew while watching her walk. It was all his father's fault. Anyway it was his father who taught him it was better for a young man of quality to learn life by breaking in a young nigger wench than it was for him to spoil a pure white virgin girl. . . . He still remembered her tears, and her frightened eyes, and how she had pleaded to be left alone, but he had persisted until she had given in to him (7-8).

Instances of rape like the one narrated by Margaret Walker were not uncommon on southern plantations. White masters took part in these sexual abuses against black female slaves and, as Walker exemplifies in *Jubilee*, even encouraged their sons to do so. Some of these abuses became customary—as in the case of

would result, in many cases, in the birth of mulatto slaves. This consequence was not feared by planters: not only would they obtain sexual satisfaction from their illicit encounters with female slaves, but also economic profit since the children born to slave women would become slaves themselves, for the rule that “the child shall follow the condition of the mother” was enacted in all slave states.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, the slaveholders’ wives did not see these sexual encounters in such a favorable way. When southern mistress learned what happened on the plantation, they either feigned ignorance of the situation (it would be a scandal for a white aristocratic southern family), or made the female slave’s life miserable through psychological and physical abuses. Most white mistresses pretended they did not know what was happening and did nothing to stop or prevent their husbands from abusing slave women sexually. Others, on the other hand, were extremely jealous of the female slaves with whom their husbands had had or were having sexual relationships, and made their lives—and their children’s lives, if they had any to their owners<sup>13</sup>—unbearable. These physically brutal and/or psychologically disturbing acts of vengeance against female slaves usually occurred when a planter kept a female slave as a long-time lover and/or

---

Hetta and Mr. Dutton—and thus, female slaves and white owners maintained sexual relationships over long periods of time.

<sup>12</sup> For example, the slave laws in South Carolina stated that: “All [slaves?] issue and their offspring, born or *to be* born, shall be, and are hereby declared to be, and remain FOR EVER HEREAFTER, absolute slaves, and shall follow the condition of *the mother*” (Goodell, *The American Slave Code* 248; emphasis in original). The rule that “the child shall follow the condition of the mother” was enacted in all slave states. Slaves were well acquainted with this regulation and echoed it in slave narratives. Thus, James W. C. Pennington, for example, writes in his autobiography entitled *The Fugitive Blacksmith* (1849): “[T]he primary law of slavery is, that the child shall follow the condition of the mother” (114).

<sup>13</sup> Moses Roper, explains his case, which is particularly moving, in his *Narrative* (1838)—which was probably written with some assistance from the Reverend Thomas Price, the editor of the short-lived British journal *Slavery in America*, and author of *The History of Protestant Nonconformity in England*:

As soon as my father’s wife heard of my birth, she sent one of my mother’s sisters to see whether I was white or black, and when my aunt had seen me, she returned back as soon as she could, and told her mistress that I was white, and resembled Mr. Roper very much. Mr. R.’s wife being not pleased with this report, she got a large club stick and knife, and hastened to the place in which my mother was confined. She went into my mother’s room with full intention to murder me with her knife and club, but as she was going to stick the knife into me, my grandmother happening to come in, caught the knife and saved my life (493).

The ex slave Lewis Clarke also comments on the suffering undergone by slaves born to their masters: “There are no slaves that are so badly abused, as those that are related to some of the women, or the children of their own husband; it seems as though they never could hate these quite bad enough” (613).

concubine.<sup>14</sup> As Eugene D. Genovese states, “[e]vidence from the slaveholders themselves confirms the existence of the stable interracial unions suggested in the narratives” (418). Genovese further adds that, although white planters admitted their systematic sexual exploitation of female slaves, they denied the existence of loving feelings for them. They could not admit having such feelings for inferior or less-than-human beings.

Amongst other restrictive measures included in the slave codes was that which forbade slaves to leave the plantation without their masters’ authorization. If any white person found a slave outside the plantation without written permission—called *pass* or *slave pass*—he could seize him, whip him if he resisted, and/or hand him to public officials: “In Georgia, *any* person may inflict twenty lashes on the bare back of a slave found without license on the plantation, or without the limits of the town to which he belongs. So also in Mississippi, Virginia, and Kentucky, at the discretion of the justice” (Goodell, *The American Slave Code* 228; emphasis in original). Moreover, if it so happened that the slave offered strong resistance to being caught and fought against his capturer, the white person could even kill him on the spot:

South Carolina.—Act of 1740: “If any slave who shall be out of the house or plantation where such slave shall live or shall be usually employed, or without some white person in company with such slave, shall *refuse to submit* to undergo the examination of *any white person*, it shall be lawful for any such white person to pursue, apprehend, and moderately correct such slave; and if such slave shall assault and strike such white person, such slave may be *lawfully killed*”!!! (Goodell, *The American Slave Code* 306-307; emphasis in original).

---

<sup>14</sup> A thorough analysis on the relationship between female slaves and white mistresses can be found in “Green-eyed Monsters of the Slavocracy: Jealous Mistresses in Two Slave Narratives,” by Minrose C. Gwin. Many instances of the cruelty of mistresses against their husbands’ favorite female slaves can be read in slave narratives. For example, Solomon Northup describes the suffering endured by a female slave named Patsy, whose master had sexual relationships with her on a regular basis:

Patsy wept oftener, and suffered more, than any of her companions. She had been literally excoriated. Her back bore the scars of a thousand stripes; not because she was backward in her work, nor because she was of an unmindful and rebellious spirit, but because it had fallen to her lot to be the slave of a licentious master and a jealous mistress. She shrank before the lustful eye of the one, and was in danger even of her life at the hands of the other, and between the two, she was indeed accursed. . . . If she uttered a word in opposition to her master’s will, the lash was resorted to at once, to bring her to subjection; if she was not watchful when about her cabin, or when walking in the yard, a billet of wood, or a broken bottle perhaps, hurled from her mistress’ hand, would smite her unexpectedly in the face. The enslaved victim of lust and hate, Patsy had no comfort of her life (247).

As it happened in many other instances, bondmen also knew about the existence of this particular law and were aware of the consequences of breaking it, as slave narratives demonstrate: “A slave caught off his master’s plantation without a pass, may be seized and whipped by any white man whom he meets” (Northup 234). Hence, since slaves ran great risks by leaving the plantation without a pass, it is easy to imagine that they normally had powerful reasons for so doing.

There were several reasons for slaves to leave the plantation without their masters’ permission, the commonest of them being the compelling need to visit relatives who lived in neighboring areas. On some occasions, kind masters allowed these visits and provided passes for slaves. For example, James W. Pennington relates, in his 1849 narrative, how some slaves had permission to visit their relatives on other plantations:

Three or four of our farm hands had their wives and families on other plantations. In such cases, it is the custom in Maryland to allow the men to go on Saturday evening to see their families, stay over the Sabbath, and return on Monday morning, not later than “half-an-hour by sun.” To overstay their time is a grave fault, for which, especially at busy seasons, they are punished (116).

However, most slaves visited their families without their owners’ permission. These visits normally took place at night, when they could not be so easily seen.<sup>15</sup> Other slaves used tricks and deception in order not to be caught breaking this law. Some of those slaves—the few literate ones—forged passes in case they were found outside the plantation.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, when slaves wrote false passes they often used them to escape to the free states or Canada rather than simply to visit their families. Planters

---

<sup>15</sup> These night visits were very frequent, and many instances of them are found in slave narratives. For example, in his 1845 *Narrative*, Frederick Douglass relates her mother’s visits when he was a child:

I never saw my mother, to know her as such, more than four or five times in my life; and each of these times was very short in duration, and at night. She was hired by a Mr. Stewart, who lived about twelve miles from my home. She made her journeys to see me in the night, traveling the whole distance on foot, after the performance of her day’s work. She was a field hand, and a whipping is the penalty of not being in the field at sunrise, unless a slave has a special permission from his or her master to the contrary—a permission which they seldom get, and one that gives to him that gives it the proud name of being a kind master (16).

In this fragment, not only does Douglass show his knowledge of the laws that regulate slave life, but also his disgust toward this particular law, using that distinctive ironic tone of his.

<sup>16</sup> These literate bondmen also wrote false passes for other slave friends who needed to leave the plantation or wanted to escape.

feared the runaway of slaves and this was one of the reasons why slaveholders passed laws against teaching slaves to read and write. Passes were, therefore, really important for slaves and, the fact that they could forge them if they were able to read and write, gave them a very powerful reason for wanting to acquire this knowledge. This desire to learn to read and write was very common amongst slaves, and the harder slaveholders made it for slaves to acquire this learning, the greater efforts bondmen made to become literate.

Apart from preventing escape, there were other reasons for the ban on slave literacy. First, slaveholders wanted to avoid having an intelligent black leader convince slaves to organize a revolt against white people. Whites thought that if slaves were literate, they would feel encouraged to obtain their freedom—not only by the reading of abolitionist writings, but also by the acquisition of a broader knowledge of North American culture and civilization, the rights of its people, etc.—and become rebellious against their masters. They believed that ignorance prevented rebellion, and decided to maintain slaves ignorant of the abolitionist fight.

Secondly, they thought that being able to read and write would make slaves unfit for work.<sup>17</sup> For most slaveowners, bondmen's literacy was a threat to the stability of their plantations, and preferred to keep their slaves ignorant of the letters. Thus, when they bought new slaves planters usually preferred illiterate slaves. This would explain why many literate bondmen lied about this issue at slave auctions. On the one hand, they wanted to avoid future problems with their new masters; on the other hand, their present owners encouraged them to say that they could not read or write—and even to appear not to be very intelligent—so that they could be more easily sold. Henry Bibb in his 1849 *Narrative* describes how slaves were examined at an auction and the great interest that was paid to slaves' literacy:

---

<sup>17</sup> In *Narrative*, Frederick Douglass explains what his master said to his wife when he discovered that she had taught Douglass the A, B, C: “[I]f you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master” (78).



But the most rigorous examinations of slaves by those slave inspectors, is on the mental capacity. If they are found to be very intelligent, this is pronounced the most objectionable of all other qualities connected with the life of a slave. In fact, it undermines the whole fabric of his chattelhood; it prepares for what slaveholders are pleased to pronounce the unpardonable sin when committed by a slave. It lays the foundation for running away, and going to Canada. They also see in it a love for freedom, patriotism, insurrection, bloodshed, and exterminating war against American slavery.

Hence they are very careful to inquire whether a slave who is for slave can read or write. This question has been asked me often by slave traders, and cotton planters, while I was there for market (53).

Slaves lied very frequently about their age, literacy, previous attempts to escape, etc. at auctions in order to avoid punishment by their present masters, as well as to have a problem-free life in their future workplace. Masters encouraged this lying, for the slaves' price was determined by aspects such as literacy, age, sex, restlessness, and personal abilities or skills, and even used deception to trick possible buyers.<sup>18</sup>

The breaking of the law that prohibited slaves' literacy involved not only the slave's but also the teacher's punishment. In *The American Slave Code*, William Goodell provides examples of the different punishments that were administered in different states:

"In North Carolina, to teach a slave to *read* or *write*, or sell or give him *any* book [Bible not excepted] or pamphlet, is punished with *thirty-nine lashes*, or imprisonment, if the offender be a free negro; but if a white, then with a fine of \$200. The reason for this law, assigned in its preamble, is, that teaching slaves to read and write tends to *dissatisfaction* in their minds, and to produce insurrection and rebellion." . . . "In Georgia, if a white teach a *free* negro or slave to write, he is fined \$500, and imprisoned at the discretion of the Court; if the offender be a *colored* man, bond or free, he may be fined or whipped, at the

<sup>18</sup> William Wells Brown, the first African-American to publish a novel, a play, a travel book, a military study of his people, and a study of black sociology, describes the methods slaveholders used to make their slaves look younger in order to obtain greater benefits from their sale:

I had to prepare the old slaves for market. I was ordered to have the old men's whiskers shaved off, and the grey hairs plucked out, where they were not too numerous, in which case he had a preparation of blacking to color it, and with a blacking-brush we would put it on. This was new business to me, and was performed in a room where the passengers could not see us. These slaves were also *taught* how old they were by Mr. Walker, and after going through the blacking process, they looked ten or fifteen years younger; and I am sure that some of those who purchased slaves of Mr. Walker, were dreadfully cheated, especially in the ages of the slaves which they bought (*Narrative* 693; emphasis added).

On the other hand, Henry Bibb narrates how he was advised to lie about his escape attempts in order to make a higher price at the auction: "[T]hey tried to pacify me by promising not to sell me to a slave trader who would take me off to New Orleans; cautioning me at the same time not to let it be known that I had been a runaway. This would very much lessen the value of me in market" (38).

discretion of the Court. Of course, a father may be flogged for teaching his own child." . . . "In Louisiana, the penalty for teaching slaves to read and write is one year's imprisonment" (321-322; emphasis in original).

Nevertheless, there were many slaves who learned to read and write, usually aided by white children, mistresses, or abolitionists. According to John Hope Franklin, the "instruction of one or two slaves, though a violation of the law, was not regarded as serious and there was hardly any danger of prosecution" (146). This is true, since it was generally the slave who was punished for learning to read and write, whereas the white person who had taught the slave was left unpunished.<sup>19</sup>

Slaves were aware of the fact that they were not allowed to learn to read or write, but also of the importance of being able to do so. According to bell hooks,

black people regarded education—book learning, reading, and writing—as a political necessity. Struggle to resist white supremacy and racist attacks informed black attitudes toward education. Without the capacity to read and write, to think critically and analytically, the liberated slave would remain forever bound, dependent on the will of the oppressor (*Talking Back* 98).

However, many slaves managed to acquire some degree of literacy: "The estimate by W. E. B. Du Bois that, despite prohibitions and negative public opinion, about 5 percent of the slaves had learned to read by 1860 is entirely plausible and may even be too low" (Genovese 563). Slaves were eager to learn the letters because they knew that literacy would give them some advantages over white people<sup>20</sup> and, in a way, would make them freer.

On the other hand, literacy made some slaves comprehend their situation and

---

<sup>19</sup> Frederick Douglass defends another reason why not many white people were punished for teaching slaves to read and write, that is, they seldom broke this law:

There is the greatest unanimity of opinion among the white population in the south in favor of the policy of keeping the slave in ignorance. There is, perhaps, another reason why the law against education is so seldom violated. The slave is too poor to be able to offer a temptation sufficiently strong to induce a white man to violate it; and it is not to be supposed that in a community where the moral and religious sentiment is in favor of slavery, many martyrs will be found sacrificing their liberty and lives by violating those prohibitory enactments (*My Bondage* 422).

Paradoxically, Douglass was taught to read by some white children (*Narrative* 41).

<sup>20</sup> Slaves could not only forge passes to escape, as stated above, but also read the advertisements for runaway slaves. In this case, if they were the runaways, they could be more alert in the presence of white people; if they were not the advertised runaways but happened to meet one, these literate slaves could warn the fugitive and help them reach the free states.

role in society, a knowledge that would increase their suffering. In his 1849 narrative, Josiah Henson<sup>21</sup> expresses his feelings of joy and anxiety when he eventually learns to read:

Tom's perseverance and mine conquered at last, and in the course of the winter I did really learn to read a little. It was, and has been ever since, a great comfort to me to have made this acquisition; though it has made me comprehend better the terrible abyss of ignorance in which I had been plunged all my previous life. It made me also feel more deeply and bitterly the oppression under which I had toiled and groaned; but the crushing and cruel nature of which I had not appreciated, till I found out, in some slight degree, from what I had been debarred. At the same time it made me more anxious than before to do something for the rescue and the elevation of those who were suffering the same evils I had endured, and who did not know how degraded and ignorant they really were (*The Life* 751).

Therefore, as this passage shows, learning to read and write was both a difficult and pleasant task, and, although literacy could made slaves both miserable and furious at the discovery of the unfairness of their condition—they could realize that they had been under a terrible oppression, not only physical but also mental<sup>22</sup>—it also increased their desire to be free and to help other slaves to learn to read and write. Moreover, literacy turned slaves into human beings, for literacy was a sign of reason, and reason was the feature that distinguished the lowest species from human beings during the Enlightenment. Literacy enabled ex slaves to narrate their experiences in bondage, narratives of slavery that would become the first expression of blacks' humanity. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. explains this transformation from commodity into human being in *The Signifying Monkey* as follows:

<sup>21</sup> Josiah Henson dictated his autobiography to Samuel A. Eliot, three-term mayor of Boston, treasurer of Harvard, congressman, and president of the Massachusetts Academy of Music. It was published as *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada, as Narrated by Himself* (1849).

<sup>22</sup> The mental oppression suffered by slaves is also known as the colonization of the mind suffered by natives when they were colonized by white people. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon—a Martinican psychiatrist and writer who sympathized with the rebels during the French-Algerian war—asserts that during colonization times, the natives were degraded to the level of animals: “When the settler seeks to describe the native fully in exact terms he constantly refers to the bestiary” (42). The natives were perfectly aware that, for the colonizers, they were no better than animals, and this created an inferiority complex in the natives and, therefore, the physical oppression they suffered was intensified by this type of domination. Fanon also describes black people's inferiority complex and argues in *Black Skin White Masks* that it was caused by Europeans' feelings of superiority. He states that “[f]or the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white” (*Black Skin* 228).

[T]he literature of the slave consisted of texts that represent impolite learning and . . . these texts collectively railed against the arbitrary and inhumane learning which masters foisted upon slaves to reinforce a perverse fiction of the “natural” order of things. . . . The slave’s texts, then, could not be taken as specimens of a black literary culture. Rather, the texts of the slave could only be read as testimony of defilement: the slave’s *representation* and reversal of the master’s attempt to transform a human being into a commodity, and the slave’s simultaneous verbal witness of the possession of a humanity shared in common with Europeans. . . . The slave wrote not primarily to demonstrate humane letters, but to demonstrate his or her own membership in the human community (128; emphasis in original).

Once blacks had proved they were human beings (and at the same level as whites in the Great Chain of Being), they could fight for human rights and for the abolition of slavery, which is the main purpose for which ex slaves wrote their autobiographies.

The slave codes included another restriction that most slaves disliked: the prohibition to assemble, either for mental instruction or for religious worship. Black people in general and slaves in particular were not allowed to meet in large groups since white planters feared that they might use these gatherings to conspire against them and/or organize a revolt. *The Slavery Code of the District of Columbia* prohibited the gatherings of black people in the following terms:

All secret or private meetings or assemblages whatsoever, and all meetings for religious worship beyond the hour of ten o’clock at night, of free negroes, mulattoes or slaves, shall be, and they are hereby declared to be unlawful; and any colored person or persons found at such unlawful assemblages or meetings, or who may continue at any religious meeting after ten o’clock at night, shall for each and every offense, on conviction, pay the sum of five dollars, to be recovered and applied as prescribed by act of this Corporation; and in the event of any such meeting or assemblage as aforesaid it shall be the duty of any police constable of any ward to enter into the house or upon the premises where such unlawful assemblage may be held and use and employ all lawful and necessary means immediately to disperse the same (Section III, Sec. 18).

The meetings of free black people and slaves were sometimes permitted if (at least) a few white people attended; but, in some states, evening or night meetings were forbidden even if whites were present. This was the case, for example, in South Carolina: “It shall not be lawful for any number of slaves, free negroes, mulattoes, or mestizoes, *even in company with white persons*, to meet together and assemble for the purpose of mental instruction *or religious worship*, either before the rising of the sun or

after the going down of the same” (Goodell, *The American Slave Code* 329; emphasis in original).<sup>23</sup> The prohibition to assemble—for religious practice, especially—was very hard for the slaves to comply with because religion played a very important role in their lives: it helped them endure the suffering they had to go through on a regular basis, and it gave them hope for a better life.<sup>24</sup>

Some slaveholders were completely against giving their slaves religious instruction arguing that blacks did not have a soul, that they were not intelligent enough to appreciate the full value of this instruction, or that religion undermined the social order of slavery. Nevertheless, many slaves managed to meet secretly for religious worship. Eugene D. Genovese clearly explains the cases in which religious meetings by slaves had to be, necessarily, held in secret:

The slaves’ religious meetings would be held in secret when their masters forbade all such; or when their masters forbade all except Sunday meetings; or when rumors of rebellion or disaffection led even indulgent masters to forbid them so as to protect the people from trigger-happy patrollers; or when the slaves wanted to make sure that no white would hear them (236).

These secret meetings were very common and many examples can be found in slave narratives.<sup>25</sup> However, some slaveholders *were* in favor of providing their slaves with

---

<sup>23</sup> Henry Bibb quotes the same lines from the slave using as source Joseph Brevard’s *An Alphabetical Digest of the Public Statute Law of South-Carolina*, published in 1814.

<sup>24</sup> It may seem curious that slaves were very religious if considering the fact that one proslavery argument was taken from the Bible. Genesis reads that Noah’s son Ham, the father of Canaan, accidentally saw his father drunk and naked and told his brothers. The brothers walked backward into their father’s tent and covered him without looking at him. When Noah woke up and discovered what had happened, he cursed the children of Ham: “And he said, cursed be Canaan, a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren” (Genesis 9: 25). Canaan was Ham’s son and, since whites considered Africans Ham’s descendants, the enslavement of black people was justified.

<sup>25</sup> In *Sketches of Slave Life* (1855), Peter Randolph gives a clear insight of how these secret meetings were organized and held:

Not being allowed to hold meetings on the plantation, the slaves assemble in the swamps, out of reach of the patrols. . . . The male members then select a certain space, in separate groups, for their division of the meeting. Preaching in order, by the brethren; then praying and singing all round, until they generally feel quite happy. The speaker usually commences by calling himself unworthy, and talks very slowly, until, feeling the spirit, he grows excited, and in a short time, there fall to the ground twenty or thirty men and women under its influence. . . . Then they pass from one to another, shaking hands, and bidding each other farewell, promising, should they meet no more on earth, to strive and meet in heaven, where all is joy, happiness and liberty. As they separate, they sing a parting hymn of praise (30-31).

religious instruction.<sup>26</sup> They were not very numerous, but had various reasons to allow their slaves to hear sermons: some were really concerned for the spiritual welfare of their slaves; some thought that religion served as a means of control; and some thought that if slaves were listening to a reliable white preacher they would not be listening to a suspect black exhorter (Genovese 189). Therefore, some white slaveholders provided their slaves with a preacher, or even preached to their slaves themselves.

There existed white and black preachers. Slaves preferred black preachers, and slaveholders preferred white preachers. Thus, the few slaveowners that allowed slaves to gather for religious worship usually made sure that the meeting was held by a *white* preacher.<sup>27</sup> These white preachers quoted those passages from the Bible that argued for obedience, humble servitude, good behavior, and fear of God. Their favorite Biblical text was “Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but in singleness of heart, fearing God” (Colossians 3: 22).<sup>28</sup> In his 1847 *Narrative*, William Wells Brown summarizes the kind of religious teaching slaves received that was encouraged by their masters:

[I]n Missouri, and as far as I have any knowledge of slavery in the other States, the religious teaching consists in teaching the slave that he must never strike a white man; that God made him for a slave; and that, when whipped, he must not find fault,—for the Bible says, ‘He that knoweth his master’s will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes!’ And slaveholders find such religion very profitable to them (707).

This kind of preaching constituted another kind of mental oppression for blacks. Many slaveholders were conscious of the power that these sermons had on their slaves and knew that this kind of preaching served to keep them down, which was obviously very

---

<sup>26</sup> An example is found in Henry Bibb’s personal history. In this literary work, Bibb narrates an occasion on which he was allowed to attend a religious meeting: “I got permission from the Deacon, on one Sabbath day, to attend a prayer meeting, on a neighboring plantation, with a few old superannuated slaves, although this was contrary to the custom of the country—for slaves were not allowed to assemble for religious worship” (61).

<sup>27</sup> Some of these white preachers were slaveholders themselves.

<sup>28</sup> Another favorite verse among slaveholders was “Servants, be subject to your masters with all fear; not only to the good and gentle, but also to the forward.” (1 Peter 2:18). Nevertheless, slaves preferred verses like “Masters, give unto your servants that which is just and equal, knowing that ye also have a Master in heaven” (Col. 4:1); “Neither be ye called masters; for one is your master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren” (Matt 23: 8, 10); and “Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them” (Matt. 7: 12).

profitable for slaveowners. Nevertheless, slaves' most common attitude toward these white preachers and their sermons was that of indifference.

There were other preachers who, instead of promulgating servants' obedience to masters, had a more revolutionary discourse: they preached about happiness, and about hope in heaven, where slaves would lead a new and better life after death, and where they would be rewarded for their efforts. These preachers were usually black, and some of them were—or had been—slaves. Law forbade them to do their job but, one way or another, they managed to preach to slaves.<sup>29</sup> In *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, the African* (1815), Jea narrates how he went into preaching and how the kind of sermons that he used to preach to slaves were of a very different nature from those of white preachers:

The other black man and myself used to go fourteen miles of a night to preach, and to instruct our poor fellow brethren . . . I knew it was a hard task for the poor slaves to get out, because when I was a slave I had gone fifteen miles to hear preaching, and was obliged to get back before sun rising, to go to my work, and then, if my master knew I had been to hear preaching, he would beat me most unmercifully, so that I encouraged the other poor slaves to seek the Lord, and to be earnest in prayer and supplication, for well I knew that the Lord would hear and deliver them, if they sought him in sincerity and in truth, as the Lord delivered me; for they did not suffer for evil doing, but for doing the will of God. Being under that promise which says, "*But and if ye suffer for righteousness' sake, happy are ye*" (39-40; emphasis in original).

Slaves looked for relief, understanding and comfort for their sufferings in black preachers, especially since slaves made great efforts to attend camp meetings. Their reaction to black preachers was quite different from their reaction to white preachers. If the latter were met with slaves' indifference, the former were very much appreciated and respected by slaves. Their sermons helped slaves to accept their situation as such and to long for a better life in heaven, a hope that would help them bear their lives of

---

<sup>29</sup> Eugene D. Genovese describes how black preachers managed to do their job both in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: "When confronted with white hostility, [Negro preachers] organized clandestine plantation meetings and took the beatings that rewarded their efforts. Forbidden by law from functioning as preachers during the nineteenth century, they insinuated themselves into the confidence of local whites as "assistants" to white clergymen and went about their own business" (257). Genovese also explains the two main reasons why white people accepted black preachers: first, because, no matter what the law said, blacks and slaves would find a way to hear their own preachers, so it would be better to supervise what they preached; and second, because it promoted religious segregation, and represented another form of white racism (260-261).

suffering. Other slaves, however, rejected these sermons and preferred to offer resistance to their masters rather than be obedient and hope for heaven after death. These slaves considered that being free would be like being in heaven and fought actively for freedom on earth.

In any case, as the number of black preachers increased, planters became more and more cautious about allowing meetings or religious activities and preferred that “only whites be allowed to preach to slaves because too many black preachers were troublemakers” (Genovese 259). In fact, John Hope Franklin argues that in most states black preachers were “outlawed between 1830 and 1835, and thereafter Negro religious services were presided over by some white person” (144). Slaves found it difficult to feel deeply attached to a religious feeling and instruction that came from their oppressors, and, as stated above, felt emotionally closer to black preachers because they could understand their problems better. These black preachers became very important in slavery times because they managed to hold blacks together spiritually and to teach them to value themselves, to love one another, and to trust in ultimate deliverance. Since slaves felt that planters used religion as another method of control over them, they managed to find the means to obtain religious instruction from black—as opposed to white—preachers.

Although the slave codes placed these and many other restrictions on the life of slaves,<sup>30</sup> they also included measures for their welfare. For example, the slave codes stated that slaveholders should provide their slaves with adequate shelter and sufficient food and clothing.

SOUTH CAROLINA.—“In case any person, &c., who shall be owner, or who shall have the care, government, or charge of any slave or slaves, shall deny, neglect, or refuse to allow such slave or slaves, under his or her charge, sufficient clothing, covering, or food, it shall and may be lawful for any person or persons, on behalf of said slave or slaves, to make complaint to the next neighboring justice in the parish where such slave or slaves live, or are usually employed, and the said justice shall summon the party against whom such

---

<sup>30</sup> Like the prohibition to possess firearms and to sell goods, for example.



complaint shall be made, and shall inquire of, hear, and determine the same” (Goodell, *The American Slave Code* 137).

Slaveholders provided for slaves’ basic needs, but did so in the most advantageous manner for them due to the fact that, even if slaves were not sufficiently fed or properly clothed, they could not complain or use any legal measure against their masters: first, because, as stated earlier, they could not offer testimony in courts against white people; and second, because if slaves dared to complain they were normally punished. Thus, masters could do as they pleased as regards the allowances of food, clothing and housing that their slaves received. In *Negro Slavery Described by a Negro, Being the Narrative of Ashton Warner* (1831), Susanna Strickland<sup>31</sup> describes, thus, the allowances of food and clothing given to slaves, as well as their housing:

The quantity of food allowed the slaves is from two pounds and a half to three pounds of salt-fish per week, for each grown person. . . . In building their houses, they are allowed as much board as will form a window and a door. They go to the woods and cut wild canes, to form the walls and roof. The huts are thatched with cane-trash or tops.

For clothing, the owner gives to each slave in the year six yards of blue stuff, called bamboo, and six yards of brown. The young people and children are given a less allowance, in proportion to their size and age; the young children getting only a small stripe to tie round the waist. For bed-clothing, they give them only a blanket once in four or five years; and they are obliged to wear this till it falls in pieces (Warner and Strickland 40-42).

This kind of description is very frequently found in slave narratives, in which the narrators often complain of hunger and cold.<sup>32</sup> There were, however, masters who *did*

<sup>31</sup> English writer and abolitionist, Susanna Strickland (1803-1885) published this work under the pseudonym Simon Strickland. She was also the editor of another slave narrative: *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave* (1831).

<sup>32</sup> Peter Randolph provides a good example when describing in detail the amount of food and clothing allowed to slaves:

[Slaves] have one pair of shoes for the year; if these are worn out in two months, they get no more that year, but must go barefooted the rest of the year, through cold and heat. . . . They have one suit of clothes for the year. . . . It will not last more than three months, and then the poor slave gets no more from the slaveholder, if he go naked. This suit consists of one shirt, one pair of pants, one pair of socks, one pair of shoes, and no vest at all. The slave has a hat given him once in two years; when this is worn out, he gets no more from the slaveholder, but must go bareheaded till he can get one somewhere else. . . . The food of the slave is this: Every Saturday night they receive two pounds of bacon, and one peck and a half of corn meal, to last the men through the week. The women have one half pound of meat, and one peck of meal, and the children one half peck each. When this is gone, they can have no more till the end of the week (18).

care about their slaves and tried to feed and clothe them adequately. They were usually the exception, though, as testimonies in ex slaves' autobiographies prove.<sup>33</sup>

Slaves' complaints about the lack and quality of food and clothes given are the most numerous, though slaves also complained about their cabins.<sup>34</sup> Eugene D. Genovese writes that, from the late 1830s, there was a campaign to improve the quality of slave cabins, and adds that:

By the 1850s the great majority of the slave cabins in all parts of the South met the specification as to size and the restriction to one family unit. The census reports from 1850 and 1860, as well as plantation records, show that, on the average, five to six slaves—one family unit—occupied a cabin. Where crowding occurred the masters were not always at fault, for the slaves often took orphans, old people, or single friends in to live with them rather than leave them to a barrackslike existence (524).

Although slaves *did* complain about their cabins being too small, they had other complaints regarding their housing: lack of windows, lack of furniture—some of the cabins did not even have beds—and discomfort were the main faults they found in their dwellings.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, slaveholders were quite satisfied with their slave quarters: “The slaveholders expressed satisfaction with their slave quarters while admitting deplorable conditions and prodding each other for improvements. Their satisfaction rested on the thought that most of the world’s peasants and workers lived in dirty, dark, overcrowded dwellings and that, by comparison, their slaves lived decently” (Genovese 526). The difference between these poor whites (peasants and workers) and slaves was

---

<sup>33</sup> Henry Bibb describes his kind master Mr. Young, who “never was known to flog one of his slaves or sell one. He fed and clothed them well, and never over-worked them” (96). Bibb continues commenting on the fact that Mr. Young allowed slaves to have a small garden where they could grow vegetables, from which slaves could obtain a supplement of food: “He allowed each family a small house to themselves with a little garden spot, whereon to raise their own vegetables; and a part of the day on Saturdays was allowed them to cultivate it” (96). Nevertheless, slaves were not usually very happy with the food they were given. Sometimes, the problem was the amount of food, sometimes the quality, and, as Frederick Douglass states in his *Narrative*, sometimes the time allowed to eat: “[Mr. Freeland], like Mr. Covey, gave us enough to eat; but, unlike Mr. Covey, he also gave us sufficient time to take our meals” (70).

<sup>34</sup> Several pictures of slave quarters and cabins can be seen in “Appendix A: Illustrations,” pp. 379-380.

<sup>35</sup> Josiah Henson describes the dwellings he and his fellow slaves occupied on the plantation as follows: Our lodging was in log huts, of a single small room, with no other floor than the trodden earth, in which ten or a dozen persons—men, women, and children—might sleep, but which could not protect them from dampness and cold, nor permit the existence of the common decencies of life. There were neither beds, nor furniture of any description—a blanket being the only addition to the dress of the day for protection from the chillness of the air or the earth (*The Life* 727).

that the latter lacked control over their lives and freedom of movement (to go to a different place to make a more decent living, for instance). Moreover, unlike poor whites, slaves did not earn money for their work. In any case, slaves adapted well to their dwellings and even tried to improve the appearance of their cabins by keeping them clean, making furniture, and decorating them the best they could.

As previously mentioned, the slave codes regulated every aspect of the life of slaves. However, it is also true that there were some gaps in this legislation. For example, the slave codes did not regulate slave marriages. Slaves were items of property, and people's belongings do not marry. Thus, marriage among slaves was not even an issue to be discussed, even though these marriages did, in fact, exist. Planters faced serious problems when their slaves wanted to marry slaves from other plantations. These marriages would involve a lot of traveling from one plantation to the other, and therefore a decrease in the production of those slaves: "Slaves were, therefore, encouraged to marry on the plantation, if at all possible; and when this was not possible masters sought either to purchase the spouse of his slave or sell his slave to the owner of the spouse" (Franklin 147). In these cases of interplantation marriage, the owner of the slave woman would obtain economic profit if he did not sell her to the other planter because, according to the law, the children of the couple would belong to him.

Many slaveholders *forced* some of their female slaves to marry other slaves on the same plantation so as to have children that would increase their wealth.<sup>36</sup> These unions, however, had no legal consequences, and slaveowners would support, encourage and even force the marriage of already married slaves if their husbands or wives were sold away to other plantations.<sup>37</sup> William Goodell discusses these cases:

Forced marriages of slaves with slaves, including second and third marriages after separations from former companions by sale, constitute a class of well attested facts. The Savannah River Baptist Association decided that in case of such separation of Baptist slave husbands and wives, it was lawful for them,

---

<sup>36</sup> The ex slave John Brown writes: "[Crittty] was married, in the way that slaves are, but as she had no children, she was compelled to take a second husband. Still she did not have any offspring" (329).

<sup>37</sup> John Brown, for example, explains: "[My father] and my mother were separated in consequence of his master's going further off, and then my mother was forced to take another husband" (324).

without church censure, to form such new connections, “*in obedience to their masters,*” whose right to enforce such arrangements was thus tacitly acknowledged (*The American Slave Code* 86; emphasis in original).

Although these forced marriages were very frequent, there was also love in slave quarters. In these cases, marriages were very important and meaningful for slaves.<sup>38</sup> Slaveowners, however, violated the sacred bond of marriage, not only by separating husbands from wives (selling them to different planters), but also by raping married—as well as single—female slaves. These acts destroyed the slave family because, the law being on the master’s side, the husband of the female slave could do nothing to protect his wife. Goodell discusses the powerlessness of the slave man:

The obligations of marriage are evidently inconsistent with the conditions of slavery, and cannot be performed by a slave. The husband promises to protect his wife and provide for her. The wife promises to be the help-meet of her husband. They mutually promise to live with and cherish each other, till parted by death. But what can such promises by slaves *mean*? The “legal relation of master and slave” renders them void! It forbids the slave to protect even himself. It clothes his master with authority to bid him inflict deadly blows on the woman he has sworn to protect. . . . It bids the woman assist, not her husband, but her owner! Nay! it gives him unlimited control and full possession of her own person, and forbids her, on pain of death, (as will be shown,) to resist him, if he drags her to his bed! It severs the plighted pair, at the will of their masters, occasionally, or for ever! . . . What, then, can the marriage vows of slaves *mean*? (*The American Slave Code* 107-108; emphasis in original).

The slave marriage being thus violated, the construction of a slave family became almost impossible. In the same way in which slaveholders disregarded slave marriages, they also considered that slaves could not have *proper* families. They argued that, on the one hand, blacks were less than human beings and therefore incapable of having any

---

<sup>38</sup> Henry Bibb narrates how he fell in love with Malinda and sentimentally describes their love for each other. Nevertheless, when he enters the subject of marriage, his tone ceases to be sentimental to become more critical and angry:

We soon broached the old subject of marriage, and entered upon a conditional contract of matrimony, viz: that we would marry if our minds should not change within a year; that after marriage we would change our former course and live a pious life; and that we would embrace the earliest opportunity of running away to Canada for our liberty. Clasp[ing] each other by the hand, pled[ing] our sacred honor that we would be true, we called on high heaven to witness the rectitude of our purpose. There was nothing that could be more binding upon us as slaves than this; for marriage among American slaves is disregarded by the laws of this country. . . . There is no legal marriage among the slaves of the South; I never saw nor heard of such a thing in my life, and I have been through seven of the slave states. A slave marrying according to law, is a thing unknown in the history of American Slavery (23).

kind of feelings, not even towards the members of their family;<sup>39</sup> on the other hand, slave marriages were sometimes, as stated above, forced by slaveholders and therefore, the slave family was constructed upon a lie. Slave narratives proved otherwise, however. In these writings one can read about slaves' pain and suffering at the separation from their families, especially at slave auctions:

Here may be seen husbands separated from their wives, only by the width of the room, and children from their parents, one or both, witnessing the driving of the bargain that is to tear them asunder for ever, yet not a word of lamentation or anguish must escape from them; nor when the deed is consummated, dare they bid one another good-bye, or take one last embrace. Even the poor, dear, little children, who are crying and wringing their hands after "daddy and mammy," are not allowed to exchange with them a parting caress. Nature, however, will not be thus controlled, and in spite of the terrors of the paddle and the cow-hide, the most fearful scenes of anguish and confusion too often take place, converting the auction-room into a perfect Bedlam of despair (John Brown 363-364).

Thus, even in those cases in which their masters forced marriages, slaves *did* develop some kind of affection and love toward the members of their families, especially toward their children. These narratives of bondage proved that, although slaves knew that they could be separated from their beloved ones at any time if their masters chose to do so, the separation would be really painful for them.

The slave codes did not forbid the separation of slave families, with one exception: "Only Louisiana effectively limited this outrage by forbidding the sale away from their mothers of children under the age of ten" (Genovese 32). In the nineteenth century, there were some attempts to regulate slave marriage in the slave codes, but no changes were made, as Eugene D. Genovese rightly states: "As late as 1855 a group of North Carolinians made a major effort to humanize the slave code especially with respect to marriage and literacy, but got nowhere" (53). The gap in the legislation concerning slave marriages would never be filled in.

---

<sup>39</sup> The belief that black people could not have feelings was another argument used to locate them in a low rank of the Great Chain of Being. In Ashton Warner's narrative, the opposite is argued in a rhetorical way: "Has God poured the tide of life through the African's breast, and animated it with a portion of his own divine spirit, and at the same time deprived him of all natural affections, that *he* alone is to be struck off the list of rational beings, and placed on a level with the brutes?" (Warner and Strickland 9; emphasis in original).

The laws contemplated in the slave codes—and the gaps in the legislation with regard to the rape of black women and slave marriages, for example—restricted slaves' life and made their lives very hard. The ones that have been discussed in the previous pages are just a few examples of the rules that were harder for slaves to comply with. Nevertheless, they are, at the same time, the ones that constituted the basis of the slave codes in most states and the ones that most strongly influenced slaves' daily lives.<sup>40</sup>

These laws were particularly unfair and harmful for female slaves, especially as regards their sexuality. On the one hand, no punishment was contemplated for those who raped black women. On the other hand, as legislation established, the children of slave women became—automatically—slaves, a regulation that would have one disastrous consequence for female slaves: the slaveholder's appropriation of bondwomen's sexuality. If the slaveowner raped his slaves, apart from physical pleasure, he could obtain another type of profit: the increase of his stock of slaves with mulatto children. Yet he could decide to make use of his female slaves' sexuality in a different way. He could turn these women into breeders by forcing them to *marry* other slaves. In any case, if the slave codes included restrictive and oppressive laws for the slaves, they put *female* slaves in a more difficult situation than *male* slaves. The same restrictions and punishments applied, but the laws paved the way for abuses that slave men would not endure. These abuses suffered by—male and female—slaves were frequently related to the jobs they performed on the plantations, something that will be examined in the following pages.

---

<sup>40</sup> For a more thorough discussion of the legislation that regulated the slavery system, see *Slavery and the Law*, edited by Paul Finkelman, Robert Olwell's *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects: The Culture of Power in the South Carolina Low Country, 1740–1790*, Sally E. Hadden's *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas*, and Mark V. Tushnet's *Slave Law in the American South: State v. Mann in History and Literature*.

**2****JOBS PERFORMED BY MALE AND FEMALE SLAVES:  
FROM CHILDHOOD THROUGH ADULTHOOD**

In the nineteenth century, slaves were mainly employed in agricultural activities. This is not surprising since most slaves lived on small farms and plantations. Franklin provides more specific data on the location of slave population: “It is estimated that only 400,000 slaves lived in towns and cities in 1850. This left approximately 2.8 million to do the work on the farms and plantations. The great bulk of them, 1.8 million, were to be found on cotton plantations, while the remainder were primarily engaged in the cultivation of tobacco, rice, and sugar cane” (136). Two important conclusions can be drawn from this information: first, that there were two very different types of slaves, plantation slaves and urban slaves; second, that most slaves worked on plantations. In this part of the chapter I will analyze slaves’ jobs on farms and plantations, but will also briefly examine the characteristics of urban slaves and the jobs they performed. Special emphasis will be placed on the different roles played by slave men and slave women in nineteenth-century America.

Being born a slave was the worst thing that could happen to anyone in nineteenth-century America, for it doomed this person to a life of work and suffering. Nevertheless, the first years of a slave’s life were not so hard. In fact, many former

slaves would recall in their narratives the first seven or eight years of their lives as the happiest ones in their years in bondage:

[I]f cold and hunger do not pierce the tender frame, the first seven or eight years of the slave-boy's life are about as full of sweet content as those of the most favored and petted *white* children of the slaveholder. . . . In a word, he is, for the most part of the first eight years of his life, a spirited, joyous, uproarious, and happy boy, upon whom troubles fall only like water on a duck's back (Douglass, *My Bondage* 144; emphasis in original).

Although Frederick Douglass refers in this fragment to the situation of slave *boys*, no distinction between female or male slave children was made on the plantation. Their duties were exactly the same and they did not depend on the slaves' sex but on their age.<sup>41</sup> Slaves were, as a rule, considered children until they were twelve and, until they were around eight years of age, these slave children lived a joyful life, free of the worries that assailed adult slaves.

These young slaves were, for the first years of their lives, occupied in looking after younger (black and white) children on the plantation. They had to take care of both their masters' children and the slave children whose parents were working on the field. Many slave narratives describe this kind of nursing,<sup>42</sup> which was troublesome for both the child who took care of the younger children, and for those younger slaves and white

---

<sup>41</sup> Talking about the age of slaves is rather difficult and frequently inaccurate, due to the fact that most slaves did not know how old they were. Slaveholders wanted to keep their slaves ignorant of their age both to demonstrate that they had total power and control over their lives, and to be able to lie about this issue at slave auctions. Thus, they could make a more profitable sale since the age of slaves determined, to some extent, their market price. Consequently, slaves were frequently examined like animals at slave auctions: "As it is hard to tell the ages of slaves, they look in their mouths at their teeth, and prick up the skin on the back of their hands, and if the person is very far advanced in life, when the skin is pricked up, the pucker will stand so many seconds on the back of the hand" (Bibb 53). As it will be examined in the following chapter, slaves regretted not knowing their age, and often complained about this lack of knowledge in their personal histories.

<sup>42</sup> The ex slave John Brown, for example, recalls looking after his younger brother in *Slave Life in Georgia*:

At this period, my principal occupation was to nurse my little brother whilst my mother worked in the field. Almost all slave children have to do the nursing; the big taking care of the small, who often come poorly off in consequence. I know this was my little brother's case. I used to lay him in the shade, under a tree, sometimes, and go to play, or curl myself up under a hedge, and take a sleep. He would wake me by his screaming, when I would find him covered with ants, or musquitos, or blistered from the heat of the sun, which having moved round whilst I was asleep, would throw the shadow of the branches in another direction, leaving the poor child quite exposed (325).



children who would have probably fared better in the hands of a more experienced nurse.

Generally speaking, between the ages of eight and twelve, slave children helped their parents not only by looking after their younger brothers and sisters, but also by doing other chores in the slave quarters, such as working on the gardens and trapping animals for food. Adult slaves had to do some work in or around their cabins after a long day's work on the fields (cooking, cleaning, etc.), and their children could lighten the weight of these tasks. Although only exceptionally would young children have to do harder jobs, there were southern slaveholders who "worked the little ones unmercifully from the time they could toddle" (Genovese 502). Slave children could be asked to clean up the yards, dig up tomatoes, shell peas for the kitchen and tote water to the field hands, for example.<sup>43</sup> The hardest time for these under-twelves came probably during the cotton-picking season, when sometimes some of them were required to help.<sup>44</sup> However, black children would not understand what it meant to be a field hand in its full import until they were about twelve years of age, the time at which their future as a slave would be decided. The tasks that these children had to perform during their first years of life would help them to become acquainted with their role in society and with the duties that they would have in the future as adult slaves.

Despite the fact that these children had many *little* things to do here and there on the plantation, they managed to find some spare time to play. Interestingly enough,

---

<sup>43</sup> In *My Bondage*, Frederick Douglass enumerates the responsibilities he had as a child on the plantation where he lived: "The most I had to do, was, to drive up the cows in the evening, to keep the front yard clean, and to perform small errands for my young mistress, Lucretia Auld" (206). The tasks assigned to slave children varied greatly. In *Slave Life in Georgia*, John Brown describes the jobs he had to do as a child, and the tasks assigned to slave children on the plantation he lived in:

I was put to grub and hoe. [My mother] also had other very hard work to do, such as making fences, grubbing bushes, fetching and burning brush, and such like. I had the same kind of work to do, though being small, I could only help my mother very little, except in the tobacco-fields, where I was of most use, picking off tobacco-worms from the leaves (327).

<sup>44</sup> John Brown writes about this circumstance: "It was, I think, the month of February, for it was towards the close of cotton-picking time, and we all went out into the field to pick cotton from the bole, the children from ten years of age going out with us" (367). John Brown describes another period of hard work for slave children: "the small children . . . are better able to creep amongst the plants and pick out the weeds with their little fingers, than grown-up men and women are; and they are also, for the same reason, more suitable to do the transplanting" (385).

slave children did not only play with each other, but also with white children. As stated above, black children were employed in the care of white children<sup>45</sup> (normally their owner's children) but, in most cases, the relationship between slave and white children was that of playmates: "Most slave children had the run of the plantation and played with the white children in and out of the 'big house,' in and out of the cabins, and through the yards without any inhibitions" (Franklin 143). Genovese explains that some slaveholders were against letting their children play with slave children, but that very often "the white children eagerly sought the companionship of the black children their own age and loved nothing better than to romp in the quarters" (515). It would be false to say that this interracial relationship was perfect, for there were plenty of instances of cruelty against black children, with white children imitating the brutality with which their parents treated adult slaves.<sup>46</sup> Ignoring (voluntarily or not) their position as slaves, many slave children fought their masters' children back, and sometimes defeated them. Although one might imagine that slave children were punished for beating up white children, there were many cases in which these black children were not even rebuked for doing so. Some planters understood these quarrels either as playful and manly games, or as means of making their children stronger. Other slaveholders simply did not like slaves being abused by their despotic children.

Not all slave children enjoyed the same privileges. Masters decided on their duties, obligations, and opportunities for personal improvement. Thus, some slave children were granted basic education and learned to read and write; other fortunate slave children were sent to town to learn a trade with local carpenters, blacksmiths,

---

<sup>45</sup> This was the case of Frederick Douglass, for example, who, in *My Bondage* explains that one of his duties was to look after his master's child Tommy: "My employment was to run of errands, and to take care of Tommy; to prevent his getting in the way of carriages, and to keep him out of harm's way generally" (216).

<sup>46</sup> James W. C. Pennington expresses this fact in his autobiography:

There is another source of evil to slave children, which I cannot forbear to mention here, as one which early embittered my life,—I mean the tyranny of the master's children. My master had two sons, about the ages and sizes of my older brother and myself. We were not only required to recognize these young sirs as our young masters, but *they* felt themselves to be such; and, in consequence of this feeling, they sought to treat us with the same air of authority that their father did the older slaves (114-115; emphasis in original).

etc.<sup>47</sup> As it will be examined later in this essay, the slaves who knew a trade—skilled slaves—were very valuable for their masters, reputed amongst other slaves, and frequently enjoyed a privileged situation on the plantation. Thus, being sent to a tradesman to acquire a skill would be one of the best things that could happen to a slave child. This opportunity was, nevertheless, denied to slave girls, for skilled jobs were at the time performed by men, not women.

In any case, when the slaveholder decided that the slave child was old enough to carry out the work of an adult slave, being a boy or a girl marked significant differences. It was the moment at which the master decided what kind of job the slave would perform in the future, if that of a field hand, or that of a house servant. Generally speaking, most of the house servants were women, and most of the field hands were men. Although this division of work was very significant on large plantations, on small farms<sup>48</sup> the distribution of tasks was not so strict, since there were also cases in which slaves and masters worked hand in hand in the field (Franklin 136-137). The white farmer and his wife divided the chores among slaves, but this distribution of labor mainly consisted of assigning a few female slaves to do house work,<sup>49</sup> whereas male slaves were in charge of the tasks related to the cultivation of crops. Female slaves would, thus, be in a more favorable position compared to their male counterparts, for the latter had to perform the toughest jobs in the fields.

The relationship between masters and slaves on small farms was probably quite close since, as stated above, slaveholders and slaves usually did field work together. This closeness between masters and slaves did not imply comradeship between owners

---

<sup>47</sup> In *The Fugitive Blacksmith*, James W.C. Pennington describes his case explaining that, when he was a child, his master made him learn a trade, something that was not strange in the part of the country where he lived (Maryland). This learning would prove to be very useful for him in his future life:

The slaveholders in that state often hire the children of their slaves out to non-slaveholders, not only because they save themselves the expense of taking care of them, but in this way they get among their slaves useful trades. They put a bright slave-boy with a tradesman, until he gets such a knowledge of the trade as to be able to do his own work, and then he takes him home. I remained with the stonemason until I was eleven years of age (115).

<sup>48</sup> *Small* farms were those whose owners usually held less than twenty slaves.

<sup>49</sup> However, these household slaves would occasionally—depending on their owner's needs—have to work in the fields as well.

and *property*. It was—more than anything else—a question of closeness of space. Although they were forced to work together, slaves were constantly aware of the fact that their masters had the power, that their lives depended on their owners' decisions and desires. Slaves knew that their masters could punish or whip them at any time, no matter how close the relationship between them.

Unlike what happened on small farms, on larger plantations the relationship between master and slaves depended on the kind of jobs slaves did. If on small farms there was not a great division of tasks among slaves, on larger plantations, however, there was a greater specialization in the jobs performed by slaves. The greatest division of work among slaves was that which distinguished between house servants and field hands. House servants were those who worked mainly in or around the Big House,<sup>50</sup> cleaning and making sure that the planter's house was in perfect conditions, looking after the yards and the gardens, cooking the meals, driving the carriages, caring for the children, and carrying out any other tasks their white masters and mistresses—and their children—demanded. Field hands were those slaves who did the most physical tasks on the plantation related to the cultivation, harvesting, etc. of the crops.

This division of work was often made on the basis of slaves' sex and physical appearance. Thus, having a pleasing physical appearance<sup>51</sup> could ensure a slave woman<sup>52</sup> a position in or around the Big House. In consequence, the majority of house

---

<sup>50</sup> The Big House was the plantation home where the slaveholder and his family lived.

<sup>51</sup> Slaveholders preferred good-looking house servants, since they would have to see them more often than field hands, and because they would give a better impression to their guests. In *My Bondage*, Frederick Douglass describes the differences between the appearance of house servants and field hands:

Behind the tall-backed and elaborately wrought chairs, stand the servants, men and maidens—fifteen in number—discriminately selected, not only with a view to their industry and faithfulness, but with special regard to their personal appearance, their graceful agility and captivating address. . . . These servants constituted a sort of black aristocracy on Col. Lloyd's plantation. They resembled the field hands in nothing, except in color, and in this they held the advantage of a velvet-like glossiness, rich and beautiful. The hair, too, showed the same advantage. The delicate colored maid rustled in the scarcely worn silk of her young mistress, while the servant men were equally well attired from the overflowing wardrobe of their young masters; so that, in dress, as well as in form and feature, in manner and speech, in tastes and habits, the distance between these favored few, and the sorrow and hunger-smitten multitudes of the quarter and the field, was immense; and this is seldom passed over (191-192).

<sup>52</sup> Women were considered more appropriate for the performance of domestic tasks.

servants were women, better-looking than field hands, and frequently elected on the basis of their color, being those of a lighter shade of black preferred over the dark ones.<sup>53</sup>

Slave women were, from their teens, prone to be sexually abused by their masters. In this way, their owners, who possessed the product of their labor, became also proprietors of these women's sexuality. This domination of the slave's sexuality was an extension of the white men's domination over the slaves' whole life. As Angela Davis explains, "the right claimed by slaveowners and their agents over the bodies of female slaves was a direct expression of their presumed property rights over Black people as a whole. The license to rape emanated from and facilitated the ruthless economic domination that was the gruesome hallmark of slavery" (*Women* 175). Another argument used by proslavery agents to justify these sexual abuses was based on the myth of Jezebel, the myth of the lewdly sensuous enslaved black woman, "the counter image of the mid-nineteenth-century ideal of the Victorian lady. She did not lead men and children to God; piety was foreign to her" (Deborah Grey White 29).<sup>54</sup> White men created the stereotype of the lewd and promiscuous black woman to escape the blame for the sexual abuses committed on female slaves:

Measured against constructs shaped by puritanical ideals and Christian morality, enslaved Black women were deemed the immoral instigators of their own fall from grace. The stereotype of the Jezebel helped to provide rationalization for the sexual exploitation of enslaved Black women by White men, while simultaneously providing justification for the White men's behavior in the eyes of their White wives, mothers, and sisters (Mitchell 28).

Denigrated by the white men—the rapists—who justified their base deeds, and without the help or understanding of the mistress, the female slave was in a difficult position: if

---

<sup>53</sup> According to Jenny Sharpe, expert in colonial and postcolonial studies, "domestic positions were usually held by racially mixed slaves" (130). There were two main reasons for this: on the one hand, white people considered blacks rather ugly, and those who had a lighter color—more similar to their own—were considered more beautiful; on the other hand, many slaves were born to white planters, who might have been inclined to place these mulatto slaves as domestic servants, thus putting them in a more favorable position on the plantation.

<sup>54</sup> In the New Testament the name Jezebel is used to refer to a corrupting wicked woman: "But I have this complaint against you. You are permitting that woman—that Jezebel who calls herself a prophet—to lead my servants astray. She teaches them to commit sexual sin and to eat food offered to idols" (Revelation 2:20).

a house servant, she would have to spend longer hours in the Big House near her abuser, and thus her chances of being sexually abused by her master—and physically and/or psychologically tortured by her mistress—increased; if a field hand, most of her time would be devoted to physically hard chores, but sexual abuses were also inescapable.

Special was the case of the female quadroon,<sup>55</sup> “a visible marker of ‘mixed blood’” (Nelson 83). White men appreciated these women for their beauty, and even tempted them with a comfortable life in exchange for sexual favors. Thus, these women had to make a choice that would mark their lives: they had to choose between free-life-like concubinage and a harsh life in slavery (that might also include sexual abuses), between survival and virtue. Some women accepted to become concubines, but others demonstrated to be strongly principled and rejected selling their bodies for a more comfortable life.<sup>56</sup> Some slave women, unable to make a decision coherent with their moral values, resorted to escape or even suicide. Others justified their decision arguing that slave women had a different moral, and that “amongst the slave population no safeguard is thrown around virtue, and no inducement held out to slave women to be chaste” (William Wells Brown, *Clotelle* 2). Slave women were raped on a regular basis. Therefore, they could not live up to the same moral standards as white women at the time if their masters appropriated these black women’s sexuality. As Sarah Grimké—daughter of a slaveholding judge from South Carolina—states (1839),

---

<sup>55</sup> One-quarter black by descent.

<sup>56</sup> William Wells Brown provides an interesting example of this crossroads in his *Narrative* (1847):

[Cynthia] was a quadroon, and one of the most beautiful women I ever saw. She was a native of St. Louis, and bore an irreproachable character for virtue and propriety of conduct. Mr. Walker bought her for the New Orleans market, and took her down with him on one of the trips that I made with him. . . . On the first night that we were on board the steamboat, he directed me to put her into a state-room he had provided for her, apart from the other slaves. I . . . watched him into the state-room, and listened to hear what passed between them. I heard him make his base offers, and her reject them. He told her that if she would accept his vile proposals, he would take her back with him to St. Louis, and establish her as his housekeeper at his farm. But if she persisted in rejecting them, he would sell her as a field hand on the worst plantation on the river. Neither threats nor bribes prevailed, however, and he retired, disappointed of his prey (694-695).

Although Cynthia first rejects Mr. Walker’s proposals, Wells Brown continues explaining that, in the end, she accepts and Walker establishes her “as his mistress and housekeeper” (*Narrative* 695). Eventually, however, and after having had four children to Mr. Walker, he finally sells her and her children.

the virtue of female slaves is wholly at the mercy of irresponsible tyrants, and women are bought and sold in our slave markets, to gratify the brutal lust of those who bear the name of Christians. In our slave states, if amid all her degradation and ignorance, a woman desires to preserve her virtue unsullied, she is either bribed or whipped into compliance, or if she dare to resist her seducer, her life by the laws of some of the slave states may be and has actually been sacrificed to the fury of disappointed passion (17).

Thus, it was easier for bondwomen to give up their sexuality and live as a domestic slave, rather than perform the hard tasks of field hands and run the risk of being sexually assaulted all the same. Nevertheless, there were many courageous and determined slave women who resisted the temptation and who were loyal to their moral and religious principles.

In any case and as previously stated, slaves preferred working as house servants<sup>57</sup> because they enjoyed a privileged position on the plantation: they had better housing, better clothes, and better and more abundant food than field hands. However, one of the most valued advantages for this group was the fact that they were not normally sold by lot like field hands. When house servants were sold they had more chances of being sold as a family, than as separate slaves, which was frequently the case of field hands. Many field hands were separated from their families in the multiple slave auctions that took place in the United States, whereas house servants tended to remain together.

Although house servants enjoyed many privileges, they nevertheless felt oppressed and abused as well. If they worked for cruel masters and mistresses, house servants fared worse than field hands: they spent more time with their owners and were constantly observed by them. Therefore, they had more chances of being found at fault than field hands. Lewis Clarke writes about the drawbacks of being a house servant in the following terms:

---

<sup>57</sup> The ex slave William Wells Brown was of that opinion. As a slave, he experienced the benefits of being a house servant and, in his slave narrative, enumerates the privileges he had *enjoyed* as such: "During the time that Mr. Cook was overseer, I was a house servant—a situation preferable to that of a field hand, as I was better fed, better clothed, and not obliged to rise at the ringing of the bell, but about half an hour after" (*Narrative* 684).

We were constantly exposed to the whims and passions of every member of the family; from the least to the greatest their anger was wreaked upon us. Nor was our life an easy one, in the hours of our toil or in the amount of labor performed. We were always required to sit up until all the family had retired; then we must be up at early dawn in summer, and before day in winter. If we failed, through weariness or for any other reason, to appear at the first morning summons, we were sure to have our hearing quickened by a severe chastisement. Such horror has seized me, lest I might not hear the first shrill call, that I have often in dreams fancied I heard that unwelcome voice, and have leaped from my couch, and walked through the house and out of it before I awoke. I have gone and called the other slaves, in my sleep, and asked them if they did not hear master call. Never, while I live, will the remembrance of those long, bitter nights of fear pass from my mind (612).<sup>58</sup>

As shown in the previous extract, and in many other slave narratives, some southern mistresses were extremely lazy, irritable, and never pleased with their slaves' work. Nevertheless, this was not something serious unless the source of white mistresses' irritability was jealousy. Many mistresses were jealous of female slaves to whom white men in their families—especially their husbands—felt attracted. They had usually good reasons for being jealous, for, as previously examined, if a white man wanted to have sexual intercourse with a female slave, nothing and nobody could stop him, which caused that many of the mulatto children born on southern plantations were their masters' offspring.<sup>59</sup> White mistresses' jealousy would be even greater if these female slaves worked in or around the Big House because they saw them more often. In this sense, female slaves were in a more disadvantageous position compared to their male counterparts. Male slaves had to endure mistreatment for different reasons (laziness at work, stealing, etc.), but not on account of their sex. Slave women's sexual condition determined that they could have to endure sexual abuses on the part of their masters and, consequently, physical and psychological abuses on the part of their jealous masters' wives. Male slaves would never experience either type of abuses.

---

<sup>58</sup> Lewis and Milton Clarke dictated their narratives to the abolitionist Joseph C. Lovejoy, who published them as *Narratives of the Sufferings of Lewis and Milton Clarke, Sons of a Soldier of the Revolution, During a Captivity of More than Twenty Years Among the Slaveholders of Kentucky, One of the So Called Christian States of North America. Dictated by Themselves* (1846).

<sup>59</sup> As examined earlier in this essay, the rape of female slaves was a customary practice among slaveholders and many mulatto children were the outcome of these aggressions. There were other—less common—cases, in which the white master and his female slave had consented sexual relationships or even a love affair, something which would increase the mistress's jealousy and rage.



House servants also complained of another disadvantage. Unlike field hands, who enjoyed more freedom of movement and specific leisure time (field hands were normally allowed free Sundays, special holidays and every evening to relax as best they could if the needs of the field were not more demanding than usual), house servants had to be available twenty-four hours a day in case their masters needed them. Nevertheless, the advantages were greater than the disadvantages, and house servants tried to maintain their position on the plantation as such. They also wanted their children to become house servants as well, and used their *influence* within the white family to achieve this purpose. Thus, the number of house servants was, on some plantations, larger than necessary for the keeping of the planter's home.<sup>60</sup> However, slaveholders did not mind having an excessive number of house servants because this would help them convey a reputation of greatness, affluence, and luxury among other planters from neighboring areas.

As regards the relationship between masters and slaves on large plantations, the generalization could be made that house servants had a closer relationship with their masters than field hands.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, although many masters and mistresses usually gave their favorite house servants privileges and had great intimacy with them (some house servants knew all the secrets of the planter's family), there were also masters and mistresses who, as stated above, physically and psychologically tormented their house servants on a regular basis. Many of these house servants even felt identified with their owners, their good manners (which they frequently imitated), and their standard of living and assimilated these values as their own.

---

<sup>60</sup> Franklin explains that this group "tended to perpetuate and even to increase itself. Once a slave had served in a home, the prospect of working in the field was frowned upon and resisted with every resource at his disposal. House servants were even anxious to 'work' their children into the more desirable situation and to marry them off to the children of other house servants" (137).

<sup>61</sup> This relationship was frequently more intimate and affectionate than between slaves and masters on small farms. The reason for this different relationship was probably based on the fact that the distinction between master and slave was much clearer on larger plantations than on smaller farms, where, as stated above, both slaveholders and slaves worked together. Thus, smaller planters would want to establish a clear distinction between masters and slaves at a personal level.

Thus, the feelings that both house servants and field hands had for their owners were somehow contradictory. On the one hand, they feared them because they had the power to punish them. On the other hand, they admired their wealth, education, and manners. Both fear and admiration were grounded on the opinion of neighbor planters and slaves. Many slaves were happy to say that their master was a rich man who owned a large plantation and so many slaves. A lot of them were even proud of their position on the plantation because they felt that they contributed to the richness of their master with their daily work. According to Eugene D. Genovese, the slaves who worked on larger plantations and for richer slaveholders seemed to *assimilate* their masters' social status and standard of living and make it their own:

A genuinely aristocratic ethos characterized by something other than a supine quest for identification with the strong emerged among the slaves. White southerners forever spoke of the slaves' pride in belonging to a great planter family, and the slave narratives bear them out; but the whites saw only envy and pretension and missed the deeper attitude. . . . The slaves' much celebrated—and denigrated—identification with their own white folks, especially the rich, undoubtedly had its elements of servility, envy, and idolatry, but it remained a respect for “de quality.” They by no means deceived themselves about the brutal and seamy side of their masters' lives. But when they expressed admiration for the aristocratic features of southern life, they set a high standard for themselves (113-115).

This identification with and assimilation of slaveholders' aristocratic features made most slaves prefer working on larger plantations rather than on small farms, since their reputation among other slaves in the neighborhood would be associated to that of the masters.<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> In *My Bondage*, Frederick Douglass describes the greatness of Col. Edward Lloyd's plantation with feelings of admiration:

Besides these dwellings, there were barns, stables, storehouses, and tobacco-houses; blacksmiths' shops, wheelwrights' shops, coopers' shops—all objects of interest; but, above all, there stood the grandest building my eyes had then ever beheld, called, by every one on the plantation, the “Great House.” . . . The great house itself was a large, white, wooden building, with wings on three sides of it. In front, a large portico, extending the entire length of the building, and supported by a long range of columns, gave to the whole establishment an air of solemn grandeur. It was a treat to my young and gradually opening mind, to behold this elaborate exhibition of wealth, power, and vanity (162).

Douglass seems to be proud of living on that wonderful plantation and appropriates his master's possessions when he writes: “These all belonged to me, as well as to Col. Edward Lloyd, and for a time I greatly enjoyed them” (*My Bondage* 163).

Having examined the relationship between slaves and owners, another question must be answered: what kind of relationship existed between house servants and field hands? Although they considered they were brothers in bondage, the relationship between house servants and field hands was not always on friendly terms. Sometimes, house servants did not have a good reputation among field hands, who felt that the former were traitors to their own people because they did not resist their master's will and power, because they were obedient slaves, and because they were sometimes found being disloyal to their brothers and sisters in bondage.<sup>63</sup> More often, though, field hands were simply jealous of house servants because they did not do as hard work as them, and always had a better appearance. Conversely, some house servants considered field hands rude, unclean, and ill-mannered. They were accustomed to attending to the needs of wealthy and educated southerners, and field hands presented a tougher side of reality. They reminded the house servants of what their fate could have been if other conditions had been given, and these slaves seemed willing to eliminate that picture from their minds.

Nevertheless, among the privileged group of house servants there were some slaves who were in an even more favorable position. Among them was the mammy: the "adult African woman who work[ed] as head of the master's household" (Chinosole 101). She was a prominent mother figure in the Big House, very much loved and respected by everybody within both the black and the white community. Her tasks and duties were manifold:

Primarily, the Mammy raised the white children and ran the Big House either as the mistress's executive officer or her *de facto* superior. . . . She played the diplomat and settled the interminable disputes that arose among the house servants; when diplomacy failed, she resorted to her whip and restored order. She served as confidante to the children, the mistress, and even the master. She expected to be consulted on the love affairs and marriages of the white children and might even be consulted on the business affairs of the plantation. She

---

<sup>63</sup> This is, for example, Henry Bibb's opinion, who, in his *Narrative*, affirms: "I would remark that the domestic slaves are often found to be traitors to their own people, for the purpose of gaining favor with their masters, and they are encouraged and trained up by them to report every plot they know of being formed about stealing any thing, or running away, or any thing of the kind; and for which they are paid" (69).

presided over the dignity of the whole plantation and taught the courtesies to the white children as well as to those black children destined to work in the Big House. On the small and medium-sized plantations she had to carry much of the house work herself, and her relationship to the field slaves drew closer. . . . She also had to be a tough, worldly-wise, enormously resourceful woman (Genovese 355-356).<sup>64</sup>

Eugene D. Genovese's description of the relationship between the mammy and the white family is particularly interesting. White children loved the mammy. They spent a long time with her since the time they were born. The mammy saw her master's children grow up, and she would see them become adults, get married, have children, etc. She was a loving figure who told white children off when necessary and, sometimes, gave them more affection than their parents. That is why they told her their secrets, big or small, especially concerning love affairs. The master and mistress also trusted, loved and respected the mammy as much as their own children, and told her their secrets as well. Thus, the mammy had a great advantage in the household: the power of information. She knew whatever happened in the Big House even better than its owners, and could use all that knowledge to her own advantage. She was the most important female slave on the plantation.

These mammies were usually to be found on large plantations, but on smaller farms there existed another category of female slaves with similar functions: the nurses. Although on many small farms nurses acted as mammies, on larger plantations the duties of mammies and nurses were delimited.<sup>65</sup> Genovese states that

---

<sup>64</sup> Angelyn Mitchell summarizes the role as the mammy as follows:

As an enslaved Black woman who worked in the enslaver's house, the religiously faithful mammy generally managed the household and cared for the physical and emotional needs of her owner and his family. In many cases, suckling and rearing the enslaver's children were the mammy's primary responsibilities. In her later years, the mammy, having been a good and faithful servant, generally held a position of respect within her surrogate family and a position of power within her own community" (25).

<sup>65</sup> Moreover, it is usually agreed that even though there was a mammy on the plantation, there was at least one nurse as well. As Eugene D. Genovese observes, slaveholders always insisted "that an old nurse cared for the slave children under the watchful eye of Ole Missus while the parents worked in the fields. Every plantation had one or more old women to look after the children, to cook for them, and to keep them out of mischief" (506-507). Nevertheless, as stated above, it was other older slave children who frequently looked after the younger ones while their parents were working in the fields. In those cases, the nurse's job would be to supervise the older children. In any case, the figure of the nurse was never as prominent and legendary as that of the plantation mammy, frequently represented in films like *Gone with the Wind*.

beyond their medical services, to these nurses fell most of the duties associated with the more formally designated and prestigious Mammies. It was they who imparted the speech of the quarters to the children of the Big House, who introduced them to black folklore, who taught them to love black music, and who helped bend their Christianity in the folkish direction the black preachers were taking it (358).

This versatility of jobs—they also acted as midwives and medical practitioners if necessary—made these female servants favorite among slaveholders. Their owners appreciated them—especially for the tasks they performed—and, therefore, gave them some privileges that field hands did not have. Nevertheless, not all slaveholders had the same opinion of nurses. Some believed that they were incompetent, indifferent to their duties, lazy, and even tyrannical. Not only were there slaveholders who criticized nurses, but also slaves, some of whom felt some kind of resentment against them. This resentment frequently grew out of one of the tasks assigned to nurses: the feeding of slave children while their parents were at work in the fields. Slave parents regretted not being allowed to feed their own children, especially the babies who required breastfeeding.

Female slaves did not only nurture other slaves' children, but also many white children from the Big House. This “coercive nurturing” created a special bond between black and white women, and between black and white children on the plantation:

Coercive nurturing by slave women of mistresses within the confines of slavery made women bound and bonded in two ways: one that parallels immediate family ties, such as when Black women nurse other women's children and children of both women grow up as playmates; another that works as counter-matrilineage by destroying Black women's ties with their own children (Chinosole 112-113).

As stated above, slave families lacked importance for white people and, willingly or not, their behavior and demands contributed to destroying the black family. Coercive nurturing had this destructive effect, but slave families were endangered in many different ways: slave children wandered around the plantation doing errands and looking after themselves, without experiencing—as much as they would have liked—their parents' attention and affection; house servants worked harder for the white

family's household than for their own, especially because of the number of hours they had to spend toiling in the Big House; rapes destroyed slave families at a deeper level, for not only did they have consequences for the slave woman but also for their husbands (who were powerless to defend their women) and the rest of the family, who would go through a painful situation.

There were also some privileged bondmen on the plantation. One of them was the driver, whose main task was to assist the owner or overseer<sup>66</sup> in making field hands work as hard and fast as possible, and to supervise slaves while they were working. In *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, Eugene D. Genovese depicts the figure of the driver and his duties very clearly:

The drivers, slaves themselves, acted as foremen of the labor gangs and supervisors of the decorum of the quarters. Capable drivers—and there were many such—readily became the most important slaves on the place and often knew more about management than did the whites. The term “driver” itself expresses the primary function of keeping the field hands moving. Yet, formally designated drivers did not constitute the whole of the foreman category, for the farms and small plantations that had no such designated personages normally did have, with or without some title, slave leaders on whom the masters relied. No formula governed the number of drivers per slaveholding unit, but one driver would usually suffice for a plantation of fifty slaves or less, with others added on the larger units. Where there was more than one driver, usually but with many exceptions one would be designated head driver and given supervision of the others (365-366).

Similar descriptions of the duties and personal characteristics of drivers can also be found in slave narratives. Solomon Northup, an ex slave who worked as a driver for eight years, writes about his responsibilities as such in the following terms: “The whip was given me with directions to use it upon any one who was caught standing idle. If I

---

<sup>66</sup> The overseer was in charge of managing the plantation whenever the owner was not there or if the plantation was too big to be managed by just the slaveholder. Most plantations were managed by the owners themselves because, as John Hope Franklin estimates, “[a]n overseer would not be needed unless there were more than twenty slaves or unless the planter was an absentee landlord” (139). The slave codes demanded that there should be a white overseer on the plantation: the presence of a white man amongst slaves was indispensable. Overseers were very well known for their cruelty and brutality against slaves. They had an almost unlimited authority over field hands, and exerted it in order to get the most from their toil. In some cases, overseers were fired due to their extreme cruelty. On other occasions, however, they were fired for the opposite: treating slaves too leniently. Still, although the slave codes discouraged the use of black overseers, many slaveholders had one. Some slaveholders relied on black men because they could not afford to pay a white man to do the job; on other occasions black drivers, who usually occupied an intermediate position between the field hands and the white overseer, became overseers in fact though not in name when slaveholders fired white overseers.

failed to obey them to the letter, there was another one for my own back. In addition to this my duty was to call on and off the different gangs at the proper time. I had no regular periods of rest, and could never snatch but a few moments of sleep at a time” (249). Even though Northup offers a disadvantageous description of the drivers—they worked longer hours than field hands and were obliged to whip or else be whipped—they *did* enjoy some privileges: they were given extra food and clothes, better quarters, special gifts (money, tobacco and whiskey, for example), and they did not have to carry out the hardest and most boring tasks on the field.

The drivers’ position between the white overseer and their fellow black slaves made them feel—to some extent—powerful, though lonely. Many field hands did not like or appreciate black drivers—due to the fact that they were obliged to whip slaves if their work was not adequate—and even felt hostility towards them for considering they were traitors and even crueler than white masters or overseers.<sup>67</sup> Some black drivers did enjoy, however, a good reputation among slaves due to circumstances similar to those explained by Northup, who was very much respected by field hands during the time he worked as a driver:

[D]uring my eight years’ experience as a driver, I learned to handle the whip with marvelous dexterity and precision, throwing the lash within a hair’s breadth of the back, the ear, the nose, without, however, touching either of them. If Epps was observed at a distance, or we had reason to apprehend he was sneaking somewhere in the vicinity, I would commence plying the lash vigorously, when, according to arrangement, they would squirm and screech as if in agony, although not one of them had in fact been even grazed. Patsey would take occasion, if he made his appearance presently, to mumble in his hearing some complaints that [I] was lashing them the whole time, and Uncle Abram, with an appearance of honesty peculiar to himself, would declare roundly I had just whipped them worse than General Jackson whipped the enemy at New-Orleans (263).

The truth is that black drivers were in a very difficult and uncomfortable position: they had to find a balance between whipping slaves unmercifully (in order to keep up with work and discipline) and being lenient with them (out of their identification with this

---

<sup>67</sup> Lewis Clarke explains his opinion of black drivers in his *Narrative*: “He must be very strict and severe or else he will be turned out. The master selects the hardest-hearted and most unprincipled slave upon the plantation” (661).

group). The solution Solomon Northup found was, therefore, quite agreeable for everyone: for him, because he did not like whipping other slaves; for the other slaves, because they worked without worrying about being whipped; and for the overseer, because he had the impression that Northup was a very good driver who used the whip often and hard enough to keep the field hands working. Thus, generally speaking, black drivers managed to keep both slaveholders and slaves happy. On the one hand, slaveholders normally trusted them (it was usually the masters who chose the black drivers for their knowledge of plantation business, their skills, and their leadership among other slaves). On the other hand, field hands often preferred laboring under the command of black drivers rather than of white overseers.

Nevertheless, the drivers were not the only privileged slave men. On many plantations, there were mechanics, craftsmen, masons, carpenters, etc. who knew a trade and whose job was very important for the daily well-functioning of the plantation:

During the colonial period the plantations of Maryland, Virginia, and South Carolina hummed with the sounds of the blacksmith and the carpenter, the cooper and the stonemason, the miller and the shoemaker. The wealthier plantations resembled industrial villages, and substantial numbers of slaves acquired a high level of skill in a wide variety of trades (Genovese 388).

Although these skilled slaves were very useful on plantations, they were most frequently found in towns<sup>68</sup> since their owners hired them out<sup>69</sup> to townspeople. This practice of hiring out skilled slaves was very profitable for both slaveowners and slaves. For slaveowners, because they kept all or part of the money the slaves earned, and because, if sold, skilled slaves would make much more money than a field hand.<sup>70</sup> For slaves, being hired out had two great advantages: money and freedom of movement.

---

<sup>68</sup> A further analysis of urban slaves will be made later on in this section of the chapter.

<sup>69</sup> This was a common practice amongst slaveholders: a white man hired a slave who belonged to another white man for a period of time, and paid him a salary for his work. The slave would then have to give his pay to his owner although, on some occasions, masters allowed the slaves to keep part of the money they had earned. Not only were skilled slaves hired out, but also house servants. Nevertheless, the mechanics and craftsmen had an important advantage over the common laborers and the domestics: they could “choose their own masters and make their own arrangements. In effect, they could live approximately as did the free Negroes, except that they had to surrender a large part of their income to their owners” (Genovese 392).

<sup>70</sup> This is another reason why slaves were allowed and even encouraged to learn a trade by their masters.



Some of these skilled slaves managed to save part of the money they received from their employers. This was very important for them in different ways: some had the opportunity to achieve a better standard of living within the plantation, both for them and for their families; other slaves were capable (after saving money for years) of buying their freedom, despite anti-manumission laws; finally, some others felt they were treated as human beings—as opposed to their regular treatment as items of property—because they were paid for their work. On the other hand, the freedom of movement they enjoyed allowed them to go to different towns and villages, to get to know other places and meet different sorts of people (the most helpful of whom were Quakers<sup>71</sup> and abolitionists). Some of these skilled slaves would eventually take advantage of this mobility and escape.

In general, house servants, black drivers and skilled slaves were very much respected by field hands, and some of them were even considered leaders because they knew a trade. They were, furthermore, regarded exemplary preachers, runaways, or contributors to the creation of an African American culture—especially thanks to their artistic manifestations as carpenters, musicians, sculptors, potters, and writers.<sup>72</sup> These privileged slaves knew that they enjoyed a better life than common slaves but understood, however, that they were brothers in bondage: “[T]he force of white racism, as well as their own inclinations, drew them close to the field hands in kinship, religion, interest, and sympathy” (Genovese 441). Moreover, house servants had relatives among field hands to whom they felt deeply attached, who never let them forget that they were brothers and sisters in bondage. Yet the privileged slaves previously depicted constituted a minority, a powerful minority, but a minority after all. Their lives did not

---

<sup>71</sup> The Quakers, or Religious Society of Friends, are a Christian sect that was involved in American and British abolitionist movements during the nineteenth century.

<sup>72</sup> According to Eugene D. Genovese, “[t]hey led the transformation of Africans into Americans. But the Americans they became were Afro-Americans, not merely in the sense of being another ethnic component in a variegated American nationality but in the deeper sense of contributing to an absorbing American national culture and yet remaining apart from it on some important levels” (441). The publication of slave narratives—many of which were written by these privileged slaves because, as stated above, they had easier access to the printed word, and more facilities to become literate and to escape—also contributed to the creation and spread of an African American identity with its particular culture, religion, language, etc.

represent the reality of the majority of slaves in the United States, for the majority of the African American slaves were field hands, who lived and labored under very harsh circumstances.

Field hands constituted the greater group of slaves on the plantation. Although they were not leaders, they also contributed to the development and richness of African American culture with their use of the English language, their songs, superstitions, etc. Nonetheless, their greatest contribution was rather material, for they largely contributed to the wealth of the southern states and their planters. Field hands were the slaves that did the hardest jobs on the plantation: not only were they in charge of raising the crop, but also of “clearing land, burning underbrush, rolling logs, splitting rails, carrying water, mending fences, spreading fertilizer, breaking soil, and the like” (Franklin 138). Their workday was very long but the number of work hours depended on different conditioning elements: it depended on the amount of hours of daylight, on the slaveholder’s character, and on the seasonal demands of the field.<sup>73</sup> Bondmen got up at about four in the morning on average and remained on the field after sunset. Eugene D. Genovese states that a slave workday in the South, calculating “the extras” was an average of fifteen hours: “That is, the slaves worked about twelve hours in the fields and a few hours more in getting to and from work and doing odd jobs” (60).<sup>74</sup> The tasks that slaves did on the plantation were, sometimes, different for slave men and for slave women: “On the large plantations, which displayed a greater division of labor than the

---

<sup>73</sup> Slaves worked longer hours during harvest time because planters wanted the crop harvested before it could be damaged by inclement weather.

<sup>74</sup> As Solomon Northup describes in the following extract, a slave’s long workday did not finish after laboring on the fields. After having worked for their masters’ profit, they started working for themselves:

The day’s work over in the field, the baskets are “toted,” or in other words, carried to the gin-house, where the cotton is weighed. . . . After weighing, follow the whippings; and then the baskets are carried to the cotton house, and their contents stored away like hay, all the hands being sent to tramp it down. If the cotton is not dry, instead of taking it to the gin-house at once, it is laid upon platforms, two feet high, and some three times as wide, covered with boards or plank, with narrow walks running between them.

This done, the labor of the day is not yet ended, by any means. Each one must then attend to his respective chores. One feeds the mules, another the swine—another cuts the wood, and so forth; besides, the packing is all done by candle light. Finally, at a late hour, they reach the quarters, sleepy and overcome with the long day’s toil. Then a fire must be kindled in the cabin, the corn ground in the small hand-mill, and supper, and dinner for the next day in the field, prepared (238).

small plantations and farms, men did heavy work on rainy days or in slack periods while the women sewed, cleaned up the grounds, and did assorted lighter tasks” (Genovese 489). Slave women were, in this sense, in a more favorable position compared to slave men. Nevertheless, after a long day’s work on the plantation, this human chattel had to do some housework in their quarters and, in this case, slave women fared worse than slave men because, although the household chores were shared, female slaves usually worked longer hours on this type of tasks than slave men, in a clear reflection of the sexism inherent in nineteenth-century American society.

The extra jobs that slave men did after working on the field were, among others, collecting firewood, feeding the stock, and hunting for food. Slave men normally obtained extra food by means of hunting or putting traps for animals. Some slaves were lucky and used their free Saturday afternoons to hunt; many others, however, did not have this leisure time and had to find time to hunt after a long day’s work. Sometimes slaves were allowed to hunt at night by their masters; on many other occasions, however, they would have to do it secretly, running the risk of being caught and, therefore, punished. They needed to improve their family’s—and their own—diet and had to do whatever was necessary to obtain a supplement of food.

Like slave men, slave women had extra work at the end of the day. They were in charge of domestic tasks, like cooking, cleaning, sewing, spinning, weaving, doing the washing, and cooking. Both slave men and women also used part of their spare time to improve their dwellings. Female slaves cleaned, tidied, and decorated their cabins as best they could. Slave men made some furniture, such as tables and benches, to make their houses more comfortable. The improvements slaves made in their dwellings were important for them, as it made them proud of the appearance and coziness of their cabins.

Another extra job slaves had—both men and women—was the care of the gardens, for some slaveholders allowed their slaves to have a little piece of ground to

grow their vegetables and thus obtain an extra supply of food. The care of the garden was also performed after a long day's work on the field, and after all the household chores were done. Although both men and women did the gardening, women spent more hours on this task than men. Some men did this gardening job because they liked it or because their women had too much work in their cabins. Slaves (men and women) usually helped each other to harvest the crops they grew in their gardens, but always during their leisure time.

Pregnancy did not prevent slave women from working in the field; they were required to do the same amount of work as any other slave woman. Many of these pregnant slaves had miscarriages due to “overwork, inadequate prenatal care, and enforced performance of tasks beyond their strength” (Genovese 498). Nevertheless, working long hours was not the worst thing for a pregnant slave; for, if they did something wrong in the eyes of their masters or overseers, they would be whipped as usual, regardless their pregnancy.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, the suffering of female slaves was not over after giving birth because, then, the nursing of their babies became a new source of agony. The conditions under which these women had to nurse their new-born children were—to say the least—inappropriate: they had to take them to the field, do their share of work, and nurse their babies when given a break from work.<sup>76</sup> Some planters allowed their slave women to attend to their babies three or four times a day; on other occasions

---

<sup>75</sup> In *Slave Life in Georgia*, John Brown makes this point clear: “I know full well that women in a state of pregnancy are not spared from the infliction of the most dreadful scourgings, with the cow-hide, the bull-whip, and the cobbing-paddle. Thousands of them never bring their burden into the world” (346).

<sup>76</sup> Voices of complaint about this situation can be heard in many slave narratives. For example, in Sojourner Truth's 1850 *Narrative* one can read the following paragraph:

When Isabella went to the field to work, she used to put her infant in a basket, tying a rope to each handle, and suspending the basket to a branch of a tree, set another small child to swing it. It was thus secure from reptiles, and was easily administered to, and even lulled to sleep, by a child too young for other labors. I was quite struck with the ingenuity of such a baby-tender, as I have sometimes been with the swinging hammock the native mother prepares for her sick infant—apparently so much easier than aught we have in our more civilized homes; easier for the child, because it gets the motion without the least jar; and easier for the nurse, because the hammock is strung so high as to supersede the necessity of stooping (Truth and Gilbert 38-39).

nurses brought the babies to their mothers in the field for some time so that they could breastfeed them.<sup>77</sup>



*Slave women working on the field*<sup>78</sup>

Parental care did not improve when babies became older. In fact, many slaves—women and men—managed to see their children very little. As stated above, field hands had to work long hours every day while their children were being looked after by other older children. Slave family ties were disregarded by planters and both adult and children slaves had a sense of abandonment: slave parents could not look after their children as they would have liked to, and slave children were unattended.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>77</sup> There were other possibilities, as well. Henry Bibb describes his experience as a father and, in *Narrative*, explains that his wife, Malinda, had to work on the field while their daughter, Frances, was left with their mistress. Many slaves could have preferred the kind of care and attention that Frances received rather than the care their own slave children had, but Bibb makes sure everyone knows that this favorable circumstance was only preferable in appearance: “She was left at the house to creep under the feet of an unmerciful old mistress, whom I have known to slap with her hand the face of little Frances, for crying after her mother, until her little face was left black and blue” (25).

<sup>78</sup> This illustration is taken from Henry Bibb’s *Narrative*, and is accompanied by the following comment:

The cotton planters generally, never allow a slave mother time to go to the house, or quarter during the day to nurse her child; hence they have to carry them to the cotton fields and tie them in the shade of a tree, or in clusters of high weeds about in the fields, where they can go to them at noon, when they are allowed to stop work for half hour. This is the reason why so very few slave children are raised on these cotton plantations, the mothers have no time to take care of them—and they are often found dead in the field and in the quarter for want of the care of their mothers. But I never was eye witness to a case of this kind, but have heard many narrated by my slave brothers and sisters, some of which occurred on the deacon’s plantation (59-60).

<sup>79</sup> James W. C. Pennington suffered this lack of attention and recalls it with sorrow in *The Fugitive Blacksmith*. At the same time, he makes some comments about the sad condition of slave children:

When slaves grew old,<sup>80</sup> their sex did not determine their position on the plantation. Elderly male and female slaves were in the same uncertain situation.<sup>81</sup> Fifty-year-old slaves were worth—market price—the same as an eight-year-old child. Therefore, slaveholders could expect neither much work from an old and overworked slave, nor much money from his sale. Thus, many old slaves were manumitted by their masters who, by doing this, escaped responsibility for them. The problem for these aged and freed slaves was then to find a job to make a living. If they had been capable of performing a job, they would not have been manumitted—slaveholders would have lost money. Thus, the elderly slave who was manumitted was not very likely to find a job, especially not one that required the use of physical strength. Even if he managed to find a job as a free man, he would not normally be paid the same salary as a white man with the same occupation, due to the racist attitudes of the time. Moreover, if it was hard for a young free black man to find a job in nineteenth-century America, it would have probably been harder for someone considered too old to work. Fortunately for these aged slaves—and ironically—there existed anti-manumission laws that prevented masters from freeing their slaves too easily.

Other slaveholders sent their aged slaves to beg, an option that was profitable for both slaves and slaveowners. Slaves found in begging a way of earning enough money

---

My parents were not able to give any attention to their children during the day. I often suffered much from *hunger* and other similar causes. To estimate the sad state of a slave child, you must look at it as a helpless human being thrown upon the world without the benefit of its natural guardians. It is thrown into the world without a social circle to flee to for hope, shelter, comfort, or instruction. The social circle, with all its heaven-ordained blessings, is of the utmost importance to the *tender* child; but of this, the slave child, however tender and delicate, is robbed (114; emphasis in original).

<sup>80</sup> Generally speaking, slaves—and white people—were regarded as old at the age of fifty. The problem was to determine the exact age of slaves because, as mentioned before, most slaves did not know their age accurately. Thus, slaves were usually deemed old according to their masters' wishes.

<sup>81</sup> Lewis Clarke summarizes the situation of old slaves when he answers one of the questions he was frequently asked:

*What do they do with old slaves, who are past labor?*—Contrive all ways to keep them at work till the last hour of life. Make them shell corn and pack tobacco. They hunt and drive them as long as there is any life in them. Sometimes they turn them out to do the best they can, or die. One man, on moving to Missouri, sold an old slave for one dollar, to a man not worth a cent. The old slave was turned out to do the best he could; he fought with age and starvation a while, but was soon found, one morning, *starved* to death, out of doors, and half eaten up by animals. I have known several cases where slaves were left to starve to death in old age. Generally, they sell them south, and let them die there; send them, I mean, before they get very old (657; emphasis in original).

to support themselves. For planters, sending old slaves to beg was profitable because, on the one hand, they would not spend any money on the maintenance of these slaves; and on the other, they would keep part of the money earned by them.

Other masters decided to provide their aged slaves with a small cabin, a hut, or some other kind of dwelling. Slaveowners took pride in this decision and “congratulated themselves on their solicitude for the aged slaves and loudly claimed that no free laboring class could look forward so securely to decent retirement” (Genovese 519). Nevertheless, this action was not as kind as it may have seemed. In many cases, those aged slaves were left alone in their cabins without anyone to take care of them. This forgetfulness was very much resented by younger slaves—who remembered that the old slaves had devoted their lives to make their owners’ more comfortable<sup>82</sup>—but extremely practical for slaveowners—who, in this way, got rid of a nuisance by doing an apparently good deed.

However, there were many instances in which old slaves were looked after by other younger slaves who, generally speaking, very much loved and respected their elders.<sup>83</sup> They did as much as they could to make aged slaves feel comfortable and live

---

<sup>82</sup> This was the case of Frederick Douglass. After spending her whole life making her master’s life comfortable, Douglass’s grandmother is sent to live alone in a hut. Douglass bitterly complains of this undeserved treatment her grandmother received:

She had served my old master faithfully from youth to old age. She had been the source of all his wealth; she had peopled his plantation with slaves; she had become a great grandmother in his service. She had rocked him in infancy, attended him in childhood, served him through life, and at his death wiped from his icy brow the cold death-sweat, and closed his eyes forever. . . . And, to cap the climax of their base ingratitude and fiendish barbarity, my grandmother, who was now very old, having outlived my old master and all his children, having seen the beginning and end of all of them, and her present owners finding she was of but little value, her frame already racked with the pains of old age, and complete helplessness fast stealing over her once active limbs, they took her to the woods, built her a little hut, put up a little mud-chimney, and then made her welcome to the privilege of supporting herself there in perfect loneliness; thus virtually turning her out to die! (*Narrative* 47-48)

<sup>83</sup> Frederick Douglass explains the respect slaves feel for their elders as follows:

Strange, and even ridiculous as it may seem, among a people so uncultivated, and with so many stern trials to look in the face, there is not to be found, among a people, a more rigid enforcement of the law of respect to elders, than they maintain. . . . A young slave must approach the company of the older with hat in hand, and woe betide him, if he fails to acknowledge a favor, of any sort, with the accustomed “*tank’ee*,” &c. So uniformly are good manners enforced among slaves, that I can easily detect a “bogus” fugitive by his manners (*My Bondage* 164).

decently and with a certain degree of dignity. In return, and whenever possible, old slaves helped younger slaves taking care of their vegetable gardens, looking after slave children,<sup>84</sup> attending the sick, and doing other tasks to make other slaves' lives as easy as they could.

Outside the plantation scene, in urban areas, the situation of slaves was a bit different. As stated before, in 1850 there were 400,000 slaves living in urban communities.<sup>85</sup> Compared to the approximately 2.8 million slaves that could be found on small farms and plantations, the amount of slaves living in towns and cities was quite small. These urban slaves were mainly engaged in non-agricultural activities. There were many skilled slaves, like carpenters, mechanics, shoemakers and tailors in towns: "In the Charleston census of 1848, for example, there were more slave carpenters than there were free Negro and white carpenters. The same was true of slave coopers. In addition, there were slave tailors, shoemakers, cabinetmakers, painters, plasterers, seamstresses and the like" (Franklin 141). These skilled slaves were mainly men who had learned their trade spending time with white craftsmen. Nevertheless, some of these white craftsmen did not like the idea of teaching a black person their trade: first, because of their racism; and second, because slaves would become cheaper workers and, thus, strong competitors. On the other hand, skilled slaves also found strong support from planters and proslavery leaders for three main reasons: first, because they thought that training a slave in a skill would increase his market price; second, because having skilled slaves on the plantation would prevent them from hiring a white tradesman, whose work would be more expensive; and third, because if slave labor was more widely used, the slavery system would not be abolished.

---

<sup>84</sup> In *My Bondage*, Douglass recalls being looked after by his beloved grandmother and expresses his distress when he learns that slave children could only live with their grandmother for a limited period of time: "I was told that this 'old master,' whose name seemed ever to be mentioned with fear and shuddering, only allowed the children to live with grandmother for a limited time, and that in fact as soon as they were big enough, they were promptly taken away, to live with the said 'old master.' These were distressing revelations indeed; . . . a shade of disquiet rested upon me" (143).

<sup>85</sup> This number would, however, increase if the slaves whose owners hired them out to townspeople were included.



However important the number of skilled urban slaves, the majority of slaves who lived in towns or cities were employed as domestic servants (most of them female slaves who worked as cooks, nurses, and cleaners), porters, or common laborers. There were also other urban slaves who worked in mills, iron furnaces, tobacco factories, textile factories, and mines, though their number was smaller. Finally, other urban slaves were used in the construction of railroads, in river transportation, to unload boats on the docks, etc.

To conclude, although female and male slaves lived under the same legislation and on the same plantation, the roles they played were different. In the same way in which nineteenth-century America established that white women had to perform a domestic role,<sup>86</sup> whereas white men could have a more public function, slave men and women had a distinctive position. Their roles paralleled those of white society (slave women in the Big House—private sphere; slave men on the plantation field—public sphere), although not in such a strict way, as their masters could do with their human chattel as they pleased. However, unlike white women, who would never be expected to use their strength to perform a task, female slaves were also employed as field hands, carrying out burdensome tasks. Unlike white women, whose virtue was demanded and expected, and whose sexuality was private, slave women were not supposed or expected to be virtuous, and their sexuality was exposed. Unlike white men, who defended and protected their family from any danger, slave men were powerless to protect and defend their relatives from their owners' abuses.

---

<sup>86</sup> According to Erlene Stetson, during colonial times, and due to the need of workers, "white women were allowed much freedom in their choices of lifestyles" and, although generally speaking "the work of white women centered around the home, . . . in many colonies they were allowed to purchase and own land, as well as to become professionals in areas of work which later came to be considered 'men's work' (75). Stetson further argues that "[a]ny work they performed was considered as valuable, as important, and as useful as the work men performed. During the colonial period, white women possessed much more autonomy and decision-making power than at any other point in history. Unmarried white women, although never totally accepted, were more accepted within colonial society than in later years, notably after 1776" (75). In this light, when slavery was fully institutionalized in the United States, white women's role became more submissive: "the same laws that stated that children must follow the condition of the mother, and that slaves could not own property, made it implicitly obvious that the only way the white man could secure inheritance rights of private property was through his free children. Thus white women became 'marriage material.' Gradually, the white woman was forced into the 'woman's sphere' of marriage, motherhood, and the family" (Stetson 75).

It would be difficult to determine who led a more difficult life, whether male or female slaves. On the one hand, both endured the same harsh treatment from their owners, both had to perform hard tasks, and both endured extremely long work days. On the other hand, female slaves had to endure a particular suffering of their own: an assault on their sexuality. Male slaves would not have to go through this experience, but would have to tolerate the sexual aggressions committed on their wives, mothers and sisters, being unable to do anything about it. Male slaves would feel helpless and vindictive against the white men; female slaves would feel abandoned and not understood by the men in their families.

These psychologically disturbing circumstances for both the male and the female slave would lead to conflict. When the slave could not tolerate this situation any longer, resistance was the only way out. The most effective means of resistance was escape: it decreased slaveholders' property, and gave hope to the rest of his slaves. There were, however, other strategies that slaves used to show their opposition against slavery and slaveholders: "Because survival is key to the collective existence, resistance is usually extended along a continuum from subversion, masking, sabotage, flight, and self-defense; and, in rare cases, to organized bloody revolt" (Chinosole 109). In the following pages, several of the most effective methods of resistance employed by African American slaves will be examined.

**3****SLAVES' MEANS OF RESISTANCE TO SLAVERY**

After having studied the body of laws that regulated the lives of human beings in bondage (known as slave codes), and the jobs assigned for slaves during slavery in the United States, one could wonder whether these bondmen simply accepted their situation and conformed to it or whether they reacted against their condition. This is an important issue because, as Dana D. Nelson states, “[f]or slavery to function as an efficient social system, the slaves must to some extent agree with their degraded status” (133). The truth is that, although proslavery literature and even the film industry have presented black people and slaves as lowly, loyal and contented with their lot,<sup>87</sup> many slaves rejected their situation as such, and reacted against the power their masters exerted over them in many different ways. Slaves’ resistance is, in fact, as old as the institution itself. Wherever human bondage is (and was) found, there are both antislavery movements and slaves’ reactions against their enslavement. The nineteenth-century United States was

---

<sup>87</sup> John Hope Franklin, for example, argues that “[o]wners of slaves almost always sought to convey the impression that their human chattel were docile, tractable, and happy”(149). The slaveholders’ aim in so doing was to defend the institution of slavery as a beneficial system not only for them, but for slaves as well. Franklin continues arguing that not only did proslavery forces present slaves as docile, but also antislavery movements: “Frequently, also, the antislavery forces contended that the slaves were easily controlled and that was the explanation for their exploitation by their owners” (149). Of course, the objective was different. Slaveowners wanted to convey the impression that they were kind masters whom their slaves respected and probably loved. Abolitionists, on the other hand, wanted to depict slaves as righteous and slaveholders as cruel. Neither group was interested in mentioning slaves’ different reactions to their status because, then, they would have to change their arguments in favor or against slavery.

not an exception, and the different methods of resistance used by slaves against slaveholders during this period will be the central issue of this part of the chapter.

In the United States, slaves reacted against their masters and the institution of slavery in many different ways. The *easiest* method of resistance, and one that could even be used in front of their owners, was using language as a weapon. Some slaves sang songs, either to find religious relief and to psychologically escape from their daily suffering, or to—covertly—criticize the slavery system. Others used double-meaning or talking back when speaking to white people. This peculiar way of speaking—typical of the trickster or rogue figure—was used by many slaves in order to justify their thefts (of food, usually), to learn to read and write, etc., which were other means of resistance employed by slaves. Nevertheless, escaping to free land was probably the most well-known and effective means of reaction, and one that proved that slaves did not lack creativity or imagination.<sup>88</sup> Other means included the destruction of their masters' property by burning houses and fields, hurting or killing cattle, destroying farming tools, etc. These methods caused great harm, but were not as brutal and savage as others were. The most barbarous ways in which slaves resisted against their status consisted of mutilations, suicide, murder, infanticide, and revolt. In the following pages, these reactions against the *peculiar institution* will be thoroughly examined.

As stated above, language was a powerful weapon used by slaves as a means of resistance. They found it very difficult to react violently against their owners: on the one hand, female slaves lacked strength; on the other, male slaves either lacked the courage or feared reprisals. This is why slaves found in signifying<sup>89</sup> an interesting method of resistance. According to Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, signifying consists of “ways of encoding messages and meanings which involve, in most cases, an element of

---

<sup>88</sup> This is an important issue since, as analyzed earlier, one of the proslavery arguments used during the Enlightenment stated that black people were not human, but inferior beings without *reason*. Slaves' use of imaginative and creative means of escape would therefore prove that they *were* endowed with intellect.

<sup>89</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argues that the word “signifying” comes from the Signifying Monkey—the main character of the Signifying Monkey's tales—who “stands as the figure of an oral writing within black vernacular language rituals. . . . As anthropologists demonstrate, the Signifying Monkey is often called the Signifier, he who wreaks havoc upon the Signified” (*The Signifying Monkey* 52).

indirection” (311). Thus, signifying implies saying one thing but meaning another. As Theodore O. Mason, Jr. states, “[o]ne who signifies says without explicitly saying, criticizes without actually criticizing, insults without really insulting” (665). Signifying is, therefore, a playful and conscious use of language in which words undergo a change of meaning.<sup>90</sup> This may not seem a successful way of reacting against white people but, as William L. Andrews writes, “the signifying slave lays claim to the right to redefine terms like master and slave” (*To Tell a Free Story* 274). By signifying the slave feels that he controls the situation, that he has some kind of power over the enslaver: the power of words.

Instances of double-meaning or double-talk are found in slaves’ ordinary language, but also in slave songs.<sup>91</sup> The lyrics of these songs were apparently inoffensive for white people, but when listened to thoroughly and attentively, one can find interesting instances of double-meaning. Many of the songs that slaves sang were religious, although they were sung at any time: during work time, play time, and rest time, as well as on Sundays at praise meetings. With songs like “Soon I Will Be Done” and “Walk Together Children,” slaves sang about their hope in Heaven, where their burdens and suffering would be relieved, and where they would be able to rest and be reunited with those friends and relatives who had died before them:

*Soon I Will Be Done*

Soon I will be done with the troubles of the world,  
 Troubles of the world, the troubles of the world,  
 Soon I will be done with the troubles of the world.  
 Goin’ home to live with God.

<sup>90</sup> For a more extended discussion of “signifying,” see *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.. Other interesting works on this issue are Claudia Mitchell-Kernan’s “Signifying as a Form of Verbal Art,” and Geneva Smitherman’s *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*.

<sup>91</sup> Melvin Dixon discusses the significance of slave song as follows: “Not only did the spirituals identify the slave’s peculiar syncretistic religion, sharing features of Protestant Christianity and traditional African religions, but they became an almost secretive code for the slave’s critique of the plantation system and for his search for freedom in *this* world” (298; emphasis in original). Dixon further establishes a connection between these songs and slave narratives in the following terms: “Similarly, the narratives identified the slave’s autobiographical and communal history as well as his active campaign against the ‘peculiar institution.’ Both forms of cultural expression from the slave community create a vision of history, an assessment of the human condition, and a heroic fugitive character unlike any other in American literature” (298).

I want t' meet my mother,  
 I want t' meet my mother,  
 I want t' meet my mother,  
 I'm goin' to live with God.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Walk Together Children*

Walk together children,  
 Don't you get weary,  
 Walk together children,  
 Don't you get weary.  
 Oh, talk together children,  
 Don't you get weary,  
 There's a great camp meeting in the Promised Land.<sup>92</sup>

These songs offered slaves some kind of spiritual relief and made their physical burden a bit more bearable, as well as their earthly lives a bit more hopeful. Nevertheless, in some of these songs the word *Heaven* could also be understood as *free land* and, thus, their meaning would change completely, for, when slaves sang about *dying*, they were actually singing about *escaping*. Frederick Douglass explains this double meaning in *My Bondage*:

A keen observer might have detected in our repeated singing of

“O Canaan, sweet Canaan,  
 I am bound for the land of Canaan,”

something more than a hope of reaching heaven. We meant to reach the *north*—and the north was our Canaan.

“I thought I heard them say,  
 There were lions in the way,  
 I don't expect to stay  
 Much longer here.  
 Run to Jesus—shun the danger—  
 I don't expect to stay  
 Much longer here,”

was a favorite air, and had a double meaning. In the lips of some, it meant the expectation of a speedy summons to a world of spirits; but, in the lips of *our* company, it simply meant, a speedy pilgrimage toward a free state, and deliverance from all the evils and dangers of slavery (308; emphasis in original).

Double-meaning became, thus, a powerful weapon for slaves, who would sing these songs in front of their owners and other white people without fearing that these

---

<sup>92</sup> The complete lyrics of these and the following songs can be found in “Appendix C: Slave Songs and Poems on Slavery,” pp 395-400.

powerful enemies would understand the real meaning of their words. For slaves, it was a small victory over their oppressors, but a victory after all.

Some slave songs went a little bit further and included a veiled criticism of earthly life's overwork, injustice, and violence against slaves, although the songs that more openly and strongly criticized the slavery system and talked about physical—not only spiritual—escape and freedom were usually sung in secret. Secret songs like “No More Auction Block,” “Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel?” and “Oh Freedom!” expressed slaves' desire for freedom from bondage and criticized the injustice and cruelty of the slavery system.

*No More Auction Block*

No more auction block for me,  
 No more, no more,  
 No more auction block for me,  
 Many thousand gone. . .  
 No more driver's lash for me,  
 No more, no more,  
 No more driver's lash for me,  
 Many thousand gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel?*

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,  
 Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel?  
 Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel?  
 An' why not everyman?  
 He delivered Daniel from the lion's den,  
 Jonah from de belly of de whale.  
 And de Hebrew children from de fiery furnace,  
 An' why not everyman?

\* \* \* \* \*

*Oh, Freedom!*

Oh, freedom,  
 Oh, freedom,  
 Oh, freedom over me!  
 An' befor' I'd be a slave,  
 I'll be buried in my grave,  
 An' go home to my Lord an' be free.

For most slaves, singing songs like the ones above was the only opportunity they had of expressing their opposition against slavery. For, although some slaves were able to

escape and give speeches at abolitionist meetings, or even write articles or books about their lives in bondage, most of them did not have those opportunities.

Slaves also sang during festivities and celebrations. At these times, they normally improvised songs about their courtships, their quarrels, their victories and defeats at competitions, and other issues. However, these songs sometimes turned into satire and social criticism as well. As Gerald Jaynes argues, “even during the jubilee, ‘de big times,’ that accompanied a corn-shucking,<sup>93</sup> the slaves might set the pace of their labors with songs of exploitation and class domination” (109). In these *festivity* songs slaves depicted the contrast between their masters and mistresses’ easy and comfortable life and their own hard-working and tiresome lives:

Missus in de big house,  
Mammy in the yard.  
Missus holdin her white hands,  
Mammy workin hard.  
Missus holdin her white hands,  
Mammy workin hard.

Slaves knew that the difference in this system of labor was established according to the worker’s color of the skin. Blacks were considered inferior, they knew it, and “accommodated themselves to this superior force, an accommodation that was far from acceptance of the paternalist ideal. It was an accommodation which produced songs of exploitation and despair” (Jaynes 110-111). Another of these songs that depicts the differences between masters’ and slaves’ lives is included in *My Bondage*. With the following song, Frederick Douglass summarizes the “injustice and fraud of slavery:”

We raise de wheat,  
Dey gib us de corn:  
We bake de bread,  
Dey gib us de cruss;  
We sif de meal,  
Dey gib us de huss;  
We peal de meat,  
Dey gib us de skin;

---

<sup>93</sup> On many slave plantations, corn shucking was a festivity: “With the exception of the Christmas holiday—and not always that—former slaves recalled having looked forward to corn-shucking most of all. . . . Some ex slaves remembered corn shuckings as their only good time, but many more said simply that they were the best. . . . For the vast majority, . . . they were ‘de big times’” (Genovese 315-316).



And dat's de way  
 Dey takes us in;  
 We skim de pot,  
 Dey gib us de liquor,  
 And say dat's good enough for nigger.

Walk over! walk over!  
 Tom butter and de fat;  
 Poor nigger you can't get over dat;  
 Walk over! (*My Bondage* 290)

Nevertheless, Douglass refers to slave songs not only as tools for criticizing and offering resistance against slavery, but also as sad songs that moved him whenever he listened to them. In *My Bondage*, for example, he states that the “songs of the slave represent the sorrows, rather than the joys, of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears” (185). For Douglass, “slaves sing more to *make* themselves happy, than to express their happiness” (*My Bondage* 185). This idea contrasts with the general belief—amongst slaveholders and white people in nineteenth-century America—that slaves were happy workers because they sang while working in the field.

Work songs were very popular among slaves, but sometimes slaves sang at work because planters encouraged—and even commanded—they to do so.<sup>94</sup> Thus, although slaves seemed to be happily singing while working, they used this singing as a way of reacting against their master's orders in two different ways: first, double-meaning prevailed in the lyrics of most songs as a means to express their opposition against slavery; and second, while “[t]he masters encouraged quick-time singing among their field slaves, . . . the slaves proved themselves masters of slowing down the songs and the work” (Genovese 324). Therefore, it can be concluded that slave songs were a powerful, defensive, indirect and, sometimes, satirical way of reacting against the *peculiar institution*.

<sup>94</sup> Frederick Douglass asserts: “Slaves are generally expected to sing as well as to work. A silent slave is not liked by masters or overseers” (*My Bondage* 183-184). Appearances were very important at the time and planters wanted to convey the impression that their slaves were happy workers because their masters were kind to them.

Apart from the use of songs, slaves had other weapons of verbal aggression, such as talking back. Slaves were not supposed to respond to their masters' commands; they had to answer to their masters' questions when asked to do so, but always in a respectful way. Talking back involved not only speaking when not asked to do so, when an answer was not demanded, or when supposed to remain silent, but also answering in a disrespectful manner.

The most interesting examples of talking back in slave narratives are probably those included in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. As a woman, Jacobs could not use her physical strength as a means of resistance against her master. Therefore, she used language instead. As Joanne M. Braxton states, "[Jacobs] employ[ed] verbal warfare and defensive verbal postures as tools of liberation" (*Black Women* 31). Jacobs fought with language and managed to defeat her master with the only means at her hand. Speech became a powerful weapon for Jacobs, who managed to feel *free* during those moments in which she verbally fought against her master, Dr. Flint.<sup>95</sup> Although Dr. Flint owned Jacobs and controlled everything she did, he could neither control her speech, nor defeat her with words. Even though he hit her, Jacobs continued resisting with language, showing Dr. Flint that he could not defeat her by beating her up, showing him that her words were more powerful and harmful than the physical pain he could inflict on her.

Words were even more powerful after slaves obtained their freedom. Some ex slaves managed to write autobiographies that narrated their experiences in bondage, and it is in these writings in which their use of language as a weapon is more evident. They were not fighting for freedom any more, but for the abolition of slavery. Nevertheless, they used the same means in freedom and in bondage: words. Thus, bell hooks argues that speaking was—and is—for the oppressed classes an act of resistance:

---

<sup>95</sup> Chapter 3 will further examine this issue, providing illustrative examples of Harriet Jacobs's use of talking back.

For us [the oppressed and colonized], true speaking is not solely an expression of creative power; it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless. As such, it is a courageous act—as such, it represents a threat. To those who wield oppressive power, that which is threatening must necessarily be wiped out, annihilated, silenced. . . . Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of “talking back,” that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice (*Talking Back* 8-9).

Writing autobiographies of bondage became, for the ex slave, a powerful and courageous act of resistance against the system. Many obstacles had to be overcome for their narratives to be written and published. The slave-authors had to avoid being recaptured and taken back into slavery and, at the same time, make their voice heard. They had to escape both physical slavery and the slavery of silence.

Nevertheless, although writing their autobiographies was in itself an act of resistance, slave authors also used signifying within their narratives as another powerful way of defeating the system. The language of signifying used in slave narratives is critical, satirical and, sometimes, humorous—even when relating difficult episodes in their author’s lives. Henry Bibb is an excellent example of this peculiar use of language: “Among other *good trades* I learned *the art of running away* to perfection. I made a regular business of it, and never gave it up, until I had broken the bands of slavery, and landed myself safely in Canada, where I was regarded as a man, and not as a thing” (14; emphasis added). Milton Clarke does something similar when he writes the following:

But before leaving the deacon, I wish to give a few recollections of his family matters, to illustrate the workings of good society among slaveholders. The deacon lost his wife about the time of the death of my mother. He was an elder of the Presbyterian church, and afterwards became a deacon of a Congregational church; and there was a widow named Robb, of the same communion; a good name for the whole clan of slaveholding tyrants, male and female; they are all *robbers* of the worst kind (641; emphasis in original).

This particular use of language made by slaves had the aim of showing that they had some control over their bodies and lives, an idea opposed to slaveowners’ thoughts and

opinions. Slaves may not have been able to control many aspects of their lives, but they *could* and *did* control the way in which they used language.

This peculiar way of speaking put into practice by slaves is one of the characteristics of the *trickster*, a figure that resembles the sixteenth-century Spanish *pícaro*.<sup>96</sup> Being a trickster implied more than using signifying, double-meaning or talking back to outwit the powerful. It involved deceiving and tricking people in order to achieve or obtain something wanted or needed but denied to them (food, tools, free time, etc.). The commonest of these actions was stealing, something that, for slaves, was *taking*. Genovese explains the distinction slaves made between *stealing* and *taking*:<sup>97</sup>

They *stole* from each other but merely *took* from their masters. Their logic was impeccable. If they belonged to their masters—if they were in fact his chattels—how could they steal from him? Suppose they ate one of his chickens or hogs or some of his corn? They had only transformed his property from one form into another, much as they did when they fed the master’s corn to the master’s chickens (602; emphasis added).<sup>98</sup>

These justifications of stealing are plentiful in slave narratives, especially when the object stolen is food. Food was, for slaves, the most precious and common thing to steal. Slaves stole what they needed and, since food was slaves’ main necessity, they used their wit to obtain extra supplies:

We were allowed to take three bushels of peaches every day, for the use of the quarter; but we could, and did eat, at least three times that quantity, for we stole at night that which was not given us by day. I confess, that I took part in these thefts, and I do not feel that I committed any wrong, against either God or man,

---

<sup>96</sup> In his comparison between sixteenth-century Spanish picaresque literature and slave narratives, Charles H. Nichols establishes a parallelism between the *pícaro* (protagonist of picaresque works like the anonymous *Lazarillo de Tormes*, and Mateo Alemán’s *Guzmán de Alfarache*) and the trickster slave who writes his story of bondage. Both the trickster figure and the *pícaro* are more thoroughly described in the following chapter.

<sup>97</sup> This is, clearly, another example of signifying.

<sup>98</sup> Henry Bibb justifies his stealing—or taking—a donkey using this same argument: “I well knew that I was regarded as property, and so was the ass; and I thought if one piece of property took off another, there could be no law violated in the act; no more sin committed in this than if one jackass had rode off another” (63). Milton Clarke does something similar in the following extract:

I had the pleasure of giving the “right hand of fellowship” to a goodly number of my former acquaintances and fellow-sufferers. The masters accused me of *stealing* several of them. This is a great lie. I never stole one in my life. I have assisted several to get into possession of the true owner, but I never assisted any man to steal another away from himself (645; emphasis in original).

by my participation in the common danger that we ran, for we well knew the consequences that would have followed detection (Charles Ball<sup>99</sup> 349).

Sometimes the thefts were not completely successful,<sup>100</sup> but all of them showed particular characteristics of the trickster: his wit, his desperate struggles to survive in a hostile environment, and his having good reasons for committing the crimes enumerated in his autobiography. Slaves had other needs apart from food, and so they became very resourceful tricksters.<sup>101</sup>

On some occasions the tricks emerged from a need or willingness to annoy slaveholders. Feigning illness was “a favorite tactic” (Genovese 620) amongst slaves, but this tactic could only be considered a means of resistance so far as “all could take their share of time in the sickhouse and collectively slow down the general pace. When, as usually happened, a few played the game well while others did not or could not, the advantage of a few became the disadvantage of the rest” (620). Slaves feigned illness mainly to avoid hard work, though they also did so for other purposes, such as provoking planters into selling them,<sup>102</sup> or facilitating escape.

---

<sup>99</sup> Charles Ball was the pseudonym of an anonymous slave who collaborated with Isaac Fisher, an attorney of Lewistown, Pennsylvania, to produce the longest slave narrative of the antebellum period, entitled *Slavery in the United States: a Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, a Black Man, Who Lived Forty Years in Maryland, South Carolina and Georgia as a Slave*, and published in 1836.

<sup>100</sup> William Grimes, for example, *did* manage to steal some milk, but the method used to do it did not help him enjoy the drink as much as he would have liked:

We had gourds growing on the side of the fence. I had often used and seen used, the shell of the gourd for a ladle, or scoup dish, and I took a gourd that was green, and excoriated a part, took out the seeds, &c., and without any further cleansing, I filled it with milk from the cow, and then hid it in the chaff pen.—I then went home and baked some bread, and got another gourd and carried there the milk. . . . But when I went to get the milk, the gourd being green, the milk had contracted a bitterness of which no one can judge, unless they have had a trial. I was however driven to the necessity of eating it, or eating my bread dry (197).

<sup>101</sup> It is difficult, though, to find evidence of these tricks in slave narratives, since slave narrators kept some secrets. However, they are, according to Frances Smith Foster, more easily found in oral literature:

Survival techniques, with which the oral literature is especially replete such as tricking the master out of additional food, hustling clothing and gifts by exploiting the prejudices of whites, and using their mother wit to avoid any number of unpleasant situations are rarely revealed. In the slave narratives the protagonist is at first a victim of almost overwhelming forces. He is alone in his struggle to survive. His energies are focused upon the essentials of life: food, rest, and the avoidance of pain (*Witnessing* 99).

<sup>102</sup> The ex slave William Grimes, for example, explains in his personal narrative that he pretended to be sick so that his master would sell him. Grimes did not like his owner, but his master did not want to sell

Slaves also tricked their masters to obtain other privileges. Frederick Douglass, for instance, was determined to learn to read and write because he thought it was indispensable for him to do so if he wanted to become a free man. Thus, forbidden to learn by his master, Douglass had to use his wit and different tricks to acquire these abilities:

Seized with a determination to learn to read, at any cost, I hit upon many expedients to accomplish the desired end. . . . I used to carry, almost constantly, a copy of Webster's spelling book in my pocket; and, when sent of errands, or when play time was allowed me, I would step, with my young [white] friends, aside, and take a lesson in spelling. I generally paid my *tuition fee* to the boys, with bread, which I also carried in my pocket. For a single biscuit, any of my hungry little comrades would give me a lesson more valuable to me than bread (*My Bondage* 223-224; emphasis in original).

Thus, playing the role of the trickster figure was an excellent way for slaves to obtain things denied to them by their owners, and to establish firm opposition to slaveholders, without really facing their *rivals*. The extra food and clothes, literacy, and other privileges that slaves obtained by means of different tricks were something like victories for them. Nevertheless, the greatest trick they could play—and which would become the most dangerous, successful, and effective method of resistance against their masters—was escaping to free land.

Escaping “represented the continuous fight that slaves carried on against their masters” (Franklin 153). Although running away for freedom was the most effective method of resistance, not all slaves dared to do so. There was usually a traumatic episode in their lives that triggered their escape. These circumstances were varied: some slaves escaped in anticipation of a severe punishment or in anger after having suffered one; others ran away after being insulted or overworked in the field; some other slaves escaped to rejoin their families; finally, other slaves escaped as a way of repudiating slavery. It is estimated that during the 1850s about a thousand slaves a year escaped to

---

him. Thus, Grimes was “determined not to eat any thing in his sight, or to his knowledge, in order to make him think he must either sell [him] or lose [him]” (203).

free land. The characteristics of the runaway slave are enumerated by Eugene D. Genovese:

Any slave might slip into the woods for a few days, but those whose departure rated an advertisement and organized chase—those who headed for freedom in the North, the southern cities, or the swamps—fell into a pattern. At least 80 percent were men between the ages of sixteen and thirty-five. The age profile contains no surprise, but the sex profile does. At least one-third of the runaways belonged to the ranks of the skilled and privileged slaves—those with some education and with some knowledge of the outside world—and women occupied these ranks only as house servants. In view of the physical strength and general assertiveness of the women, their stronger ties to children and family probably account for much of their unwillingness to defect. Many of the young women had children before they had husbands; the young men could more readily fly, for they often had not yet assumed responsibilities toward a woman or children even if they were already fathers (648-649).

Whereas the population of escaped slaves fell within certain patterns, the means they used to escape were very manifold: “Some slaves disguised themselves or armed themselves with free passes in their effort to escape. Others simply walked off, apparently hoping that fate would be kind and assist in their permanent escape” (Franklin 153). Slave narratives provide examples of these three methods of escape listed by Franklin.<sup>103</sup> Disguise was successfully used by William and Ellen Craft—husband and wife—to run away. This extraordinary escape, frequently related in analyses of slave narratives, is narrated by William Wells Brown in a letter to the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison:<sup>104</sup>

One of the most interesting cases of the escape of fugitives from American slavery that have ever come before the American people, has just occurred,

<sup>103</sup> Some slave narratives, however, do not include a detailed description of the slave’s escape because their authors considered it necessary to maintain certain secrecy on the subject so that other slaves could escape in the same way without being caught by white people. This is the case of Frederick Douglass, who writes the following on this issue, who deems it proper “not to state all the facts” connected with his escape from slavery for two main reasons:

First, were I to give a minute statement of all the facts, it is not only possible, but quite probable, that others would thereby be involved in the most embarrassing difficulties. Secondly, such a statement would most undoubtedly induce greater vigilance on the part of slaveholders than has existed heretofore among them; which would, of course, be the means of guarding a door whereby some dear brother bondman might escape his galling chains. . . . I would allow myself to suffer under the greatest imputations which evil-minded men might suggest, rather than exculpate myself, and thereby run the hazard of closing the slightest avenue by which a brother slave might clear himself of the chains and fetters of slavery (*Narrative* 84-85).

<sup>104</sup> William Lloyd Garrison published *The Liberator*, official newspaper of the antislavery movement, in 1831.

under the following circumstances:—William and Ellen Craft, man and wife, lived with different masters in the State of Georgia. Ellen is so near white, that she can pass without suspicion for a white woman. Her husband is much darker. He is a mechanic, and by working nights and Sundays, he laid up money enough to bring himself and his wife out of slavery. Their plan was without precedent; and though novel, was the means of getting them their freedom. Ellen dressed in man's clothing, and passed as the *master*, while her husband passed as the *servant*. In this way they traveled from Georgia to Philadelphia. They are now out of the reach of the blood-hounds of the South (Aptheker 277-278; emphasis in original).<sup>105</sup>

There were other curious modes of escape, apart from the Crafts'. Henry Brown was named Henry *Box* Brown after his escape. He had unsuccessfully tried to run away several times before he thought of being put inside a box 3-feet long and 2-feet wide, and sent to Philadelphia direct by express.<sup>106</sup> He did so and managed to obtain his freedom. Harriet Jacobs escaped in another curious way: she hid in a small garret—nine feet long and seven wide, the highest part being three feet high—at her grandmother's house for seven years until she finally managed to reach free land safely.

Getting free passes was another successful means of escaping, according to John Hope Franklin. The use of this type of documents has already been discussed in the first part of this chapter, but it must be added that this method was not always successful, since many white people were able to recognize forged passes. This is what happened, for example, to John Brown, who “obtained a forged pass from a poor white man” (348) by giving him an old hen, and was taken back to slavery when the forgery was discovered.

---

<sup>105</sup> The original letter was published in *The Liberator*, January 12, 1849. In *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860), William Craft writes: “[I]t occurred to me that, as my wife was nearly white, I might get her to disguise herself as an invalid gentleman, and assume to be my master, while I could attend as his slave, and that in this manner we might effect our escape” (498). Perhaps Frederick Douglass was right when demanding secrecy regarding slaves' means of escape, for the “publicity given their story caused so much concern among Southerners that for years young masters travelling north accompanied by a single slave were regarded with suspicion” (Starling 238). In “Appendix A: Illustrations,” p. 375, two portraits of Ellen Craft are provided: one in her usual appearance, and the other wearing the gentleman disguise she used to escape.

<sup>106</sup> The title of his biography includes a reference to the dimension of this box: *Narrative of Henry Box Brown, Who Escaped from Slavery, Enclosed in a Box Three Feet Long, Two Wide, and Two and a Half High. Written from a Statement of Facts Made by Himself. With Remarks Upon the Remedy for Slavery by Charles Stearns* (1849). A representation of this box can be seen in “Appendix A: Illustrations,” p. 381.



Some slaves managed to escape at their first attempt. Others, however, became *professional runaways*, who lived in a continuous attempt to escape to free land.<sup>107</sup> The idea of freedom was so powerful for slaves that they forgot about the risks—patrols, bloodhounds, whippings, etc.—they had to run in order to achieve their goal. The risks runaway slaves ran decreased if they were aided in their escape by white abolitionists, Quakers, or by the *underground railroad*.

The underground railroad, a term that apparently came into public use in Illinois in 1842, was a system organized by both white and black abolitionists (some of which had been slaves themselves) to help escaped slaves make their way to Canada or to the northern free states.<sup>108</sup> Some ex slaves narrate their encounter with this *organization* in their autobiographies of bondage:

[Mr. D.] then commenced telling me of the facilities for my escape to Canada; of the Abolitionists . . . He conducted me to the house of one of these warm-hearted friends of God and the slave. I found him willing to aid a poor fugitive on his way to Canada, even to the dividing of the last cent, or morsel of bread if necessary.

These kind friends gave me something to eat, and started me on my way to Canada, with a recommendation to a friend on my way. This was the commencement of what was called the under ground rail road to Canada (Bibb 29-30).

John Brown also mentions the underground railroad in *Slave Life in Georgia*, and even includes a brief history of it, written by the editor of his narrative, Louis A. Chamerovzow. In this history of the underground railroad, taken from the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, April, 1853, there is a detailed description of how it worked to help escaped slaves:

Travelling by it cannot strictly be said to be either pleasant or altogether safe; yet the traffic is greatly on the increase. It is exclusively a passenger traffic; the trains are all express, and strange to add, run all one way, namely, from South towards the North: there are no *return tickets*. The stations are numerous, but by no means conspicuous. The principal aim of the projectors having been to get the line itself into good working condition, the stations were selected for convenience more than for show. They lie from ten to fifteen miles apart,

<sup>107</sup> This was the case, for example, of Henry Bibb. Bibb escaped at least six times but, every time he was free, he returned to the South to rescue his wife and child from slavery and was recaptured. He would eventually succeed in gaining his and his family's freedom.

<sup>108</sup> See "Appendix B: Documents and Maps," p. 394, for a map of the underground railroad.

having nothing in their external appearance to distinguish them particularly, though they are never, or very rarely missed. Once the passenger is fairly on the line, he seldom fails reaching its ultimate destination. . . . The Underground Railroad being for the exclusive use of slaves, who are running for freedom, its managers are not known, in a general way. It is rather a point with them to evade popularity, for detection would bring with it no end of fines and imprisonment (John Brown 395-396; emphasis in original).

This need for secrecy is a constant worry in slave narratives, especially when referring to the names of white abolitionists. Slave authors do not usually give the names of the people—black or white—that helped them escape in order to prevent them from having legal problems. Secrecy was also needed in the case of the underground railroad for another reason: if it was something well-known by the public, it would become ineffective for helping fugitive slaves.<sup>109</sup>

Although all the slaves understood the relevance of being *free*,<sup>110</sup> some of them found it very hard to escape, not only because of the normal difficulties to be encountered during the flight, or the fear of being caught and taken back to their masters (who would surely punish them), but also because they did not want to suffer the pain of being separated from their families. Thus, some slaves preferred a life in bondage near their loved ones, than living as free human beings away from them. This was the case of many female slaves—especially those who were mothers—and, consequently, only a small percentage of the escaped slaves were women. These slaves, and many others

---

<sup>109</sup> This is why Frederick Douglass criticizes the way in which the underground railroad was conducted:

I have never approved of the very public manner in which some of our western friends have conducted what they call the *underground railroad*, but which, I think, by their open declarations, has been made most emphatically the *upperground railroad*. I honor those good men and women for their noble daring, and applaud them for willingly subjecting themselves to bloody persecution, by openly avowing their participation in the escape of slaves. I, however, . . . see and feel assured that those open declarations are a positive evil to the slaves remaining, who are seeking to escape. They do nothing towards enlightening the slave, whilst they do much towards enlightening the master. They stimulate him to greater watchfulness, and enhance his power to capture his slave (*Narrative* 85; emphasis in original).

<sup>110</sup> Contradicting the opinion of many slaveholders and proslavery agents, Solomon Northup writes that even the most ignorant slaves understand the idea of freedom:

They understand the privileges and exemptions that belong to it—that would bestow upon them the fruits of their own labors, and that it would secure to them the enjoyment of domestic happiness. They do not fail to observe the difference between their own condition and the meanest white man's, and to realize the injustice of the laws which place it in his power not only to appropriate the profits of their industry, but to subject them to unmerited and unprovoked punishment, without remedy, or the right to resist, or to remonstrate (278).

who did not have the opportunity to run away, accepted their destiny as captives and decided to fight against slavery offering resistance against the slavery system and slaveowners in different ways.

One of these methods of resistance against slavery consisted of destroying slaveholders' property. Slaves destroyed their masters' possessions in different ways, the most noticeable of which was probably arson. Slaves burned houses, barns, ginhouses, etc. mainly for two reasons: as revenge for the inhuman treatment they endured, and to decrease the value of their owner's property. Arson was more common in towns and cities, although plantations suffered from it as well. It was not easy for white people to prove that slaves had committed this crime, but they assumed that they had done it because, *who else could do such a thing?* There were, however, slaves who did not agree with burning slaveowners' property. Eugene D. Genovese writes that the slaves "who failed to sympathize with their arsonists, or who took a harsh attitude toward them, or who handed them over for punishment, were not necessarily playing the Tom. They had to weigh the impulses behind the brave deeds against their effect on the community, and often they found them wanting" (615). Although it is true that some slaves feared the consequences that the burnings carried out by a few could bring to the whole slave community, other bondmen felt identified with their owners and felt that harm done to their masters was harm done to them. Thus, for some slaves, arson was not the best method of destruction.

Nevertheless, apart from arson, slaves had many other methods of destroying their masters' property: they broke farming tools, destroyed fields, harmed and killed cattle, etc. John Hope Franklin describes what he calls "elaborate program of sabotage:"

The slave was so hard on the farming tools that special ones were developed for him. He drove the animals with a cruelty that suggested revenge, and he was so ruthless in his destruction of the growth in the fields that the most careful supervision was necessary to insure survival of the crops until harvest time. He burned forests, barns, and homes to the extent that members of the patrol were frequently fearful of leaving home lest they be visited with revenge in the form of the destruction of their property by fire (151).

Many of these (petty) crimes were committed progressively, little by little, so that they would go unnoticed. The discovery of these deeds would end up in a punishment, but this did not worry the human chattel because: first, the planter had to discover *who* had committed the crime; and second, the punishments normally consisted of whippings or brandings, chastisements to which slaves were unfortunately accustomed to, since they were usually whipped for the least offence.

These crimes were *easy* ways of offering resistance against slavery and slaveowners. They did not involve great risks, a lot of strength, or courage. Slaves, however, *did* run more risks, used their physical strength, and demonstrated great courage when putting into practice other more violent means of reaction. One of these means was self-mutilation. This method of resistance was also, for masters, a means of checking their slaves' degree of desperation. Slaves committed these savage deeds against themselves mainly for two reasons: to elude physical work, and to decrease their value as slaves so that they would not be sold by their masters and thus separated from their families. Franklin explains this issue in the following extract:

Slaves cut off their toes, hands, and mutilated themselves in other ways so as to render themselves ineffective as workers. One Kentucky slave carpenter, for example, cut off one of his hands and the fingers of the other when he learned that he was to be sold down the river. There are several instances of slaves having shot themselves in the hand or foot, especially upon being recovered from running away (151).

Instances of self-mutilation like the ones described by Franklin are not frequently found in slave narratives, for they try to present slaves as victims rather than as cruel or brutal human beings. Nevertheless, William Grimes narrates an attempt to break his leg with an axe in order not to be taken to Georgia with his new master:

I then attempted to break my leg myself. Accordingly I took up an axe, and laying my leg on a log, I struck at it several times with an axe endeavouring to break it, at the same time I put up my fervent prayers to God to be my guide, saying, "if it be thy will that I break my leg in order that I may not go on to Georgia, grant that my blows may take effect; but thy will not mine be done." Finding I could not hit my leg after a number of fruitless attempts, I was convinced by my feelings then, that God had not left me in my sixth trouble, and would be with me in the seventh. Accordingly I tried no more to destroy myself (199).

Grimes's action was owed to his desperation, as his words express. However, when the degree of desperation increased, slaves' brutality also increased. Thus, they resorted to either suicide or murder to escape slavery.

Some slaves found in suicide the solution to their sufferings, "a unique response of resistance for salvation" (Reyes 47). The number of suicides among slaves was quite high, especially amongst the African slaves that were introduced in America by ship. As previously stated, some African captives, being aware of what awaited them at their arrival at the United States threw themselves overboard slave ships during the Middle Passage, thus preferring death to a life in slavery. William Wells Brown witnessed a similar suicide, though in the United States, and includes this episode in his personal history:

There was on the boat a large room on the lower deck, in which the slaves were kept, men and women, promiscuously—all chained two and two, and a strict watch kept that they did not get loose; for cases have occurred in which slaves have got off their chains, and made their escape at landing-places, while the boats were taking in wood;—and with all our care, we lost one woman who had been taken from her husband and children, and having no desire to live without them, in the agony of her soul jumped overboard, and drowned herself. She was not chained (*Narrative* 692).

This proves that the preference for death rather than slavery was not exclusive of African slaves brought to America, but a common feeling amongst slaves born in America as well. Many ex slaves express their brother bondmen's preference for death rather than slavery in slave narratives. In this line, Charles Ball states: "I longed to die, and escape from the hands of my tormentors" (275); similarly, John Brown writes: "[D]eath seemed preferable to the life I was leading" (352). Slave narratives usually justify suicide and argue that it was largely due to the ill treatment suffered by slaves.<sup>111</sup>

---

<sup>111</sup> As stated in the introduction, Africans believed that suicide was an abomination because life was sacred, and blacks felt a compulsion to hide or justify this deed. On the other hand, Angelita Dianne Reyes also defends that suicide had a different meaning in the Americas:

Cosmological perspectives toward suicide were transformed in the New World because of slavery. Suicide remained forbidden, but when it did occur, it would signify as a source of power, defilement, and 'regeneration' by the survivors. In contrast, when suicide was documented by the slave masters, it was often presented as a reaction to despair and nostalgia. For African-born slaves the "text" of suicide was redemption and evoked an inversion of sacred beliefs (50).

This act of self-destruction was very harmful for slaveholders, not only because it decreased their property, but also because their popularity and reputation among other slaveowners diminished.<sup>112</sup> Charles Ball explains this in plain words:

When a Negro kills himself, the master is unwilling to let it be known, lest the deed should be attributed to his own cruelty. A certain degree of disgrace falls upon the master whose slave has committed suicide—and the same man, who would stand by, and see his overseer give his slave a hundred lashes, with the long whip, on his bare back, without manifesting the least pity for the sufferings of the poor tortured wretch, will express very profound regret if the same slave terminates his own life, to avoid a repetition of the horrid flogging. Suicide amongst the slaves is regarded as a matter of dangerous example, and one which it is the business and the interest of all proprietors to discountenance and prevent (Charles Ball 289-290).

Taking into account slaveholders' reactions at their slaves' suicide, it can be stated that killing oneself became, for slaves, not only a means of bringing their own misery to an end, but also a powerful means of resistance against slavery and slaveholders.

Although suicide was quite a brutal means of resistance, slaves were capable of more cruel acts of opposition to the system of slavery. One of these methods was terribly shocking and disturbing for white people: infanticide.<sup>113</sup> This brutal act was more frequently carried out by the child's own mother rather than by the father, something which made this crime even more outrageous in the eyes of white people, who could not imagine the slave mother's desperate reasons to kill her offspring.

---

This transformation of belief would ease Africans' feelings towards the act of suicide. Their justification would be similar than for African American slaves: death is better than slavery.

<sup>112</sup> Thus, Angelita Dianne Reyes argues that "most suicides among slaves throughout the Americas were not documented, officially recognized, or counted. When it did occur, suicide by hanging, drowning, swallowing the tongue (suffocation) and any other means may well have been dismissed or denied. The community of fellow slaves who did not escape or commit suicide would attempt to hide from the masters the truth of what really happened" (41). Therefore, in the light of Reyes's words, one can conclude that more slaves killed themselves than records—black or white—show.

<sup>113</sup> One of the most famous cases of infanticide is depicted in Margaret Garner's story, which inspired Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987). Garner, 21, pregnant, her family and nine other slaves escaped from the border of Kentucky into Ohio. When they reached Cincinnati they decided to break up into groups, the Garner family—four adults and four children—remaining together. Slave catchers found them and Margaret Garner, seeing that their hopes of freedom were in vain, seized a butcher knife and cut the throat of her three-year-old daughter because she did not want to see it taken back into slavery. She then tried to take the life of her other children and to kill herself, but she could not do it. In the end, all of them were arrested and taken to jail. The Garners were finally taken out of jail and back to Kentucky by their owner. There, he decided to sell them because of the publicity the case had aroused. The boat that was to carry them further south had a collision and, although Margaret Garner was rescued, her little girl Silla drowned. Garner did not regret this death, for she considered a happy event that another one of her children would not live as a slave. Garner remained enslaved until she died of tuberculosis in 1861.

Generally speaking, those slave mothers who killed their children did so because they did not want their offspring to grow up and live as slaves, bound to suffer the same cruelties that they were enduring themselves. Some slave narratives also mention these violent acts. The ex slave Lewis Clarke explains in his *Narrative* that he was often asked if he had ever known a slave mother to kill her own children. To this question, he answers the following:

There was a slave mother near where I lived, who took her child into the cellar and killed it. She did it to prevent being separated from her child. Another slave mother took her three children and threw them into a well, and then jumped in with them, and they were all drowned. Other instances I have frequently heard of. At the death of many and many a slave child, I have seen the two feelings struggling in the bosom of a mother—joy, that it was beyond the reach of the slave monsters, and the natural grief of a mother over her child. In the presence of the master, grief seems to predominate; when away from them, they rejoice that there is one whom the slave-driver will never torment (656).

Nevertheless, although infanticide was a means used by slave woman to prevent their children from becoming slaves, it was also a way of confronting white power over black bodies. According to Homi Bhabha,

this most tragic and intimate act of violence is performed in a struggle to push back the boundaries of the slave world. Unlike acts of confrontation against the master or the overseer which were resolved within the household context, infanticide was recognized as an act against the system and at least acknowledged the slave woman's legal standing in the public sphere. Infanticide was seen to be an act against the master's property—against his surplus profits (942).

Thus, infanticide demonstrated white people that slaves were ready to do anything to escape their life of suffering. However, this cruel act of resistance had a negative effect for black people, as slaveholders and proslavery agents used these crimes to justify the inhumanity of black people. They argued that blacks did not have feelings, not even for the members of their families. Thus, “nineteenth-century abolitionists and slave owners alike recognized that murdering one's children could not be the vehicle for abolition” (Reyes 73). Consequently, slave narrators do not publicize infanticide in their writings. They prefer showing instances of suicide to exemplify the fact that, for slaves, death was preferable to slavery.

Nonetheless, there was a violent act of rebellion that white people feared most: slaves' physical attack and even murder of their own masters or of other members of the white population. Slaves' attack on their masters, overseers and even drivers—some of whom, as stated above, were black—occurred normally as a response to a punishment or whipping that slaves considered unfair. Examples of this kind of physical resistance against the power of slaveowners are quite frequently found in slave narratives. William Grimes narrates his defense from a physical attack by his black driver:

[T]he old Negro driver came to me, and asked me why I did not rake up my oats, or those I had cut. I replied, that I had a large boil under each arm, and was unable to do it. He swore I should do it, and went for a stick to beat me, in order to compel me to do it. I heard him coming back, and when he burst open the door, I let him have it in old Virginia stile, (which generally consists in gouging biting and butting.) I drove my head against him, (hardly knowing what I was about, being so much terrified,) until he could scarcely stand or go. I then compelled him to give up the stick to me, which I kept in my hand, walking to and fro, while he, as soon as he recovered from the bruising I had given him, called aloud to the other slaves to come to his assistance (210).<sup>114</sup>

Slave narrators justify these acts of violence and present the *rebel* slaves as both victims and heroes of the unjust system of slavery: victims, because they normally acted in self-defense in case of unfair whipping or punishment; heroes, because, on the one hand, they became models for other slaves and, on the other, because they had done something that other slaves would never dare to do.

---

<sup>114</sup> Another example can be the one presented by Solomon Northup in his slave narrative:

I was about to say something further in justification, but with concentrated vengeance, he sprang upon me, seizing me by the throat with one hand, raising the whip with the other, in the act of striking. Before the blow descended, however, I had caught him by the collar of the coat, and drawn him closely to me. Reaching down, I seized him by the ankle, and pushing him back with the other hand, he fell over on the ground. Putting one arm around his leg, and holding it to my breast, so that his head and shoulders only touched the ground, I placed my foot upon his neck. . . . I snatched the whip from his hand. . . . I cannot tell how many times I struck him. Blow after blow fell fast and heavy upon his wriggling form. At length he screamed—cried murder—and at last the blasphemous tyrant called on God for mercy. But he who had never shown mercy did not receive it. The stiff stock of the whip warped round his cringing body until my right arm ached (213).

Not all slave narrators relate episodes like this in such a vivid manner—the narration of the fight resembles action or adventure books—mainly for two reasons: because the authors of slave narratives lacked literary skills; or because they eluded literary figures in order to prevent their narratives from being considered fiction rather than reality. Their aim was to present a *true* picture of slavery so that everyone would condemn it and fight for its abolition.



Fighting masters and overseers was a very courageous and risky thing to do but, at the same time, it was an act that made the slaveholder know that he had to be careful with that slave. The slave had asserted his manhood, his power, his rebellion, and had let the master know that he would never be whipped again for no reason, that the punishments that he would endure in the future would have to be justified, and/or that he was ready to do whatever it took to become a free man. This fight was a *turning point* in the life of a slave, as Frederick Douglass would claim in his *Narrative*:

This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free. The gratification afforded by the triumph was a full compensation for whatever else might follow, even death itself. He only can understand the deep satisfaction which I experienced, who has himself repelled by force the bloody arm of slavery. I felt as I never felt before. It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact (65).<sup>115</sup>

Thus, slave narrators consider it very important to include this episode of their lives in their autobiographies of bondage, for it marked their determination to be treated like men, not like animals or things. Slaveholders had good reasons for fearing slaves' physical resistance over them: they knew that this fighting implied that their slaves had undergone a change in their minds, that they had found the strength needed to become free and not to tolerate any (unjust) harm or punishment done to them. Slaveholders feared that slaves would take the natural following step: killing their masters.

Although many slaveholders were constantly in fear of being killed by their slaves, not many slaves dared or managed to murder their masters. John Hope Franklin argues that slaves used different methods to kill their owners, like poisoning them, or mixing ground glass in their food. He states that the "times that overseers and masters were killed by slaves in the woods or fields were exceedingly numerous, as the careful

---

<sup>115</sup> For a more thorough examination of this episode in Frederick Douglass's life, see Ronald Takaki's "Not Afraid to Die: Frederick Douglass and Violence," included in his *Violence and the Black Imagination*, in which Takaki traces Douglass's rise to a political activist who advocated killing for freedom.

reading of almost any Southern newspaper [would] reveal” (152). These numbers would increase if one took into account Eugene D. Genovese’s analysis. Genovese states that newspapers sometimes decided not to publish the murder of a master by his slave “so as not to put ideas in the heads of imitative slaves” (616). Therefore, the real and true figures of masters’ murders in the hands of slaves will never be accurately known.

Slaves did not only kill their masters, but also their overseers. The difference between killing a master or an overseer could be great in the eyes of the law. Sometimes “many masters supported their slaves in the murder of a cruel overseer and effectively blocked inquiry” (Genovese 616). That would not happen if the murdered had been a slaveholder. The slave could be sure that the law would fall upon him with full strength. Nevertheless, many murders of overseers were also punished with the murderer-slave’s death. Solomon Northup narrates one of these cases:

The slave was given his task at splitting rails. In the course of the day the overseer sent him on an errand, which occupied so much time that it was not possible for him to perform the task. The next day he was called to an account, but the loss of time occasioned by the errand was no excuse, and he was ordered to kneel and bare his back for the reception of the lash. They were in the woods alone—beyond the reach of sight or hearing. The boy submitted until maddened at such injustice, and insane with pain, he sprang to his feet, and seizing an axe, literally chopped the overseer in pieces. He made no attempt whatever at concealment, but hastening to his master, related the whole affair, and declared himself ready to expiate the wrong by the sacrifice of his life. He was led to the scaffold, and while the rope was around his neck, maintained an undismayed and fearless bearing, and with his last words justified the act (262).

Once again the power of slave narratives is demonstrated, for even though the slave is a murderer, he is presented as a victim of an unjust and cruel system in which he has to fight—in this case kill—for survival. In order to avoid these murders, many slaveholders put into practice certain tricks: for example, those masters who knew which of his slaves were the most dangerous and strongest would try to give them an important position within the plantation, and keep them happy so that they would not resort to violence.

Among the most violent acts in which slaves were involved were revolts or insurrections. For John Hope Franklin, revolts were “the most sensational and desperate

reaction of Negroes to their status as slaves” (153). If, as stated above, there was great fear of being murdered among slaveholders, their fear of slave revolts was even greater. Insurrections usually involved terrible killings and bloodshed on both sides—slaves and slaveholders—and slaveowners panicked at the thought of a revolt. These slave uprisings were bitter reminders of the human desire for freedom. For slaveholders, it was a desperate criminal attack on whites. Franklin describes both slaves’ and white people’s view of revolts:

To the Negroes who could summon the nerve to strike for their freedom in a group, it was what might be termed “carrying the fight to the enemy” in the hope that it would end, once and for all, the degradation of human enslavement. To the whites it was a mad, sinister act of desperate savages, in league with the devil, who could not appreciate the benign influences of the institution and who would dare shed the blood of their benefactors (153).

Although slaveholders feared this bloodshed—especially on their side—slave revolts were not as frequent in the United States as in the Caribbean or South America. In the United States, slave insurrections were only organized when specific circumstances were given. Eugene D. Genovese enumerates these circumstances:

Slave revolt flourished particularly where the master-slave relationship had developed more as a matter of business than paternalistically; where economic distress and unusual hardship prevailed with greater frequency and intensity than in the Old South; and where slaveholding units were large. . . . Revolts occurred in both town and country; on the whole, urban centers, like the great plantation districts, offered especially favorable conditions. Revolts also germinated in areas in which a high ratio of slave to free and black to white prevailed and in which the slaves had had a chance to acquire military experience (590-591).

These circumstances were not frequently given in the United States, for there were only three well-known slave insurrections in this country: Gabriel Posser’s, Denmark Vesey’s, and Nat Turner’s. They shared three common features: (i) each of these revolts had literate leaders who had been privileged slaves (Posser had been a blacksmith; Vesey, a free black man who had bought his freedom after working as a seaman; and Turner, a foreman and an exhorter); (ii) each revolt had an urban dimension (Posser planned to seize Richmond; Vesey, Charleston; and Turner, Jerusalem); and (iii) each revolt was formed when there was division in the ruling classes.

One of these revolts, the one led by Nat Turner, is documented in more detail, perhaps because it was the deadliest slave revolt in the history of the United States.<sup>116</sup> The reason lies in the fact that Turner was interviewed in prison by the attorney Thomas Ruffin Gray, and the result was published as *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1831).<sup>117</sup> Nat Turner's revolt is mentioned in some slave narratives, like Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage* (231). Other minor insurrections are also cited in other personal histories of ex slaves. Thus, Solomon Northup narrates an instance of slave revolt in Bayou Boeuf, Louisiana, led by Lew Cheney. After describing what had happened, Northup adds:

Such an idea as insurrection, however, is not new among the enslaved population of Bayou Boeuf. More than once I have joined in serious consultation, when the subject has been discussed, and there have been times when a word from me would have placed hundreds of my fellow-bondsmen in an attitude of defiance. Without arms or ammunition, or even with them, I saw such a step would result in certain defeat, disaster and death, and always raised my voice against it (273).

All in all, slave insurrections were not a common topic in slave narratives. As stated above, the main purpose for which these narratives of bondage were written was to present slaves as victims, and the narration of these acts of rebellion would cause the opposite effect. It would increase slaves' unpopularity within proslavery movements.

As previously discussed, both proslavery and antislavery movements wanted to convey the impression that slaves were docile and respectful, although their reasons for so doing were completely different: proslavery agents wanted to maintain the institution of slavery arguing that it was beneficial for both slaves—who were even happy with their status—and masters; and antislavery advocates wanted to present black people as victims of an unjust system of labor, human beings that were easily controlled by their owners, who did not need to fear any danger from their bondmen. Nevertheless, and as this part of the chapter has discussed, reality was different: slaves developed many

---

<sup>116</sup> A small band of Nat Turner's followers—who thought he was a prophet—armed with axes killed between fifty-seven and sixty-five white men, women and children. Turner killed only one person: a white woman.

<sup>117</sup> Thomas Ruffin Gray was a slaveowner “who tried to paint Turner as the devil incarnate” (Taylor, “Introduction” xxxiii). His *Confessions* includes a graphic account of Turner's religious visions and the murder of white men, women, and children.

strategies to escape work and punishment, to obtain things denied to them, to run away to free land, to defend themselves from white people's brutality, and to cope with the sufferings they endured with as good humor as they were capable of.

The methods of resistance used by slave men and slave women were different. Male slaves were more ready to fight physically for their *rights*, to run the risk of escaping, attacking, killing or conspiring to revolt. Women resorted to their wit and to language, although they were also presented as infanticides who killed their own children to prevent them from becoming slaves. Both male and female slaves used signifying and suicide as other means of resistance. All these methods used by slaves as a reaction against slavery and the enslavers were included in their personal histories of bondage, for, as stated above, they were very important episodes in their lives in which bondmen and women asserted their determination to fight against the slavery system, and slave narratives were, after all, antislavery writings.

The analysis of the circumstances under which slaves lived and labored, and their reactions against their masters and the institution of slavery presented in this chapter, provides this dissertation with the necessary contextualization that will help understand the following chapters. Slave narratives describe these life conditions and methods of resistance employed by nineteenth-century African American slaves. Thus, the following chapter will examine the main thematic and stylistic characteristics of these narratives of bondage in order to ascertain their value not only as historical but also as literary documents.

## CHAPTER 2

### SLAVE NARRATIVES: THEIR VALUE AS HISTORY AND AS LITERATURE

---

Oh, freedom,  
Oh, freedom,  
Oh, freedom over me!  
An' befo' I'd be a slave,  
I'll be buried in my grave,  
An' go home to my Lord an' be free

(Traditional slave song)<sup>1</sup>

The locus classicus of Afro-American literary discourse is the slave narrative  
(Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* 31).

In the second half of the eighteenth century a few black ex slaves started to write and publish their autobiographies. These autobiographies that related the authors' experiences in slavery were to be named slave narratives. Slave narratives—origin of African American letters—are very interesting and relevant documents. As stated in previous pages, one proslavery argument defended the enslavement of blacks on the basis of their lack of reason and intelligence. By writing their autobiographies, black authors demonstrated that they were endowed with intellect and that, therefore, they had to be regarded as human beings. Thus, these African American authors defended, with the publication of their personal histories, the right of black people to become free citizens of the United States. Their (auto)biographies demonstrated their humanity and, therefore, their right to freedom in accordance with *The Declaration of Independence*

---

<sup>1</sup> See "Appendix C: Slave Songs and Poems on Slavery," p. 400, for the complete lyrics of this song.

(1776): “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, *Liberty* and the pursuit of Happiness” (emphasis added).<sup>2</sup> Slave narratives became, thus, literary and documented evidence of blacks’ right to freedom. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argues in his foreword to Valerie Smith’s edition of Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,

[s]ince the beginning of the sixteenth century, Europeans had wondered aloud whether or not the African “species of men,” as they were most commonly called, *could* ever create formal literature, could ever master “the arts and sciences.” If they could, the argument ran, then the African variety of humanity was fundamentally related to the European variety. If not, then it seemed clear that the African was destined by nature to be a slave (“In Her Own Write” ix-x).

Such being the importance of slave narratives, many critics of African American literature have provided a variety of definitions of this literary genre. These definitions have been developed from different perspectives (authorship, reliability, etc.) and, only by means of a profound analysis of each of these definitions, can one draw a clear, complete, and comprehensive characterization of slave narratives as a genre.

However, I must state, first, that scholars like Angelyn Mitchell, Eleanor W. Traylor, Sherley Anne Williams, and Toni Cade Bambara prefer to use the term *emancipatory narrative* “to identify the narrative written by the self-emancipated African American of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (Mitchell 5). By using the term *emancipatory* instead of *slave* narrative, Mitchell, Traylor, Williams, and Bambara shift “the gaze from the objectified identity of the author to the author’s impetus for writing and [the] primary focus of the narrative—emancipation from slavery” (Mitchell 152 n3), thus defining these works from a more hopeful and optimistic perspective. In the following pages, however, the traditional term *slave narratives* will be used, since I consider that the fact that these men and women had lived as slaves conditioned their writings to a greater extent than the fact that they had managed to obtain their freedom.

<sup>2</sup> See “Appendix B: Documents and Maps,” p. 383, for a more complete text of *The Declaration of Independence*.

As stated earlier, many different definitions of the slave narrative genre have been provided. African American scholar Frances Smith Foster, for instance, defends that slave narratives are “the personal accounts by black slaves and ex-slaves of their experiences in slavery and of their efforts to obtain freedom” (*Witnessing* 3). According to this definition, these narratives would not only include the ex slave’s representation of life in bondage, but also an explanation—even if brief—of how they managed to become free men and women (escape and manumission being the commonest methods of obtaining freedom). Foster does not specify, however, the origin of the slave voices. It is Houston A. Baker who locates slave narratives in a particular context when he argues that slave narratives are not only those that were produced “by fugitive slaves and freed black men and women in America” but also the narratives “by Africans in England” (*Blues* 31). Baker defends both locations of slave narratives, on the grounds that both types of writings observe the conventions of the genre. I will, thus, include within the slave narrative genre the personal histories written by those slaves who obtained their freedom in England and decided to remain there as free citizens,<sup>3</sup> as well as the narratives by those African Americans who traveled to England to have their work published.<sup>4</sup>

Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., prominent theorists of African American literature, argue that slave narratives are “the written and *dictated* testimonies

---

<sup>3</sup> This is, for example, the case of Olaudah Equiano, who became a leading abolitionist in England after obtaining his freedom. He published *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* in London in 1789. Similarly, Ottobah Cugoano was freed and taken to England as a servant, publishing *Thoughts and Sentiments* in London in 1787, and *Narrative of the Enslavement of Ottobah Cugoano*, also in London in 1825.

<sup>4</sup> Moses Grandy and James W.C. Pennington were two of the authors who published their personal histories in England in 1843 and 1849 respectively. African Americans found it easier to publish their works in England due to the peculiar condition of slavery in this country. The last form of enforced servitude of adults (*villeinage*) had disappeared in Britain with the beginning of the seventeenth century. But by the eighteenth century, African, Indian and East Indian slaves began to be brought into London and Edinburgh as personal servants. They were not bought or sold, and their legal status was unclear until 1772, when the case of a runaway slave named James Somersett forced the legal decision that the condition of *slavery did not exist under English law in England itself*. (See *Though the Heavens May Fall: The Landmark Trial that Led to the End of Human Slavery*, by Steven M. Wise for further information on this case). This judgment emancipated ten to fourteen thousand slaves, or possible slaves in England, most of whom were domestic servants. It also laid down the principle that *slavery contracted in other jurisdictions* (such as the American colonies) *could not be enforced in England*. Despite the fact that some writings by African Americans were published initially in England, they would reach the U. S. audience reasonably easily and future reprints would be issued in America, especially in northern states.



of the enslavement of black human beings” (“Introduction” xii; emphasis added). The word “dictated” is particularly important here, since it implies the inclusion of two different types of narratives of bondage within the slave narrative genre: on the one hand, the personal histories of those ex slaves who dictated their autobiographies (usually to white abolitionist editors) before and after the Civil War;<sup>5</sup> and, on the other, “the oral slave narratives collected in the 1930s by the Federal Writers’ Project” (Davis and Gates, “Introduction” xii). In the first case, emphasis is made on the illiteracy of bondmen, one of the above-discussed evils of the slave codes, which denied blacks the right to education. The second case (the narratives collected by the Federal Writers’ Project) is slightly different and must be discussed at greater length.

The narratives collected by the Federal Writers’ Project, more commonly known as WPA narratives,<sup>6</sup> are analyzed in depth by historian Paul D. Escott in his essay “The Art and Science of Reading WPA Slave Narratives.” Escott defines WPA narratives as the “written report[s] of an interview, or several interviews, with a former slave, recorded in the 1930s by a field worker hired by the Works Progress Administration” (41). There are 16 volumes of WPA narratives, containing about 10,000 pages. They are based on interviews with approximately 2,200 blacks in 17 states, compiled between 1936 and 1938. Thus, most of the interviewees had been born in the last years of slavery or during the Civil War, although some of them were simply “direct descendants of slaves” (Reyes 35). These interviews are interesting documents because they provide “first-hand accounts of their experiences on plantations, in cities, and on small farms” (Fort, par. 1). Issues such as slaves’ jobs and working hours, their methods of survival and resistance against slaveowners and the slave system, the means they used to escape from slavery, slaves’ religious beliefs, etc., are all examined in these interviews. Since these topics are also common conventions in the slave narratives as previously defined by some critics, WPA narratives may also be included within the slave narrative genre.

---

<sup>5</sup> Yuval Taylor argues that “slightly less than half of the antebellum narratives, and almost all of the postbellum narratives, were self-penned” (xxxvi).

<sup>6</sup> Works Progress Administration narratives.

All these definitions being considered, one can conclude that slave narratives are *the personal accounts of the enslavement of black people written or dictated by Africans in England and by fugitive slaves and freed black men and women in America, who narrate their experiences in slavery and their efforts to obtain freedom.*

Once the slave narrative genre has been clearly defined, the value of these writings as history and as literature must be examined. First, an analysis of the historical value of slave narratives will be carried out, taking into consideration the differences between the narratives written before and after the American Civil War, and the special features of WPA narratives. These narratives were dismissed as historical sources for decades, a surprising dismissal if one considers that documents written by white people *were* used for historical purposes. Was it just a question of racism, or were there elements in these narratives that diminished their historical reliability? These questions will be answered in the first part of this chapter.

The second part of the chapter will deal with the literary value of traditional slave narratives. This value is unquestionable, for these documents of bondage have exercised an enormous influence on modern African American writers: “[T]he narratives of ex-slaves are, for the literary critic, the very generic foundation which most subsequent Afro-American fictional and non-fictional narrative forms extended, refigured, and troped” (Davis and Gates, “Introduction” xxxiii). In order to carry out this literary analysis, I will first examine the similarities between the traditional slave narrative and other existing literary genres. Finally, this chapter will conclude with a thorough examination of the stylistic and thematic conventions that contributed to the creation of the slave narrative genre.

**1****ANTEBELLUM AND POSTBELLUM SLAVE NARRATIVES:  
THEIR VALUE AS HISTORY**

The stories of suffering depicted in slave narratives are very much related to the historical period in which these works were written. This is why slave narratives are essential documents to interpret slavery times. Nevertheless, they cover a period of almost two centuries (1760-1940)<sup>7</sup> during which the United States experienced a huge social transformation. This transformation initiated around the Civil War (1861-1865), a war that would constitute the turning point of American society, since, when the American Civil War came to an end, the peculiar institution was abolished in all the States.<sup>8</sup> This event would create a great modification in American society, especially with regard to the social status and consideration of the black community in the United States. Consequently, the abolition of slavery would also mark a change in the way in which the narratives of human bondage were written. In this light, scholars of African American literature like Frances Smith Foster have established a distinction between *antebellum* and *postbellum* slave narratives: antebellum slave narratives being those

---

<sup>7</sup> It is generally agreed that the slave narrative genre was cultivated between 1760 and 1940. The first slave narrative, written by Briton Hammon in fourteen pages, and published in Boston by Green & Russell in 1760, was entitled *A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings, and Surprizing Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man*. The last recorded slave narratives are the WPA narratives compiled by the Works Progress Administration. This collection of narratives was deposited in the Library of Congress in 1941, and later microfilmed for distribution.

<sup>8</sup> The Thirteenth Amendment to American Constitution reads as follows: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for a crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction" (Mason and Stephenson 684).

published *before* and *during* the Civil War (1760-1865), and postbellum slave narratives those published *after* the Civil War (1865-1940).

One of the elements that differentiate the narratives of these two periods is related to their plot and thematic content. Whereas the antebellum narrator criticizes the slave system and slaveholders, presents instances of physical and psychological abuses towards slaves and free blacks, and describes his escape from a life in bondage, postbellum slave narratives relate how the ex slave managed to survive in a hostile society dominated by the slavery system: “The large majority of postbellum ex-slave autobiographers . . . take pride in having endured slavery without having lost their sense or purpose and without having given in to the despair that the antebellum narrator pictures as the lot of so many who languished in slavery” (Andrews, “The Representation of Slavery” 81). This thematic difference between antebellum and postbellum slave narratives is grounded on the situation of the slave narrator at the time of writing his autobiography. Antebellum slave narrators could, according to *The Fugitive Slave Law* (1850),<sup>9</sup> be captured and taken back into slavery to their former owners. After the Civil War, black people could not be held in bondage as the property of another person. Thus, the perspective from which the slave author writes his personal history is completely different. The antebellum writer endangers his freedom by describing his experiences as a former slave but does so because he has a powerful motivation: to help bring about the abolition of slavery. He feels that he is fighting for a just cause and is happy to do so. On the other hand, the postbellum slave narrator writes his autobiography as an ordinary exercise of his freedom and, though criticizing the slavery system, he focuses on his individual experiences, on his strength and determination to survive in a hostile and racist society.

Although the original purpose for writing slave narratives—condemning slavery—disappeared with the abolition of the peculiar institution, postbellum slave

---

<sup>9</sup> This law demanded American citizens to turn in fugitive slaves so that they could be taken back to their legitimate owners. This law also forbid all kind of assistance to runaways. For a selection of fragments from this law, see “Appendix B: Documents and Maps,” pp. 384-386.

narratives *had* something to add to the previously written accounts of slavery. These blacks who lived as free citizens of the United States complain in their narratives of being treated as second-class human beings and of the prevailing racism even in the North of the country. Thus, whereas the purpose of antebellum slave narratives was to help bring about the abolition of slavery, postbellum slave narratives aimed at presenting racial conflicts and abuses in the free United States.

Further to this distinction between antebellum and postbellum slave narratives, Frances Smith Foster argues that there are two periods within the narratives published before the Civil War: eighteenth century (1760-1807) and nineteenth century (1831-1865) slave narratives (*Witnessing* xi). Foster grounds this distinction on the differentiated plots of the slave narratives written in these two periods, arguing that, whereas eighteenth-century slave narrators were born free in Africa, kidnapped, turned into slaves, and introduced in Western society, nineteenth-century slave authors were born slaves in the United States. Nevertheless, Foster also points out a difference in the religious or political dimension of the slave narratives written in these two centuries, and states that, whereas many eighteenth-century slaves understand their enslavement as some kind of punishment from God for a crime-sin they have committed, and believe that they have to earn His forgiveness in order to become free, nineteenth-century slaves—born in the United States, and aware of *The Declaration of Independence*—complain of the unfairness of their situation and argue that, as human beings, they should have the same rights as white people. Slave narrators complain in their autobiographies of the hypocrisy of American society, who proudly extols the virtues of *The Declaration of Independence*—a document that established *all men's* rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—but limits its application to white men. As Linda M. Grasso argues, “at the same time that America proclaimed itself the exemplar of democracy, it institutionalized slavery and excluded women,<sup>10</sup> ‘free’ people of color, Native Americans, and people of Asian descent from equal rights and citizenship”

---

<sup>10</sup> Let us not forget that white women were denied the right to vote (see page 12, footnote 15).

(Grasso 19). Therefore, whereas eighteenth-century slave narrators pay more attention to the spiritual and religious dimension of their work, nineteenth-century slave authors emphasize the political dimension of slavery, arguing for its abolition.

Another difference between eighteenth and nineteenth-century slave narratives lies in the description of the way in which slaves obtained their freedom. After traveling to different places, the protagonists of eighteenth-century slave narratives usually relate having procured their freedom by buying it, or as a reward for their good behavior. Nineteenth-century slave narratives, on the other hand, introduce the figure of the fugitive slave as a heroic character who fights the slave system by running away to freedom. Thus, whereas the eighteenth-century slave narrator is a good slave, and tries to obtain his emancipation on account of his behavior, the nineteenth-century slave fights both physically<sup>11</sup> and politically<sup>12</sup> for the abolition of slavery.

Similarly, although both eighteenth and nineteenth-century slave narrators criticize slavery in their writings, their attack focuses on different issues: whereas eighteenth-century slave authors condemn the slave *trade*<sup>13</sup> (most of them had been kidnapped from Africa and brought into the New World as slaves), nineteenth-century slave authors attack the *institution* of slavery.<sup>14</sup> This attack is constructed upon multiple scenes of daily cruelties and punishments that were inflicted on slaves (especially female slaves), scenes that were unusual in eighteenth-century slave narratives. In the same way in which postbellum narratives do not argue for the abolition of slavery after it had been abolished, nineteenth-century slave narrators do not fight against the transatlantic slave trade, for it was outlawed in the United States in 1808. What they *do*

---

<sup>11</sup> The nineteenth-century slave narrator prides in rebelling against his master or overseer by fighting against one or the other and often defeating them.

<sup>12</sup> Once the nineteenth-century slave has obtained his freedom, he comes into contact with pro-abolition agents and participates actively in many abolitionist meetings in which his story of bondage and escape, and argues for the necessity of removing the slavery system from American society.

<sup>13</sup> Olaudah Equiano, for example, writes that the chief design of his narrative is: “[T]o excite in your august assemblies a sense of compassion for the miseries which the Slave-Trade has entailed on my unfortunate countrymen. By the horrors of that trade was I first torn away from all the tender connexions that were naturally dear to my heart” (7).

<sup>14</sup> Reverend Richard Allen states the purpose of his narrative as follows: “I do not wish to make you angry, but excite attention to consider how hateful slavery is, in the sight of that God who hath destroyed kings and princes, for their oppression of the poor slaves” (45).

complain about is the slave trade within the country, especially in—and towards—the southern states.

If, as previously examined, the world in which slaves lived exerted an enormous influence on the political side of their future autobiographies, the differences between *traditional* slave narratives (antebellum and postbellum writings)<sup>15</sup> and WPA narratives—based on interviews to ex slaves and collected more than six decades after the abolition of slavery, in the 1930s—must be taken into account. In a comparative analysis of these two types of narratives, several differences can be extracted. First of all, whereas traditional slave narratives are usually book-length, WPA narratives “vary considerably in length and quality. Some are barely a page, whereas others run to several pages or more; the ‘typical’ narrative might be between two and four pages in length” (Escott 41). Thus, eighteenth and nineteenth-century slave narratives provide more details about the narrator’s experiences and knowledge of slavery than WPA interviews and, therefore, the view of the slave system in the United States is more ample in the former writings than in the latter ones.

Secondly, WPA narratives “are not a direct presentation of the slave’s views” (Escott 41), for the ex slaves’ answers to the interviewer’s questions were changed into a report written by the interviewer himself, which would be later reviewed by an editor. They were, then, second or even third-hand accounts of slavery. Historian John W. Blassingame adds that “even when the former slave’s views are purportedly typed in his own words, the interview may have been ‘doctored,’ certain portions deleted without any indication in the typescript, and his language altered” (87). Thus, most of these reports are not a direct transcription of the interview. They do not reproduce the real words used by former slaves, but what the interviewer considered interesting or acceptable. Similarly, some slave narratives were not written by the ex slaves themselves either (usually because they could neither read nor write) but dictated to

---

<sup>15</sup> I will use the adjective *traditional* to refer to the slave narratives written during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

someone else, usually a white editor. Nevertheless, it is also generally agreed that these dictations only underwent slight modifications, for the objective of the narrative (the abolition of slavery) was shared by slaves' editors. This was not so clear in the case of WPA narratives: the interviews took place in the twentieth century and "the South of that day was a tightly segregated society. Institutionalized racial discrimination dominated social life as pervasively and almost as harshly as slavery ever had" (Escott 42). Thus, most blacks felt that they could not speak freely to whites and, since most interviewers were southern whites, the answers of most of the interviewed black men and women could have been biased. Blassingame explains why some of the answers given by the ex slaves might have been guided by the interviewers:

Many of the WPA interviewers consistently referred to their informants as darkeys, niggers, aunteys, mammies, and uncles. Reminiscent as these terms were of rigid plantation etiquette, they were not calculated to engender the trust of the blacks. Rather than being sensitive, the white interviewers failed to demonstrate respect for the Blacks, ignored cues indicating a tendency toward integration, and repeatedly refused to correct the informants' belief that the interviewer was trying to help them obtain the coveted pension. Not only did most of the whites lack empathy with the former slaves, they often phrased their questions in ways that indicated the kinds of answers they wanted (86).

In this light, one may understand why these former slaves decided not to talk, for example, about the cruelty of some slaveholders. They might have been afraid of making enemies among white people.<sup>16</sup> This fear is similar to the fear that antebellum slave narrators had of being recaptured into slavery after making themselves known to the community with the publication of their personal histories. On the other hand, the blacks interviewed by the WPA might have suffered the segregation and racism of the twentieth century, but would never have been turned into slaves. Conversely, they did not have a group of abolitionists providing them with shelter and help if necessary.

Finally, the reports of slavery presented in traditional slave narratives and in WPA narratives show differences that emerge from the age at which the black person

---

<sup>16</sup> John Edgar Wideman states that "the ex-slaves who told their tales to the WPA interviewers had to censure themselves, had to talk between the lines, had to protect themselves and protect the corner of truth they wished to preserved by being selective about what they said and how they said it" (70).



had experienced slavery. On the one hand, the interviewed ex slaves were usually quite old at the time of the interview (some of them had lived seventy or more years since they had been slaves),<sup>17</sup> and their memories of slavery might not have been very precise. On the other hand, the authors of eighteenth and nineteenth-century slave narratives wrote their autobiographies soon after becoming free and when their memories of slavery were still very vivid. Moreover, since the protagonists of WPA narratives had experienced slavery as children,<sup>18</sup> their life as slaves would have been much easier compared to that endured by adult slaves, for, as stated in the previous chapter, children were quite free of worries up to the age of twelve. By contrast, the narrators of traditional slave narratives had been slaves from childhood through adulthood and, therefore, their experiences were not only more accurate but also more varied than those of the blacks interviewed in the 1930s.

Due to the fact that WPA narratives were not direct transcriptions of the interview, that the memory of these blacks could have been distorted due to their age (both at the time of the interview and at the time of their enslavement), and that they were interviewed by white people in a period where segregation was still operating in the United States, many historians have almost completely neglected these materials,<sup>19</sup> arguing that they did not present an objective view of slavery. Yet these interviews are not the only slave narratives that have been deprived of historical value, since eighteenth and nineteenth-century slave narratives have also suffered this disregard for a long period of time. Many Western historians refused, for decades, to consider traditional slave narratives authentic or valuable for historical purposes.<sup>20</sup> In the

---

<sup>17</sup> According to John W. Blassingame, “two-thirds of [the informants] were at least eighty years old when they were interviewed” (88).

<sup>18</sup> Blassingame reports that “only 16 percent of the informants had been fifteen years or older when the Civil War began” (88).

<sup>19</sup> John W. Blassingame points out another factor that might have influenced the reliability of the accounts, that is, the sex and race of the interviewers: “Generally, the stories are most revealing when the informant and the interviewer were of the same sex; black interviewers obtained more reliable information than white ones; and white women received more honest responses than white men” (89-90).

<sup>20</sup> Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argue that historians “have, until recently, treated these texts either with an alarmingly irresponsible naïveté, or else with a pernicious double-standard, finding ‘bias’ in the slave’s text and ‘objectivity’ in that of the master” (“Introduction” xi-xii).

twentieth century, however, there was an increasing interest in slave narratives, and great efforts were made to determine whether these testimonies of slavery were authentic or fictional. Some proved to be fictional, but historians were reluctant to use even the authentic ones in their reviews on American history, despite the fact that materials written by white authors were invariably used for these purposes. Nonetheless, according to John W. Blassingame, these narratives have the same historical value as other documents written by white people:

If scholars want to know the heart and secret thoughts of slaves, they must study the testimony of the blacks. But since the slave did not know the heart and secret thoughts of masters, they must also examine the testimony of whites. Neither the whites nor the blacks had a monopoly on truth, had rended the veil cloaking the life of the other, or had seen clearly the pain and the joy bounded by color and caste. The perceptions of neither can be accepted as encapsulating the totality of plantation life. Consequently, whether one focuses on the slaves or the master, one must systematically examine both black and white testimony (94).<sup>21</sup>

There are many other scholars who argue for the use of slave and WPA narratives on the grounds that they provide first-hand information about how slaves lived, worked, enjoyed, married, etc., and contain valuable religious and secular songs, genealogical data on black families, and instances of black speech patterns. This is probably why, nowadays, “many historians have come to accept their value and expect their use in any study of slavery” (Escott 40) in the same way in which they use the testimonies of slavery written by slaveholders or other non-slaves. If a true, complete, and unbiased picture of the slave system is to be drawn, the voices of both enslavers and enslaved must be heard.

---

<sup>21</sup> C. Vann Woodward writes a similar defense, using a very vehement tone:

[I]s the traditional suspicion of this material justified? Shall historians discard the slave interviews as worthless? Not unless they are prepared to be consistent and discard most of the other sources they habitually use. . . . The slave narratives have their peculiarities, as all types of historical sources do, but they are not all that different from the norm. The norm for historical sources is a mess, a confusing mess, and the task of the historian is to make sense of it (53).

Similarly, Frances Smith Foster argues that slave narratives are of great historical value since they do not only exemplify nineteenth-century American culture, but have also played an essential role in the history of the United States, “and they continue to this moment to provide insights into the history from which America was created, the history to which we must turn in order to begin to learn who we are and what our relation is to the world” (*Witnessing* 154).

**2****SLAVE NARRATIVES AS LITERATURE**

Whether slave narratives' relevance as historical documents has been surrounded by great controversy, there is no doubt about the significance of these personal histories within African American literature. As stated in previous pages, they are considered the origin and basis of this literary tradition, and develop specific thematic aspects that future black authors would revisit in their writings. Thus, after having defined the genre, a thorough analysis of the conventions that guided the slave narrative must be here carried out.

First of all, though, I will examine the way in which slave authors resorted to familiar literary styles to put their experiences of bondage into writing. The act of writing their personal histories had some implications in literary terms, the most important of which was the fact that a new literary form emerged in American letters. Many authors had written their autobiographies, but none of them were black people narrating their experiences as slaves. Thus, the first African Americans to tell what was like to be a slave had to find the most appropriate voice to do so in a way that would attract their readers' attention, but which would also be understood and approved by this audience. With this thought in mind, ex slaves found inspiration in genres like the (spiritual) autobiography, the novel of ordeal, and the sentimental novel to narrate their tribulations under the yoke of slavery. Hence, I will examine in this section the

similarities and differences between slave narratives and already existing and contemporary literary genres so as to determine the originality of these writings by African Americans.

This chapter will conclude with a thorough analysis of the stylistic and thematic conventions that contributed to give full shape to the slave narrative genre. The narratives of bondage follow a very strict pattern that most slave authors adjust to point by point. This pattern was elaborated on the basis of the slave narratives that were considered of greater relevance. It so happens that these relevant narratives had been written by male authors, which means that the picture of slavery that ex slave women like Harriet Jacobs depicted in their writings was neglected. Thus, it is necessary to analyze the conventions of the slave narrative genre as developed by former bondmen so as to determine the originality of Jacobs's contribution to it, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

## **2.1. SLAVE NARRATIVES VS. OTHER CONTEMPORARY LITERARY GENRES**

In the following analysis of the similarities and differences between slave narratives and other contemporary literary genres, I will be referring to the characteristics of *traditional* eighteenth and nineteenth-century slave narratives alone, disregarding the interviews with slaves published by the Works Progress Administration (WPA narratives), since the aim of this work is to analyze the originality of Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) by comparing it with other slave narratives of similar characteristics, and WPA narratives, though developing topics already discussed in prior narratives of bondage, have very few other *narrative* similarities with the biographies of former slaves written and published in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

When slave narrators started to write about their experiences in bondage, they needed to find the most appropriate voice so that their personal histories could move their readers to do something for the abolitionist cause: “If readers were to act justly and swiftly to abolish slavery, antislavery authors needed to find a form of writing that could break through conventional responses to literature and awaken the audience’s political unconscious” (Bennett 119). Hence, in their efforts to elaborate the most appropriate voice, they mixed elements of different existing literary genres—the autobiography, the sentimental novel, the spiritual autobiography, the captivity narrative, and the novel of ordeal—and thus created a new literary genre. Paradoxically, ex slaves used literary genres created by the white man to present a strong voice against a system that had also been created by this white man, and which had contributed to make these black authors’ lives miserable: slavery. None of these genres could *separately* give voice to the ex slave’s experiences, for no white authors had previously endured slavery. Therefore, slave narrators had to find an appropriate balance in the use of existing and contemporary genres that would suit not only their narrative desires, but also their readers’ expectations, for, “if genres are essentially received forms through which an author fulfills audience expectations, then the abolitionists needed to destabilize traditional generic expectations and so rewrite the contract between author and reader” (Bennett 120). Therefore, many of the stylistic differences found in slave narratives are the consequence of one literary genre being predominant in a particular narrative. For instance, Olaudah Equiano’s narrative resembles very much a travel book, whereas Harriet Jacobs’s bears great similitude with the sentimental novel. For a better understanding of the stylistic and literary features that shaped the narratives of bondage, an analysis of the genres that more strongly influenced their authors will be developed in the following pages.

## AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Slave narratives have usually been regarded as autobiographies—without any further consideration—if the protagonist and the author/narrator of the story were the same person, for, after all, an autobiography is “an account of a person’s life, written by that person” (*The New Oxford Dictionary of English*). Nevertheless, other definitions included in other dictionaries (the Merriam-Webster’s for example) include in the genre those personal histories *narrated* (though maybe not written) by that person. Similar definitions have been provided by literary critics such as Houston A. Baker, who defined this genre as “the recounting of the self’s or the selves’ history” (“Autobiographical Acts” 259). These simple definitions meet the challenge of other literary critics who consider the autobiography a complex type of writing with a particular set of conventions, conventions which are not always followed by slave narrators. A deep analysis of the characteristics of autobiographies will determine the appropriateness of classifying slave narratives within this genre.

The North American critic James Olney has studied some autobiographical works very closely and he asserts that it is his “experience that everyone knows what autobiography is—but that no two people agree about what it is” (“The Value” 213). From his point of view, the reason for this lack of agreement resides in the “differences in understanding the three elements that form the word and the concept of autobiography: *autos*, *bios*, *graphein*; *autos*, ‘the self’ or ‘himself’, *bios*, ‘life’, and *graphein*, ‘to write’” (“The Value” 213; emphasis in original), as well as in the complexity of these terms both separately and together. His conclusion is rather disheartening for the critic interested in the search of a precise set of conventions within the autobiographical mode:

There are, indeed, almost as many senses for the word “autobiography” as there are autobiographies, for every instance of the mode tends to establish its own ad hoc and sui generis conditions and form. This is naturally very troubling for the literary critic who would make of autobiography a literary genre like any other: if every autobiography tends to be sui generis, then of course the critic cannot establish any generic rules or requirements that will fit all the diverse books to

which we would agree to give the large and loose title of autobiography (“The Value” 212).

Nevertheless, Olney allows particular definitions of autobiography for different purposes. When he analyzes the inclusion of slave narratives within the genre of autobiography he states that in this particular case “autobiography may be understood as a recollective/narrative act in which the writer, from a certain point in his life—the present, looks back over the events of that life and recounts them in such a way as to show how that past history has led to this present state of being” (“I Was Born” 149). Olney’s definition of autobiography focuses on one particular characteristic of this genre: the use of memory.

In order to write the story of one’s life, the author must exercise his memory to compose and give a structure to his work. Memory becomes, in this way, a creative force. In James Olney’s own words, “the autobiographer is not a neutral and passive recorder but rather a creative and active shaper,” and memory “creates the *significance* of events in discovering the pattern into which those events fall” (“I Was Born” 149). Nevertheless, slave narrators could not afford to use memory as a *creative* force. They had to simply use memory as a *neutral* mechanism to bring past events to the present in an objective way, as if memory were a mere recorder. They had to do so for the sake of veracity. On the one hand, if memory shaped the slave’s personal history in a creative way, proslavery agents could argue that the narrator was not presenting plain truths about slavery but an interpretation of reality and that, therefore, the narration was not reliable.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, the slave narrator had great interest in demonstrating that the narrative presented *true* facts about slavery, because if white people saw the reality of the slavery system, they would understand the need to abolish it.<sup>23</sup> Thus, slave

---

<sup>22</sup> In fact, and as it will be seen later on, slave authors had to demonstrate the veracity of their accounts by including, for example, authenticating documents written by white people—who were more reliable than blacks—in their narratives. In these documents the truthfulness of the episodes narrated by the slaves was explicitly stated.

<sup>23</sup> This can also explain why the authors of these narratives claim no literary pretensions when they write their stories of bondage. They describe their experiences of slavery using plain language to prevent their narratives from being deemed unreliable or fictional.

narrators write about remembering past events demonstrating a conscious use of memory. However, their memory acts as a *passive recorder* of the facts that marked their lives. Frederick Douglass, for example, repeats the words “I remember” in a paragraph so as to demonstrate that he has very clear memories of the outrageous scenes he witnessed as a slave because memory cannot forget the events that shocked the mind: “*I remember* the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but *I well remember* it. I never shall forget it whilst *I remember* any thing” (*Narrative* 18; emphasis added). Olaudah Equiano also uses phrases such as “I remember” and “I can recollect,” but only in the first chapter of his *Interesting Narrative* (1789). In this chapter, Equiano narrates his experiences while still a child in Africa, that is, before he starts narrating his experiences as a slave. Just after finishing recalling his experiences as a child in Africa he states: “Such is the *imperfect* sketch *my memory* has furnished me with of the manners and customs of a people among whom I first drew my breath” (43; emphasis added). Equiano admits that he does not remember his childhood experiences in Africa clearly, but, during his ulterior account of slave life, there are no phrases like the above, for, as stated previously, slaves wanted their accounts of slavery to be deemed objective and reliable.<sup>24</sup>

Another characteristic that has been associated to the genre of autobiography is its truthfulness, the fact that the events reported by the narrator are considered nothing but a true depiction of his experiences. North American scholar Elizabeth Bruss explains it clearly when she states two premises for every autobiographical writing:

- (a) under existing conventions, a claim is made for the truth-value of what the autobiography reports—no matter how difficult that truth-value might be to ascertain, whether the report treats of private experiences or publicly observable occasions. (b) The audience is expected to accept these reports as true, and is free to “check up” on them or attempt to discredit them (11).

---

<sup>24</sup> Surprisingly, William Grimes complains of his bad memory at the end of his narrative, an argument that might have been used to deny the truthfulness of his story. He justifies himself as follows: “I may sometimes be a little mistaken, as I have to write from memory, and there is a great deal I have omitted from want of recollection at the time of writing. I cannot speak as I feel on some subjects. If those who read my history, think I have not led a life of trial, I have failed to give a correct representation” (232).



However, this characteristic was not applicable to slave narratives. These writings of bondage were not presupposed to be true. It was their authors who had to prove the veracity of the events narrated. To this end, slave narratives included documents, letters, and other kinds of—either appended or prefaced—testimonials whose aim was to prove, first, the existence of the slave protagonist, and second, that his story was true, that the events related in his narrative were not fictional. These documents—marriage certificates, letters, advertisements for runaway slaves, etc.—were usually written by white people, such as abolitionists, friends, or even the ex slaves' own masters.

Another characteristic of the autobiographical mode, and one which has been considered essential to establish whether a piece of literary work is autobiographical, is the spiritual or moral growth of the narrator. This idea belongs to what Robin W. Winks calls "Roy Pascal's test of autobiography," based on the fact that an autobiography "must reveal a conscious growth, a new self-awareness, on the part of the subject as a result of the self-analysis involved in the act of writing" (113). This means that the author who starts writing the story of his life must undergo a process of personal development at an intellectual, spiritual, moral or emotional level, and that this development in the protagonist's personality must be noticeable in his writing. Thus, for slave narratives to be regarded as autobiographical writings, there should be some kind of personal growth in the slave narrator's character.

There are two contradictory opinions on the issue regarding the personal development of slave narrators in their writings. On the one hand, Winks considers that almost none of the slave narratives passes Pascal's test, "for they are largely static in the sense that they rather breathlessly review the subject's life from a single unchanged perspective, that of a condition known as Freedom" (113-114). James Olney explains this point further when he asserts that "what is being recounted in the narratives is nearly always the realities of the institution of slavery, almost never the intellectual, emotional, moral growth of the narrator" ("I Was Born" 154). On the other hand,

African American scholars such as Frances Smith Foster defend the personal growth of the slave narrators:

In the slave narratives, as in other autobiographical literature, the authors are keenly interested in the clues provided by the narrated experiences about their identities and about the ultimate significance of their lives. They investigate the *process of their spiritual and emotional development* and try to assess the effects of social and familial relationships upon the ways in which they see themselves. Statements and arguments about philosophical, political, and religious beliefs are interspersed throughout their stories of physical bondage and escape (*Witnessing* 4; emphasis added).

All these slave narratives begin with the bondman's experiences as a slave child and finish with freedom obtained. After undergoing a lot of tribulations, the slave's personality cannot and does not remain intact. One can easily see the evolution from the slave child to the slave adult in these narratives of bondage. A clear example of this evolution is the shift in the slave's comments on the institution of human bondage from the moment in which he recalls his happy childhood to the moment in which he realizes of his condition as another man's property. As soon as the child discovers he is a slave for life, he begins an indefatigable search for freedom, a journey during which the slave undergoes personal changes at different levels: first, his moral values change—the distinction between good and evil is blurred—in his fight for survival; secondly, a spiritual growth or—religious—conversion experience is felt; finally, the personality and character of the slave undergoes a significant change in contact with different hardships that force him to face reality from a different perspective and to make difficult decisions—betrayal, resistance, theft, murder.

On the other hand, James Olney argues that there are two more features that distinguish an autobiographical work from other kinds of writing: “an element of apologetics” (“The Value” 212), and the fact that “the autobiographer always knows the end of his story—or rather, he *is* the end of his story at the moment of writing” (“The Value” 212; emphasis in original). These two conditions are met by slave narratives. First of all, if, as Olney defends, all autobiographies must be—to some extent—

apologias,<sup>25</sup> slave narratives must be clearly deemed autobiographical writings: on the one hand, they aim at justifying the ex slave's life, particularly the ex slave's errors and crimes; on the other, they were written to argue for and demand the abolition of slavery in America. Slave authors considered that their story was worth being written down not only for personal reasons, but also as a way to help other slaves in bondage by trying to convince white people of the need to abolish the cruel system of slavery.

Moreover, slave narratives also meet the second condition that personal histories must fulfill in order to be considered autobiographies proposed by James Olney. According to this scholar, autobiographers do not only know but *are* the end of their stories at the moment of writing. The slave narrator relates his experiences from childhood to freedom or, in some cases, up to the present moment of writing. The author obviously knows the end of his story, as he *is* that end. His present self is the product of his past experiences.

Nevertheless, and despite these considerations, Olney refuses to regard slave narratives as autobiographies. To justify this decision, he argues that slave narratives are "very much alike one another" ("I Was Born" 154), whereas an autobiography is supposed to be a unique story: "[T]he unique tale, uniquely told, of a unique life" ("I Was Born" 148). Olney asserts that

unlike autobiography in general the narratives are all trained on one and the same objective reality, they have a coherent and defined audience, they are possessed of the very specific motives, intentions, and uses understood by narrators, sponsors, and audience alike: to reveal the truth of slavery and so to bring about its abolition ("I Was Born" 154).

Olney argues that, whereas each autobiographer shows different realities, addresses different audiences, and has different motives for writing his experiences in life, slave narratives deal with the same reality (slavery), address the same audience (white

---

<sup>25</sup> The term *apologia* is defined in *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* as "a formal written defence of one's opinions or conduct." Vincent Carretta uses similar terms when he affirms that an *apologia* is the "justification and vindication of one's life" (xxii).

readers),<sup>26</sup> and have similar purposes for writing their experiences of slavery (the necessity of abolishing this system). This explains the great stylistic and thematic similarities among these narratives of bondage.

These similarities have led some scholars to consider that slave narratives are the accounts of a whole community rather than of an individual, that slave narratives relate the story of the whole slave community rather than the personal history of a particular bondman. This aspect of slave narratives separates them from their classification as autobiographies because, in autobiographical writings, individuals narrate the story of their own life, not of other people's lives. Bell hooks justifies this fact arguing that "[n]on-literary works by writers opposing domination also speak to the primacy of coming to voice, of speaking for the oppressed" (13). They speak for the whole oppressed community (black slaves), which may not have the opportunity to speak for itself. Thus, in their fight for the abolition of slavery, ex slave authors had to struggle with their own literary pretension and combine a presentation of their own individuality with the narration of the experiences of thousands of people in bondage:

The search for spiritual identity in the slave narratives was complicated by the desire to use incidents in the narrator's life as examples of the experiences of many others like him. As a result, the slave narrator increasingly focused upon the effects of a dehumanizing environment upon his race rather than upon his own individuality. In most cases the desire to recognize oneself and to be recognized as a unique individual had to counter the desire to be a symbol, and it created the tension that is a basic quality of slave narratives (Foster, *Witnessing* 5).

However, although slaves narrate the experiences of a whole community in their *personal* histories, they *do* try to show their individuality in their narratives, and they do so in two different ways. First, they relate the particularities of their escape from slavery. Slaves emancipated in a great variety of ways, and the authors of these narratives of bondage give special relevance to this differentiating episode in their lives

---

<sup>26</sup> White readers were the ones who had the capacity to fight for the abolition of slavery. This is why slave authors write mainly for a white audience. There were authors who wrote for an even more specific audience. This is, for example, the case of Harriet Jacobs, who writes for white *women* readers, as she suggests when she writes the following: "I do earnestly desire to arouse *the women of the North* . . ." (*Incidents* 6; emphasis added).

in their writings. Secondly, ex slaves introduce their own opinions about religion, philosophy, politics, economics, etc. in their personal histories. The inclusion of this kind of digressions contributed to make the ex slave's story unique. Thus, at the same time that slave narrators present the reality of the slave community as a whole, they also leave a personal imprint in their work.

There is yet another factor that is responsible for the similarities among slave narratives: the influence white abolitionists exerted on slave narrators. These *friends of the slave* helped and encouraged ex bondmen to write their experiences in slavery giving special emphasis on its evils. For abolitionists the end was more important than the means, that is, the abolition of the slavery system was more important than either literary pretensions, or the peculiarities of individual lives:

The abolitionists wanted case histories. They encouraged formula expressions of stereotypical persons who often did not correspond to what the narrator felt himself to be. The narrator was often searching for his own meaning in his own experience—a quest which he often saw as a choice between appearing as a unique individual or as a nonentity (Foster, *Witnessing* 60).

Abolitionists exerted an enormous influence on slave narrators and convinced them to put aside their own individual adventures in order to narrate experiences common to all slaves. Former bondmen were supposed to work in the best interest of the whole slave community, not for their own benefit. Nevertheless, ex slaves use different means to personalize their narratives: first, the tone in which the cruelest aspects of slavery are related range from the sentimental, or the bitterer, to the dialectical; second, the personal opinions are presented and defended using a great variety of arguments; finally, the voice used to narrate their personal histories resemble that of a preacher, a politician, etc.

Finally, Robert B. Stepto proposes another argument against considering *all* slave narratives autobiographies. He argues that

when a historian or literary critic calls a slave narrative an autobiography, for example, what he or she sees most likely is a first-person narrative that possesses literary features to distinguish it from ordinary documents providing

historical and sociological data. But a slave narrative is *not* necessarily an autobiography (6; emphasis in original).

Stepto asserts that *all* slave narratives are personal histories, but only *some* are true autobiographies. The basis for his analysis is the author's control over his own text. Thus, Stepto affirms that ex slaves could not control their narratives because, due to the "demands of audience and authentication" (16-17), they had to introduce authenticating documents in their personal histories, something which they would probably not have done if these demands had not existed. In these documents, white abolitionists played an important role, selecting the testimonials to be published, thus exercising an authorial-editorial control on the slave author's personal history. Nevertheless, Robert B. Stepto also argues that a slave narrative *is* an autobiography—a novel, a history, or even an essay—if the slave narrator demonstrates total control over his personal history.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, the classification of a slave narrative as an autobiography depends on who had greater control over the narrative: whether its protagonist or the white people who helped him write and publish his personal narrative.

Hence, considering the above-examined characteristics of autobiography as a genre, and analyzing the way in which slave narratives were written, one can conclude that slave narratives are *personal histories written in an autobiographical form*, as long as in these works "the hero, narrator, and author can be identified by the same name" (Blasing xi). In those cases in which the author is not the slave hero or narrator, the slave narrative would be deemed *biography*. In fact, "many of the narratives were, in

---

<sup>27</sup> According to Robert B. Stepto, this control is achieved "when the author's persona not only becomes the definitive historian (or fictionizer) of his past, but also finds a voice that is articulate enough to at least modulate, if not absolutely control, the pressing forces of a hostile environment" (143-144). This transformation takes place during what Stepto has classified as the third Phase of Narration. He distinguishes between three phases and four modes of narration within slave narratives. The classification of the phases and modes of narration is based on the role authenticating documents play in the slave narrative. The first phase is the "eclectic narrative," where the authenticating documents constitute an appendix, that is, they are *outside* the slave narrative. The next phase is the "integrated narrative," where the authenticating documents are *inside* the slave narrative, and perfectly integrated in it. The third and last phase includes two types of narrative: the "generic narrative," in which the authenticating documents are subsumed by the tale and therefore the slave narrative becomes a precise generic text such as autobiography; and the "authenticating narrative," in which the slave narrative is subsumed by the authenticating strategy and becomes an authenticating document itself for other texts. For a more thorough analysis on this issue, see *From Behind the Veil* (pp. 3-31).

fact, ghost written, or taken from dictation, or were almost wholly the work of another person, and thus more nearly biography than autobiography” (Winks 113). Abolitionists wanted to publish as many stories of bondmen as possible and, if ex slaves could not read or write, they were willing to have former slaves *dictate* their experiences in bondage to a more qualified person and have them published. Many critics have attempted to distinguish the slave narratives written by ex slaves themselves—which can be termed personal histories written in an autobiographical form—from those written by someone else, usually a white abolitionist—which would be defined as biographical texts written in first person, or *first-person biographies*. James Olney provides the key to make this distinction:

the style of an introduction and the style of a narrative should be one and the same in those cases where introduction and narrative were written by the same person—Charles Stearns writing introduction and narrative of Box Brown, for example, or David Wilson writing preface and narrative of Solomon Northup. What is strange, perhaps, and a good deal more interesting, is the instance in which the style of the abolitionist introducer carries over into a narrative that is certified as “Written by Himself,” and this instance is not nearly so isolated as one might initially suppose (“I Was Born” 159).

Thus, in order to discover the real authorship of the slave narrative, a close analysis of the stylistic characteristics of both introduction and narrative, and, in some cases, of the author’s preface, must be carried out. If these texts are similar in style, then the critic can conclude that they were written by the same person, a person that would frequently not be the slave himself but the white editor, for the capacity of—reading and—writing was not very common among slaves due to anti-literacy legislation. Therefore, these personal histories would be biographical rather than autobiographical despite the fact of having been written in the first person. If, on the other hand, there is a clear difference between these sections of the book and the actual narrative, the author would be, very frequently, the ex slave himself. In this case, the slave narrative could be termed a *proper* autobiography.

This procedure was followed by scholar Jean Fagan Yellin to demonstrate Harriet Jacobs’s authorship of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, an authorship that

had been denied by prominent scholars of African American literature like Sterling Brown and Arna Bontemps. In order to prove that Harriet Jacobs and not her editor—Lydia Maria Child<sup>28</sup>—was the real author of the text, Yellin had to demonstrate, first of all, the author's existence, and second, that she had written her personal history herself.

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was published under the pseudonym Linda Brent, something that contributed to the belief that this slave narrative had not been written by the former bondswoman herself. There were no records of a slave named Linda Brent, which meant that, if the slave did not exist, *Incidents* was a fictionalized—as opposed to authentic—slave narrative, probably written by Lydia Maria Child. Harriet Jacobs's identity remained undisclosed for decades for two main reasons. First, it served Jacobs as “a mechanism of self-protection. The creation of Linda Brent as a fictional narrator allowed Jacobs to manipulate a series of conventions that were not only literary in their effects but which also threatened the meaning of Jacobs's social existence” (Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood* 50). Writing about her sexuality in such an open way, admitting that she had practiced extramarital sex, would put the free Harriet Jacobs in a difficult situation in an American society so dominated by religious values like chastity and piety. As Jean Fagan Yellin argues,

[*Incidents's*] special focus and its confessional aspects—the account of sexual error, guilt, rejection and at least partial acceptance—are . . . unique. Jacobs' decision to create a pseudonymous narrator, instead of revealing herself the author of her book, can perhaps be explained by this sensational aspect of her autobiography (“Text and Contexts” 271).

Hence, it seems that Jacobs intended to separate her chaste and virtuous new self in freedom from her sexually-active old self in slavery. Her purpose for so doing was probably her willingness to make her audience understand that she had behaved in such an indecorous manner in the past due to her personal situation at the time. She intended

---

<sup>28</sup> Lydia Maria Child (1802–1880) was a white abolitionist, women's rights activist, novelist, editor and journalist. Before writing the introduction to Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents*, she had published, among other works, *Hobomok: A Tale of Early Times* (1824), the first historical novel published in the United States, *The Frugal Housewife* (1828), in which she describes ingenious methods of making do with little means, and *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans* (1833), a book that would mark a turning point in Child's career as abolitionist.



to create “a distance between the published work and the author” (hooks 163).<sup>29</sup> Thus, Jacobs’s published work presents a character from which she tries to escape, from which she wants to establish a distance because, though she justifies her sins in slavery, she is not proud of them.

Secondly, Harriet Jacobs’s use of the pseudonym Linda Brent can be justified on the basis of *The Fugitive Slave Act*. Harriet Jacobs had managed to escape from her master and mistress but positively knew that, if they could, they would get hold of her again.<sup>30</sup> Hence, by using the pseudonym Linda Brent, Jacobs tries to avoid giving her former owners clues about her whereabouts.

There is, however, one further argument that can be used to defend Jacobs’s use of a pseudonym to narrate her personal history. Harriet Jacobs wanted to represent the common sufferings of black women in bondage, as the title *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* indicates. She wanted to signify that her story was not different from that of many slave girls, that her autobiography could be/have been the autobiography of *any* slave girl. *Incidents* can, in this way, be considered a community narrative like any other slave narrative which related the experiences of thousands of blacks in bondage by presenting, as an example, the hardships endured by one of them.

Once Linda Brent’s real identity as Harriet Jacobs had been demonstrated, critics started to carry out specific research on the authorship of *Incidents*. The protagonist slave had claimed in the title of this personal history that it had been “*Written by Herself*.” In order to discover whether this was the case, Jean Fagan Yellin compared the style of Jacobs’s personal letters—to Lydia Maria Child, to her Quaker confidante

---

<sup>29</sup> This is the argument Gloria Watkins gives to justify the use of the pseudonym bell hooks in her writings.

<sup>30</sup> Although Harriet Jacobs’s master had already died, she knew she was still in danger of being recaptured, for she writes the following in *Incidents*:

His departure from this world did not diminish my danger. He had threatened my grandmother that his heirs should hold me in slavery after he was gone; that I never should be free so long as a child of his survived. . . . The doctor had died in embarrassed circumstances, and had little to will to his heirs, except such property as he was unable to grasp. . . . Mrs. Flint openly declared that her daughter could not afford to lose so valuable a slave as I was (294-295).

Amy Post,<sup>31</sup> and to William Lloyd Garrison<sup>32</sup>—with the style of *Incidents*. Having carried out this analysis, Yellin concludes:

Written in the genteel manner of the period, the literary style of *Incidents*—which seems to echo writers like Willis and Child—has been judged an incongruous mode of expression for an emancipated slave. Yet the discovery of Jacobs’ correspondence shows that the style of *Incidents* is completely consistent with her private letters (Yellin, “Text and Contexts” 268).

Let us examine, for example, the following extract from “Letter from a Fugitive Slave” written by Harriet Jacobs to the *New York Daily Tribune*: “And oh, *Christian mothers!* *you* that have daughters of *your* own, can *you* think of *your* sable sisters without offering a prayer to that God who created all in their behalf!” (emphasis added). In this letter, the repetition of the personal pronoun “you” and the possessive adjective “your” contributes to attract the readers’ attention and involve him (or rather, *her*, in this case) in the message. These addresses to the reader are also frequently repeated in *Incidents* and constitute, thus, a typical feature of this book. See, for instance, the following extract:

Pity me, and pardon me, *O virtuous reader!* *You* never knew what it is to be a slave: to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce *you* to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another. *You* never exhausted *your* ingenuity in avoiding the snares, and eluding the power of a hated tyrant; *you* never shuddered at the sound of his footsteps, and trembled within hearing of his voice (*Incidents* 86; emphasis added).

These repetitions or addresses to the reader contribute to the creation of a sentimental tone which underlies both Jacobs’s “Letter from a Fugitive Slave” and *Incidents*, and

---

<sup>31</sup> Amy Kirby Post (1802-1889), who writes a postscript at the end of *Incidents*, was a white abolitionist and women’s rights advocate. Her home served as a station on the Underground Railroad, holding up to 20 escaped slaves at a time. She participated in the First Women’s Rights Convention held in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. Post became friends with Harriet Jacobs and urged her to write her autobiography. Harriet Jacobs replies to this proposal in a private letter to Amy Post written around 1852:

[Y]our proposal to me has been thought over and over again but not with out [sic] some most painful rememberances [sic] dear Amy if it was the life of a Heroine with no degradation associated with it far better to have been one of the starving poor of Ireland whose bones had to bleach on the highways than to have been a slave with the curse of slavery stamped upon yourself and Children . . . I have tried for the last two years to conquer [my stubborn pride] and I feel that God has helped me or I never would consent to give my past life to any one for I would not do it with out giving the whole truth if it could help save another from my fate it would be selfish and unchristian in me to keep it back (“Harriet Jacobs to Amy Post” [1852?]).

<sup>32</sup> See page 98, footnote 104.

whose main function is to arouse the readers' humane feelings for slaves. Nevertheless, not only does Jacobs write her letters using the same tone and style that she would later use in *Incidents*, but also discusses similar ideas and feelings. She writes, for example, of the pain she feels when remembering her past life as a slave in "Letter from a Fugitive Slave" as follows: "I was born a slave, raised in the Southern hot-bed until I was the mother of two children, sold at the early age of two and four years old." This fragment is very similar to the opening words of her autobiography: "I was born a slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away" (*Incidents* 11). Thus, Jacobs's correspondence is an essential tool that enabled Jean Fagan Yellin to affirm that Harriet Jacobs wrote *Incidents* herself, something that Lydia Maria Child had already stated in her "Introduction" to *Incidents*:

At [the author's] request, I have revised her manuscript; but for such changes as I have made have been mainly for purposes of condensation and orderly arrangement. I have not added any thing [sic] to the incidents, or changed the import of her very pertinent remarks. With trifling exceptions, both the ideas and the language are her own. I pruned excrescences a little, but otherwise I had no reason for changing *her lively and dramatic way of telling her own story* (7; emphasis added).

Child claims not to have made many changes to the narrative, as did many writers/editors of male and female slave narratives. She did not have to do it, for Jacobs's style already met the expectations of her intended audience: white women. If Child had written *Incidents*,<sup>33</sup> she would have done so using a similar sentimental tone, and similar stylistic devices. Thus, she had no need to modify Jacobs's writing.

---

<sup>33</sup> Many critics believed this to be so, but a letter written by Harriet Jacobs to Amy Post in 1860 demonstrates that Lydia Maria Child entered the publication of *Incidents* after the manuscript had been completed:

[M]y M.S. was read at Phillips and Sampson they agreed to take it if I could get Mrs Stowe or Mr Willis to write a preface for it—the former I had the second clinch from & the latter I would not ask . . . this Autumn I sent it to Thayer—and Eldredge of Boston—they were willing to publish it if I could obtain a preface from Mrs Child. They had no Objection to the one I had—but that it must be by some one known to the public—to effect the sale of the Book. I had never seen Mrs Child past experience made me tremble at the thought of approaching another Sattillite [sic] of so great magnitude. . . I gave her my M S. to read you introduction I told her of the feeling that had existed between us—that your advice and word of encouragement—had been my strongest promter [sic] in the writting [sic] of the Book ("Harriet Jacobs to Amy Post" October 8, 1860) .

Moreover, Harriet Jacobs had already claimed authorship of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. In fact, she usually prided in the authorship of all her writings, despite their imperfections. In “Letter from a Fugitive Slave” she writes the following paragraph to assert her authorship:

Would that I could write an article worthy of notice in your columns. As I never enjoyed the advantages of an education, therefore I could not study the arts of reading and writing, yet poor as it may be, *I had rather give it from my own hand*, than have it said that I employed others to do it for me. *The truth can never be told so well through the second and third person as from yourself* (emphasis added).

Similarly, *Incidents* reads:

When I first arrived in Philadelphia, Bishop Paine advised me to publish a sketch of my life, but I told him I was altogether incompetent to such an undertaking. Though I have improved my mind somewhat since that time, I still remain of the same opinion; but I trust my motives will excuse what might otherwise seem presumptuous. . . . I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is (6).

In both extracts Harriet Jacobs argues that she prefers writing something imperfect but in the first person, than having someone else write beautifully and with perfection about her but in the third person. By making this assertion, Jacobs demonstrates her courage as author, the same courage with which she faced her personal hardships, the same courage that underlies *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Everything considered, Harriet Jacobs’s personal history *is* an autobiography.

## CONFESSIOAL LITERATURE AND SPIRITUAL BIOGRAPHY

African American literary critics such as Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. have argued that slave narratives have some typical features of confessional texts (“Introduction” xii). The term confessional is, however, a bit ambiguous, being

---

Another letter written by Lydia Maria Child on August 13, 1860 to Harriet Jacobs clarifies the kind of editorial work she did on Jacobs’s manuscript. It can be found in “Appendix B: Documents and Maps,” p. 391.

originally used to refer to a kind of poetry “whose subject matter reveals intimate details of the poet’s life,” and whose focus is “on particularly painful moments in [the poets’] lives, which they often relate to more general historical or cultural problems” (Ousby 214). If the term *confessional* so defined is applied to slave narratives, it is clear that the definition matches two basic characteristics of these narratives of bondage. First of all, these works reveal very intimate details of the ex slave’s life (including their sexuality, in the case of bondwomen); secondly, the experiences of these slaves relate clearly to two important historical and cultural problems, i.e. slavery and racism. Nevertheless, for a confession to exist, there must be some kind of confessor, someone the author confesses to. This is, according to the literary critic Terrence Doody, one of the most important features of confessional literature:

A Confession is the deliberate, self-conscious attempt of an individual to explain his nature to the audience who represents the kind of community he needs to exist in and to confirm him. Confession is always an act of community, and the speaker’s intention to realize himself in community is the formal purpose that distinguishes confession from other modes of autobiography or self-expression. This same formal purpose also distinguishes confessional novels from other first-person novels, which have different intentions and different attitudes toward their audience. For no one can make a confession without addressing a confessor, and no one would make a confession without a need for the confessor he addresses (4-5).

Slave narratives also meet this criterion, for, as explained above, these stories of bondage address a particular audience, which, in the case of the ex slave, is represented by three different communities: the white community into which the ex slave wants to integrate so as to recover his sense of manhood; the free black community he now belongs to and seeks approval of; and the slave community which he has left behind but towards which he feels a strong bond that urges him to publish his story of slavery as a means of fighting for the abolitionist cause.

Another basic convention of the confessional model that slave narratives fulfill is “an ending that spiritually ‘justifies’ the sinner by lifting the load of guilt he has borne previously” (Cooley 30). In this sense, slave narrators justify their behavior while in bondage taking advantage of the publication of their personal histories. In this

justification, the ex slaves argue that they had to use all the means available to them in order to survive and/or escape from slavery. For the former slaves, the end (freedom) justifies the means (used to attain it). Slave narratives serve, thus, the purpose of helping slaves lift a heavy weight from their chests, of liberating them from the burden of the crimes-sins committed before reaching free land by providing them with the means to confess these crimes-sins to their readers.

The confessional genre understood as a means to justify a sinner's deeds is very closely related to another genre that strongly influenced slave narrators: the spiritual autobiography. As previously examined, religion was very important for slaves,<sup>34</sup> and a common topic in their narratives of bondage. Nevertheless, according to Frances Smith Foster, religion was more than just a common topic in slave narratives. Foster argues that slave narrators further used religion as a literary device:

They adopted the Judeo-Christian myth structure. They alluded to Old Testament stories and prophecies. They defined good and evil by Christian standards. Slave narrators made it a point to portray themselves as Christians and to emphasize the loving, patient, forgiving quality of their lives. They were quick to identify occasional lies or thefts as "sins" and to profess repentance while trying to explain to their audiences the extenuating circumstances that necessitated such lapses . . . References to religion as a sustaining force are usually brief and infrequent. The hypocrisy of professed Christians (the slaveholders) who abused sincere Christians (the slaves) is a more favored topic. Accounts of their religious conversions were told to verify that their own Christianity was obtained by the ritual of guilt recognition, repentance of sin and salvation favored by the large fundamentalist segment of their audience. Worship practices were mentioned primarily to show the extent to which slavery attempted to thwart their salvation and to demonstrate the strength of the slave's commitment to his religion (*Witnessing* 83).

Foster defends that slave narrators follow the pattern used in spiritual autobiographies, that these authors include the four steps that lead to conversion and which constitute the

---

<sup>34</sup> As stated in the previous chapter, slaves used religion in many different ways and for different purposes. First of all, religion provided slaves with hope—they thought of themselves as the Israelites enslaved in Egypt and led to freedom by Moses; Canaan, the Israelites' Promised Land was understood by African American slaves as the land of freedom, either on Earth or in Heaven. Religion was also a means of gathering, for slaves frequently carried out religious meetings during the night (even though they were not allowed to have a Sabbath school, or any kind of religious instruction). Moreover, religion provided slaves with a means of expression through black spirituals, which spoke of the suffering of slaves in bondage and became a kind of secret code which enabled them both to criticize the plantation system without being understood, and, sometimes, to escape from it (white people's religious hymns were also sung by slaves sometimes, although they used to change the lyrics of these songs to complain about their situation without arousing suspicion).

typical plot of spiritual biographies. These steps are summarized by Vincent Carretta as “sin, repentance, spiritual backsliding, and a new birth through true faith” (xix). This journey from sin to conversion, the most relevant feature of this genre, is what Frances Smith Foster calls the Judeo-Christian myth, which, according to this scholar, “follows a progression from innocence to the knowledge of evil, repentance and conversion, the resistance of sin, and salvation” (*Witnessing* 84). Foster explains that this myth is realized in four chronological phases in slave narratives: loss of innocence, resolution to be free, escape, and freedom obtained.

The first stage, or *loss of innocence*, occurs when bondmen become aware of “what it means to be a slave” (*Witnessing* 85), a moment in a person’s life that can be compared to “the descent from perfection or mortification” (*Witnessing* 85).<sup>35</sup> In most slave narratives this moment is crucial, for, up to this moment, slaves have led happy lives as children without noticing the injustice of their situation as slaves. As stated above, it is after this moment of realization that slaves begin to suffer from their condition. Mortification begins. Slaves get to know evil. Nevertheless, the slave’s realization of his situation in American society does not involve its acceptance. On the contrary, the slave will try to change and improve his position in this society that denies his humanity. After witnessing numerous whippings, murders, and abuses on the slave community, the slave studies the alternatives to that kind of life, and makes a final resolution: to fight for freedom. This *determination to be free* will mark the second phase of the narrative, and is, according to Foster, “a climax to a conversion experience” (*Witnessing* 85). The third phase is the *escape*, the stage in which the slave becomes free (sometimes through manumission). This is part of “the struggle to overcome evil” (*Witnessing* 85). Slave narrators relate the means by which they managed to obtain their freedom, the different attempts they made to escape, the tricks

---

<sup>35</sup> In *Ghosts of Slavery*, Jenny Sharpe argues that “this opening convention, which follows the biblical plotting of an Edenic existence before the Fall, establishes black slaves as God’s children created in a state of innocence” (129-130). Thus, slave narrators’ use of conventions of confessional literature had the additional aim of demonstrating that they experienced similar emotions as white people and that they were, therefore, human beings who should be treated as such.

they used, the guidance of the north star, the dangers they encountered, etc. The path to salvation is not an easy one in slave narratives, as it is not in spiritual autobiographies. The fourth phase is *freedom*. Once the slave has finished his journey from birth (slavery) to rebirth (freedom), a journey that has brought about a change in the self of the slave (from chattel to man), the narrative can end. The slave is free from human bondage, just like the converted self is free from sin in spiritual autobiographies.<sup>36</sup> The ties to bondage have disappeared.

The fact that slave narratives are very much alike does not separate them from confessional or spiritual autobiography, for the journey from sin to salvation is not unique: “[T]he genre of spiritual autobiography assumes that the spiritual life of an individual Christian, no matter how minutely detailed and seemingly singular his temporal existence, reflects the paradigm of progress any true believer repeats” (Carretta xx). In a literal sense, those slave narratives that focus on the religious aspects of the ex slave’s life imply a brotherhood of black and white men: if all conversions are similar, the conversion of the slave is similar to the white man’s conversion. Those slave narratives that focus on the real—rather than spiritual—journey from slavery to freedom also include reflections on religion, and a confession of the slave’s deeds. This confession is carried out as a means of asking white society—the readers in particular—for understanding and forgiveness.

Special is the case of Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Some scholars have analyzed the confessional aspects of this book and one of them, Jean Fagan Yellin, concludes that these “confessional aspects—the account of sexual error,

---

<sup>36</sup> Melvin Dixon explains the use of the spiritual autobiography as a model by slave narrators:

When slaves came to write their formal autobiographies they emphasized a conversion-like model of personal experience and testimony to construct their own “witness” to the horrors of slavery and the regenerative joy of freedom. The conversion experience helped to organize the individual life and unite it with time and the eternal presence of God. . . . The change is from chattel status, unholiness, and damnation in the hell which was slavery to the integrity of being a man and a saved child of God now walking the paved streets of a heavenly city, the promised North. The slave has been delivered. Conversion was the correlative for a subjective synthesis of history; earning freedom through escape (or insurrection) was heroic action (303-304).



guilt, rejection and at least partial acceptance—are . . . unique” (“Text and Contexts” 271). They are unique because, though some male slave narratives resemble the confessional autobiography, the above-listed confessional aspects of *Incidents* do not appear in male accounts of bondage. As previously stated, many male slave narratives follow the pattern of the confessional autobiography (guilt-repentance-spiritual backsliding-rebirth) adapting it to the ex slaves’ lives. Jacobs does so as well, but in a different manner.

The first stage of a typical spiritual autobiography—guilt—would correspond to Harriet Jacobs’s “sexual error” (Yellin, “Text and Contexts” 21), an event that did not resemble in any way the first stage of the writings by or about male slaves: the narrator’s enslavement. In fact, sexuality was not even a topic to be discussed in many male slave narratives. When it was, the author’s aim was to depict slave women as victims of their masters’ abuses, not to disclose a sexual error of the slave narrator. Jacobs’s *Incidents* offers, thus, a new perspective in this type of narratives, in which the guilt phase corresponds to the author’s extramarital sexual relationships. The second stage—repentance—includes Jacobs’s realization that she is a sinner and the confession of her sexual sin to her grandmother, whereas in the narratives of male ex slaves corresponds to their recognition as slaves and their desire to escape from this situation. The third stage of spiritual autobiography—spiritual backsliding—corresponds to the expiation process Harriet Jacobs undergoes, a process which involves hiding in a small garret at her grandmother’s house for seven years. In the narratives that relate the experiences of male slaves, this stage would correspond with another kind of expiation journey: escape. Finally, the rebirth stage—freedom obtained in the personal histories of male slaves—is identified with Jacobs’s emancipation, and the beginning of a new and more virtuous life in freedom.

Other black women such as Maria Stewart, Zilpha Elaw, Nancy Prince, and Jarena Lee had already written spiritual autobiographies before the publication of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Nevertheless, the pattern followed in their writings

does not resemble Harriet Jacobs's for two main reasons. First, because their autobiographies are not slave narratives; and second, because these women do not write about their sexuality in their literary works. Consequently, the three phases of narration they include in their personal histories are similar to those of traditional white-authored spiritual autobiographies.

Moreover, these spiritual narratives had a didactic purpose, a didacticism that is not present in *Incidents* or, at least, not in the same way. Instead, and according to Joanne M. Braxton, the use of the confessional mode to narrate her personal history serves Jacobs as "a kind of expiation" (*Black Women* 33) of her sexual fall. Braxton further argues that "[t]hrough her confessional narrative, she begins to expiate her guilt and to find a physical and spiritual community where her humanity and sensitivity will be valued and where she can rise above her painful past" (*Black Women* 25). Thus, Harriet Jacobs becomes spiritually and physically free after a painful process full of "despair, fear and solitude" (Dixon 313). Freedom is, according to Melvin Dixon, "the central transforming episode in the death-rebirth cycle of life as viewed by the slave" (312). Freedom from earthly slavery is the culminating point of slave narratives as freedom from sin is the climax of spiritual autobiographies. At the end of *Incidents*, Jacobs obtains legal freedom, which can be understood both literally and metaphorically: physical freedom from bondage and spiritual freedom from sin.

### *SENTIMENTAL NOVEL*

The sentimental novel, such a different genre from spiritual or confessional autobiography, has frequently been associated to the way in which slave narratives were written. Several scholars have analyzed the similarities and differences between these two genres, which coexisted for some time since the sentimental novel flourished in the

mid eighteenth century,<sup>37</sup> and the first acknowledged slave narrative was written by Briton Hammon in 1760. When nineteenth-century slave narrators decided to write about their experiences in bondage, the sentimental novel had already settled as a popular genre, especially among white female readers. Therefore, it is not surprising that many literate slaves, being acquainted with the tradition of the sentimental novel, chose to write their experiences in slavery under the literary influence of this popular genre.

Frances Smith Foster considers that the fact that slave narratives and the sentimental novel were contemporary is very relevant to understand the formal characteristics and the evolution of these texts of bondage. According to Foster, the sentimental novel “emphasized the cultivation of sensibility, the glorification of virtue, the preservation of family life, the revival of religion, and the achievement of a utopian society” (*Witnessing* 64). These elements of the sentimental novel are found in most slave narratives, but most especially in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

As stated above, and according to Frances Smith Foster, one of the most important features of the sentimental novel is “the cultivation of sensibility” (*Witnessing* 64). This feature of the genre can be linked to slaves’ desire for knowledge, that is, to their willingness to learn to read and write. Slaves considered it essential to acquire a basic education in order to be considered full citizens of the United States.<sup>38</sup> Thus, the narration of the vicissitudes they went through and the difficulties that they encountered trying to accomplish this goal plays an essential role in their personal histories. Nevertheless, the term “cultivation of sensibility” can also be related to the emphatic expression of feelings and emotions. Although slave narrators, in an attempt to demonstrate the veracity of their accounts, try to present the naked truth of slavery in an

---

<sup>37</sup> In England, Samuel Richardson wrote two of the most important works of sentimental fiction in the eighteenth century: *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747-1748).

<sup>38</sup> This knowledge would also enable them to become acquainted with abolitionist arguments, put them into contact with pro-abolition agents and, consequently, give them the tools to escape and join this cause.

objective way, without too much sentimentalism (usually associated to exaggeration and falsehood), the sensibility of the sentimental novel ends up by being reproduced in slave narratives. This is done for a twofold purpose. Firstly, slave narrators know that this sensibility and sentimentalism is an essential characteristic of the genre they are trying to conform to, and a characteristic that their readers would easily identify in the narratives of bondage. Secondly, by putting their feelings into writing, slaves are proving—once again—that they are not animals or objects, but human beings who should not be enslaved.

Another characteristic of the sentimental novel that Frances Smith Foster mentions in the extract above is “the glorification of virtue” (*Witnessing* 64). The idea of *virtue* can be linked to both moral values and purity. Both are clearly present in slave narratives. On the one hand, slave narrators praise the good and the right (usually done by themselves, other slaves, abolitionists, and very few masters and mistresses), and strongly criticize the wrong (perpetrated by most slaveowners and proslavery agents). On the other hand, and as stated above, slaves defend the idea of chastity but argue that female slaves cannot aspire to be as chaste as white women, for rapes and sexual abuses are common on the plantation. This is why Harriet Jacobs addresses her white female readers as follows:

But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely! . . . the condition of a slave confuses all principles of morality, and, in fact, renders the practice of them impossible . . . Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! . . . I feel that *the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards as others* (*Incidents* 83-86; emphasis added).

If in the sentimental novel the heroine aspires to chastity and hopes for marriage and a family (Foster, “Historical Introduction” xxxi), Jacobs presents herself in a situation in which neither chastity nor marriage are realistic goals because she is a slave. White women can choose their sexual partners; female slaves cannot.

Harriet Jacobs focuses on the sexual oppression undergone by female slaves in several chapters of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: “The Trials of Girlhood,” “The Jealous Mistress,” “The Lover,” “A Perilous Passage in a Slave Girl’s Life,” and “A New Tie to Life” (Braxton, *Black Women* 29). As Jacobs explains in these chapters, female slaves are, unlike white women, denied the possibility of being virtuous and Christian. Female slaves have to submit to rape and take it as natural in their circumstances. In her personal history, Jacobs aims at giving voice to these women since she is aware of the fact that most of them will not have the chance to put their experiences into writing. Nevertheless, Harriet Jacobs does not present herself as such a victim, but as a strong woman who fights for her chastity with the weapons at her hand, as a heroine, a warrior within the system. By escaping from her own victimization, Jacobs identifies herself “both with her readers and with the protagonists of sentimental fiction. Like them, she aspires to chastity and piety as consummate feminine virtues, and hopes that marriage and family would be her earthly reward” (Valerie Smith, “Loopholes” 219). However, Jacobs feels that marriage is not, unlike in the plot of the sentimental novel, the happy ending of her story.

Continuing with Frances Smith Foster’s characterization of the sentimental novel, it must be stated that slave narrators introduce very strong arguments defending “the preservation of family life” (*Witnessing* 64). Ex slaves describe innumerable separations of slave family members in order to move their readers, including particularly dramatic and moving scenes of slave auctions in which children are taken away from their mothers and wives separated from their husbands, by being sold to different masters or mistresses. The slave narrator wants to convey the message that family ties are equally—or even more—important for white people and slaves,<sup>39</sup> since the only thing slaves can possess is blood relations. Moreover, these painful scenes of separation aim at demonstrating that blacks have feelings and are, therefore, human.

---

<sup>39</sup> As it will be examined in the following chapter, Harriet Jacobs frequently refers to the importance that her family has for her well-being. She writes about her brother, her grandmother, and especially about her beloved children, who provide her with the necessary strength to fight for freedom.

The fourth thematic characteristic of the sentimental novel as described by African American scholar Frances Smith Foster—"the revival of religion" (*Witnessing* 64)—is also fulfilled by slave narrators. These authors emphasize the fact that Christianity has been degraded by white people. Most slaveholders are presented as hypocritical Christians in slave narratives: although they profess to be good Christians because they attend Sunday service and read the Bible, bondmen believe that possessing slaves and abusing them (both physical and psychologically) is inconsistent with true Christianity. Moreover, slave authors repeatedly complain of planters' manipulation of the biblical text to keep their slaves under control and in fear of God. Some slaves knew the Bible<sup>40</sup> and knew that their masters' were interpreting the Holy Scriptures to their best interests: first of all, they used Genesis to justify the enslavement of black men;<sup>41</sup> secondly, they did not usually allow slaves to have religious instruction but, in the cases in which they did, they selected the lines that called for servitude.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, slaves tried to be the best Christians they could on the belief that by enduring a life of harshness with a truly Christian spirit<sup>43</sup> they would be able to enjoy eternal happiness in Heaven. Heaven became, thus, the maximum aspiration for slaves.

Finally, the last feature Frances Smith Foster distinguishes as typical of the sentimental novel, that is, "the achievement of a utopian society" (*Witnessing* 64), can be somehow recognized in slave narratives. Nevertheless, in the case of the slave, the word "achievement" is not the most appropriate one, and should be substituted by "desire." Slaves write about their *desire* for a utopian society since they long for the abolition of slavery in America. A free America is, for the bondman, a utopian society. Thus, slaves *tried to achieve* this utopian society by different means: writing their personal histories to present the cruelty of the system; giving public lectures or speeches

---

<sup>40</sup> Although slaves were forbidden to learn to read and write, many of them managed to acquire this kind of knowledge using the Bible as initial reading. Others read the Bible for instruction after becoming literate.

<sup>41</sup> See page 48, footnote 24.

<sup>42</sup> See page 49.

<sup>43</sup> Harriet Jacobs writes, for example, "I wondered for what wise purpose God was leading me through such thorny paths, and whether still darker days were in store for me" (*Incidents* 33).

at abolitionist meetings; and helping other slaves to escape. However, these black men and women could only put these actions into practice once they had obtained their freedom, hardly ever before then.

The use that slave narratives make of the above-discussed thematic features of the sentimental novel—the cultivation of sensibility, the glorification of virtue, the preservation of family life, the revival of religion, and the achievement of a utopian society (Foster, *Witnessing* 64)—is corresponded with the employment of different literary devices that are peculiar to this genre. Foster argues that the “long passages of dialogue and of discussions of the moral and spiritual dangers which assailed every slave of sensibility” (*Witnessing* 58) are instances of the influence the sentimental novel exerted on slave narratives. Similarly, Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. establish a connection between the “florid asides, strident polemics, the melodramatic imagination” (“Introduction” xv) of the slave narratives and the sentimental novel. The melodrama of the sentimental novel was depicted by slave narrators to different extents, for, although most slave narratives include this stylistic feature, one slave narrative follows this parameter of the sentimental novel more closely: Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Jacobs’s discourse is constructed upon exclamations, rhetorical questions, interpellations to the reader, and subjective adjectives, features all that contribute to the creation of a melodramatic tone. The following extract is a good example of Jacobs’s use of melodrama:

What does *he* know of the half-starved wretches toiling from dawn till dark on the plantations? of mothers shrieking for their children, torn from their arms by slave traders? of young girls dragged down into moral filth? of pools of blood around the whipping post? of hounds trained to tear human flesh? of men screwed into cotton gins to die? (*Incidents* 114; emphasis in original).

The use of this melodramatic tone responds to Jacobs’s need to move her readers to act against the system of slavery. The features of the sentimental novel were known to most of her (white female) readers and Harriet Jacobs probably considered that the most effective means by which she could appeal to their humanity was writing in a style that

they would recognize, a style that would appeal to their human feelings, a style that would eventually stand half-way between the sentimental novel and the slave narrative genres.

Apart from the thematic and stylistic similarities between the sentimental novel and the slave narrative, there are other aspects of these genres that must be examined in order to determine the relationship between them: the characteristics of the setting and of the protagonist, and the plot of the story. First of all, the typical setting of the sentimental novel was a domestic arena, for, the sentimental novel, traditionally “written by, for, and about women” (Tompkins 125), was “concerned with the problems of women’s domestic lives” (Grasso 21). Ex slaves, especially *female* ex slaves, had to transform the typical domestic setting of the sentimental novel in their personal histories because the genteel and settled domesticity of American and British sentimental novels was not appropriate to narrate the oppression—and, at times, violence—that bondwomen endured during their enslavement. Thus, although *Incidents*—the slave narrative that most closely follows the conventions of the sentimental novel—is located in a “world of mistresses and slaves-in-waiting,” that is, a “domestic arena” (Baker, *Blues* 50), the world that Harriet Jacobs depicts is, unlike in the typical sentimental novel, hostile to the heroine. Although the domestic aspects are predominant in *Incidents*, this domesticity is abruptly violated as a direct consequence of slavery, a direct consequence of the nature of the protagonist-heroine as a black slave.

Secondly, and as regards the features of the protagonists-heroes/heroines of the sentimental novel, *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English* asserts that “sentimental characters often found themselves too good for this world and the world too much for them. The heroes and heroines were beautiful, brilliant, talented and morally perfect” (Ousby 888-889). Slave narrators, the heroes and heroines of their personal histories, present themselves as good *human beings* who had—and still have—to survive in a hostile world, and fulfill, in this sense, the expectations of the sentimental novel. Yet they present themselves as ordinary men and women to whom



their humanity has been denied, not as “beautiful, brilliant, talented and morally perfect.” Had they done so, they would have contradicted the rules of modesty that prevailed in the literature of the period. Therefore, slave narrators present themselves as human beings, with the same good and bad qualities as any other white person. They may be beautiful, brilliant, and talented, but they do not put that into writing. As for being morally perfect, they characterize themselves as *trying* to be morally good and following all the Christian principles, but frequently admit failure due to their condition as slaves.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the typical middle-class white lady, protagonist of the American and British sentimental novel, is very different from the black slave woman who happens to be the heroine of *Incidents*, a heroine who is positioned in the lowest rank of society, and a heroine who is helpless in a society ruled by white people who seem doomed to subjugate (white women and) other races for their own profit.

Harriet Jacobs is not the typical heroine of the sentimental novel, for she cannot conform to the ideal of chastity. Hazel V. Carby expresses Jacobs’s rupture with the typical heroine of the sentimental novel arguing that “Linda Brent’s decision as a slave, to survive through an act that resulted in her loss of virtue, placed her outside the parameters of the conventional heroine” (*Reconstructing Womanhood* 74). The conventional heroine of the sentimental novel would never give her virginity up to the seducer, but resist at all costs. Consequently, Harriet Jacobs’s sexual error does not follow the criteria assigned to this conventional heroine.

Nevertheless, Jacobs wants to justify her loss of virtue to her audience—for she is, at the time of the publication of *Incidents*, a free woman who feels the need to integrate in American society—and introduces this disturbing episode of her life within the context of her struggle to escape from Dr. Flint’s sexual harassment. According to Manuela Matas Llorente, Harriet Jacobs is innocent of this sexual crime. Since she did

---

<sup>44</sup> Slave narratives support the belief that black men and women held in bondage (must) have a different set of moral values from those professed by white people because, as stated in previous pages, black slaves are forced to do whatever it takes (steal, fight their masters and overseers, deceit, counterfeit documents, become concubines to their masters, etc.) to survive in a hostile society.

not really want to have that relationship, she cannot be accused of experiencing illicit desires (32). Jacobs argues that it was slavery itself that forced her to act in that way, and that this system of human bondage holds the blame for her loss of innocence. She feels obliged to lose her virginity in order to survive in a society dominated by the domestic institution. As Joanne M. Braxton observes, “*Incidents* demonstrates that it is impossible for ‘true womanhood’ to flourish under slavery because slave women are not allowed to practice the virtues of modesty, chastity, and domesticity” (*Black Women* 26). Nevertheless, Harriet Jacobs is aware that her extramarital sexual relationships would disconcert and perturb the virtuous women of the North to whom the book is addressed, and may arouse their disrespect for her. Consequently, after confessing her sexual transgression, Jacobs writes:

Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another. You never exhausted your ingenuity in avoiding the snares, and eluding the power of a hated tyrant; you never shuddered at the sound of his footsteps, and trembled within hearing of his voice. I know I did wrong. No one can feel it more sensibly than I do. The painful and humiliating memory will haunt me to my dying day. Still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others (*Incidents* 86).<sup>45</sup>

In this fragment, Harriet Jacobs apologizes for what she has done, but further argues that the whole system of slavery is to blame for it, that slavery forced her and other slave women to act against the standardized morally good principles, that they cannot be judged by the same moral axioms as free white women. Jacobs had already stated in *Incidents* that “the condition of a slave confuses all principles of morality, and, in fact, renders the practice of them impossible” (85) but, in this extract, she further states that there are two types of morality: the morality of women slaves and the morality of (free) white women. As Hazel V. Carby points out, “Jacobs’s narrative was unique in its

---

<sup>45</sup> Harriet Jacobs writes in the following terms about the difficulties she has encountered when writing about her sexuality in a letter to Amy Post: “I have My dear friend . . . striven faithfully to give a true and just account of my own life in slavery—God knows I have tried to do it in a Christian spirit—there are somethings [sic] that I might have made plainer I know—woman can whisper—her cruel wrongs into the ear of a very dear friend—much easier than she can record them for the world to read” (“Harriet Jacobs to Amy Post” June 21, 1857).

subversion of a major narrative code of sentimental fiction: death, as preferable to the loss of purity, was replaced by ‘Death is better than slavery’” (*Reconstructing Womanhood* 59).<sup>46</sup> The moral value of purity found in the sentimental novel is substituted, thus, by the physical value of freedom. Purity is a requirement for marriage, but Jacobs’s ultimate objective is not marriage but freedom. Hence, purity is not essential for her life objective to be fulfilled. Jacobs becomes, thus, a different heroine, a heroine for whom marriage is not the ultimate goal. In this sense, it could be argued that *Incidents* is one of the first works that represents the feminist movement in the United States:

Jacobs may have been, in this regard, the first African American feminist theorist. Challenging us in her closing chapter to consider freedom and marriage as binary opposites, she draws attention to the fact that nineteenth-century marriages were inequitable property relationships, much like slavery. Furthermore, Jacobs theorizes about the concepts of freedom and agency in its . . . application for enslaved Black women (Mitchell 40).

Harriet Jacobs becomes not only one of the first feminist authors, but also one of the first womanist<sup>47</sup> writers, for she introduces a black woman at the center of a narrative, as the heroine of a life full of struggle. She reverses the traditional role of women as domestic and passive creatures presenting a strong courageous black woman subdued by the system of slavery. She reverses the ideals of piety and chastity in her autobiography, something which might shock her readers, but something that is understood and supported by leading white women like Lydia Maria Child. Jean Fagan Yellin describes Jacobs’s fight and the bonds she established with white feminists in the following extract:

*Incidents* was published in the face of taboos prohibiting women from discussing their sexuality—much less their sexual exploitation—in print. Yet between its covers Harriet Jacobs, a black American woman, pseudonymously presents her shocking narrative in defiance of the rules of sexual propriety;

<sup>46</sup> The belief that “Death is better than slavery” (Jacobs, *Incidents* 96) was common in male slave narratives, as examined in the previous chapter, but not in the context of female sexual oppression. It was when female slave authors like Jacobs express this feeling in their narratives that the phrase “death is better than slavery” acquires a new dimension.

<sup>47</sup> “Womanist” is a term coined by Alice Walker in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*. It is defined, in simple terms, as “[a] black feminist or feminist of color” (xi). This concept will be more thoroughly examined in the following chapter.

and she is supported in this effort by L. Maria Child, a prominent white American woman (“Text and Contexts” 276).

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* leads, in this way, a feminist sisterhood between black women—who were enduring terrible treatment under slavery—and white women—who wanted to fight for their own rights and who joined Jacobs in her struggle to change the idea of true womanhood.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, Harriet Jacobs wants to integrate in white society and her statement “the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others” (*Incidents* 86) may suggest that, as a slave, she lived her life under the moral principles of slave women, survival and freedom, but that as a free woman, she will live her life under the moral principles of free (white) women: chastity and piety. She seems to be interested in the appreciation of white women, whether feminist or conservative.

To conclude, the similarities and differences between the plot of the sentimental novel and that of slave narratives—especially of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*—must be examined. The plot of nineteenth-century American sentimental novels emulated British novels of sentiment like Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*, a plot that was summarized by Valerie Smith as follows:

---

<sup>48</sup> The suffragist and abolitionist movements in America joined efforts to fight for women’s and blacks’ rights during the first half of the nineteenth century. However, after the Civil War there was a break between these movements regarding the strategy to be used. In 1868, abolitionists demanded a constitutional amendment that recognized all citizens’ right to vote, no matter their race, religious beliefs, or color. The suffragists complained that the proposed amendment did not mention women, and abolitionists alleged that women would have to postpone their demand so as not to endanger the passing of the law. Many suffragists considered any delay unacceptable and, when it appeared that Congress would grant the vote to black men but not to any women, white suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton declared, “I will cut off this right arm of mine before I will ever work for or demand the ballot for the Negro and not the woman” (Andrews, Foster, and Yarborough, “Literature” 464). Racism split the Equal Rights Association into two separate organizations when Stanton and others withdrew to form the National Woman Suffrage Association. On December 6, 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which abolished slavery and “involuntary servitude” throughout the country was ratified by the newly United States of America. The Fourteenth amendment (1868) provided equal protection to African Americans under the law, and the Fifteenth (1870) granted suffrage to black men. Although in Washington State (1910), California (1911), Arizona, Alaska, Oregon (1912), Montana, and Nevada (1914) women were granted the right to vote (Mead 2), it would not be until 1920, with the ratification of the Nineteenth amendment, that women could vote in the whole territory of the United States. For a more detailed account on the relationship between suffragists and abolitionists, see Jean Fagan Yellin’s *Women and Sisters*; Karen Sánchez-Eppler’s “Bodily Bonds: The Intersecting Rhetorics of Feminism and Abolition;” and Blanche Glassman-Hersh’s *The Slavery of Sex: Feminist-Abolitionists in America*.

In this plot, a persistent male of elevated social rank seeks to seduce a woman of a lower class. Through her resistance and piety, however, she educates her would-be seducer into an awareness of his own depravity and his capacity for true honorable love. In the manner of Pamela's Mr. B., the reformed villain rewards the heroine's virtue by marrying her ("Loopholes" 222-223).

Slave narratives could not follow this plot, for the lives of slaves had nothing to do with the experiences of white ladies. Nevertheless, *Incidents* resembles this plot in several ways, inasmuch as the "persistent male of elevated social rank" can be said to be Dr. Flint, and the "woman of a lower class" he tries to seduce would be Harriet Jacobs herself. However, the differences between the typical plot of the sentimental novel and *Incidents* soon become visible. First of all, the woman-heroine does not only belong to a lower social class, but further belongs to her seducer, Dr. Flint, as property, as a slave. Thus, he has an absolute control over her life and, at least legally, can do whatever he pleases with her. Secondly, Jacobs resists to being seduced like the heroines of sentimental novels but, unlike them, she does not manage to educate her seducer into being an honorable man. Instead, she rebels in different ways, and inflicts a painful chastisement to Dr. Flint when she finds herself a lover and has two children with him. Moreover, the villain does not become a reformed man, but persists in making Jacobs's life as hard as he can till his death. Third, the heroine—Harriet Jacobs—does not get married at the end of the book. This "conventional happy ending" (Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood* 48) of the sentimental novel is missing from *Incidents* due to the condition of the protagonist as a slave. Jacobs wants to make this divergence from her generic model clear to her readers, and writes the following in her autobiography: "Reader, my story ends with *freedom*; not in the usual way, with *marriage*" (*Incidents* 302; emphasis added). As explained above, Jacobs was an avid reader and was well acquainted with the sentimental fiction, its plot, and stylistic and thematic conventions. Thus, through this statement, Jacobs "acknowledges that however much her story may resemble superficially the story of the sentimental heroine, as a black woman she plays for different stakes; marriage is not the ultimate reward she seeks" (Valerie Smith, "Loopholes" 224). With this statement, Harriet Jacobs proves to be familiarized with

nineteenth-century American and British sentimental novel, admits to having tried to adequate her personal history to this genre, but recognizes the impossibility of so doing due to her condition as a black female slave. Thus, by transforming the plot of the sentimental novel, Jacobs shows her white audience the significant differences between their comfortable lives and the lives of so many black women in bondage. Jacobs makes white women realize that black women cannot live up to their expectations of chastity and piety, that the Christian values they so cherish cannot be attained by women in bondage. It is not until white women have understood the conditions under which female slaves live, that they will be (more) willing to fight for the abolition of slavery, or so hopes Harriet Jacobs, for whom a sisterhood between black and white women *can* be achieved.

Another moment in which *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* abandons the disciplined plot of the sentimental novel is when Harriet Jacobs narrates her second pregnancy. Her loss of virginity and first pregnancy can be understood as Jacobs's tools to annoy Dr. Flint and frustrate his sexual harassment, but Jacobs says nothing to justify her second pregnancy. In fact, she does not talk about her relationship with Mr. Sands in the two chapters that follow the birth of her son. When she finally does so, she simply tells Dr. Flint that she is pregnant again: "When Dr. Flint learned that I was again to be a mother, he was exasperated beyond measure" (Jacobs, *Incidents* 118). The omission of further details suggests that describing the events that led to her second pregnancy are not relevant for the story because there is no room for them within the sentimental novel. Harriet Jacobs, once again, deviates from this genre, but not so much in her narrative mode as in her own life. Although slave women should not be judged by the same standard as free (white) women (Jacobs, *Incidents* 86), Jacobs is not proud of the use she made of her sexuality while a slave. Thus, she chooses to omit details she finds difficult to justify.

In this light, and despite the similarities between *Incidents* and the genre of the sentimental novel, it is clear that Harriet Jacobs's narrative does not conform to this

genre in the three aspects that constitute its axes: the characteristics of the setting, the moral features of the heroine, and the plot. Nevertheless, there is another difference between the sentimental novel and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: Jacobs claims that the events recalled in her autobiography are nothing but true. This ultimately separates *Incidents* from the sentimental novel, a genre of fictional events and fictional characters, and proves, for Valerie Smith, the inadequacy of the sentimental form for the writing of a slave narrative like Harriet Jacobs's: "[W]hen Jacobs asserts that her narrative is not fiction, that her adventures may seem incredible but they are nevertheless true, and that only experience can reveal the abomination of slavery, she underscores the inability of her form adequately to capture her experiences" ("Loopholes" 222). The premise under which a sentimental story must be read—it portrays fictional events—is eliminated from Jacobs's narrative.

In this light, it is easy to conclude that the sentimental novel could not fully represent Harriet Jacobs's experiences in slavery. As a black woman and former slave, her tribulations had little to do with those of middle or upper-class white women whose lives were more clearly depicted in sentimental fiction and who were avid readers of this kind of literature. Hence, though the seduction process of the sentimental novel could be applied to the sexual harassment endured by Jacobs during her enslavement, had her master wanted to, he would have raped her (like many other female slaves were raped by their masters). This brutal act was not, however, characteristic or even present in the sentimental novel. Moreover, the heroine of the sentimental novel prides herself on her chastity and resistance to sexual advances, whereas Harriet Jacobs has to justify and apologize for her extramarital sexual encounters. Such a means of resistance against her harasser could never be found in the sentimental novel. Sentimental heroines are interested in marriage, and giving up their virginity would prevent them from marrying. Jacobs—the slave heroine—is interested in freedom, and having extramarital sexual relationships is the most effective tool she finds to achieve this objective.

## PICARESQUE NOVEL AND AFRICAN FOLKTALES

Many scholars have argued that slave narratives bear some resemblance with a typical Spanish genre: the picaresque novel, a genre inaugurated with the anonymous publication of *Lazarillo de Tormes* in 1554. The picaresque novel is defined as “the episodic narrative describing the progress of the *picaro*” (Ousby 777; emphasis in original). Thus, for a picaresque novel to exist there must be a picaresque character central to the story. The term *picaro* has been translated into English as “rogue” or “knave,” but the term *picaro* has connotations that are not included in the English term. According to *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English*, the term *picaro* refers to “a character from low life, living on his wits and often a scoundrel” or to “anyone at odds with society” (Ousby 777). The African American slave fits in this definition since he is definitely at odds with society, a society that denies his humanity and turns him into property. There are, however, other features of the *picaro* which must be analyzed in an attempt to compare this character with the slave, protagonist of the narratives of bondage.

According to the literary critic Harry Sieber, the *picaro*, “as Mateo Alemán<sup>49</sup> defines him, is the product of poverty and of a social value system which prohibits him from being anything else” (23). This definition can be ascribed to the slave character, but only to some extent: although (like the *picaro*) the slave lives in a system which does not allow him to be anything else, (unlike him) he is not the product of poverty, that is, he does not become a slave because he has no other means to survive; he was either born in slavery or kidnapped in Africa and brought to America as a slave. Nevertheless, the slave is similar to the *picaro* in the sense that they both ignore many details of their ancestors. In *The Picaresque Element in Western Literature*, Frederick Montser contrasts the figure of the “*hidalgo*, that is, *un hijo de algo*,”<sup>50</sup> with the figure of the *picaro*, who “by definition was so far from being ‘the son of someone’ that he

---

<sup>49</sup> Spanish author of the picaresque novel *Guzmán de Alfarache* (1599).

<sup>50</sup> “A son of something.”



was often ignorant of his own parents” (3; emphasis in original). Like the picaro, and as previously examined, most slaves born in America are ignorant of their parentage due to the fact that many slaves were born to white men, who did not want their children to be known as his offspring. Monteser further describes the characteristics of the picaro in the following extract:

The picaro must be an individual of comparative youth, presently in great poverty, who has no financial or professional resources to which he may reasonable look for security. If he can, by swallowing his pride, escape from his present circumstances and become socially acceptable, he is not a picaro. Phrased differently, *picarismo* is never voluntary, and therefore does not result from deliberate adventures (17-18; emphasis in original).

Although the circumstances of the picaro and the African American slave are similar, there are two significant differences between them: first, the picaro is, unlike the slave, regarded as another human being—though of an inferior social class; second, the picaro does not, unlike the slave, belong to another person by law. What they both have in common, though, is that, as the description above states, their situation is never voluntary. They do not have the opportunity to choose their position in life, and therefore their adventures are not deliberate products of their wickedness, but an expression of their fight for survival.

Even though the picaro shares some features with the slave, for the comparison between these two marginal characters to be accurate one must consider the great differences between the male picaro and the female picara. The picaro cheats, deceives, and robs in order to survive in a hostile society. The picara uses her body, that is her sexuality—the only thing she truly possesses—in order to survive in sixteenth-century Spanish society. According to Frederick Monteser, the picara is “endowed by her sex with one commercially valuable resource,” and it is “obvious that the unfortunate girl early must have become involved in some degree of prostitution” (4). Her objective is to stay alive and, if possible, to provide her children with a father and financial security. Monteser concludes his depiction of the picara stating that the picara, “inevitably a whore, may exhibit an earthy pleasure in sex, but the story must show that her moral

situation is the result of social helplessness, not promiscuity. Along with her male counterpart, she is just trying to survive, and would much rather use legitimate means if they were available to her” (18). Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* (1722) could have been a source of inspiration for the portrayal of the picaresque female slave. David Blewett defends that “*Moll Flanders* possesses many of the features of the picaresque narrative, including the low-born protagonist, a protean ability at disguise, a sense of the random uncertainty of life exemplified in a series of adventures, sexual freedom, the opting for survival over personal integrity, and social and spatial mobility” (22). These features are also present in some female slave narratives and definitely in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

Like the picara, the female slave is also very conscious of the fact that her sexuality plays a very important role in her life in bondage. Nevertheless, unlike the picara, who can resort to begging or serving wealthy families to make a living, the slave woman has no choice: if she does not submit to her master, she will have to suffer his revenge, either by being whipped (even to death), or by seeing her children and husband being punished or taken away from her. However, female slave narrators do not usually present themselves as victims of their masters’ sexual advances, but as strong women who had to endure this kind of treatment in order to survive. As stated in the previous chapter, some slave women have the difficult choice between submitting to concubinage and being punished. Yet some of them are able not to submit to their masters’ desires and survive. This is the case of Harriet Jacobs who, unlike the picara, (i) does not express any pleasure in sex in her personal history; (ii) does not prostitute herself in exchange for money; (iii) does not submit to a man, but has sexual relationships with the man she chooses; and (iv) does not get an immediate reward for her sexual encounters.

Thus, although some female slaves resemble the figure of the picara in the use of their sexuality to survive in a hostile society, there are great differences between them. On the one hand, whereas the picara usually rejoices in her sexual relationships, the

female slave normally recalls these encounters with disgust. On the other hand, whereas the *picara* usually accepts her situation and frequently adopts it voluntarily, the female slave normally tries to resist and fights to escape from this situation. Consequently, the picaresque novel could not provide Harriet Jacobs with an appropriate model for her personal history.

Nevertheless, the central element of the picaresque is not its protagonist, but his or her adventures, for “the mere existence of a picaresque personality is not sufficiently unusual to place a work in that category” (Monteser 6). Thus, the stylistic and narrative features of the picaresque novel must be examined so as to determine the connection between this genre and the slave narrative. First of all, “like the Spanish ‘rogue’, the slave narrators tell their life story in retrospect, after having triumphed over the brutalizing circumstances of their youth” (Nichols 283). Both types of narrative have plots in which the protagonist, after having endured a life of suffering and pain, is able to survive, to escape, and to achieve a better standard of living. The difference lies in the fact that there is “an additional delight to the *picaro*, since he is usually speaking now as a virtuous, reformed citizen, and can therefore admit unabashedly the frolics and tricks of his youth” (Monteser 16). Whereas the old *picaro* finds pleasure in narrating his past adventures, the slave finds his experiences so traumatic that it is painful—even in the present moment of writing—to recall and narrate them. The cruelty the slave had to endure in the past, as well as his struggles to survive in a hostile society, are not recalled with pleasure but with bitterness. He feels obliged to narrate his personal history to help bring about the abolition of slavery, but does not take delight in the narration of his adventures.

In the written account of the Spanish *picaro*'s adventures, there is a typical and interesting use of comedy: black humor,<sup>51</sup> sarcasm, and irony are frequently found as

---

<sup>51</sup> I use the term *black humor* in line with the *Webster's New Millennium Dictionary of English* (2008) definition: “in literature and drama, combining the morbid and grotesque with humor and farce to give a disturbing effect and convey the absurdity and cruelty of life.”

narrative modes of expression.<sup>52</sup> The slave narrator, on the other hand, does not make the same use of comedy, for his aim is not to entertain, but to present a sorrowful picture of the slavery system in order to convince white people of its injustice: “[T]he slave narrative is rarely comic, but its personae have a curious double vision and a tendency to employ comic modes” (Nichols 285). The use of comic modes by slave authors includes certain kind of bitterness, so that the effect they create is not fully comic. Former slaves do not intend to make people laugh with their writings, but to make them aware of the cruelty of the slavery system. Whereas the picaresque enjoys telling his story in an amusing tone, the slave narrator employs irony, sarcasm, and mordant satire with acridity.

Irony is probably the most important comic element used in picaresque novels: the picaresque is “an ironist. By overstating and emphasizing the ‘sins’ of others, he attempts to portray himself as a blameless man, no better, but certainly no worse than his neighbours” (Sieber 12). Slave narrators also use irony very appropriately: “Even the duller slaves perceived the irony of the slaveholders’ loud boasts of a superior knowledge and love of liberty. While pretending to accept the religion which exhorted them to obedience, they embrace the God who delivered the Israelites from Egyptian bondage” (Nichols 285). Slaveholders’ religious hypocrisy is a recurring theme in most slave narratives and, even though irony lies underneath, slave authors do not make a comic use of it, since the unjust slavery system and the society that condones it are always present in the background, like a curse for the slave. There are, however, a few significant instances in which the slave narrator uses irony in a comic mode, though the comedy created is rather bitter.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> As Charles H. Nichols puts it, “the picaresque is alert to every possible avenue of escape. His effective means of expression are comic modes—irony, satire, paradox, sarcasm, exaggeration, innuendo (284).

<sup>53</sup> For instance, the slave authors’ justification of the theft of food is usually narrated in an ironic funny way: “The master exclaims angrily: ‘You scoundrel, you ate my turkey.’ The slave replies, ‘Yes, sir, Massa, you got less turkey but you sho’ got mo’ nigger’” (quoted in Nichols 286). (See page 95, footnote 98 for other examples). This search for food is also present in picaresque novels, in which strategies, tricks and tactics to steal food from their masters abound in the *picaresque*’s accounts.

Nevertheless, some scholars argue that this use of irony and black humor in episodes in which the slave tricks the master exemplifies the influence of African folktales—trickster tales—in slave narratives. These folktales, examples of African oral tradition, and which African slaves brought into the New World, were adapted by African American slaves in order to express their situation and used as a means of evading the unpleasant reality they were living. In these tales, the protagonist is in a position of disadvantage but is able to defeat the powerful character of the story by using artful stratagems, wit, deception, double-meaning, irony and other (more or less comical) means. Slave narrators were acquainted with the tales told by Africans and write similar anecdotes in their narratives, making use of an essential element of these folktales: sass, double-meaning, or signifying.<sup>54</sup> Signifying—a playful and conscious use of language in which words undergo a change of meaning in order to confuse the strong character so that the signifier can defeat him<sup>55</sup>—is employed by the trickster in African folktales and by slaves in their narratives of bondage for a twofold purpose: (i) to show their ability and wit using the English language, and (ii) to feel they had some kind of power over their white superiors, the power of understanding the slaves’ linguistic code, incomprehensible to whites. Harriet Jacobs uses language in this special manner and, consequently, some critics have argued that she is “a feminine reflection of

---

<sup>54</sup> Zora Neale Hurston provides plenty of examples of black folktales in *Mules and Men*. One of the tales she includes in this book is “Deer Hunting Story”:

You know Ole Massa took a nigger deer huntin’ and posted him in his place and told him, says: “Now you wait right here and keep yo’ gun reformed and ready. Ah’m goin’ ’round de hill and skeer up de deer and head him dis way. When he come past, you shoot.”

De nigger says: “Yessuh, Ah sho’ will, Massa.”

He set there and waited wid de gun all cocked and after a while de deer come tearin’ past him. He didn’t make a move to shoot de deer so he went on ‘bout his business. After while de white man come on ’round de hill and ast de nigger: “Did you kill de deer?”

De nigger says: “Ah ain’t seen no deer pass here yet.”

Massa says: “Yes, you did. You couldn’t help but see him. He come right dis way.”

Nigger says: “Well Ah sho’ ain’t seen none. All Ah seen was a white man come along here wid a pack of chairs on his head and Ah tipped my hat to him and waited for de deer” (106-107).

<sup>55</sup> Signifying has already been discussed in the previous chapter (see p. 87 and following).

the trickster figure” (Braxton, *Black Women* 30). Joanne M. Braxton discusses Jacobs’s role as trickster in the following terms:

The use of disguise and concealment, and of trickery and wit, to overwhelm a larger and more powerful foe, long important to the slave narrative genre, takes on new meaning in relation to the slave woman, her abject status, and the atmosphere of moral ambiguity that surrounds her. Women resort to wit, cunning, and verbal warfare as forms of rebellion; in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Linda employs verbal warfare and defensive verbal postures as tools of liberation. Quick thinking and invective play vital roles, and Linda becomes a veritable trickster (*Black Women* 30-31).<sup>56</sup>

In the same way in which male slaves use their manly strength to resist and fight their oppressors back, Jacobs uses language and her wit to defeat her master, Dr. Flint. She uses signifying “as a shield against Flint’s physical sexual aggression” (Braxton, *Black Women* 31). Jacobs dares to answer her master back on many occasions and frequently outwits him, like in the following extract:

Finally, he asked. “Do you know what you have said?”

“Yes, sir; but your treatment drove me to it.”

“Do you know that I have a right to do as I like with you,—that I can kill you, if I please?”

“You have tried to kill me, and I wish you had; but you have no right to do as you like with me.”

“Silence!” he exclaimed, in a thundering voice. “By heavens, girl, you forget yourself too far! Are you mad? If you are, I will soon bring you to your senses. Do you think any other master would bear what I have borne from you this morning? Many masters would have killed you on the spot. How would you like to be sent to jail for your insolence?”

“I know I have been disrespectful, sir,” I replied; “but you drove me to it; I couldn’t help it. As for the jail, there would be more peace for me there than there is here” (*Incidents* 62).

Words empower Harriet Jacobs. She outwits Dr. Flint with an effective use of language. It is a verbal or spiritual victory, though, for Dr. Flint has the power to physically strike and abuse her whenever he wants. The law protects him. In real life, slaveholders were always in command, but in these dialogues, Jacobs has the power. Thus, these verbal exchanges are Jacobs’s “attempts to reverse the roles of master and slave in her text” (Garfield, “Earwitness” 109). Jacobs takes control of the situation by outwitting her

<sup>56</sup> Other critics who recognize in Harriet Jacobs a trickster are Houston A. Baker (*Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, 53-55), William L. Andrews (*To Tell a Free Story*, 257-259), and Valerie Smith (*Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative*, 29-39).

master with a powerful and clever language that becomes one of her most effective means of resistance.<sup>57</sup>

Another characteristic that relates the picaresque novel to slave narratives is “the seemingly unstructured, episodic plot” (Sieber 12). In the picaresque novels one episode follows another without ascribing to any structural pattern. Something similar occurs in slave narratives. The slave author inserts episodes of cruelty, scenes of rebellion, description of slave auctions, and other elements which are not so closely related to his personal history, or which at least do not follow the chronological pattern of the story. According to Charles H. Nichols, this formal characteristic expresses the situation of the world described in the narration: “The episodic march of events in the narrative, its loose disregard of causality, its frequent use of coincidence and chance dramatize the chaos and decadence of the world here depicted” (283). Harriet Jacobs includes episodes of this nature within the narration of her personal experiences. Among chapters that are grounded on Jacobs’s tribulations while a bondwoman (“Childhood,” “The New Master and Mistress,” and “The Lover,” for instance), there are interspersed chapters that present a more general picture of the slavery system, such as “The Slaves’ New Years’ Day,” “What Slaves Are Taught to Think of the North,” “Scenes at the Plantation,” and “The Fugitive Slave Law.” These chapters are not about Jacobs’s personal experiences under slavery, but about slaves in general. They aim at clarifying the situation of thousands of bondmen and women in North America as a means to justify the protagonist’s actions. They offer a clear description of the hostile world in which the slave had to survive.

The worlds which serve as the background for both the picaresque novel and the slave narrative are similar in the sense that both of them are in crisis: sixteenth-century Spain is in decline; the slavery system will give rise to a Civil War. Nevertheless, the

---

<sup>57</sup> As it will be discussed in the following chapter, Harriet Jacobs does not only use her wit to defeat Dr. Flint with her words, but also to devise different tricks to annoy and discourage him, first in his harassment, and later in his pursuit of her. These artful stratagems can also be connected with the tradition of African folktales.

important thing is that this world is against the picaro-slave: “The world of the picaresque story must be an unsympathetic one, not necessarily to everyone, but definitely to the picaro. He must be so placed as to be forced to compete with others of greater strength and advantages, so that the odds of his winning are always against him” (Monteser 19). The situation the slave faces is similar, or even worse. In a society where everything is against the slave—even the law, he rebels and fights for his rights. Most of the times the slave loses the fight but when he wins and becomes free, his story is published in another effort to fight the system. Charles H. Nichols summarizes this similarity as follows:

[T]he picaresque tradition was often an attack on the chivalric ideal. The slave narrative performed the same function: it punctured the inflated rhetoric and empty boasts of the slavocracy. It destroyed the idyllic setting and cultivated setting created by southern romance. It portrayed the rude and violent behavior of the master class and the inhumanity of the plantation system (287).

However, it is important to consider that whereas the picaro “reflects unfavorably upon the environment in which it is placed, resulting in a satire on specific social conditions, especially *hidalguía* . . . this is often a consequence rather than an intent” (Monteser 6; emphasis added). Whereas the picaro writes to entertain, the ex slave does so to condemn the society he lives in: “The picaro must be conscious, either during his adventures or later as a mature author, of the reflections upon society which his tale points up. He need not criticize but he must be aware of what the reader is to criticize” (Monteser 18). The picaro does not take any side. He shows interesting aspects of Spanish society, but does not criticize them. This matches his personality and his cowardice, which make him play his tricks on—more or less—defenseless people only in the darkness. The ex slave is more courageous. He has managed to become free, and does not hesitate to criticize slavery and the society which allows the existence of the slavery system. Moreover, he tries to convince the reader to condemn it too. As Frances Smith Foster explains, “slave narratives were didactic writings, created as a response to the specific needs of a specific society” (*Witnessing* 4), whereas picaresque novels were merely written to entertain.



In the societies that both the slave and the picaresque depict in their writings, people's social status and class plays a very important role. Both the slave and the picaresque belong to the lowest strata of the society in which they live. Nevertheless, their situation is not exactly the same: the picaresque is considered by society as the lowest human being, whereas the slave is not even considered human; the picaresque belongs to the lowest social class, whereas the slave cannot belong to any since that classification only applied to human beings, not to chattel. As for the picaresque, there is a small possibility for him to improve his social position, whereas that possibility is denied to the slave, unless he ceases to be so. It is true that the slave can escape to the North, become free, find a job, and live more or less comfortably, but that possibility includes moving or escaping to another town or city. For the slave it is impossible to improve his situation in the society he lives in unless he escapes. Nevertheless, if he manages to escape, he will become a fugitive and run the risk of going to prison, being captured and returned to his master, being sold to a Southern state, or even being lynched and killed.

Thus, one of the central topics of both the picaresque novel and the slave narrative is survival: "The work of literature, to be picaresque, must include a discussion of the basic problem of physical survival in a realistic, practical, manner . . . If the protagonist's basic need is not sheer survival, he is not a picaresque!" (Monteser 18-19). It is true that the slave wants to survive, but that is not his or her basic need. What the slave needs most of all is freedom: he would rather die than remain a slave forever: *death is better than slavery* is a common motto in slave narratives. Nevertheless, the need to survive is also present in these writings of bondage. The slave needs to keep alive in order to escape and die free. The tactics the picaresque and the slave employ to survive are similar. The picaresque resorts to "minor criminal acts, refraining from deliberate violence for its own sake, and foregoing murder or pointless evil" (Monteser 18). He would not do anything too dangerous which would risk his life. The slave, on the one hand, uses similar methods as the picaresque to obtain an additional amount of food, but *does* risk his life in the search for freedom.

Stealing food from their masters is a common means of survival for both the picaro<sup>58</sup> and the slave.<sup>59</sup> It is also a way of revenging for the abuses they endured. The description of the cruelties of their different masters plays an essential role both in the picaresque novel and in the slave narrative. They serve as examples of the sufferings that these characters had to endure in their past lives, and are the basis of the picaro-slave's criticism of society. As Charles H. Nichols states,

[i]n each account the writer presents a welter of realistic detail designed to drive home the brutality and inhumanity of his experience as a victim, a commodity, a rootless, alienated soul without hope or future. His origin is obscure, his masters heartless and treacherous . . . With bitter irony the picaro-slave underlines his contempt for the illusions, the chivalric pretensions and the folly of the master class . . . The servant sees his master's nakedness and human weakness as well as his power and wealth (283).

Although the cruelties suffered by both picaro and slave may be similar, the position of the slave is worse than the picaro's, for the slave's master is also his owner and can dispose of the slave's life as he wishes. As previously examined, he can even beat him to death and escape legal punishment. In both the picaresque and slave narratives, the masters' point of view and reasons to be cruel against their servants-slaves are hardly ever considered. The only points of view which count are the picaro's and the slave's, for their stories are first-person narratives.

One significant difference between picaresque novels and slave narratives is the fact that the picaro changes masters more or less frequently and voluntarily, whereas the

---

<sup>58</sup> In *Lazarillo de Tormes*, Lazarillo is a servant who complains of the greediness and miser of one of his masters, and explains how he was starved by this man in an episode in which he further narrates how he outwitted him to steal food from him. Lazarillo's master carried food in a bag and kept the neck of it closed with an iron ring that had a padlock and key:

[W]hen he put things in or took them out, he did it so carefully and counted everything so well that no one in the world could have gotten a crumb from him. . . . After he had closed the lock and forgotten about it, thinking that I was busy with other things, I would begin to bleed the miserly bag dry. There was a little seam on the side of the bag that I'd rip open and sew up again. And I would take out bread—not little crumbs, either, but big hunks—and I'd get bacon and sausage too. And so I was always looking for the right time to score, not on a ball field, but on the food in that blasted bag that the tyrant of a blind man kept away from me (T-1, 27-28).

<sup>59</sup> John Brown justifies slaves' thefts of food as follows: "If we did not steal, we could scarcely live. I believe every master is plundered of corn, hogs, chickens, turkeys, and such like, to a very large extent, by his slaves. They are forced to do it. Hunger drives them to it, though they know they will be flogged if they are found out. But the fear of punishment, instead of deterring them from committing thefts, only makes them more cunning in trying not to be found out" (389).

slave cannot choose. In the same way, the *picaro* can also move from one town to another quite freely, whereas the slave is forced either to remain with the same master or change owners and move to a different town or even state: “The *picaro*’s mode of existence usually resulted in his exhausting his welcome in all but the largest towns in a minimum of time” (Monteser 3). On the other hand, slaves—especially slave women—do not want to leave the place they belong to since that would imply leaving behind the people they love. When the slave cannot endure any more hardships he escapes, though feeling great sorrow at the separation from friends and family. The *picaro*, who does not usually have friends or family, does not experience sadness or remorse when changing masters and, consequently, moves frequently from town to town. The slave would prefer to stay in the same place with his family, but as a free man or woman.

Finally, the greatest difference between the picaresque novel and the slave narrative is the fact that picaresque novels are fictional autobiographies, whereas slave narratives present the real experiences of men and women in bondage. It is true that some slave narratives have been proved to be fictional, but most of them are the personal histories of real men and women, as authenticating documents signed by white people have demonstrated.

### *CRIMINAL AND CAPTIVITY NARRATIVES*

Although slave narratives use characteristics of popular genres such as the spiritual autobiography, the sentimental fiction, and the picaresque novel, there were other less well-known modes of writing that can also be related to these narratives of bondage. Amongst these modes of writing are criminal and captivity narratives, genres which were quite popular in the United States during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Their influence on the way in which slave narratives were written was not as important as the influence exerted by the genres mentioned above and analyzed in

previous pages. Nevertheless, it is interesting to witness how ex slaves use all the literary tools available to them to write their stories of bondage in a style that their coetaneans would recognize.

Criminal narratives were, in the nineteenth century, and according to Thomas Cooley, “the second most popular autobiographies after the religious narrative.” Cooley defines criminal narratives as “the ‘confessions’ (often ghost-written) of notorious thieves, murderers, rapists, and counterfeiters. Usually under twenty-five pages long and published in the same locale and year of the subject’s execution, criminal narratives were circulated ostensibly to discourage lawbreaking” (5). The most famous criminal narrative about a black person is *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1831), who led the deadliest slave revolt in the United States, killing between fifty-seven and sixty-five white men, women and children.<sup>60</sup> Narratives like Turner’s circulated during the same period as slave narratives, and could have had some impact on their authors. Frances Smith Foster argues that slave narratives and criminal narratives have two characteristics in common:

[T]he criminal narratives were written in the first person. This illustrates the trend toward the acceptance of a black person as narrator and indicates a willingness of a white audience to acknowledge that a black person could articulate the facts of his life from his own perspective and in a manner that entertained and instructed them.

Secondly, the criminal narratives and the slave narratives share an assertion of humanity. In both forms of narrative, the narrators take responsibility for their actions, thus indicating a sense of themselves as persons with some degree of self-determination (*Witnessing* 39).

However, although Foster thus summarizes the similarities between these two modes of writing, she does not affirm that criminal narratives influenced slave narratives in any way. This is so because she considers that “the slave narrative genre . . . was only one of several to evolve. The emergence of the black narrator came first” (*Witnessing* 36). This is why, even though the similarities between these two types of writing are obvious, a

---

<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, as stated in the previous chapter, Nat Turner himself only killed a white woman. The revolt took place August 22, 1831 in Jerusalem, Southampton County, Virginia. Turner was captured October 31, and made his confession to the lawyer Thomas R. Gray November 5, in the prison where he was confined at Jerusalem.

precise influence of the criminal on the slave narrative cannot be established. They were popular in the same period, and shared the same starting point (a black narrator). However, the purposes for which these narratives were written differ: whereas criminal narratives intend to influence people against committing crimes, slave narratives demand the abolition of slavery. Moreover, the black identity portrayed is also different: whereas criminal narratives present morally-corrupt black narrators who have repented of their crimes, slave narratives introduce black narrators who characterize themselves “as exemplars” (Foster, *Witnessing* 42). These narrators-protagonists would become, in this light, one of the first morally-good blacks portrayed in American literature.<sup>61</sup>

Other exemplary blacks were also to be found in another type of writing within African American letters: the so-called *captivity narratives*. Thomas Cooley asserts that these captivity narratives consisted of “the reminiscences of hostages (or simply sojourners) amidst Indians, pirates, political enemies, or criminals” (6). This genre was used “by black writers in the second half of the eighteenth century” (Foster, *Witnessing* 39)—the period when the first slave narratives were produced—with the aim of proving, first, that there were good blacks, and second, that blacks were as human as whites.

Stylistically speaking, these narratives also use the autobiographical form but, apart from this feature, captivity narratives bear no stylistic similarities with slave narratives. However, the slave narrative *has* some thematic features that resemble the captivity narrative, for, after all, many black men and women were kidnapped and taken away from Africa, their native land, to become slaves in the New World. This abduction resembles the one depicted in captivity narratives, but even the experiences of those slaves who were born in America are similar to the ones depicted by the captives in their narratives. After all, African American slaves led a life of bondage and captivity:

---

<sup>61</sup> Other well-known criminal narratives are *Confessions of John Joyce* (1818), *Sketches of the Life of Joseph Mountain* (1790), and *The Confessions and Dying Words of Samuel Frost* (1793). The last two, as well as other criminal narratives, can be found in *Pillars of Salt: An Anthology of Early American Criminal Narratives*, by Daniel E. Williams.

they belonged to a white person and worked for him, receiving only the basics to subsist.

The similarities between the slave and captivity narrative have contributed to make the classification of some personal histories a burdensome and problematic task. Works like *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black* (1785) have been traditionally considered slave narratives by critics such as Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., although they can also be found in anthologies of captivity narratives.<sup>62</sup> According to Frances Smith Foster, captivity narratives are “stories of a different kind of bondage and freedom from that dealt with in the genre identified as slave narrative” (*Witnessing* 42), but can be regarded as forerunners of slave narratives, since both genres are written in the first person by black narrators who characterize themselves as honorable and exemplary.<sup>63</sup>

Therefore, the similarities and differences between criminal narratives, captivity narratives, and slave narratives express the evolution of black American letters, and further support the idea that these are three different types of writings with their own set of characteristics. Nevertheless, these three forms of autobiographical writings would mark the origin of African American literature.

---

<sup>62</sup> John Marrant's narrative appears, for example in *Held Captive by Indians*, edited by Richard VanDerBeets. In this edition, the classification of Marrant's personal history as a slave narrative is discussed as follows: “Although this narrative is often mistakenly classed with American ‘slave narratives,’ John Marrant was an educated freeman from a family of some means” who “was found by an Indian deer hunter and taken to live among the Cherokees” in 1770 (VanDerBeets 177-178). Marrant would remain with the Indians nearly two years.

<sup>63</sup> The beginning of John Marrant's narrative bears great similitude with the beginning of many slave narratives, for it includes an account of his birth, parentage, and childhood, as well as the purpose of his autobiography:

I JOHN MARRANT, born June 15th, 1755, in New-York, in North-America wish these gracious dealings of the Lord with e to be published, in hopes they may be useful to others, to encourage the fearful, to confirm the wavering, and to refresh the Hearst of true believers. My father died when I was little more than four years of age, and before I was five my mother removed from New-York to St. Augustine, about seven hundred miles from that city. Here I was sent to school, and taught to read and spell (180).

Moreover, Marrant also annexes authenticating documents (201) to his personal history, thus being one of the precursors of what future former bondmen would do in their slave narratives.

### *NOVEL OF ORDEAL*

The novel of ordeal, defined by Mikhail Bakhtin as a type of novel that “is constructed as a series of tests of the main heroes, tests of their fidelity, valor, bravery, virtue, nobility, sanctity, and so on” (11) may also be somehow related to the slave narrative genre. Like in the novels of ordeal, these narratives of human beings in bondage present the protagonist as a hero who goes through a series of experiences which test his courage, intelligence, and fidelity. Moreover, according to Bakhtin, the world presented in the novel of ordeal is “the arena of the struggle and testing of the hero” (11), and this characteristic can also be applied to slave narratives: the world where the slave lives is also his battle-field, a world where the bondman will have to fight for survival, and a world that the free black will try to change.

Slave narratives do not only resemble the novel of ordeal in these two aspects—the characteristics of both the hero and the environment where he lives—but also in their plot. Mikhail Bakhtin enumerates the conventionalities of the plot of the novel of ordeal as follows: “The novel of ordeal always begins where a deviation from the normal social and biographical course of life begins, and it ends where life resumes its normal course” (14). Bakhtin highlights two aspects in the plot of the novel of ordeal: (i) the hero’s life does not follow a normal course, and the plot is constructed upon exceptional—far from ordinary—events and situations; (ii) the novel begins in an unnatural situation for the hero, and ends when life resumes its normal course. Slave narratives meet these two points. First, a life in slavery is not the usual situation for a writer, for the fact that a human being belongs to another cannot be deemed a normal course of life. Thus, the events the ex slave narrates cannot be other than extraordinary. Secondly, slave narratives begin with a situation which is a deviation from normal life (slavery) and end when life takes its normal course (freedom).

Nevertheless, though these similarities are important and establish a link between slave narratives and the novel of ordeal, there are significant differences

between these two literary models. First, Mikhail Bakhtin states that the hero “is always presented as complete and unchanging. All his qualities are given from the very beginning, and during the course of the novel they are only tested and verified” (12). As examined earlier in this essay, the slave narrator’s personal psychological qualities *do* evolve all throughout his narrative. On the one hand, the author relates his life in slavery from childhood to adulthood and indicates how his experiences become harsher as he grows older. On the other hand, the experiences and trials he undergoes in life produce a—more or less dramatic—change in his personality, especially as regards his moral values, which tend to shatter.

Secondly, Mikhail Bakhtin’s analysis of the question of time and historicity of the novel of ordeal cannot be applied to slave narratives:

The peculiarities of the plot, which centers on deviations from the historical and biographical course, determine the overall uniqueness of time in a novel of ordeal. It lacks the means for actual measurement (historical and biographical), and it lacks historical localization, that is, significant attachment to a particular historical epoch, a link to particular historical events and conditions. The very problem of historical localization did not exist for the novel of ordeal (15).

Slave narratives *do* show a progression in time. The narrator relates his experiences letting the reader know at which precise moment of his life those experiences or events took place. The narrator begins his personal history from the moment he is born, and finishes it when he has become free. Moreover, the slave narrator is very concerned about presenting details of the historical epoch he lives in, and criticizes the society of the time because it has created a legal system that supports and regulates the enslavement of black human beings.

Finally, the relationship between the hero and the world he lives in is completely different in the novel of ordeal and in slave narratives. According to Mikhail Bakhtin in the novel of ordeal

[t]here is no real interaction between the hero and the world: the world is not capable of changing the hero, it only tests him; and the hero does not affect the world, he does not change its appearance; while undergoing tests and vanquishing his enemies, the hero leaves everything in the world in its place. He



does not alter the social face of the world, nor does he restructure it, and he does not claim to (15-16).

This relationship operates at two levels: the world's effect on the hero and the hero's effect upon the world. In the case of the novel of ordeal, and according to Bakhtin, the effects on one another are non-existent. However, the case of the slave narratives is completely different. The world in which the bondman lives is determined by the slavery system, and thus, has a strong effect on the protagonist of the slave narrative: after all, the slave character would not have existed if American society had not been constructed upon the *peculiar institution*. The slave is a product of the society he lives in, and, therefore, all the experiences and tests he undergoes are the typical in that situation. These experiences *do* produce an effect on his personality, making him more mature and realistic—even pessimistic—about the world he has to live in. On the other hand, the slave *does* try to have an effect on society, a purpose clearly stated in their narratives of bondage: to bring about the abolition of slavery.

Thus, the slave narrator does not simply present a story in which he undergoes different extraordinary circumstances and has exciting experiences, like the heroes in the novel of ordeal. The slave also criticizes the world he has to live in and tries to bring about a change in society that would benefit many other people in bondage. The slave is an example to his community—like the protagonist of the novel of ordeal, but a more complete hero notwithstanding because he further tries to improve other people's lives.

As examined above, hardly any African American autobiographical writings had been created before the appearance of slave narratives. Therefore, these black authors had to resort to their knowledge of existing autobiographical works of literature—written by white people—to elaborate their personal histories. Slaves' desire to condemn slavery—the reason for which they mainly wrote their personal histories—*forced* them to write their personal histories in a style that would be recognized by their white audience, for it was this audience who could bring about the abolition of slavery.

On the other hand, white readers needed to find in ex slaves' works of literature some connection with the literary works they were used to reading so as to fully comprehend them. Thus, as Frances Smith Foster argues, "[n]ot only did contemporary audiences demand adherence to such concepts, but also the formal education of slave narrators incorporated those traditions which produced such expectations" (*Witnessing* 64). Nevertheless, the ex slave's "racial identity with all its connotations in the culture of the United States, gave him an additional set of references" (Foster, *Witnessing* 64). Slave narrators used a language and style that white audiences would recognize, but added other features that derived from their experiences as a particular culture and race. Therefore, their adherence to the literary genres examined in the previous pages could not be complete.<sup>64</sup>

Consequently, slave authors' imitation of the literature written by whites is similar to what some postcolonial critics have called *mimicry*, or the imitation of the colonizers. As it happened in the Caribbean, in nineteenth-century America the white man constituted the *superior* class, the colonizers, whereas the Africans constituted the oppressed race. The colonizers (slaveholders) *felt* superior, and the colonized (black slaves) had an analogous feeling of inferiority. Martinican psychiatrist and scholar Franz Fanon states that, in colonialism, the colonized black peoples search for approval in the white world, that they want to be members of the dominant culture and imitate the oppressor's modes of expression, way of life, culture, etc., and thus abandon their own traditions:

Every colonized people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards (*Black Skin* 18).

---

<sup>64</sup> Some critics have further connected different slave narratives to other existing literary genres. An interesting connection is that between Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and the gothic novel, examined in works like "Dislocation, Violence, and the Language of Sentiment," by Cynthia S. Hamilton, and "The 'Mysteries and Miseries' of North Carolina: New York City, Urban Gothic Fiction, and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," by Jennifer Rae Greeson.

If we agree with Fanon when he states that “[t]he black man wants to be like the white man” (*Black Skin* 228), one would think that African American slaves imitated white people’s literary modes because they wanted to be like them; that the slaves considered white people superior because they mastered the letters, because they lived comfortably, because they had rights. Consequently, according to Edward Kamau Brathwaite,

imitation went on, naturally, most easily among those in closest and most intimate contact with Europeans, among, that is, domestic slaves, female slaves with white lovers, slaves in contact with missionaries or traders or sailors, skilled slaves anxious to deploy their skills, and above all, among urban slaves in contact with the ‘wider’ life. . . . It was one of the tragedies of slavery and of the conditions under which creolization had to take place, that it should have produced this kind of mimicry; should have produced such ‘mimic-men’ (“Creolization in Jamaica” 203).

Nevertheless, ex slaves did not simply imitate their white oppressor’s literature. They appropriated the way in which they had—for centuries—narrated their autobiographies and adapted them to suit their literary purposes. For, though they wanted white readers to understand their writings and thus used literary models that their audience would recognize, these literary models could not fully represent the oppression suffered by the former slaves. Therefore, slave narrators had to readjust white people’s literary genres in order to create their own genre: the slave narrative. However, this adjustment can also be termed *mimicry*, for, according to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, mimicry is associated to a parody that the colonized peoples make of the colonizers:

When colonial discourse encourages the colonized subject to ‘mimic’ the colonizer, by adopting the colonizer’s cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values, the result is never a simple reproduction of those traits. Rather, the result is a ‘blurred copy’ of the colonizer that can be quite threatening. This is because mimicry is never very far from mockery, since it can appear to parody whatever it mimics. Mimicry therefore locates a crack in the certainty of colonial dominance, an uncertainty in its control of the behavior of the colonized (139).

Nonetheless, slave narrators’ creative work was not simply mimicry. They did more than satirize or parody the colonizer’s literature. Slave authors used their literary creations to fight the system created by their oppressors.

This creativity would correspond to what Franz Fanon calls the third phase in the cultural evolution of the colonized peoples. This scholar argues that there are three phases that colonized peoples follow when creating works of literature: the assimilationist, the cultural nationalist, and the nationalist. He describes these phases as follows:

In the first phase, the native intellectual gives proof that he has assimilated the culture of the occupying power . . . His inspiration is European and we can easily link up these works with definite trends in the literature of the mother country. This is the period of unqualified assimilation . . . In the second phase we find the native is disturbed; he decides to remember what he is . . . Past happenings of the bygone days of his childhood will be brought up out of the depths of his memory; old legends will be reinterpreted in the light of a borrowed estheticism and of a conception of the world which was discovered under other skies . . . Finally in the third phase, which is called the fighting phase, the native, after having tried to lose himself in the people and with the people, will on the contrary shake the people. Instead of according the people's lethargy an honored place in his esteem, he turns himself into an awakener of the people; hence comes a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature, and a national literature. During this phase a great many men and women who up till then would never have thought of producing a literary work, now that they find themselves in exceptional circumstances—in prison, with the Maquis, or on the eve of their execution—feel the need to speak to their nation, to compose the sentence which expresses the heart of the people, and to become the mouthpiece of a new reality in action (*The Wretched* 222-223).

Analyzing these three stages in relation to slave narratives, it could be concluded that the African American writings of bondage belong to the third—nationalist—phase because their authors did not simply *imitate*—assimilate—the literary genres that white people had previously employed. Slave authors *transformed* these modes of narration as a means to *fight* against the system—slavery—and to give voice to the slaves' feelings so as to convince people that slavery was evil and had to be abolished. By doing this, slave authors created “a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature, and a national literature.” African American literature (Fanon, *The Wretched* 223).

For slave narrators, it would have been much easier either to remain in the assimilationist phase and simply imitate the colonizers in order to find their approval,<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>65</sup> According to bell hooks, assimilation is “the way to gain acceptance and approval from those in power” (80). Black scholars usually criticize this assimilation because it eliminates characteristics that belong solely to the African race: “While assimilation is seen as an approach that ensures the successful entry of

or to use *mimicry*. Nevertheless, they would have been betraying themselves and, thus, ex slave writers did not simply imitate the literature of the oppressors but introduced their own voice, the voice of the black man:

Within any situation of colonization, of domination, the oppressed, the exploited develop various styles of relating, talking one way to one another, talking another way to those who have power to oppress and dominate, talking in a way that allows one to be understood by someone who does not know your way of speaking, your language. The struggle to end domination, the individual struggle to resist colonization, to move from object to subject, is expressed in the effort to establish the liberatory voice—that way of speaking that is no longer determined by one’s status as object—as oppressed being. That way of speaking is characterized by opposition, by resistance (bell hooks 15).

Writing became, for ex slaves, not only a means to fight against an unjust system of human slavery, but also a means to create a new identity, an identity that would hybridize the African with the American:

[A]nticolonial movements and individuals often drew upon Western ideas and vocabularies to challenge colonial rule. Indeed they often hybridised what they borrowed by juxtaposing it with indigenous ideas, reading it through their own interpretative lens, and even using it to assert cultural alterity or insist on an unbridgeable difference between coloniser and colonised (Loomba 174).

African American ex slaves created their own literary voice, their own style; for, although they used existing literary genres to construct their narratives of bondage, the voice they used to do so was different from that of preceding white authors. Ex bondmen did not simply criticize slavery and the cruelty of slaveholders. They further appealed to other blacks in a similar situation to follow their example. They provided other potential black authors with a mode of writing, a literary genre that would be employed by future African American ex-bondmen: the slave narrative genre.

---

black people into the mainstream, at its very core it is dehumanizing. Embedded in the logic of assimilation is the white-supremacist assumption that blackness must be eradicated so that a new self, in this case a ‘white’ self, can come into being” (hooks 67).

## 2.2. THE SLAVE NARRATIVE AS A LITERARY GENRE

When the term *genre* is applied to slave narratives it is not done lightly. According to the literary critic Paul Hernandi, there are “four main types of similarity” that different works of literature have to meet in order to be said to constitute a genre: (i) similarities in the authors’ mental attitude; (ii) similarities in the effect the works have on the reader; (iii) similarities in the writings as verbal creation; and (iv) similarities in the imaginative world where the action is located (6). These four criteria are clearly fulfilled by slave narratives. In the first place, their authors have a similar mental attitude: they intend to condemn slavery by presenting its hardest and cruelest aspects, and to justify their own actions while still in bondage. Secondly, the effect that these authors want to create on their readers’ minds is also similar: the slave author wants his readers to feel disgusted with slavery so that they fight actively for its abolition. Thirdly, slave narratives are written in a very similar way and, as explained above, follow a very strict pattern or “master outline” (Olney, “I Was Born” 152) that will be analyzed in the following pages. Finally, the world in which slave narratives take place (though not imaginary), and the societies they portray are similar, since they are mainly characterized by the underlying presence of legalized slavery.

Furthermore, slave narratives can also be said to form a literary tradition, as defined by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in “In Her Own Write.” Gates argues that literary works become a tradition when other authors read and revise the tropes presented by those authors:

Literary works configure into a tradition not because of some mystical collective unconscious determined by the biology of race and gender, but because writers read other writers and *ground* their representations of experience in models of language provided largely by other writers to whom they feel akin. It is through this mode of literary revision, amply evident in the *texts* themselves—in formal echoes, recast metaphors, even in parody—that a “tradition” emerges and defines itself (xviii; emphasis in original).

Although Gates is here referring to the literary tradition of African American women writers, this criterion can also be applied to slave narratives, for, as previously

examined, the similarities between these works are so strong that a clear pattern can be distinguished in the construction of these writings. Therefore, it seems very unlikely that slave authors had not become acquainted with former slave narratives before writing their stories of bondage.<sup>66</sup> Moreover so when a thorough analysis of the structure and content of slave narratives reveals that these writings follow a very strict pattern, a pattern that was elaborated along the years in which these narratives of bondage were written and published. The similarities between the autobiographies of so many ex slaves create what the scholar James Olney has called “master outline”<sup>67</sup> (“I Was Born” 152). In his essay “‘I Was Born’: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature,” Olney argues that this master outline can be drawn from the great narratives, such as Frederick Douglass’s, and that it guides the lesser ones. His analysis of the conventions of the slave narrative genre will inspire the following pages, though Olney’s list will be extended with other stylistic and thematic features common to most narratives.

James Olney starts his description of the “master outline” of the slave narrative genre by analyzing the texts that *precede* the actual narrative. Thus, the first convention he identifies is the inclusion in the narrative of different documents whose purpose was to demonstrate the authorship and existence of the protagonist-author-slave. Demonstrating both the authorship and existence of the slave may seem strange, for, as stated in previous pages, no previous autobiographer had to conform to these standards. Nevertheless, slave authors feel compelled to do so: since the narratives of ex slaves argued for the abolition of the peculiar institution through a thorough depiction of the cruelties of the system as witnessed by the narrators, if whites could prove that these

---

<sup>66</sup> This is true not only for African American slave narratives, but also for other contemporary stories of bondage, like Mende Nazer and Damien Lewis’s *Slave*. Topics already included in nineteenth-century American slave narratives such as the sexual harassment suffered by female slaves, suicide as preferable to a life in bondage, the need for secrecy, and the attempts to escape from slavery until this is finally achieved are also present in this book. This proves, not only that slave narratives influenced future authors, but also that slaves, no matter where and when, share common experiences.

<sup>67</sup> James Olney uses the term *master outline* to refer to the strict stylistic and thematic pattern to which slave narratives adjusted on a regular basis.

narrators did not exist, they would also prove that what the stories portrayed were nothing but a bunch of lies, that slavery was not as cruel as the authors had presented it.

One of the devices used to demonstrate the existence of the slave narrator is the inclusion of a photograph of the slave, signed by himself.<sup>68</sup> Though this portrait proves that the protagonist of the story existed in real life, it does not, however, demonstrate the veracity of the events related. Most pro-slavery agents doubted the truthfulness of the events related, and claimed that the authors had exaggerated—if not lied—in their depiction of slavery. This is why many slave narrators also include other documents—prefaces, introductions, appendixes, etc—written and signed by white abolitionist friends, editors, authors, lawyers, etc.<sup>69</sup> On other occasions, these documents serve to prove that the author of the narrative is the ex slave himself,<sup>70</sup> something which many whites people also refused to admit on the belief that blacks were not endowed with intellect, and on the fact that slaves were denied the right to education. In this light, proslavery agents argued that it was impossible that a black ex

<sup>68</sup> The signed portraits of Frederick Douglass, Solomon Northup, Henry Bibb, and William Wells Brown are included in “Appendix A: Illustrations,” pp. 370-371.

<sup>69</sup> If necessary, these white people would offer testimony in court to defend their position, for black people could not, as examined previously, be witnesses in a trial. An example of these documents added to slave narratives is a letter written by Daniel S. Lane, included in the introduction to Henry Bibb’s *Narrative*:

SIR:—Yours of the 1<sup>st</sup> of March is before me, inquiring if one Walton Bibb, a colored man, escaped from me at Louisville, Ky., in the Spring of 1839. To that inquiry I answer, he did. The particulars are these: He ran off from William Gatewood some time in 1838 I think, and was heard of in Cincinnati. Myself and some others went there and took him, and took him to Louisville for sale, by the directions of his master. While there he made his escape and was gone some time, I think about one year or longer. He came back it was said, to get his wife and child, so report says. He was again taken by his owner; he together with his wife and child was taken to Louisville and sold to a man who traded in Negroes, and was taken by him to New Orleans and sold with his wife and child to some man up Red River, so I was informed by the man who sold him. He then ran off and left his wife and child and got back, it seems, to your country. I can say for Gatewood he was a good master, and treated him well. . . . Yours, truly,

DANIEL S. LANE (9-10).

<sup>70</sup> William Lloyd Garrison writes the following about Douglass’ *Narrative*:

Mr. DOUGLASS has very properly chosen to write his own Narrative, in his own style, and according to the best of his ability, rather than to employ some one else. It is, therefore, entirely his own production; and, considering how long and dark was the career he had to run as a slave,—how few have been his opportunities to improve his mind since he broke his iron fetters,—it is, in my judgment, highly creditable to his head and heart” (Douglass, *Narrative* 37-38).

Further examples of these authenticating documents can be found in “Appendix B: Documents and Maps,” pp. 387-390.



slave could produce a work of literature and, consequently, “the authority of the fugitive slave was not presumed but had to be proved” (Sharpe 129). This urge to ratify the veracity of the account and the authorship of the narrative would give rise to several conventions in the genre. Two of them had already been discussed—the signed portrait of the slave and the annexed documents, but there is another device that deserves attention as well: the inclusion of the words “Written by Himself” in the title of the ex slave’s personal history.

These initial words included in the title of the book aimed at demonstrating the authorship of the text. If the author was a female slave, these words would naturally change to “Written by *Herself*.” The use of the word “Herself” might have had a greater impact on white readers, for, if it was strange for a black (bond)man to write an autobiography, it was even more shocking to hear of a black (bond)woman writer. Though for slaves in general it was difficult to become literate, the sexism of the time placed women in a domestic sphere while it left public life to men—white or black. This could explain the fact that only twelve percent of the slave narratives were written by women.<sup>71</sup> Therefore, a narrative like Jacobs’s *Incidents* would have probably attracted readers’ attention, not only because slave narratives were popular literature at the time, but also because it was the story of an ex slave narrated from a different perspective: a bondwoman’s perspective.

As stated above, the use of the words “Written by Himself/Herself” to introduce the narrative of bondage aimed at establishing that the first-person biography had been written by the ex slave, not by a white editor who had used the first-person mode of narration as a literary device. However, not all slave narrators were able to read and write. Some had to dictate their experiences of slavery to a white abolitionist. In these cases, the words “Written by Himself” were not used. Instead, a close variant like “Dictated” or “Related by Himself” served a similar purpose: indicate the manner by

---

<sup>71</sup> See page 19, footnote 23.

which the ex slave had managed to have his autobiography written and published.<sup>72</sup> Thus, this convention either stressed the significance of the ex slave who had managed to write his autobiography in a society that prohibited his literacy, or defended that the text was nothing but a literal transcription of the ex slave's experiences by a reliable white person.

The last convention that James Olney identifies in the texts that precede the actual slave narrative, is the inclusion of an initial poetic epigraph, frequently written by William Cowper.<sup>73</sup> Nevertheless, other sources were also frequently quoted. Thus, in the title page of Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents* one can read two different extracts. The first one is from *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South* (1836), written by Angelina E. Grimké, which reads as follows: "Northerners know nothing at all about Slavery. They think it is perpetual bondage only. They have no conception of the depth of *degradation* involved in that word, Slavery; if they had, they would never cease their efforts until so horrible a system was overthrown." The second one is an extract from the Bible, Isaiah

---

<sup>72</sup> See, for example: *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, Written by Himself; *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa, But Resident above Sixty Years in the United States of America*, Related by Himself; *Account of Life, Experience, Travels, and Gospel Labours of George White, an African*, Written by Himself and Revised by a Friend; *Slavery in the United States, a Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, a Black Man, Who Lived Forty Years in Maryland, South Carolina, and Georgia as a Slave*, Prepared by Fisher from the verbal narrative by Ball; *Narratives of the Sufferings of Lewis and Milton Clarke, Sons of a Soldier of the Revolution, during a Captivity of More than Twenty Years among the Slave-Holders of Kentucky, One of the So Called Christian States of North America*, Dictated by Themselves (emphasis added in all cases).

<sup>73</sup> William Cowper, forerunner of the British romantic poets, wrote some antislavery poems, the most famous of which is probably "The Task" (1785). Solomon Northup includes some lines from this poem in *Twelve Years a Slave*.

Such dupes are men to custom, and so prone  
To reverence what is ancient, and can plead  
A course of long observance for its use,  
That even servitude, the worst of ills,  
Because delivered down from sire to son,  
Is kept and guarded as a sacred thing.  
But is it fit or can it bear the shock  
Of rational discussion, that a man  
Compounded and made up, like other men,  
Of elements tumultuous, in whom lust  
And folly in as ample measure meet,  
As in the bosom of the slave he rules,  
Should be a despot absolute, and boast  
Himself the only freeman of his land? (165)

Two other complete poems by Cowper, "The Negro's Complaint," and "Pity for Poor Africans" can be found in "Appendix C: Songs and Poems on Slavery," pp. 406-407.

32:9: “Rise up, ye women that are at ease! Hear my voice, ye careless daughters! Give ear unto my speech.” Isaiah was also quoted in the title page of James W. C. Pennington’s *The Fugitive Blacksmith*: “Let mine outcasts dwell with thee, Moab; be thou a covert to them from the face of the spoiler. Isaiah xvi.4.” In any case, the poetic epigraph included in the title page of slave narratives fulfilled two main functions. On the one hand, it served to specify, from the very beginning of the book, the purpose of the ex slave’s personal history: the condemnation of the slavery system. On the other hand, it also demonstrated that the author had received some education, that he was a literate black, that he knew the Bible, and that he had read various works of literature. Thus, it further demonstrated that the black ex slave had some literary and biblical knowledge and, therefore, enough education to be the real author of his autobiography.

Within the actual text of the narrative, some conventions were commonly used by slave narrators. The first convention identified by James Olney is the use of the words “I was born”<sup>74</sup> to begin the autobiography. This standard opening, together with the portrait and signature, the titular label “Written by Himself,” and the prefatory and appended letters and documents “are intended to attest to the real existence of a narrator, the sense being that the status of the narrative will be continually called into doubt, and so it cannot even begin, until the narrator’s real existence is firmly established” (Olney, “I Was Born” 155). This need emerged partly from two important facts: first, the genre of the slave narrative had become really popular in the nineteenth century among white readers; second, some white authors had written fictional slave narratives from the point of view of a black ex slave.<sup>75</sup> Fictional slave narratives were

<sup>74</sup> Rev. Richard Allen begins his *Life* (1833) as follows: “I was born in the year of our Lord 1760, on February 14th” (5). William Grimes begins his *Life* (1825) in a similar manner: “I was born in the year 1784, in J—, County of King George, Virginia” (187). Josiah Henson’s *Life* (1849) has a similar initial sentence: “I was born, June 15, 1789, in Charles County, Maryland” (725). James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, born in Africa and taken to America as a slave, also begins his *Narrative* in this way: “I was born in the city of Bournou” (8).

<sup>75</sup> Among fictional slave narratives are Richard Hildreth’s *The Slave; or Memoirs of Archy Moore* (1836); Delano Hammond’s *Life and Opinions of Julius Melbourn* (1847); Peter Neilson’s *Life and Adventures of Zamba, an African Negro King* (1847); and Emily Catharine Pierson’s *Jamie Parker, the Fugitive* (1851). Mattie Griffith’s *Autobiography of a Female Slave* (1856), which will be further examined in the following chapter, is the only example of a “female fictionalized slave narrative” (Gates, “Introduction”

also quite common in the period, blacks being, on some occasions, convinced into claiming authorship of fictional slave narratives narrated or edited by white abolitionists so as to distract critics from the origin of the book. In any case, most of these writings were eventually proved to be fiction since, although the scenes of slavery depicted were taken from real life, the slaves portrayed in the narrative did not really exist, sometimes not even the author-narrator of the personal history. As Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argue, the demonstrably fictional narratives “imitated and sometimes even pretended to be the written testaments of ex-slaves” (*The Slave’s Narrative* 319). Thus, the authentic slave narratives had to demonstrate their genuineness and the truthfulness of the facts narrated by providing evidence to support this veracity. After including the words “Written by Himself” in the title of the book, adding different testimonials written by white people in which the existence and veracity of the author were stated, and introducing a photograph of the slave—sometimes even signed by the slave himself, the narrative could commence; and the best way to begin was establishing the author’s identity: “I was born”.<sup>76</sup> Once the identity of the slave author was established, the narrative of his life in bondage could begin.

In the initial paragraph of the slave narrative, several conventions of this genre are firmly established. First of all, many slave narrators complain of their lack of knowledge concerning their age. This ignorance was seen as another evil consequence of slavery and racism. Slaves believed that since white people—even young children—*did* know their age, this knowledge was an exclusive privilege of white people:

I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. . . . A want of information concerning my own was a

---

xiv). Griffith had to reveal her identity as a white woman, partly because some reviews of her work argued that this slave narrative could only have been written by a white person, “some rabid abolitionist” (Lockard 405, 408-409, 411; quoted in Gates’s “Introduction” to Hannah Crafts’s *The Bondswoman’s Narrative*, p. xiv).

<sup>76</sup> This convention is so integrated in the genre that one collection of slave narratives edited by Yuval Taylor in two volumes bears this title: *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives*. Other modern African American writers use a similar beginning, even in non-literary works, thus demonstrating the influence that slave narratives exerted on future African American authors. Angelyn Mitchell, for instance begins the preface to *The Freedom to Remember* with the words “I was born free” (ix). Furthermore, present-day accounts of African slavery, like *Slave*, by Mende Nazer and Damien Lewis, start in a similar way: “When I was born . . .” (11).

source of unhappiness to me even during childhood. The white children could tell their ages. I could not tell why I ought to be deprived of the same privilege (Douglass, *Narrative* 15).

Slaves were deprived of this privilege for several reasons: first, slaveholders considered that it was safer for them to keep slaves ignorant of as many things as possible. Knowledge meant power. If slaves were kept ignorant, they would be powerless against the slavery system and against slaveholders.<sup>77</sup> Secondly, as stated in the first chapter, slaves were considered inferior beings because it was thought that they could not reason, that they were not endowed with intellect and, thus, that they did not need to know their age since they would surely not be curious about it. Slaveholders manifested a final practical-economical reason for keeping slaves ignorant of their own age: if slaves did not know their age, they would not be able to say how old they were when questioned about it at slave auctions, a place where the age of the slave determined—to some extent—their value. As John Brown writes in his autobiography, “it is quite a truism that ‘a nigger never knows when he was born,’ for though he may be quite certain of the year and might swear to it blindfold, he must say he is just as old as his master chooses to bid him do, or he will have to take the consequences” (363). Therefore, although there were slaves like Henry Bibb, Reverend Richard Allen, Solomon Bayley, and George White who knew their age, they were often told to lie about it so that their owners could get a better price for them at the sale.

After having introduced himself as the protagonist of the narrative, the ex slave presents a detailed account of his childhood and parentage, indicating the location of the plantation where he had lived and labored in the first years of his life. Nevertheless, some details are often omitted for the sake of secrecy. Slave narrators were in a difficult position. On the one hand, they felt obliged to include details about their owners and

---

<sup>77</sup> In *Negro Slavery* this thought is put into words as follows: “Knowledge is power: and could the slaves be held in their original blindness, there would be nothing to hinder the master, whilst such ignorance prevailed, from maintaining the same sovereign and undisturbed authority which he has been wont to do” (Warner and Strickland 136-137). Frederick Douglass explains that slaves are kept under this ignorant condition so that they do not dare to fight against slavery: “I have found that, to make a contented slave, it is necessary to make a thoughtless one. It is necessary to darken his moral and mental vision, and, as far as possible, to annihilate the power of reason” (*Narrative* 83).

overseers, the plantations on which they had lived, the place where the plantation was located, names of neighboring plantations, etc. in order to prove that their story was true, that their book was not fictional. On the other hand, they had to maintain some details away from their capturers once they had obtained their freedom, in order to avoid being taken back into slavery by virtue of *The Fugitive Slave Act*. Thus, authors like Harriet Jacobs use pseudonyms to write their autobiographies and/or change the names of different people in their narratives for fear of being captured.<sup>78</sup> Similarly, slave narrators avoid to give the names of white people who have been kind to them—or even helped them escape—in order not to put these people in a difficult position in American society.<sup>79</sup> Giving details of their escape and providing the names of the places they had lived in or visited, once free, could also aid their capturers.<sup>80</sup> Consequently, secrecy became an imperative for the former slave.

In the fragments in which slaves examine their parentage and family ties, a recurrent figure can be found: the white father. Since it was established by law that children should follow the condition of the mother, children born to slave women would automatically become slaves themselves, no matter whether their father was white, a free black, or another slave. Thus, as discussed in the previous chapter, many slaveowners raped their female slaves, obtaining a double gratification: on the one hand, they satisfied their sexual desires; on the other, they increased their stock of slaves. Nevertheless, although these rapes were well-known at the time, secrecy was imposed

---

<sup>78</sup> As previously examined, the fact that Harriet Jacobs wrote *Incidents* under the pseudonym Linda Brent made many critics believe that *Incidents* was fictional, since the slaves portrayed did not exist in real life. It was not until 1981 when Jean Fagan Yellin firmly established the validity of *Incidents* that this text ceased to be considered fictional.

<sup>79</sup> Frederick Douglass does not write the names of the children who taught him to read and write and explains why as follows: “I am strongly tempted to give the names of two or three of those little boys, as a testimonial of the gratitude and affection I bear them; but prudence forbids;—not that it would injure me, but it might embarrass them; for it is almost an unpardonable offence to teach slaves to read in this Christian country” (*Narrative* 41). Lewis Clarke does not mention his master’s name but he does so, not as a sign of gratitude, but for fear of being caught and brought back into slavery: “I was transferred, at the age of sixteen or seventeen, to a Mr. K., whose name I forbear to mention, lest, if he or any other man should ever claim *property* where they never had any” (615).

<sup>80</sup> Lewis Clarke says, about his escape: “The place from which I started was about fifty miles from Lexington. The reason why I do not give the *name* of the place, and a more accurate location, must be obvious to any one who remembers that, in the eye of the law, I am yet accounted a slave” (619; emphasis in original).

by the planter and, therefore, it is not surprising to read sentences like “It is almost impossible for slaves to give a correct account of their male parentage” (Bibb 13). When slave narrators assert that they ignore who their father was, they also suggest that he was a white man, very often their own masters.<sup>81</sup>

Once their existence and lineage has been determined, slave authors can begin the bulk of their story: their life in bondage. In these accounts, ex slaves do not simply comment on their own experiences of slavery, but also describe what other slaves have suffered—and were suffering—under this system, for they were aware that most of them would be incapable—or deprived of the opportunity—of writing their autobiographies. In this sense, an individual account of bondage articulates the thoughts and experiences of many voiceless slaves, thus becoming a collective autobiography that depicts slave life from an ample point of view.

In this characterization of slave life, the figure of a cruel master, mistress, or overseer is very frequently described. This cruel white pro-slavery agent is presented inflicting terrible whippings and brutal punishments to other slaves,<sup>82</sup> preferably to (pregnant) female slaves because this kind of cruelty would more strongly arouse the readers’ sympathy. This is the case of Mary Prince, who relates how a pregnant slave named Hetty is whipped to death:

One of the cows had dragged the rope away from the stake to which Hetty had fastened it, and got loose. My master flew into a terrible passion, and ordered the poor creature to be stripped quite naked, notwithstanding her pregnancy, and to be tied up to a tree in the yard. He then flogged her as hard as he could lick, both with the whip and cow-skin, till she was all over streaming with blood. He rested, and then beat her again and again. Her shrieks were terrible. The consequence was that poor Hetty was brought to bed before her time, and was delivered after severe labour of a dead child. She appeared to recover after her confinement, so far that she was repeatedly flogged by both master and mistress

<sup>81</sup> This was the case, for example, of Frederick Douglass, who writes the following: “My father was a white man. He was admitted to be such by all I ever heard speak of my parentage. The opinion was also whispered that my master was my father; but of the correctness of this opinion, I know nothing; the means of knowing was withheld from me” (*Narrative* 15). Similarly, William Grimes affirms: “My father, —, was one of the most wealthy planters in Virginia” (187). Other slaves born to white men who would eventually publish their autobiographies were, for example, Moses Roper, and Henry Bibb.

<sup>82</sup> Some slave narratives also include a description of different instruments and tools designed to punish slaves. An illustrated explanation of some of these instruments of torture are included in “Appendix D: Instruments of Torture Used by Slaveholders.”

afterwards; but her former strength never returned to her. Ere long her body and limbs swelled to a great size; and she lay on a mat in the kitchen, till the water burst out of her body and she died (7).<sup>83</sup>

The description of the cruelties endured by other slaves served two purposes: first, it depicted the endurance of thousands of voiceless slaves; secondly, and according to Jenny Sharpe, it introduced the slave narrator as “a reliable eyewitness,” thus preparing the reader to hear “the narrator’s own abuse” (130). This personal abuse, like the abuse suffered by other slaves and previously described, is considered a terrible injustice:

I have thought [my master] took a peculiar delight in whipping me, as I uniformly received about four whippings per day. If I was awkward, cried too much, or was lazy, it was sure to purchase me a good drubbing. Sometimes I got a flogging for freezing my feet while I was foddering and cutting the ice out of the watering place. And one day, while I was getting corn up stairs, I designedly pushed his boy down stairs, for while I had the basket upon my shoulder he began whipping me, & chirping to me, as would a driver to his horse. For this I was knocked down stairs, basket, corn and all shared the same fate; and to complete my punishment, the next morning I received fifty lashes with a horse-whip (Brinch and Prentiss 152-153).

Some of these cruel acts against male and female slaves were *justified* on the basis of some kind of misbehavior on the part of the slave (attempt to escape, ill treatment of tools, fighting, robbery, idleness, etc.).<sup>84</sup> Nevertheless, whether justified or not, slaves

---

<sup>83</sup> William Wells Brown witnessed his mother’s whipping and describes it as one of the most painful episodes in his life:

My mother was a field hand, and one morning was ten or fifteen minutes behind the others in getting into the field. As soon as she reached the spot where they were at work, the overseer commenced whipping her. . . . I heard her voice, and knew it, and jumped out of my bunk, and went to the door. Though the field was some distance from the house, I could hear every crack of the whip, and every groan and cry of my poor mother. I remained at the door, not daring to venture any further. The cold chills ran over me, and I wept aloud. (*Narrative* 684-685).

Similarly, John Brown narrates the whippings of two slave women, one of whom received the flogging while being held by her husband (345). Thus, both husband and wife were punished for the same offence.

<sup>84</sup> There was a whole code of offenses and punishments on plantations. Solomon Northup explains the reasons why slaves were whipped on Mr. Epps’ plantation, and the number of lashes they received for different offenses:

The number of lashes is graduated according to the nature of the case. Twenty-five are deemed a mere brush, inflicted, for instance, when a dry leaf or piece of boll is found in the cotton, or when a branch is broken in the field; fifty is the ordinary penalty following all delinquencies of the next higher grade; one hundred is called severe: it is the punishment inflicted for the serious offence of standing idle in the field; from one hundred and fifty to two hundred is bestowed upon him who quarrels with his cabin-mates, and five hundred, well laid on, besides the mangling of the dogs, perhaps, is certain to consign the poor, unpitied runaway to weeks of pain and agony (243).



considered these whippings unfair<sup>85</sup> and disproportioned, especially when inflicted upon themselves.

In any case, it is interesting to note that slaveholders demanded the rest of their slaves to witness the whipping of the bondman found at fault so that they could learn the lesson. The punishments served, thus, two purposes: on the one hand to correct the wrongs committed by the slave and, on the other, to set an example for the rest. John Brown narrates an instance of such an event on the plantation he was living at the time: “[The slave] was secured and brought back to quarters, and the other slaves were called together *to witness the infliction* upon him of a punishment called bucking” (403; emphasis added).<sup>86</sup> These instances of brutality were deemed a necessary convention of slave narratives, for the objective was to demonstrate the evilness of the institution of slavery and thus, the need to abolish it. They served to arouse their readers’ sensibility and to demonstrate that slavery was not only destructive for blacks but also for whites, who lost their kindness and Christian values by being placed in a superior position, by becoming omnipotent judges who could treat their slaves as they pleased.

Nevertheless, in order to present a fair view of slavery, many slave narrators also include descriptions of kind masters and mistresses whom they had belonged to or become acquainted with.<sup>87</sup> Slave narrators were often accused of presenting a partial and biased view of slavery. Thus, by introducing the figure of the kind slaveholder,

---

<sup>85</sup> This is the case of Charles Ball who uses hunger to justify the theft of a sheep, for which he was brutally punished: “I have always been a hard working man, and have suffered a great deal from hunger in my time. It is not possible for a man to work hard every day for several months, and get nothing but a peck of corn a week to eat, and not feel hungry” (307).

<sup>86</sup> Similarly, Henry Bibb writes the following passage about his whipping for attending a camp meeting: “He ordered that the field hands should be called together to witness my punishment, that it might serve as a caution to them never to attend a prayer meeting, or runaway as I had, lest they should receive the same punishment” (67). William Grimes quotes his mistress when she shows another slave what will happen to him if he misbehaves: “Do you see how your master does with Grimes? He will do so with you too. . . . if you do not behave yourself well you shall be served in the same manner (218).

<sup>87</sup> Rev. Richard Allen talks about a kind master he had belonged to: “My master was an unconverted man, and all the family; but he was what the world called a good master. He was more like a father to his slaves than any thing else. He was a very tender, humane man” (5-6). Charles Ball also experienced kindness on the part of one of his owners when he was a child: “[Jack Cox] was a man of kindly feelings towards his family, and treated his slaves, of whom he had several besides me, with humanity. He permitted my grandfather to visit me as often as he pleased, and allowed him sometimes to carry me to his own cabin” (270).

these authors show white readers that, their account is a *true* description of their experiences as bondsmen and the reality of the peculiar institution. Furthermore, “the existence of a kind mistress also reassures readers that slaves are loyal and obedient workers so long as they are treated well” (Sharpe 130). Slave authors want to prove that, although they consider slavery a crime committed towards blacks, slaves are naturally good, and that if they were treated as workers instead of bondsmen, with respect and a salary instead of with insults and abuses, they would be the best employees. Slaves, they believe, lose their human virtues under the yoke of slavery and slaveholders.

Kind slaveholders owed their amiable behavior—at least in slave authors’ depictions—to their religious beliefs. As stated in the previous chapter (and as it will be examined in the following pages), religion played a very important role for black slaves and, thus, it is not surprising that slaves praised their masters’ and mistresses’ kindness by referring to the religion they professed. In these cases, slave narrators write about *true* Christian slaveholders. Emphasis has been placed on the word *true* because slave authors frequently use the term *Christian* in a sarcastic way to refer to particularly brutal and cruel masters, some of whom prided themselves on attending religious services. These religious slaveholders are, for Frederick Douglass, the worst:

I assert most unhesitatingly, that the religion of the south is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes,—a justifier of the most appalling barbarity,—a sanctifier of the most hateful frauds,—and a dark shelter under, which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal deeds of slaveholders find the strongest protection. Were I to be again reduced to the chains of slavery, next to that enslavement, I should regard being the slave of a religious master the greatest calamity that could befall me. For of all slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst. I have ever found them the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly, of all others (*Narrative* 69).<sup>88</sup>

Critiques to slaveholders’ religious beliefs would, therefore, become another convention of the slave narrative genre, in which, planters are depicted as *hypocritical* Christians, whereas slaves are presented as faithful and *true* Christians. This convention is very

---

<sup>88</sup> Similarly, Moses Roper, who had belonged to Mr. Gooch, a professed Baptist, says of him that “[h]ardly a day ever passed without some one being flogged,” and that, consequently, “[h]is slaves, thinking him a very bad sample of what a professing Christian ought to be, would not join the connexion he belonged to, thinking they must be a very bad set of people” (507).

significant, for religion did not only play a very important role in the life of slaves, but also in nineteenth-century American society in general. People's goodness was measured in terms of religion, and being—or appearing to be—a good and religious member of society would favor good attitudes and friendships.

In order to survive in such a hostile society many blacks resorted to religion. In religion, slaves found relief and hope. Thus, in the narratives of former bondmen, the religious beliefs held by slaves become a very significant topic, especially in the cases of those ex slaves, like Richard Allen and James W. C. Pennington, who became pastors and were licensed to preach after obtaining their freedom. Although many slaveholders and proslavery agents supported the opinion that slaves professed no religion but simply believed in African superstitions,<sup>89</sup> one can often read about slaves' tremendous efforts to attend illegal<sup>90</sup> camp-meetings: first, they had to find the means to avoid being discovered outside the plantation and doing something illegal; second, they had to be on the plantation on time to start their daily chores.<sup>91</sup> These efforts indicate that these meetings, and the religious instruction offered at them, were really important for black slaves. As George White expresses:

In the year 1804, I attended a Camp-Meeting, being one of the first held in this district. A large concourse of people, of all descriptions, convened on the

---

<sup>89</sup> Sir Hans Sloane writes: "The Negroes have no manner of religion by what I could observe of them. It is true that they have several ceremonies, as dances, playing etc., but these for the most part are so far from being acts of adoration of a God that they are for the most part mixed with great deal of bawdy and lewdness" (quoted by Anne Bradford Warner in "Carnival Laughter: Resistance in *Incidents*," p. 216).

<sup>90</sup> Reverend James W. C. Pennington writes about the resistance offered by some slaveholders towards giving their slaves religious instruction or letting them attend camp-meetings: "The Methodists at one time attempted to evangelize the slaves in our neighbourhood, but the effort was sternly resisted by the masters. They held a Camp Meeting in the neighbourhood, where many of the slaves attended. But one of their preachers for addressing words of comfort to the slaves, was arrested and tried for his life" (146). Nevertheless, some slaveholders let their slaves meet for religious purposes, considering that religion made them better slaves. Reverend Richard Allen describes a slaveholder of this kind:

We frequently went to meeting on every other Thursday; but if we were likely to be backward with our crops we would refrain from going to meeting. When our master found we were making no provision to go to meeting, he would frequently ask us if it was not our meeting day, and if we were not going. We would frequently tell him, "no, sir, we would rather stay at home and get our work done." He would tell us, "Boys, I would rather you would go to your meeting". . . At length our master said he was convinced that religion made slaves better and not worse, and often boasted of his slaves for their honesty and industry (6).

<sup>91</sup> Sometimes slaves had to run many miles to where the meeting was held, and be back in their cabins before they were called to work in the early morning.

occasion, of which, many were made the subjects of saving grace, and believers were filled with perfect love. At this meeting, the Lord, in a more powerful manner than ever, made known his salvation to me, by the influences and witness of his Holy Spirit; so that, when the exercises were over, I left the hallowed place with a glow of heavenly joy, which none but God himself can inspire (9).

Religion became a very important part of slaves' lives, a part for which they would be willing to run many risks, a part that helped them endure a life in bondage, and which gave them strength to escape from the chains of slavery. In this sense, it is not surprising that many slave narrators thank the Providence for guiding them through slavery to freedom: "And when I came to think that the yoke was off my neck, and how it was taken off, I was made to wonder, and to admire, and to adore the order of kind providence, which assisted me in all the way (Bayley 18-19).<sup>92</sup> It seems that the slave's efforts would not have been successful were it not for the intercession of Providence. Hence, slaves could be said to be the new Israelites, who, through God's assistance, are able to reach the Promised Land.

The comparison between African American bondmen and Israelites is frequently found in slave narratives, for slaves see themselves as the new Israelites, held in bondage in their own Egypt, in America: "I had no Moses to go before me and lead the way from bondage to a promised land. Yet I was in a far worse state than Egyptian bondage; for they had houses and land; I had none; they had oxen and sheep; I had none; they had a wise counsel, to tell them what to do, and where to go, and even to go with them; I had none" (Bibb 19). Thus, religion would also provide slaves with hope for deliverance from bondage: just like the Israelites left Egyptian bondage and reached the Promised Land, African American slaves expected to reach the Free Northern States, or Canada.<sup>93</sup>

---

<sup>92</sup> John Brown asserts "When I look back upon the events of my life, I fancy I can perceive the directing hand of Providence in all that befel [sic] me at this particular time" (357). James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw also sees the works of Providence in his life: "I cannot but admire the footsteps of Providence; astonished that I should be so wonderfully preserved!" (21).

<sup>93</sup> Reverend Richard Allen writes in "An Address to those who keep slaves, and approve the practice," included in his narrative, the following words:

Another convention of the slave narrative genre that Olney includes in what he calls the master outline of slave narratives, is the “account of one extraordinarily strong, hardworking slave—often ‘pure African’—who, because there is no reason for it, refuses to be whipped” (“I Was Born” 153). This resistance to being punished usually leads up to a fight between the slave and his master or overseer, a fight in which the slave is usually victorious. This triumph will bring about a change in the way in which the slave is considered on the plantation: white people would start to be afraid of him and to treat him more respectfully. This is when the slave *becomes a man*, wants to be treated as such, and determines to do whatever it takes to obtain his freedom from bondage. This act of resistance is, therefore, the prelude to the slave’s emancipation, usually obtained by means of escaping.<sup>94</sup> Nevertheless, and as described in the previous chapter, many slaves—women, for example—did not have the opportunity to fight their white oppressors, but used other methods of resistance against them. Slave narratives are compendiums of instances of all these acts of slave resistance to indicate that, although slaves may have looked content with their situation, reality proves otherwise: all slaves longed for freedom.

A typical act of resistance against slavery is the slave’s willingness and final success at learning to read and write. As examined above, slave codes forbid slaves’ literacy because it was thought that it was safer to keep them ignorant. On the one hand,

---

Pharoah [sic] and his princes with the posterity of king Saul, were destroyed by the protector and avenger of slaves. Would you not suppose the Israelites to be utterly unfit for freedom, and that it was impossible for them, to obtain to any degree of excellence? Their history shews how slavery had debased their spirits. Men must be wilfully blind, and extremely partial, that cannot see the contrary effects of liberty and slavery upon the mind of man (45).

Conversely, in Charles Ball’s narrative one can read: “This small house was the abode of a despot, more absolute, and more cruel than were any of those we read of in the Bible, who so grievously oppressed the children of Israel” (320).

<sup>94</sup> One of the slave authors that best exemplifies that this physical resistance against either slaveholder or overseer causes a big change in the personality of the slave, to the extent that he decides to escape, is Frederick Douglass, who describes the episode in which he defeated Mr. Covey, his overseer, and states at the end: “This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free (*Narrative* 64-65). Harriet Jacobs narrates a similar episode in *Incidents* in the chapter entitled “The Slave Who Dared to Feel Like a Man” (*Incidents* 28-43).

if they learned to read, they could become acquainted with abolitionist texts. On the other, if bondmen learned to write, they would have the tools to forge slave passes which would eventually facilitate their escape. Thus, being literacy and freedom so closely linked,<sup>95</sup> many slaves made extraordinary efforts to acquire this learning. Some of those who achieved this goal would finally manage to write and have their own autobiographies published. Nevertheless, slaves' quest for literacy was preceded by the trope of the "talking book," which can be found in five slave narratives. It first occurred in James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw's 1770 personal history and was repeated and revised in four other narratives published by John Marrant (1775), Ottobah Cugoana (1787), Olaudah Equiano (1789), and John Jea (1815). These authors narrate their first encounter with the written word as follows: the slave sees a white person reading a book and thinks that the book is talking to the reader; the slave, then, picks up the book to be disappointed that the book does not speak to black slaves. Gronniosaw, the first who includes this trope in a slave narrative, relates this episode as follows:

He used to read prayers in public to the ship's crew every Sabbath day; and when first I saw him read, I was never so surprised in my whole life as when I saw the book talk to my master; for I thought it did, as I observed him to look upon it, and move his lips.—I wished it would do so to me.—As soon as my master had done reading I follow'd him to the place where he put the book, being mightily delighted with it, and when nobody saw me, I open'd it and put my ear down close upon it, in great hope that it wou'd say something to me; but was very sorry and greatly disappointed when I found it would not speak, this thought immediately presented itself to me, that every body and every thing despis'd me because I was black (12).<sup>96</sup>

According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., the trope of the talking book disappeared after Jea's narrative: "Jea's odd revision of the scene of the Talking Book served to erase the

---

<sup>95</sup> Angelyn Mitchell, on the other hand, argues that "there is no necessary connection between freedom and literacy. Most slaves who escaped were not literate, and literacy is just as likely to follow as to precede the achievement of freedom" (178). Although it is true that many illiterate slaves managed to escape, and that many literate slaves lived their whole lives as bondmen, it is also true that many other slaves were able to escape thanks to the forgery of slave passes, and many more made the decision to escape after reading abolitionists articles. Furthermore, slaves' emphasis on the importance of acquiring some basic education is another way of complaining of the lack of opportunities and rights they were procured, and of ridiculing *The Declaration of Independence*, which stated that all men were born free and equal, whereas, in fact, blacks were deprived of basic rights, education among them.

<sup>96</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr. analyzes Gronniosaw's development of this trope in an essay entitled "James Gronniosaw and the Trope of the Talking Book."

figurative potential of this trope for the slave narrators who followed him” (*The Signifying Monkey* 240).<sup>97</sup> Ulterior authors “refigured a repeated scene of instruction in terms of reading and writing rather than in terms of making the text speak” (*The Signifying Monkey* 240).<sup>98</sup> Whether it was because John Jea’s revision of the trope erased its figurative potential for future writers, or because slaves did not want to convey a naïve and ignorant figure of black people, the fact remains that slaves’ efforts to learn to read and write became a common convention in subsequently published slave narratives.

Common are, as well, descriptions of the conditions under which bondmen and women lived. Slave narratives frequently include detailed information about the amount of food and clothing this human chattel was given, the amount of work slaves had to perform, the pattern of a day, a week, a year, the holidays they were granted, the cabins they lived in, etc. This documentary information can be regarded as curious for this type of writing since it makes slave narratives read as historical documents rather than as autobiographies. Most of the information included in slave narratives as regards these issues is also found in various documents written by white people, but the sources (white and black, slaveholder and slave) disagree on the generosity of slaveowners, for, unlike proslavery writers, slave narrators argue that the allowances of food and clothing were scarce, that slave cabins were in poor conditions, and that bondmen had to perform

---

<sup>97</sup> John Jea begins the trope in the usual way, lamenting that the Bible does not talk to him, but transforms it and turns it into a quest for learning to read, which Jea eventually acquires through God’s intercession:

Then I began to ask God in faithful and fervent prayer, as the Spirit of the Lord gave me utterance, begging earnestly of the Lord to give me the knowledge of his word, that I might be enabled to understand it in its pure light . . . the Lord was pleased in his infinite mercy, to send an angel, in a vision, in shining raiment, and his countenance shining as the sun, with a large bible in his hands, and brought it unto me, and said, “*I am come to bless thee, and to grant thee thy request,*” as you read in the Scriptures. . . . “*Thou hast desired to read and understand this book, and to speak the language of it both in English and in Dutch; I will therefore teach thee, and now read;*” and then he taught me to read (33-35; emphasis in original).

<sup>98</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr. further argues that it is John Jea’s ability to read the Bible, “alone of all other texts, which leads directly to his legal manumission” (*The Signifying Monkey* 164). Thus, slave’s literacy proves to be intimately related to freedom, for learning to read and write is a first step towards emancipation. Curiously, Rebecca Cox Jackson (1795-1871), a free black woman, included a similar episode in which she learns to read and write through God’s intercession. She does so in her—spiritual—autobiography (written between 1830 and 1864 but published in 1981) entitled *Gifts of Power*.

an excessive amount of work. Nevertheless, in the same way in which slave authors present kind masters and mistresses as the exception to the rule, they also write about slaveholders who did not overwork their slaves and who provided them with comfortable cabins and enough food and clothing. Once again, slave authors aimed at presenting the truthfulness of slavery, a realistic view of the society they had lived in. If they had simply written about the cruelties of slaveholders, their veracity might have been at stake. By describing milder forms of slavery, the authors of slave narratives expect their readers to be more willing to believe the slave's words. However, and as stated above, historians refused to consider the personal histories of ex slaves as reliable sources for many decades.

The former slave's words become particularly bitter and moving when describing a slave auction, another convention of these writings of bondage. The emphasis here is laid on the separation of slave families, separations that do not only occur at slave auctions, but also at private sales.<sup>99</sup> These accounts are described with a tone which is at the same time bitter and sentimental. Bitter because slave narrators show a restrained anger and wrath at being treated as equal to animals during these sales; sentimental because of the manner in which these heart-breaking scenes of separation are related:

After the men were all sold they then sold the women and children. They ordered the first woman to lay down her child and mount the auction block; she refused to give up her little one and clung to it as long as she could, while the cruel lash was applied to her back for disobedience. She pleaded for mercy in the name of God. But the child was torn from the arms of its mother amid the most heart rending shrieks from the mother and child on the one hand, and bitter

---

<sup>99</sup> Amongst the causes of separation of slaves was the death of the master. At such distressing events, the slaveholder's possessions (human chattel included) were divided into his children and wife, or were used to pay for his debts. John Brown suffered from this kind of separation and relates it as follows:

According to the will left by old Moore, the slave-property was to be equally divided amongst the mother and the three daughters, when the youngest married. . . . By about two o'clock, the business was concluded, and we were permitted to have the rest of the day to ourselves. It was a heart-rending scene when we all got together again, there was so much crying and wailing. I really thought my mother would have died of grief at being obliged to leave her two children, her mother, and her relations behind. But it was of no use lamenting, and as we were to start early next morning, the few things we had were put together that night, and we completed our preparations for parting for life by kissing one another over and over again, and saying good bye till some of us little ones fell asleep (325-326).



oaths and cruel lashes from the tyrants on the other. Finally the poor little child was torn from the mother while she was sacrificed to the highest bidder. In this way the sale was carried on from beginning to end (Bibb 97).<sup>100</sup>

Slave authors, once again, present slavery as a dehumanizing system in which slaves are ranked at the same level as cattle or things, property which is treated as their owners please. These vivid descriptions of separations of slave families had the purpose of condemning slavery and of moving people to act in favor of its abolition. The use of a sentimental tone to describe these separations would be especially appealing to white women readers, who would be more likely to feel sympathy for slave mothers, and thus join the abolitionist cause.

While abolitionists fought politically for the eradication of the domestic institution, slaves fought with their own means for their freedom. Thus, one of the most interesting episodes of slave narratives is the one devoted to the escape of the slave narrator. There are usually very vivid descriptions of different—failed—attempts to escape, of patrols running after the slave, and of the cruel and frightening pursuit of the fugitive slave by men and hounds.



*From the anonymous The Suppressed Book About Slavery! (1864)*

<sup>100</sup> At auctions like the one described by Henry Bibb, slaves were examined like animals before they were sold. This demonstrates, once again, the fact that slaves were considered property, that they were in the same rank of the Chain of Being as animals, that they were as important for their owners as beasts of burden, as cattle. Solomon Northup considers slaves are treated like horses at an auction: “He would make us hold up our heads, walk briskly back and forth, while customers would feel of our hands and arms and bodies, turn us about, ask us what we could do, make us open our mouths and show our teeth, precisely as a jockey examines a horse which he is about to barter for or purchase” (199).

Slave patrols are presented as one of the greatest evils of slavery in which white men become fierce animals in the pursuit of runaways. Lewis Clarke defines patrols as

men appointed by the county courts to look after all slaves without a pass. They have almost unlimited power over the slaves. They are the sons of run-down families. They are the offscouring of all things; the refuse, the fag end, the ears and tails of slavery; the scales and fins of fish; the tooth and tongues of serpents. They are the very fool's cap of baboons, the echo of parrots, the wallet and satchel of polecats, the scum of stagnant pools, the exuvial, the worn-out skins of slaveholders; they dress in their old clothes. They are, emphatically, the servants of servants, and slaves of the devil; they are the meanest, and lowest, and worst of all creation (657-658).<sup>101</sup>

Nevertheless, the climax of the narrative is the final successful escape from bondage of the slave narrator. Although the way in which slave narrators obtained freedom vary greatly, in many slave narratives fugitives write about the guidance the North Star offered them,<sup>102</sup> the meeting of helpful Quakers and abolitionists, and the use made of the underground railroad.<sup>103</sup> Other slaves used more original methods, like Henry "Box" Brown, and William and Ellen Craft, whose escapes were narrated in the previous chapter.<sup>104</sup> Nevertheless, some authors prefer not to say anything about the means by which they had managed to escape. This is the case of Frederick Douglass,<sup>105</sup> who will

---

<sup>101</sup> Solomon Northup describes patrols and patrollers with the following words:

[O]n Bayou Boeuf there is an organization of patrollers, as they are styled, whose business it is to seize and whip any slave they may find wandering from the plantation. They ride on horseback, headed by a captain, armed, and accompanied by dogs. They have the right, either by law, or by general consent, to inflict discretionary chastisement upon a black man caught beyond the boundaries of his master's estate without a pass, and even to shoot him, if he attempts to escape (268).

John Brown narrates one of his unsuccessful attempts to escape and how he was chased by men and dogs: "I soon found that I was being hunted down with dogs. I looked behind, and saw my master and a good many strange people, some on horses and some on foot, who were exciting the hounds to follow me" (352-353). For further information on slave patrols, see Sally E. Hadden's *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas*.

<sup>102</sup> William Wells Brown talks about his good friend the North Star: "We remained in the woods during the day, and as soon as darkness overshadowed the earth, we started again on our gloomy way, having no guide but the NORTH STAR. . . . and every night, before emerging from our hiding-place, we would anxiously look for our friend and leader,—the NORTH STAR" (*Narrative* 702; emphasis in original).

<sup>103</sup> Robert Voorhis describes the Quakers as "friends"—epithet commonly used to refer to abolitionists by many ex-slaves—who "advocated for the emancipation of their fellow beings in bondage" (Voorhis and Trumbull 15). John Brown writes that the Quakers "were known to have helped off the runaways, by the Underground Railroad, and that they had been brought into great trouble through it, and through having otherwise protected the coloured people" (376). In fact, many Quakers were injured by violent mobs, or ruined by lawsuits brought against them by slaveholders. On occasions, they had their farms, woods, and plantations burnt down by slaveholders.

<sup>104</sup> See pages 98-99.

<sup>105</sup> See page 98, footnote 103. The only information Frederick Douglass provides about his escape is the following: "according to my resolution, on the third day of September, 1838, I left my chains, and

later on, in his speeches, encourage other slave authors to hide the means by which they had escaped, in order not to give clues to white persecutors. In any case, more men than women obtained their freedom by escaping because, first, they were stronger, and some strength—not only psychological, but also physical—was necessary to run away and be ready to fight any slave hunter. Secondly, many slave men had seen their family ties suppressed by the system of slavery and, although some of them wanted to obtain their freedom and find the means to set their relatives free, others simply cared for their own welfare and freedom. Slave women demonstrated to have closer family ties, especially with their children, and found it psychologically disturbing to escape to free land and leave their beloved ones—especially their children—under the yoke of slavery.

After having obtained their freedom, slaves usually changed their names, as a way of signaling the beginning of their lives as free human beings.<sup>106</sup> Nevertheless, they sometimes retained their first name—changing only their last one—to maintain a sense of identity. Frederick Douglass exemplifies this need for selfhood when, in his *Narrative*, he writes that once he has become a free man, “the question arose as to what name [he] should be called by.” He explains:

The name given me by my mother was, “Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey.” I, however, had dispensed with the two middle names long before I left Maryland so that I was generally known by the name of “Frederick Bailey.” I started from Baltimore bearing the name of “Stanley.” When I got to New York, I again changed my name to “Frederick Johnson,” . . . But when I got to New Bedford, I found it necessary again to change my name. . . . I gave Mr. Johnson the privilege of choosing me a name, but told him he must not take from me the name of “Frederick.” I must hold on to that, *to preserve a sense of my identity*. Mr. Johnson . . . at once suggested that my name be “Douglass.” From that time until now I have been called “Frederick Douglass” (*Narrative* 92-93; emphasis added).<sup>107</sup>

---

succeeded in reaching New York without the slightest interruption of any kind. How I did so,—what means I adopted,—what direction I travelled, and by what mode of conveyance,—I must leave unexplained” (*Narrative* 89).

<sup>106</sup> As stated above, fugitive slaves also changed their names so that they would not be captured and taken back into slavery. Harriet Jacobs used the pseudonym Linda Brent to avoid being captured by her master. Nevertheless, most slaves had several different names during their bondage since, as William Grimes explains, “it is a practice among the slave holders, whenever one buys a slave of another, if the name does not suit him, or if he has one of the same name already, he gives him what name he pleases. I for this reasons, have had three different names” (222).

<sup>107</sup> William Wells Brown had had to change his name to Sandford when his master’s nephew, called William, was brought to live with him. Wells Brown considered this change of name as “one of the most

Former slaves cannot and do not want to forget the hard experiences they have lived. They need to transmit them, to inform people of their sufferings as slaves, so that they can all fight for the abolition of slavery. At the time in which their narratives were published, thousands of blacks were still held in bondage and slave narrators do not want white people to forget about these blacks, whose sufferings are similar to the ones described in their personal histories. Ex slaves' first name was a reminder of both their own past and the present of many other slaves, something that would encourage them to fight for the abolition of the slavery system. As bell hooks argues, "[n]aming is a serious process. It has been of crucial concern for many individuals within oppressed groups who struggle for self-recovery, for self-determination" (166). Naming is not simply "a method of resisting the hegemony of white society," it is also "a method of regaining control of one's life" (Wilentz 90). Naming is both an act of resistance and an act of self-assertion. It implies asserting oneself as an individual human being.<sup>108</sup>

This political end is very present in slave narratives, for James Olney argues that the writers of these stories include reflections upon slavery in their autobiographies ("I Was Born" 153). These digressions did not only have the function of condemning slavery, but also of demonstrating that blacks possessed intellect and were thus—according to the Enlightenment theory of humanity—human beings:

The judicious part of mankind, will think it unreasonable, that a superior good conduct is looked for from our race, by those who stigmatize us as men, whose baseness is incurable, and may therefore be held in a state of servitude, that a merciful man would not doom a beast to; yet you try what you can, to prevent our rising from a state of barbarism you represent us to be in, but we can tell you from a degree of experience, that a black man, although reduced to the most abject state human nature is capable of, short of real madness, can think, reflect,

---

cruel acts that could be committed upon my rights; and I received several very severe whippings for telling people that my name was William, after orders were given to change it" (*Narrative* 711). Wells Brown thought he was entitled to some rights, even though he well knew he was a slave, and understood his change of name as a violation of his identity, as if he had to disappear as a human being. Thus, when he obtains his freedom, he decides to recover his identity, the name William he should have never been deprived of (see *Narrative*, p. 714).

<sup>108</sup> It is interesting to note here that the naming process carried out by African Americans is related to naming practices in Africa. As Melville Herskovits argues, "[n]ames are of great importance in West Africa. . . . That is why, among Africans, a person's name may in so many instances change with time, a new designation being assumed on the occasion of some striking occurrence in his life, or when he goes through one of the rites marking a new stage in his development" (191). Thus, it seems that this,—as well as other—African custom was inherited by African Americans in the diaspora.

and feel injuries, although it may not be with the same degree of keen resentment and revenge, that you who have been, and are our great oppressors would manifest, if reduced to the pitiable condition of a slave. We believe if you would try the experiment of taking a few black children, and cultivate their minds with the same care, and let them have the same prospect in view as to living in the world, as you would wish for your own children, you would find upon the trial, they were not inferior in mental endowments. (Allen 45).<sup>109</sup>

Those slaves who had put into writing their autobiographies themselves had already demonstrated that they had intellect, for they were able to read and write, but they still felt the need to show proslavery agents that they could also reason, argue, and defend their opinions against the peculiar institution.

These digressions on the evil of slavery constitute the last element of the master outline of slave narratives as described by James Olney. Nevertheless, these narratives of bondage present other similarities that can be also deemed stylistic conventions. One of these conventions is the inclusion of paragraphs whose aim is to convince white readers of the truthfulness of the events narrated in the slave narrative. Although the inclusion of authenticating documents written by white people served the same purpose, many slave authors themselves write an initial paragraph in their narratives in which they argue for the veracity of their story, often adding that they have not exaggerated the facts in the least: “READER, be assured this narrative is no fiction. I am aware that some of my adventures may seem incredible; but they are, nevertheless, strictly true. I have not exaggerated the wrongs inflicted by Slavery; on the contrary, my descriptions fall far short of the facts” (Jacobs, *Incidents* 5).<sup>110</sup> If the truthfulness of the events

---

<sup>109</sup> Similarly, Henry Bibb concludes his *Narrative* with the following condemnation of slavery and assertion of blacks’ humanity:

I believe slaveholding to be a sin against God and man under all circumstances. I have no sympathy with the person or persons who tolerate and support the system willingly and knowingly, morally, religiously or politically. . . . And I here pledge myself . . . ever to contend for the natural equality of the human family, without regard to color, which is but fading *matter*, while *mind* makes the man (98; emphasis in original).

Lewis Clarke, on the other hand, finishes his personal story not with a condemnation of slavery, but with a strong criticism of slaveholders: “They are a SEED of *evil-doers—corrupt* are they—they have done abominable works” (634; emphasis in original).

<sup>110</sup> Henry Bibb also denies having exaggerated any of the facts narrated: “I hope that it may not be supposed by any, that I have exaggerated in the least, for the purpose of making out the system of slavery worse than it really is, for, to exaggerate upon the cruelties of this system would be almost impossible” (96). Briton Hammon writes a similar paragraph at the end of his narrative: “I think I have not deviated

related was believed by white readers, they would not accept the proclaimed goodness of slavery, or so slave authors conjectured.

Thus, ex slaves demonstrate that the main objective of their narratives is to help bring about the abolition of slavery. However, this objective was not only implicit, but clearly stated in the book:

Sincerely and earnestly hoping that this little book may do something toward throwing light on the American slave system, and hastening the glad day of deliverance to the millions of my brethren in bonds—faithfully relying upon the power of truth, love, and justice, for success in my humble efforts—and solemnly pledging my self anew to the sacred cause,—I subscribe myself,  
FREDERICK DOUGLASS (Douglass, *Narrative* 102).<sup>111</sup>

If readers believed that slave authors had presented a clear honest depiction of slavery, and that they had reasoned against slavery themselves, not through the mouth of a white abolitionist, they would understand that blacks were endowed with intellect. This would further prove that at least one of the arguments in favor of slavery was clearly refutable.

Apart from arguing for the truthfulness of their account and stating the purpose of their narratives, many slave narrators begin their autobiographies with an apology to the readers for their lack of literary abilities. They claim to have no “pretension to literature” (Bibb 12),<sup>112</sup> that their aim was not to write an artful book, but a plain story

---

from Truth, in any particular of this my Narrative, and tho' I have omitted a great many Things, yet what is wrote may suffice to convince the Reader, that I have been most grievously afflicted” (14).

<sup>111</sup> Most slave narrators express their wish for their writings to help bring about the abolition of slavery. Harriet Jacobs, on the other hand, simply aims at portraying the sad and terrible truth of the slavery system: “I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage . . . I want to . . . convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is” (*Incidents* 6). John Brown, in England when his book was published in London, has a different purpose for writing his narrative: to make enough money to buy some tools and make a living, but also “to show the world that a ‘nigger’ has quite as much will, and energy, and purpose in him, as any white man, if you only give him fair play,” and “to show [his] coloured brethren who are in Canada, that they might do something great for our people in the South, by turning their attention to growing cotton in the West Indies or in Africa” (394-395).

<sup>112</sup> Similarly, Olaudah Equiano apologizes “for addressing to you a work so wholly devoid of literary merit; but, as the production of an unlettered African . . . I trust that *such a man*, pleading in *such a cause*, will be acquitted of boldness and presumption” (7; emphasis in original). Equiano reiterates his lack of literary abilities in the final paragraph of his autobiography: “I am from the vanity of thinking there is any merit in this Narrative” (235). Even Frederick Douglass, whose *Narrative* is considered the master slave narrative talks about his work as “this little book” and his efforts towards the abolition of slavery as “humble” (*Narrative* 102). And his female counterpart, Harriet Jacobs, also shows a humble attitude towards *Incidents*: “I wish I were more competent to the task I have undertaken. But I trust my readers will excuse deficiencies in consideration of circumstances” (5).

of their lives. Critics like Vincent Carretta argue that the description of the slave author “as humble and unpretentious is quite conventional for writers of autobiographies during the period” (Equiano 239 n13). Thus, although one may have seen a contradiction in slaves’ literary modesty and their pride at their ability to read and write, slave authors were, on the one hand, meeting a literary convention (demonstrating, once again, their literary education) and, on the other, adding that their main purpose was to be faithful and not artful when narrating their experiences of slavery.

Once slave authors have introduced the purpose of their autobiographies and justified both their authorship and the veracity of their account, the story can begin. One of the most interesting moments of the narrative is the discovery of the author-narrator’s status as a slave. This is presented as a traumatic event in their lives, usually in their childhood. This realization is a tremendous shock that makes slaves look at people around them—black and white—differently. Many slave authors design a more or less dramatic scene in which they explain how they became acquainted with their condition as slaves:

The first time I was separated from my mother, I was young and small. *I knew nothing of my condition then as a slave . . .* I was taken away from my mother, and hired out to labor for various persons, eight or ten years in succession; and all my wages were expended for the education of Harriet White, my playmate. It was then my sorrows and sufferings commenced. It was then I first commenced seeing and feeling that I was a wretched slave, compelled to work under the lash without wages, and often without clothes enough to hide my nakedness” (Bibb 13-14; emphasis added).<sup>113</sup>

Nevertheless, other authors express their status as slaves from the very beginning of their narratives, thus eliminating this dramatic moment of realization: “I was born in Maryland, in 1812, and was a slave to a Mrs. Wagar” (John Thompson 417).<sup>114</sup> This dramatic quality *is* present in the narratives written by authors who had been born free (either in Africa or in America), kidnapped, and turned into slaves. Their narration is

<sup>113</sup>Harriet Jacobs’s description of his realization is less melodramatic: “I was born a slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away” (*Incidents* 11). In *My Bondage*, Frederick Douglass writes: “[I]t was a long time before I knew myself to be a *slave*. I knew many other things before I knew that” (142; emphasis in original).

<sup>114</sup>William Grimes writes, similarly, “I was born in the year 1784 . . . I was yet born a slave” (187).

usually more dramatic, for they had experienced freedom before losing it. Unlike other slaves, they *knew* what it meant to be free, and desperately tried to recover their status as such. Robert Voorhis complains about the kidnapping of black Africans in his slave narrative:

Kidnapping and consigning to slavery the free-born sons of Africa, soon became a traffic, in which some of almost every state in the union were engaged—and which was attended in many instances with acts of the most cruel barbarity—for no other fault or crime than that of being born black, in an unsuspecting moment they were seized, forced from their own country, conveyed to this, where husbands and wives, parents and children, were separated [sic] with as much unconcern as sheep and lambs by the butcher, and with the same indifference disposed of to the highest bidders!—and in bondage were for the most trivial offences made the subjects of torture and punishments to a degree that would cause humanity to recoil at a bear recital (Voorhis and Trumbull 31-32).

Voorhis is interested in the suffering of free Africans turned into slaves in Western countries, but does not mention the pain of those American free blacks who were kidnapped and sold into slavery, like Solomon Northup. Northup lived as a free man in New York until he was kidnapped and held as a slave in the south for twelve years. He narrates how he was assaulted by some men and that “when consciousness returned, [he] found [himself] alone, in utter darkness, and in chains” (180). He continues describing his suffering at the realization of what had happened:

Then did the idea begin to break upon my mind, at first dim and confused, that I had been kidnapped. But that I thought was incredible. There must have been some misapprehension—some infortunate mistake. It could not be that a free citizen of New-York, who had wronged no man, nor violated any law, should be dealt with thus inhumanly. The more I contemplated my situation, however, the more I became confirmed in my suspicions. It was a desolate thought, indeed. I felt there was no trust or mercy in unfeeling man; and commending myself to the God of the oppressed, bowed my head upon my fettered hands, and wept most bitterly (181).<sup>115</sup>

To these terrible acts came to contribute *The Fugitive Slave Act*, which established that all citizens, north or south, should turn in runaway slaves, that “any slave who escaped from slavery could be seized by a white person in any state of the Union and returned to

---

<sup>115</sup> Solomon Northup’s narration is particularly moving because it is written in the first person. Instances of black people being kidnapped into slavery, either from Africa, or from different states in north America can be found in the narratives by Olaudah Equiano, John Brown, Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass, and James W. C. Pennington among others.



slavery as legal property of the owner” (Reyes 59).<sup>116</sup> Ex slaves frequently criticize this law in those narratives published after 1850. Harriet Jacobs, for example, dedicates a whole chapter of *Incidents* to criticize the passing of this law and its consequences (287-292), and the ex slave James Watkins writes the following about the abomination of this regulation:

This atrocious and abominable law makes it a great crime, punishable with heavy fines and imprisonment, to be either directly or indirectly a party to the escape of a slave. It also appoints Commissioners and Assistant-Commissioners throughout the so-called Free States, to see after catching the fugitives, and returning them to their owners. These officers are, in addition empowered to call in the aid of free citizens in carrying out the provisions of this ‘sop’ to the slave states. Any one who refuses to assist in catching his fellow man and depriving him of liberty, is also exposed to a heavy penalty (32-33).<sup>117</sup>

Therefore, it is not surprising that many slave narrators write about the impossibility of trusting anyone with their plans to escape from bondage.

“Trust no one” were frequently-used words amongst slaves. Fugitive slaves could only trust themselves. They could not trust white people, for those who were not slaveholders were willing to turn slaves in for a reward. However, they could not confide in blacks either: if blacks were slaves, they could turn them in to avoid punishment or to be granted their owner’s favor; if they were free, they would be in serious legal trouble if found out helping fugitive slaves. William Wells Brown writes

---

<sup>116</sup> Nevertheless, ex-slaves were not completely at ease on free land before the passing of this law. According to Frances Smith Foster,

[e]ven before the Compromise of 1850 had codified the Fugitive Slave Law, freedom for any African American was perilous at best. Upon the demand of any person who asked, African Americans had to prove not only that they were not slaves but that they were entitled to be in the area. . . . African Americans often were allowed to stay only by obtaining a license. Such licenses were generally available only with the recommendation of a respected white person and upon the payment of exorbitant fees, and it was not uncommon, especially in border states, that these valuable papers were confiscated and the hapless soul jailed, or even worse, kidnapped and sold into slavery (“Historical Introduction” xxiv-xxv).

<sup>117</sup> On the other hand, the ex-slave William Green, trying to read more impartial, discusses both the good and evil of this law:

The infamous fugitive slave bill has caused a great deal of misery, and I truly believe done a great deal of good. In the first place it has given the first sound of freedom to many a poor slave, and been the unintentional means of their getting away to a land of freedom. It has also made us many friends; and some who would never have given the subject a thought, have been led by the working of this instrument, to look into this great subject, and to see the great enormity of the system, and have lifted up their voices against it (9).

about his distrust of both blacks and whites: “I had long since made up my mind that I would not trust myself in the hands of any man, white or colored. The slave is brought up to look upon every white man as an enemy to him and his race; and twenty-one years in slavery had taught me that there were traitors, even among colored people” (*Narrative* 711).<sup>118</sup> This distrust is based on many real instances of betrayal, which constitute another convention of slave narratives. The treason that hurt runaways most was that committed by other slaves or by free blacks. James W. C. Pennington relates the discovery of a traitor slave who acted as a spy for their master in the following terms:

I have stated that my master was watching the movements of our family very closely. Sometime after the difficulties began, we found that he also had a confidential slave assisting him in the business. This wretched fellow, who was nearly white, and of Irish descent, informed our master of the movements of each member of the family by day and by night, and on Sundays. This stirred the spirit of my mother, who spoke to our fellow-slave, and told him he ought to be ashamed to be engaged in such low business (119).<sup>119</sup>

Nevertheless, had it not been for many Quakers and abolitionist friends, many ex slaves could not have escaped.

Many slaves escaped knowing that, if caught, they might get killed. However, as stated in previous pages most bondmen preferred death rather than slavery, as slave narratives prove: “I should prefer death to hopeless bondage” (Douglass, *Narrative* 74). Slavery was worse than being dead; freedom was life. A very special moment in slave

---

<sup>118</sup> Frederick Douglass states in *My Bondage* that “[w]hite men have been known to encourage slaves to escape, and then—to get the reward—they have kidnapped them, and returned them to their masters” (234). But he also mentions the kind of betrayal slaves can find in fellow black men: “Jake told me . . . that the black people in New York were not to be trusted; that there were hired men on the lookout for fugitives from slavery, and who, for a few dollars, would betray me into the hands of the slave-catchers” (*My Bondage* 351). Similarly, Solomon Northup writes: “There was not another slave we dared to trust” (195).

<sup>119</sup> Solomon Bayley, betrayed by another black man, writes that after arriving in Richmond, “a coloured man pretended to be my friend, and then sent white people to take me up” (4). Nevertheless, there were also white traitors:

When I left my friend W. W. in Pennsylvania to go on north, I ventured to write a letter back to one of my brothers, informing him how I was; and this letter was directed to the care of a white man who was hired on the plantation, who worked in the garden with my father, and who professed a warm friendship to our family; but instead of acting in good faith, he handed the letter to my master. I am sorry that truth compels me to say that that man was an Englishman (Pennington 142).

narratives is that in which the slave makes the firm decision to escape: “FREEDOM or DEATH” (Lewis Clarke 720; emphasis in original).<sup>120</sup> This decision-making marks the *turning point* in the slave’s life, as it represents the incident that gives the slave the courage and determination to fight for his freedom and/or humanity. Lewis Clarke depicts this moment with the following words: “I had long thought and dreamed of LIBERTY; I was now determined to make an effort, to gain it. No tongue can tell the doubt, the perplexities, the anxiety which a slave feels, when making up his mind upon this subject” (618-619; emphasis in original).<sup>121</sup> The slave’s final decision to fight for freedom would also mark the beginning of the transformation of an item of property into a human being, the transition from chattel to man, the ascension in the Great Chain of Being.<sup>122</sup>

Thus, slaves restored their lost humanity by becoming free. This humanity that white people naturally had was lost under the harmful influence of the domestic institution, for, according to slaves and abolitionists, slavery was also dehumanizing for white people: “[S]lavery is a curse to the whites as well as to the blacks” (Jacobs, *Incidents* 81). Many slave narratives describe not only the effects of the peculiar institution on the human chattel, but also the destruction of white people’s—especially mistresses’—humane characteristics:

---

<sup>120</sup> Similarly, Henry Bibb writes: “I would be free or die” (21), showing his strong determination to become a free man, and that if he could not achieve this goal, he would rather die than continue living in bondage. John Brown makes a similar decision: “I set out once more on my travels, with a full determination either to gain my freedom, or to die in the attempt” (355). William Wells Brown writes about his fear of being taken back to slavery in similar terms: “The thought of death was nothing frightful to me, compared with that of being caught, and again carried back into slavery” (*Narrative* 712).

<sup>121</sup> Reverend James W.C. Pennington writes: “Although it was sometime after this event before I took the decisive step, yet in my mind and spirit, I never was a *Slave* after it (117; emphasis in original).

<sup>122</sup> Nevertheless, not all slave narrators consider this decision to escape as the turning point of their lives, the moment that marks their passage from *thing* to *man*. For Solomon Northup the turning point in his life is the episode in which he is kidnapped and turned into a slave, for he had been born free. Just before chapter II, in which he narrates his kidnap, he writes:

Thus far the history off my life presents nothing whatever unusual . . . But now I had reached a *turning point* in my existence—reached the threshold of unutterable wrong, and sorrow, and despair. Now had I approached within the shadow of the cloud, into the thick darkness whereof I was soon to disappear, thenceforward to be hidden from the eyes of all my kindred, and shut out from the sweet light of liberty, for many a weary year (176; emphasis added).

Similarly, for Frederick Douglass, the turning point in his life occurred when he decided not to be whipped, as stated on page 108.

My new mistress proved to be all she appeared when I first met her at the door,—a woman of the kindest heart and finest feelings . . . she had been in a good degree preserved from the blighting and *dehumanizing effects of slavery*. I was utterly astonished at her goodness . . . But, alas! This kind heart had but a short time to remain such. The fatal poison of irresponsible power was already in her hands, and soon commenced its infernal work. That cheerful eye, under the influence of slavery, soon became red with rage; that voice, made all of sweet accord, changed to one of harsh and horrid discord; and that angelic face gave place to that of a demon (Douglass, *Narrative* 36-37; emphasis in original).<sup>123</sup>

This trope is another example of the politics inside slave narratives. As stated above, the main purpose of these writings was to help bring about the abolition of slavery. Ex slaves probably thought that talking and writing about the cruelties of slaveholders towards their slaves, about the separations of black families, about the sexual abuses suffered by female slaves, etc. might not be enough to convince white people to fight for the abolition of the slavery system. They probably thought that white people's minds might be more strongly affected if they understood the evils that slavery caused on the white population, if they understood that this cruel system of human bondage could corrupt innocent minds of white girls, boys, women, and men; that not only were black people turned into less than human, but also whites lost human attributes like kindness, trust, and affection under slavery; that they were "not inherently cruel" but that it was "the system of slavery that corrupt[ed] them" (Sharpe 130). This contrast between kind and cruel slaveholders in slave narratives is very significant: whereas kind masters and mistresses are presented with religious, angelical expressions, cruel ones are described as having animal-like qualities, behaviors resembling those of dogs and snakes.<sup>124</sup>

<sup>123</sup> Frederick Douglass also illustrates how slavery corrupts white children: "It was a common saying, even among little white boys, that it was worth a half-cent to kill a 'nigger,' and a half-cent to bury one" (*Narrative* 32). Similarly, Charles Ball, states in his *Narrative*: "It seems to be a law of nature, that slavery is equally destructive to the master and the slave; for, whilst it stupefies the latter with fear, and reduces him below the condition of man, it brutalizes the former, by the practice of continual tyranny; and makes him the prey of all the vices which render human nature loathsome" (265).

<sup>124</sup> Henry Bibb writes of a white man that he was "what might be called one of the *watch dogs* of Kentucky," and explains why: "There was nothing too mean for him to do. He never blushed to rob a slave mother of her children, no matter how young or small. He was also celebrated for slave selling, kidnapping, and negro hunting" (39-40). William Wells Brown writes about "swarms of planters" (*Narrative* 694) examining the slaves to be sold at the auction. Frederick Douglass also writes about his overseer, Mr. Gore, that "I shunned him as I would have shunned a *rattlesnake*" (*My Bondage* 200; emphasis in original), and called Mr. Covey—his master—"the snake" (*My Bondage* 265). Solomon Northup finds it "difficult to determine which I had most reason to fear—dogs, alligators or men!" (227).

Nevertheless, animal-like qualities are also attributed to slaves in the personal histories of bondmen. In this case, however, slave authors simply imply that bondmen are considered and valued in the same way as animals, that many people do not regard them as more important or valuable than animals.<sup>125</sup> This animal-like consideration was applied in a special way to female slaves. As stated above, the standing legislation of the time established that slave mothers' children had to become slaves as well. Thus, the owners of slave women encouraged them to find themselves a slave man to have children, thus regarding them as mere *breeders*. On many occasions, however, and as explained above, slaveholders raped their female slaves "too obviously to administer to their own lusts, and make a gratification of their wicked desires profitable as well as pleasurable" (Douglass, *Narrative* 17). This practice became customary in the southern states.<sup>126</sup> Although a particularly difficult topic to include in a nineteenth-century piece of writing, many slave narratives include a reference—sometimes very short—to these "violent depredations on the chastity of female slaves" (Equiano 104). John Brown narrates the kidnap, rape, and sale of a black female in the following terms:

The other incident was the stealing of a young negro girl. An old lady whose name I do not remember, and who was going to Georgia, traveled with the drove for the sake of society. She was accompanied by her waiting-maid, a young woman about twenty years of age and of smart appearance. When we stopped at night, the old lady would be driven to some planter's house to ledge, and her horses be sent back to feed with ours. The girl remained with us . . . Finney determined to steal this girl. One morning, we being then on our way through South Carolina, the old lady's horses were sent as usual, to the house

<sup>125</sup> John Jea writes that the horses rested about five hours a day, more than slaves: "[T]hus did the beasts enjoy greater privileges than we did" (4). The comparison between slaves and cattle is frequently found in previous descriptions of slave auctions. Another instance is given in Chloe Spear's *Memoir*: "[N]ow they were to be disposed of like cattle taken to a Fair, to the highest bidder" (Rebecca Warren Brown 16). Robert Voorhis uses similar words: "I was conducted to a place expressly appropriated to the sale of human beings! Where, like the meanest animal of the brute creation, I was disposed of at public auction to the highest bidder" (Voorhis and Trumbull 14). Milton Clarke describes the scene of a sale as follows: "Among the articles and animals put upon the catalogue, and placed in the hands of the auctioneer, were a large number of slaves" (638).

<sup>126</sup> Although most slave narratives refer to the rape of African American female slaves, many African women were raped during the Middle Passage. According to Angelita Dianne Reyes, "the sexual exploitation of African women . . . was an integral part of the Atlantic crossing. The ritual mass rape aboard ship was labeled *la pariade* . . . Many women were pregnant, had given birth, or had killed the unnamed New World babies 'without skin' (meaning 'mulatto') by the time they reached the plantations" (73). Descriptions of this kind of abuses suffered by African women can be found in a 1854 book edited by Malcolm Cowley: *Being A True Account of the Life of Captain Theodore Canot, Trader in Gold, Ivory, and Slaves on the Coast of Guinea* (232).

where she had staid the night, and we went on. Instead, however, of keeping the direct road, Finney turned off and went through the woods, so that we gave the poor girl's mistress the slip. She was then forced to get up in the waggon with Finney, who brutally ill-used her, and permitted his companions to treat her in the same manner. This continued for several days, until we got to Augusta, in the state of Georgia, where Finney sold her (329-330).

The sentimental novel, very popular amongst white women, emphasized virtues like sentimentality, love, virtue, and Christianity. Thus, although the rape of slave women was commonly known by white women, the narration of this abuse would have shocked the (female) readers of slave narratives. Thus, slave authors had to decide whether to write openly or covertly about the abuses suffered by bondwomen. Some found this issue so difficult to describe that decided to simply narrate the physical abuses these women had to endure, eliminating all references to female slaves' sexuality. Many slave men had wives, sisters, or mothers who had suffered sexual abuses and felt it really distressing to tackle this issue in their personal histories, for, although rape was clearly destructive for the slave woman, it also cause a great distress to male slaves, who felt powerless to defend their female relatives from white men's abuses.

Slave men could do nothing to stop or revenge the abuses endured by their mothers, sisters, or wives.<sup>127</sup> Thus, "the impact of the rape on the conquered women was twofold: it dishonored the women and by implication served as a symbolic castration of their men" (Lerner, "Women and Slavery" 176). Their inability to protect their women would haunt them and destroy the relationship between them: "Rape is destructive to family and male/female relations. Its pain is destructive to gender relations within the community, not an isolated suffering visited upon women" (Chinosole 123). Many slave narratives comment on this sexual abuse: "[F]emale virtue

---

<sup>127</sup> Josiah Henson provides an exception in *Truth Stranger than Fiction*, explaining how his father was able to prevent his wife's—Henson's mother—rape by fighting the overseer:

It seemed the overseer had sent my mother away from the other field hands to a retired place, and after trying persuasion in vain, had resorted to force to accomplish a brutal purpose. Her screams aroused my father at his distant work, and running up, he found his wife struggling with the man. Furious at the sight, he sprung upon him like a tiger. In a moment the overseer was down, and, mastered by rage, my father would have killed him but for the entreaties of my mother, and the overseer's own promise that nothing should ever be said of the matter (3).

This case was, however, the exception, as many slave narratives show.

trampled under foot with impunity” (Bibb 26). The ex slave Henry Bibb narrates how his wife is taken “to a private house where [Garrison] kept female slaves for the basest purposes” (51). Many female slaves fought to preserve their chastity, but they well knew that their masters could make their lives—and their relatives’ lives—miserable if they did not give in to their sexual advances.



“The abolition of the Slave Trade, Or the Inhumanity of Dealers in human flesh exemplified in Captain Kimbers treatment of a Young Negro Girl of 15 for her Virgin Modesty”<sup>128</sup>

As examined in previous pages, there were also cases in which slaveholders felt a strong attraction and towards one particular female slave and tempted her with a better life if she became his concubine. She had to decide between being ill-treated—and possibly sexually abused anyway—on a plantation, or voluntarily become their master’s lover, for which they would be granted certain privileges: “[T]he choice put before many slave women was between miscegenation and the worst experiences that slavery

<sup>128</sup> Jenny Sharpe includes this abolition cartoon published in 1792—courtesy of Wilberforce House Museum, Kingston upon Hull—in *Ghost of Slavery*. In this picture, a captain is punishing a slave girl for resisting his sexual advances. Sharpe argues that “the words of the sailor stringing her up (‘My Eyes Jack our Girls in Wapping are never flogged for their modesty’) allude to the hypocrisy of the proslavery advocates who maintained double standards for black and white women” (122).

had to offer” (Deborah Gray White 34). Concubinage became, thus, a means of survival in a hostile society,<sup>129</sup> especially for racially-mixed women, the favorite among white men.

Nevertheless, many female slaves were criticized, even by male slaves, for giving themselves up this way: “Indeed, the greater portion of the colored women, in the days of slavery, had no greater aspiration than that of becoming the finely-dressed mistress of some white man” (William Wells Brown, *Clotelle* 2). This accusation has been largely criticized<sup>130</sup> and can be refuted on two bases: first, concubinage was a means of survival for slave women, a means of resistance from the oppressive slavery system: “The stereotype was that they yearned for financially secure white men who could provide economic, if not legal, escape from oppression” (Reyes 67). Secondly, unlike white women, female slaves were not educated to remain chaste until marriage. As William Wells Brown himself states in *Clotelle; or, The Colored Heroine*<sup>131</sup> (1867) that “no safeguard was ever thrown around virtue, and no inducement held out to slave-

<sup>129</sup> Harriet Jacobs, who resisted her owner’s sexual proposals for years, justifies her choosing a white man as her sexual partner with the following words: “It seems less degrading to give one’s self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment” (*Incidents* 84-85). For Jacobs, having a white lover was a means of empowerment, a way of resistance to her master. Although she defends her decision against the opinion of white women arguing that “the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards as others” (*Incidents* 86), having a white lover made Jacobs stronger in the eyes of her master, the person she wanted to defeat.

<sup>130</sup> William Wells Brown includes this sentence in the following extract:

When we take into consideration the fact that *no safeguard was ever thrown around virtue, and no inducement held out to slave-women to be pure and chaste*, we will not be surprised when told that immorality pervades the domestic circle in the cities and towns of the South to an extent unknown in the Northern States. . . . Indeed, *the greater portion of the colored women, in the days of slavery, had no greater aspiration than that of becoming the finely-dressed mistress of some white man.* (*Clotelle* 2; emphasis added).

Alice Walker, for whom “any sexual intercourse between a free man and a human being he owns or controls is rape” (*In Search* 305), vehemently criticizes William Wells Brown for the paragraph above:

Notice how adroitly Brown places the responsibility for rape, child abuse, incest, and other “immoralities” squarely on the shoulders of the persons least responsible for them, being enslaved and powerless . . . Nor does Brown consider the millions of raped, enslaved African women who had no likelihood whatsoever of becoming “finely-dressed,” or ever attaining “mistress” status . . . These feverishly imagined “quadroon” women were not real, and had more to do with the way white men *chose* to perceive black women than the way black men perceived them or black women perceived themselves (*In Search* 298-299; emphasis in original).

<sup>131</sup> First published in 1853 as *Clotelle, or the President’s Daughter*, this was William Wells Brown’s first novel.



women to be pure and chaste” (2). Or, as Harriet Jacobs puts it, “it is deemed a crime in [the female slave] to wish to be virtuous” (*Incidents* 49). Thus, although female slaves were not proud of their concubinage, their guilt was strongly alleviated. In fact, some even considered it an honor to be offered the possibility of escaping the cruelest forms of slavery in the hands of a white lover, or at least this is what the abolitionist leader Thomas Cooper writes in *Facts Illustrative of the Condition of the Negro Slaves in Jamaica* (1824):

I have been assured, on the best authority, that the White men are not more ready to connect themselves with Black or Brown women, than the latter are to receive their unlawful amours. Indeed, they are said to think it an honour to be thus employed. They regard the Whites as a superior species, and are, therefore, flattered by any attentions from them. Hence, in the estimation of their own community, that is to them an honour which, in a moral respect, ought to be viewed with abhorrence. But here, again, it may be fairly asked, whether they are not, in a great degree, objects of pity? Their ignorance must be taken into the account, and also, that it is quite out of their power to enter into the married state. Slavery sinks them beneath the condition of women, and to slavery a great part of their immoralities must be imputed (40).

In this extract, Cooper justifies female slaves’ immoral behavior by blaming it on slavery, a system that corrupts “all principles of morality” and on slaves’ ignorance of religious principles. He underscores women’s strength, for many of them used their sexuality as a powerful weapon to improve their situation within the slavery system, and to defeat white men; for, instead of letting white men abuse them at their own will, they appropriated their own sexuality. Nevertheless, the representation of these women in European American writings differs greatly from their depiction by (male) slave narrators: whereas slave narrators present them as sexually desirable for white men, “in dominant culture, Black women are rarely depicted as authentic objects of erotic and romantic desire. They are most frequently depicted as social deviants or sexual objects outside accepted legal and aesthetic forms” (Chinosole 100). According to Western writers, white men could not have loving feelings for black women, only sexual desires.

Moreover, men were not to blame for these sexual desires; it was black women who aroused white men. They were not victims, but provokers.<sup>132</sup>

This extended belief would be the cause of yet another suffering these women would have to endure: their mistress's jealousy. The white man's wife could not bear thinking that her husband had sexual relationships with a black female slave, and, since she could not fight her husband, she would take revenge on the slave. Thus, the female slave would be doubly abused: sexually by her master, and physically by her mistress. In both cases, there would also be a psychological damage. On the other hand, the situation of the children of these interracial encounters was very difficult, especially if they looked like their white fathers, for mistresses did not only revenge on her husband's favorite female slave, but also on their illegitimate children.<sup>133</sup> Therefore, slaveholders frequently sold their mulatto children and their mothers to other planters in order to keep them away from their wives' wrath.

Another common topic in slave narratives is the inclusion of a reference to the value of bondmen. When slaves were sold, their market price was determined, on the one hand, by the slave's sex. Thus, "[t]he value of male slaves was primarily determined by the work they performed for whites. The value of female slaves derived not only from their work, but also from their ability to bear and rear children" (Valerie Smith, "Introduction" xxx-xxxii).<sup>134</sup> As a consequence, the slave woman was doubly objectified: first, as a slave, she was nothing but property, a free worker, a beast of burden; second, as a *woman* slave, she was a breeder whose task was to increase her owner's stock of slaves. On the other hand, the value of *female* slaves was also

---

<sup>132</sup> See page 64 for a revision of the myth of Jezebel applied to black women.

<sup>133</sup> See page 40, footnote 13, for a description of a failed attack on a new-born slave by his mistress on account of being her husband's son.

<sup>134</sup> About the value of slaves, Harriet Jacobs distinguishes between the value of ordinary slaves—"These God-breathing machines are no more, in the sight of their masters, than the cotton they plant, or the horses they tend" (*Incidents* 16), and the value of slave women—"Women are considered of no value, unless they continually increase their owner's stock. They are put on a par with animals" (*Incidents* 76). William Goodell quotes an advertisement for the sale of a black female slave published in the *Charleston Mercury*, the leading political paper of South Carolina, that reads "She is very prolific in her generating qualities, and affords a rare opportunity to any person who wishes to raise a family of healthy servants for their own use" (*The American Slave Code* 84).

determined by the shade of black of their skin, being more valuable the ones with a lighter color “because they [were] sold to be concubines for white Americans” (Ripley 438). Thus, when ex slaves write about the price they had reached at auctions, two different forces fight inside them: on the one hand, being sold at an auction put slaves in the same position as cattle, for they were examined and sold to the highest bidder like animals: “I was soon surrounded by strange men, who examined and handled me in the same manner that a butcher would a calf or a lamb he was about to purchase, and who talked about my shape and size in like words—as if I could no more understand their meaning than the dumb beasts” (Mary Prince 4).<sup>135</sup> On the other hand, those slaves who were sold for a high price pride themselves on their value, since this determined that they were strong, healthy, valuable workers.<sup>136</sup> For once in their lives, they found white people’s praise and appreciation, and they felt so proud that they had to put it in writing.

To conclude this analysis on the conventions of slave narratives, I will focus on the final paragraphs of these works. As stated above, many slave narratives conclude with an appendix containing documents and letters whose aim is to determine the veracity of the events told by the ex slave in his narrative,<sup>137</sup> or with a poem or song related to slavery.<sup>138</sup> Nevertheless, these elements may be included at the beginning of the autobiography instead. Apart from these documents and poems, most of these

---

<sup>135</sup> William Grimes compares himself with a horse: “After that I again refused to eat any thing at all, but pretended to be sick all the time. I also told Frankee, to tell my master, that I was subject to such turns every spring, and I should not live through this. She told him, which frightened him very much, thinking he should lose me. (which would grieve him as much as it would to lose a fine horse of the same value) (202). Another fact that can prove the fact that slave auctions were very much like the sales of animals in the market is that slave women were frequently priced by their capacity of having children and sold as *breeders*. Charles Ball describes in these terms the sale of female slaves at an auction: “[The stranger] asked the prices of the two pregnant [slaves]. Our master replied, that these were two of the best breeding-wenches in all Maryland . . . that the first was already the mother of seven children, and the other of four” (291; emphasis in original).

<sup>136</sup> Solomon Northup was very conscious of his value as a slave and defends in his personal history that he was “too costly a chattel to be lost” (205). When Mary Prince is sold at a slave auction she writes proudly that “the people who stood by said that I had fetched a great sum for so young a slave” (4). On the other hand, John Brown writes about his disappointment when he learns that he is going to be sold for a small amount of money: “In truth I was not much to look at. I was worn down by fatigue and poor living . . . and my hair was burnt to a brown red from exposure to the sun. *I was not, however, very well pleased to hear myself run down*” (330; emphasis added).

<sup>137</sup> See “Appendix B: Documents and Maps,” pp. 387-390, for a selection of these authenticating documents.

<sup>138</sup> See “Appendix C: Slave Songs and Poems on Slavery,” p. 401, for an example of a poem appended to a slave narrative.

writings end with a sketch of the ex slave's present life. In this account, the author can refer to different issues. He can, on the one hand, narrate how his life has changed from slavery to freedom, what he does for a living, and what he does for the abolitionist cause. This is the case of William Wells Brown, who concludes his autobiography with the following words:

In the year 1842, I conveyed, from the first of May to the first of December, sixty-nine fugitives over Lake Erie to Canada. In 1843, I visited Malden, in Upper Canada, and counted seventeen, in that small village, who owned their escape to my humble efforts.

Soon after coming North, I subscribed for the *Liberator*, edited by that champion of freedom, William Lloyd Garrison. I labored a season to promote the temperance cause among the colored people, but for the last three years, have been pleading for the victims of American slavery (*Narrative* 715).<sup>139</sup>

Sometimes slave authors write about the difference between what they expected life would be like in the free states and the reality they have found, including racist attitudes met by white people.<sup>140</sup> Slaves lived with the hope of obtaining freedom, of being able to possess their own lives, to make a living for themselves and their family. Sometimes, their hopes were not met with reality, for many difficulties awaited them in the free states:<sup>141</sup> the difficulty of finding a job for which they would be paid as a white worker;

---

<sup>139</sup> Similarly, Milton Clarke explains that he and his brother Lewis “began to lecture on the subject of slavery” at a meeting at Austinburg. He continues adding that “from that time to the present, we have had more calls for meetings than we could attend. We have been in eight different states, and hundreds of thousands have listened with interest to the story of our wrongs, and the wrongs of our countrymen in bondsof” (651).

<sup>140</sup> John Brown writes “I found that there is prejudice against colour in England, in some classes, as well as more generally in America” (381). Olaudah Equiano also faces racism in the West Indies:

Hitherto I had thought only slavery dreadful; but the state of a free negro appeared to me now equally so at least, and in some respects even worse, for they live in constant alarm for their liberty, which is but nominal, for they are universally insulted and plundered without the possibility of redress; for such is the equity of the West Indian laws, that no free negro's evidence will be admitted in their courts of justice (122).

Moreover, after *The Fugitive Slave Act* was passed in 1850, the freedom of runaway slaves was constantly endangered.

<sup>141</sup> William Grimes, for example, writes about his present situation in the last paragraph of his narrative in quite a disheartening tone: “I hope some will buy my books for charity, but I am no beggar. I am now entirely destitute of property” (232). Here, the strength and pride of the ex-slave is also present in the fact that, despite his situation being so pressing, he is “no beggar.” Nevertheless, slaves' expectations were sometimes confused because of what slaveholders told them about the free territories: “The slaveholders are continually telling how poor the white people are in the free states, and how much they suffer from poverty; no masters to look out for them” (Lewis Clarke 633). People in the north were the living proof that slavery was not necessary for the wealth of a nation. For slavery to continue it had to prove its value, and slaveholders could not let slaves know that the people in the north were as rich as them, or they would rebel and escape. Thus, slaveowners argued that the people in the north were poor and that slaves lived much better than them.

the difficulty of starting a family or reuniting their own; the difficulty of living in a racist society; and the danger of being caught and taken back to slavery. For most slaves, these difficulties, these dangers, were welcome if freedom accompanied them.<sup>142</sup>

On other occasions, the slave narrative ends with the author's final comments on the institution of slavery, like Henry Bibb, who writes: "I believe slaveholding to be a sin against God and man under all circumstances. I have no sympathy with the person or persons who tolerate and support the system willingly and knowingly, morally, religiously or politically (98)". Common are also reflections on the (im)possible reunion of the slave's family,<sup>143</sup> and the expression of gratitude to the slave's friends, abolitionists, and God:

I will conclude my narrative by simply recording my gratitude, heartfelt and inexpressible, to God, and to many of my fellow-men, for the vast improvement in my condition, both physical and mental; for the great degree of comfort with which I am surrounded; for the good I have been enabled to effect; for the light which has risen upon me; for the religious privileges I enjoy, and the religious hopes I am permitted to cherish; for the prospects opening to my children, so different from what they might have been; and, finally, for the cheering expectation of benefiting not only the present, but many future generations of my race (Henson, *The Life* 755).<sup>144</sup>

<sup>142</sup> Mary Prince vehemently denies the fact that slaves are content with their condition:

I am often much vexed, and I feel great sorrow when I hear some people in this country say, that the slaves do not need better usage, and do not want to be free. They believe the foreign people, who deceive them, and say slaves are happy. I say, Not so. How can slaves be happy when they have the halter round their neck and the whip upon their back? and are disgraced and thought no more of than beasts?—and are separated from their mothers, and husbands, and children, and sisters, just as cattle are sold and separated? . . . *All slaves want to be free*—to be free is very sweet. . . . The man that says slaves be quite happy in slavery—that they don't want to be free—that man is either ignorant or a lying person (22-23; emphasis added).

<sup>143</sup> Charles Ball complains of the impossibility of seeing his family again: "For the last few years, I have resided about fifty miles from Philadelphia, where I expect to pass the evening of my life, in working hard for my subsistence, without the least hope of ever again seeing my wife and children" (485). Harriet Jacobs also has words for her family after she obtains her freedom: "I and my children are now free! . . . The dream of my life is not yet realized. I do not sit with my children in a home of my own. I still long for a hearthstone of my own, however humble. I wish it for my children's sake far more than for my own" (*Incidents* 302-303).

<sup>144</sup> Similarly, Moses Roper concludes his narrative with the following words:

I thank my dear friends in England for their affectionate attentions, and may God help me to show by my future walk in life, that I am not wanting in my acknowledgments of their kindness. But above all, to the God of all grace, I desire here before his people, to acknowledge that all the way in which he has led me, has been the right way; and as in his mercy and wisdom, he has led me to this country, where I am allowed to go free (520).

With the slave in his present and usually more comfortable situation, the narrative can come to an end. It may not have been the typical happy ending for a white reader, but for a black slave, freedom was the best possible happy ending.

To sum up, the authors of slave narratives were very conscious of the literary, stylistic and thematic conventions of this genre and adjusted to them very closely. They considered it their duty, since their objective was to contribute to the abolitionist cause. These authors probably thought that many voices fighting for the same goal using the same arguments would be more powerful than fighting separately for the abolition of slavery. By following these conventions they further contributed to the expansion and popularity of these works of literature both in the United States and in England.

Nevertheless, the conventions of the slave narrative genre are firmly constructed on the basis of *male* authors' writings. Female slave narratives constituted a very small percentage (around twelve percent) of the total slave narratives, and the characteristics of this mode of writing were elaborated using the most well-known and significant male slave narratives. Female authors would find it hard to adjust to the conventions of this genre because bondwomen had experiences of bondage of their own (such as sexual abuses and motherhood), which male slave authors had neglected in their writings due to the fact that they were more interested in the political side of slavery (more related to male experience) than in matters more closely related to sentimentality (usually associated to female experience). As it will be examined in the following chapter, the first African American ex slave woman to write her autobiography would be Harriet Jacobs. She would be the author who would introduce the first-person female voice in the slave narrative genre, thus presenting the narration of slave-experience from a different perspective and paving the way for future African American female writers.

### CHAPTER 3

## **GENDER AS DIFFERENCE: HARRIET JACOBS'S *INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL* (1861) AND THE LITERARY TRADITION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS**

---

She is a mother, pale with fear,  
Her boy clings to her side,  
And in her kirtle vainly tries  
His trembling form to hide.

He is not hers, although she bore  
For him a mother's pains;  
He is not hers, although her blood  
Is coursing through his veins!

He is not hers, for cruel hands  
May rudely tear apart  
The only wreath of household love  
Than binds her breaking heart.

(From "The Slave Mother", by Frances E. W. Harper)<sup>1</sup>

Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam . . . you nothing at all. . . . I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook . . . but I'm here.

(From *The Color Purple*, by Alice Walker)

As seen in the previous analysis of slave narratives, black authors presented typical aspects of slave women's lives—the difficulty of appropriating their own sexuality, the roles they played in the Big House, the peculiarities of living in a sexist society, etc—as perceived by black males, that is, in the third rather than in the first

---

<sup>1</sup> The whole poem can be read in "Appendix C: Slave Songs and Poems on Slavery," p. 403.

person. Female slaves found it really hard to use their own voice to relate their hardships in the first person: as black slaves, they were denied the right to education; as females, they had to perform a domestic (rather than public) role in society. If it was difficult for black men—especially for ex slaves, since they were in constant fear of being recaptured into slavery—to write and publish their works, it was even more difficult for black women—especially former bondwomen—due to the fact that they were supposed to adopt a domestic role. Thus, female ex slaves had to rely on the good will and oratory abilities of white abolitionists and male African American speakers and preachers, the only people who could present their sufferings in public pro-abolition meetings. Consequently, the personal voice of female slaves would remain unheard for decades until the publication of the first writings by ex slave women.

In the first part of this chapter, several writings by black women—ex slaves included—will be analyzed so as to determine whether Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is an original contribution to African American letters, or whether her autobiography is just another story of slavery written by a black woman. In order to do so, it is essential to determine the degree to which Harriet Jacobs was influenced by previous writers, for she had learned to read and write<sup>2</sup> and had access to abolitionist writings, slave narratives, and other works of literature while she was working as a nurse-housemaid to the family of Nathaniel Willis.<sup>3</sup> Jacobs's literacy allowed her to be "well acquainted with many of the attitudes and assumptions of the Anglo-American literary establishment" (Foster, "Resisting *Incidents*" 62), to which the fact that she lived in Willis's household contributed enormously.

Being black and a woman, Harriet Jacobs would have probably been more influenced by African American female writers than by authors from a different

---

<sup>2</sup> Her first mistress had taught Harriet Jacobs "to read and spell" (Jacobs, *Incidents* 16), and she had later improved her writing skills by herself: "One day [Dr. Flint] caught me *teaching myself* to write" (Jacobs, *Incidents* 49; emphasis added).

<sup>3</sup> Nathaniel Willis has been described as "a newspaper editor with proslavery sentiments" (Foreman 86), an "editor and writer whose home was a rendezvous for New York literati" (Foster, "Resisting *Incidents*" 62).



background. Jacobs might have felt that these women's concerns and problems were similar to hers, that they had experienced—and were still experiencing—similar subjugation on account of their race and gender. Thus, the political and literary works by African American women might have exerted some influence on Jacobs's autobiography, providing her with effective communicative tools to meet her narrative purposes. Consequently, it is essential to analyze the works by outstanding figures in black female letters such as Phillis Wheatley and Frances E. W. Harper in order to determine the influence they might have had on Jacobs's literary creation.

After having analyzed Harriet Jacobs's contribution to the development of African American women's literature, a thorough examination of this work will be carried out. Emphasis will be placed on the similarities and differences between traditional male slave narratives and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, especially on the way in which Jacobs adapted the most important thematic aspects of the typical slave narrative as written by a former bondman (the turning point in the ex slave's life, the quest for literacy, the means of resistance employed against slavery and the enslavers, and the way in which female slaves are depicted) in *Incidents*. This analysis will furthermore serve the purpose of determining the differences between the slave narratives that portray male bondage and those which relate bondwomen's experiences.

I will conclude this study by analyzing black female slaves' writings in the United States after the publication of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. It is essential to determine whether any other African American women in bondage wrote an autobiography of similar characteristics to Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents*, for this will clarify the status and originality of this personal history within African American female slave narratives. Moreover, it is also important to determine whether more modern African American women authors have developed contents or stylistic devices already present in *Incidents* so as to establish Harriet Jacobs's significance within African American women's literature, not only during her lifetime, but also in present-day North America.

1

**AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS AND FEMALE SLAVE NARRATIVES BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR.**

Harriet Jacobs began writing *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in 1853, though it would not be published until 1861, almost a decade later.<sup>4</sup> By the time of the publication of Jacobs's autobiography, several African American women—some of whom had been slaves as well—had already written several works of literature. Among these works are poems, essays, newspaper articles, and autobiographies, which might have provided Jacobs with a model for her personal history. If true, this fact would diminish the originality of Jacobs's work. Thus, in order to determine whether Jacobs was, in fact, a forerunner of African American women's literature in general, and of female slave narratives in particular, an analysis of the works by black women writers published before *Incidents* must be carried out.

---

<sup>4</sup> Jacqueline Goldsby summarizes the writing and publication process of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* as follows: "Harriet Jacobs began working on the manuscript in 1853 and completed it in 1858. After several failed negotiations with publishers in the United States and in England, Jacobs contracted for the book to be privately printed in America, in 1861" (38 n26). The fact that Harriet Jacobs decided to openly disclose her extramarital sexual relationships, a topic that would shock many of her readers—especially the white women readers to whom the narrative is addressed—might have influenced its late publication.

## 1.1. AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR

### *AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN POETS*

The first African American female writers were the poets Lucy Terry and Phillis Wheatley. Both Terry and Wheatley were born free in Africa, kidnapped and turned into slaves in America. Although the latter was the first African American to *publish* a book of poems, Terry was the first black female to *write* a poem, though it would not be published until almost a hundred years later. Despite the facts these poets had been slaves and were able to read and write, they did not write autobiographies narrating their experiences as slaves, but decided to express their feelings through poems. The other famous African American woman poet that will be examined in this section, Sarah Louise Forten, was never a slave, but a member of a respected black family settled in the North. Her poems focus on women's rights as well as on abolitionist concerns. Nevertheless, as a free black woman, her poems on slavery do not present first-hand accounts of bondwomen's experiences but simply complain of the situation slaves—especially female slaves—were in.

**Lucy Terry's** "Bar's Fight" is the earliest known work of literature by a black female in the United States. As stated above, Lucy Terry (c. 1730-1821) had been born in Africa, kidnapped, and sold into slavery in the United States. Terry would have her freedom restored when Abijah Prince, a wealthy free black, bought her freedom and married her in 1756. Despite having to endure the racism of the time after her emancipation, she did not hide, but fought for her rights within the community.<sup>5</sup> The poem "Bar's Fight," written in rhymed couplets, is the only one she published, though

---

<sup>5</sup> In *The History of Deerfield*, Sheldon presents Lucy Terry as a locally recognized poet who probably organized poetry readings at her house. He also records her linguistic facility before the Supreme Court—before which Terry argued her side of a land ownership—and the governor's council—in which Terry convinced the governor's council to insure that her family and property received the same protection as those of other villagers when some neighbors tore her fence down (Foster, *Written by Herself* 27).

not during her lifetime.<sup>6</sup> “Bar’s Fight” recreates an Indian ambush of two white families on August 25, 1746, in a section of Deerfield, Massachusetts, known as “the Bars.”<sup>7</sup> This incident would be called the Deerfield Massacre. In this poem, Terry “conveys genuine sympathy for the white men and women who died in the fight” (Gates and McKay 137), a sympathy probably based on the relationship between slaves and masters in the community where she lived.<sup>8</sup>

In order to determine Lucy Terry’s influence on Harriet Jacobs’s work some considerations must be taken into account. First, despite having lived under the yoke of slavery for many years, Terry’s only poem does not deal with either slavery or the experiences of female slaves, but describes an Indian ambush and its consequences. Second, the experiences Terry had as a slave were not similar to those of Jacobs’s: Terry experienced a milder type of slavery than Jacobs because slavery did not have such a cruel form in the part of the country where she lived. Third, Terry’s literary aptitude was not well-known outside Massachusetts, and “Bar’s Fight,” her most famous poem, was not published until 1855, two years after Jacobs had started writing *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Thus, Lucy Terry cannot be said to have exercised any influence on Jacobs’s personal history.

**Phillis Wheatley** (c. 1753-1784) gained popular recognition as a poet during her lifetime, being the most well-known eighteenth-century African American woman poet. Since, as stated above, she was the first published African American poet,<sup>9</sup> her work marks the origin of black literature in America: “[T]he birth of the Afro-American literary tradition occurred in 1773, when Phillis Wheatley published a book of poetry” (Gates, “In Her Own Write” vii). According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., not only did Wheatley initiate the Afro-American literary tradition, but also “black woman’s literary

---

<sup>6</sup> “Bar’s Fight” was published in 1855, but it is thought to have been written almost 100 years earlier and preserved orally in local memory.

<sup>7</sup> Colonial term for the meadows.

<sup>8</sup> As the Deerfield historian George Sheldon explains, in this area slaves “became in measure members of the family holding them” (905).

<sup>9</sup> With the book’s publication, Phillis Wheatley also became the second American woman to have written and published a book of verse.

tradition” (“In Her Own Write” x). As previously stated, Phillis Wheatley had been born in Africa and was brought to Boston as a slave in 1761.<sup>10</sup> Encouraged by the family that owned her, she learned to read and write and would eventually become a Boston sensation when she wrote a poem on the death of the preacher George Whitefield in 1770. Her book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, published in London<sup>11</sup> in September 1773, collected 38 poems on different issues. The book demonstrated Wheatley’s knowledge of classic Greek, Latin, and English poets, and reflected her religious beliefs.

Nevertheless, Phillis Wheatley had to demonstrate white audiences that she had written the poems herself, something which, as explained in the previous chapter, white authors did not need to do. For that purpose, Wheatley—as future authors of slave narratives would do—introduces prefatory documents (whose purpose was to demonstrate the authenticity of her work) written by white people. She would, therefore, inaugurate this convention of African American letters.<sup>12</sup>

Despite her popularity, Phillis Wheatley’s influence on Harriet Jacobs would have probably been minimal, for, although she was a slave herself, her poems do not directly address the issue of slavery. Frances Smith Foster discusses this aspect of Wheatley’s poetry as follows:

Modern critics have regarded this as indifference to racial oppression, transference of hope from physical to spiritual freedom, or even worse, acquiescence to doctrines of racial inferiority. Some have suggested that Wheatley, having left Africa at age five or six and having enjoyed an unusually protected life as the personal servant of a well-to-do intellectual and relatively liberal Boston family, had little sense of enslavement. Yet close reading of the text in the context of Wheatley’s personal situation and the general climate of the times makes it clear that Phillis Wheatley had deep personal concerns about slavery and freedom. The perspectives from which she explored the ideas of freedom and responsibility were both religious and secular. Her poems, especially when considered in light of her letters and the biographical facts

---

<sup>10</sup> Wheatley would finally obtain her freedom about a month before the book was published. Her master, John Wheatley, who had sponsored Wheatley’s book himself, emancipated her. Nevertheless, Phillis Wheatley decided to remain with her former owners tending them in their last years.

<sup>11</sup> As stated in previous pages, some African Americans published in England before in the United States. See page 115, footnote 4.

<sup>12</sup> Although Briton Hammon wrote the first slave narrative, his narrative was only fourteen pages long and did not include authenticating documents.

available, are autobiographical in that they reveal her personal experiences and chronicle her resistance to socially imposed roles. Wheatley imbued her poetry with the sensitivity and passion of a slave woman as she revised traditional poetic forms and language to accommodate new messages (*Written by Herself* 31).

For a female slave, writing poems was an act of resistance against her role as chattel and as a woman. Thus, the very act of writing was, for Wheatley, an act of resistance and opposition against slavery and sexism. Though her poems may not directly address the issue of slavery, she does not—cannot—forget the evilness inherent in the domestic institution because it has been part of her life. Through her act of writing Wheatley tries to refute the proslavery premise that blacks have no reason, intellect, or spirituality. If she managed to prove this to be a wrong belief, one of the proslavery arguments would disappear, and would probably manage to convince white people of the injustice of the enslavement of black human beings.

**Sarah Louise Forten** (1814-1898?), who used pseudonyms such as “Ada,” and “Magawisca” contributed essays and poems to antislavery journals like *The Liberator* and *The Abolitionist* during the 1830s. As stated above, she was not a slave, but a member of a highly respected free black family of the North.<sup>13</sup> The Fortens were active abolitionists who took part in the founding and financing of at least six antislavery organizations, and their home was always open to visiting abolitionists. Sarah Forten, her sisters, and her mother helped establish the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society (December 1833), the country’s first biracial organization of women’s abolitionists, which drew all of its black members from the city’s elite.

In her writings, Sarah Forten argues for both abolitionism and women’s rights. One of her most celebrated poems is “Lines Suggested on Reading ‘An Appeal to Christian Women of the South,’ by Angelina Emily Grimké”<sup>14</sup> (1836), a poem that “has gained significance within the African-American literary tradition as a feminist

---

<sup>13</sup> The daughter of James Forten, a sailmaker and one of the wealthiest African American men in nineteenth-century America, Sarah Forten was “freeborn, northern, urban, and middle class” (Foster, *Written by Herself* 53).

<sup>14</sup> A. E. Grimké (1805-1879) was a southern-born abolitionist and feminist writer.

articulation of cross-race sisterhood in the early nineteenth century” (Gernes 229). In this poem, Forten asks white feminist authors to work on behalf of black females in bondage. She would also write other antislavery poems such as “The Slave,” “The Slave Girl’s Address to Her Mother,” and “The Slave Girl’s Farewell.”<sup>15</sup>

The sentimental tone of these poems, as well as Sarah Forten’s active fight against slavery, might have inspired Jacobs’s style, for both authors cleverly combine the sentimental with the political.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, Forten’s limitation resides in her—fortunate—lack of first-hand experience of slavery. Like black male authors, she could only imagine what it was like to be a female slave in the southern states. Unlike black male authors, the protagonists of her poems were frequently slave women instead of bondmen.

### *AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN ESSAYISTS*

Continuing the path opened by Lucy Terry and Phillis Wheatley, other African American women wrote different articles, essays and poems in different publications, especially abolitionist newspapers. These women were, like Sarah Forten, members of free black families, so their knowledge of slavery was second-handed. Thus, though Mary Ann Shadd Cary, Ann Plato, and Charlotte Forten—Sarah Forten’s niece—actively fought for the abolition of the domestic institution, their accounts of the cruelties related to slavery were not autobiographical. Therefore, their writings did not describe personal experiences but the hardships of their brothers and sisters in bondage, using a critical rather than a personal perspective. Nevertheless, these works must be analyzed, even if briefly, in search for similarities with *Incidents*, for Harriet Jacobs was

<sup>15</sup> These poems were all written during the 1830s. “The Slave Girl’s Farewell,” and “The Slave Girl’s Address to Her Mother” have been included in “Appendix C: Slave Songs and Poems on Slavery,” pp. 404-405, for their interest in relation to the topic of this dissertation.

<sup>16</sup> One cannot forget the political side of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, which can be seen, for example, in the chapter that Harriet Jacobs devotes to criticize the Fugitive Slave Law (285-292).

well acquainted with abolitionist writings and might have been influenced by these African American women's writings.

**Ann Plato** (1820-?) was, according to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., the first African American to publish a book of essays. *Essays, Including Biographies and Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose and Poetry* (1841), her only known book, is the second published by a black woman<sup>17</sup> in the United States. *Essays* reflects the New England Puritan values to the extent that some critics from later generations have found Plato's essays and poetry to be overly moralizing<sup>18</sup> as well as routine and lacking in originality. Many of them have also derided her for not mentioning the issue of slavery in America, as contemporaries like Frances Harper and Charlotte Forten did. The only reference to slavery in her book concerns its abolition in the West Indies in 1838. *Essays* also contains some poetry and biographies of female friends and acquaintances. It is also interesting to note that Reverend James W. C. Pennington—who wrote his autobiography<sup>19</sup> in the form of a slave narrative—wrote some words of commendation that are included in the introduction to this book.

Although, according to Frances Smith Foster, Ann Plato had written and marketed her book to “black people, especially young black girls” (*Written by Herself* 20) the impact of this work on Harriet Jacobs would have been limited, for, as stated above, Plato does not tackle the issue of slavery in her writings, and Jacobs's main purpose for writing her narrative was to encourage white women to fight for the abolition of the slave system. Had Jacobs found any inspiration in the reading of Plato's work, it would have been the emergent from their sisterhood as black women attempting to improve the lives of those of their kind.

---

<sup>17</sup> Some critics have seen in her poem “The Native American” suggestions that may lead to the conclusion that her father was a Native American. In fact, little is known about her life except that she was “an educated young woman” (Foster, *Written by Herself* 54).

<sup>18</sup> Ann Plato's essays and poems deal with topics such as “Benevolence,” “Education,” “Employment” and “Religion.” In them, Plato mainly preaches on personal moral improvement and the necessity of leading a holy life.

<sup>19</sup> *The Fugitive Blacksmith; or, Events in the History of James W.C. Pennington, Pastor of a Presbyterian Church, New York, Formerly a Slave in the State of Maryland, United States* (1849).



**Mary Ann Shadd Cary** (1823-1893), attorney, educator, and speaker, was the first black American editor of an American newspaper, founding Canada's first antislavery newspaper, the *Provincial Freeman*, in 1853.<sup>20</sup> After the passing of *The Fugitive Slave Act* in 1850 she decided to emigrate to Canada West, where she criticized the racism that existed among white Canadians.<sup>21</sup> Shadd Cary would return to the United States in 1863. She fought for women's rights by affiliating with the National Woman Suffrage Association,<sup>22</sup> attending the Colored National Labor Convention in 1869, helping found the Colored Women's Progressive Franchise Association in 1880, gaining admission to Howard Law School, and finally receiving her bachelor of laws in 1883. Shadd Cary fought for the abolition of slavery, and sought to deconstruct the boundary of race: "She insisted that racial difference must be viewed not as a fundamental biological difference that separates peoples hierarchically but simply as a superficial difference of complexion" (Peterson 99). She preached against those who took advantage of freed slaves and tried to teach them how to be self reliant. Shadd Cary argued that "if biological theories of race are to be abandoned, so must those social constructions which derive from them and which condition the lives of African Americans, categorizing them as intellectually inferior, developmentally retarded, morally depraved" (Peterson 100). By creating works of literature, writing essays, articles, and poems, Shadd Cary and other black authors proved that African Americans were not inferior in intellect.

It is curious to note that Mary Ann Shadd Cary's narrative style does not resemble the conventions of female writings. Carla L. Peterson records how some of her readers sent her letters addressing her as "Dear Sir" or "Brother Shadd" and argues that "Shadd Cary often sought to distance herself from the local women, sarcastically referring to their 'apathy' and 'feebleness.'" The intensity of her contempt for such

---

<sup>20</sup> *The Provincial Freedom* was a weekly publication that encouraged blacks to emigrate to Canada where freedom and human rights were awaiting them.

<sup>21</sup> Mary Ann Shadd Cary published *A Plea for Emigration* to educate North American blacks about emigrating to Canada (1852).

<sup>22</sup> Shadd Cary was the first black woman to cast a vote in a national election.

conventionally feminine behavior may perhaps be attributed to the negative criticism she was forced to tolerate as a woman operating in the male sphere of the black press” (109). Harriet Jacobs, on the other hand, tried to transform the genre of the sentimental novel, a literary creation that was particularly devoured by female readers, because it could not fully represent her life as a slave. Jacobs considered that, as a woman author writing to a female audience, she would have to employ a similar style to that of other women writers, a style that female readers would find easy to understand. Thus, Jacobs was able to write with a recognizable woman’s voice, to use stylistic conventions traditionally found in the literature produced by white women, but to further adapt these conventions to suit her political and narrative purposes.

Everything considered, Mary Ann Shadd Cary’s influence on Harriet Jacobs and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was probably more than limited. On the one hand, Jacobs did not want to be a slave, but never expressed any desire for living in Canada, which is what Shadd Cary recommended black people to do. She wanted to be free in her native country. On the other hand, their literary style is completely different. Jacobs’s writing can easily be identified as a woman’s due to the use she makes of a sentimental and melodramatic tone, for example, whereas, as stated above, Shadd Cary’s style resembles the political tone of men’s writings.

**Charlotte Forten** (1837-1914), Sarah Louise Forten’s niece, was also a free educated black woman who followed the example of her aunts and grandmother by joining the local antislavery committee and by publishing occasional poems and essays. She became the first African American to teach in the Salem (Massachusetts) schools. During the Civil War, she taught freed African Americans at Port Royal, South Carolina, participating thus in an experimental program for educating former slaves. In 1876 she married Reverend Francis James Grimké, a former fugitive slave, and their home became a center for those who loved literature, art, and music and hated racism and oppression. Her diary, *The Journals of Charlotte Forten*, is “one of the few available by a free Negro” (Toppin 498). Despite the fact that it was not intended for

publication, this diary has eventually become her best known work, for, even though she also wrote poems, essays (travel descriptions and art appreciations), and letters to the editor (printed in white anti-slavery newspapers and magazines like the *Liberator*, the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, and the *Atlantic Monthly*) they never gained as much popularity as her *Journals*.<sup>23</sup> In her diaries Charlotte Forten records public events, like the capture of a fugitive slave under the so widely criticized (especially by black writers, preachers, and public lecturers) *Fugitive Slave Act*, an episode that is included in *Journal One*:

Thursday, May 25 [1854]

Did not intend to write this evening, but have just heard of something that is worth recording . . . Another fugitive [Anthony Burns] from bondage has been arrested; a poor man, who for two short months has trod the soil and breathed the air of the "Old Bay State," was arrested like a criminal in the streets of her capital, and is now kept strictly guarded,—a double police force is required, the military are in readiness; and all this is done to prevent a man, whom God has created in his own image, from regaining that freedom with which, he, in common with every other human being, is endowed. I can only hope and pray most earnestly that Boston will not again disgrace herself by sending him back to a bondage worse than death (in Gates and McKay 475).

These lines could have been written by Harriet Jacobs herself, for her feelings on *The Fugitive Slave Act* were similar, and, as previously stated, were put in writing in one whole chapter of *Incidents*. Nevertheless, Jacobs could not have read Charlotte Forten's diary before she published her slave narrative, for, as stated above, *The Journals* was not published until years after the author's death.

Charlotte Forten's most significant publication during her lifetime, "Life on the Sea Islands," appeared in two parts in *The Atlantic Monthly* (May and June, 1864). Harriet Jacobs might have read some of Forten's abolitionist pieces and poems published in different newspapers and magazines, like "The Slave Girl's Prayer."<sup>24</sup> However, this poem could not have influenced Jacobs's autobiography, for, though both

<sup>23</sup> According to Carla L. Peterson, Charlotte Forten "never fully emerged as a public speaker or writer," although she "repeatedly stated her ambition to acquire a public voice through either speaking or writing" (177) in her diary.

<sup>24</sup> *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, January 14, 1860. This has been described as "a fictional narrative that rehearses the conventional plot of a slave girl—perhaps a tragic mulatta—who begs to die rather than be sold into slavery" (Peterson 182).

pieces of writing are similar in content, *Incidents* was written—though not published—before the publication of this poem. Thus, although Charlotte Forten and Harriet Jacobs shared abolitionist concerns, as well as a particular preoccupation for female slaves' hardships, the former could not have been very determinant on the latter's slave narrative. Furthermore, the descriptions of the situation endured by slave women described in her writings are not based on personal experiences but on second-hand accounts, for Forten never lived as a bondswoman.

Consequently, Ann Plato, and Mary Ann Shadd Cary, and Charlotte Forten exerted only a partial influence on Jacobs's life and work. They probably inspired her with their strong arguments for the abolition of slavery, and with their depiction of women slaves as courageous strong beings, not as delicate women whose life was as easy and simple as that of white women. Plato, Shadd Cary, and Forten led a public life—being thus exceptional cases in nineteenth-century America, and spoke as black, and as women. They fought both racism and sexism in their writings, like Harriet Jacobs. Nevertheless, whereas these essayists were born free and enjoyed liberty during their entire lives, Jacobs was a slave until she managed to obtain her freedom. They could write about what it meant to be a black woman, but Jacobs could write about what it meant to be a black *slave* woman.

### ***AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN NOVELISTS***

*Our Nig*, published in 1859, is considered the first novel by an African American woman. Written by Harriet Wilson, *Our Nig* began a new literary path that would be followed by other black women, like Frances E. W. Harper. Though both Wilson and Harper depict the hardships of female slaves in their writings, these women had not been slaves, and had, therefore, not endured these hardships in the first person. They could imagine and fictionalize the experiences of such women, but never present them as their own, something that Jacobs *could* and *did* do. Therefore, both Wilson and

Harper had to use the third person to narrate the most significant events in the life of different slave women, something which is seen as an advantage by Carla L. Peterson:

Third-person fictional narration . . . provided greater narrational possibilities than traditional autobiography. By explicitly inscribing the third person within the text, such narration effectively opened up the enunciatory gap closed down by slave autobiography, acknowledging the split between narrating and narrated personae. African-American writers took advantage of this split, embodying themselves in the text as narrator and character(s). As narrators they could adopt authoritative omniscient perspectives denied them by history. As characters they could turn the uncomfortable alienation of slave autobiography to their advantage by distancing themselves from painful past events, and encourage personal expansion by reinventing themselves as singular or multiple selves. Fiction also enabled them to provide different perspectives on a given subject, especially the self. Finally, through fictional characterization these writers worked to dismantle essentialized notions of black subjectivity, conceptualize identity as socially constructed, and explore the multiple facts of African-American experience (149).

The greatest disadvantage lies on the limited reliability of these texts for their readers. Readers knew that these novels were based on real events, but they could feel that these authors might have exaggerated in their depiction of slave life. Slave narratives, were, for most readers, the truest depiction of slavery and, in the narratives of bondage, slave women were not primary characters. Though both Wilson and Harper gave slave women voice in their novels, neither of them spoke about first-person experiences, and thus, the first-person voice of the slave woman would remain unheard.

**Harriet E. Wilson** (1825-1900),<sup>25</sup> author of *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in a Two-Story White House, North* (1859), was, for many years considered the first African American woman novelist until Henry Louis Gates, Jr. discovered Hannah Crafts's manuscript.<sup>26</sup> In any case, unlike Crafts, whose book was not published until 2002, Wilson's work *could* have influenced Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents*. This novel is a mixture of autobiography, fiction, and exposé, but the most

<sup>25</sup> Source: *The Harriet Wilson Project* at <<http://www.harrietwilsonproject.org/>> Other scholars differ as regards birth and death dates. Carme Manuel, for example, dates Wilson's birth in 1808 and her death in 1902 (*Guía Bibliográfica* 89). In *Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers*, Cynthia J. Davis suggests the following dates 1827?-1863?

<sup>26</sup> Nowadays, there is great controversy as regards who was the first African American woman to write a novel. Although critics like Henry Louis Gates, Jr. conclude that Hannah Crafts's *The Bondswoman's Narrative* is the first novel written by a female slave, others, John Bloom among them, are not so convinced of the authenticity of this novel ("Literary Blackface? The Mystery of Hannah Crafts").

relevant characteristic of this work for the present study is its “representation of a black servant girl as a sympathetic and admirable figure” (Gates and McKay 439). This portrait of a slave woman would signify a great shift in the depiction of black females in American fiction.

*Our Nig* presents the life of a free mulatto woman in the antebellum North, who fights to achieve economic independence and self-respect. This novel resembles the style of the sentimental novel,<sup>27</sup> although it has two significant differences with this genre. First of all, Harriet Wilson revises the figure of the *mulatta*, generally the offspring of the relationship between a white man and a black female slave like in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In *Our Nig*, however, the protagonist's mother is a white woman, seduced and abandoned, who finally marries a black man: “This was an important difference in the literary depiction of the mulatto and it was an unusual coda to the plot of the seduction novel” (Foster, *Written by Herself* 87). This fictional change would have probably bewildered Wilson's (white female) readers, but it is something that Wilson does consciously, maybe in an attempt to change white people's attitude towards African Americans.<sup>28</sup> Secondly, unlike in the sentimental novel, marriage does not bring the protagonist the security that it usually symbolized for middle-class white women. This is an interesting change in the plot of the sentimental novel because, as stated earlier, Jacobs claims that her story does not end in the usual way, with marriage, but with freedom. Jacobs seems to confirm Wilson's proposal: marriage does not provide black women with happiness or security. The protagonist's victory is represented with the escape from the “two-story white house, North,” rather than with a *good* marriage, which would be the typical victorious ending of the sentimental novel.

---

<sup>27</sup> *Our Nig* has also some connections with spiritual autobiographies since, in this novel, the strength of character and moral resolution to attain a sense of dignity of the protagonist is founded on religious faith.

<sup>28</sup> The *mulatta* that Harriet Wilson portrays inverts the convention that children must follow the condition of the mother (white woman) and follows the condition of her father (free black) by becoming “Our Nig.” For Carla L. Peterson, “this inversion underscores the hypocrisy of those laws that define civil status according to the mother and affirms the inescapability of race as the primary social category in the free North” (165).

Although this novel has given rise to many praises, some scholars have criticized Harriet Wilson for her lack of commitment with the abolitionist cause. Carla L. Peterson argues that “Wilson’s text is marked by an angry acknowledgement of Northern race prejudice and a refusal to compromise with white abolitionism that, given the realities of the 1850s, was highly unrealistic” (154). Wilson did not have the same political purpose as Harriet Jacobs, for, unlike the latter, Wilson was not—and had not been—a slave, but a free black woman who lived in the North. Thus, whereas Harriet Wilson does not claim for the abolition of slavery, Harriet Jacobs clearly states that she wants to convince her readers into fighting for this objective.

Nonetheless, *Our Nig* might be considered a precursor of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in the sense that both their authors find it impossible to use the plot of the sentimental novel to depict the reality of black (slave) women, and agree on the fact that marriage is not the desirable happy ending for an African American woman. In this light, it can be concluded that, although the sentimental novel was not the appropriate genre for either work, it provided their authors with a model that would be modified according to their narrative needs. Both Jacobs and Wilson, thus, *signify* on a typical white female literary genre, establishing, at the same time, the differences between black and white women.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, it must not be forgotten that Harriet Jacobs started *Incidents* at about the same time that Harriet Wilson was writing *Our Nig*. This novel was published in 1859, that is, two years before *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and, since Jacobs finished her manuscript in 1858, it seems that the similarities between these two women’s works (style and feminist concerns) emerge from their personal experiences—despite the fact

---

<sup>29</sup> R. J. Ellis further discusses the inappropriateness of the conventions of the sentimental novel when narrating the experiences of slaves in *Harriet Wilson’s Our Nig: A Cultural Biography of a “Two-Story” African American Novel*. Ellis argues that “[s]entimental women’s fiction becomes incoherent when equating white females with slaves. In turn, African American writing awkwardly incorporates sentimental motifs of triumphal escape and climactic religious conversion—awkwardnesses rooted in experiences of discrimination upon reaching the North” (170).

that Jacobs had, unlike Wilson, been a slave—rather than from the influence one might have exerted on the other.

**Frances Ellen Watkins Harper** (1825-1911), born to free parents in Maryland—at the time a slave state, was an abolitionist public lecturer,<sup>30</sup> author of four novels, several volumes of poetry,<sup>31</sup> and numerous stories, essays, and letters. Her writings “have often been summarized as sentimental, moral, and chaste” (Foster, “Resisting *Incidents*” 60). Though she herself had never lived in bondage, Harper wrote some poems on slavery like “The Slave Mother (A Tale of the Ohio),”<sup>32</sup> “The Slave Auction,” “The Fugitive’s Wife” (the three of them published in 1854), “Bury Me in a Free Land” (1864), and “Free Labor” (1874).<sup>33</sup>

Frances Harper’s most famous work is the novel, *Iola Leroy: or, Shadows Uplifted*, the story of a woman trying to overcome racism during and after the Civil War. In this novel, “Harper explores the significance of racial identity for the question of political obligation during the Reconstruction Era by presenting us with the experience of various refugee slaves who are faced with the prospect of joining the Union Army” (Goldman 250 n26). This novel would not, however, be published until 1892, long after Harriet Jacobs had published *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Thus,

---

<sup>30</sup> According to Frances Smith Foster, Frances Harper “worked with the Underground Railroad, staged sit-ins on public transportation, and supported John Brown’s Harper’s Ferry attack. During Reconstruction, Frances Harper went around the South lecturing on political and social change”. Her lectures explain “why the fate of the country rested in its solution to the economic problems of poor whites and blacks, the suffrage demands of women of all races, and a variety of other major issues” (“Resisting *Incidents*” 60). During her career as public lecturer, Harper spoke to varied audiences, often both black and white, but sometimes just black.

<sup>31</sup> Frances Harper published several collections of poems, like *Poems of Miscellaneous Subjects*, *Sketches of Southern Life*, *Moses: A Story of the Nile*, *Light Beyond Darkness*, *The Sparrow’s Fall*, *The Martyr of Alabama and Other Poems*, *Atlanta Offering*, and *Poems* between 1854 and 1900. Nevertheless, according to Carla L. Peterson, “[p]oetry—in both its recited and printed forms—was just such an experimental activity for Watkins Harper, serving as a structural frame through which she could fashion herself in the public role of poet-preacher in order to articulate her vision of nineteenth-century America” (125).

<sup>32</sup> “The Slave Mother” recalls the slave Margaret Garner’s murder of her child in Ohio in 1856, which would further inspire Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*.

<sup>33</sup> Frances Harper’s most celebrated poem is, however, “Eliza Harris,” a poem written as response to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and whose publication in 1853 would grant her national notoriety.



Harper's influence on Jacobs would have been limited to previous works, especially her poems on slavery.

Nevertheless, Harper also published a short story entitled "The Two Offers" (1859)—the first short story published by an African American woman—which is of some interest in this study. In "The Two Offers," Harper argues that marriage is but one option for a woman of intelligence and social conscience, something that reminds us of Harriet Wilson's and Harriet Jacobs's writings. However, these three works appeared very close in time and the similarities between them, as stated above, probably emerged from the feminist concerns that these authors shared.

### *AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN AUTOBIOGRAPHERS*

The African American women authors previously discussed did not write and publish their personal histories, but depicted the life and experiences of female slaves second-handedly in poems, essays, articles, and novels. There were, however, some black women who *did* write autobiographies before the publication of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Some of these autobiographical works by African American women exist in a limbo between the spiritual autobiography<sup>34</sup> and the slave narrative: some critics consider them spiritual autobiographies; others, however, include them in bibliographical records of narratives by ex slaves. These are the cases of Jarena Lee's *The Life and Religious Experiences of Jarena Lee, A Colored Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel* (1836), Zilpha Elaw's *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experiences, Ministerial Travels and Labours of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw* (1846), Nancy Prince's *A Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince. Written by Herself* (1850), and Maria W. Stewart's *Productions of Mrs. Maria Stewart* (1835). If one takes into account that none of these authors had lived as slaves, but as free black women, the

<sup>34</sup> As examined in the previous chapter, spiritual autobiographies were personal histories in which the author described his conversion into a religious life following the pattern sin-repentance-spiritual backsliding-rebirth.

classification of these writings as slave narratives can be deemed erroneous despite the fact that their authors argued for the abolition of slavery. As it will be seen in the following pages, these works were, in fact, more alike to spiritual autobiographies although they do not perfectly adjust to this genre either.

**Jarena Lee** (1783-ca. 1850) wrote two autobiographies in the manner of the spiritual biography: *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, a Coloured Lady* (1836), and *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel* (1849). Lee was not only interested in the spiritual and religious, but was also very concerned with abolitionist issues, for she joined the New York Anti-Slavery Society in 1840, in an attempt to fight for the rights of her brothers and sisters in bondage.

The publication of Jarena Lee's first autobiography was a slow process, for "although Lee had kept a private journal for many years, she did not contemplate literary publication until after 1831, when Richard Allen's death signaled the loss of her most powerful protector within the AME Church" (Peterson 78). *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee* (1836) is a very small book (about twenty pages long). Nevertheless, as Frances Smith Foster notes, it is a very significant work in African American women's literature:

*The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, a Coloured Lady* is an excellent example of literature by African American women published during the early nineteenth century. Currently, it is believed to be the next separately published volume by an African American woman after that by Phillis Wheatley. The precedent for African American women to use their experiences as literary subjects began with Lucy Terry and Phillis Wheatley, and by the time that Lee published her work, it was not unusual for African American women to write biographical essays and to publish letters and personal essays. But as the earliest extant personal narrative written and published by an African American woman Lee's narrative represents a new development in that literary tradition (*Written by Herself* 58).

In *The Life* Jarena Lee appropriates the genre of spiritual autobiography and the tradition of Christian conversion experience to write about her own religious experiences and her efforts to transmit these experiences to other—Anglo-American and

African American—men and women, so that they could also convert. The spiritual progression from sin to rebirth is here depicted in a traditional way:

First there is a sudden and traumatic conviction of sin; the sinner repents and begins to strive for grace or a sign of redemption. During this time the penitent experiences a series of temptations and struggles with overwhelming guilt, often including suicidal urges or physical illness. Then comes a personal conviction of salvation and, eventually, sanctification. Finally, the narrator relates the experiences of this sanctified life as that of an evangelist who suffers, and succeeds, along lines similar to those of Jesus Christ and His early disciples (Foster, *Written by Herself* 61).

Nevertheless, Jarena Lee goes a bit further in her narrative, arguing for the right of women to preach. Lee complains of the difficulties she encountered to become a preacher,<sup>35</sup> and tries to pave the way for future women preachers. In her 1849 narrative (almost three times as long as the first one), Jarena Lee adds details about her journeys as a preacher, such as the miles she had traveled,<sup>36</sup> the passages from the Scriptures she had used as bases for her preaching, and the number of converted people she had met. This book also includes, on the one hand, reflections upon the need to provide African American children with some education so that they could become pious, industrious and moral; and on the other, abolitionist discourses, in some of which both the abolitionist and the religious are combined.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Jarena Lee converted to Christianity in 1804, and later joined Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) in Philadelphia, the church founded by Richard Allen in 1794. Lee heard her call to preach in 1811, and was initially rebuffed by Allen, who had earlier turned down the request of a white Methodist woman to preach. He felt at the time that there was no call for women to preach. Jarena married in the same year, to Joseph Lee, a pastor in a community close to Philadelphia. She was thus obliged to leave her own religious society and join her husband's. According to Peterson, Lee's writings suggest "that opposition to her preaching was to come not only from the official church hierarchy but also from the domestic sphere. Joseph Lee's refusal to acquiesce to her wish to relocate illustrates the degree to which marriage obliged her to subserve her own spiritual needs to those of her husband, resulting in a loss of community, loneliness, and finally ill health caused by her 'discontent'" (73). In 1818, Jarena Lee's husband died, and she returned to Philadelphia, where she again approached Allen about preaching. This time he gave his support, after a Sunday where she interrupted the guest preacher with an exhortation about Jonah.

<sup>36</sup> Lee traveled sixteen hundred miles in four years, preaching to women and men, whites and blacks, free and slaves, sometimes twice on the same day. Thus, God's call obliged her to separate from her family, leaving her son in her mother's care.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, the following extract from Jarena Lee's *Religious Experience*: "Doubtless the cause is good, and I pray God to forward on the work of abolition until it fills the world, and then the gospel will have free course to every nation, and in every clime" (90).

Therefore, although Jarena Lee's autobiographies have been included in bibliographical records of slave narratives, her personal histories are very different from the typical male and female slave narratives. In fact, Lee was never a slave, and could never have written a first-hand account of the experience of a bondwoman. Thus, her reflections on the situation of black women have nothing to do with Harriet Jacobs's representation of female slaves, for Lee only discusses the issue of slavery arguing for the need of its abolition, without indicating the differences between the conditions of male and female slaves.

Another black woman who published a spiritual autobiography in the nineteenth century was **Zilpha Elaw** (1790-?). Elaw was born around Philadelphia, and raised by a Quaker family. As a woman, Elaw found it hard to preach and/or to have a public function in society.<sup>38</sup> As a (free) black person, she was prone to endure racist attacks and discrimination. However, Elaw managed to overcome difficulties and wrote her autobiography, which was published in England, and which constituted a great success for a black woman at the time. In her autobiography, entitled *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labours of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw, an American Female of Colour* (1846), Elaw records her speeches and the gospel message that she had preached, providing detailed descriptions of the camp meetings she had attended. Nevertheless, she also had a literary purpose for writing. According to Frances Smith Foster, "her dedication implies that it was also intended as a literary contribution" and her work "was intended to counter the bad literature of her time and to exemplify right writing" (*Written by Herself* 84). In her autobiography, Elaw cautions white readers against the evil writing of the press by including in her work the following advice: "Take heed what you read: as a tree of knowledge, both of good and evil, is the press. . . . Above all, shun and infidel, obscene or disloyal newspaper press" (52). Thus,

---

<sup>38</sup> Zilpha Elaw converted to Christianity in 1808 and married Joseph Elaw in 1810. He was not a religious man, which made Elaw's spiritual demonstrations a bit difficult. She felt her call to preach the gospel in 1817, at a camp meeting. In 1823, her husband died of consumption, and Elaw started a school for black children, which she later closed to start her itinerant ministry. Like Jarena Lee, Elaw traveled quite widely in the country preaching to blacks and whites, men and women, free and bound. She also traveled to slave-holding states, where she learned that she was in danger of being caught and sold into slavery.

Zilpha Elaw proves that she is very aware of the importance of putting words in print, of the power of words to influence people's minds and feelings. Writing a spiritual autobiography—whose purpose was clearly didactic—was, therefore, the most appropriate and useful thing to do, at least from Elaw's point of view.

Zilpha Elaw's *Memoirs* is one of the best examples of those autobiographical writings in which two issues are the most powerful throughout the book: gender and race. In this sense, Elaw's *Memoirs* anticipates Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents*, for both claim authority from their "specific racial experiences by which to instruct and to encourage white readers concerning their personal lives" (Foster, *Written by Herself* 85). Nevertheless, Elaw's *Memoirs* is not a slave narrative but a spiritual autobiography, and more similar to Jarena Lee's work than to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Both Lee and Elaw describe their early lives—before conversions—as conflicting times; they both describe their conversion and sanctification; they both disclose struggles with their married lives and their calls to preach; they both explain how they finally managed to fulfill God's will; they both describe their varied journeys, and the kinds of people and experiences they encountered along the way; they both recount stories where they, individually, or with others, had visions of Jesus or angels; they both unravel the way in which God spoke directly to them; and they both claim that God's laws are more important than men's customs. Both Elaw and Lee understood their writing as a continuation of their public sermons and traveled throughout the United States preaching to mixed audiences. They transmitted their experiences in their autobiographies, which, though presenting a black woman narrator—as Jacobs would later do, do not describe the daily dangers of black slave women, for neither of them had lived as slaves.

*A Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince*, in some reference books classified within the slave narrative and in others within the spiritual autobiography genre—just like Zilpha Elaw's and Jarena Lee's autobiographies,

narrates the life experiences of **Nancy Prince** (1799-?), a free black woman.<sup>39</sup> Due to financial difficulties, Nancy Prince worked as a “chamber maid” (Nancy Prince 17) and later “went to learn a trade” (Nancy Prince 20) in order to support her family. When she found that her efforts were in vain, Prince decided to leave the United States and travel with her husband to Russia. Traveling to Russia would signify a turning point in her life, a period of reflection in which she would confront the question of identity and the perception of race in a foreign society. After experiencing life as a black servant, her marriage would bring about a significant change in status to that of a European traveler. After nine years in Russia, she returned to the United States in 1833, for her health was very much affected by the harsh climate of this country.<sup>40</sup> On her return to Boston, Nancy Prince developed her own thoughts and sentiments to help those in need. She met Reverend J. W. Holman, who was a Free Will Baptist, whom she befriended and stayed with. It was during the stay with him that she took a keen interest in an Anti-Slavery Society. This would ignite her trip to help those in need in Jamaica.<sup>41</sup> Although her struggles to change the life of unfortunate ones in Jamaica failed because of corruption and civil unrest, it can be said that her efforts and keen urge to create change would have not been as intense and deep if it had not been for her journeys abroad to Russia.

Nancy Prince's *Narrative*, published in 1850 and reprinted in 1853 and 1856, provides a detailed account of her childhood and her trips to Russia and Jamaica. The

---

<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, Nancy Prince's grandparents had been kidnapped from Africa and sold into slavery.

<sup>40</sup> Nancy Prince husband was going to follow her after two years in which he hoped “to accumulate a little property” (Nancy Prince 40), but died before returning to their home country.

<sup>41</sup> While her trip to Jamaica was supposed to become another self-transforming journey, this would rather be a disappointing one. Nancy Prince probably expected to encounter a form of interracial bridge she had experience in Russia merely because slaves had been freed and were now under the care of American and European missionaries. Rather, in contrast to her Russian experience, Prince's narrative doesn't portray the customs and manners of Jamaica and its foreign aliens, but rather focuses on the corrupt system of the British Baptist Missionaries, whom she attacks. She observes the selling of bibles at an inflated price, issuing membership to churches by collecting the cash of ex-slaves, and the establishment of churches that resembled more “a play house rather than a place of worship” (Nancy Prince 47). On July 20, 1841 Nancy returned to the United States to raise funds to finance her goal of creating a Jamaican school. Upon obtaining enough donations she traveled back to Jamaica the following April, but unfortunately her plans were put to rest by civil turmoil on the island.

1853 and 1856 editions are prefaced by a paragraph in which Nancy Prince explains her motivations to write her autobiography:

My object is not a vain desire to appear before the public; but, by the sale, I hope to obtain the means to supply my necessities. There are many benevolent societies for the support of Widows, but I am desirous not to avail myself of them, so long as I can support myself by my own endeavors. Infirmities are coming upon me, which induce me to solicit the patronage of my friends and the public, on the sale of this work. Not wishing to throw myself on them, I take this method to help myself, as health and strength are gone (4).

Prince shows some kind of pride in demonstrating society that she can look after herself, that she can make a living of her writings. She demonstrates a strong independent character, quite unusual for the time. This strength is also shown in a political attempt to move her readers towards taking action for the improvement of the situation of many slaves in the West Indies and African Americans—free and slave—in the United States. This strength of character is similar to that of the protagonists of female slave narratives.

Although Nancy Prince's *Narrative* has been classified either as a slave narrative or as a spiritual autobiography, this work is more complex, for it is also "a travel narrative,<sup>42</sup> an adventure tale, and an expository essay" (Foster, *Written by Herself* 85). Prince's work is not purely a spiritual narrative, since, unlike Jarena Lee's and Zilpha Elaw's autobiographies, Prince's main purpose for writing her autobiography was not to provide religious instruction, but to support herself in her old age. Thus, though Nancy Prince suggests that Christian women should follow the strict moral standards of the age, she also states that they should not condemn or abandon less fortunate women. On the other hand, she traveled extensively, but unlike Lee and Elaw, her call was not a call to preach the gospel but to describe what she saw and to improve the situation of the poor and desolate. However, Prince's personal history does not follow the conventions

---

<sup>42</sup> In a sense, Nancy Prince's narrative resembles Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*, for both authors were black and describe their travels in their autobiographies. Nevertheless, there are great differences between them: Equiano was a slave, and Prince was free; Equiano was forced to travel, and Prince made her own decisions; Equiano wrote from the perspective of a black man, and Prince from that of a black woman.

of spiritual autobiography, although she expresses deep religious concerns and justifies her actions attributing the merit to God. Yet it is not a slave narrative either, for, although she describes her assistance to antislavery meetings and defends the abolition of slavery, Prince was not born a slave. Everything considered, it can be concluded that Prince found it difficult to narrate the story of her life following traditional modes of writing and therefore resorted to mixing different genres. The outcome would be the creation of a very unusual type of autobiography for the time.

Although Nancy Prince's autobiography is not a slave narrative, it introduces, according to Frances Smith Foster, two aspects related to black women's experience that Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents* would also reflect upon. First, Prince establishes herself as a respectable woman of color. In the same way in which Jacobs resists being sexually abused by her master, following the moral and religious principles of the time, Nancy Prince defends her traveling alone to different countries arguing that she associated "with a respectable colored family" and "with religious people" (Nancy Prince 10). Secondly, she "carefully documents her ladylike ways" but "frankly admits more intimate knowledge of the sexual perils of womanhood than white women writers generally did" (Foster, *Written by Herself* 85-86). In this line, Prince describes how her sister is "deluded away" (12) into prostitution and how she is determined to find her and help her out of that situation:

She took it into her head to go to Boston, as a nursery girl, where she lived a few months and was then deluded away. February 7th, 1816, a friend came to Salem and informed me of it. To have heard of her death, would not have been so painful to me, as we loved each other very much . . . I was so distressed about my sister that I started the next morning for Boston, on foot . . . God knew that my object was good. "In wisdom he chooses the weak things of the earth." Without his aid, how could I ever have rescued my lost sister? . . . My sister I found seated with a number of others round a fire, the mother of harlots at the head. My sister did not see me until I clasped her round the neck . . . When my sister came to herself, she looked upon me and said: "Nancy, O Nancy, I am ruined!" I said, "Silvia, my dear sister, what are you here for? Will you not go with me?" She seemed thankful to get away; the enraged old woman cried out, "she owes me, she cannot go." Silvia replied, "I will go" (Nancy Prince 12-14).



Foster argues that “Prince reverses the conventional portrayals in novels of seduction in two ways. The seducer is not a smooth-talking unscrupulous man who lures the young nursemaid into a life of degradation. Nor does the honey-voiced woman seduce an unsuspecting man” (*Written by Herself* 86). Nancy Prince presents a woman who tries to survive in a hostile society and resorts to prostitution. In this sense, Prince can be said to follow the plot of picaresque literature, in which the female picara sells her body for survival. Nevertheless, Prince does not introduce the picara-prostitute in the first person, for hers is not a picaresque novel. It is a spiritual narrative in which people can be saved from moral degradation if they are assisted by God and His followers. In the same way in which Jacobs justifies that “the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others” (*Incidents* 86), Prince demands white readers not to judge and condemn fallen women, but to help them out of their situation.

All in all, and despite the similarities between Nancy Prince’s and Harriet Jacobs’s autobiographies, the personal histories of these two black authors are very different. First, although both writers find that no singular genre is appropriate to narrate their personal lives, Prince’s narrative is a mixture of spiritual autobiography and travel narrative, whereas Jacobs uses conventions from both the slave narrative and the sentimental novel in her autobiography. Second, although both were African American women who tried to survive in a racist and sexist society, whereas Jacobs was born a slave, Prince was born free. This fact would determine another great difference between these women’s writings: whereas Prince’s concerns focus on religion and the need to help other people, Jacobs focuses on resisting her master’s sexual advances, escaping from slavery, and her family welfare and union. As a free woman, Prince was more interested in religious and moral improvement rather than in personal improvement through freedom; as a slave, Jacobs was more interested in depicting the particular sufferings of slave women so that white people would become aware of the need to abolish the domestic institution. From Harriet Jacobs’s point of view, once freedom was gained, other issues, such as religious instruction for blacks, could be addressed.

**Maria Stewart** (1803-1879), a free black woman, is considered America's first black woman political writer. Stewart's life broadened and intensified following a religious conversion that she experienced after the death of her husband, James W. Stewart, and of her friend and mentor David Walker.<sup>43</sup> These mournful events filled her with a desire to be, as she put it, a "warrior" for her people (*Productions* 76). It was in 1831, when William Lloyd Garrison issued a call for black women to contribute items to his newspaper the *Liberator*, to which Stewart responded with the essay "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build" (1831). Other meditations from Stewart's pen would later flow in the pages of the *Liberator*. Nevertheless, she was also a prominent orator, being engaged in speeches and public lectures.<sup>44</sup>

*Productions of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart* (1835), whose second edition was published under the title *Meditations from the Pen of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart* (1879), is a collection of speeches and essays on issues such as slavery, women's rights, and African American uplift, many of which had already been written in the 1830s. It includes fourteen meditations which, according to Carla L. Peterson,

reflect the anguish of an introspective soul, fully self-absorbed and isolated from society, that has witnessed death at close hand, experienced earthly disappointments, wrongful persecutions, and the temptations of the flesh, and as a consequence longs for a well-regulated life and divine forgiveness; and it charts the struggle of this soul to overcome self-despair and achieve the strength to carry out the Lord's bidding (59).

Most of these fourteen meditations begin with a quotation of verse lines from hymns by the English minister Isaac Watts, and/or from several books of the Old Testament

---

<sup>43</sup> David Walker (1785-1830) was the son of a slave father and a free black mother. He was an active abolitionist and became involved with the first African American newspaper, the *Freedom's Journal*. He is famous for his *Appeal* (published in September 1829), considered the most radical of all anti-slavery documents.

<sup>44</sup> Maria Stewart's first public speech was delivered on April 28, 1832, before the African-American Female Intelligence Society of America. A few months later, on September 21, 1832, at a New England Anti-Slavery Society meeting in Franklin Hall (Boston), Stewart spoke on the evils of slavery and the oppression of free blacks. With this speech, Maria Stewart made history: she became the first woman (of any color) to speak on political issues before an audience composed of men and women, blacks and whites. In subsequent addresses, Stewart spoke about not only race matters but also about women's rights. Thus, she paved the way for other African American women like Frances Harper, and Mary Ann Shadd Cary, whose works have been previously examined.

(Jeremiah, Isaiah, Jonah, and the Psalms) and the New Testament (the Epistles of Paul, Revelations). What follows is Stewart's meditation, for which she calls upon her memory, imagination, and intellect. Some meditations are followed by prayers, which "represent the final step of the devotional exercise" (Peterson 63). Her conversion experience is, thus, fully represented in this book so that it can inspire other people to follow the same path.

*Productions* follows some conventions of spiritual narratives, especially those written by women, like "the citation of arguments for women's ministries" (Foster, *Written by Herself* 72). Maria Stewart defends, like Jarena Lee, women's right to preach:

What if I am a woman; is not the God of ancient times the God of these modern days? Did he not raise up Deborah, to be a mother, and a judge in Israel? Did not queen Esther save the lives of the Jews? And Mary Magdalene first declare the resurrection of Christ from the dead? Come, said the woman of Samaria, and see a man that hath told me all things that ever I did, is not this the Christ? St. Paul declared that it was a shame for a woman to speak in public, yet our great High Priest and Advocate did not condemn the woman for a more notorious offence than this; neither will he condemn this worthless worm (*Productions* 75).

This speech puts Stewart within the feminist movement and combines two of her main concerns: faith, and women's rights. *Productions* also includes Stewart's confession of her sins and sorrows as a means to prepare her soul for Judgment Day. All this is imbued with a certain degree of didacticism, since the objective of spiritual autobiographies was to enlighten people about the possibility of leading a holier and better life and to inspire them to follow their example. Everything considered, it seems that *Productions of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart* and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* are two completely different types of work. If a similarity between them was to be found, it would be as regards the importance given to Christian values in both autobiographies.

## 1.2. FEMALE SLAVE NARRATIVES BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR

Although, as stated in previous pages, the amount of slave narratives written by or about black women is scarce (twelve percent), they are essential works in African American women's literature. Female slave narratives<sup>45</sup> are significantly different in style and content from male slave narratives, and these differences constitute a key element in gender studies of these personal accounts of bondage. In this light, the following pages will include a brief study of the slave narratives which depict the experiences of slavery from a woman's standpoint. In this analysis, special emphasis will be placed on those works published before *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* so as to determine the originality of Harriet Jacobs's autobiography. Nevertheless, the narratives published after *Incidents* (1861) but before the end of the Civil War (1865) will also be examined in order to acquiesce the relevance of this original narrative of bondage within the collection of *antebellum* female slave narratives.

The first characteristic of the female slave narratives written *before* the publication of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* that comes to the mind after a brief examination of these works is that none of them was written by the female ex slaves themselves but by some amanuenses. These amanuenses were black and white men and women who wanted to help the former female slave by putting her experiences into writing so as to facilitate the publication of her biography. By doing this, these authors did not only contribute to raise money for these black women but also do their share for the abolitionist cause. However, their portrayal of the bondwomen's experiences, or, rather, the transcription of their words, may not have been as accurate as desirable. The accuracy, but especially the manner, in which these narratives were developed was greatly influenced by the personal characteristics of their authors. Consequently, in order to analyze these writings,<sup>46</sup> a distinction must be made between the female slave

---

<sup>45</sup> I will use the term "female slave narratives" to refer to those narratives in which the protagonists were slave women, regardless the authorship of the books.

<sup>46</sup> I will analyze the *individual* accounts of female slaves, thus obviating slave narratives like *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, The Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (1860), and *The*

narratives written by white women, those written by white men, and the ones written by black men. Moreover, the differences between the slave narratives about American slaves and those about slaves from other countries will also be briefly considered.

Eight famous slave narratives were written by **white women**. These narratives present special characteristics within the genre, characteristics that derive from the race and sex of their authors. White women felt the need to do something for the abolition of slavery, for they thought it was a cruel system, especially for black women. However, they did not seem to realize that their depiction of black characters as simple, meek, and/or happy was condescending and imbued with some degree of racism. Paradoxically, despite their unarguable abolitionist concerns these white authors seem to follow some conventions of the racist plantation tradition, whose objective was to perpetuate the system of slavery.<sup>47</sup> In this light, it is necessary to analyze these writings individually to understand the way in which *Incidents* would bring about a transformation in the style of female slave narratives.

Using a chronological classification, the first slave narrative about a female slave written by a white woman was that about the life and experiences of Mary Prince (1788-1833?).<sup>48</sup> Authored by Susanna Strickland (writer and member of the London

---

*Kidnapped and the Ransomed. Being the Personal Recollections of Peter Still and His Wife "Vina," after Forty Years of Slavery* (1856) because, though they include the vicissitudes of female slaves, they are both focused on the slave *man's* experiences. The author of the first narrative was William Craft, and wrote this narrative from his male perspective; the second narrative was written by Kate E. R. Pickard, a white woman who also centered on the life of Peter Still (his wife Vina does not enter the narrative until Chapter X). Another interesting work in which the life of some slave women are portrayed is Abigail Mott's *Biographical Sketches and Interesting Anecdotes of Persons of Colour*, first published in 1826. It is one of the first compilations of African American biography and it includes sketches of famous African Americans such as Phillis Wheatley. The life experiences of these colored women compiled by Abigail Mott serve as an example of Christian virtues and of the benefits of leading a pious life. Thus, more than slave narratives, they could be deemed conversion or spiritual biographies.

<sup>47</sup> Donna M. Campbell analyzes the characteristics of the genre called plantation tradition, and asserts that [w]orks in this tradition employed the metaphor of a plantation "family" with white and African American members, all of whom felt deep bonds of loyalty to one another, with the white master as the head of this patriarchal system. In keeping with its hierarchical ideals, stories of this tradition frequently portrayed African Americans as happier and better off under slavery than they would be (or, later, were) if they were free. Within this system exists the racist stereotype of the "happy darcy" (par. 1).

<sup>48</sup> Mary Prince was born into slavery in Bermuda to slave parents. When her father died, Prince and her mother were sold as household servants. When she was twelve, she changed master again and was frequently whipped. She was later sold to work in the salt ponds of Turks Islands, sold again as a slave in

antislavery movement), *The History of Mary Prince* (1831)<sup>49</sup> narrates the tribulations of a female slave from the West Indies. As it will be examined later on, the fact that Prince did not experience slavery in America would lead to the existence of some differences between her narrative and the slave narratives written by African American slaves, especially as regards issues like escape and sexuality.

Thomas Pringle, Mary Prince's employer and abolitionist writer, arranged for her narrative to be copied down by Susanna Strickland, and it was finally published in 1831. Consequently, this book is yet an interpretation of the slave narrator's words by the white author of the story, since white editors and authors that put these biographical accounts into writing transformed the words of ex slave women (whenever they deemed it necessary) so as to construct a more appealing book for their readers.<sup>50</sup> Hence, although the editor, Thomas Pringle, explains in the "Preface" to Mary Prince's biography that the narrative "was taken down from Mary's own lips" (i) and "written out fully, with all the narrator's repetitions and prolixities" (i), he also adds that it was later

pruned into its present shape; retaining, as far as was practicable, Mary's exact expressions and peculiar phraseology. No fact of importance has been omitted, and not a single circumstance or sentiment has been added. It is essentially her own, without any material alteration farther than was requisite to exclude redundances [sic] and gross grammatical errors, so as to render it clearly intelligible (Pringle i).

When Pringle states that "no fact of importance has been omitted" one imagines that this is true. Nevertheless, it is him who determines what is important, not Mary Prince. Thus, he ends up by presenting a subjective view of Prince's life. Moreover, he admits that the writer has *improved* Mary Prince's discourse "to exclude redundances and gross

---

Bermuda until yet another owner would send her to Antigua to be a domestic slave in 1818. There, she would join the Moravian Church and marry Daniel James, an ex-slave who had bought his freedom and worked as a carpenter and cooper in 1826. In 1828 her master took her as a servant to London, where slavery was illegal. However, she had no means to support herself and could not return to her husband without being re-enslaved. She remained with her owners until they threw her out. She then sheltered with the Moravian Church and took employment with Thomas Pringle.

<sup>49</sup> *The History of Mary Prince* was the first narrative of a black woman to be published in England.

<sup>50</sup> This explains, for example, the use of a sentimental tone to narrate the vicissitudes of slave women and the condescending tone in which authors refer to black people.

grammatical errors” which might have made her narration more unintelligible though *authentic*. As Jenny Sharpe argues, Prince exercised “minimal narrative control” (121)<sup>51</sup> over her personal history and, although the narrative is written in the first person, readers are deprived of the opportunity of hearing the real voice of a female slave. The reason why this biography was written in the *first* person—instead of the traditional third person of biographical accounts—lies in the author’s intention to emphasize the authenticity of the dictation. Nevertheless, this aspect of this slave narrative constitutes a peculiarity within the genre, for most of these as-told-to biographies were written in the *third* person.

*The History of Mary Prince* follows many of the conventions of the slave narrative genre: the title includes the words *Related by Herself*, which is a variation of the typical *Written by Himself*; some lines from William Cowper’s “The Negro’s Complaint”<sup>52</sup> are quoted in the title page; the opening words of the narrative are “I was born” and are followed by an account of Prince’s parentage; her childhood is documented as the happiest period of Mary Prince’s life as a slave, and a period during which she ignored her condition as a slave; the jobs performed by different slaves are enumerated; there are descriptions of both cruel and kind masters and mistresses; there is an explanation of how Prince manages to learn to read and write; there are examples of cruel beatings to slaves, especially on (pregnant) female slaves and slave children; the feeling that death is better than slavery is clearly stated; some people’s names are omitted from the narrative in order to keep them safe; the means by which she becomes a free woman are detailed, and so on.

Nevertheless, there is a striking peculiarity in this text that separates it from the tradition of the African American slave narrative: it is the narrative of bondage of a

---

<sup>51</sup> Jenny Sharpe further argues that Thomas Pringle’s statement “deauthorizes the speaker in the very act of authorizing the written record of her words” (129) and that “*The History of Mary Prince* is the product of a unique set of circumstances having to do with the role of British abolitionists played in transmitting the stories of black slaves” (127).

<sup>52</sup> The poem “The Negro’s Complaint” is included in “Appendix C: Slave Songs and Poems on Slavery,” p. 406.

West Indian slave, and the description of slave life in the West Indies that Mary Prince provides is a distinctive feature of this book. Although slave life was similar in many countries, it had some peculiarities in the West Indies, especially if compared to slavery in the United States. For example, in the United States there existed the Underground Railroad (as mentioned earlier, an organization that helped fugitive slaves reach the northern free states) and the possibility of escaping to the North, but “there was little or no way to escape from the islands” (Sharpe 136). Thus, many slaves in the West Indies made escape attempts not to become free, but so as to obtain different benefits (better work conditions, being sold to another slaveholder to be closer to their families, etc.) or greater autonomy from their masters. Another difference between Prince’s narrative and the narrative of African American *female* slaves lies in the presentation of their sexual experiences. According to Moira Ferguson,

Mary Prince’s difficulty in being able to present her authentic [sexual] experience stemmed partly from the form that was required. The British female slave narrative did not develop or emerge as part of the British slave narrative genre in the same way as it did in the United States. . . . When black women did write or tell their experiences in the United States, their vivid testimonials frequently focused on sexual exploitation and disruption of family ties. British female slaves and ex-slaves, by contrast, were either written about in the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* or had little or no opportunity to chronicle, let alone publish, their experiences (4).

Nevertheless, Mary Prince *does* relate how her owner lacks moral principles and the chaste and virtuous nature that was often demanded of white women at the time:

He had an ugly fashion of stripping himself quite naked, and ordering me then to wash him in a tub of water. This was worse to me than all the licks. Sometimes when he called me to wash him I would not come, my eyes were so full of shame. He would then come to beat me. One time I had plates and knives in my hand, and I dropped both plates and knives, and some of the plates were broken. He struck me so severely for this, that at last I defended myself, for I thought it was high time to do so. I then told him I would not live longer with him, for he was a very indecent man—very spiteful, and too indecent; with no shame for his servants, no shame for his own flesh (Mary Prince 13).

In this extract, Prince further narrates how she manages to overcome her master’s sexual advances using, like Harriet Jacobs, the power of words and language. However, unlike Jacobs, Prince does not explicitly refer to the sexual harassment—or even rape—that



Jenny Sharpe believes she had to endure. Moira Ferguson agrees with Sharpe and reasons Prince's silences in the following terms:

Mary Prince's *History* was sponsored by the Antislavery Society, who won public support by detailing atrocities and portraying female slaves as pure, Christlike victims and martyrs . . . Women whose cause they sponsored could not be seen to be involved in any situation . . . that smacked of sin and moral corruption. . . . Mary Prince manages to foil this taboo by encoding her abusive sexual experiences in accounts of angry jealous mistresses and a master who forced her to wash him while he was naked (4).

The fact that her white readers might have been shocked by a brutally accurate description of the sexual abuses endured by female slaves did not stop Harriet Jacobs, but it did Mary Prince or, rather, Susanna Strickland—her amanuensis—probably because British society was more traditional and conservative than the American. Professor Jenny Sharpe, however, argues that Prince's silence over her sexuality was due to the “minimal authorial control” (121) she exercised over her own narrative. According to Sharpe, had she been given the chance to write her own story, she might have decided to do something different in relation to the depiction of her sexual relationships with her owner.

Jenny Sharpe further discusses Prince's sexuality and argues that she attempted “to gain freedom through extramarital relationships with white men” (120), though nothing is said about this in her narrative. Harriet Jacobs, on the other hand, *does* admit in *Incidents* that she had extramarital relationships as a means of obtaining her freedom, maybe because she *did* exercise authorial control over her narrative. Yet Sharpe identifies another difference in Prince's and Jacobs's active use of their sexuality. For Sharpe, Mary Prince, unlike Harriet Jacobs, maintained sexual relations that “were closer to prostitution,” something that would also explain “why her testimony is silent about this aspect of her life as a slave” (123). Consequently, Prince's slave narrative is full of silences: on the one hand, the silences imposed by the society in which she lived and which considered it inappropriate to discuss some aspects of the private life; and on

the other hand, the silences imposed by her editor on the issues deemed as non-relevant to Prince's personal history.

*The History of Mary Prince* also functions as a conversion narrative, and the fact that she maintained sexual relationships with her master does not contradict this statement. Once Mary Prince converts, she recognizes herself as a sinner and revokes her past life. Her story can thus be understood as the journey from sin—extramarital sexual relationships—to rebirth, like *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. There is, however, a great difference between Prince's narrative and *Incidents* as regards religious matters. Whereas in *The History of Mary Prince* there are abundant comments about the author's religious feelings, *Incidents* does not dwell upon this subject. In this sense, Prince's work seems to be closer to the conversion narrative than Harriet Jacobs's.

Consequently, though Mary Prince's life as a bondwoman bore some similarities with the experiences of Harriet Jacobs as a slave, and though *The History of Mary Prince* employs many of the conventions of the African American slave narrative, the fact that it was about a woman whose slave life had taken place in the West Indies separates this work from the traditional African American female slave narrative. Moreover, one cannot forget another important difference between Mary Prince's biography and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: whereas Jacobs wrote her own autobiography, Prince had the events of her life compiled by a white woman and exercised a minimal authorial control over her narrative. In this light, though both women are heroines of their personal histories, whereas Harriet Jacobs can be seen as an author, Mary Prince can simply be seen as a narrator.

The personal history about Chloe Spear (1749/50-1815), entitled *Memoir of Mrs. Chloe Spear, a Native of Africa, Who was Enslaved in Childhood, and Died in Boston, January 3, 1815... Aged 65 Years, by A Lady of Boston* (1832), was the second female slave narrative written by a white woman. The "Lady of Boston" who claims

authority of the book seems to have been Rebecca Warren Brown, a white woman author who published several books. Rebecca Warren Brown argues that she put into writing Spear's biography<sup>53</sup> "according, to the statements from her own lips to the writer" (9). The narrative is written in the third person and, thus, we cannot hear the ex slave's own words, but her white biographer's interpretation of them. This interpretative framework can be seen, for example, in this extract in which Rebecca Warren Brown narrates how Spear was kidnapped in Africa:

While engaged in these innocent and healthful recreations, they were suddenly surprised by the appearance of several persons . . . they knew not what to imagine they were, having never seen a white man; from whose frightful presence they attempted to shrink away, but from whose cruel grasp they found it impossible to escape. Not withstanding the piteous cries and tears of these poor defenceless children, they were arrested by cruel hands, put in to a boat, and carried to the dismal Slave Ship, which lay off a few miles in the river, the horrid receptacle of a living cargo, stolen from its rightful soil, by barbarous hunters of human prey for the purposes of traffic. Terror and amazement, as may be supposed, took full possession of their minds. . . . and no tender *mother*, no avenging *father* near, to know or to alleviate their wretchedness. Ah! little did these hapless children realize, when they quitted their native huts and frolicked, away to the woody beach, that they had left, for the last time, the places of their birth, and the fond embraces of their parents and brothers and sisters—that the last parting kiss of maternal affection had rested on their lips (10-12; emphasis in original).

The use of adjectives to describe black and white people in this extract is very interesting. On the one hand, the adjectives used to describe the African children and their feelings indicate innocence, ignorance, and helplessness: "piteous cries," "poor defenceless," "hapless," etc. On the other hand, the words employed to describe the white kidnapers are full of criticism: "frightful presence," "cruel grasp," "barbarous hunters," etc. As it can easily be appreciated, the tone that Brown uses to describe this scene is sentimental, for it aims at arousing her readers' pity and compassion for the poor slaves. Moreover, Rebecca Warren Brown also tries to arouse this sympathy by

---

<sup>53</sup> The book begins with Chloe Spear in Africa, her native land, from where she is kidnapped when she is about twelve years of age, taken to America on a slave ship, and enslaved in Boston. During the American revolution, her master removes his family to Andover where Mr. Adams gives her some religious instruction. Not long after being back in Boston, Spear makes public profession in the New-North Congregational Church. Chloe later marries Cesar Spear, also a slave, and becomes the mother of seven children, all of whom would eventually die, leaving her only one grandson. Her master manumits her by the law of the Commonwealth, though she decides to remain with him receiving a salary for her services. Chloe Spear died in January 1815, and her life was memorialized seventeen years later.

asking her readers to imagine this scene with white instead of black children, whom she calls “the rosy children of America” (12). These devices meet the purpose of the narrative: to fight for the abolition of slavery.

Apart from the use of a sentimental tone, Rebecca Warren Brown employs other features that are common in female slave narratives. She, for instance, condemns slavery and its principles by complaining about black slaves' treatment as animals: “[S]laves were considered *property*, and their owners thought themselves under no more obligations to *instruct* them, otherwise than to do their work in such a manner as best to subserve their own interests, than farmers do, to take, their horses and oxen into their houses, instead of the pasture or the barn” (20; emphasis in original). Brown further criticizes proslavery agents' belief of blacks' inferiority:

Notwithstanding the dullness and inaptitude of numbers of that people, which has led some persons to conclude that they could never be instructed to any considerable extent; there have, from time immemorial, appeared instances, which have afforded reason to determine, that there may be as great a capital of mind, in a given portion of that race of man, as in an equal number of other nations; and that under early and proper cultivation, detached, in the first place, from local disadvantages, and the contaminating influence of degrading society, would shine with equal lustre. Chloe was one instance (105-106).

Although this paragraph starts discussing “the dullness and inaptitude” of some black Africans, Brown corrects this statement arguing that the proportion of intelligent and dull people equals that of any other civilization and that, given the opportunity, blacks can be as cultivated as any other white person. This statement, on the part of a white person, may be deemed somewhat racist, no matter how hard this person tried to advocate for the abolition of the enslavement of black people. A black author would have discussed the equality of both races without using offensive words for anyone but appealing to their common humanity and rights.

As regards the sexuality of female slaves, *Memoirs of Mrs. Chloe Spear* simply recollects Chloe's marriage to Cesar Spear, and very briefly: “While yet a slave, she was married to *Cesar Spear*, and became the mother of several children” (47). This is all we read about her marriage, although we hear nothing about Chloe's feelings for

Cesar Spear. Actually, this is the first time that Cesar's name appears in the narrative. This information may be avoided due to the fact that, as a white woman who had read sentimental fiction, Rebecca Warren Brown could not find it appropriate to write about such an aspect of a slave woman's life, especially since the protagonist was a decorous and religious woman.

Nevertheless, there is something interesting in *Memoirs* from a feminist point of view. After getting married, the Spears operated a boardinghouse in the city or, in Brown's words "commenced house-keeping" (52). Chloe started to gain some property and became willing to buy a house. Thus, she "not only assisted her husband in the care of a family of boarders, who were seamen, or labourers, but she also took in washing, and went into various families as a washerwoman, &c." (Rebecca Warren Brown 53). However, though while she was at work, Cesar Spear saw to the duties associated with the boardinghouse, when she returned home the situation changed:

After returning from a hard day's work, she many a time, went to washing for her customers in the night, while her husband was taking his rest,—extended lines across her room, and hung up her clothes to dry, while she retired to bed for a few hours; then arose, prepared breakfast, and went out to work again, leaving her ironing to be done on her return at night. Cesar, having been accustomed to cooking, &c. could, on these occasions, wait upon himself and boarders, during her absence; but was quite willing that she should make ready a good supper, after she came home (Rebecca Warren Brown 54).

Although one might argue that Chloe Spear was exploited by her husband, reality proved to be different. Chloe did not hand over her wages to her husband, but kept the money to herself with the aim of buying a house. Nevertheless, the law forbade married women to buy property and put it under their own name, so Chloe had to ask her husband to buy the house for her, something which very much surprised him, for he was ignorant of his wife's plans. Thus, not only did Chloe Spear manage to save money to buy a house, a great achievement for a (black) woman at the time, but also to hide this fact from her husband. This demonstrates that Chloe Spear had a great independent spirit, that she was not the typical domesticated woman who did whatever her husband pleased, and that she had her own mind and her own will. Chloe clearly exemplifies the

way in which African American women exerted an essential role in the family's economy.<sup>54</sup>

To conclude, the portrait that Rebecca Warren Brown depicts of Chloe Spear is that of a religious, hard-working and independent woman who has managed to survive slavery and find for herself and her family a much better life. Chloe Spear's hardships are of a different nature—at least as presented by Brown—from Harriet Jacobs's sufferings. However, both Spear and Jacobs exemplify the differences between black and white women: the black woman is a strong heroine who fights for her own and her family's welfare and controls the domestic sphere, whereas the white mistress is represented as a delicate weak woman, dominated by her husband.

The third book about a female slave written by a white woman was *Memoirs of Margaret Jane Blake* (1834), a book that John W. Blassingame discards as romantic and unreliable.<sup>55</sup> I have to regret not having further information about this book, although there is a *Memoirs of Margaret Jane Blake of Baltimore, Md., and Selections in Prose and Verse*, written by Sarah R. Levering—whose father had owned Blake—which could be a later version of the same text.<sup>56</sup> If this book were to be considered a new version of the original 1834 *Memoirs of Margaret Jane Blake*, a comparison with Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents* would lead to some conclusions. On the one hand, *Memoirs*

---

<sup>54</sup> This control over the household is common in African women, and was one of the traditions Chloe Spear maintained after she was taken to the United States. Different studies of the black family and gender roles argue that women exercise great independence and authority within the household. See, for example, Andrea Cornwall's *Readings in Gender in Africa* (2005), Paula Giddings's *When and Where I Enter* (1984), and Traci C. West's *Wounds of the Spirit* (1999).

<sup>55</sup> John W. Blassingame argues that this and other slave narratives like *Memoirs of Eleanor Eldridge* (1838) and *Aunt Sally; or The Cross the Way to Freedom* (1858) are "more akin to Indian-escape literature than slave autobiographies" (82). He also dismisses these works as authentic because he states that, although the majority of abolitionists faithfully recorded the details of slave life received from ex slaves, they also included their own ideas into the narratives, adding digressions, direct appeals to white readers, etc. Finally, another argument Blassingame uses to consider these female slave narratives unreliable is that these narratives focus on the flight from bondage rather than on ex slaves' experiences under the domestic institution, which is what slave narrators usually did.

<sup>56</sup> The 1897 *Memoirs of Margaret Jane Blake* was also published in Philadelphia, though many years later. Although I lack specific evidence that it is a new edition of the same book, some data may confirm this information. First, the Jane Blake in the 1897 edition was born in 1811 and died in 1880, which makes it possible that her first *Memoirs* had been written in 1834 (when Blake was 23), soon after she had bought her freedom. Secondly, Sarah R. Levering writes the following: "Some may wish to know why the selection of pieces was *added* to the memoir of Margaret Jane Blake" (vi; emphasis added), which may one believe that this is an extension of a previous version of *Memoirs*

of *Margaret Jane Blake* is written in the third person, and it does not even seem to be an as-told-to narrative, but a compilation of what the white authoress considers the most significant aspects of her father's slave woman. Moreover, there are passages which clearly separate this work from the traditional slave narrative, like the fragment in which Levering indicates that Jane Blake's mother was not happy when she obtained her freedom and that she wanted her children not to be free men and women, but slaves for life:

But it was strange that she looked back to her old home with infinite longing and desired to return to her bonds. This could not be granted her, and, failing in that petition, she begged that none of her children should be set free. That was agreed upon, and during my parents' lifetime the children of these free parents remained slaves (7-8).

This comment would never have been present in a slave narrative written by an ex slave, for, as they argued in their personal histories, the most important thing for slaves, the dearest gift they could obtain, was their freedom. Such paternalistic comments as the ones included in the passage quoted above are, however, common in the plantation tradition,<sup>57</sup> a genre which presented slavery as a beneficial system for slaves. Nevertheless, Sarah R. Levering was an abolitionist woman—like Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—and, in her narration of Jane Blake's biography, she blesses the disappearance of slavery as follows:

Glorious in the estimation of all true patriots is the memory of Abraham Lincoln for having signed the Emancipation Act. . . . Slavery, as we knew it here, was a mitigated evil, really more harmful to the masters and their families than to the slaves, and now that it is banished from our soil, even the heaviest owners are prepared to say it is a good riddance (13-14).

These and other comments present in *Memoirs* are imbued with certain sentimental tone, so common in slave narratives written by women, but also very popular in

---

<sup>57</sup> Sarah R. Levering's account of Jane Blake's life includes other episodes that are very clearly connected to this plantation tradition, such as the episode in which Blake is approached by an abolitionist woman and she refuses to listen to her antislavery discourse:

One day she was seated on the front steps, getting the fresh air, when a woman belonging to the neighborhood addressed her with numerous questions about the family and as to the treatment she received from her mistress. . . . Margy listened patiently and politely to all the lady had to say, then lifting one hand to an ear she replied: "Woman, all you have said goes in at this ear, and goes out at the other one" (Levering 8-9).

abolitionist pieces and books like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which, on the other hand, depicted slaves in a similar way as Levering's *Memoirs of Margaret Jane Blake*. Thus, one could argue that, due to the similarities between *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Memoirs of Margaret Jane Blake*, *Memoirs* is a work of fiction.

The consideration of *Memoirs* as a work of fiction may be confirmed if one takes into account Sarah R. Levering's depiction of the slave protagonist. Margaret Jane Blake is personally described as a woman of strong convictions who "was much annoyed by the abolitionists. She complained very much of them. They tormented her. She would say: 'I want my freedom, but I do not want to *steal* it'" (Levering 15). Although this comment is included in *Memoirs* as a way of praising the protagonist's loyalty and principles, it would have been impossible to find such a comment in traditional slave narratives. As seen in the previous chapter, slaves were ready to do whatever it took to become free. Hence, it is very striking that Blake criticizes abolitionists and that, when she is given the opportunity to become free during a trip to the North, Blake refuses to do so:

Mrs. G. went one summer to the North to visit her husband's relatives and gained the consent of Margaret and her mistress that she could attend her as lady's maid. Mother consented to the trip being taken . . . knowing that the moment she set foot on that soil she was free, and if she pleased to do so she might stay there. But Margaret was of a different mind. Upon the arrival of the party in the city of New York lodgings were taken in a hotel, and the Irish waiters belonging to the establishment [invited] her to walk out with them to view the city. Icily she repelled them. . . . "Are you free?" asked the waiters. "I am as free as you are," she rejoined (Levering 15).

Margaret Jane Blake is thus presented as a principled woman who would not be willing to escape to free territory or cheat her masters in any way. She would remain a good obedient slave until she managed to earn enough money to buy her freedom and be legally emancipated.

To conclude, although this book is the story of a female slave, it presents great differences with Harriet Jacobs's work. Unlike Jacobs's *Incidents*, *Memoirs* is: (i) written in the third person and not by the protagonist of the story; (ii) short (Margaret



Jane Blake's life is 21 pages long, the rest being a compilation of poems and other short pieces of writing); (iii) condescending in the depiction of slave characters. Moreover, these features do not simply separate *Memoirs* from *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, but from many other slave narratives. Thus, it is understandable that historian John W. Blassingame dismisses this work deeming it unreliable.

*Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge* (1838), written by Frances Harriet Whipple Green (1805-1878),<sup>58</sup> has also been regarded as romantic and unreliable by important scholars such as the above mentioned John W. Blassingame. However, the particular case of *Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge* (1838)<sup>59</sup> is particularly curious. Elleanor Eldridge (1784-1845?)<sup>60</sup> was born free and, consequently, her life story cannot even be deemed a slave narrative. It is interesting, though, that some of the topics discussed in this book are similar to those present in male slave narratives.

Elleanor Eldridge's life, though in freedom, was not an easy one, as the narrative of her life proves.<sup>61</sup> Eldridge's father was an African brought to Rhode Island on a slave ship. He, however, managed to earn his freedom by fighting in the American Revolutionary War. He then was able to save enough money to buy a small parcel of land and build a home in Warwick, Rhode Island. Elleanor Eldridge's mother, who was part Indian, died when she was only 10, and Elleanor started washing clothes as a live-in servant for one of her mother's former clients. She also became skilled at spinning, arithmetic and weaving. When Eldridge was 19, her father died and she took over his estate. Eldridge later went to live with her sister in Adams, Massachusetts. While there, she and her brothers and sisters started a business of weaving, washing and soap

<sup>58</sup> Frances Harriet Whipple Green was one of the most prolific abolitionist writers in Rhode Island. She was also an early proponent of women's rights—fighting for the extension of suffrage in Rhode Island—and worked for the rights and dignity of mill workers.

<sup>59</sup> A later edition of *Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge*, entitled *Elleanor's Second Book* was published in 1839.

<sup>60</sup> A portrait of Elleanor Eldridge can be found in "Appendix A: Illustrations," p. 372.

<sup>61</sup> In fact, the purpose for writing the book was to retrieve property that had been taken from her unfairly: The object in publishing her life, is to help raise a sum of money which MUST BE PAID, or she never can clear her property from its present incumbrance. She may be found, daily at work, from sun-rise until sun-set, for good wages; yet she cannot accomplish the desired end, without the assistance [sic] of friends to humanity and justice. (Frances Whipple Green 7).

boiling. The money earned enabled Eldridge to buy land and build a house, which she rented. After three years, she returned to Providence, where she contracted herself out for whitewashing, wallpapering and painting during warm months and laundering and miscellaneous work for private families, hotels and boarding houses during the winters. By 1822, she had saved enough to buy another lot and built a house for herself and a renter. Within five years, she bought two more lots and a house in Warwick. In 1831, Eldridge suffered from her second bout with typhus fever. While recuperating, a rumor circulated that she had died. Upon her return several months later, Eldridge discovered that a deceitful opportunist had petitioned to have all her property sold, to pay off a loan she had acquired just before her illness. The sale never combined her properties which were illegally auctioned off without family notification. Eldridge was able to claim rights to the property and took her case to court. Outraged friends charged that such theft would have never happened to a white man or woman. In 1837, she represented herself in court and was able to regain her property in an out-of-court settlement.

As this sketch of Eldridge's life proves, *Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge* cannot be said to be a slave narrative. The question that follows is why prominent scholars have decided to classify this book as a slave narrative. Some answers must be possible. First, *Memoirs* is a biographical work of a black person that depicts the protagonist's tribulations. Secondly, Frances Whipple Green, who uses the third person to put into writing Eldridge's sufferings, describes and condemns the injustice of slavery in several passages of the book. She writes, for example, about the moral degradation of slaves, for which slaveholders are to blame.<sup>62</sup> By laying the blame on slaveholders, Green presents blacks as naturally good and slavery as a corrupting system that makes both

---

<sup>62</sup> *Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge* explains how slaves' lack of morality is a direct consequence of slavery and slaveholders:

I am persuaded that the comforts, rights, and, more especially, the *moral health* of domestics is shamefully neglected. Instead of being treated as accountable beings—as persons indeed, capable of independent thought, feeling, and action—susceptible alike of pleasure and pain, they are considered as the mere appendages of luxury; and being generally left to their own wayward courses, often sink into depravity and vice, when a little of kindness and good feeling, a little affectionate interest and judicious advice, might restrain and save them (Frances Whipple Green 27; emphasis in original).

blacks and whites break some moral principles. In this way, Green includes one of the conventional topics of slave narratives: slavery is not only evil for slaves but also for slaveholders. Moreover, she argues—as Harriet Jacobs would a few years later in her *Incidents* though solely in reference to female slaves—that slaves should not be judged by the same moral standard as white people, for their condition as property and the way they are treated are impediments to their moral and spiritual growth.

Thus, although Frances Whipple Green makes a valuable contribution to black women's writings by presenting a black woman as the heroine or protagonist of a biography, her third-person account does not expose to the public the naked truth of a black woman's experiences under slavery, but the hardships endured by a free black woman in a racist and enslaving society. Harriet Jacobs could have found in Elleanor Eldridge's courage an example to follow, but the free black women writers previously examined would constitute a similar source of inspiration, maybe even more than Eldridge's story. After all, Eldridge's biography had been written by a white woman in her own poetic style, Eldridge's voice being thus veiled behind the author's own comments, appreciations, digressions, and poetical discourse.

*Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (1850), written by her white friend Olive Gilbert<sup>63</sup> in the third person, is one of the most famous female slave narratives, and its protagonist one of the most widely-studied African American woman of the nineteenth century. Sojourner Truth's biography includes many interesting episodes in the life of this extraordinary woman,<sup>64</sup> most well-known for her speech on women's rights entitled "Ar'n't I a Woman?"<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, Gilbert does more than literally document Truth's

<sup>63</sup> Olive Gilbert was "a rather inconspicuous member of white abolitionist circles" (Peterson 25)

<sup>64</sup> A portrait of Sojourner Truth can be found in "Appendix A: Illustrations," p.372.

<sup>65</sup> There are two main transcriptions of this speech, for Sojourner Truth never learned to read or write. One was reported in the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* on June 21, 1851, and the second—and more elaborate version—was recollectd by Frances Gage, president of the convention, and incorporated into the "Book of Life" of the 1875 *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*. The versions are very different and there are still doubts about which recollection is the closest to Truth's own and real words:

As the importance of Sojourner Truth's ideas and example has mounted in recent years, the reliability of the Gage account of the famed *Ar'n't I a Woman?* speech has been questioned. The more direct and less dialectal Sojourner truth of the *Anti-Slavery*

words in her personal history, for she inserts personal digressions whose purpose is to enlighten readers with her own views on different issues.<sup>66</sup>

Sojourner Truth was born Isabella Bomefree<sup>67</sup> in 1797 to slave parents in Ulster County, New York. In 1806 Truth was sold at a slave auction and thus separated from her parents. Until that moment, her language had been Dutch. She did not speak any English and her new owners only spoke English, something that would give rise to many misunderstandings and, subsequently, to punishments. This suffering would not cease to increase when she was sold to another slaveholder, for she suffered from numerous whippings during her stay with this new master. She was then sold twice again and while she was laboring for her fourth owner, she met and fell in love with Robert, a slave from a neighboring plantation. His owner opposed to their relationship, for he was “anxious that no one’s property but his own should be enhanced by the increase of his slaves” (Truth and Gilbert 34). Thus, he “forbade Robert’s visits to Truth, and commanded him to take a wife among his fellow-servants” (Truth and Gilbert 34). Robert would finally be savagely whipped and Sojourner Truth never saw

---

*Bugle*’s report now sounds more authentic to many analysts (Gates and McKay 197-198).

In any case, Sojourner Truth’s attempt to make the reality of the female slave known to white women had a peculiar effect since, though these women joined Truth’s cause, they also claimed to be submitted to white men in a kind of slavery of sex. In this way, white women became protagonists of Truth’s discourse, and their fight for women’s rights more important than abolitionism.

<sup>66</sup> In her introduction to the Penguin edition of *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, Nell Irvin Painter lists many instances of Gilbert’s digressions:

Before Truth had dictated a score of pages, Gilbert began inserting her own commentary. . . . Gilbert sharpens Truth’s depiction of her parents’ situation by appending her own indictment of Southern slavery . . . Truth describes the misery of slaves lodged in Charles Hardenbergh’s cold, wet, filthy cellar and its enduring legacy of fevers, arthritis, sores, and tremors. . . . but Gilbert contradicts Truth in a lengthy sermon on slaveowners’ cruelties and the humanity of slaves (xvii).

<sup>67</sup> Isabella Bomefree would change her name to Sojourner Truth after she had obtained her freedom. According to bell hooks, Sojourner Truth discarded the name under which she had lived as a slave “to leave all signs of bondage behind. With the name Sojourner Truth, she evoked her new revolutionary political calling as well as her spiritual work—a liberatory name” (164). Harriet Beecher Stowe reports Truth’s words in “Sojourner Truth, The Libyan Sybil” included in the 1875 edition of *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, as part of her “Book of Life:”

When I left the house of bondage, I left everything behind. . . . I went to the Lord an’ asked Him to give me a new name. And the Lord gave me Sojourner, because I was to travel up an’ down the land, showin’ the people their sins, an’ bein’ a sign unto them. Afterwards I told the Lord I wanted another name, ‘cause everybody else had two names; and the Lord gave me Truth, because I was to declare the truth to the people (Truth, Gilbert, and Titus 164).

him again: “This beating, and we know not what after treatment, completely subdued the spirit of its victim, for Robert ventured no more to visit Truth, but like an obedient and faithful chattel, took himself a wife from the house of his master” (Truth and Gilbert 36). Later, Truth would marry another slave, Thomas, and, though nothing is said about whether she was forced to marry him or not, it might have been the case, for, as stated in previous pages, this was a common practice among slaveholders:

Isabella was married to a fellow-slave, named Thomas, who had previously had two wives, one of whom, if not both, had been torn from him and sold far away. And it is more than probable, that he was not only allowed but encouraged to take another at each successive sale. I say it is probable, because the writer of this knows from personal observation, that such is the custom among slaveholders at the present day (Truth and Gilbert 36)

In this fragment, the appropriation of women’s sexuality is, though not openly, implicitly stated. Thomas, most likely forced by his masters, marries different slave women on different plantations. These forced marriages were performed so as to encourage and *legalize* sexual relationships among slaves, which would bring about the birth of many slave children and, therefore, the increase of their masters’ property. Thus, as regards the treatment of female slaves’ sexuality, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* focuses on the use of bondwomen as breeders,<sup>68</sup> making no explicit comments about white men’s sexual abuses of female slaves. In this light, this female slave narrative depicts slaveholders’ appropriation of slave women’s sexuality from a different perspective than that offered in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

The means by which Sojourner Truth managed to obtain her freedom also differs greatly from Harriet Jacobs’s. Truth relates her biographer that her master had promised to emancipate her one year before she was “legally free by statute” (Truth and Gilbert

---

<sup>68</sup> The role of bondwomen as *breeders* appears in many slave narratives in an attempt to condemn the dehumanization of blacks under slavery. *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* also exemplifies the general treatment of slaves as animals and the particular consideration of bondwomen as breeders:

The same terms are applied to slaves that are given to cattle. They are called ‘stock.’ So, when the children of slaves are spoken of prospectively, they are called their ‘increase;’ the same term that is applied to flocks and herds. So the female slaves that are mothers are called ‘breeders,’ till past child-bearing; and often the same terms are applied to the different sexes that are applied to the males and females among cattle (Truth and Gilbert 133).

39) if she did well and was faithful. Nevertheless, this proved to be a lie, for, when the time had come for her to be given her free papers, “he refused granting it, on account (as he alleged) of the loss he had sustained by her hand”<sup>69</sup> (Truth and Gilbert 39). Truth then decides to escape, “to take her freedom into her own hands, and seek her fortune in some other place” (Truth and Gilbert 41). The specific point in time at which Jacobs and Truth decide that the only thing they can do is to escape is marked by two completely different events: sexual harassment and deception. However, there is something that connects both experiences: their master’s ill-use of their powerful position.

Motherhood determines the way in which these two women escape from slavery. However, whereas Harriet Jacobs refuses to run away without having provided for her children’s welfare and freedom and remains hidden at her grandmother’s house—from where she can see her children grow—for seven years, Sojourner Truth leaves her children with her husband—she believed that he was in a better situation to provide for them—and escapes only with her younger baby in her arms: “[O]ne fine morning, a little before day-break, she might have been seen stepping stealthily away from the rear of Master Dumont’s house, her infant on one arm, and her wardrobe on the other” (Truth and Gilbert 41). In this sense, both women contradict, in different ways, proslavery agents’ belief that blacks were incapable of having feelings for their families. Both Truth and Jacobs present themselves as strong, courageous, good *mothers* who care for their children. In fact, as these women prove and state, children are more important for them than their own lives.

Another similarity between the lives of Sojourner Truth and Harriet Jacobs is explained by Carla L. Peterson in *Doers of the Word*: “Gilbert account of Truth’s life in New York at that time is remarkably similar to Harriet Jacobs’s later autobiographical narration of her years there” (26). Once freedom has been obtained, both former slaves work as domestic servants in the home of wealthy families. Yet this similarity occurs at

---

<sup>69</sup> Olive Gilbert explains that, “[i]n the year 1826, [Truth] had a badly diseased hand, which greatly diminished her usefulness” (Truth and Gilbert 39).

a personal rather than at a narrative level, and resembles the experiences of many ex slave women who did not have many job offers or opportunities.

It is, however, discouraging to see that Sojourner Truth never managed to put her words into writing and that we will never know what exactly she said at the famous convention for women's rights, or how she would have written her narrative herself. Harriet Jacobs would let us hear the voice of a black woman with similar experiences to those of Truth's in the first person. Both women were slaves for many years, both fought bravely for their freedom and for their own and their children's freedom. In this sense, it could be argued that Harriet Jacobs gave voice to Sojourner Truth's ideas and experiences.

*Narrative of Phebe Ann Jacobs* (1850), by Mrs. T. C. Upham, has been neglected in many compilations of slave narratives, probably due to the fact that it is a very short volume consisting of eight pages written by a white amanuensis, and with a particular emphasis on the religious feelings and pious life led by the protagonist. Like in many of the narratives about slave women written by white authors, the slave woman is depicted as “*contented and happy*” (2; emphasis in original) and doing her work “cheerfully” and “heartily” (2). The reason Upham gives for Phebe Ann Jacobs's happiness lies in religion: “Everybody knew that Phebe was *happy*, and that it was *religion* that made her so” (2; emphasis in original). In any case, the presentation of a slave as contented and happy is, as stated above, typical of the plantation tradition rather than of the slave narrative genre.<sup>70</sup> As a consequence, although the protagonist of this narrative was a slave woman, this work is not frequently included in bibliographical accounts of slave narratives due to its short length and to the fact that its depiction of bondmen and women makes it an unreliable slave source.

Another female slave narrative written and published by a white authoress was *Aunt Judy's Story: A Tale from Real Life* (1855), by Matilda G. Thompson. *Aunt*

---

<sup>70</sup> In fact, according to Theodore R. Hovet, Mrs. T. C. Upham's Phebe Ann Jacobs served Harriet Beecher Stowe as a model for her Uncle Tom.

*Judy's Story* is a 36-page story generally considered a work of fiction. The book is about the Fords, a family of well-to-do white Christians who provide charity to Aunt Judy, a free African American woman. When the Ford children become curious about Aunt Judy's past, Mrs. Ford tells them that she was once a slave. The children want to hear more about Aunt Judy's life, and Mrs. Ford takes a sleigh ride to Aunt Judy's cabin and asks her to "recollect all that has past and happened to [her] since childhood" (Matilda Thompson 18-19). Judy does so, but her voice is not heard in the narrative, for Mrs. Ford appropriates Judy's narrative and retells it to her own family. When she finishes Aunt Judy's life story "her tears were falling fast, and the children were sobbing around her" (Matilda Thompson 36). This last sentence clearly reflects the sentimental tone in which the narrative is written, a tone that aimed at moving white Christians to reject slavery and fight against this system of human bondage. This sentimental tone is not surprising coming from a nineteenth-century white woman writer, especially one who had published several works of abolitionist children's literature during the 1850s.<sup>71</sup>

There is, however, another feature of this story that separates it from the slave narrative genre: the depiction of colored people. Although Matilda Thompson argues for the abolition of slavery, the argument she uses is quite striking and never to be found in slave narratives written by the former slaves themselves. Thompson argues that the enslavement of blacks was wrong because they "never annoyed us in America" (13), not because, as slave authors would have put it, they were also human beings and deserved to have the same rights as white people. Hence, Thompson, though an abolitionist, contributes to perpetuate racist attitudes and the hierarchies established in the Great Chain of Being, like other white abolitionist authors such as Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Among the slave narratives written by white women authors about former bondwomen there is a curious case, the fictional narrative written by Martha Griffith

---

<sup>71</sup> Little else is known about Matilda G. Thompson, except that she also wrote the short story entitled "Mark and Hasty, or, Slave Life in Missouri" in 1856.



Browne (ca. 1826-1906)—known as Mattie Griffith—entitled *Autobiography of a Female Slave* (1856). As stated in previous pages, it is the only example of a fictionalized *female* slave narrative.<sup>72</sup> Contemporary reviews of the narrative thought that this work seemed to have been written by an abolitionist, and Griffith would finally reveal her identity as a white woman within weeks of the book's publication. Nevertheless, Griffith, an antislavery writer<sup>73</sup> and women's suffragist activist, argued that the incidents of the story were composed entirely of true incidents of slavery that she had previously witnessed.

Like Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mattie Griffith's intention for writing her novel was to convince her readers of the need to abolish the cruel system of slavery<sup>74</sup> but, though both Stowe's and Griffith's purpose was similar to that of many ex slaves who published their personal histories, they included some racist connotations which separated them from the writings by black authors. This is, as explained above, one of the features of fictionalized slave narratives written by white people that distinguish them from authentic slave narratives:

Whereas several black authors of the slave narratives drew sharp class and intellectual distinctions between house and field slaves, and sometimes indicated these differences by color and dialect . . . rarely did they allow themselves to be caught in the web of racist connotations associated with slaves, blackness, and the "natural capacities" of persons of African descent, as often

---

<sup>72</sup> See page 190, footnote 75.

<sup>73</sup> Despite having antislavery opinions, Mattie Griffith was a slaveholder herself, since she inherited a half-dozen slaves from her father. Her close friend and reform intellectual Elizabeth Palmer Peabody argued that Mattie and her sister were brought several times before a Kentucky grand jury for lax management of their slaves. Peabody wrote: "Mattie has been known from childhood among her friends as opposed to slavery—but they never appreciated the depth & entireness of her soul's abhorrence of it. . . . Nevertheless they have in some degree humored her in the disposition of her negroes while she has been under age" (Ronda 282-283). Originally a Catholic, Griffith converted to evangelical Protestantism because, as reported by Peabody, her confessor had counseled her not to emancipate her slaves on account of prejudicing church interests.

<sup>74</sup> Griffith dedicates her book to pro-abolition agents with the following words:

TO ALL PERSONS  
INTERESTED IN THE CAUSE OF FREEDOM,  
This little Book  
IS RESPECTFULLY AND AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED,  
BY  
THE AUTHOR (iv; emphasis in original)

Griffith further states that she expects to raise enough money to emancipate and resettle her slaves in free territory

did the handful of white authors in antebellum America attempting to adopt a black persona through a novel's narrator (Gates, "Introduction" xv-xvi).

This is what Griffith does when she writes the following description of her master: "Young master, with his pale, intellectual face, his classic head, his sun-bright curls, and his earnest blue eyes, sat in a half-lounging attitude, making no inappropriate picture of an angel of light, whilst the two little black faces seemed emblems of fallen, degraded humanity" (113). This extract is exemplary of white and black characters' depiction in fictionalized slave narratives. Whereas the white person is described as "intellectual," "earnest," and "an angel of light," blacks are portrayed as "emblems of fallen, degraded humanity." Racism underlies the narration despite the author's abolitionist feelings.

The argument that whites have greater intellectual capacities than blacks is repeated when the protagonist's mother is introduced as "a very bright *mulatto* woman" (9; emphasis added), who "was possessed of an indomitable ambition, and had, by the hardest means, endeavored to acquire the rudiments of an education; but all that she had succeeded in obtaining was a knowledge of the alphabet, and orthography in two syllables" (10). This mulatto woman had "adopted the mode of speech used by the higher classes of whites" (10). In this sense, the protagonist's mother was not only different from the majority of slaves on account of her color (she was a mulatto woman), but also because of her intellect, which enabled her to acquire the "rudiments" of literacy and adopt "the mode of speech" of "higher classes of whites." Reading between the lines, one could think that Mattie Griffith was establishing a relationship between brighter shades of blackness and intellectual capacity. In addition, Ann—the protagonist, and supposedly Griffith, the slave woman—is presented as the daughter of a white man she does not know. She is described as white, pretty as her master's daughters, and much more intelligent than her mother.<sup>75</sup> One could understand that

---

<sup>75</sup> Mattie Griffith describes her beauty as follows: "[M]y father, I suppose, was a white man . . . A consequence of this amalgamation was *my very fair and beautiful complexion*. My skin was no perceptible shade darker than that of my young mistresses. My eyes were large and dark, while a

Griffith is thus associating beauty and intelligence with whiteness, something commonly found in fictionalized slave narratives like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*,<sup>76</sup> but not in the writings by ex slaves themselves, who simply indicate the differences in color between slaves as part of their physical characteristics in a purely descriptive tone—neither judging character or intelligence nor establishing a relationship between color and intellect—and sometimes even stating the beauty of black or mixed racial features.<sup>77</sup>

What makes *Autobiography of a Female Slave* different from the female slave narratives previously discussed is that Mattie Griffith uses the first person from the very outset of her novel, which begins with the typical opening words of slave narratives “I was born” (9). Nevertheless, Griffith soon separates from this genre by presenting her kind white master before giving an account of her family, the opposite to what slave narrative authors normally did:

My earliest recollections are of a large, old-fashioned farm-house, built of hewn rock, in which my old master, Mr. Nelson, and his family . . . At times, a shadow of an idea, like the reflection of a kind dream, comes over my mind, and, then, I conjure him up as a large, venerable-looking man . . . a wide, hard-featured face, with yet a kindly glow of honest sentiment . . . I well remember that, as a token of his good-will, he always presented us (the slave-children) with a slice of buttered bread, when we had finished our daily task. I have also a faint *reminiscence* of his old hickory cane being shaken over my head two or three times, and the promise (which remained, until his death, unfulfilled) of a good “*thrashing*” at some future period (9; emphasis in original).

---

profusion of nut-brown hair, straight and soft as the whitest lady's in the land” (9-10). Moreover, Griffith also praises her intelligence when she narrates the following episode: “Mrs. Woodbridge or Miss Betsy (as we called her) began to instruct me in the elements of the English language. . . . The aptitude that I displayed, may be inferred from the fact that, in three months from the day she began teaching me the alphabet, I was reading, with some degree of fluency, in the “First Reader.” I have often heard her relate this as *quite a literary and educational marvel*” (10; emphasis added).

<sup>76</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe describes Miss Eva, and Topsy, a slave girl, as follows:

There stood the two children, representatives of the two extremes of society. The fair, high-bred child, with her golden head, her deep eyes, her spiritual, noble brow, and prince-like movements; and her black, keen, subtle, cringing, yet acute neighbour. They stood the representatives of their races. The Saxon, born of ages of cultivation, command, education, physical and moral eminence; the Afric, born of ages of oppression, submission, ignorance, toil, and vice! (213)

<sup>77</sup> Solomon Northup describes his wife as a beautiful woman, and argues that her beauty resides in the fact that she is of mixed races: “On Christmas day, 1829, I was married to Anne Hampton . . . she is not able to determine the exact line of her descent, but the blood of three races mingles in her veins. It is difficult to tell whether the red, white, or black predominates. The union of them all, however, in her origin, has given her a singular but pleasing expression, such as is rarely to be seen” (173).

As seen in this extract, the protagonist of Griffith's narrative, Ann, enjoyed a comfortable life as a child-slave, something frequently observed in slave narratives. Nevertheless, her childhood was even better than that of the common slave child, for she received the education denied to most of them.

Mattie Griffith continues her alleged autobiography by explaining how, at the age of twelve, she is sold to a brutal master when her late master's property is divided (about two and a half years after his death). In her new home, a Kentucky plantation, she witnesses and experiences the cruelty of slave life. Following her master's death, one of his daughters takes Ann to the city as her servant. Ann finds new friendships there and falls in love with Henry, a slave who kills himself as a consequence of having been cheated out of his self-purchase. After being sold to an elderly Bostonian who emancipates her, Griffith-Ann concludes her story working as a schoolteacher for black children. All these events are compatible with the slave narrative genre, whose plot—as stated above—includes the journey from slavery to freedom, from chattelhood to humanity. It is the plot of the self-made woman.

Thus, although, in a way, Mattie Griffith follows the pattern of the slave narrative, the comments, reflections, digressions, and especially the description of both black and white characters are more closely related to the sentimental novel and the plantation tradition than to the slave narrative. Consequently, although providing a first-hand account of the life of a female slave, a heroine, who manages to escape the brutal system of slavery and start over a new life, Griffith cannot speak with the voice of a female slave, for she had not been one. She gives voice to a female slave, or rather, the picture she has of a female slave. Being an activist for women's suffrage, the slave woman she depicts is intelligent, strong, and determined, characteristics that male slave narratives reserved for the depiction of male slaves, but characteristics that can be applied to Harriet Jacobs's Linda Brent.

This analysis of the female slave narratives written by white women leads to the conclusion that these writings were influenced by the sentimental novel, a genre that was very popular among authors of this kind, and a genre that could fulfill their readers' narrative expectations. Although this feature of these female slave narratives is not very striking, what *is* surprising is that some of these slave biographies showed some degree of inherent racism, a racism that was non-existent in slave narratives written by black authors, a racism that demonstrates the condescending treatment of black people by whites in the nineteenth century, but a racism that pervades throughout these writings despite the unquestionable abolitionist positioning of these authors. This racism may explain why some of these female slave narratives have been regarded as unreliable and neglected in studies of this literary genre.

There were, however, other female slave narratives that were written by **white men**, who added sexist prejudices to the racist prejudices existent in some of the narratives of former female slaves written by white women. In these personal histories, the depiction of female slaves is that of sensuous women who are, frequently, victims of their masters' sexual abuses. They are not portrayed as complex beings with their own personality; they are, on the other hand, depicted with simplicity as stereotypes of female slaves. Thus, an analysis of these works will clarify the novelty of Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, an autobiography that would get rid of both the sexist and racist prejudices included in previous female slave narratives, and that would present the slave woman as a complex being with internal contradictions.

One of this female slave narratives written by white men is *Narrative of Joanna; an Emancipated Slave, of Surinam* (1796), by John Gabriel Stedman (1744-1797). Nevertheless, this is a special case, for it depicts the experiences of a South American slave woman from Suriname, formerly known as Netherlands Guyana or Guiana or Dutch Guiana. The personal history of Joanna,<sup>78</sup> whose family name remains unknown, was first published as part of a white soldier's account of his experiences in

---

<sup>78</sup> A portrait of Joanna can be found in "Appendix A: Illustrations," p. 373.

Surinam entitled *Narrative of a Five Year's Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam, in Guiana, on the Wild Coast of South America, from the year 1772 to 1777*. *Narrative of Joanna* would finally be excerpted in an individual volume by abolitionist propagandists in 1838. Stedman, author of both his own and Joanna's narratives was a distinguished British-Dutch soldier and noted author. He volunteered for a military expedition to Surinam, at the time a Dutch colony in South America, whose mission was to suppress uprisings by the colony's African slaves in what would be known as the First Boni Maroon War (1768-1777). Stedman would later chronicle his experiences and observations in the above-mentioned *Narrative*, which would include the personal history of Joanna, an emancipated slave, and his wife.<sup>79</sup>

Both of John Gabriel Stedman's narratives are considered to be seminal denouncements of slavery as well as invaluable resources on the daily life and culture of the New World's African Diaspora in the eighteenth century. The original text includes his romance with Joanna and his efforts to gain her freedom, the military campaigns against the rebel slaves, his relations with other soldiers, the description and investigation of exotic flora and fauna, the depiction of Amerindian and African slave life, and the explanation and analysis of relations between planters and slaves.

John Gabriel Stedman's relationship with Joanna occupies much of his *Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*. The opening paragraph of Joanna's *Narrative* begins with Stedman's description of this mulatto woman, a description with which Joanna is presented as "a domesticated Other

---

<sup>79</sup> Although the terms *marriage*, *husband*, and *wife* are used in reference to the relationship between Stedman and Joanna, they are not lawfully applied. Stedman and Joanna were not *legally* married in accordance with American laws. The narrative's readers could not know this, however, for John Gabriel Stedman's reputation would have been at stake. Nevertheless, *Narrative of Joanna* has an interesting concluding paragraph in relation to Stedman's marriage with Joanna:

His marriage was unquestionably a sincere tribute of respect to the delicacy and natural refinement of Joanna's character. Yet we find him often apologizing for feelings and conduct, which are more truly creditable to him than any of his exploits in Surinam; and he never calls her his *wife*. Perhaps Joanna, with the quick discernment of strong affection, perceived that he would be ashamed of her in Europe, and therefore heroically sacrificed her own happiness. If he had any reluctance to acknowledge his love, his admiration and his gratitude in England, he is at least manly enough to be ashamed of confessing it (Stedman 56-57; emphasis in original).

who appears more white than black, the only betrayal of her race being her brown skin, slightly prominent lips, curly hair, and exotic clothing” (Sharpe 52-54). Stedman describes Joanna using the following terms:

Rather taller than the middle size, she had the most elegant shape nature can exhibit, and moved her well formed limbs with unusual gracefulness. Her face was full of native modesty, and the most distinguished sweetness. Her eyes, as black as ebony, were large, and full of expression, bespeaking the goodness of her heart. A beautiful tinge of vermillion glowed through her dark cheeks, when she was gazed upon. Her nose was perfectly well formed, and rather small. Her lips, a little prominent, discovered, when she spoke, two regular rows of teeth as white as mountain snow. Her hair was dark brown, inclining to black, forming a beautiful globe of small ringlets (5-6).

According to Jenny Sharpe, this description of Joanna “served as model for the tragic mulatto, a figure that would eventually displace the earlier stereotyping of mulatto women as vain, arrogant, and sexually promiscuous” (46). Furthermore, Stedman draws a picture of Joanna as a model slave or, in Sharpe’s words, “a Noble Slave who is too good for the cruel society in which she lives” (79). The presentation of Joanna as such a good woman “is designed to evoke feelings of pity, compassion, and sympathy for her” (Sharpe 79). Thus, *Narrative of Joanna* bears some resemblance with other female slave narratives written by white abolitionists, in which the slave woman had to be pitied so that the readers would finally react against the injustice of slavery. Nevertheless, many other authors of female slave narratives portray the slave woman protagonist as a strong, principled woman, a heroine who fights for her rights and freedom. Stedman does not completely avoid this presentation but offers a slightly different picture of the slave woman.

Before Joanna and John Gabriel Stedman started their relationship, Joanna lived under the constant threat of being sold. After her marriage to Stedman, Joanna was purchased by a woman who allowed her to live with Stedman. He describes how he marries Joanna and how he buys her—as well as their son’s—freedom, but does not seem to realize that all throughout these events, it is Joanna who is in control of the situation. She is the one who decides when to marry Stedman, and exercises a personal

control over her sexuality since, through her relationship with this white man, Joanna manages to have her son manumitted.<sup>80</sup> In any case, Stedman does not write about his sexual encounters with Joanna before she becomes his wife. He is more concerned with the sentimental and romantic aspect of his narration, which, in this sense, resembles the genre of the sentimental novel.

All in all, *Narrative of Joanna* bears little resemblance with *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* or even with other female slave narratives because, first of all, her story is part of a longer piece of writing about a white man's experiences in Surinam. Secondly, her biography was compiled by a white *man*, who was not an editor, but her *husband*, whereas most female slave narratives were written by white *women* editors. Thus, the point of view from which the narrative is presented is very different from that of the typical female slave narrative. The female slave's voice is not only unheard, but *hidden* behind that of a white free man who was in love with her and who idealizes her throughout his narration. On the other hand, this is not the slave narrative of a woman who lived in the United States, but of a South American slave. The only similarity between this work and the typical African American female slave narrative—and one that is found reading between the lines—is the depiction of a female slave as owner of her sexuality, as a strong woman who makes decisions about her life. Nevertheless, the doubt remains whether this was actually so or it is simply a personal interpretation of John Gabriel Stedman's words since Joanna does not speak for herself but through his writing.

Louisa Picquet's slave narrative, entitled *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon, or, Inside Views of Southern Domestic Life* (1861), was also written by a white American man named Hiram Mattison (1811-1868). This work, though interesting, is very unlikely to have influenced Harriet Jacobs, for *Incidents* had been arranged long before

---

<sup>80</sup> Jenny Sharpe argues that Joanna "must have been practicing some form of birth control, as she did not become pregnant again after giving birth to their son, John. Since sons were more likely to be manumitted than daughters (as John eventually was), it is possible that her pregnancy was calculated rather than accidental" (68). Hence, Joanna demonstrates to have some control over her life, especially as regards her sexuality, which for the slave woman meant a high degree of control.



Picquet's biography was published. In any case, *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon* is not as important a slave narrative as *Incidents*. In this book, Mattison assembles his interview with Louisa Picquet (c. 1829-1896)<sup>81</sup> in Buffalo, New York, in May 1860. Nevertheless, he does not simply literally transcribe her words. He further adds personal comments and digressions, like many other white editors and authors of slave narratives.

*Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon* is, however, interesting because of the nature of the protagonist. Octoroons, like quadroons,<sup>82</sup> were especially appreciated for their beauty by white men. Picquet exemplifies the situation of these women, for she bore four of her master's seven children. Moreover, Picquet's narrative—particularly the “Conclusion and Moral” added by Hiram Mattison—emphasizes the appalling number of cases in which slave women bore their master's children. This is probably the greatest similarity between this narrative and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Both *Incidents* and *Louisa Picquet* openly relate the sexual nature of the protagonists' encounters with their masters, and the sufferings and exposure slave women were subject to.

When Hiram Mattison met Louisa Picquet, she was already free, and he joined her cause to raise funds to free her mother. The fact that Mattison was a white man is relevant to Picquet's narrative, for his presentation of the life of a slave woman who was almost white intended to be as realistic as possible (it is presented in question-answer pattern as a literal transcription of their meeting)<sup>83</sup> but might result a bit morbid at times. Daphne A. Brooks writes:

Displaying a relentless interest in the (un)readability of the light-skinned Picquet, Mattison assures that no one ‘would suspect’ that she ‘has a drop of African blood in her veins.’ Peculiarly drawn to ‘white slaves’ and physical affliction, Mattison repeatedly returns in his interrogation of his subject to the

<sup>81</sup> A portrait of Louisa Picquet can be found in “Appendix A: Illustrations,” p. 373.

<sup>82</sup> An octoroon is a person having one-eighth black ancestry. As stated previously, a quadroon is one-quarter black by descent.

<sup>83</sup> *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon* is presented in an interview format with Hiram Mattison asking questions and Louisa Picquet answering them. This format can be misleading, for, though one may think that the narrative is a literal transcription of the ex slave's words, the compilation of a personal history through an interview depends on the questions asked. Had Mattison asked different questions, the narrative would have been different.

petrified flesh of Picquet and others who 'looked like her,' who faced the whip and who were 'stripped and examined' under the evil eye of slavery (19).

It seems as if Mattison delights and finds some kind of morbid pleasure in the narration of Picquet's sexual encounters with white masters and in the description of her scarred back. The question is whether a black man or Picquet herself would have narrated these events in a similar manner. Black men would have probably addressed this issue concentrating on the suffering of women slaves, but without including such morbid comments. Picquet would have, more likely, focused on her motives and feelings. Hence, the fact that Picquet's narrative was written by a white man *is* relevant for an insightful analysis of the book. As Brooks argues, "[b]y discursively excavating and exhibiting the body of the octoroon, Mattison uncovers the body of white power itself and paradoxically leaves traces of its impurities. . . . No surprise that Mattison's work hinges on exposing and spectacularizing the white mulatta's figure as a means to demarcate the boundaries of racial difference" (19). Once again, this female slave narrative—like the ones written by white authors previously discussed—distills racism, despite the fact that the aim of this white author was to help this former slave woman.

Thus, as examined in previous pages, a few ex slave women managed to have their personal histories published by relating their life experiences to white editors and authors. These white people seemed interested in their publication either due to their abolitionist feelings or because they found in the publication of slave narratives a profitable business (they were quite popular at the time). These editors and authors thought that helping ex slave women write about their sufferings in slavery would imply helping the abolitionist cause. Moreover, they believed that these original works about women slaves could make good sales, since they were different from the popular male slave narratives that had been written before. Nevertheless, racism and sexism distills from some of these narratives due to the nature of their authors.

Consequently, it is necessary to analyze the similarities and differences between the way in which *white* authors wrote female slave narratives and the way in which

**black men** put into writing the experiences of black women. It is interesting to note that only two female slave narratives before the publication of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* were written by black male authors: *Aunt Sally* (1858), and *Narrative of the Life of Jane Brown* (1860). These works are, despite having been written by black authors with similar concerns, very different. Whereas *Aunt Sally* maintains the paternalistic tone which imbues the female slave narratives written by white abolitionists, the slaves depicted in *Narrative of the Life of Jane Brown* are strong and rebellious. Nevertheless, the description of slave women in either case could not be equated to the one provided by Harriet Jacobs in *Incidents*, for the depiction that she offers is much more complex and complete.

Sally Williams (ca. 1796-?) seems to have dictated her personal history, entitled *Aunt Sally; or The Cross the Way to Freedom* (1858), to her son Isaac Williams.<sup>84</sup> As stated above, this work was considered by John W. Blassingame, a romantic and unreliable narrative of bondage. Erlene Stetson argues that *Aunt Sally* is often “labeled ‘bogus’” probably because it “records the Uncle Tom-type suffering, saintly slave” and “is full of self-deprecating and pious sentiments” (82). Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* aroused criticism on the part of black readers for her depiction of the content passive slave.<sup>85</sup> Blacks and slaves did not like being depicted as a passive race. Thus, it would seem that this book had been written by an abolitionist white person—such as Harriet Beecher Stowe or Frances H. Whipple Green, who, though active in the fight for the disappearance of slavery from American society, found it hard to eliminate

<sup>84</sup> In fact, Sally Williams’s story does not begin until Chapter III of *her* narrative, since the first two are devoted to her son’s (auto)biography and written in the third-person. Among the scholars who consider that *Aunt Sally* was written by her son Isaac Williams are Eileen Southern and Josephine Wright (*African-American Traditions in Song, Sermon, Tale, and Dance, 1600-1920*), and Jean Fagan Yellin and Cynthia D. Bond (*The Pen is Ours*). A portrait of Aunt Sally can be found in “Appendix A: Illustrations,” p. 374.

<sup>85</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe relied on slave narratives as documentary sources for some of the events she related but contradicted these sources in different ways. She gave slaves roles they would not have normally assumed, and allocated them actions they would not have carried out. Chinosole argues that Stowe presents slaves as “caricatures” that “contort the very faces of the people it purports to redeem from chattel slavery” (106). Michael Bennett also discusses some contradictions between *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and slave narratives in *Democratic Discourses*. He argues that, whereas slave narratives portrayed heroic figures of slaves whose happiness lied in freedom from bondage, “[t]he narrative logic of Stowe’s representation of slavery leads relentlessly to this conclusion. The only happiness for the black character lies in death or service” (133).

racist prejudices from their writings—and not by a black man like Aunt Sally's son. In any case, whether the author was the protagonist's son or not, he uses some conventions of the slave narrative genre: the assertion that the facts related are true, that it is a literal transcription of the ex slave's words, the confirmation of the existence of the former bondswoman, and the indication of the purpose for which the narrative has been written:

It is strictly true in all its incidents. It has not been embellished, or wrought up for effect, but is given, as nearly as possible, in the words in which it was related to the writer. "Aunt Sally" is a veritable person, and is now living in Detroit, Michigan, with her son, Rev. Isaac Williams, who is pastor of a Methodist church there . . . The writer hopes that this little story may be the means of leading those who read it to think and feel deeply upon the truths which it involves, and that many more similar books may be written for our Sabbath Schools, so that the young may grow up imbued with the spirit of liberty, and rejoicing to labor for that oppressed and unhappy race which "Aunt Sally" represents (Isaac Williams iii-v).

In this extract, the author argues, first, that all the information he has compiled is "strictly true;" second, he states that the words he has used are plain and void of literary effects, and that he has simply transcribed "as nearly as possible" the ex slave's words; finally, he explicitly states the purpose of the narrative, which is to aid the young "grow up imbued with the spirit of liberty, and rejoicing to labor for that oppressed and unhappy race,"<sup>86</sup> or, in other words, to convince people of the injustice of slavery and to move them to fight against this oppressive institution.

Unlike *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, *Aunt Sally* does not depict the sexual persecution female slaves were subject to, probably because Aunt Sally did not experience this harassment as her owner was a white woman. Nevertheless, her sexuality was appropriated all the same, for Sally was forced to marry one of her mistress's slaves. She was only thirteen at the time:

[H]er mistress decided that she should be married, and that [Abram Williams] should be her husband. . . . It happened very well in this case, but the same power could have been employed, had they disliked each other. . . . Sally had never seen him, and knew nothing about the matter, till one day, when she was in the house, her mistress said—

"Well, Sally, you're thirteen years old, and I want you to be married. There's a young man over on the plantation who'll make you a good husband.

---

<sup>86</sup> According to Erlene Stetson, "[t]his narrative was used as a Sunday School text" (82).

He'll come here soon, and you'll see him," and then followed an enumeration of his good qualities. . . . They were pleased with each other, as she had predicted, and as there was no reason for delaying their union, it was agreed that they should be married as soon as the hurry of the planting time was over. He was a kind, good-hearted man, and Sally was happier than she had been for a long time, in feeling that she had some one to love who would love her (Isaac Williams 50-51).

After reading this extract, one can understand why scholars have considered this narrative fraudulent, for the reaction of the slave girl is very different from the one recorded in most (male and female) slave narratives. Sally agrees to marry the black slave without complaining, and even claims—to her mistress's content—that she is glad to do so. Aunt Sally loved the man before even meeting him, or so the author says.

Aunt Sally also seems to accept her fate without complaining when her beloved husband is sold away and she is again forced to marry another man:

When Abram had been gone four years, Sally's master began to look for another husband to fill his place. Sally had seen marriages so lightly made and broken, that it was to her a matter of course. Her respectability and thrift had procured her many admirers, and as her master deigned to consult her on the subject, she chose from among them a free colored man named Beggs, because she thought he could never be sold away from her (Isaac Williams 83).

Although the author claims that Aunt Sally is a respectable black woman, that four years has already elapsed before she is to take another husband, and that she *chooses* whom to marry, the fact still remains that she is a female slave whose opinions are not of great importance to her owners because, had they chosen to do so, she would have got married earlier, and—if her character is faithfully depicted in this book—she would have demonstrated a passive and relatively content attitude, an attitude that contradicted slave narratives' portrait of bondmen and women.

There is another element in this narrative which is not common in slave narratives: a detailed and extended depiction of a vindictive slave who tries to make the protagonist's life miserable. Chapter XIV of *Aunt Sally* entitled "The Lash—Flight and Return" is devoted to the revenge that a slave named Eve takes on Aunt Sally for being placed in her former job:

OLD Aunt Eve was full of *vexation* to see Sally promoted and herself set aside as useless, where once she had been supreme. All her life had been spent on an isolated plantation; she had had no religious influences to soften her heart; the only instruction she had ever received had been in relation to her cooking, and her *naturally violent temper* had grown *harsher* and *sourer* with advancing age. She *envied* and *hated* her new rival, and longed for an opportunity of *revenge* (Isaac Williams 149-150; emphasis added).

Words like the ones applied to describe Eve's character are not frequently found in slave narratives in reference to a fellow slave, for the purpose of these writings was to condemn slavery and slaveholders, not to portray bondmen and women as brutal, cruel and vindictive. Moreover, these personal histories of bondage are characterized by the ties that bound slaves, and, although some allusions to traitors are present, they are normally excused and the blame falls on the cruel system of slavery.

In the light of these differences between traditional slave narratives and *Aunt Sally*, some scholars conclude that *Aunt Sally* is a fake slave narrative. Whether fake or not, *Aunt Sally*; or *The Cross the Way to Freedom* is a very unusual type of slave narrative because the protagonist is not depicted as a strong and combative female slave who does whatever it takes to fight the system of slavery and obtain her freedom, but as a meek, pious, good slave who trusts God for deliverance and faithfully obeys her slaveholders. These characteristics are normally applied to slaves in the plantation tradition, a genre which, as previously stated, was created by proslavery agents nostalgic for antebellum times who try to present slaves as contented and incapable of looking after themselves.

Finally, it does not seem that *Aunt Sally* could have inspired Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents*. Although both works present a female slave as protagonist, there are many differences between these works. First of all, *Aunt Sally* is a third-person account of the life of a female slave written by a person other than the protagonist, whereas *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is written in the first person by the protagonist herself (though using a pseudonym). Second, *Aunt Sally* talks about love among slaves and about the importance marriage has for the protagonist. Jacobs, on the other hand, concludes her

narrative arguing that freedom is more important than marriage for the bondswoman. Third, whereas Jacobs fights and provides for her children's freedom, Aunt Sally was freed by her son. Fourth, *Aunt Sally* does not reflect on the appropriation of sexuality by slaveowners—the only comment in this line being the one related to the forced marriages among slaves, whereas this is the main topic of *Incidents*. Finally, *Aunt Sally* portrays either contented or cruel slaves, thus contradicting the traditional depiction of these bondmen and women in slave narratives, but following proslavery agents' ideas about black slaves. On the other hand, Jacobs portrays (first herself but also other) slaves as courageous, discontented with their situation in life, and combative for their freedom and the abolition of slavery. In this light, the only common point between these two narratives is the fact that their protagonists were slave women.

Different is the case of Jane Brown, who dictated her narrative to Reverend G. W. Offley, a black local preacher. It was entitled *Narrative of the Life of Jane Brown and Her Two Children. Related to the Reverend G. W. Offley*, and published in 1860, not long before Harriet Jacobs published *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. According to Manning Marable, Jane Brown asserts in her narrative that “virtually every slave longed for freedom, and that both freed and enslaved Blacks covertly discussed rebellion” (75), a statement that clearly separates this biographical account of a slave woman's life from the previously discussed. The reason for this disruption may lie in the fact that the writer of this book was not a white woman, but a black man, who had been a slave himself.<sup>87</sup> This author might have wanted to reverse the racist comments inherent in some of the female slave narratives written by white authors. This female slave narrative is, however, very difficult to find and, therefore, little known and studied.

In the light of this analysis, it could be concluded that the female slave narratives published before *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* are not as relevant as this work

---

<sup>87</sup> This reflection can be, however, simply the writer's opinion of slavery, for, in his own narrative, entitled *A Narrative of the Life and Labors of the Rev. G. W. Offley, a Colored Man, Local Preacher and Missionary* (1859), Reverend G. W. Offley largely criticizes the institution of human bondage.

within the genre for several reasons: (i) they were not written by the ex slave herself, but by another person who presents the former bondswoman's voice veiled behind his or her own perspective of slavery; (ii) some of them are not reliable and are more similar to the plantation tradition than to the slave narrative genre due to the inherent racism in the narrative; (iii) at least one of them (*Autobiography of a Female Slave*) is fictional.

However, in order to analyze whether Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was the only antebellum female slave narrative written by the former bondswoman herself or not, the other narratives of female bondage published after *Incidents* but before the end of the Civil War must be examined. These are *Memoir of Old Elizabeth, a Coloured Woman* (1863), published anonymously, and *The Story of Dinah* (1863), written by the Englishman John Hawkins Simpson. An analysis of these works will demonstrate that *Memoir of Old Elizabeth* cannot even be considered a slave narrative but a spiritual autobiography, and that *The Story of Dinah* is a peculiar slave narrative that combines politics and storytelling.

*Memoir of Old Elizabeth, a Coloured Woman* (1863), written anonymously,<sup>88</sup> compiles Old Elizabeth's experiences in slavery. Elizabeth was ninety-seven years of age at the time when she narrated her experiences in slavery, which explains the epithet "Old" used to refer to this woman.<sup>89</sup> Several facts dismiss this work as a reliable antebellum female slave narrative. First of all, it is a very short narrative, barely 19 pages long. Secondly, and like many other previous narratives of bondage about women slaves, this account "was taken mainly from her own lips" (Elizabeth, *Memoir* 3) and not written by herself. The narrative further reads "her simple language has been

---

<sup>88</sup> In bibliographical records of slave narratives, Elizabeth's name is given as author of the text, for the cover page to the book so suggests. In this line, Elizabeth figures as author of *Memoir of Old Elizabeth* in the bibliography that is compiled at the end of this document.

<sup>89</sup> Elizabeth (1766-1866) was born a slave in Maryland in 1766. Both her parents were slaves. After becoming a free black woman, she tried to travel and preach, something which women like Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw also did. Nevertheless, the opposition she encountered forced her to hold prayer meetings in homes, a practice that she continued for many years in spite of the opposition she found in the church. She would later travel and hold religious meetings in Virginia, Maryland, Michigan, and Canada. At the age of eighty she moved to Michigan, and during her four years there, she founded an orphanage for black children. Seven years later Elizabeth would finally settle in Philadelphia, where she was living at the time of the publication of her biography *Memoir of Old Elizabeth*. This book was republished by Quakers after her death and retitled *Elizabeth, A Colored Minister of the Gospel, Born in Slavery* (1889).



adhered to as strictly as was consistent with perspicuity and propriety” (Elizabeth, *Memoir* 3), leaving unclear which adjustments were made to make Elizabeth’s language “consistent with perspicuity and propriety.” The veil that covers Elizabeth’s own words will never disappear and we will never know to what extent the language or even events in her life were altered or eliminated from the original dictation, for the distance between the real dictation and the written account cannot be measured.

The third element that contributes to discarding this personal history as reliable is the fact that it was dictated to the anonymous author when Elizabeth was ninety-seven years old, and one could presume that her memories of slavery could not be as clear and accurate as other younger ex slaves’.

Finally, Elizabeth’s experiences of slavery cover about a quarter of her whole narrative, which is mainly devoted to her religious feelings and her preaching. In this sense, *Memoir of Old Elizabeth* is probably wrongly placed within the genre of slave narratives. It could be said that the fact that Elizabeth was born a slave and remained so for about thirty years does not make her biography a slave narrative, especially if this account is more concerned with her conversion experience and her call to preach the gospel. Indeed *Memoir of Old Elizabeth* is more closely related to the conversion narrative or spiritual autobiography than to the slave narrative genre.

*The Story of Dinah* (1863) included in *Horrors of the Virginian Slave Trade and of the Slave-Rearing Plantations* was written by the Englishman John Hawkins Simpson, who, after a preface in which he establishes his opposition to the slave trade, and a summary of Virginia’s slave trade and laws, relates the story of Dinah. Dinah was born a slave on a plantation in Virginia. She was born to a slave mother and to a white father who, as Simpson suggests, was also her master. Vivid are the descriptions of cruel beatings and punishment endured by Dinah, her husband, children, and friends. When she was young, a neighbor told Dinah about the possibility of freedom in England. She tried to escape but was caught, whipped, and branded on her right

shoulder and left instep. Later, her owner allowed her to marry a field hand, with whom she had fifteen children (including four sets of twins). Her husband would be killed by an overseer in 1855. Like many other female slaves, she was asked to take another husband<sup>90</sup> but refused to do so. Five years later, her master told her: "You are now of no service; my children are grown up, and you won't marry Jones, so there is no use my keeping you; you will be sold to-night to a trader" (Simpson 50). The morning later, before she was handed to her new owner, Dinah escaped. She was aided by sympathetic people she encountered on her way to the northern states, until she finally arrived in London.

*The Story of Dinah* seems to be an excuse to condemn the slave trade, slavery and slave laws, which is the main purpose of the book. Dinah's story occupies the majority of the book, which is 63 pages long in total. It also includes John Simpson's personal comments on *The Declaration of Independence*, a description of Virginia and its slave laws, and final antislavery comments. Dinah's life story begins in chapter II, entitled "The Planter and His Property." A note specifies the origin of this story: "This is the true story of the escaped slave, having eleven scars on her body, referred to by the Rev. Newman Hall, in his speech lately at Exeter Hall, in the meeting at which the Rev. H. Ward Beecher gave his address" (Simpson 6). Although with this sentence Simpson argues that the story to be told is "true," one may wonder if this is the case when reading the sentence that commences Dinah's life: "About two miles from Petersburg, in the State of Virginia, lived a wealthy planter, to whom we will give the name Henry Hope" (Simpson 6). This sentence resembles the beginning of fairy tales or children's stories more than the beginning of slave narratives, and the same style is used in following paragraphs:

He had, at the time when our story begins, that is, more than thirty-three years back, a great number of slaves, probably not much less than four hundred. He was also a partner in a large warehouse in the town, where ready-made clothes

---

<sup>90</sup> "Di was ceaselessly tormented by her master, who did all he could to force her to take Jones the blacksmith, or, if she would not have him, some one else, no matter who, if only she would not remain a widow" (Simpson 47).

were sold. . . . The Mrs. Hope with whom we shall shortly become acquainted was his second wife; the first wife left him several children, and some of them were at school when he married a second time. His second wife was a tall fair lady of rather pleasing face and manners, and was generally kind to the children of her predecessor. (Simpson 6).

The story continues in the same tone,<sup>91</sup> and it is this tone that might have led historian John W. Blassingame to deem this story “unreliable” (96 n17). Moreover, the fact that John Hawkins Simpson admits having compiled Dinah’s story from an interview he had with her instead of writing literally what she dictated<sup>92</sup> makes one wonder what the story would have been like if Dinah had narrated it herself. The result might have been completely different.

Thus, during the antebellum period, neither before nor after the publication of *Incidents* another ex slave woman wrote her own personal history *herself*. Only Harriet Jacobs had the opportunity to do so. It was only Jacobs who managed to give voice to thousands of women in bondage, to portray the reality they were experiencing in the first person, to depict the complexity of slave women’s life without racist or sexist prejudices. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is, thus, *the only female slave-authored slave narrative of the antebellum period*.

The analysis of the writings by African American women during the antebellum period leads to some conclusions. First, the African American women who used their own voice in their writings and who wrote their own works did not write slave

---

<sup>91</sup> *The Story of Dinah* is written in this storytelling style except when instances of cruelty toward slaves are narrated. See, for example, the episode in which Dinah is branded:

Wildshaw held her hands, the black overseer pulled her cotton dress from her right shoulder, then, taking the large brand from Jones, he pressed it deep into the hissing flesh. She writhed in Wildshaw’s grasp and cried piteously. The smaller brand was then given to the coloured overseer; he stooped down and pressed it hard upon her left instep. She became deadly sick; all around her seemed to be a black curtain, and she fainted away (Simpson 16).

<sup>92</sup> John Hawkins Simpson writes: “The story of Dinah is written with no attempt at elegance of style. It took me five days to take notes from her word of mouth: those notes were answers to questions and cross-questions searching as I could make them. I have merely connected the answers as briefly as possible. My aim was, not to spin out a long tale, and not to introduce anything at all of an imaginary nature” (vii).

narratives but essays, poems, articles, novels, or spiritual autobiographies. Many of these women had not been slaves themselves, and though they presented arguments in favor of the abolition of slavery, they did it in political essays or articles instead of in the shape of slave narratives. Others were simply more interested in the religious aspects of their lives than in a political fight, and consequently some of their works were used as Christian didactic writings.

Secondly, Harriet Jacobs constructed the first autobiographical female slave narrative, since the female slave narratives that had been published before Harriet *Incidents* had not been written by the ex slave herself, but usually by a white abolitionist writer, editor, or transcriber. These authors followed many of the conventions of the slave narrative genre examined in the previous chapter, but many of them included racist comments and digressions in their writings, something which was typical of the plantation tradition, and not of the slave narrative. Some of these personal histories can, on account of these and other features, be considered unreliable and fictionalized. In fact, one of them—*Autobiography of a Female Slave*, by Mattie Griffith—was discovered to be so. These writers were also very much influenced by their abolitionist opinions and the sentimental fiction that was so popular at the time. Thus, many of these writings are a mixture of sentimental fiction, abolitionist speech and slave narrative, a mixture that is also present in *Incidents*.

Nevertheless, most female slave narratives were written in the third person, for their authors were not the ex slaves themselves. These authors decided what to include in the work and what not to, carrying out an editorial control on what was important in the former bondwoman's life in slavery. Especially conflicting was the discussion of the female slave's sexual encounters with white men. Many of these white authors decided not to include these experiences, either because they found it impossible to describe this aspect of the female slave (due to the modesty that was observed in the writings that were produced at the time), or because they wanted to present the ex slave as an honest and religious woman, a heroine whose character was without fault. Hence, Harriet

Jacobs's achievement is to have reinterpreted the slave narrative genre so that it could be used by ex slave women to describe their experiences in bondage in the first person.

Third, taking into account that Harriet Jacobs began writing *Incidents* in 1853—though it was not published until 1861—some of the above-examined African American women poets, essayists, novelists, and autobiographers may not have influenced Jacobs's work at all.

Finally, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was not only the first autobiographical account of a female slave, but also the only one published in the antebellum period. The rest of the personal histories about female slaves published in this period were not written by the ex slave women themselves, but by an amanuensis, who tried to depict the women's voices in their writings, with more or less success.

Thus, the appearance of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in the literary panorama of the time was convulsing. Though some female slave narratives had already been published, Harriet Jacobs presented a novel view of bondwomen's experiences in slavery. Harriet Jacobs's authorial control over her autobiography allowed her to write about the most conflicting aspect of the slave woman's life, and one that had not been so openly disclosed before: her sexuality. Not only did she present the sexual nature of the white master's approach to the female slave openly and honestly, but did so in the first person, rendering herself for criticism on the part of virtuous white women. In this light, the originality of Harriet Jacobs's personal history is two-fold: first, *Incidents* is the first first-person self-penned female slave narrative; secondly, it is the first narrative that focuses on the sexual harassment slave women endured from their masters. Therefore, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* deserves special attention and a more thorough examination.

2

***INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL:  
A WOMANIST APPROACH TO SLAVE NARRATIVES***

The pattern of slave narratives examined in the previous chapter was drawn up by analyzing, almost exclusively, male slave narratives. Though it is true that few slave narratives were written by—or from the point of view of—female slaves, it is also true that these works have not received much attention by scholars in their study of these peculiar historic-literary documents: “Until recently, and with few notable exceptions, the critical treatment of the slave narrative has almost dealt with the narratives of heroic male slaves, not their wives or sisters” (Braxton, *Black Women* 18).<sup>93</sup> Consequently, the part of slave life that dealt with the particular roles and sufferings of women slaves was discarded: “By focusing almost exclusively on the narratives of male slaves, critics have left out half the picture” (Braxton, *Black Women* 18). The half of the picture that was presented by male slaves was used to determine what it meant to be a slave in nineteenth-century America. Nevertheless, it simply explained what it meant to be a slave *man*, for slave *women* were secondary characters in these narratives of bondage. Their experiences were briefly presented, if presented at all, as the experiences of the hero-slave’s mothers, sisters, wives, or grandmothers. Thus, as Valerie Smith suggests,

---

<sup>93</sup> Similarly, Patricia Bell Scott writes the following on the neglect endured by black women writers of all times: “From reading the literature, one might easily develop the impression that Black women have never played any role in this society, and that they represent only a minute percentage of the total American population” (85-86). In this line, Alice Walker argues in an interview that black women writers are not as highly considered as their male counterparts precisely because they are women (O’Brien 201).

the slave narratives written by male authors forget to discuss those peculiar aspects of female slave experience:

The conventions of the male-authored narratives thus conflate the experience of slavery and freedom with prevailing definitions of masculinity. The form and rhetoric might broadly suit the outline of the slave woman's quest for liberation, but they inadequately capture the specifics of her experience. They rarely feature protagonists who suffer over the separation from their families or who bring relatives North with them. More importantly, they fail to represent the slave woman's sexual vulnerability, the crucial fact that differentiated her experience from that of her male counterparts ("Introduction" xxx).

In this light, it is clear that reading and studying the slave narratives written by or about women is essential if a complete picture of slavery is to be provided.

Slave women did not only have their own sufferings and experiences but, as discussed in previous pages, also played different roles than slave men on the plantation—and later in society. In fact, one of these roles made them central figures in the perpetuation and expansion of slavery: their role as *breeders*. As Erlene Stetson writes, "[s]ince Black women held it in their power to reproduce the labor force, does this not make them central to an understanding of slave history?" (67). If women played such an essential role within the slave system, their experiences should also be heard, but from a first-person point of view, not as experiences analyzed by black men who probably could not fully understand the female slave's behavior, attitude, or motives. As Gloria Anzaldúa would argue, ex slave women "write the stories others have miswritten about [them]" (169).<sup>94</sup> These women had similar concerns than male slave authors and the objective for which they wrote their stories of bondage was also similar, but they wanted to communicate the unique experiences of the silenced women slaves because, as Harriet Jacobs would write, "[s]lavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, *they* have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own" (*Incidents* 119; emphasis in original). These

---

<sup>94</sup> Although Gloria Anzaldúa makes this statement in reference to Third-World women writers, it can be also applied to female slave narrators. Their role as writers in nineteenth-century America is similar to Third-World women authors due to the fact that slaves' minds were also colonized by their masters and white society.

women had fewer opportunities to be heard than their male counterparts, and few of them would finally manage to have their experiences written down. Consequently, when they do so, they speak not only for themselves, but for the women that are still in bondage and whose voice might never be heard. Thus, we could apply to these slave women the words that Gay Wilentz dedicates to contemporary African and African American women writers:

What we see from the voices of these Black women writers is that their concerns may not be entirely different from those of their male counterparts in wanting to communicate a message, liberate and bolster their own people, and improve their society; but in the manner of production and the focus of the material, these women writers have a distinguishable aim. They address the formerly unvoiced members of the community—the wife, the barren woman, the young child, the mother, the grandmother. They look at their existence as a continuum, an invisible thread drawn through the women's stories to women readers and the men who will listen. Through their alternative, mothering practice, these writers (re)construct residual herstory as emergent culture (xxxiii).

If writing and publishing works of literature was difficult for black men, it was even more difficult for black women, for they had to confront not only racism but also sexism. As Gloria T. Hull and Barbara Smith argue, black women “belong to two groups that have been defined as congenitally inferior in intellect, that is Black people and women” (“Introduction” xxiv). This consideration of black women as inferior beings was particularly acute in the nineteenth century, a period in which white women were not allowed to vote, and were thought to occupy a lower position in the Great Chain of Being than white men. Black men would come afterwards in the ladder and, after them, black women, whose intelligence was, thus, considered to be the lowest for a human being, very close to animal intellect.<sup>95</sup>

Nevertheless, and despite all the difficulties they encountered, ex slave black women were brave enough to make public speeches and/or to write their former experiences as slaves. Thus, the act of speaking became, for the black woman, an act of resistance against their subjection as both black and a woman. Silence is the mark of the

---

<sup>95</sup> In Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, the protagonist is a silent black woman who is told by a black man how insignificant her life is as a black person and as a woman: “You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. . . . you nothing at all” (176).



oppressed. Speech is the mark of the free or liberated. In bell hooks's words, "silence is evoked as a signifier, a marker of exploitation, oppression, dehumanization. Silence is the condition of one who has been dominated, made an object; talk is the mark of freeing, of making one subject. . . . The act of speaking is a way women come to power" (129). By overcoming the imposed silence, ex slave women fight against the system that had oppressed them in a brutal way. Moreover, speech helps them gain control over their own lives. They assert their selfhood, their independence of mind and experiences, and their willingness to improve the quality of their lives.<sup>96</sup>

Furthermore, their speech introduces significant differences in their characterization as women and as slaves, a characterization that was based on the descriptions that the slave narratives written by men had provided. Male slave narrators had represented them "as mothers and nurturers (generally of their own) or, often, as degraded and dehumanized individuals who ha[d] lost their self-respect and self-esteem" (Braxton, *Black Women* 19). Whereas the male slave was depicted as the heroic figure of his narrative, these women were secondary characters in the life of the male slave, even if they played important roles in their lives (mothers, wives, etc.). These women's voices were not heard and, even if their experiences were portrayed in the narrative, the male author often misinterpreted behaviors, attitudes, decisions, comments, etc. The female slave was not allowed to speak in male narratives of bondage. Thus, when a slave narrative tells the story of a bondswoman in the first person, attention must be paid, and a thorough analysis must be carried out to understand the sufferings these women endured; sufferings that, in many cases, were

---

<sup>96</sup> In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker presents the letters of a black woman, Celie, who remained silent about the rapes she endured in childhood for many years because she was told "[y]ou better not tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (3). Thus, whereas her life is full of silence and secrecy, she writes letters to God in which she opens her heart and expresses her inmost feelings. It is not until she meets a woman, Shug Avery, who opens her eyes and presents her with a new perspective of life, that she can start feeling confident, assert her selfhood, laugh, recover her voice, and write letters to her sister Nettie confessing her the sufferings she has endured. She is also able to refute her husband's assertion—"You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. . . . you nothing at all" (Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* 176)—as follows: "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, . . . But I'm here" (Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* 176). She has decided to fight, to assert her selfhood, to leave behind her life of silence. Her coming to voice signifies her coming to real life.

peculiar of their gender, and which male slaves found almost impossible to address in their writings, or to understand as men.

When female ex slaves engage in the task of telling or writing their stories of bondage they, first of all, present themselves not only as former slaves, but also as *women*. They argue for black women's public role as speakers, preachers, and writers. They argue for their experiences to be heard, not as a reminder of black men's sufferings, but as a depiction of a different side of the slave system. These writings would constitute the origin of the literary tradition of African American women writers, a tradition that, according to Mary Helen Washington, has a clear distinguishable characteristic: "[I]t is about black women; it takes the trouble to record the thoughts, words, feelings, and deeds of black women, experiences that make the realities of being black in America look very different from what men have written" ("The Darkened Eye" 35). Male ex slaves had timidly attempted to explain the sufferings common to so many women in bondage, but they could not—or dared not—represent these women's thoughts and feelings. The female slave narratives written in the antebellum period depict the experiences of bondwomen from their own personal perspective, being the protagonists of the narratives. Nevertheless, and as examined in previous pages, only *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was written by the ex slave herself before the Civil War. Thus, Harriet Jacobs's portrayal of the slave woman is probably the most intimate of all antebellum female slave narratives.<sup>97</sup> Consequently, the analysis of the stylistic and thematic characteristics of this autobiography will provide clear insights into the description of female slave narratives written by black and white (male and female) authors in comparison with the narratives of enslaved men. In this analysis, Harriet Jacobs's womanism will play a central role.

Womanism, a term coined by African American writer and scholar Alice Walker, is associated to black feminism or feminism of color, for that is the first

---

<sup>97</sup> In this line, Jean Fagan Yellin argues that *Incidents* is "the most female-centered of the narratives" ("Through Her Brother's Eyes" 45).

definition of the term womanist that Walker provides in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. However, womanism is a more complex concept. Walker further argues that a womanist is a woman who “[a]ppreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility . . . and women’s strength” (*In Search* xi).<sup>98</sup> Deborah K. King argues that womanism characterizes women “as audacious as well as capable” (1486). King further states that this characterization “contrasts with the image of females under patriarchy as submissive and inferior” (1486), a racist and sexist characterization that was found in many (male and female) slave narratives, as well as in the literature of the plantation tradition. Thus, womanist characters have been described as adventurous, audacious, and courageous: “[T]hey are willing to take risks in order to accomplish desires and goals. They have the mental capacity and moral fiber to face difficulties, endure hardships, and resist fears. Their determined minds and intentional purpose in pursuit of the self demonstrate their bravery and tenacity of spirit” (Bates 99). Similarly, Harriet Jacobs presents herself not as a victim, but as a heroine, a brave black woman capable of fighting her enslaver and the domestic institution with all the weapons within reach. As Gerri Bates argues, “women who are womanist are survivors” (100), and Harriet Jacobs is clearly both a survivor and a womanist. Bates further associates the term womanist to women “who free themselves from debilitating historical patterns of

---

<sup>98</sup> Alice Walker prefaces the text of *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* with the definition of the term “womanist.” The following is the complete definition provided by Walker, which has been used as basis for further womanist studies:

**Womanist 1.** From *womanish*. (Opp. Of “girlish,” i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.

**2. Also:** A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: “Mama, why are you brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?” Ans.: “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in: “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time” (*In Search* xi).

patriarchal dominance, racism, and discrimination” (100). Harriet Jacobs lived in a period of time in which (white and black) women were in a submissive position and in which black people were enslaved. In her writing, Jacobs fights against both considerations. On the one hand, she offers another ending for her personal history: instead of getting married, which was the typical happy ending of the sentimental novel, and the ultimate objective in life for many white women, she becomes a free woman, the objective she had been fighting for during her entire life. On the other hand, she wants to fight racism and discrimination by taking political side for abolitionism. In fact, she states in her personal history that the reason why she wrote it was to convince white readers of the need to abolish slavery.

Thus, womanism is more than black feminism. In fact, scholars like Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi have distinguished between white and black feminism:

African and Afro-American women writers share similar aesthetic attitudes in spite of factors that separate them. As a group, they are distinct from white feminists because of their race, because they have experienced the past and present subjugation of the black population along with present-day subtle (or not so subtle) control exercised over them by the alien, Western culture (Ogunyemi 22).

Thus, black feminism established clear differences with white feminism early in time. According to Helen (Charles) “[t]heories specific to challenging white feminism . . . are evident in the many letters and statements produced in nineteenth-century abolitionist literature” (372). Womanism enlarged the term feminism adding elements of race and social class to the origin of women’s discrimination. Hence, black women choose not to have their experiences written by abolitionist white women but to make themselves heard in the first person. In this way, Harriet Jacobs can be said to have paved the way for ulterior ex slave women and black women authors who would also write from a womanist perspective, hence her relevance within African American women’s literature.

In nineteenth-century America, Harriet Jacobs was in an excellent position to write about slavery from a woman’s perspective, for not only was she one of the few

literate (female) ex slaves, but was also well acquainted with black and white women's writings and had already demonstrated interesting authorial abilities in the different letters she had written to abolitionist white women. Frances Smith Foster summarizes Jacobs's knowledge of the literature written before and during her time in the following extract:

During an era in which the majority of Americans could barely write their names, Jacobs enjoyed reading, corresponding, and conversing with a coterie of intellectuals, artists, and social activists, and she had enough literary sophistication to know that literacy was but one requirement for authorship. She was well acquainted with many of the attitudes and assumptions of the Anglo-American literary establishment, for not only did she read widely, but she lived in the household of Nathaniel Willis, the editor and writer whose home was a rendezvous for New York literati. She knew also the conventions of abolitionist and African American literature ("Resisting *Incidents*" 62).

Consequently, Jacobs used her literary abilities and her position to write about slavery from the perspective of a slave woman, and to do so in the first person.

The traditional slave narrative as written by former bondmen concentrated on the portrait of slave men's experiences and sufferings—experiences and sufferings that did not include the sexual oppression endured by female slaves. Since this oppression constitutes the axis of *Incidents*, Harriet Jacobs presents slave life from a new and interesting perspective: that of a slave woman. Nevertheless, Jacobs copies some of the stylistic conventions of the slave narrative because they are useful to portray the experiences of a slave woman at the same time that they underline the different perspective used in this slave narrative. In this light, some of the stylistic strategies of the slave narrative genre that Harriet Jacobs follows are, for example, the inclusion of the words "Written by Herself" in the title of the narrative; the insertion of quotations in the title page of her autobiography; the assertion of the veracity and authorship of the author's account by both the writer and the editor; the explanation of the reasons why the author decided to tell her story; the inclusion of authenticating documents proving the existence and authorship of the ex slave woman; and the opening words "I was born" followed by an account of her parentage. However, Jacobs feels the need to adapt

these stylistic conventions to fit the narration of the personal history of a *woman* slave. In this line, although she also uses some of the thematic precepts of male slave narratives discussed in the previous chapter, such as the description of the turning point in the life of slaves, enslaved people's quest for literacy, and their resistance against their owners and slavery, she must also adapt these topics, for they cannot represent the experiences of slave women in the same way in which they served to depict the tribulations of so many male slaves. Furthermore, Jacobs must also introduce the concerns inherent in female bondage, concerns like sexuality and motherhood that were not discussed in male slave narratives, for they neglected the depiction of female slave experience to concentrate on what it was like to be a bondman.

In an analysis of the adaptations that Harriet Jacobs makes of the slave narratives written by ex slave men to relate her experiences of bondage, the first stylistic convention that must be examined is the inclusion of the words "Written by Herself" in the title of her autobiography. This is a close variant of the typical "Written by Himself" of male slave narratives. Thus, the full title of Jacobs's narrative's is *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself*. This title is important within the slave narrative genre, for it presents two significant differences from the typical title of these narratives of bondage. On the one hand, it presents the story of a *female* slave. Unlike most of the previous slave narratives which focused on the experiences of *male* slaves, the protagonist of this story is a slave *woman*. On the other hand, using the subtitle *Written by Herself*, Jacobs "asserts her authorship" (Yellin, "Text and Contexts" 270). Jacobs makes it clear, from the very beginning, that her personal history has been written by the ex slave herself. Jacobs is thus able to establish part of the originality of her work in its title, and using three words only: "Written by Herself."<sup>99</sup> These words indicate that *Incidents* is the personal history of a slave woman written by herself in the first person.

---

<sup>99</sup> For a more thorough analysis on the title of Harriet Jacobs's autobiography, see Frances Smith Foster's "Resisting *Incidents*," pp. 69-70.

Another convention that Harriet Jacobs copies from the slave narrative as written by former bondmen is the inclusion of a quotation in the title page of the ex slave's personal history. In this case, Jacobs quotes two different extracts in the title page of *Incidents*. First, she quotes the words by "A Woman of North Carolina":<sup>100</sup> "Northerners know nothing at all about Slavery. They think it is perpetual bondage only. They have no conception of the depth of *degradation* involved in that word, SLAVERY; if they had, they would never cease their efforts until so horrible a system was overthrown" (emphasis in original)<sup>101</sup> By quoting this extract by a *woman*, Jacobs positions herself within the women's abolitionist movement. She could have quoted many abolitionist discourses by men, but she quotes an abolitionist woman, a fact that might confirm Jacobs's womanist concerns.

The second extract Harriet Jacobs quotes in the title page of her autobiography, following the convention of the slave narrative as described in the previous chapter, is from the Bible: "Rise up, ye women that are at ease! Hear my voice, ye careless daughters! Give ear unto my speech. Isaiah xxxii.8." Once again, a biblical extract that attracts *women's* attention, and appeals, more specifically, to Jacobs's intended audience (white women) because these are the women who should cease to be "at ease" and start fighting for the rights of their sisters in bondage. According to Carme Manuel, Harriet Jacobs uses the prophet's words to legitimize her own warning, a warning which detaches itself from the merely spiritual to encourage political action ("Estudio crítico" 354), white people's political action against the system of slavery. Both extracts emphasize, thus, the feminine and womanist nature of *Incidents*. In this light, both the title Jacobs gives to her personal history, and the entire title page of her book indicate, from the very beginning, that *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is a very different slave narrative.

<sup>100</sup> Frances Smith Foster discusses the authorship of the quote and concludes that "it is quite likely that readers, especially those who were African American, might assume that Jacobs is quoting another slave woman or herself" ("Resisting *Incidents*" 71-72).

<sup>101</sup> These words were quoted by Angelina E. Grimké in *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South* in 1836.

On the other hand, in the "Preface" to *Incidents*, Harriet Jacobs follows the pattern of the traditional slave narrative as well by affirming, first, the veracity of her account: "READER, be assured this narrative is no fiction. I am aware that some of my adventures may seem incredible; but they are, nevertheless, strictly true" (*Incidents* 5; emphasis in original). This interest in establishing the truthfulness of the events compiled in *Incidents* is a common feature of the slave narrative genre, as previously discussed. Secondly, Jacobs's "Preface" serves to explain the purpose for which she has written and published her autobiography. Jacobs argues that she has written her personal history to make her white female northern readers to realize the sufferings that slave women are enduring in the south and calls, thus, for some kind of sisterhood between black and white women, an alliance that would enable them both to fight for their rights. Nevertheless, Jacobs expresses another wish, which can be understood as a second purpose of *Incidents*: "[T]o convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is" (6). This is why Harriet Jacobs tries to present in her narrative the most horrendous but truthful aspects of the domestic institution: to convince the inhabitants of the free states of the need to eliminate this system of human bondage from society. For slavery to be eradicated, the collaboration of northerners is essential.

Following the conventions of the male slave narrative, the editor of the ex-slave's personal history, in this case Lydia Maria Child, argues for the veracity of the events narrated in the book in an "Introduction:"

The author of the following autobiography is personally known to me, and her conversation and manners inspire me with confidence. During the last seventeen years, she has lived the greater part of the time with a distinguished family in New York, and has so deported herself as to be highly esteemed by them. This fact is sufficient, without further credentials of her character. I believe those who know her will not be disposed to doubt her veracity, though some incidents in her story are more romantic than fiction (Child, "Introduction" 7).

Lydia Maria Child's "Introduction" serves the purpose of corroborating Jacobs's writing and publishing objectives. Furthermore, Child also explains her own motives to publish this narrative:



I do this for the sake of my *sisters in bondage*, who are suffering wrongs so foul, that our ears are too delicate to listen to them. I do it with the hope of arousing conscientious and reflecting women at the North to a sense of their duty in the exertion of moral influence on the question of Slavery, on all possible occasions. I do it with the hope that every man who reads this narrative will swear solemnly before God that, so far as he has power to prevent it, no fugitive from Slavery shall ever be sent back to suffer in that loathsome den of corruption and cruelty (“Introduction” 8; emphasis added).

Child argues for a sisterhood between black and white women to fight for the abolition of slavery. In fact, she is the living proof of this collaboration, since she has aided her *sister* Jacobs to publish her personal account of slavery, despite the fact that she knows she will be criticized by North American men and women for doing such a thing:<sup>102</sup> “I am well aware that many will accuse me of indecorum for presenting these pages to the public; for the experiences of this intelligent and much-injured woman belong to a class which some call delicate subjects, and others indelicate” (Child, “Introduction” 8). Exposing the sexual harassment and rape endured by many female slaves was not a common thing to do. Doing so in such an explicit and open manner as it is disclosed in *Incidents* would, surely, shock many of her readers. Hence, Child’s justification of her editorial participation in *Incidents* can be understood.

Lydia Maria Child’s “Introduction” to *Incidents* does not only corroborate Harriet Jacobs’s veracity, authorship, and publishing purposes, but further serves as an authenticating document for the narrative. As discussed in previous pages, these documents abounded in slave narratives, as a device to demonstrate, on the one hand, the real existence of the slave-protagonist of the narrative, and on the other, the veracity of the events included in the book. In this light, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* follows another convention of traditional slave narratives: the inclusion of authenticating documents. *Incidents* further incorporates, as documentary material, two appended letters: one by Amy Post, and another one by George W. Lowther, “a highly respectable colored citizen of Boston” (Jacobs, *Incidents* 306). Child’s introduction and

<sup>102</sup> The events narrated in *Incidents* would be shocking for the delicate ears of many Christian men and women. Moreover, Lydia Maria Child would also be criticized by proslavery agents, but, as an abolitionist writer and editor, she was well acquainted with the kind of criticism that would emerge from this group.

these appended documents contribute, moreover, to demonstrate Jacobs's authorship,<sup>103</sup> for, though Harriet Jacobs herself had previously claimed authorship of her work<sup>104</sup> and apologized for its imperfection,<sup>105</sup> it was necessary—according to non-written norms that black authors had to follow—that a white person confirmed the authorship of any writing by a black person. Hence, slave narrators included authenticating documents in their personal histories. Nevertheless, Charles J. Heglar argues that the authentication documents in *Incidents* show some differences from those included in other slave narratives. Heglar defends that, unlike in most narratives of bondage, the authenticating documents included in *Incidents* assure the authorship, existence, and truthfulness of the experiences of a person whose real identity is hidden from the readers of the book:

Because *Incidents* was published under the acknowledged pseudonym Linda Brent, the authenticating materials vouch for a person whose actual identity is hidden from the reader; in contrast, male narrators, writing and speaking under the names they were known by in freedom, add a further guarantee of their credibility because their truthfulness in relating their pasts could lead to their recapture and re-enslavement as fugitives. . . . Jacobs' need to authenticate both her credibility under the pseudonym Linda Brent and the events she narrates suggests that . . . narratives that move outside the conventions of the genre require the inclusion of a different kind of testimonial (37-38).

On the one hand, Harriet Jacobs does not compile as many authenticating documents as other male slave narrators. On the other, the documents included have some special characteristics. First, Amy Post does not simply admit to Jacobs's being the author of her autobiography but further states that it was her who convinced her into publishing it: "I urged upon her the duty of publishing her experiences, for the sake of the good it

---

<sup>103</sup> Moreover, Child explains why "a woman reared in Slavery should be able to write so well" ("Introduction" 7) in the following manner:

In the first place, nature endowed her with quick perceptions. Secondly, the mistress, with whom she lived till she was twelve years old, was a kind, considerate friend, who taught her to read and spell. Thirdly, she was placed in favorable circumstances after she came to the North; having frequent intercourse with intelligent persons, who felt a friendly interest in her welfare, and were disposed to give her opportunities for self-improvement ("Introduction" 8).

<sup>104</sup> Harriet Jacobs further justifies her authorship explaining the difficulties she has encountered when writing her autobiography: "Since I have been at the North, it has been necessary for me to work diligently for my own support, and the education of my children. This has not left me much leisure to make up for the loss of early opportunities to improve myself; and it has compelled me to write these pages at irregular intervals, whenever I could snatch an hour from household duties" (*Incidents* 5).

<sup>105</sup> Like many authors of slave narratives, Jacobs does not claim literary pretensions and writes: "I wish I were more competent to the task I have undertaken. But I trust my readers will excuse deficiencies in consideration of circumstances" (*Incidents* 5).

might do; and, at last, she undertook the task. . . . Her story, as *written by herself*, cannot fail to interest the reader” (Jacobs, *Incidents* 305; emphasis added). Secondly, George W. Lowther recounts several of the “living truths” included in *Incidents* and introduces himself as “witness to them” (Jacobs, *Incidents* 306). He does not simply affirm the veracity of Jacobs’s account on the basis of her reliability—like the authors of authenticating documents do in other slave narratives, but states that he has witnessed important events in the ex slave’s life.

The beginning of *Incidents*—which occurs after both the author and the editor of *Incidents* have made important points in the “Preface” and in the “Introduction” of the narrative—conforms to the tradition of male slave narratives, for Harriet Jacobs begins her personal history with the words “I was born.” Nevertheless, the details she adds to this phrase are very interesting. She writes “I was born a slave; but I never knew it till six months of happy childhood had passed away” (Jacobs, *Incidents* 11). With these words, Jacobs identifies herself as a slave at the outset of her narrative. This opening statement can be understood as a way of introducing the cause of all her suffering, but also as a means of laying the foundations to justify her inappropriate and indecorous behavior, something which male slave narrators did not feel the need to do, at least not at this stage of their narratives. Male slave narratives begin with the words “I was born” but do not normally add the word “slave,” as Jacobs does, to assert their protagonists’ status and position in society, and thus blame slavery for all the evils in their future lives. The second part of the sentence, especially the words “happy childhood,” confirm something discussed in previous pages, that slave children’s conditions were not usually as hard as adults’. After this initial statement, Jacobs continues her autobiography with a brief sketch of her parentage, following thus the conventional beginning of slave narratives.

Nonetheless, despite the stylistic similarities between *Incidents* and male slave narratives, Harriet Jacobs soon establishes clear thematic differences between her experiences as a bondwoman and the experiences of male slaves as published in

previous narratives, thus giving her narrative a womanist perspective. She has to adapt several topics of male slave narratives in order to find her own voice: the turning point in her career as a slave, her quest for literacy, the means by which she offered strong and determined resistance against her master-harasser, and the portrait of female slaves as heroines rather than victims. Jacobs's adaptations of these topics, common to most slave narratives about bondmen's experiences, will be analyzed in the following pages.

Harriet Jacobs, like many authors of slave narratives had done before, signals a *turning point* in her career as a slave. Nevertheless, this turning point is completely different from the typical of a male slave. Whereas slave men consider a turning point in their lives one particular fight with a white master or overseer that gives them the determination to obtain their freedom, Jacobs's turning point is determined by her "sexual maturity" (Jacqueline Jones 32). Instead of realizing the need for things to change through an external and physical action (fight), the turning point in her slave life is the moment when she reaches sexual maturity and realizes the implications of being a slave and a woman in nineteenth-century southern America. Jacobs describes as follows the moment she realized her life had changed: "I now entered on my fifteenth year—a *sad epoch in the life of a slave girl*. My master began to whisper foul words in my ear" (*Incidents* 44; emphasis added). With this statement, Harriet Jacobs does not simply identify her sexual maturity as the turning point in her life as a slave woman, but further states that this is a common experience to all female slaves, that this is the turning point in the life of *any* slave woman. She presents her experiences as ordinary—rather than unique—among her class, and she does so for two main purposes. On the one hand, she aims at arousing white readers' criticism of the slave system that condones the rape of female slaves. On the other hand, she aims at alleviating the weight of her guilt, for, after all, her sexual crime was simply a means of escaping from this suffering, a suffering endured by many slave women before and after her.

Harriet Jacobs modifies another typical theme of slave narratives in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: the quest for literacy. As stated in previous pages, literacy was

forbidden to slaves, but for Jacobs, like for most slaves, being able to read and write meant a kind of freedom, a reappropriation of stolen rights. Jacobs's first mistress teaches her to read and write,<sup>106</sup> and, like many slaves, Jacobs uses her literacy as a means of empowerment and resistance. She does not, however, write false passes with which to escape to free land like other male slaves. Instead, she writes false letters to Dr. Flint during her concealment in her grandmother's garret to misguide him in his pursuit of her.<sup>107</sup> In this line, Charles J. Heglar establishes the differences between the benefits literacy provided Frederick Douglass (the most widely-read male author of a slave narrative) and Harriet Jacobs (the most popular author of a female slave narrative) as follows: "Whereas Douglass' literacy allows him to reach a psychological freedom within the constraints of slavery before his eventual escape to the North, Jacobs' literacy allows her to write letters that convince Dr. Flint that she is in the North when she is actually hidden in her free grandmother's Southern home" (23). As a slave, literacy became an effective means to trick the master, to gain some power over the enslaver, and eventually, to obtain freedom. As a free black, literacy was a means to fight for a better life, for the rights of many brothers and sisters in bondage, for the abolition of slavery.

As seen in previous pages, the tools that slave men and slave women employed to fight the slave system and the enslavers, like the use of literacy, were different. Both used all the tools within reach to escape from slavery, but these tools were somewhat different depending on slaves' sex. Male slaves fought against their masters or overseers

---

<sup>106</sup> When Harriet Jacobs was twelve, her mistress died. She was so grateful to her for having taught her to read and write that Jacobs recalls this episode in *Incidents* with sadness (despite the fact that she cannot approve her having being kept as a slave): "As a child I loved my mistress; and, looking back on the happy days I spent with her, I try to think with less bitterness of this act of injustice. While I was with her, she taught me to read and spell; and for this privilege, which so rarely falls to the lot of a slave, I bless her memory" (*Incidents* 16).

<sup>107</sup> While in her grandmother's garret, Harriet Jacobs wants to make Dr. Flint believe she is in New York so as to confuse his pursuit of her. She writes two letters, one to her grandmother (Jacobs was sure Dr. Flint would read the letter to her grandmother), and one to Dr. Flint, dates them from New York, and makes a friend carry them to this city and send them from there. Jacobs fears that Dr. Flint "suspects her whereabouts, [and] writes him letters that she then has postmarked in Boston and New York to send him off in hot pursuit in the wrong direction" (Valerie Smith, "Loopholes" 215). Jacobs describes this episode in the chapter entitled "Competition in Cunning" as a contest with her master (*Incidents* 193-194).

with great violence, often defeating them. This act of resistance would make them gain some power within the plantation structure. They would recover part of the manhood lost in slavery. They would recover their pride, and gain white people's respect or, at least, fear, which, in any case, would make them feel powerful.

This means of empowerment, of resistance against their situation as slaves and against their enslavers, was not available to the slave woman, owing to her lack of physical strength to defeat her master. The female slave found, however, other means to resist the power imposed over her. In the same way in which male slave narrators relate proudly how they had defeated their masters through physical resistance, female slave narrators also discuss how they managed to exercise some control over their own lives. These *female* methods of resistance and empowerment were not depicted in male slave narratives, whose aim was to explain how brave slave *men* resisted and opposed slavery and slaveholders. Since bondwomen were secondary characters, their efforts to resist and oppose the *domestic institution* were also secondary; more than that, completely neglected.

Male slave narrators mainly focus on their individual opposition and fighting back, though they also include references to the violent rebellions, such as Nat Turner's. In any case, the examples of slave resistance male authors present are normally imbued with violence. Hence, male slave narrators explain how, either individually or collectively, slave men acted violently against slaveholder: "[S]laves' resistance could be covert and overt, individual and collective. Gradations of resistance ranged from individual subversion to open warfare as in Nat Turner's rebellion" (Chinosole 109). These individual or collective acts of resistance are narrated with pride in male slave narratives. For, although other examples of resistance such as sabotage or theft described in previous pages are also given in these narratives of bondage, greater emphasis is placed on violent instances of rebellion, probably in an attempt to attract white readers' attention to the dimension of brutality originated by slavery. Sherley

Anne Williams argues that slave men's physical aggression aimed at leveling the power whites exercised on the lives of so many black men:

Nineteenth-century black men, confronted with the impossibility of being the (white) patriarch, began to subvert certain of patriarchy's ideals and values to conform to their own images. Thus, the degree to which, and the basis on which the hero avoids physical aggression was one means of establishing the hero's noble stature and contributed to the hero's intellectual equality with—not dominance over—the collective white man ("Some Implications" 71).

The black man felt emasculated in the sense that he could not protect his wife, mother, and sisters from being raped; he could not provide for his children himself; and he endured the humiliation of being punished and whipped for the least offence in the presence of his wife and children. He could not be seen as a hero by the people who, had he been white, were dependent on him, his work, his efforts, and his courage. Thus, fighting the white man on equal terms made the black male slave recover some of the power he had been robbed of. It made him a hero among his people.

Female slaves, on the other hand, did not have the chance of recovering their lost self through violent fighting.<sup>108</sup> Consequently, the representation of physical fight against the oppressors included in male slave narratives could not successfully represent slave women's experiences. Carole Boyce Davies argues that "by adopting the paradigm of the male slave narrative, with physical flight and physical resistance often embedded textually, the specifics of women's resistance to slavery are often not addressed" ("Mobility" 130). Therefore, when slave women narrate their experiences of bondage, they write about the importance of their *private* or *domestic* opposition to slavery.

Most of the oppression female slaves endured was related to their sexuality, something that belongs to the private and domestic sphere. Therefore, their resistance to sexual abuses was also a private and domestic one. The weapon that most female slaves used to *fight* the system was that of words. Talking back, signifying, insulting their

---

<sup>108</sup> The only case in which violence occurs as part of black women's opposition to slavery is probably infanticide. Nevertheless, female slave narrators do not usually write about these brutal acts. Examples can be found in contemporary works like *Beloved*, by Toni Morrison.

masters, were the only tools available for them. As Chinosole argues, “[i]n the case of slave women in whom the master had a sexual interest which was not mutual, the power struggle was often fought on the psychological and murky emotional turf of repulsion and desire” (109). Slave women reject their masters’ sexual advances by attacking them verbally. Thus, as stated above, when Mary Prince is severely beaten for breaking some plates she, at last, defends herself using the powerful tool of language: “I then told him I would not live longer with him, for he was a very indecent man—very spiteful, and too indecent; with no shame for his servants, no shame for his own flesh” (13). Harriet Jacobs also responds eventually to her master’s sexual advances verbally, reproaching him for his baseness. Jacobs’s use of language is so intelligent and powerful that it becomes an effective weapon against Dr. Flint’s sexual advances. As Joanne M. Braxton asserts, Jacobs “makes use of wit and intelligence to overwhelm and defeat a more powerful foe” (“Redefinition” 385) bringing “the oppressor down low through ridicule” (Chinosole 118). Following the conventions of the trickster tale—discussed in the previous chapter—Jacobs uses sass and talking back, something that both irritates and outwits her master, whose use of words is not as efficient as hers. She does not remain silent to her master’s sexual advances and does not let silence impose. For, if silence is the sign of the oppressed, coming to voice is the sign of resistance to submission.

The effectiveness of the use of talking back as a means of resistance against slavery and enslavers—more frequently used by bondwomen—has to be analyzed from two different perspectives. On the one hand, it seems very unlikely that a slave could speak this way to a master and not be beaten for so doing, considering that they were beaten for smaller offences. As Jenny Sharpe states, “one has to wonder whether morally upright speech could prevent a lashing” (Sharpe 134). On the other hand, talking back “has the narrative effect . . . of proving that a moral high ground can control the slaveholder’s abuse of power” (Sharpe 134). Whether reality conformed to this situation or not, this powerful use of speech by a victimized figure had a very strong



effect in the narrative's readers, whose morality was determined by Christian values and standards, but whose knowledge of the slave system would allow them to fully appreciate the female slave's determination to fight for her rights as a human being deprived of freedom.

Another weapon of resistance used by female slaves against their enslavement that was not used by slave men, and that had great impact on their readers, was their active and peculiar use of sexuality. As examined previously, some female slaves escaped an existence of intense work and suffering by giving themselves up and becoming concubines to white men. Although this can be seen as another form of enslavement, it meant a sort of freedom for the black woman: "This assessment points to the paradoxical subjectivity of a slave woman who gains control over her exploitation through self-exploitation rather than self-determination" (Sharpe 144). Some female slaves were not raped, but *decided* to have sexual relationships with their masters voluntarily. They were *convinced* into doing it or else suffer the consequences, but their situation was similar to that of being a free (white) woman, either a white woman for whom her parents had arranged a—forced—marriage, or a white woman who had decided to maintain sexual relationships outside marriage to obtain some kind of benefit.

Nonetheless, sexuality was used by bondwomen to fight the system of slavery or to resist to their master's oppression not only by becoming concubines in exchange for personal favors, but also by finding themselves a (usually white) lover. There were some female slaves who found a lover so as not to submit to their masters' desires. These women's experiences remain unveiled, however, because of what William L. Andrews calls "the rhetoric of antislavery moral absolutism" ("The Changing Rhetoric" 476). Once again, silence is imposed on the black woman: if she wants to be considered as virtuous as her white counterpart, there are certain aspects of her life she must not put into writing. Nevertheless, at least two brave ex slave women, Harriet Jacobs and Mary Prince, disclose their extramarital sexual relationships in their writings. Professor Jenny

Sharpe argues that "Prince attached herself to free men as a way of loosening the knot of control her owners had over her" (139-140). Similarly, Jacobs chose a white man for a lover, who would finally buy their children's freedom. Nevertheless, her case is a bit more complex.

In chapter seven, entitled "The Lover," Harriet Jacobs writes about her falling in love with a free black man, a young carpenter. This episode, strongly influenced by the sentimental novel in its narration, demonstrates that Jacobs has assimilated the Christian values of piety, chastity, and morality, since she identifies sexual relations with romantic love. She furthermore writes about a love that will free her from all her sufferings or, in Angelyn Mitchell's words, "Linda romantically dreams, a characteristic convention of the sentimental novel, of a love that will rescue her from the turmoil of her life" (33). She intends to marry this young man and dreads the moment when she will confess her love to her master. When she finally does and asks her master's permission to get married, his reaction is as violent as expected:

"So you want to be married, do you?" said he, "and to a free nigger."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I'll soon convince you whether I am your master, or the nigger fellow you honor so highly. If you *must* have a husband, you may take up with one of my slaves."

What a situation I should be in, as the wife of one of *his* slaves, even if my heart had been interested!

I replied, "Don't you suppose, sir, that a slave can have some preference about marrying? Do you suppose that all men are alike to her?"

"Do you love that nigger?" said he, abruptly.

"Yes, sir."

"How dare you tell me so!" he exclaimed, in great wrath. After a slight pause, he added, "I supposed you thought more of yourself; that you felt above the insults of such puppies."

I replied, "If he is a puppy I am a puppy, for we are both of the negro race, it is right and honorable for us to love each other. The man you call a puppy never insulted me, sir; and he would not love me if he did not believe me to be a virtuous woman."

He sprang upon me like a tiger, and gave me a stunning blow. It was the first time he had ever struck me; and fear did not enable me to control my anger. When I had recovered a little from the effects, I exclaimed, "You have struck me for answering you honestly. How I despise you!" (Jacobs, *Incidents* 61; emphasis in original).

Although her dreamed escape from her master in the hands of her lover is not fulfilled, Harriet Jacobs gains something from this encounter with Dr. Flint. She comes to voice with such strength that her master cannot do anything but hit her in return to her words. Still, Jacobs has the power to give voice to her despise for him. In slavery times, when masters were in total control of their slaves' lives, abusing a slaveholder—even if verbally, as stated above—was a very daring thing to do, and demonstrates that Jacobs had refused to be a victim. After this episode, Dr. Flint continues to make Jacobs proposals of concubinage, telling her that he would build a cottage for her in another state. She continues refusing to submit to his will and further advises her beloved carpenter to escape to another state for fear of her master's reprisals. He finally does so, and they sadly part.

Once the man she loves is far from home, Harriet Jacobs meets another man, a white man named Mr. Sands with whom she starts having extramarital sexual relationships. She hopes that he will manage to buy her freedom, though Jacobs's first intention is, however, to annoy—and, thus, defeat—her master: “I knew nothing would enrage Dr. Flint so much as to know that I favored another; and it was something to triumph over my tyrant even in that small way. I thought he would revenge himself by selling me, and I was sure my friend, Mr. Sands, would buy me” (Jacobs, *Incidents* 85). Harriet Jacobs has a strong determination to fight Dr. Flint, and Mr. Sands becomes, in this way, an effective means of resistance:

As for Dr. Flint, I had a feeling of satisfaction and triumph in the thought of telling *him*. From time to time he told me of his intended arrangements, and I was silent. At last, he came and told me the cottage was completed, and ordered me to go to it. I told him I would never enter it. He said, “I have heard enough of such talk as that. You shall go, if you are carried by force; and you shall remain there.”

I replied, “I will never go there. In a few months I shall be a mother.”

He stood and looked at me in dumb amazement, and left the house without a word (Jacobs, *Incidents* 86-87; emphasis in original).

Jacobs's lover and, eventually, her pregnancy constitute effective means by which Jacobs reappropriates her sexuality and uses it as a means of opposition against her

owner. Nevertheless, and though she wins this battle, her victory is a bitter one, as she recognizes that her life cannot then conform to the Christian values that prevail in the society in which she now lives as a free woman: "I thought I should be happy in my triumph over him. But now that the truth was out, and my relatives would hear of it, I felt wretched. . . . My self-respect was gone! I had resolved that I would be virtuous, though I was a slave. . . . how humiliated I felt! (Jacobs, *Incidents* 87). This extract does not only show the contradictions inherent in her life as a slave and as a woman (something which slave men did not experience), but also the contradictions existing in the narrative style of *Incidents*, a style that tries to find a balance between the traditional slave narrative and the sentimental novel.

Another difference between the slave narratives that depict black men's enslavement, and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is the fact that, whereas male slave authors describe their journey to freedom as a solitary trip in which they reach free land without being very much aided by other people, Harriet Jacobs is never alone. The support she receives from various friends and relatives is essential. She finds support in her grandmother, her black friend Peter, her slave friend and escape companion Fanny, and white abolitionists who shelter her in their homes. Harriet Jacobs's cannot be said to be a solitary journey in which she manages to reach free territory by herself. Unlike male slave narrators who "represent the life in slavery and the escape as essentially solitary journeys . . . Not only does [Jacobs] diminish her own role in her escape, but she is quick to recognize the care and generosity of her family in the South and her friends in the North" (Valerie Smith, "Loopholes" 217). According to Angelyn Mitchell, "while [Jacobs] enacts her escape, her community helps in orchestrating its success" (38-39). The community in which Jacobs lived during her enslavement played a very important role in her life. It constituted a great source of support and helped her improve her situation. Had it not been for Peter and the white abolitionists who

provided her with a place to stay and hide in Philadelphia and New York,<sup>109</sup> her escape could not have been successful. As Angelyn Mitchell puts it, “she needs a community in order to possess and to complete herself as a unified being” (30). This communal support is probably residue of African tradition since, when Gay Wilentz discusses the bonds between the women characters in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, she writes:

The strongest bonds in the novel, however, recreate African extended family organization in an African-American structure. They are what I call “community” ties—neither consanguinal nor conjugal, although these ties do include lovers of one’s husband and in-laws. This bonding is always that of women, as “mates,” co-wives, and sisters/daughters-in-law. This community of women is a residual African model of the village compound, where all the women are in charge of all the children, and domestic as well as economic duties are often shared (69).

Thus, the communal support present in *Incidents* can also be representative of this African model of organization, especially so since nineteenth-century slaves had a recent past in Africa.

Nevertheless, this communal support separates Harriet Jacobs’s narrative from the tradition of the slave narrative genre, whose main character used to be a self-made *man*: a man who managed to escape alone and who fought individually for his rights. Jacobs, however, “celebrates the cooperation and collaboration of all the people, black and white, slave and free, who make her freedom possible. She celebrates her liberation and her children’s as the fruit of a collective effort, not individual effort” (Braxton, “Re-definition” 387). Jacobs has demonstrated to be a strongly determined woman, ready to do whatever it takes to achieve her objectives. Thus, whereas Harriet Jacobs needs to give credit to all the people who have aided her reach her present status, the slave man

---

<sup>109</sup> Once Harriet Jacobs settles in the North, white women provide her with assistance to avoid her being recaptured. Among them is Mrs. Bruce, the woman for whom Jacobs works as a nurse-housemaid, and who finally pays for her freedom. Jacobs expresses her contradictory feelings at this event as follows:

I received this brief letter from Mrs. Bruce: “I am rejoiced to tell you that the money for your freedom has been paid to Mr. Dodge. . . .” So I was *sold* at last! . . . I well know the value of that bit of paper; but much as I love freedom, I do not like to look upon it. I am deeply grateful to the generous friend who procured it, but I despise the miscreant who demanded payment for what never rightfully belonged to him or his.

I had objected to having my freedom bought, yet I must confess that when it was done I felt as if a heavy load had been lifted from my weary shoulders (*Incidents* 300-301; emphasis in original).

who writes his experiences wants to demonstrate that he is a very capable independent man, or, in Valerie Smith's words, "the plot of the slave narrative does not adequately accommodate differences in male and female development. Jacobs's tale is not the classic story of the triumph of the individual will; rather, it is more a story of a triumphant self-in-relation" ("Loopholes" 216-217). Being—or proving to be— independent was not as important for female slaves as it was for male slaves. Although male narrators thank those people who aided them to escape, they normally concentrate on their own depiction as heroes, emphasizing their individual efforts to fight for freedom:

With the notable exception of the narrative of William and Ellen Craft, most of the narratives by men represent the life in slavery and the escape as essentially solitary journeys. This is not to suggest that male slaves were more isolated than their female counterparts, but they were attempting to prove their equality, their manhood, in terms acceptable to their white, middle-class readers (Valerie Smith, "Loopholes" 217).

Male slaves consider their achievement an individual one. Slave women, on the other hand, acknowledge the help received by their relatives and friends, on whom they habitually rely to accomplish specific goals. The idea of community—especially the community formed by other female slaves in the family—is of great relevance for the female slave. Women are, therefore, those who make family bonds stronger, especially in a context in which they are at great risk, as was the case in slavery times. Harriet Jacobs could not be a unified being, could not possess herself (she was her master's property) without her family's and friends' help. Jacobs's escape is, therefore, a complex personal and intimist journey, but also a journey in which her children are always in her thoughts. Thus, the domestic aspect of slave life is in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* much more relevant than in most male slave narratives, in which the individual characteristics of the protagonist are highlighted. Moreover, Jacobs presents a very different slave hero, the slave heroine for whom her children's welfare is more important than her own, and for whom communal support is essential.

Hence, within the community that support the female slave, Harriet Jacobs's family has a prominent role. In fact, Jacobs's family plays an essential role in her narrative, more than any other slave family in any other narrative of bondage, whether male or female.<sup>110</sup> Within Jacobs's family, one person has a particularly prominent status: her grandmother. For Harriet Jacobs, her grandmother is a referent. She is a strong woman who fights for what she considers rightful, and protectively cares for her children and grandchildren, while educating them in good behavior and Christian principles. Jacobs loves, respects, and admires her but reciprocally needs her love, respect, and admiration. Hence, when Jacobs starts being harassed by Dr. Flint, she feels ashamed and fears telling her grandmother the suffering she is experiencing. Jacobs describes her grandmother's character in the following terms:

[A]lthough my grandmother was all in all to me, I feared her as well as loved her. . . . She was usually very quiet in her demeanor; but if her indignation was once roused, it was not very easily quelled. I had been told that she once chased a white gentleman with a loaded pistol, because he insulted one of her daughters. . . . But though I did not confide in my grandmother, and even evaded her vigilant watchfulness and inquiry, her presence in the neighborhood was some protection to me. Though she had been a slave, Dr. Flint was afraid of her. He dreaded her scorching rebukes. (*Incidents* 46-47).

Harriet Jacobs feels ashamed having to explain her present situation to a person she so much loves, respects and admires. She fears her grandmother might despise her.<sup>111</sup> Jacobs's fears increase when she decides to use her body to resist to her master's sexual proposal. Nevertheless, when she comes to the decision to tell her grandmother that she has a white lover and is pregnant, her grandmother's reaction is not as violent or despising as Jacobs thought it would be:

She listened in silence. I told her I would bear any thing and do any thing, if in time I had hopes of obtaining her forgiveness. I begged of her to pity me, for my dead mother's sake and she did pity me. She did not say, "I forgive you;"

<sup>110</sup> The only exception within male slave narratives could be *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*, whose protagonist escapes several times but always returns for his wife and children, being recaptured into slavery. He and his family would eventually obtain their freedom.

<sup>111</sup> In fact, when Harriet Jacobs's grandmother wrongly believes that her granddaughter has an affair with Dr. Flint, she reacts as follows: "'O Linda! has it come to this? I had rather see you dead than to see you as you now are. You are a disgrace to your dead mother.'" She tore from my fingers my mother's wedding ring and her silver thimble. 'Go away!' she exclaimed, 'and never come to my house, again'" (*Incidents* 87-88).

but she looked at me lovingly, with her eyes full of tears. She laid her old hand gently on my head, and murmured, "Poor child! Poor child!" (*Incidents* 89).

From this moment onward, Jacobs's grandmother will assist her at all costs. She will protect her and her children. Furthermore, she will provide Jacobs with a hiding-place from which she will finally enact her escape North.

Other members of her family are also important for Harriet Jacobs, especially her children. Thus, when Jacobs tells her grandmother about her plans to escape to the northern free states, she uses Jacobs's children to convince her to stay. According to Donald B. Gibson, "[t]he grandmother's response comes totally out of domestic values centering around the primacy of family relations" (166). Jacobs's grandmother is aware of the important role a slave family plays for a woman and appeals to her loving feelings for her children so as to convince her to remain in slavery instead of escaping. Jacobs's grandmother's words are quoted in *Incidents*: "Linda, do you want to kill your old grandmother? Do you mean to leave your little, helpless children? I am old now, and cannot do for your babies as I once did for you" (139). Jacobs, however, justifies her willingness to escape arguing, precisely, that she does it for her family: "I replied, that if I went away, perhaps their father would be able to secure their freedom" (*Incidents* 139). Jacobs's grandmother insists on the importance of family relations and argues that her good reputation among the slave community will diminish if she abandons her children: "Stand by your own children, and suffer with them till death. Nobody respects a mother who forsakes her children; and if you leave them, you will never have a happy moment" (*Incidents* 139). Hence, the private (family, sexuality) and the public (reputation) are presented as conflicting issues.

In any case, women slaves prove to have a more responsible attitude towards parenthood than male slaves. For some slave women, motherhood is a deterrent to escape. They do not want to become free and leave their children under the yoke of slavery. In contrast, male slaves usually write about their own freedom as a tool for the achievement of their relatives' release from bondage. Male slave narrators justify their



leaving their beloved ones behind arguing that, in order to successfully fight for the liberation of their family, their individual freedom must be achieved first. Women, on the other hand, feel the need to stay with their children: “Ironically, motherhood could cause the enslaved woman to feign complacency since escape or insurrection was more complicated for the enslaved mother” (Mitchell 26). Thus, Carole Boyce Davies affirms “[t]he mark of motherhood is often ascribed to women’s inability to travel” (“Mobility” 135). For the slave woman, freedom means freedom for her and her children. Therefore, to the normal difficulties encountered by male slaves to escape, the slave mother would have to add the *burden* of her children.

Nevertheless, Harriet Jacobs’s children give her the strength and courage to fight for freedom, for, according to Angelyn Mitchell, there were cases in which “motherhood provided the impetus or inspiration for rebellion or escape” (26).<sup>112</sup> Besides, motherhood is another source of communal support, and one that makes Jacobs think of escape as the only means to achieve freedom. First of all, she wants to prevent her little daughter from enduring the typical hardships of slave women: “When they told me my new-born babe was a girl, my heart was heavier than it had ever been before. Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, *they* have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own” (*Incidents* 119). One of the most powerful elements that contribute to Jacobs’s desire to escape is therefore, the birth of her children, particularly of her daughter. When Harriet Jacobs becomes a slave *mother*, she becomes more aware of her children’s position in American society. It is her children’s present and future situation as slaves that convince her to escape: “[A]lthough they complicate her plans for escape, her children give her the inspiration and the courage necessary to secure their freedom”

---

<sup>112</sup> Angelyn Mitchell further argues that “[t]his compromised situation conditioned the convoluted roles and emotions relating to sexuality and motherhood for the enslaved Black woman” (26). The examples Mitchell gives are Margaret Gardner—whose case has been previously discussed—and Dinah, whose story is the basis for the novel *Dessa Rose*, by Sherley Anne Williams. The novel begins with Dessa imprisoned in a sheriff’s cellar. She has been sentenced to death for participating in a revolt on a slave coffle that killed five white men and maimed the trader, Wilson, but her execution has been delayed pending the birth of her child. She would finally manage to escape.

(Mitchell 37). However, and in contrast to most escaped slave men, Jacobs's desire to obtain her freedom is not selfish, for she is determined not to escape without making sure her children are already free.

Thus, the slave woman begins a journey, which, in contrast to the physical journey from slavery to freedom that slave men depict in their narratives, is a "personal and psychological journey" (McDowell 157). Women slaves' journey from slavery to freedom has to be internal, for its physical achievement was extremely difficult. This journey is also the journey away from victimization and into consciousness, a journey that will also be fulfilled with the publication of the narrative of the ex slave woman's life in bondage. Consequently, the arrival at free land<sup>113</sup> only marks one step of the journey, for the journey occurs at a psychological rather than at a physical level. As Claudia Tate argues, "the black heroine's . . . quest does not terminate with her arrival at a new destination; in fact she remains stationary. Her journey is an internal one and is seldom taken on land" (xx-xxi). Harriet Jacobs's case is particularly interesting. Her journey to freedom presents significant differences compared to the way in which male slave narrators describe their escape. On the one hand, and as stated above, Jacobs's escape is not a solitary journey, but a journey in which she finds the help of friends and relatives. On the other hand, Jacobs's escape is described "as a progression from one small space to another" (Valerie Smith, "Loopholes" 215). Instead of finding references to open spaces, nature, and the north star, which were common in male slave narratives, Jacobs describes the different hiding-places in which she has to take refuge in order to reach free land.

---

<sup>113</sup> Female slaves had to resort to escape or hope for manumission to obtain their freedom since, according to Jenny Sharpe, "it was next to impossible for slave women to earn enough money to purchase their freedom, especially since they were not trained in the artisanal skills that allowed male slaves to hire themselves out" (137-138). Lorna Simmonds, in "Slave Higglering in Jamaica 1780-1834" suggests that higglering was precisely one of the few occupations that gave slave women a similar mobility to that of male slaves who were hired out (32-33). Another option suggested by Barbara Bush in *Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650-1838* and by Jerome S. Handler in *The Unappropriated People* was concubinage or prostitution (33-50; 32-37).

Harriet Jacobs uses several hiding places. Paradoxically, hiding in a confined space becomes, for Jacobs, a kind of freedom, especially the second concealment<sup>114</sup> in her grandmother's garret, which Jacobs names "the loophole of retreat" (*Incidents* 173). Concealment is, thus, felt as a kind of emancipation<sup>115</sup> that provides her with a peculiar form of freedom. This escape does not separate her from her children, but rather allows her to see them on a daily basis: Harriet Jacobs "escapes but remains in confinement in the attic of her grandmother's house so that she can watch, voyeur-like, her children" (Davies, "Mobility" 134). She cannot leave her children, but the situation on the plantation is unsustainable. Consequently, the concealment in her grandmother's garret becomes the ideal solution to the problem: on the one hand, Jacobs escapes from her master's sexual advances; and on the other, she does not abandon her children but can see them grow.

Concealment—as opposed to escape—is a recurrent topic in *Incidents*, for hiding becomes an effective method of avoiding recapture during her journey to freedom. In this way, concealment is one of the most effective means of resistance for Harriet Jacobs. In fact, it would be the means by which she finally managed to obtain her freedom. In her escape, Harriet Jacobs would hide in different friends' houses. Ironically, and as Carole Boyce Davies argues, "home is often a place of exile for the woman" ("Migratory Subjectivities 1010).<sup>116</sup> Living in exile involves living in a strange land, away from home. However, Jacobs exiles in friends' houses. All the hiding places Jacobs uses are homes. It seems that women cannot be separated from a domestic arena which is, on the one hand, oppressive, and on the other, liberating. For Jacobs, however, home is not a place of alienation but a place from which her escape will be orchestrated. Her family is not oppressive but helpful and her children do not prevent her from having

<sup>114</sup> First, Harriet Jacobs would conceal herself at one of her mother's friends' house.

<sup>115</sup> In fact, according to Valerie Smith, Jacobs "dates her emancipation from the time she entered her loophole" ("Loopholes" 212).

<sup>116</sup> Carole Boyce Davies addresses the issue of home and family—topics previously discussed in relation to Jacobs's *Incidents*—in African American women's writings: "The autobiographical subjectivity of Black women is one of the ways in which speech is articulated and geography redefined. Issues of home and exile are addressed. *Home is often portrayed as a place of alienation and displacement in autobiographical writing*" ("Migratory subjectivities" 1009; emphasis added).

her own selfhood, but give her courage to fight for her rights. Furthermore, though the garret in which she hides for seven years is oppressing,<sup>117</sup> she views it as a place in which she gains some kind of freedom. Harriet Jacobs feels freer in that small and uncomfortable garret than in the open air, where she is a slave in everybody's eyes, especially in her pursuer's eyes.

If concealment is an effective means of escape for Harriet Jacobs (as opposed to the physical journey to freedom described in male slave narratives), the garret in her grandmother's house becomes the most significant hiding-place in the autobiography. This concealment is particularly interesting at two levels. First, Jacobs spends almost seven years in it (the longest period that she, or any other slave, spent in concealment). Second, hiding at her grandmother's garret puts her in a privileged position: not only can Jacobs watch her children play and grow up from this place of concealment, but also become acquainted with Dr. Flint's plans to recapture her. Moreover, hiding in this confined and oppressive place allows Jacobs to defeat her master in several ways. First, Dr. Flint believes Jacobs has escaped north and spends a lot of money trying to recapture her. Second, and as stated above, Jacobs is able to manipulate and confuse him in his chase by sending him false letters.<sup>118</sup> By this time, Jacobs has spent almost five long years in the small garret. Dr. Flint has spent so much money on his chase that he needs to sell Jacobs's children, and he sells them to their free father. Jacobs is, thus, able to free her children in a surreptitious way, and do so from her place of concealment.

---

<sup>117</sup> Harriet Jacobs writes the following about the this hiding place:

It was a pent roof, covered with nothing but shingles, according to the southern custom for such buildings. The garret was only nine feet long and seven wide. The highest part was three feet high, and sloped down abruptly to the loose board floor. There was no admission for either light or air. . . . A bed had been spread on the floor. I could sleep quite comfortably on one side; but the slope was so sudden that I could not turn on the other without hitting the roof (*Incidents* 173).

A drawing of Harriet Jacobs's grandmother's house and garret can be found in "Appendix A: Illustrations," p. 382.

<sup>118</sup> In this way, Jacobs becomes the owner of her life, and master and mistress become slaves to her plans (Manuel, "Estudio crítico" 359).

Although Jacobs considers that she has reached some kind of freedom when she enters her grandmother's garret, she will not actually be emancipated until she reaches free territory around seven years later. Hence, her journey to freedom will be one of the longest recorded in slave narratives: seven long and oppressive years, which will conclude with her final trip to the free states. She eventually escapes on a boat with another slave woman named Fanny when her friend Peter tells her that it is the appropriate time to leave. On arrival in Philadelphia, she finds shelter in a friend-of-the-slave's house and separates from Fanny, who is sheltered in another abolitionist man's house. Fanny accepts the Anti-Slavery's society offer to pay her expenses to travel to New York, but Jacobs refuses, given that her grandmother had handed her enough money to pay her expenses to the end of her journey. A few days later, Fanny and Jacobs travel together to New York in what Jacobs deems "a very disagreeable ride" (*Incidents* 248), for the vehicle is crowded and uncomfortable. In New York, Fanny and Jacobs finally part. Fanny is found a home by the Anti-Slavery Society and Jacobs stays at a friend's house. It is in New York that she will eventually find a job and make a living for her and her children.

In this portrayal of Harriet Jacobs's life, the author—herself—presents herself as a strong woman, a heroine, evading thus the description of slave women as victims, so frequent in male slave narratives. The narratives of bondage that describe the experiences of slave men focus on their lives of these extraordinarily strong black men who managed to obtain their freedom, whereas slave women—if introduced at all in the narratives—are depicted as victims, especially as victims of sexual abuses. Male slave narratives, as well as abolitionist literature in general, present the black woman as a breeder, as a harmed, emaciated, ulcerated, bruised, skinned, torn, bleeding, mutilated, raped, and murdered body (Manuel, "Estudio crítico" 342): a victim. Nevertheless, her interior life and survival strategies are rarely described (Valerie Smith, "Introduction" xxxi). The female slave is stereotyped as a "sexually exploited" being (Foster,

*Witnessing* xxx) because most slave narratives were written by or about men.<sup>119</sup> Nevertheless, ex slave women do not portray themselves as victims in their personal histories, but as heroines. These heroines can even be said to be more courageous than male slaves, for they survived and escaped a crueler form of slavery (as Harriet Jacobs says, slavery is far more terrible for women). The problem lies in the fact that slave women's versions of their lives were, first of all, limited in number and, second, widely neglected and dismissed by historians and literary critics, something which has perpetuated the myth of the victimized slave woman.

Male slaves' descriptions of female slave experience focus especially on their abused sexuality (and, sometimes, on the whippings and physical-psychological torture they endured). However, Harriet Jacobs—and most female slave narratives—present slave women from a different perspective. Bondwomen cease to be just victims to become active agents in their own lives. Moreover, rape is not presented as the most important event in the bondwoman's life. Experiences like motherhood, escape, acquisition of literacy, and resistance mark essential moments in these black women's lives. These are all positive experiences that would make their readers see these female slaves as brave heroines who endured a life full of harsh events, survived, managed to escape, and constructed a better life for—and by—themselves. As Frances Smith Foster explains:

When slave women tell their stories, however, they barely mention sexual experiences and never present rape or seduction as the most profound aspect of their existence. Though they document the trauma and grief of sexual exploitation and physical abuse beyond the comprehension of most nineteenth-century (and twentieth-century) white women, the slave women's works do not center around these tragedies. From their narratives it is repeatedly clear that slave women saw themselves as far more than victims of rape and seduction. Though they wrote to witness slavery's atrocities, they also wrote to celebrate their hard won escape from that system and their fitness for freedom's potential blessings (*Witnessing* xxxiii).

---

<sup>119</sup> Frances Smith Foster further argues that “[m]ale narrators’ use of slave women’s experiences was limited by the generic conventions of slave narratives as well as by their conventional nineteenth-century male notions of woman’s place. As a result, slave women were stereotyped as sexual victims” (*Witnessing* xli).

The sufferings these women endured could not disappear from their narratives, just like they had not disappeared from male slave narratives. Nevertheless, “[r]ather than elaborating upon the weight of their oppression, the women emphasize the sources of the strength with which they met that force” (Foster, *Witnessing* xxxiv). These former bondwomen see themselves as courageous heroic figures, like the protagonists of male narratives, and not as victimized beings. As Hazel V. Carby points out,

in the slave narratives written by black women the authors placed in the foreground their active roles as historical agents as opposed to passive subjects; represented as acting their own visions, they are seen to take decisions over their own lives. They document their suffering and brutal treatment but in a context that is also the story of resistance to that brutality (*Reconstructing Womanhood* 36).

Thus, the shift in the representation of the female slave—from secondary character of a male slave narrative to protagonist of a slave narrative written by or about a woman— involves the rejection of victimization. Moreover, when female slave narratives present other slave women as secondary characters, their depiction is not as victims, but as strong survivors.

Harriet Jacobs avoids this victimization writing *Incidents* herself, and becoming, thus, the first slave woman to write her own autobiography. She also avoids victimization when she introduces herself as a strong, determined, and intelligent woman: a black slave heroine. She does not react in a passive manner to her master’s base proposals, but actively tries to find a solution to the problem. First, she rebukes her owner using verbal aggression. Second, she finds herself a lover and gets pregnant with a twofold purpose: on the one hand, to make her master understand that she owns her sexuality and decides how and when to make use of it; on the other hand, to have her white lover provide for their children’s freedom. Third, she hides for seven years and misleads Dr. Flint in his search for her. Finally, she seizes the opportunity to escape to the North and, thus, become a free woman. She is not proud of all the decisions she has made until she eventually becomes free, but she justifies them as necessary, as evil consequences of the slave system. As a result, her depiction of the slave woman-heroine

is distinct from the male slave-hero. The female slave heroine admits her errors and imperfection, and asks her readers for forgiveness, at the same time that she presents her new and more perfect self in freedom. In this light, whereas the slave hero seems to be a perfect example of self-made man, to whom nothing can be reproached in his fight for emancipation, Jacobs presents a different kind of heroine, a heroine who assumes her guilt and tries to make her readers understand the motives behind her extraordinary behavior.

Although, as seen in the previous chapter, Harriet Jacobs relies on the sentimental novel to write her personal history, the slave heroine she depicts in *Incidents* is not the typical protagonist of either the sentimental novel or the male slave narrative, in the same way in which her personal history cannot conform to the plot of either the sentimental novel or the slave narrative. Thus, Jacobs “seized authority over her literary restraints in much the same way that she seized power in life. From within the ellipses and ironies—linguistic narrow spaces—she expresses the complexity of her experience as a black woman (Valerie Smith, “Loopholes” 213). This experience as a black woman was similar to those of thousands of female slaves, but Jacobs manages to write about it from a personal point of view, in the first person, and in a manner that no one else had done it before. As a sentimental work, *Incidents* is unique. As a slave narrative, *Incidents* is very special.

Nevertheless, if the greatest act of resistance against the enslavers, the oppressors, and the system of human bondage itself was escape, the greatest act of vengeance against all these agents was, for both male and female ex slaves, the act of writing their autobiographies: giving voice to the oppression endured, condemning the system of slavery, denouncing cruel slaveholders in the eyes of society, etc. make them free, alleviate the weight that oppressed their consciousness, and them feel active in the fight for the abolition of slavery. However hard it was for both male and female narrators to have their works made public, it was probably harder for the female slave, not only because of the sexism that dominated nineteenth-century America, but also



because the sufferings endured by the slave woman belonged to a more private sphere, and her audience may not be prepared to read about these issues. Whereas the male narrator relates cruelties common to all slaves, his heroic acts of resistance, and his courageous escape, without leaving room for the expression of feelings, the female slave narrator discloses her intimacies, her emotions and, in a nutshell, her most private self, in her book.

Nonetheless, female slave narrators also conceal some episodes of their turbulent lives. In this case, silence is not a sign of oppression, but a symbol of power, the power gained with freedom. As Gloria Anzaldúa puts it, “a woman who writes has power” (171). The female slave decides what to write and what to omit in her personal history, and this means power. The aspects the female slave narrator usually conceals from her readers or, at least, gives veiled or vague information about, are those events that could give rise to criticism on the part of their virtuous readers who may not be able to understand their sexual behavior, and who were accustomed to books in which women were examples of morality and virtue:

Given that masking operates as a form of protection for women and other disenfranchised groups in unequal power relationships, it is not surprising that it is central to their artistry. Masking encourages risk-taking; it creates a shield against incursion and retaliation; it enables imaginative and intellectual free play; and it provides the opportunity to safeguard one’s own, as well as one’s community’s secrets, motives, and dignity.

By concealing self and information, the masked writer achieves *power* over her readers; by masking her message in subterfuge, elusion, irony, and shifting personas, she obscures the impropriety of her critique while conveying it simultaneously. (Grasso 37-38; emphasis added).

Thus, in the same way in which female slaves gain control over their lives by obtaining their freedom, they exercise that control with the publication of their personal histories, for they decide what they want to say and how, and what they want to keep away from their readers; which conventions of the *traditional* male slave narrative are appropriate to relate their experiences as bondwomen, and which aspects of their lives cannot be narrated using this genre, a genre whose conventions had been created to suit male authors’ needs, and a genre in which female slaves were secondary characters.

At the time when slave narratives were a popular genre, many white women were also avid readers of sentimental fiction. This literature presented a very specific role for virtuous (white) women to play. Nevertheless, since the lives led by slave women—especially as regards their sexual life—did not conform to the moral standards of the sentimental novel, their sentimental writings also have a confessional tone, with which they try to justify the sins they committed while in slavery. As bell hooks argues, “[f]eminist thinkers in the United States use confession and memory primarily as a way to narrate *tales of victimization*, which are rarely rendered dialectically” (110; emphasis added). Thus, the confessional mode allows the female narrators to present themselves as victims of the slavery system, something which contradicts their desire to portray themselves as heroines, not victims. Nevertheless, if they want to be understood—even pitied—by white women readers, they need to justify their immoral behavior through the confessional mode. In doing this, they apologize for their lack of virtue as slaves, let their readers know that had they been free women they would not have behaved in that manner, and try to convince them that, as bondwomen, they had managed to survive using the only means of resistance available to them.

As a result, and in the light of this analysis, female slaves construct their narratives following many of the conventions included in the tradition of the slave narrative, but their writings incorporate different motives, events and modes of narration that make these works special. Gay Wilentz writes the following paragraph about black women writings:

What we see from the voices of these Black women writers is that their concerns may not be entirely different from those of their male counterparts in wanting to communicate a message, liberate and bolster their own people, and improve their society; but in the manner of production and the focus of the material, these women writers have a distinguishable aim (xxxiii).

These brave female slave narrators who present bondwomen as heroines rather than victims, who use their own peculiar means of empowerment and resistance against slavery, who express their concerns about sexuality and motherhood, do not speak just

for themselves, but give voice to many silent women slaves. They had been silent because they were black and slaves. They remained silent because they were women.

When these women decide that their experiences have to be heard they feel the need to create a new voice—their own voice, the voice of the female slave, for the voice of male slave narrators had proved not to be appropriate to depict the peculiar experiences of women in bondage. Consequently, the first ex bondswoman to give voice to the female slave would also give rise to the literary tradition of female slave narratives. This woman was Harriet Jacobs. Other black women had written books before her, and other slave narratives about women had been written and published before hers. Nevertheless, she was the first ex slave woman who put into writing her experiences in bondage using her own voice. In so doing, she became the precursor, not only of female slave narratives, but also of autobiographical African American women's writings. Harriet Jacobs does something different by introducing herself as the paradigm of the female slave and her sufferings as the typical and customary of her kind. In doing so, she opens her heart to her readers and exposes herself to criticism for disclosing her extramarital sexual relationships and for overtly writing about the sexual abuses slave women were subject to (something that people believed had to be kept in secret and limited to a private sphere). In this sense, Jacobs demonstrates a courage that male authors of slave narratives had lacked.

3

**THE HAUNTING MEMORY OF *INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL*: FROM POSTBELLUM SLAVE NARRATIVES TO CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S WRITINGS**

After the Civil War and once human enslavement had been abolished with the passing of the thirteenth amendment to the Constitution<sup>120</sup> (1865), the urge to publish ex slaves' experiences under slavery diminished significantly. As Frances Smith Foster argues, "[e]mancipation had made an anti-slavery focus unnecessary and undesirable. In general, readers in the reunited states were more interested in healing wounds and moving toward a harmonious future than in rehearsing past wrongs that had divided and devastated their nation" (*Written by Herself* 118). White and black people agreed in their willingness to move forwards and to leave the past behind, though for different reasons.<sup>121</sup> Nevertheless, and despite the fact that white readers' curiosity about the inside of the domestic institution had diminished, many black men and women had their experiences in bondage written down and published after the Civil War. As it had happened before the Civil War, black men found it easier to narrate their experiences to the public than black women, since men were often seen in public spheres, whereas women were supposed to occupy a domestic arena. Furthermore, men were in a higher

---

<sup>120</sup> See page 118 footnote 8.

<sup>121</sup> White people wanted to forget their shameful past as slaveholders and traders of human beings. Black people wanted to begin a new life in freedom, making money for their work, and providing their families with all they needed. They wanted to have the same rights and responsibilities as white people. In short, they wanted to recover the humanity they had lost during slavery times.

position in the Great Chain of Being, their intellect was considered superior, and, therefore, they were thought more capable of writing something coherent and reasoned than women, who occupied a lower rank in the Great Chain of Being. However, some biographies and autobiographies of female slaves were published during the nineteenth, twentieth, and up to the beginning of the twenty-first century.

As it will be demonstrated in the following pages, some postbellum female slave narratives were written in the first person, whereas others are biographical writings written by the ex slaves' friends, both black and white, due to the fact that the female protagonists of these personal histories lacked the education to put their experiences into writing. The autobiographical accounts, though more significant because they portray the voice of ex slave women, devote fewer pages to the protagonist's experiences in bondage than to their lives as free black women, which comes to prove that *Incidents* is the only full-length autobiographical slave narrative written by an African American woman.

In any case, female slave narratives in general, and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in particular, initiated the autobiographical tradition of African American women's writings, a tradition that would incorporate a series of topics already developed by Harriet Jacobs in her personal history. As it will be seen in the following pages, Harriet Jacobs's narrative pattern and the women's concerns she discusses in her autobiography would be revisited, not only by nineteenth-century African American women authors as seen before, but also by black women autobiographers and fiction writers in twentieth and twenty-first-century America. Thus, the influence that *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* has had on these authors has a threefold dimension. First of all, twentieth and twenty-first-century African American women authors have copied the autobiographical mode of expression to narrate their individual experiences. Secondly, they have created works of literature in which black women's sexual and psychological oppression—frequently similar to the oppression described in *Incidents*—

is a key topic. Finally, issues like sexuality, motherhood and freedom are common in the writings by twentieth and twenty-first-century black women in the United States.

Once the Civil War had come to an end, some works about black women slaves were published in the United States. Among the biographical accounts of female slave bondage are *The Story of Mattie J. Jackson* (1866), written and arranged by Dr. L. S. Thompson;<sup>122</sup> *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (1869), by Sarah Hopkins Bradford;<sup>123</sup> *Narratives of Colored Americans* (1875), by Abigail Mott and M. S. Wood;<sup>124</sup> *The House of Bondage* (1890), by Octavia V. Rogers Albert;<sup>125</sup> and *Homespun Heroines and other Women of Distinction* (1926), by Hallie Quinn Brown.<sup>126</sup> Although these female slave narratives are important for (African) American history and literature, the fact that they were written by other than the former bondwomen—something discussed in previous pages—makes these narratives less significant within African American women's writings than Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents*, for Jacobs *did* use her own voice to narrate her personal history.

Nevertheless, there were a few relevant African American women who wrote about their experiences in bondage in the first person after the Civil War. Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley (ca. 1818-1907) was the first author of an autobiographical female slave narrative after the Civil War: *Behind the Scenes, Or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House* (1868). *Behind the Scenes* became, thus, the second first-person female slave narrative in African American letters. This is the most thoroughly studied female slave narrative of the postbellum period, and some scholars believe that

---

<sup>122</sup> Dr. L. S. Thompson was Mattie J. Jackson's (African American) stepmother.

<sup>123</sup> Sarah Hopkins Bradford was a white schoolteacher. She would release another volume of Harriet Tubman's life in 1886 called *Harriet, the Moses of Her People*, which presented a less bitter view of slavery and the South.

<sup>124</sup> Abigail Field Mott (1766-1851), writer and abolitionist, was involved in a number of political and social causes like many Quaker women of the time. As a writer, Abigail Mott explored a number of topics, experimenting with political, historical, and children's literature. As an abolitionist and political activist her home served as a meeting place for social and political reformers and as a station on the Underground Railroad. She had also written *Biographical Sketches and Interesting Anecdotes of Persons of Colour* in 1826. M. S. Wood was also a Quaker.

<sup>125</sup> Octavia V. Rogers Albert (1853-1890) lived in slavery until the Emancipation.

<sup>126</sup> Hallie Quinn Brown (1850-1949) was the daughter of former slaves, and actively involved in the Underground Railroad.

“Keckley’s text was to the postbellum slave narratives as Harriet Jacobs’s had been to slave narratives of the antebellum period” (Foster, *Written by Herself* 120). Other autobiographical postbellum slave narratives by black women like Amanda Smith, Kate Drumgoold, and Annie L. Burton<sup>127</sup> are less significant for various reasons.

Amanda Smith’s *An Autobiography. The Story of the Lord’s Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith the Colored Evangelist* (1893) summarizes the author’s experiences in slavery in the first chapter, entitled “Birth, Parentage and Deliverance from Slavery through the Conversion of My Mother’s Young Mistress—My Pious Grandmother.” The rest of the book is devoted to Amanda Smith’s life as a free black woman, and her travels in America, England, Ireland, Scotland, India and Africa as a missionary. Thus, this book can be understood as a conversion autobiography which focuses on the description of the life of an African American woman missionary—who happened to have been a slave in her early years— rather than as a slave narrative that relates how the ex slave survived to bondage and managed to obtain her freedom, which is the typical plot of both male and female slave narratives .

Kate Drumgoold, who authored the postbellum female slave narrative entitled *A Slave Girl’s Story, Being the Autobiography of Kate Drumgoold* (1897), only spent her first few years of her life in slavery. She was born in 1858 or 1859, according to Jennifer Fleischner (134), and hence must have been four or five years of age when Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. Thus, *A Slave Girl’s Story* has a misleading title, for only a few pages of the total narrative explain this woman’s experiences in bondage. As a consequence, the relevance of this book within (male or female) slave narratives is very little, for it focuses on the experiences of a free black woman in America. Moreover, and as stated in previous pages, slave children experienced a milder type of slavery. Hence, Drumgoold’s experiences of the slave

---

<sup>127</sup> I have not included in this list Julia A. J. Foote’s *A Brand Plucked From the Fire* (1879) because, though she was the daughter of ex slaves, her book does not relate her experiences in slavery. She simply writes about her parents being slaves and how her father bought their freedom as follows: “My father bought himself, and then his wife and their first child, at that time an infant” (10). Julia A. J. Foote (1823-1900) states that she was her mother’s fourth child and was, therefore, born free (9).

system were not the typical of a slave woman or man, who could give a more accurate description of what it was like to be a slave in nineteenth-century America. In this sense, no comparison can be made between *A Slave Girl's Story* and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, for, though the titles bear some similarity, these works narrate two completely different things: the early years in slavery and life of a free black in America, and the tribulations of a slave girl and woman until her escape to free land.

Similarly, Annie L. Burton (b. 1858?) spent few years in slavery and, consequently, her narrative, entitled *Memories of Childhood's Slavery Days* (1909), devotes very few pages to her life under this system of human bondage. More strikingly, the chapter in which she recalls slavery days until emancipation is entitled "Recollections of a Happy Life." Though it seems contradictory to find the few pages dedicated to the narration of the protagonist's experiences in slavery under this title, it is probably due to the fact that she only endured slavery during childhood, which, according to slave narratives, was the happiest period in the life of a slave. Consequently, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Annie L. Burton's autobiography bear few similarities, for *Incidents* presents the harshest version of female slave experience, whereas *Memories of Childhood's Slavery Days* presents the worry-free life of a slave girl who would not experience the cruelty of the slave system.

Therefore, Amanda Smith's, Kate Drumgoold's and Annie Burton's autobiographies were written by women whose experiences in slavery were not as significant as Harriet Jacobs's or Elizabeth Keckley's, for they did not spend as many years in bondage as these authors. These personal histories are more relevant as general works of literature by African American women than as slave narratives. They exemplify, however, Hazel V. Carby's argument that "[t]he consequences of being a slave woman did not end with the abolition of slavery as an institution but haunted the texts of Black women throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth" (*Reconstructing Womanhood* 61). These women continued the tradition of black women's writing autobiographies—something that other twentieth-century African



American female authors will also do—but their works are minor in the tradition of slave narratives. Hence, only Keckley’s autobiography can be equated to Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents*, and deserves, therefore, special attention.

Both Harriet Jacobs and Elizabeth Keckley<sup>128</sup> made significant contributions to African American (women’s) literature, but in two completely different historical times. Since their autobiographies rely very much on the historical moment lived by the protagonists, the differences between these two works are clear. Keckley revisits topics that were already present in *Incidents* (motherhood, sexuality, resistance, abolitionism), but finds it difficult to write her autobiography in a similar manner. The historical moment in which she lives demands that she writes something different, something that (African) Americans could understand and feel identified with.

Frances Smith Foster has carried out a deep analysis of this work in several publications. She has also examined the similarities and differences between Harriet Jacobs and Elizabeth Keckley and concludes that the similarities in the lives and writings of these two women are the following:

Like Harriet Jacobs, [Elizabeth Keckley] had succeeded in freeing herself, in establishing herself as a woman of refinement and integrity, and in winning the confidence and support of prominent white women. Like Jacobs, Keckley had long resisted the importunities of friends to write the story of her bondage and freedom. She too had suffered indignities and been forced to make choices that she might whisper into the ear of a dear friend but did not wish to promulgate. But as with Harriet Jacobs, public events stirred her to sacrifice her privacy and write her personal history, not to gain sympathy for herself but for the good it could do for other, less fortunate women (*Written by Herself* 118).

---

<sup>128</sup> Elizabeth Keckley was born a slave in 1818. Keckley had a child fathered by a white man, friend of Keckley’s owner, who had a local plantation and who sexually abused Keckley for over four years until she became pregnant. Elizabeth married James Keckley in 1852, but it was an unhappy marriage. Keckley would leave him eight years later. In 1855 she had saved enough money to buy her freedom. Once a free woman, she worked as a seamstress for upper class women, such as the wives of Jefferson Davis and Abraham Lincoln. Elizabeth Keckley had a close relationship with Mary Todd Lincoln which she disclosed—together with some intimate details surrounding the assassination of President Lincoln—in *Behind the Scenes*. The publication of this book did not only arouse criticism on the part of the press and general public—who found exception with the fact that a black woman could become friends with a white woman, especially the President’s wife—but also annoyed Robert Lincoln, the oldest son of the late president, who tried to have the book withdrawn from publication. It also estranged Keckley and Mary Todd Lincoln. In her final years, Elizabeth Keckley lived at the Home for Destitute Women and Children in Washington, D.C., which she had helped establish. She finally died in 1907 of a paralytic stroke. A portrait of Elizabeth Keckley can be found in “Appendix A: Illustrations,” p. 374.

Nevertheless, the similarities between Harriet Jacobs and Elizabeth Keckley are not limited to their experiences as slaves or to their interest in publishing their autobiographies. There are also similarities in their texts of bondage. First of all, both of them portray a heroic female character, a black woman, who is able to climb up in social status.<sup>129</sup> Similarly, both Jacobs and Keckley admit and narrate some dark episodes in their lives in relation to their sexuality. They cannot be called virtuous or chaste if judged by the same standard as white women. Both authors narrate having been sexually harassed by white men. Nevertheless, unlike Jacobs, Keckley was unable to avoid sexual relationships with her harasser. She does not admit rape either, but draws a veil around this episode that concludes with the birth of her son. Keckley, nonetheless, uses the same argument as Jacobs to defend herself from accusations of immorality. If Jacobs argues that slave women “ought not to be judged by the same standard” (*Incidents* 86) as other women, Keckley writes: “if my poor boy ever suffered any humiliating pangs on account of birth, he could not blame his mother, for God knows that she did not wish to give him life; he must blame the edicts of that society which deemed it no crime to undermine the virtue of girls in my then position” (39). Yet the greatest difference between Jacobs’s and Keckley’s disclosure of this episode is the fact that whereas Jacobs makes this sexual harassment the center of her narrative, Keckley does not dwell on her sexual experiences with this white man,<sup>130</sup> but focuses on different aspects of her enslavement and on her life as a free black woman.

The issue of motherhood is also dealt with in a similar manner in both *Incidents* and *Behind the Scenes*. The fact that Harriet Jacobs’s and Elizabeth Keckley’s children were not born out of ordinary marital sexual relationships did not diminish the love both women felt for them, something which they demonstrated in their lives and depicted in their books. For these brave mothers, their children’s freedom was more important than

---

<sup>129</sup> Elizabeth Keckley’s jump is higher, for she became a modiste for Washington’s political elite and befriended President Lincoln’s wife.

<sup>130</sup> Keckley narrates her four-year sexual harassment as follows: “I was regarded as fair-looking for one of my race, and for four years a white man—I spare the world his name—had base designs upon me. I do not care to dwell upon this subject, for it is one that is fraught with pain. Suffice it to say, that he persecuted me for four years, and I—I—became a mother” (38-39).

their own. Both Jacobs and Keckley agree in the consideration that they could not be free women as long as their children remained in bondage. Thus, they use all the tools available to them in order to fight for their offspring's freedom, as well as for their own. Unlike in the case of many female slaves, motherhood is not a deterrent in their achievement of freedom but rather give them greater encouragement and determination to fight for it.

Despite the similarities between the treatment that Harriet Jacobs and Elizabeth Keckley give to conflicting topics like sexuality and motherhood, *Incidents* and *Behind the Scenes* present narrative differences. One of these differences is related to the tone in which their authors write about the evil of slavery and slaveholders. As stated above, after the Civil War and the emancipation of black slaves, slave narratives had lost its main purpose, that is, the abolition of slavery. Once this objective has been achieved and the purpose of these writings has disappeared, these works tend to disappear as well. At least, the tone and interpretation of past events that was present in antebellum slave narratives is modified in accordance with the new historical and social circumstances. Thus, as Frances Smith Foster suggests, "Keckley modified the tone and the interpretation of her story of life in bondage. She . . . chronicled the atrocities and deprivations engendered by that system, but reinterpreted this suffering and degradation as a historical moment" (*Written by Herself* 118). Keckley justifies black people's sufferings as coming from God, a suffering that was required to instruct African Americans into faith. This argument, which had not been used by previous authors of slave narratives, became common in postbellum slave narratives, leaving clear the distance that separated the stories of bondage written before and after the Civil War.

Another difference between *Incidents* and *Behind the Scenes* resides in the means of resistance Jacobs and Keckley offer to their enslavers' abuses. Whereas Harriet Jacobs uses sass to outwit and defeat her master at a psychological plane, Elizabeth Keckley describes physical fight. Keckley recollects an episode in her life in which she is going to be whipped (for no particular reason) and she refuses to be beaten

saying "you shall not whip me unless you prove the stronger. Nobody has a right to whip me but my own master, and nobody shall do so if I can prevent it" (33). Although her words do not stop the white man from beating her, Keckley fights back:

My words seemed to exasperate him. He seized a rope, caught me roughly, and tried to tie me. I resisted with all my strength, but he was the stronger of the two, and after a hard struggle succeeded in binding my hands and tearing my dress from my back. Then he picked up a rawhide, and began to ply it freely over my shoulders. With steady hand and practised eye he would raise the instrument of torture, nerve himself for a blow, and with fearful force the rawhide descended upon the quivering flesh. It cut the skin, raised great welts, and the warm blood trickled down my back (34).

Keckley narrates two other occasions in which she has a similar reaction to a whipping until, eventually, the person who is to whip her refuses to do so any more. Keckley argues that she has defeated a powerful foe:

On Friday following the Saturday on which I was so savagely beaten, Mr. Bingham again directed me come to his study. I went, but with the determination to offer resistance should he attempt to flog me again. On entering the room I found him prepared with a new rope and a new cowhide. I told him that I was ready to die, but that he could not conquer me. In struggling with him I bit his finger severely, when he seized a heavy stick and beat me with it in a shameful manner. Again I went home sore and bleeding, but with pride as strong and defiant as ever. The following Thursday Mr. Bingham again tried to conquer me, but in vain. We struggled, and he struck me many savage blows. As I stood bleeding before him, nearly exhausted with his efforts, he burst into tears, and declared that it would be a sin to beat me any more. My suffering at last subdued his hard heart; he asked my forgiveness, and afterwards was an altered man. He was never known to strike one of his servants from that day forward (36-37).

Elizabeth Keckley is able to subdue a white man but, unlike Harriet Jacobs, she does not employ the subtle weapon of language. She uses her physical strength. Frances Smith Foster justifies this difference between the two most famous female slave narratives as follows:

Both antebellum and postbellum whites might consider it unseemly for a black or a woman to raise a hand against a white man, but the heroism of both during the Civil War made postbellum readers a bit more inclined to tolerate, excuse, perhaps even admire, a black woman's desperate attempts to defend her virtue and to preserve her pride by any means necessary (*Written by Herself* 121-122).

As one can deduce from Foster's words, the difference in the means used by Jacobs and Keckley to offer resistance to their being abused bears a connection with the time in which their autobiographies were published: writing before or after the Civil War made a difference. Keckley knew she could not be recaptured into slavery because this system of forced human labor had already been abolished before she decided to write *Behind the Scenes*. Jacobs's situation was completely different. She wrote her autobiography despite the fear of being found out, captured, and taken back to the south as a slave.

Finally, the greatest difference between *Incidents* and *Behind the Scenes* lies in the number of pages devoted in both books to narrate the protagonist's experiences under slavery. Elizabeth Keckley dedicates only the first three (of the fifteen) chapters of her autobiography to this topic, focusing later on her experiences in freedom, especially those in the White House. The first two chapters of *Behind the Scenes* are devoted to Keckley's tribulations while a slave.<sup>131</sup> The third one narrates how she managed to obtain her freedom. By contrast, Harriet Jacobs devotes most of her text to her life in slavery. The reason is, once again, related to the time in which the books were published. Jacobs published her autobiography with the aim of convincing people of the need to abolish slavery. Keckley wrote after slavery had been abolished and, though her experiences in slavery were interesting for many of her readers, she had to adapt her personal history to the conventions of the genre. Instead of focusing on her life as a slave, Keckley—like Amanda Smith, Kate Drumgoold, and Annie L. Burton—concentrates on the description of what it was like to be a free (ex slave) black woman in nineteenth-century America.

Thus, in the light of this analysis of all the biographical and autobiographical female slave narratives published after the Civil War—among others *The Story of Mattie J. Jackson*, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*, *The Story of the Lord's*

---

<sup>131</sup> It is interesting, though, to remark that chapter two of *Behind the Scenes*, devoted to Elizabeth Keckley's experiences of slavery, bears a similar title to one of the chapters of *Incidents*. Keckley entitles chapter two "Girlhood and its Sorrows," which reminds us of "The Trials of Girlhood," the fifth chapter of *Incidents*.

*Dealings with Amanda Smith, A Slave Girl's Story, Memories of Childhood's Slavery Days*, and, more significantly, *Behind the Scenes*—it can be concluded that Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is the only full-length autobiographical slave narrative by an African American woman. The other antebellum and postbellum female slave narratives were either not written by the ex slave herself, or devoted fewer pages to the protagonist's experiences in bondage than to their lives as free black women.

Having examined the relevance of Harriet Jacobs within (male and female) slave narratives, it is necessary to analyze the extent to which *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* has influenced ulterior African American women authors. As it will be seen later on, black women writers in twentieth and twenty-first-century America have frequently used the autobiographical mode of narration—first used by an African American slave woman in *Incidents*—as a sign of cultural identity. Moreover, twentieth and twenty-first-century African American women authors have revisited topics like sexuality, motherhood, and freedom in their writings, thus presenting them as common concerns of black women in America. Since *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is the first autobiographical account of female bondage, and the first to discuss these African American women's concerns in the first person, Harriet Jacobs can be considered the forerunner of African American women's literature.

As stated above, modern African American women writers seem to feel identified with the autobiographical mode of narration, whose first expression in African American literature was the slave narrative. Many black American women authors use the first-person mode of narration in their writings. Toni Morrison admits this legacy in “The Site of Memory:”

A very large part of my own literary heritage is the autobiography. In this country the print origins of Black literature (as distinguished from the oral origins) were slave narratives. These book-length narratives (autobiographies, recollections, memoirs), of which well over a hundred were published, are familiar texts to historians and students of Black history (299).

Historian and women's studies scholar Elizabeth Fox-Genovese agrees with Morrison when she writes that nineteenth-century autobiographies of black women "are inescapably grounded in the experience of slavery and the literary tradition of the slave narratives" (178-179). Fox-Genovese identifies slave narratives as the origin of *autobiographical* writings by black women.<sup>132</sup> In this sense, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, being the first truly autobiographical female slave narrative, can be considered the forerunner of African American women's autobiographies.

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese further argues that the "common denominator" between slave narratives and ulterior autobiographies by African American women "derives not from the general categories of race or sex, but from the historical experience of being black and female in a specific society at a specific moment and over succeeding generations" (179). Thus, Fox-Genovese connects literature and history, something which, as already discussed in the previous chapter, slave narratives did as well. History and literature could not be separated in slave narratives and cannot be separated in African American women's writings either. The oppression endured by black women and depicted in their literary creations is connected to the specific historical moment in which they are set. Being black and a woman in nineteenth century involved a series of particular experiences, which were depicted in their autobiographies.

In the twentieth century, many black women writers continued and extended the tradition of writing autobiographies as a means of expression of black female consciousness. Among the most popular autobiographies of African American women writers are Ida B. Wells's *Crusade for Justice* (1928), Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust*

---

<sup>132</sup> Elizabeth Fox-Genovese further discloses the similarities between female slave narratives and nineteenth-century autobiographies by African American women when she argues that they were written "to be read by those who might influence the course of public events, might pay money for their books, or might authenticate them as authors" (185-186). These women authors did not, continues Fox-Genovese, write primarily for members of the slave community or for other black women. They wrote as much for white readers or black male intellectuals as for readers of their own condition. It seems as if they felt the need to communicate their innermost feelings and concerns to other people so that they could understand—or even help—they improve their situation. It seems that people of their condition would not have access to their literary productions either on account of their lack of education or unconcern. It seems that they needed to be appreciated by people in a more elevated position in society, rather than by other black women like themselves, who had traditionally occupied the lowest rank in American society.

*Tracks on a Road* (1942), Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), Angela Davis's *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (1974), and Assata Shakur's *Assata: An Autobiography* (1987). Joanne M. Braxton has thoroughly studied twentieth-century black women's autobiographies in several books and makes the following statement about these authors and their writings:

While black women writers might share traditional motivations for writing autobiography, other motives derive from their unique experiences. In the eyes of the predominantly white and male culture, women, and particularly black women, speak as "others," which is to say that, at least as far as the awareness of the dominant group is concerned, the black woman speaks from a position of marginality. And yet, against all odds, she comes to self-awareness and finds herself at the center of her own experience. Veiled though she might be (even twice veiled, thrice if she should be a member of a sexual minority), the black woman autobiographer possesses her own self-conscious vision of herself and her community. She sees herself and her community in relation to those who have described her as "other," and the very awareness of her enforced marginality becomes an additional catalyst for life writing, for testifying, for "telling it like it is" ("Symbolic Geography" 4).

In this extract, Braxton discloses black women's motivations to write autobiographical works. She argues that, on the one hand, these authors consider that their experiences have been unique, and that, on the other, they transmit not only a picture of themselves but also their own vision of the communities to which they belong. They are black, and they are women—Braxton also foresees the possibility of these women to belong to the lesbian community—and these women write about what it means to belong to these communities from a personal point of view, but further presenting the problems common to all their members. As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese explains, autobiographies of black women "constitute a running commentary on the collective experience of black women in the United States" (178). In the same way in which *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was autobiographical but represented the experiences of thousands of black female slaves, African American women's autobiographical writings depict the experiences of thousands of black women in the United States.

Harriet Jacobs had narrated in *Incidents* her unique experiences as a bondswoman and was the first author of a slave narrative who openly disclosed the sexual persecution



endured by female slaves. Nevertheless, she further let us know that thousands of black women in bondage had endured and were enduring the same treatment. Thus, her narrative does not simply present Jacobs's own suffering, but the suffering common to the community she had belonged to: black bondwomen. In this sense, *Incidents* is a precursor of twentieth and twenty-first century-African American women's autobiography. Moreover, though the oppression Jacobs endured was different from the one described in twentieth-century black women's autobiographies, the roots of this oppression is similar and has two bases: race and gender. African American women have traditionally been—and some still are—oppressed for being black and women.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that African American women authors have very frequently used the autobiographical mode of writing first effectively employed by Harriet Jacobs, there are also black women authors who have written fiction during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In these works of fiction these writers examine topics that were already present in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: freedom, black women's sexuality, and motherhood. African American women writers like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Ntozake Shange, and Gloria Naylor discuss sexual oppression, motherhood, and freedom from the perspective of a twentieth-century black woman maintaining, therefore, concerns already present in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.<sup>133</sup>

A distinction must be made, however, between the fiction which keeps on building on the sufferings endured by female slaves on southern plantations, called liberatory or liberating narratives,<sup>134</sup> and the fiction which is not set in or after slavery times, but which, nevertheless, is indebted to the slave narrative genre. To the first group, or liberatory narratives, belong novels like *Jubilee* (1966) by Margaret Walker,

---

<sup>133</sup> As Angelyn Mitchell argues, "*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* . . . is not merely a literary convention or even the formula for a literary convention. The narrative is, rather, the constructed discourse of the major concerns and issues that have organized and structured much of the African American woman's life" (15).

<sup>134</sup> Angelyn Mitchell defines the liberatory narrative "as a contemporary novel that engages the historical period of chattel slavery in order to provide new models of liberation by problematizing the concept of freedom" (4).

*Dessa Rose* (1986) by Sherley Anne Williams, and *Beloved* (1987) by the Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison.<sup>135</sup> These novels recall the experiences of female slaves but further describe the consequences of their traumatic experiences as bondwomen in their lives after emancipation. When narrating the suffering endured by these women during their enslavement—focusing mainly on sexual abuse—they do so from a twentieth-century perspective that allows their authors not only to present the crude reality of the existence of thousands of female slaves, but also to dwell on the feelings and innermost thoughts of these women, feelings and thoughts that had not been disclosed in either male or female slave narratives, except for Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. When narrating the oppressive lives of black women after emancipation, it is made clear that they have not left behind their trauma. These women simply try to live and forget, though their memories of slavery times keep on haunting them.

In liberatory narratives, two topics are of utmost importance: freedom and sexuality.<sup>136</sup> Harriet Jacobs had changed the ideal ending of the sentimental novel when she wrote: "Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage" (*Incidents* 302). She had rejected, thus, the happy ending of the sentimental novel because she knew that, as a black woman occupying the lowest rank in the scale of being, her future was to be submissive, if not to a slaveholder, to a (black) man. She had refused to be thus subjugated and preferred living in freedom than in marriage. Thus, when women like Toni Morrison write about black women after emancipation, they associate freedom with sexual liberty. It seems as if black women, especially feminist ones, cannot be free (even in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries) if they are married or *belong* to a black man. Besides, these modern writers keep on building on the sexual abuses endured by black women, not only during slavery, but also after emancipation.

---

<sup>135</sup> Toni Morrison revisits the topic of slavery in her latest novel *A Mercy* (2008), going back to the seventeenth-century American, when slavery was not equated with race yet.

<sup>136</sup> *Beloved* deals with another topic that Harriet Jacobs had also anticipated in her narrative: the need of a sisterhood between white and black women to improve their circumstances. "*Beloved* also offers several positive images of female community in which women work together to empower women . . . Both Amy Dever . . . and Baby Suggs help heal Sethe in body and spirit during and after Sethe's escape and journey to 124. Similarly, *Beloved* initially creates a nurturing female community in 124 by helping Sethe and Denver engage in the difficult process of reconstructing the past" (Beaulieu 46-47).

As stated above, apart from liberatory narratives, there are other works of fiction which are indebted to the slave narrative genre in general and to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in particular. Authors like Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison disclose the situation of modern African American women in relation to topics like sexuality and motherhood, and it seems that no great improvements have been made in the lives of black women in America. Slavery has ended, but black women seem to be subjugated to black men in a kind of slavery of sex that must still be overcome in black America.

One of the topics that modern African American women continue discussing in their books is sexual abuse. The sexual abuse of black girls and women is present in works of fiction like Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970). It seems that black women cannot own their sexuality even after the abolition of slavery. Black women have reappropriated their own bodies, but not their sexuality. What has changed, however, is the person who abuses these women. If during slavery times black women were raped by white men, it is black men (usually their fathers or husbands) who sexually abuse them after emancipation. Sexuality remains, thus, a common topic in African American women's writings. Mary Helen Washington explains the anxiety with which these women address this issue in their works of literature:

The anxiety black women writers over the representation of sexuality goes back to the nineteenth century and the prescription of for womanly "virtues" which made slave women automatically immoral and less "feminine than white women," but that anxiety is evident even in contemporary texts, many of which avoid any kind of vulnerability or project the most extreme forms of sexual vulnerability onto children and poor women. Once again the issue is control, and control is bought by cordoning off those aspects of sexuality that threaten to make women feel powerless. If pleasure and danger are concomitant aspects of sexuality, it seems clear to me that black women writers have, out of historical necessity, registered far more of the latter than the former ("The Darkened Eye" 38).

Harriet Jacobs's statement "slave women ought not to be judged by the same standard as others" (*Incidents* 86) seems to be valid well into the twentieth century. Black girls

and women are raped by their fathers and husbands. Putting that into writing is an act of healing, but also an accusation and condemnation of black men. Black women cannot overcome their past as slaves if black men are unable to find a balance between their desire to exercise male authority within the family—something that was denied to them during slavery—and black women's rights. Black men have left behind slavery times, at least apparently. Black women are unable to do so until they escape the domestic tyranny they endure within their household. They are still slaves—at least as regards their sexuality—to the black men in their families. African American women writers express this point in their works, and the most effective means by which they can do this is describing the rape of black women.

Finally, another topic that modern African American authors borrow from female slave narratives, especially from *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, is motherhood. Closely related to sexuality but at a different level, motherhood continues to be a touchstone in black women's writings. From slavery times in which black motherhood prevented many slave women from escaping to free territory, in which black motherhood was infected by miscegenation, in which black motherhood was made difficult by slaveholders who separated families, and in which black motherhood and matriarchy was exemplified by the figure of the Mammy, black mothers have found it very difficult to combine their personal desires and needs with their children's. These difficulties have been discussed in novels like Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977), and Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), and plays like Angelina Weld Grimké's *Rachel* (1920), Georgia Douglas Johnson's *Safe* (1929), Shirley Lola Graham's *It's Morning* (1940), and Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf* (1975). During the 1950s and 1960s black matriarchy was a stereotype to exemplify the black American family. According to Gerda Lerner, the question of "black matriarchy" is commonly misunderstood: "Matriarchy, by definition, means power by women: decision-making power; power over their own lives; power over the lives of others; power in their communities. To

speak of black matriarchy in contemporary society is a cruel hoax” (*The Majority* 62). Thus, contemporary novels by African American women bring down this myth by presenting the reality of black mothers, subdued by their children’s and their husband’s needs, which are always in the foreground.

Everything considered, it can be concluded that Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, as the only full-length autobiographical female slave narrative, anticipates the mode of narration (autobiography) and many topics (freedom, sexuality, and motherhood) that twentieth and twenty-first century-African American women authors like Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker would revise and extend in their writings, disclosing them from the perspective of present-day black women. These authors will focus on what it is like to be black and a woman in contemporary North America, concluding that slavery is the root of the present situation of African American women in the United States, that the problems they have nowadays are the consequence of the evils inherent in the domestic institution. The past must be made known in order to prevent people from making the same mistakes over and over again. Black women writers cannot forget about the past because they know that there lies the origin of present-day black women’s oppression on account of their sex and race. Their conflicting feelings as regards sexuality, motherhood, and freedom can only be understood reading female slave narratives, the most reliable, extended, and intimate one being Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* would not only be the first and only full-length autobiographical female slave narrative, but also the work of a strong woman who tried to fight the system that had made her life miserable at a time in which it was dangerous to do so. *Incidents* and the courage demonstrated by Harriet Jacobs in her narration would be a source of inspiration for many ulterior African American women authors, who would revisit the concerns that Jacobs introduced in her autobiography. Therefore, it could be stated that present-day African American women’s literature is haunted by the spirit of Harriet Jacobs and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

## CONCLUSION

---

All History is current; all injustice continues on some level, somewhere in the world.  
(From, "One Child of One's Own," by Alice Walker)

History, despite its wrenching pain,  
Cannot be unlived, but if faced  
With courage, need not be lived again.  
(From, "On the Pulse of Morning," by Maya Angelou)

As it has hopefully been demonstrated throughout this dissertation, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* occupies an exceptional position within the field of African American literature. Not only is it the first and only full-length autobiographical female slave narrative, but it also presents the personal history of one of the first womanist authors of all times: the former slave woman Harriet Jacobs. The relevance of Harriet Jacobs's autobiography further emerges from the fact that her personal history anticipates and sets the literary basis for topics like freedom, sexuality, and motherhood that would be revisited in modern African American women's writings. Nevertheless, Harriet Jacobs's autobiography could not have existed if the slave system had not been in force in the United States for over two hundred years.

During the period in which slavery was a legal institution in the United States, there existed a body of laws that regulated the trade and management of black human beings. These regulations were created to maintain the system of slavery and to defend white people from black slaves. They established the policies that regulated not only the possession of slaves, but also every aspect of slave life. Whatever slaves did and ate, their mobility, their legal status, etc. was regulated in the slave codes. Those aspects that

the slave codes did not regulate (slaves' marriages and the rape of female slaves, for example) did not exist.

Generally speaking, the laws included in the slave codes were protective towards slaveowners and oppressive for bondmen, especially for bondwomen. Female slaves found in one particular article of these slave codes the origin of a particular suffering of their own. This article read "the child shall follow the condition of the mother" (Goodell *The American Slave Code* 248-249) and it contributed to making slave women victims of rape in the hands of their white masters, for the children these white men might father would also become slaves. Thus, masters did not only obtain sexual pleasure from their encounters with their female slaves, but also economic profit. Therefore, although both male and female slaves were subject to physical and psychological abuses on the part of their masters, mistresses, and overseers, female slaves had to endure a typical suffering of their kind: their sexual exploitation. Slaves could not own anything, for they were not even able to keep their families together—they were separated if their masters chose to do so. Slave men only possessed their own bodies, but slave women did not, for their bodies—their sexuality—belonged also to their masters.

This sexual exploitation endured by slave women was quite frequent among both types of slave workers on the plantation: field hands and house servants. Although slaves normally preferred to work as house servants in the Big House since the tasks were not as burdensome and hard as those carried out by field hands, female slaves' preference was not so distinctive. As a domestic slave in the Big House, the female slave would spend longer hours with her master, and would, therefore, have more chances of being sexually harassed. As a field hand, the female slave would also be prone to endure sexual abuses and would further perform the hardest physical tasks on the plantation. Thus, the female slave's sexuality was endangered no matter whether she was a house servant or a field hand. Moreover, even if slave women were not raped by their masters, they were robbed of their sexuality anyway, for they were considered and used as *breeders*. Slaveholders made their female slaves take male slaves on the same

plantation as *husbands* so that they would have children and thus increase their stock of slaves and, therefore, their wealth.

Everything considered, it is not surprising that some female slaves decided to surrender their sexuality to white masters and became their concubines. They were aware that their owners were going to seize their sexuality one way or another, and thought that, if given the choice, leading a more comfortable life would be preferable. Slaveholders offered their favorite female slaves—usually of a paler shade of black (quadroons and octoroons)—a home and different *luxuries* if they accepted to submit sexually to them. Some accepted this *contract*, for the alternative was tougher: work hard on a plantation and being subject to physical, psychological and sexual abuses. The decision was not easy, but one can readily understand why some female slaves surrendered their bodies in exchange for a more *luxurious* life.

The condition of slave women as victims of rape, breeders, or concubines also affected many slave men. Male slaves—fathers, brothers, sons—would endure the pain of having a female relative in these circumstances. Slave men could do nothing to prevent the women in their families from enduring sexual exploitation, and were, thus, destroyed by secrecy and powerlessness. The only thing they could do was resist against the system of slavery and against their masters by employing a variety of methods. These methods of resistance included arson, fighting, and even murder. Slave men would use violent ways to react against their masters and against the system of slavery, being insurrection the most feared by slaveholders.

Slave women, on the other hand, would resort to resistance methods that would not require the use of physical strength such as signifying, escaping, and stealing. There were a few cases in which the female slave resorted to a more cruel and terrible act: infanticide. Some slave women decided to prevent their offspring—especially their daughters—from becoming slaves and, hence, from enduring the hardships they were themselves experiencing (rape among them) by killing them. This method of resistance



would shock white people, who would consider these women savage, hence misunderstanding their motives for carrying out such a terrible crime.

The greatest and most successful act of resistance against slaveholders and slavery was escape. Slaves escaped using a variety of methods, some of which were really witty, and some others never to be revealed. Escape, or freedom obtained by any other means (some slaves managed to obtain their freedom by buying it and others were manumitted by their owners), would bring about, in many cases, the beginning of a public life as lecturer or writer. Some ex slaves started to participate in public abolitionist speeches telling the audience about their suffering while in bondage. Some would even have the opportunity to have their personal histories published in a book. This would be the origin of the slave narrative.

As examined in this document, the slave narrative genre can be defined as the personal accounts of the enslavement of black people written or dictated by Africans in England and by fugitive slaves and freed black men and women in America, who narrate their experiences in slavery and their efforts to obtain freedom. These writings have proved to have an enormous value both as historical documents and as literature. As historical documents, these personal histories depict different aspects of slave life that help us understand the conditions under which slaves lived and labored, their concerns, their feelings, and their routines. As literature, slave narratives constitute a clearly defined literary genre with its own particular set of stylistic and thematic conventions.

Slave narrators would follow these stylistic and thematic conventions very closely creating, in this way, a genre with very distinctive characteristics. In the elaboration of slave narratives, their authors used techniques from different contemporary genres such as the autobiography, the sentimental novel, the confessional narrative, and spiritual autobiography. These and other genres inspired slave narrators when relating their experiences in bondage and, thus, the slave narrative genre was

born. Paradoxically, ex slaves used literary genres created by the white man to criticize the system of human bondage that had been created by this white man, and which had contributed to make these black authors' lives miserable. They had to do so because hardly any African American autobiographical writings had been created before the appearance of slave narratives. Although none of the genres conceived by white people could separately give voice to the ex slave's experiences, slave narrators had to write their personal histories in a style that would be recognized by their white audience. They had to do so since these authors' objective was to convince white people of the necessity to abolish the system of human bondage, for it was this audience who could bring about the abolition of slavery. Nonetheless, although slave narrators used existing literary genres to construct their narratives of bondage, the voice they used to do so was different from that of preceding white authors, a voice that derived from their experiences as a particular culture and race.

Consequently, although some scholars consider that slave authors' imitation of the literature written by whites was similar to what some postcolonial critics have called *mimicry*, or the (parodical) imitation of the colonizers, the African American writings of bondage belong to what Frantz Fanon names *nationalist* phase of the creation of literature by colonized peoples. In this third phase (the first being *assimilationist*, and the second *cultural nationalist*), colonized authors do not simply *imitate*—assimilate—the literary genres that white people have previously employed, but *transform* these modes of narration as a means to fight against the system. In this case, slave narrators transformed different literary genres to fight against slavery. Ex slave writers did not simply imitate the literature of the oppressors but introduced their own voice, the voice of the black man. Hence, the slave narrative became the origin of African American literature.

As stated above, the slave narrative genre follows a very strict stylistic and thematic pattern to which the former bondmen narrators adjust. This pattern includes a title page with the words "Written by Himself," the inclusion of authenticating

testimonials, the initial phrase “I was born...” at the beginning of the narrative, as well as the discussion of recurrent themes like the comparison between black slaves and Israelites, the unity of the black family, the cruel whippings suffered by slaves (especially female slaves), the manner in which a few strong slaves resisted to being whipped, and the difficulties slaves found in learning to read and write. Nevertheless, this stylistic and thematic pattern was firmly constructed on the basis of *male* authors’ writings. Female slave narratives constituted a very small percentage (around twelve percent) of the total slave narratives, and their authors would find it hard to adjust to the conventions of this genre because bondwomen had experiences of bondage of their own (related to sexuality and motherhood), which male slave authors had neglected in their writings.

Consequently, when Harriet Jacobs decided to put into writing her tribulations under slavery, she could not adhere completely to the stylistic and thematic conventions of the slave narrative genre, for it had been created by slave *men* to narrate the experiences of bondage of slave *men*. Thus, she transforms these conventions presenting them from a womanist—combative black feminist—perspective. Jacobs might have felt the need to find inspiration in the writings by African American women, ex slaves if possible. She could have done this, having learned to read and write when she was young. She could have had access to the writings by African American poets Phillis Wheatley and Sarah Louise Forten, essayists Mary Ann Shadd Cary, Ann Plato, and Charlotte Forten, and novelists Harriet Wilson and Frances E.W. Harper. Nevertheless, the influence these women could have exerted on Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* would have been minimal, for only one—Phillis Wheatley—had been a slave, and none of them had their autobiographies published before *Incidents*. Consequently, the similarities between *Incidents* and the poems, articles, essays, and novels written by these women reside in their common concerns related to gender and race, rather than in purely literary influences. The political dimension to be found in the life and work of these African American women was probably inspiring for Harriet

Jacobs, but these women's writings did not (could not) provide Jacobs with an adequate model to narrate her experiences in bondage.

There were, however, African American women who *had* published their autobiographies before Harriet Jacobs wrote or published *Incidents*. Among them were the works by Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, Nancy Prince, and Maria Stewart. Although some scholars have classified these women's autobiographies as slave narratives, they are more similar to spiritual autobiographies, though some of them do not completely fit in this classification either. The truly deemed female slave narratives published before *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* were not written by the former bondwomen themselves, but by white women, white men, or black men. The female slave narratives written by white women—*Memoirs of Mrs. Chloe Spear*, and *Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge* among them—distill racism despite the abolitionist concerns of their authors. They depict black characters as simple, meek and/or happy, a depiction that abounded in the genre that developed proslavery feelings: the plantation tradition. The classification of these works as true slave narratives is rather doubtful, for, first of all, one of them—*Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge*—is not even a slave narrative, its protagonist being a free black woman. Secondly, some of them—*Memoirs of Margaret Jane Blake* among others—have long been considered fictional and “more akin to Indian-escape literature than slave autobiographies” (Blassingame 82). Third, *Autobiography of a Female Slave*, by Mattie Griffith, intended to be passed as an authentic narrative of bondage but contemporary critics unveiled it as a work of fiction. Finally, *The History of Mary Prince* does not narrate the experiences of a North American slave woman, but those of a West Indian female slave. This geographical distinction created differences in the way in which slaves were kept and treated, differences that will be reflected in their narratives of bondage.

If female slave narratives written by white women distill racism, those written by white men add sexist prejudices to their writings. They depict slave women as sensuous, and victims of their masters' sexual abuses. Female slaves are portrayed with

the simplicity of stereotypes, stereotypes based on white and male experience. In this category are *Narrative of Joanna*, written by her husband John Gabriel Stedman, and *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon*, by Hiram Mattison. Stedman's narrative and description of the protagonist is furthermore biased on account of his love for Joanna, whom he would eventually marry. Mattison, on the other hand, focuses on the sexual nature of Picquet's encounters with her master, thus simplifying the figure of the *mulatta* as a sexual and sensuous character.

Only two female slave narratives were written by black men: *Aunt Sally*, written by the protagonist's son, and *Narrative of the Life of Jane Brown*, by Rev. G. W. Offley. *Aunt Sally* has traditionally been considered unreliable due to the fact that it maintains the paternalistic description of black characters found in the female slave narratives written by white authors as well as in the plantation tradition. *Narrative of the Life of Jane Brown*, on the other hand, presents slaves as combative and strong, a depiction that resembles the one found in slave narratives written by former bondmen, probably because its author, Rev. Offley, had been a slave himself and had already written his own autobiography. In this sense, it could be argued that Rev. Offley wrote two slave narratives with different protagonists, one being himself—a man—and one being a female slave, but from a similar point of view: the point of view of a male slave.

Whereas written by white or black men or women, none of the slave narratives of female bondage written before the publication of *Incidents* was penned by the former bondwoman herself. Thus, the first conclusion that we can extract is that Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was the first autobiographical account of bondage by an ex slave woman, the first work in which we can hear the voice of a slave woman narrating her own experiences in bondage. Moreover, although before the end of the Civil War other slave women had their narratives published, none of them wrote their personal histories themselves, but narrated their experiences to an editor or author who would put them in writing and publish them. These are the cases of the narratives about Old Elizabeth, and Dinah. Consequently, *Incidents* was not only the *first*

autobiographical female slave narrative, but the *only* one published in the antebellum period.

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is also a particularly interesting work from a narrative perspective since, though clearly a slave narrative, it does not follow the strict pattern of traditional *male* slave narratives. It *does* follow some of its conventions, like the inclusion of the words “Written by Herself” in the title and some quotations in the title page, the claim that her narrative is not fictional and that it was written by herself (though in an imperfect manner), the initial phrase “I was born,” an account of her parentage, the turning point in her career as a slave, her quest for literacy, and the means by which she offered strong and determined resistance against her master-harasser. Jacobs, however, transforms these conventions using a female and womanist perspective. For instance, the use of the words “Written by Herself” is very significant, for it shows that this is the narrative of a female slave written by herself, something which was not common at the time. On the one hand, the vast majority of slave narratives compiled the life experiences of *male* slaves. On the other hand, many ex slaves did not write their autobiographies themselves but, due to their illiteracy, related or dictated their personal histories to an amanuensis. Thus, these three words, “Written by Herself,” in the title page of *Incidents* served to indicate—to some extent—the originality of this narrative.

Harriet Jacobs’s experiences in slavery were completely different from those of the male slaves and, consequently, she had to resort to additional strategies to write her personal history. Using a womanist point of view she rejects the depiction of slave women as victims, and portrays herself as a survivor, an adventurous, audacious, and courageous woman who fights for her rights, who fights for her freedom. She fights the consideration of women as submissive by rejecting the sentimental novel as appropriate genre to narrate the sexual harassment she had to endure. She further chooses a different ending for her narrative. If the sentimental novel ends with marriage, *Incidents* finishes when the protagonist achieves her ultimate objective: freedom. As a womanist, she does

not want her happiness to depend on the finding of a husband, but on freedom from bondage. Thus, her fight is also a political fight for abolitionism. She is an active, strong, and brave black woman, a womanist who fights for her rights as both black and a woman.

*Incidents* separates from the traditional slave narrative not only in terms of style—the modification of the typical “Written by Himself” in the title and its resemblance with the sentimental novel among other characteristics—but also in the treatment of some topics, such as the turning point of the slave’s life, the quest for literacy, the means by which slaves reacted against slavery, or the portrayal of women characters as heroines rather than as victims. The adaptations Harriet Jacobs makes of these topics are grounded on her sex. The fact that she was a woman determined how she faced all these different situations in life. Her sex conditioned her response to all these events, a response that differed from that of male slaves. Thus, if the turning point of a bondman’s life is his physical fight against his master or overseer, Harriet Jacobs’s turning point is her entrance into the age of sexual maturity. This sexual maturity would mark the beginning of her sufferings, the beginning of her master’s sexual harassment, which she would have to endure until she decided to escape.

This is not, however, the only thematic convention that Harriet Jacobs adapts from the slave narratives of male bondage, for she also modifies the description of the slave’s quest for literacy. Unlike many bondmen, who use their literacy to write false passes with which to escape, and unlike Frederick Douglass, whose literacy provides him with certain psychological freedom before his actual escape, Harriet Jacobs uses her literacy to write letters to her master, Dr. Flint, to mislead him in his pursuit of her.

Moreover, whereas male slaves resorted to violence, or arson to offer resistance against slavery, the tools Jacobs discloses in *Incidents* are a bit subtler and include talking back, reappropriation of sexuality by finding herself a lover, concealment in different hiding places, and final escape. In the narration of these events, Harriet Jacobs

transforms another convention of the slave narrative genre as written by men: the role assigned to female slaves. Whereas in male slave narratives slave women are secondary characters stereotyped as victims of sexual abuse, Harriet Jacobs presents the female slave as a heroine. This heroine has different features than the typical hero of male slave narratives. Whereas the slave hero is independent, the slave heroine thanks the support she receives from the slave community—especially from female slaves—as well as the helpfulness of white women. This sisterhood, typical in womanist writings, is accompanied by the support Harriet Jacobs receives from her family. Jacobs writes openly about her dependence on her relatives, who played an essential role in her life and escape. Family, especially motherhood, is a central topic in *Incidents*, for Jacobs's children constitute the engine in her life, the motor that moves her to escape and fight for her own freedom as well as her children's.

By explaining the importance her family has for her and disclosing her sexual life openly, Harriet Jacobs separates her work from the tradition of the slave narrative. By explaining her extramarital sexual relationships and claiming that freedom is more important than marriage for the female slave, she separates from the other literary genre that greatly influenced her personal history: the sentimental novel. *Incidents* is the slave narrative that most closely follows the plot of the sentimental novel, maybe as an attempt to attract white female audiences. Nevertheless, Jacobs is aware of the impossibility of narrating her experiences of bondage using this literary genre, as well as of the limitations of the traditional slave narrative genre. Thus, when writing her autobiography, Harriet Jacobs alters the conventions of these two genres to create a unique voice never heard before: the voice of the female slave.

The voice of the female slave Harriet Jacobs depicts would be the most special of all female slave narratives, for, although some narratives of female bondage were published after the Civil War (*The Story of Mattie J. Jackson, Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman, The Story of the Lord's Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith, A Slave Girl's Story, Memories of Childhood's Slavery Days, and Behind the Scenes*, for



example), none of these works can be equated with *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. On the one hand, only one of these narratives (*Behind the Scenes*) was written by the ex slave herself (Elizabeth Keckley). On the other hand, few of them are full-length narratives of bondage since most of these narratives simply summarize the female slave's experiences in bondage in the first chapters of the book. Only *Behind the Scenes* has had as much relevance as *Incidents* in terms of literary criticism, being considered the greatest postbellum female slave narrative. Nonetheless, although Elizabeth Keckley also deals with the appropriation of female slaves' sexuality by slaveholders, motherhood, resistance, etc. she does it from the perspective of a free woman who runs no risk of being recaptured into slavery. Moreover, despite the fact that *Behind the Scenes* is considered to have the same position among postbellum female slave narratives as *Incidents* in the antebellum period, *Behind the Scenes* is not a *full-length* narrative of bondage, for only the first three chapters of the book are devoted to Keckley's experiences in slavery. Consequently, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is not the only autobiographical account of a female slave written in the antebellum period, but also *the only full-length first-person female slave narrative of all times*.

Furthermore, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* has exerted an enormous influence on twentieth and twenty-first African American women's literature. First, many modern black women authors have revisited the experiences of bondswomen during the slavery period in liberatory narratives like Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Secondly, a vast majority of African American women writers like Ida B. Wells and Maya Angelou have found in autobiography—first used in effect by Harriet Jacobs—their favorite mode of narration. Finally, most contemporary African American women writers such as Zora Neale Hurston or Alice Walker—just to name a few—have focused on the oppression endured by black women on account of their sex and race—whose origin lies in slavery—and developed topics like sexuality, motherhood, and freedom already present in Harriet Jacobs's autobiography..

---

All in all, not only does *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* constitutes a unique work in African American women's literature (for it is the only full-length autobiographical female slave narrative), but it is also a point of reference for present-day black women authors in the United States, who revisit the typical concerns of African American women—already disclosed in Harriet Jacobs's personal history—from a twentieth and twenty-first-century point of view.

## APPENDIXES

---

### APPENDIX A: ILLUSTRATIONS

#### *PORTRAITS OF AFRICAN AMERICANS DURING SLAVERY TIMES*

➤ Harriet Jacobs.....	369
➤ Frederick Douglass .....	370
➤ Solomon Northup.....	370
➤ Henry Bibb.....	371
➤ William Wells Brown .....	371
➤ Elleanor Eldridge .....	372
➤ Sojourner Truth.....	372
➤ Joanna .....	373
➤ Louisa Picquet.....	373
➤ Aunt Sally .....	374
➤ Elizabeth Keckley .....	374
➤ Ellen Craft.....	375

#### *ILLUSTRATIONS ON SLAVERY AND THE SLAVE TRADE*

➤ The Great Chain of Being.....	376
➤ The slave ship <i>Brookes</i> (1788).....	378
➤ Slave quarters in the South .....	379
➤ Slave cabins .....	380
➤ Representation of Henry “Box” Brown’s box .....	381
➤ Harriet Jacobs’s grandmother’s house and garret.....	382

### APPENDIX B: DOCUMENTS AND MAPS

#### *DOCUMENTS*

➤ From <i>The Declaration of Independence</i> (1776).....	383
➤ From <i>The Fugitive Slave Act</i> (1850).....	384

➤ From <i>Twelve Years a Slave</i> .....	387
➤ From <i>Slave Life in Georgia</i> .....	389
➤ From <i>Narrative of the Life of J.D. Green, a Runaway Slave</i> .....	390
➤ From <i>Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl</i> .....	390
➤ Letter from Lydia Maria Child to Harriet Jacobs. August 13, 1860.....	391

#### MAPS

➤ The African Diaspora.....	392
➤ Slave destinations.....	393
➤ The Underground Railroad .....	394

### APPENDIX C: SLAVE SONGS AND POEMS ON SLAVERY

#### SLAVE SONGS

➤ [Go Sound the Jubilee!] .....	395
➤ <i>Soon I Will Be Done</i> .....	396
➤ <i>Walk Together Children</i> .....	397
➤ <i>No More Auction Block</i> .....	398
➤ <i>Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel?</i> .....	399
➤ <i>Oh, Freedom!</i> .....	400

#### POEMS ON SLAVERY

➤ Liberty's Champion .....	401
➤ The Slave Mother, by Frances E. W. Harper .....	403
➤ The Slave Girl's Farewell, by Sarah Louise Forten.....	404
➤ The Slave Girl's Address to Her Mother, by Sarah Louise Forten.....	405
➤ The Negro's Complaint, by William Cowper.....	406
➤ Pity for Poor Africans, by William Cowper .....	407

### APPENDIX D: INSTRUMENTS OF TORTURE USED BY SLAVEHOLDERS

<i>WHIPS</i> .....	409
<i>THE PADDLE</i> .....	412
<i>THE FLOPPING PADDLE</i> .....	413
<i>THE COTTON SCREW</i> .....	413
<i>BELLS AND HORNS</i> .....	414
<i>IRON COLLAR</i> .....	415
<i>COLLAR AND CHAIN</i> .....	416

<i>IRON MASK, NECK COLLAR, LEG SHACKLES, AND SPURS</i> .....	417
<i>THE TREADMILL</i> .....	418
<i>STOCKS</i> .....	419
<i>THE PUMP</i> .....	420
<i>BREAKING ON THE RACK</i> .....	421
<i>HANGING BY THE RIBS</i> .....	422

## APPENDIX A: ILLUSTRATIONS

### PORTRAITS OF AFRICAN AMERICANS DURING SLAVERY TIMES

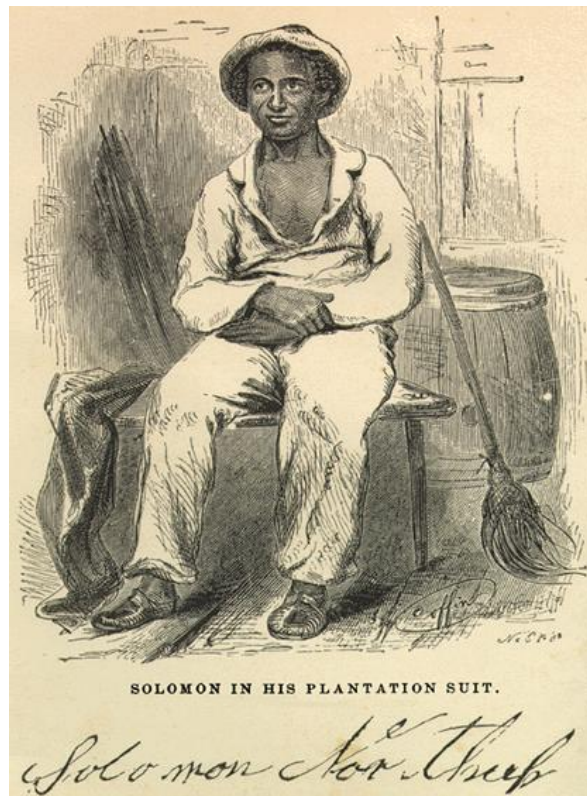
#### HARRIET JACOBS



*Harriet Jacobs in 1894, aged 81. From Harriet Jacobs: A Life, by Jean Fagan Yellin*

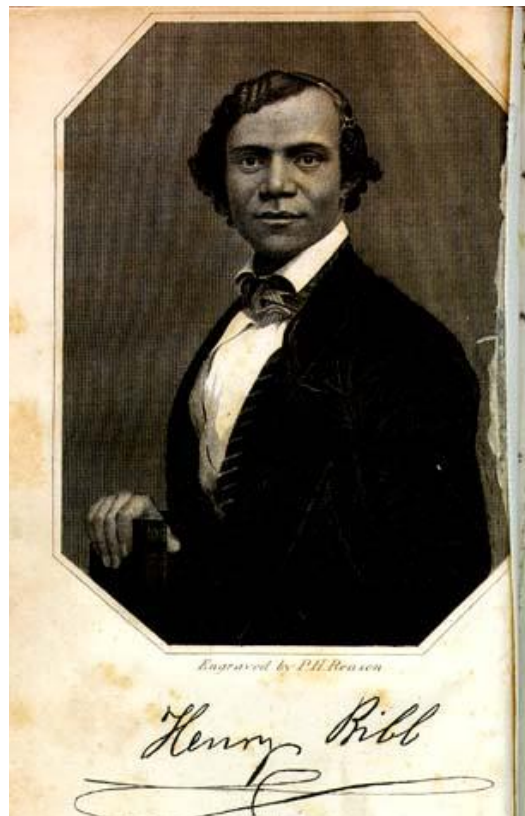
**FREDERICK DOUGLASS**

*From Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself*

**SOLOMON NORTHUP**

*From Twelve Years a Slave, by Solomon Northup*

**HENRY BIBB**



*From Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave. Written by Himself*

**WILLIAM WELLS BROWN**



*From Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave. Written by Himself*



**ELLEANOR ELDRIDGE**

*From Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge, by Frances H. Whipple Green*

**SOJOURNER TRUTH**

*From Narrative of Sojourner Truth, by Sojourner Truth and Olive Gilbert*

**JOANNA**



*From Narrative of Joanna, by John Gabriel Stedman*

**LOUISA PICQUET**



*From Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon, by Louisa Picquet and Hiram Mattison*

**AUNT SALLY**

*From Aunt Sally: or, The Cross the Way of Freedom, by Isaac Williams*

**ELIZABETH KECKLEY**

*From Behind the Scenes, by Elizabeth Keckley*

**ELLEN CRAFT**



*From The Underground Railroad, by William Still*



*Ellen Craft disguised as a white gentleman. From Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom, by William Craft*

## ILLUSTRATIONS ON SLAVERY AND THE SLAVE TRADE

### THE GREAT CHAIN OF BEING

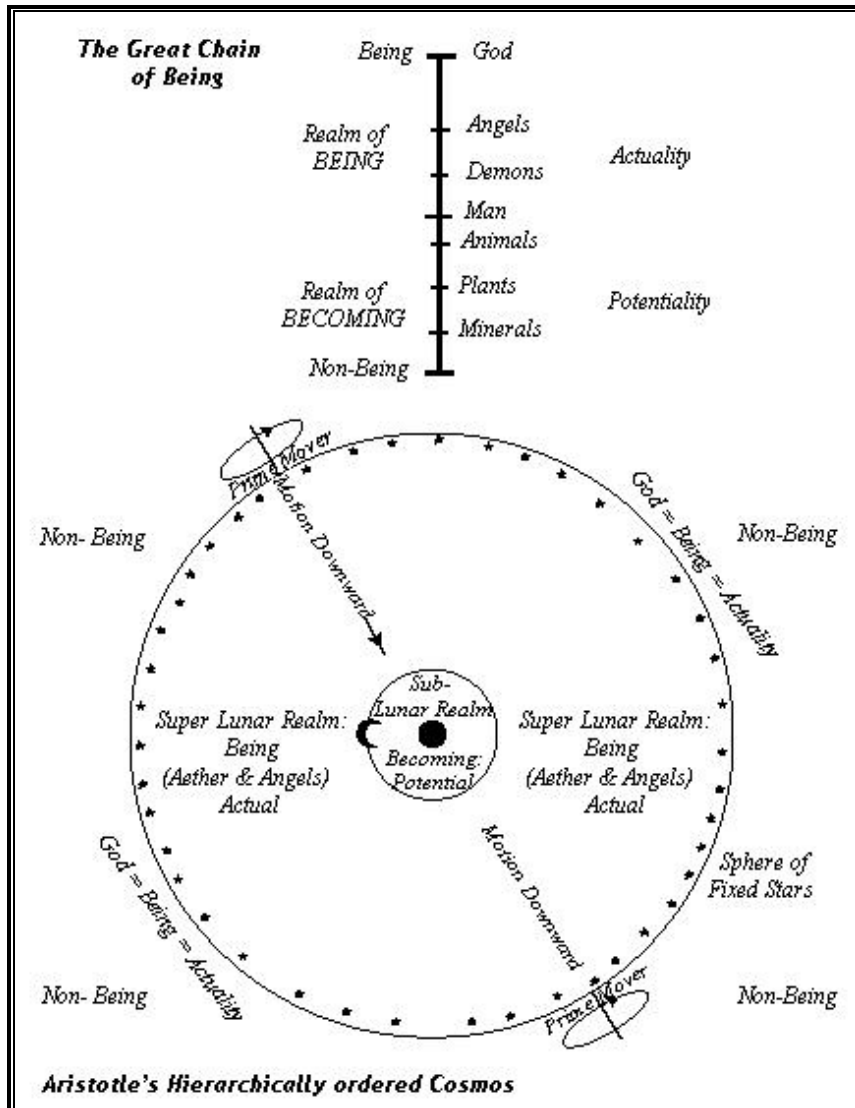


Fig. 1

From <www.clas.ufl.edu><sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> E.M.W. Tillyard explains the concept of the Great Chain of Being in the following terms:

The chain stretched from the foot of God's throne to the meanest of inanimate objects. Every speck of creation was a link in the chain, and every link except those at the two extremities was simultaneously bigger and smaller than another . . . First there is mere existence, the inanimate class: the elements, liquids, and metals. But in spite of this common lack of life there is a vast difference of virtue; water is nobler than earth, the ruby than the topaz, gold than brass: the links in the chain are there. Next there is existence and life, the vegetative class, where again the oak is nobler than the bramble. Next there is existence life and feeling, the sensitive class. In it there are three grades. First the creatures having touch but not hearing memory or movement. Such are shellfish and parasites on the base of trees. Then there are animals having touch memory and movement but not hearing, for instance ants. And finally there are the higher animals, horses dogs, etc., that have all these faculties. The three classes lead up

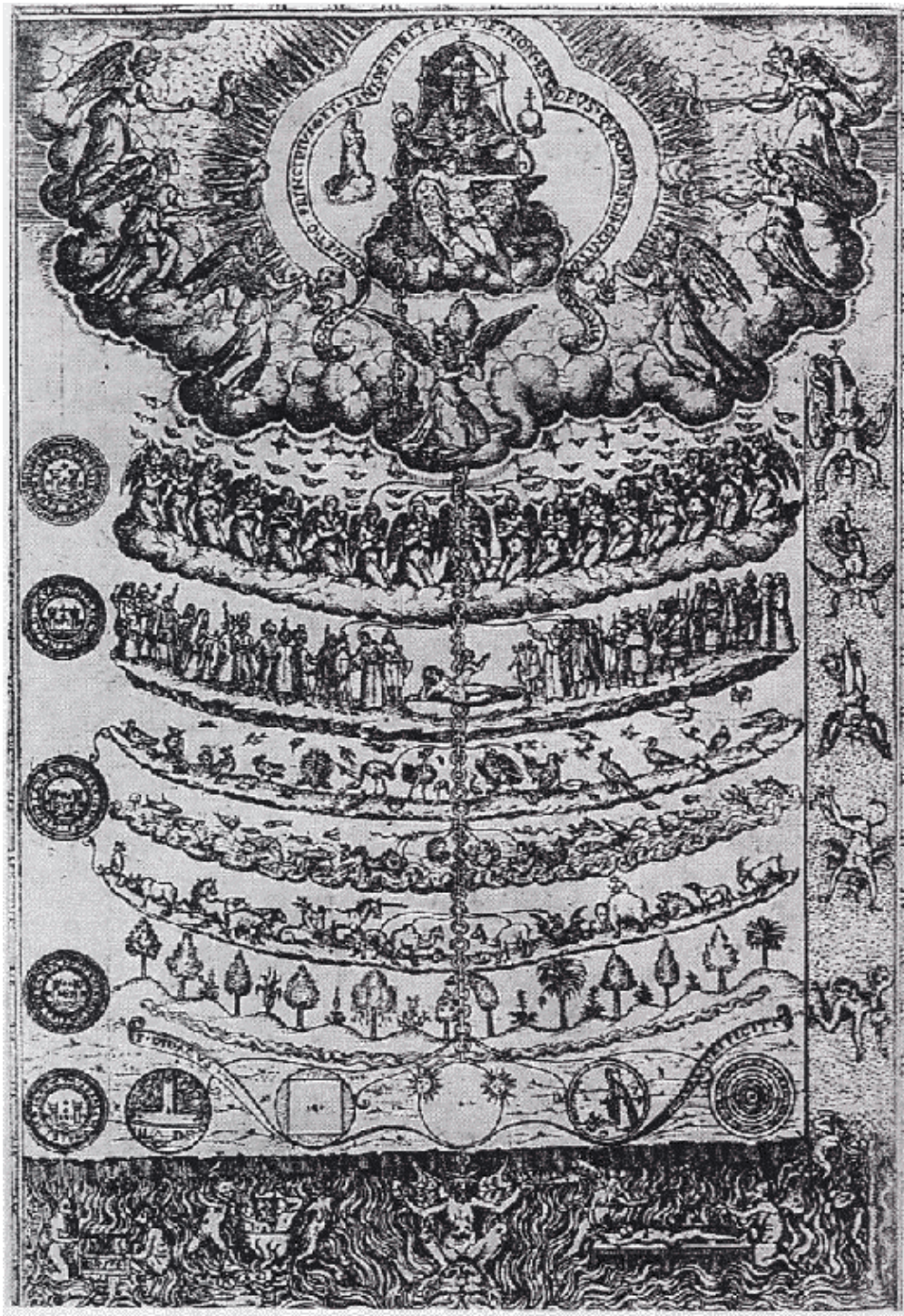


Fig. 2

*Drawing of the Great Chain of Being from Didacus Valades, Rhetorica Christiana (1579)*

to man, who has not only existence life and feeling, but understanding: he sums up in himself the total faculties of earthly phenomena. (For this reason he was called the little world or microcosm). But as there had been an inanimate class, so to balance it there must be a purely rational or spiritual. These are the angels, linked to man by community of the understanding, but freed from simultaneous attachment to the lower faculties. . . . The elements are alimantal. There is a progression in the way the elements nourish plants, the fruits of plants beasts, and the flesh of beasts men. And this is all one with the tendency of man upwards toward God (23, 25-26).

### THE SLAVE SHIP *BROOKES* (1788)

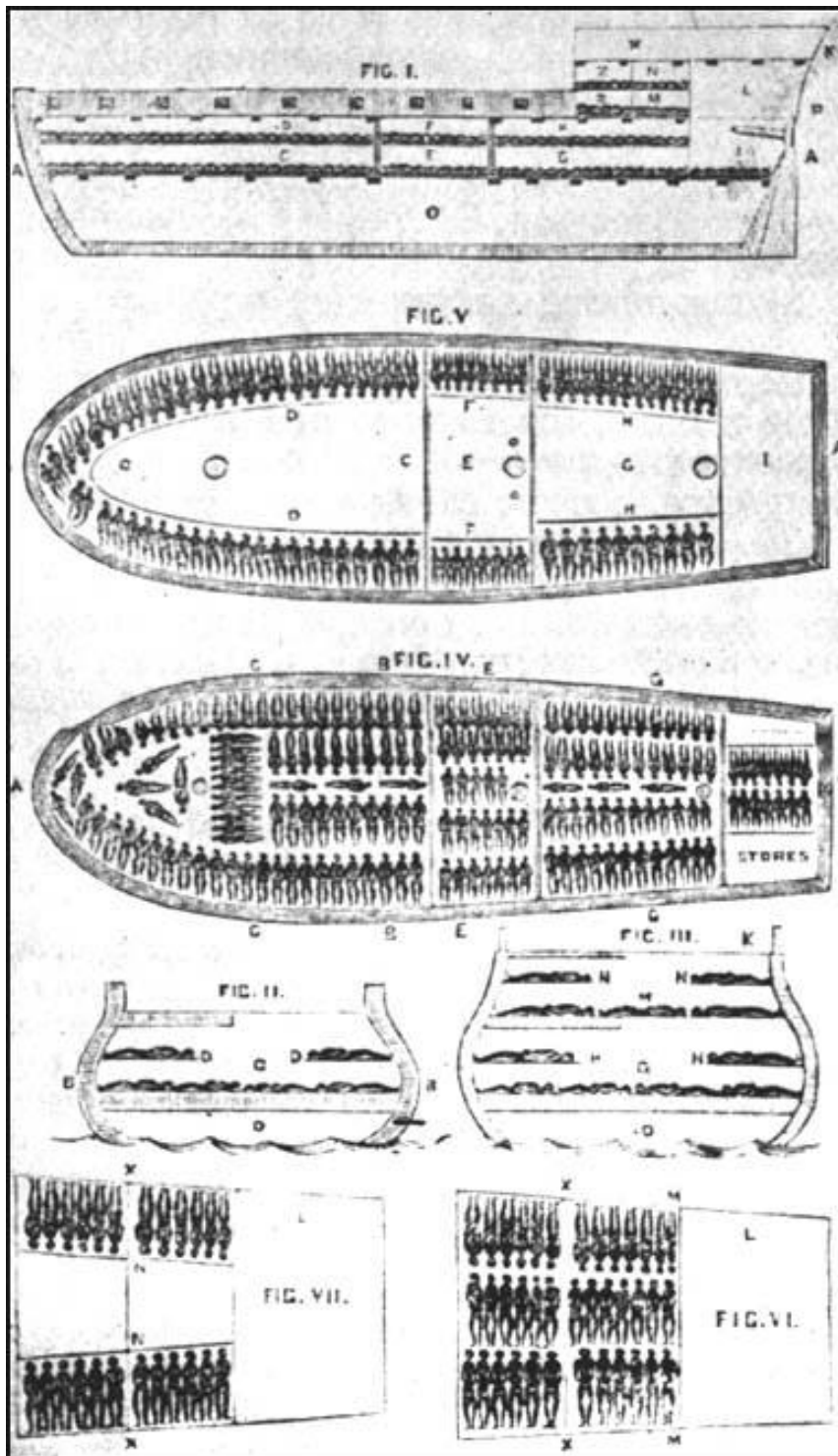


Fig. I: lengthwise cross-section

Fig. II: breadthwise cross-section: men

Fig. III: breadthwise cross-section: women

Fig. IV: lower deck with platforms

Fig. V: lower deck without platforms

Fig. VI: half-deck with platforms

Fig. VII: half-deck with platforms

A: lower deck

B: lower deck: breath

C: men's section

D: platform: men's section

E: boy's section

F: platforms

G: women's section

H: platforms: women's section

I: gun room

K: quarter deck

L: cabin

M: half-deck

From <[www.spartacus.shooolnet.co.uk](http://www.spartacus.shooolnet.co.uk)>

## SLAVE QUARTERS IN THE SOUTH



From <[www.encarta.msn.com](http://www.encarta.msn.com)>



From <[www.wolcottwheeler2.blogspot.com](http://www.wolcottwheeler2.blogspot.com)>



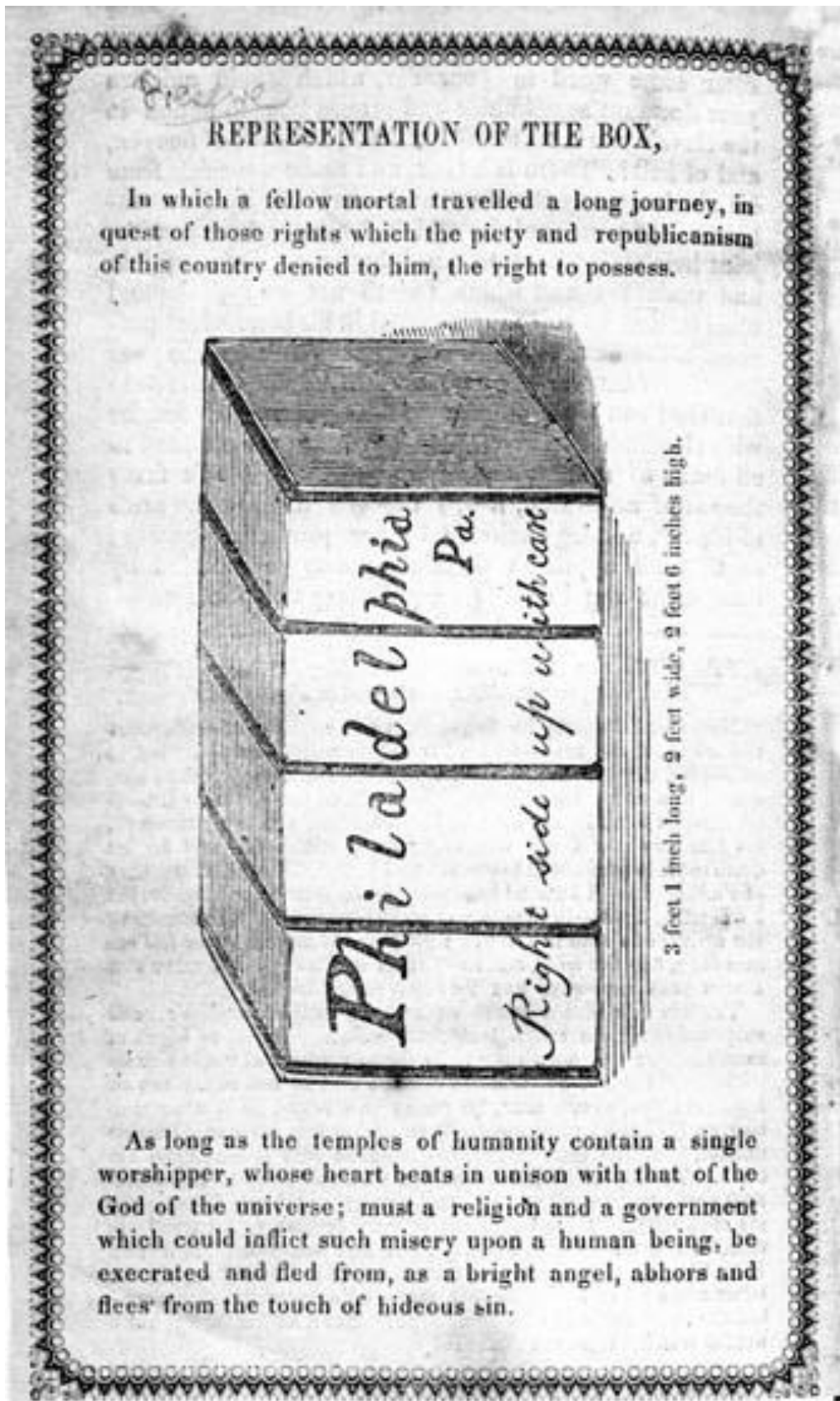
**SLAVE CABINS**

From <[www.civilwarhistory.com](http://www.civilwarhistory.com)>

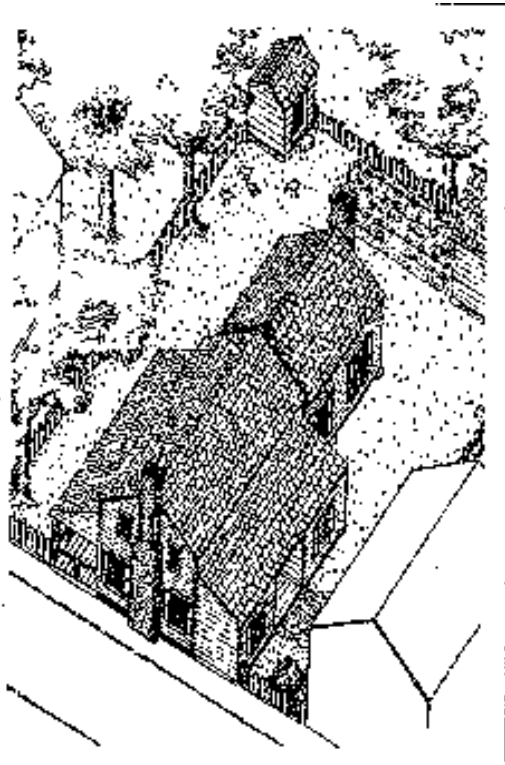


From <[www.spartacus.shoolnet.co.uk](http://www.spartacus.shoolnet.co.uk)>

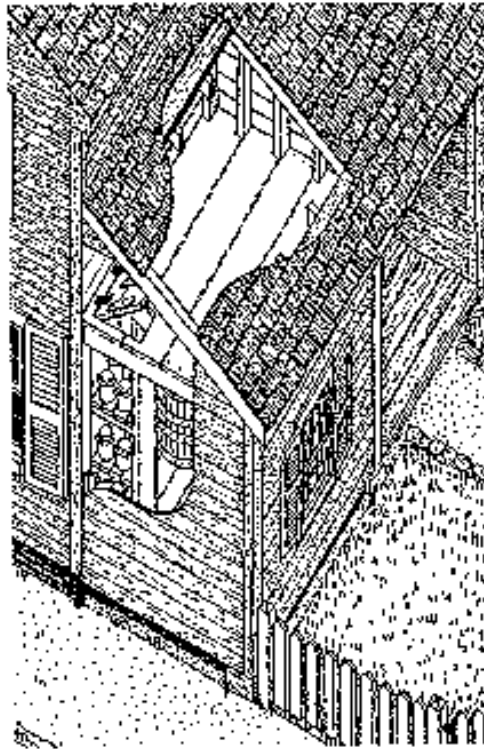
## REPRESENTATION OF HENRY BOX BROWN'S BOX



*From Narrative of Henry Box Brown, by Henry Box Brown and Charles Stearns*

**HARRIET JACOBS'S GRANDMOTHER'S HOUSE AND GARRET**

*The house of Harriet Jacobs's grandmother*



*Harriet Jacobs's garret in her grandmother's house<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>2</sup> Both drawings were elaborated by Nancy Takahashi, and can be seen in *Letters from a Slave Girl*, by Mary E. Lyons.

## **APPENDIX B: DOCUMENTS AND MAPS**

### **DOCUMENTS**

#### ***FROM THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE (July 4, 1776)***

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the Powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation. We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shown, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security. -- Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world. . . .

Signers:

John Adams, Samuel Adams, Josiah Bartlett, Carter Braxton, Charles Carroll, Samuel Chase, Abraham Clark, George Clymer, William Ellery, William Floyd, Benjamin Franklin, Elbridge Gerry, Button Gwinnett, Lyman Hall, John Hancock, Benjamin Harrison, John Hart, Richard Henry Lee, Joseph Hewes, Thomas Heyward, Jr., William Hooper, Stephen Hopkins, Fras. Hopkinson, Samuel Huntington, Thomas Jefferson, Frans. Lewis, Francis Lightfoot Lee, Phil. Livingston, Thomas Lynch, Jr., Thomas M'Kean, Arthur Middleton, . . .

**FROM THE FUGITIVE SLAVE ACT (1850)**

SEC. 4. And be it further enacted, That the commissioners above named shall have concurrent jurisdiction with the judges of the Circuit and District Courts of the United States, in their respective circuits and districts within the several States, and the judges of the Superior Courts of the Territories, severally and collectively, in term-time and vacation; shall grant certificates to such claimants, upon satisfactory proof being made, with authority to take and remove such fugitives from service or labor, under the restrictions herein contained, to the State or Territory from which such persons may have escaped or fled.

\* \* \* \* \*

SEC. 6. And be it further enacted, That when a person held to service or labor in any State or Territory of the United States, has heretofore or shall hereafter escape into another State or Territory of the United States, the person or persons to whom such service or labor may be due, or his, her, or their agent or attorney, duly authorized, by power of attorney, in writing, acknowledged and certified under the seal of some legal officer or court of the State or Territory in which the same may be executed, may pursue and reclaim such fugitive person, either by procuring a warrant from some one of the courts, judges, or commissioners aforesaid, of the proper circuit, district, or county, for the apprehension of such fugitive from service or labor, or by seizing and arresting such fugitive, where the same can be done without process, and by taking, or causing such person to be taken, forthwith before such court, judge, or commissioner, whose duty it shall be to hear and determine the case of such claimant in a summary manner; and upon satisfactory proof being made, by deposition or affidavit, in writing, to be taken and certified by such court, judge, or commissioner, or by other satisfactory testimony, duly taken and certified by some court, magistrate, justice of the peace, or other legal officer authorized to administer an oath and take depositions under the laws of the State or Territory from which such person owing service or labor may have escaped, with a certificate of such magistracy or other authority, as aforesaid, with the seal of the proper court or officer thereto attached, which seal shall be sufficient to establish the competency of the proof, and with proof, also by affidavit, of the identity of the person whose service or labor is claimed to be due as aforesaid, that the person so arrested does in fact owe service or labor to the person or persons claiming him or her, in the State or Territory from which such fugitive may have escaped as aforesaid, and that said person escaped, to make out and deliver to such claimant, his or her agent or attorney, a certificate setting forth the substantial facts as to the service or labor due from such fugitive to the claimant, and of his or her escape from the State or Territory in which he or she was arrested, with authority to such claimant, or his or her agent or attorney, to use such reasonable force and restraint as may be necessary, under the circumstances of the case, to take and remove such fugitive person back to the State or Territory whence he or she may have escaped as aforesaid. In no trial or hearing under this act shall the

testimony of such alleged fugitive be admitted in evidence; and the certificates in this and the first [fourth] section mentioned, shall be conclusive of the right of the person or persons in whose favor granted, to remove such fugitive to the State or Territory from which he escaped, and shall prevent all molestation of such person or persons by any process issued by any court, judge, magistrate, or other person whomsoever.

SEC. 7. And be it further enacted, That any person who shall knowingly and willingly obstruct, hinder, or prevent such claimant, his agent or attorney, or any person or persons lawfully assisting him, her, or them, from arresting such a fugitive from service or labor, either with or without process as aforesaid, or shall rescue, or attempt to rescue, such fugitive from service or labor, from the custody of such claimant, his or her agent or attorney, or other person or persons lawfully assisting as aforesaid, when so arrested, pursuant to the authority herein given and declared; or shall aid, abet, or assist such person so owing service or labor as aforesaid, directly or indirectly, to escape from such claimant, his agent or attorney, or other person or persons legally authorized as aforesaid; or shall harbor or conceal such fugitive, so as to prevent the discovery and arrest of such person, after notice or knowledge of the fact that such person was a fugitive from service or labor as aforesaid, shall, for either of said offences, be subject to a fine not exceeding one thousand dollars, and imprisonment not exceeding six months, by indictment and conviction before the District Court of the United States for the district in which such offence may have been committed, or before the proper court of criminal jurisdiction, if committed within any one of the organized Territories of the United States; and shall moreover forfeit and pay, by way of civil damages to the party injured by such illegal conduct, the sum of one thousand dollars for each fugitive so lost as aforesaid, to be recovered by action of debt, in any of the District or Territorial Courts aforesaid, within whose jurisdiction the said offence may have been committed.

\* \* \* \* \*

SEC. 9. And be it further enacted, That, upon affidavit made by the claimant of such fugitive, his agent or attorney, after such certificate has been issued, that he has reason to apprehend that such fugitive will be rescued by force from his or their possession before he can be taken beyond the limits of the State in which the arrest is made, it shall be the duty of the officer making the arrest to retain such fugitive in his custody, and to remove him to the State whence he fled, and there to deliver him to said claimant, his agent, or attorney. And to this end, the officer aforesaid is hereby authorized and required to employ so many persons as he may deem necessary to overcome such force, and to retain them in his service so long as circumstances may require. The said officer and his assistants, while so employed, to receive the same compensation, and to be allowed the same expenses, as are now allowed by law for transportation of criminals, to be certified by the judge of the district within which the arrest is made, and paid out of the treasury of the United States.

SEC. 10. And be it further enacted, That when any person held to service or labor in any State or Territory, or in the District of Columbia, shall escape therefrom, the party to whom such service or labor shall be due, his, her, or their agent or attorney, may apply to any court of record therein, or judge thereof in vacation, and make satisfactory proof to such court, or judge in vacation, of the escape aforesaid, and that the person escaping owed service or labor to such party. Whereupon the court shall cause a record to be made of the matters so proved, and also a general description of the person so escaping, with such convenient certainty as may be; and a transcript of such record, authenticated by the attestation of the clerk and of the seal of the said court, being produced in any other State, Territory, or district in which the person so escaping may be found, and being exhibited to any judge, commissioner, or other officer authorized by the law of the United States to cause persons escaping from service or labor to be delivered up, shall be held and taken to be full and conclusive evidence of the fact of escape, and that the service or labor of the person escaping is due to the party in such record mentioned. And upon the production by the said party of other and further evidence if necessary, either oral or by affidavit, in addition to what is contained in the said record of the identity of the person escaping, he or she shall be delivered up to the claimant. And the said court, commissioner, judge, or other person authorized by this act to grant certificates to claimants or fugitives, shall, upon the production of the record and other evidences aforesaid, grant to such claimant a certificate of his right to take any such person identified and proved to be owing service or labor as aforesaid, which certificate shall authorize such claimant to seize or arrest and transport such person to the State or Territory from which he escaped: Provided, That nothing herein contained shall be construed as requiring the production of a transcript of such record as evidence as aforesaid. But in its absence the claim shall be heard and determined upon other satisfactory proofs, competent in law.

*Approved, September 18, 1850*

**FROM TWELVE YEARS A SLAVE (1853)<sup>1</sup>**

STATE OF NEW-YORK:

Washington County, ss.

Orville Clark, of the village of Sandy Hill, in the county of Washington, State of New-York, being duly sworn, doth depose and say—that he, this deponent, is over fifty years of age; that in the years 1810 and 1811, or most of the time of those years, this deponent resided at Sandy Hill, aforesaid, and at Glens Falls; that this deponent then knew Mintus Northup, a black or colored man; he was then a free man, as this deponent believes and always understood; that the wife of said Mintus Northup, and mother of Solomon, was a free woman; that from the year 1818 until the time of the death of said Mintus Northup, about the year 1829, this deponent was very well acquainted with the said Mintus Northup; that he was a respectable man in the community in which he resided, and was a free man, so taken and esteemed by all his acquaintances; that this deponent has also been and was acquainted with his son Solomon Northup, from the said year 1818 until he left this part of the country, about the year 1840 or 1841; that he married Anne Hampton, daughter of William Hampton, a near neighbor of this deponent; that the said Anne, wife of said Solomon, is now living and resides in this vicinity; that the said Mintus Northup and William Hampton were both reputed and esteemed in this community as respectable men. And this deponent saith that the said Mintus Northup and his family, and the said William Hampton and his family, from the earliest recollection and acquaintance of this deponent with him (as far back as 1810,) were always reputed, esteemed, and taken to be, and this deponent believes, truly son, free citizens of the State of New-York. This deponent knows the said William Hampton, under the laws of this State, was entitled to vote at our elections, and he believes the said Mintus Northup also was entitled as a free citizen with the property qualification. And this deponent further saith, that the said Solomon Northup, son of said Mintus, and husband of said Anne Hampton, when he left this State, was at the time thereof a free citizen of the State of New-York. And this deponent further saith, that said Anne Hampton, wife of Solomon Northup, is a respectable woman, of good character, and I would believe her statements, and do believe the facts set forth in her memorial to his excellency, the Governor, in relation to her said husband, are true.

(Signed,)

ORVILLE CLARK.

Sworn before me, November  
19<sup>th</sup>, 1852.

U. G. PARIS, Justice of the Peace.

---

<sup>1</sup> The full title of this slave narrative, written by Solomon Northup is *Twelve Years a Slave. Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853, from a Cotton Plantation near the Red River, in Louisiana.*



## STATE OF NEW-YORK:

Washington County,ss:

Benjamin Ferris, of the village of Sandy Hill, in said county, being duly sworn, doth depose and say—that he is now fifty-seven years old, and has resided in said village forty-five years; that he was as well acquainted with Mintus Norhtup, named in the annexed memorial of Anne Northup, from the year 1816 to the time of his death, which occurred at Fort Edward, in the fall of 1829; that he knew the children of the said Mintus, namely, Joseph Northup and Solomon Northup, and that the said Solomon is the same person named in said memorial; that said Mintus resided in the said county of Washington to the time of his death, and was, during all that time, a free citizen of the said State of New-York, as deponent verily believes; that said memorialist, Anne Northup, is a woman of good character, and the statement contained in her memorial is entitled to credit.

(Signed)

BENJAMIN FERRIS.

Sworn before me, November  
19<sup>th</sup> 1852

U. G. PARIS, Justice of the Peace.

## STATE OF NEW-YORK:

Executive Department.

WASHINGTON HUNT, *Governor of the State of New-York, to whom it may concern, greeting:*

Whereas, I have received information on oath, which is satisfactory to me, that Solomon Northup, who is a free citizen of this State, is wrongfully held in slavery, in the State of Louisiana:

And whereas, it is made my duty, by the laws of this State, to take such measures as I shall deem necessary to procure any citizen so wrongfully held in slavery, to be restored to his liberty and returned to this State:

Be it known, that in pursuance of chapter 375 of the laws of this State, passed in 1840, I have constituted, appointed and employed Henry B. Northup, Esquire, of the county of Washington, in this State, an Agent, with full power to effect the restoration of said Solomon Northup, and the said Agent is hereby authorized and empowered to institute such proper and legal proceedings, to procure such evidence, retain such counsel, and finally to take such measures as will be most likely to accomplish the object of his said appointment.

He is also instructed to proceed to the State of Louisiana with all convenient dispatch, to execute the agency hereby created.

In witness whereof, I have hereunto subscribed my name, and affixed the privy seal of the State, at Albany, this 23d day of November, in the year of our Lord 1852.

(Signed,)

WASHINGTON HUNT.

JAMES F. RUGGLES, Private Secretary.

**FROM SLAVE LIFE IN GEORGIA (1855)<sup>2</sup>**

We the undersigned do certify our knowledge of John Brown, who was a Slave in America, in the state of Georgia, and was four times sold. He came to Lake Superior, for refuge, in 1847, and was employed by our Company. He was employed by our Company for one year and a half; during that time we found him quiet, honest, and industrious. His object in coming to England was to see Captain Joseph Teague, by whom he was promised support. Unfortunately the Captain died in America, and J. Brown not knowing of his death till he came to Redruth, Cornwall, by that means he is thrown out in a strange country for a little support. We have helped him all that lay in our power, and would heartily do more for him if we could. We have heard him several times lecture on Slavery and also on Teetotalism. We hope the object he seeks will induce the sympathy of English Christians.

*Dated, Redruth,  
February 26<sup>th</sup>, 1851*

JAMES VIVIAN, Redruth.  
RICHARD PASCOE, Redruth.  
THOMAS WILLIAMS, Redruth.  
THOMAS CHAMPION, Redruth.

---

*27, New Broad Street, 18<sup>th</sup> May, 1853.*

I am desirous of adding my testimony to those which John Brown, the bearer, already has in his possession. I have had many opportunities, as extraordinary as they were unexpected, of testing the accuracy of his narrative of his life and sufferings, and am quite satisfied that he is altogether trustworthy in this respect.

I also believe him to be a man of upright views and sound principles, and who is most anxious to do something for his race, in calling attention to the capabilities of the free Negroes of Canada to grow cotton in Africa and in Australia. He is directing their energies in the right way, and is also advancing the Anti-Slavery cause; for in proportion as free labour can be made to compete with slave labour, especially in the article of cotton, will Slavery be undermined.

I hope he will meet with consideration from all the friends of the slave.

L.A. CHAMEROVZOW,  
*Secretary of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society.*

The bearer, John Brown, is a total abstainer.

---

<sup>2</sup> The full title of this slave narrative, which relates John Brown's experiences under the system of human bondage is *Slave Life in Georgia: A Narrative of the Life, Sufferings and Escape of John Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Now in England.*

**FROM NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF J.D. GREEN, A RUNAWAY SLAVE  
(1864)<sup>3</sup>**

I have much pleasure in bearing my testimony in favour of Mr. Jacob Green, as a lecturer on the subject of American Slavery, having been present when he gave an able and efficient lecture here about a month ago. Having himself witnessed and experienced the fearful effects of that accursed "institution," he is well fitted to describe its horrors, and I have no doubt that amongst certain classes, his labours in the anti-slavery cause may be more telling and efficient than those of more highly educated lecturers who do not profess his peculiar advantages. I shall be well pleased to hear of him being employed by any anti-slavery society.

JAMES CAMERON,  
Minister of Hopton Chapel.

---

Mr. J. D. Green has lectured four times in our School-rooms, and each time he has given very great satisfaction to a large assembly. From what I have seen of him, I believe him to be worthy of public sympathy and support.

WILLIAM INMAN, Minister.

Ovenden, Nov. 14, 1863.

**FROM INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL (1861)**

This narrative contains some incidents so extraordinary, that, doubtless, many persons, under whose eyes it may chance to fall, will be ready to believe that it is colored highly, to serve a special purpose. But, however it may be regarded by the incredulous, I know that it is full of living truths. I have been well acquainted with the author from my boyhood. The circumstances recounted in her history are perfectly familiar to me. I knew of her treatment from her master; of the imprisonment of her children; of their sale and redemption; of her seven years' concealment; and of her subsequent escape to the North. I am now a resident of Boston, and am a living witness to the truth of this interesting narrative.

GEORGE W. LOWTHER.

---

<sup>3</sup> J. D. Green entitled his autobiography with a very descriptive title: *Narrative of the Life of J. D. Green, a Runaway Slave, from Kentucky, Containing an Account of His Three Escapes, in 1839, 1846, and 1848.*

**LETTER FROM LYDIA MARIA CHILD TO HARRIET JACOBS. AUGUST 13, 1860**

Wayland [Massachusetts], Aug. 13, 1860

Dear Mrs. Jacobs,

I have been busy with your M.S. ever since I saw you; and have only done one third of it. I have very little occasion to alter the language, which is wonderfully good, for one whose opportunities for education have been so limited. The events are interesting and well told; the remarks are also good, and to the purpose. But I am copying a great deal of it, for the purpose of transposing sentences and pages, so as to bring the story into continuous order, and the remarks into appropriate places. I think you will see that this renders the story much more clear and entertaining.

I should not take so much pains, if I did not consider the book unusually interesting, and likely to do much service to the Anti-Slavery cause. So you need not feel under great personal obligations. You know I would go through fire and water to help give a blow to Slavery. I suppose you will want to see the M.S. after I have exercised my bump of mental order upon it; and I will send it wherever you direct, a fortnight hence.

My object in writing at this time is to ask you to write what you can recollect of the outrages committed on the colored people, in Nat Turner's time. You say the reader would not believe what you saw "inflicted on men, women, and children, without the slightest ground of suspicion against them." What were those inflictions? Were any tortured to make them confess? and how? Where any killed? Please write down some of the most striking particulars, and let me have them to insert.

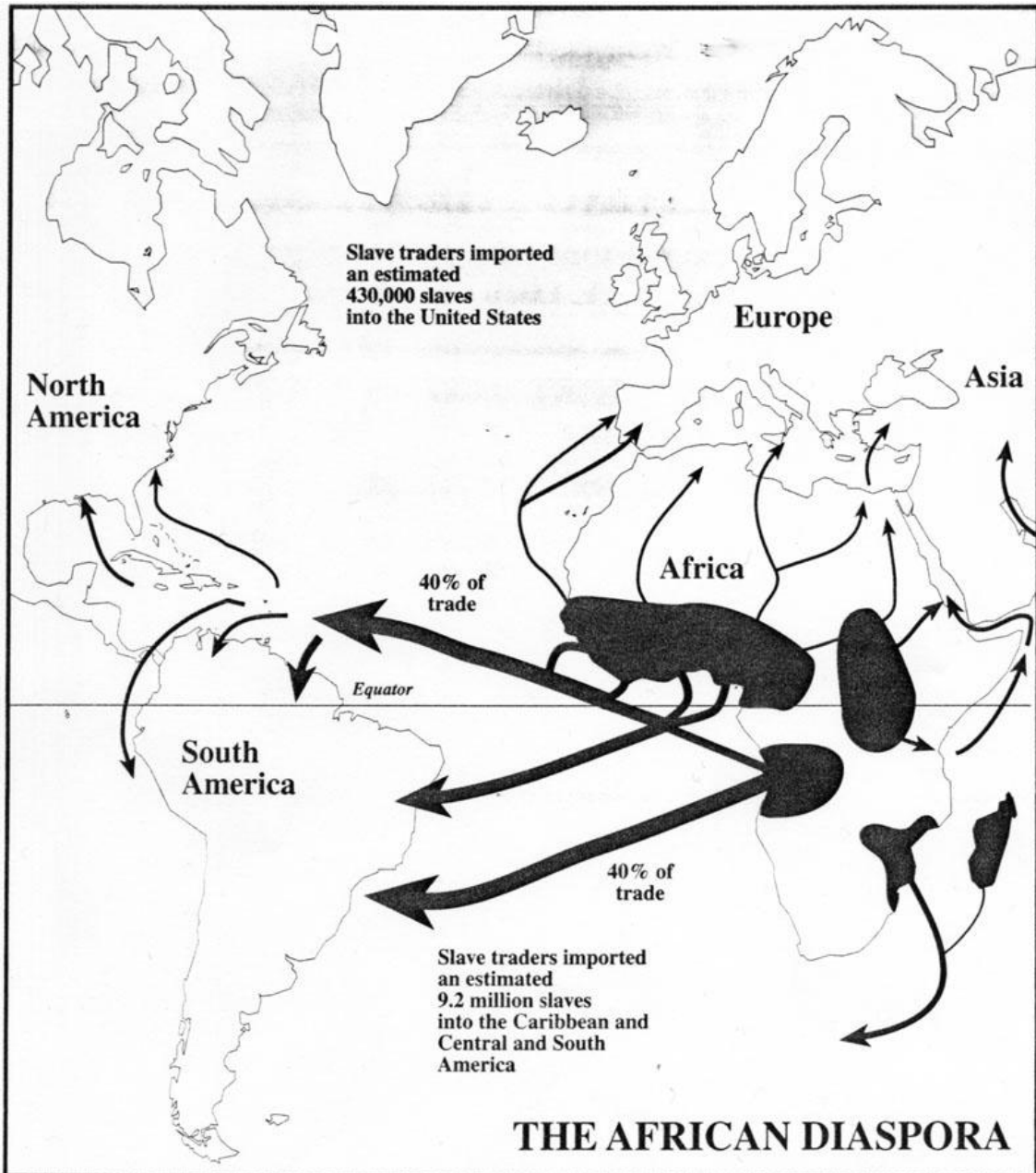
I think the last Chapter, about John Brown, had better be omitted. It does not naturally come into your story, and the M.S. is already too long. Nothing can be so appropriate to end with, as the death of your grand mother.

Mr. Child desires to be respectfully remembered to you. Very cordially your friend,

L. Maria Child.

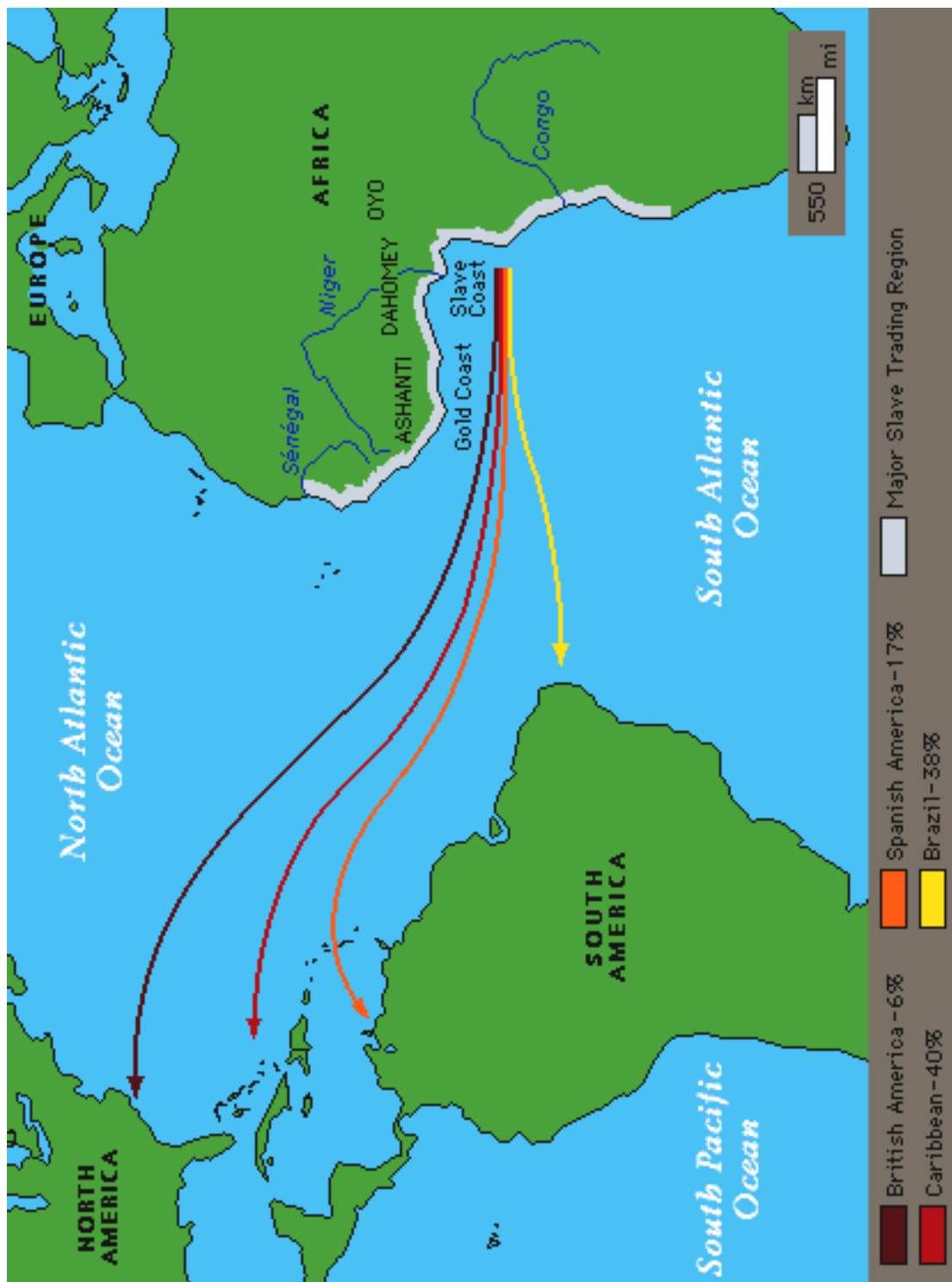
## MAPS

### THE AFRICAN DIASPORA



From Macmillan Encyclopedia of World Slavery, Paul Finkelman and Joseph Miller, eds. Reproduced in <http://hitchcock.itc.virginia.edu/Slavery/index.php> arranged by Jerome S. Handler and Michael L. Tuite, Jr.

**SLAVE DESTINATIONS**



From <www.encarta.msn.com>

### THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD



From <www.encarta.msn.com>

## APPENDIX C: SLAVE SONGS AND POEMS ON SLAVERY

### SLAVE SONGS

#### [*GO SOUND THE JUBILEE!*]

See these poor souls from Africa  
Transported to America;  
We are stolen, and sold to Georgia,  
Will you go along with me?  
We are stolen, and sold to Georgia,  
Come sound the jubilee!

See wives and husbands sold apart,  
Their children's screams will break my heart;—  
There's a better day a coming,  
Will you go along with me?  
There's a better day a coming,  
Go sound the jubilee!

O, gracious Lord! When shall it be,  
That we poor souls shall all be free;  
Lord, break them slavery powers—  
Will you go along with me?  
Lord break them slavery powers,  
Go sound the jubilee!

Dear Lord, dear Lord, when slavery 'll cease,  
Then we poor souls will have our peace;—  
There's a better day a coming,  
Will you go along with me?  
There's a better day a coming,  
Go sound the jubilee!<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> This anonymous song was first published in *The Liberator* in 1844, under the title "The Plantation Song," and was republished in William Wells Brown's *Anti-Slavery Harp: A Collection of Songs for Anti-Slavery Meetings* (1848) under the title "Song of the Coffle Gang."



***SOON I WILL BE DONE***

Soon I will be done with the troubles of the world,  
Troubles of the world, the troubles of the world,  
Soon I will be done with the troubles of the world.  
Goin' home to live with God.

No more weepin' and a-wailing,  
No more weepin' and a-wailing,  
No more weepin' and a-wailing,  
I'm goin' to live with God.

Soon I will be done with the troubles of the world,  
Troubles of the world, the troubles of the world,  
Soon I will be done with the troubles of the world.  
Goin' home to live with God.

I want t' meet my mother,  
I want t' meet my mother,  
I want t' meet my mother,  
I'm goin' to live with God.

Soon I will be done with the troubles of the world,  
Troubles of the world, the troubles of the world,  
Soon I will be done with the troubles of the world.  
Goin' home to live with God.

I want t' meet my Jesus,  
I want t' meet my Jesus,  
I want t' meet my Jesus,  
I'm goin' to live with God.

Soon I will be done with the troubles of the world,  
Troubles of the world, the troubles of the world,  
Soon I will be done with the troubles of the world.  
Goin' home to live with God.

***WALK TOGETHER CHILDREN***

Walk together children,  
Don't you get weary,  
Walk together children,  
Don't you get weary.  
Oh, talk together children,  
Don't you get weary,  
There's a great camp meeting in the Promised Land.

Sing together children,  
Don't you get weary,  
Sing together children,  
Don't you get weary.  
Oh, shout together children,  
Don't you get weary,  
There's a great camp meeting in the Promised Land.

Gwineter mourn and never tire,  
Mourn and never tire,  
Mourn and never tire.  
There's a great camp meeting in the Promised Land.

Oh, get you ready children,  
Don't you get weary,  
Get you ready children,  
Don't you get weary.  
We'll enter there, oh, children,  
Don't you get weary,  
There's a great camp meeting in the Promised Land.

***NO MORE AUCTION BLOCK***

No more auction block for me,  
No more, no more,  
No more auction block for me,  
Many thousand gone.

No more peck of corn for me,  
No more, no more,  
No more peck of corn for me,  
Many thousand gone.

No more pint of salt for me,  
No more, no more,  
No more pint of salt for me,  
Many thousand gone.

No more driver's lash for me,  
No more, no more,  
No more driver's lash for me,  
Many thousand gone.

***DIDN'T MY LORD DELIVER DANIEL?***

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,  
 Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel?  
 Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel?  
 An' why not everyman?

He delivered Daniel from the lion's den,  
 Jonah from de belly of de whale.  
 And de Hebrew children from de fiery furnace,  
 An' why not everyman?

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,  
 Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel?  
 Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel?  
 An' why not everyman?

De moon run down in a purple stream,  
 De sun forbear to shine,  
 And every star disappear,  
 King Jesus shall be mine.

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,  
 Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel?  
 Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel?  
 An' why not everyman?

De wind blows east and de wind blows west,  
 It blows like de judgment day,  
 And every poor soul dat never did pray'll  
 Be glad to pray dat day.

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,  
 Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel?  
 Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel?  
 An' why not everyman?

I set my foot on de Gospel ship,  
 An' de ship begin to sail.  
 It landed me over on Canaan's shore  
 And I'll never come back no more.

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,  
 Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel?  
 Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel?  
 An' why not everyman?

**OH, FREEDOM!**

Oh, freedom,  
Oh, freedom,  
Oh, freedom over me!  
An' befor' I'd be a slave,  
I'll be buried in my grave,  
An' go home to my Lord an' be free.

No mo' moanin',  
No mo' moanin',  
No mo' moanin' over me!  
An' befo' I'd be a slave,  
I'll be buried in my grave,  
An' go home to my Lord an' be free.

No mo' weepin',  
No mo' weepin',  
No mo' weepin' over me!  
An' befo' I'd be a slae,  
I'll be buried in my grave,  
An' go home to my Lord an' be free.

There'll be singin',  
There'll be singin',  
There'll be singin' over me!  
An' befo' I'd be a slave,  
I'll be buried in my grave,  
An' go home to my Lord an' be free.

There'll be shoutin',  
There'll be shoutin',  
There'll be shoutin' over me!  
An' befo' I'd be a slave,  
I'll be buried in my grave,  
An' go home to my Lord an' be free.

There'll be prayin',  
There'll be prayin',  
There'll be prayin' over me!  
An' befo' I'd be a slave,  
I'll be buried in my grave,  
An' go home to my Lord an' be free.

## POEMS ON SLAVERY

### *LIBERTY'S CHAMPION*<sup>2</sup>

On the wings of the wind he comes, he comes!  
With the rolling billow's speed;  
On his breast are the sings of peace and love,  
And his soul is nerved with strength from above:  
While his eyes flash fire,  
He burns with desire  
To achieve the noble deed.

To the shores of the free he goes, he goes!  
And smiles as he passes on;  
He hears the glad notes of Liberty's song,  
And bids the brave sons of freedom be strong.  
While his heart bounds high  
To his crown in the sky,  
He triumphs o'er conquests won.

To the homes of the slave he flies, he flies!  
Where manacled mourners cry;  
The bursting groan of the mind's o'erflow,  
Transfixed on the dark and speaking brow:  
With a murmuring sound,  
Ascends from the ground,  
To the God that reigns on high.

To his loved Father's throne he hastes, he hastes!  
And pours forth his soul in grief:  
Uprising he finds his strength renewed,  
And his heart with fervent love is imbued;  
While the heaving sigh,  
And the deep-toned cry,  
Appeal for instant relief.

To the hard oppressor he cries, he cries,  
And points to the bleeding slave;  
He tells of the rights of the human soul,  
And his eyes with full indignation roll:  
While his heart is moved,  
And the truth is proved,  
He seeks the captive to save.

---

<sup>2</sup> Annexed in James W. C. Pennington's *The Fugitive Blacksmith*, it was written by a friend of the author's.

Again to the foreman he speaks, he speaks,  
    But utters his cry in vain;  
He breathes no curse, no vengeance seeks,—  
For the broken hearts or the anguished shrieks,  
    For the mother's pains,  
    Or the father's gains,—  
Upon the oppressor's name.

To nations of freemen once more he comes,  
    To raise Liberty's banner high;  
He tells of the wrongs of the bonded slave.  
And cries aloud, 'mid throngs of the brave,  
    "O freemen, arise!  
    Be faithful and wise,  
    And answer the mourner's cry.

In melting strains of love he calls, he calls,  
    To the great and good from afar;  
Till sympathy wakes to the truthful tale,  
And the prayer of the faith, which cannot fail,  
    Ascends to heaven,  
    And grace is given,  
    To nerve for the bloodless war.

The truth with a magic power prevails:  
    All hearts are moved to the strife;  
In a holy phalanx, and with deathless aim,  
They seek a peaceful triumph to gain  
    O'er the tyrant's sway,  
    In his onward way,  
    To raise the fallen to life.

At the mighty voice of the glorious free  
    The chain of the oppressor breaks;  
The slave from his bondage springs forth to love,  
And, standing erect, his eye fixed above,  
    He honours his race,  
    And in the world's face,  
    The language of liberty speaks.

The oppressor no longer owns a right,  
    Or property claims in the slave,  
But the world, in the glory of freedom's light,  
Beams out from the darkness of wide-spread night;  
    Throughout its length,  
    In greatness and strength,  
    The honour of the free and brave.

**THE SLAVE MOTHER**

Heard you that shriek? It rose  
 So wildly on the air,  
 It seemed as if a burden'd heart  
 Was breaking in despair.

They tear him from her circling arms,  
 Her last and fond embrace.  
 Oh! never more may her sad eyes  
 Gaze on his mournful face.

Saw you those hands so sadly clasped—  
 The bowed and feeble head—  
 The shuddering of that fragile form—  
 That look of grief and dread?

No marvel, then, these bitter shrieks  
 Disturb the listening air:  
 She is a mother, and her heart  
 Is breaking in despair.

Saw you the sad, imploring eye?  
 Its every glance was pain,  
 As if a storm of agony  
 Were sweeping through the brain.

Frances E. W. Harper<sup>3</sup>

She is a mother, pale with fear,  
 Her boy clings to her side,  
 And in her kirtle vainly tries  
 His trembling form to hide.

He is not hers, although she bore  
 For him a mother's pains;  
 He is not hers, although her blood  
 Is coursing through his veins!

He is not hers, for cruel hands  
 May rudely tear apart  
 The only wreath of household love  
 That binds her breaking heart.

His love has been a joyous light  
 That o'er her pathway smiled,  
 A fountain gushing ever new,  
 Amid life's desert wild.

His lightest word has been a tone  
 Of music round her heart,  
 Their lives a streamlet blent in one—  
 Oh, Father! must they part?

<sup>3</sup> Included in *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (1854).



**THE SLAVE GIRL'S FAREWELL**

Mother, I leave thee-thou hast been  
Through long, long years of pain  
The only hope my fond heart knew;  
Or e'er shall know again.  
The sails are set-my master waits  
To bear me far from thee;  
I linger-can I give thee up,  
And cross the fearful sea?  
Oh, let me gaze! how bright it seems  
As busy memory flies  
To view those scenes of other days,  
Beneath those bright blue skies.  
The little hut where I have played  
In childhood's fearless hours-  
The murmuring stream-the mossy bank,  
Where I have gathered flowers.  
I knew not then I was a slave,  
Or that another's will,  
Save thine, could bend my spirit's pride;  
Or bid my lips be still.  
Who now will soothe me at my toil,  
Or bathe my weary brow?  
Or shield me when the heavy lash  
Is raised to give the glow?  
Thy fond arms press me-and I feel  
Thy tears upon my cheek;  
Tears are the only language now  
A mother's love can speak.  
Think of me, mother, as I bend  
My way across the sea;  
And midst thy tears, a blessing waft,  
To her who prays for thee.

Sarah Louise Forten<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup>Quoted in <<http://www.lehigh.edu/~dek7/SSAWW/writFortenFarewell.htm>>

**THE SLAVE GIRL'S ADDRESS TO HER MOTHER**

Oh! mother, weep not, though our lot be hard,  
And we are helpless-God will be our guard:  
For He our heavenly guardian doth not sleep;  
He watches o'er us-mother, do not weep.  
And grieve not for that dear loved home no more;  
Our sufferings and our wrongs, ah! why deplore?  
For though we feel the stern oppressor's rod,  
Yet he must yield as well as we, to God.  
Torn from our home, our kindred and our friends,  
And in a stranger's land, our days to end,  
No heart feels for the poor, the bleeding slave;  
No arm is stretched to rescue and to save.  
Oh! ye who boast of Freedom's sacred claims,  
Do ye not blush to see our galling chains;  
To hear that sounding word-'that all are free'-  
When thousands groan in hopeless slavery?  
Upon your land it is a cruel stain-  
Freedom, what art thou?-nothing but a name.  
No more, no more! Oh God, this cannot be;  
Thou to thy children's aid wilt surely flee:  
In thine own time deliverance thou wilt give,  
And bid us rise from slavery, and live.

Sarah Louise Forten<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> In <<http://www.lehigh.edu/~dek7/SSAWW/writFortenSlave.htm>>

**THE NEGRO'S COMPLAINT**

FORCED from home and all its pleasures,  
 Afric's coast I left forlorn;  
 To increase a stranger's treasures,  
 O'er the raging billows borne.  
 Men from England bought and sold me,  
 Paid my price in paltry gold;  
 But, though slave they have enroll'd me,  
 Minds are never to be sold.

Still in thought as free as ever,  
 What are England's rights, I ask,  
 Me from my delights to sever,  
 Me to torture, me to task?  
 Fleecy locks and black complexion,  
 Cannot forfeit nature's claim;  
 Skins may differ, but affection  
 Dwells in white and black the same.

Why did all-creating Nature,  
 Make the plant for which we toil?  
 Sighs must fan it, tears must water,  
 Sweat of ours must dress the soil.  
 Think, ye masters, iron-hearted,  
 Lolling at your jovial boards:  
 Think how many backs have smarted  
 For the sweets your can affords.

Is there, as ye sometimes tell us,  
 Is there One who reigns on high?  
 Has He bid you buy and sell us,  
 Speaking from His throne, the sky?  
 Ask Him if your knotted scourges,  
 Matches, blood-extorting screws,  
 Are the means which duty urges,  
 Agents of his will to use?

Hark! He answers — wild tornadoes,  
 Strewing yonder sea with wrecks:  
 Wasting towns, plantations, meadows,  
 Are the voice with which He speaks.  
 He, foreseeing what vexation  
 Afric's sons would undergo,  
 Fix'd their tyrants' habitations  
 Where His whirlwinds answer — "No!"

By our blood in Afric wasted,  
 Ere our necks received the chain;  
 By the miseries that we tasted,  
 Crossing in your barks the main;  
 By our sufferings, since ye brought us  
 To the man-degrading mart,  
 All sustain'd by patience, taught us  
 Only by a broken heart!

Deem our nation brutes no longer,  
 Till some reason ye shall find  
 Worthier of regard and stronger  
 Than the colour of our kind.  
 Slaves of gold, whose sordid dealings  
 Tarnish all your boasted powers,  
 Prove that you have human feelings  
 Ere ye proudly question ours!

William Cowper

**PITY FOR POOR AFRICANS**

*Video meliora proboque,  
Deteriora sequor.*

I OWN I am shock'd at the purchase of slaves,  
And fear those who buy them and sell them are knaves;  
What I hear of their hardships, their tortures, and groans,  
Is almost enough to draw pity from stones.

I pity them greatly, but I must be mum,  
For how could we do without sugar and rum?  
Especially sugar, so needful we see;  
What, give up our desserts, our coffee, and tea!

Besides if we do, the French, Dutch, and Danes  
Will heartily thank us, no doubt, for our pains;  
If we do not buy the poor creatures, they will;  
And tortures and groans will be multiplied still.

If foreigners likewise would give tip the trade,  
Much more in behalf of your wish might be said;  
But, while they get riches by purchasing blacks,  
Pray tell me why we may not also go snacks?

Your scruples and arguments bring to my mind  
A story so pat, you may think it is coin'd,  
On purpose to answer you, out of my mint;  
But I can assure you I saw it in print.

A youngster at school, more sedate than the rest,  
Had once his integrity put to the test;  
His comrades had plotted an orchard to rob,  
And ask'd him to go and assist in the job.

He was shock'd, sir, like you, and answer'd, "Oh no!  
What! rob our good neighbour? I pray you don't go!  
Besides, the man's poor, his orchard's his bread:  
Then think of his children, for they must be fed."

"You speak very fine, and you look very grave,  
But apples we want, and apples we'll have  
If you will go with us, you shall have a share,  
If not, you shall have neither apple nor pear."

They spoke, and Tom ponder'd — "I see they will go;  
Poor man! what a pity to injure him so!  
Poor man! I would save him his fruit if I could,  
But staying behind will do him no good.

William Cowper

## **APPENDIX D: INSTRUMENTS OF TORTURE USED BY SLAVEHOLDERS**

### **WHIPS**

The whip, in an unpractised hand, is a very awkward and inefficient weapon; but the best qualification of the overseer of a cotton plantation is the ability of using this whip with adroitness; and when wielded by an experienced arm, it is one of the keenest instruments of torture ever invented by the ingenuity of man (Ball 329-330).

#### **The cart whip**

An instrument with which a very severe wound may be inflicted. It was a horrible instrument, consisting of a strong handle, with a long whip formed of the hide of the steer, and having attached to it a thin lash made of the tough fibres of a vegetable substance called *penguin*; and in the hand of an expert driver it is capable of inflicting most severe punishment. Indeed it lacerates the flesh most terribly. The colonial law allows the whites, except the book-keepers, to order thirty-nine lashes to be inflicted, with this instrument, on any slave, provided the effect of former punishment shall not remain, and ten to be given by the drivers, if in their opinion the punishment is called for. The mode of administering it is, by holding the victim down on the ground, and, as he lies extended, the lashes are inflicted on his bared body (Warner and Strickland 84-85).

#### **The bull-whip**

First a stock is chosen of a convenient length, the butt of which is loaded with lead, to give the whip force. The stock is then cleverly split to within a foot or so of the butt, into twelve strips. A piece of tanned leather, divided into eight strips, is then drawn on the stock, so that the split lengths of the wooden stock and the strips of leather can be plaited together. This is done very regularly, until the leather tapers down to quite a fine point, the whip being altogether about six feet long, and as limber and lithesome as a snake. The thong does not bruise, but cuts; and those who are expert in the use of it, can do so with such dexterity, as to only just raise the skin and draw blood, or cut clean through to the bone. I have seen a board, a quarter of an inch thick, cut through with it, at one blow. I have also seen a man fasten a bullet to the end of the thong, and after

giving the whip a whirl round its head, send the thong whizzing forward, and drive the bullet into a door. This fearful instrument is called a “bull-whip,” because it is the master of all whips. It is also employed to “whip down” savage bulls, or unruly cattle. I have seen many a horse cut with it right through the hollow of the flank, and the animal brought quivering to the ground. The way of using it is to whirl it round the head until the thong acquires a certain forward power, and then to let the end of the thong fall across the back, or on the part intended to be cut, the arm being drawn back with a kind of sweep. But although it is so formidable an instrument, it is seldom employed on slaves in such a manner as to disable them, for the “licks” are always regulated to an extreme nicety, so as only to cut the flesh and draw blood (John Brown 367-368).

**The staff**

The staff is about twenty or twenty-two inches in length, with a large and heavy head, which is often loaded with a quarter or half a pound of lead, wrapped in cat-gut, and securely fastened on, so that nothing but the greatest violence can separate it from the staff (Ball 329).

**The lash**

The lash is ten feet long, made of small strips of buckskin, tanned so as to be dry and hard, and plaited carefully and closely together, of the thickness, in the largest part, of a man’s little finger, but quite small at each extremity. At the farthest end of this thong is attached a cracker, nine inches in length, made of strong sewing silk, twisted and knotted, until it feels as firm as the hardest twine (Ball 329).

**The cowskin**

The cowskin is a kind of whip seldom seen in the northern states. It is made entirely of untanned, but dried, ox hide, and is about as hard as a piece of well-seasoned live oak. It is made of various sizes, but the usual length is about three feet. The part held in the hand is nearly an inch in thickness; and, from the extreme end of the butt or handle, the cowskin tapers its whole length to a point. This makes it quite elastic and springy. A blow with it, on the hardest back, will gash the flesh, and make the blood start. Cowskins are painted red, blue and green, and are the favorite slave whip. I think this whip worse than the “cat-o’-nine-tails.” It condenses the whole strength of the arm to a single point, and comes with a spring that makes the air whistle. It is a terrible instrument, and is so handy, that the overseer can always have cause for using it. With him, it is literally a word and a blow, and, in most cases, the blow comes first (Douglass, *My Bondage* 187-188).

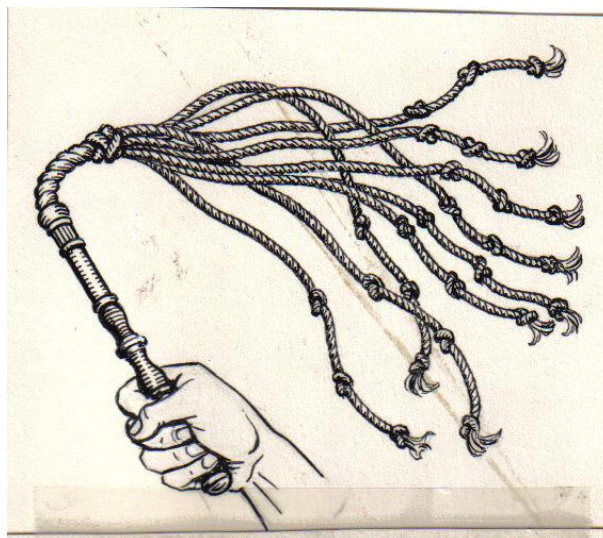
**The cat-o'-nine-tails**

The cat was a large rope of many strands—the strands unraveled, and a knot tied at the extremity of each (Northrup 184).

The cat-o-nine tails, used in the British military service, is but a clumsy instrument beside this whip; which has superseded the cow-hide, the hickory, and every other species of lash, on the cotton plantations. The cow-hide and hickory, bruise and mangle the flesh of the sufferer; but this whip cuts, when expertly applied, almost as keen as a knife, and never bruises the flesh, nor injures the bones (Ball 330).



*From Aunt Sally: or, The Cross the Way of Freedom*



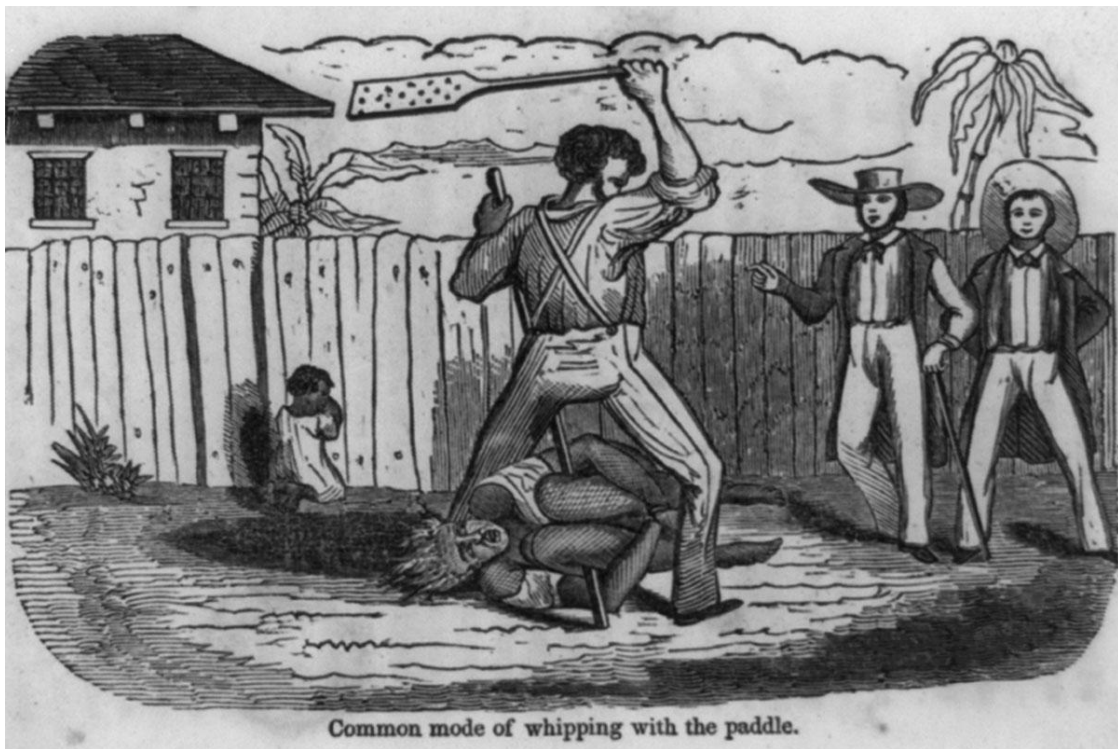
*From <[www.commonswikimedia.org](http://www.commonswikimedia.org)>*



## THE PADDLE

The paddle is made of a piece of hickory timber, about one inch thick, three inches in width, and about eighteen inches in length. The part which is applied to the flesh is bored full of quarter inch auger holes, and every time this is applied to the flesh of the victim, the blood gushes through the holes of the paddle, or a blister makes its appearance. The persons who are thus flogged, are always stripped naked, and their hands tied together. They are then bent over double, their knees forced between their elbows, and a stick is put through between the elbows and the bend of the legs, in order to hold the victim in that position, while the paddle is applied to those parts of the body which would not be so likely to be seen by those who wanted to buy slaves (Bibb 54-55).

This paddle is a piece of wood from eighteen inches to two feet long, having a handle about eight inches in length. It is made of oak, one end being broad and flat, and between five and six inches in width, with eight holes drilled through it. Before being used, it is wetted and rubbed in sand (John Brown 346).



Common mode of whipping with the paddle.

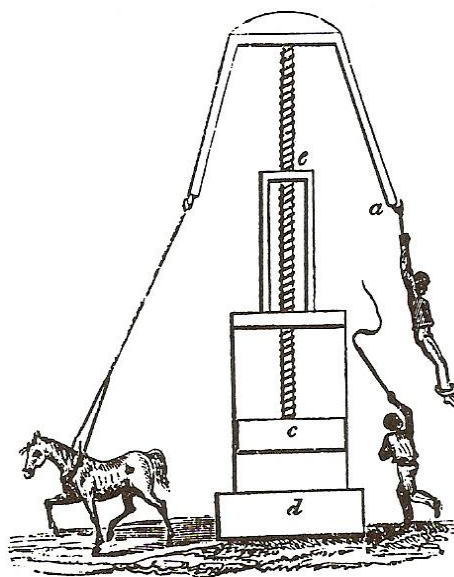
*From Trial and Imprisonment of Jonathan Walker, by Jonathan Walker*

### THE FLOPPING PADDLE

The “flop” is of leather, about a foot-and-a-half long, and as broad as the palm of the hand; perhaps a little broader: the handle is of wood, and about two feet long. Men, women, and girls are all punished alike. They are brought in and stripped stark naked, and laid flat on the floor, with their face downwards, their hands being made fast to the cleets by means of the cords. Sometimes their feet are bound in the same manner, but usually a Negro, who is called in for the purpose, holds the victim’s feet down by main force, whilst the whipper lays on, “flop, flop, flop,” for half an hour, which is the usual time the flogging lasts. The punishment is dreadfully severe, for all no blood is drawn. I have frequently been forced to come in and hold the feet of women and girls, and sometimes to “flop” them, as well as men; but I was never myself punished in this manner. “Flopping” was inflicted for various offences, especially the unpardonable one of “not speaking up and looking bright and smart” when the buyers were choosing (John Brown 362-363).

### THE COTTON SCREW

This is a machine used for packing and pressing cotton. By it he hung me up by the hands at letter *a*, a horse moving round the screw *e*, and carrying it up and down, and pressing the block *c* into the box *d*, into which the cotton is put. At this time he hung me up for a quarter of an hour. I was carried up ten feet from the ground, when Mr. Gooch asked me if I was tired. He then let me rest for five minutes, then carried me round again, after which he let me down and put me into the box *d*, and shut me down in for about ten minutes (Roper 506).

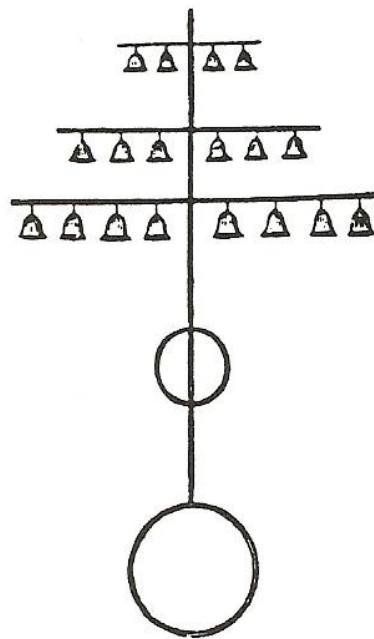


*From A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, by Moses Roper*

## BELLS AND HORNS

To prevent my running away any more, Stevens fixed bells and horns on my head. This is not by any means an uncommon punishment. I have seen many slaves wearing them. a circle of iron, having a hinge behind, with a staple and padlock before, which hang under the chin, is fastened round the neck. Another circle of iron fits quite close round the crown of the head. The two are held together in this position by three rods of iron, which are fixed in each circle. These rods, or horns, stick out three feet above the head, and have a bell attached to each. The bells and horns do not weigh less than from twelve to fourteen pounds. When Stevens had fixed this ornament on my head, he turned me loose, and told me I might run off now if I liked.

I wore the bells and horns, day and night, for three months, and I do not think any description I could give of my sufferings during this time would convey anything approaching to a faint idea of them. Let alone that their weight made my head and neck ache dreadfully, especially when I stooped to my work. At night I could not lie down to rest, because the horns prevented my stretching myself, or even curling myself up; so I was obliged to sleep crouching. Of course it was impossible for me to attempt to remove them, or to get away, though I still held to my resolution to make another venture as soon as I could see my way of doing it. (John Brown 353-354).



*From A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, by Moses Roper*

The image on the left, captioned “Iron Horns with Bells Attached” only appears in the 1<sup>st</sup> edition (1837) and not in the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (1838), while the image on the right, “A woman with Iron Horns and Bells on, to keep her from running away” is only in the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition and not in the 1<sup>st</sup>.

**IRON COLLAR**

*From Harper's Weekly, Feb. 15, 1862: 108*

This picture was sent to *Harper's Weekly* by a sergeant in the Union Army. It represents an instrument used to punish fugitive slaves in Missouri and includes the following comments:

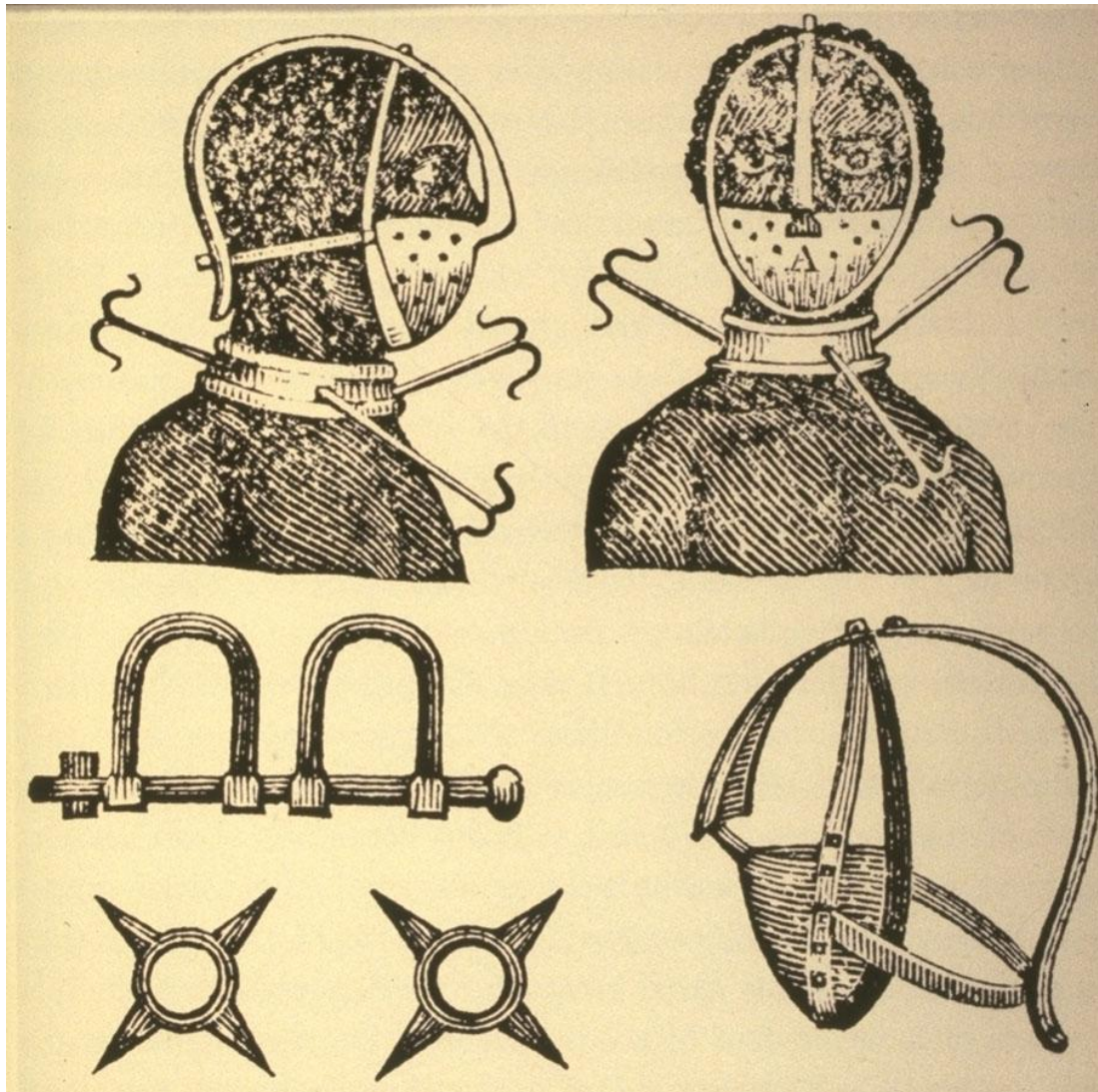
It was securely riveted [around the neck] and required an hour's filing before it could be removed. This proved to be a very painful operation to the poor 'contraband;' for his neck was so snugly incased by the iron band. . . . The negro stated that he had worn it two months. . . . The form of the instrument prevented him from lying down and taking his rest at night; and its weight and close fit rendered it very burdensome during the day. It consisted of a heavy iron ring, fitting closely round the neck, from which extended three prongs, each two feet in length, with a ring on the end...

**COLLAR AND CHAIN**

*From Life in Brazil, by Thomas Ewbank*

While waiting for [an acquaintance] . . . a dozen at least of butcher's slaves went past in the course of an hour with crushing loads of fresh-killed beef. . . . One poor fellow had a collar, and a chain extending from it to an ankle. . . . Other slaves went by, awfully crippled in their feet and legs; among them two women, lame with elephantiasis. . . . The right leg of one was really almost as large as her waist (Ewbank 277).

### IRON MASK, NECK COLLAR, LEG SHACKLES, AND SPURS



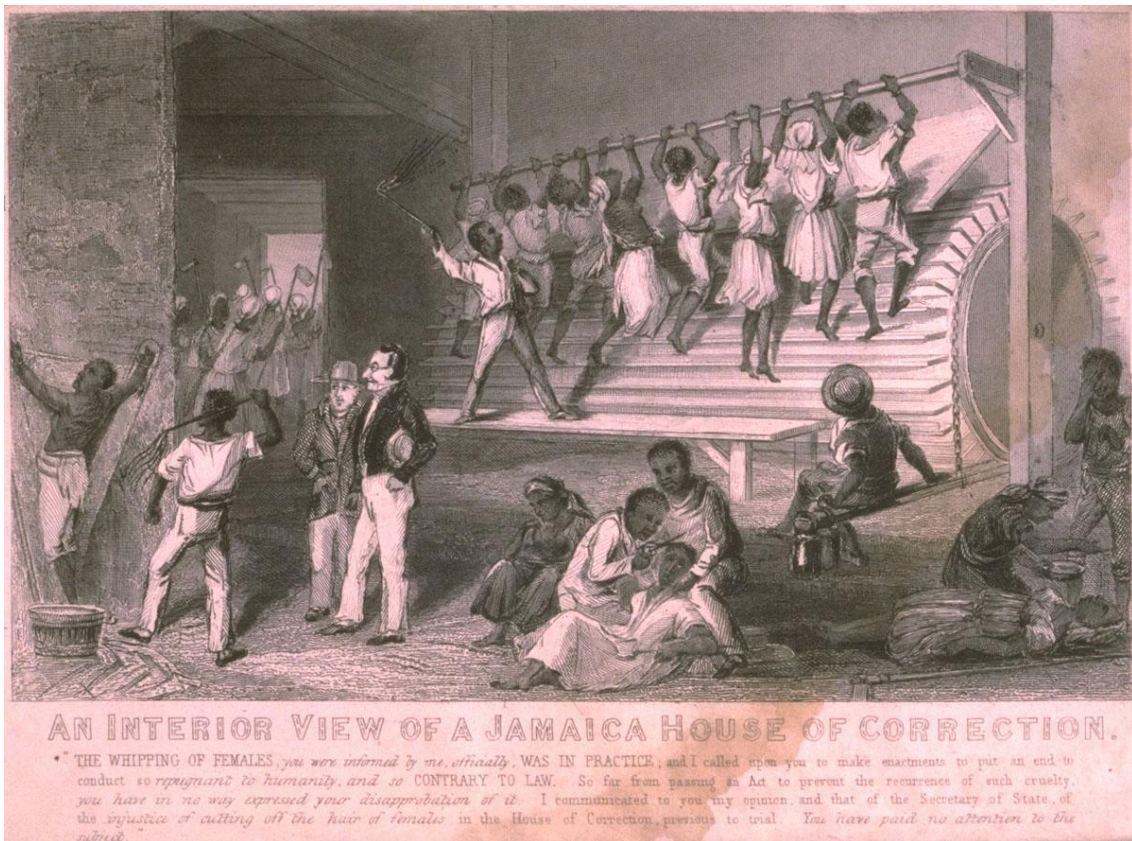
*From The Penitential Tyrant, by Thomas Branagan*

This illustration is described by Branagan as follows:

A front and profile view of an African's head, with the mouth-piece and necklace, the hooks round which are placed to prevent an escapee when pursued in the woods, and to hinder them from laying down the head to procure rest. At A [over the mouth of figure on the right] is a flat iron which goes into the mouth, and so effectually keeps down the tongue, that nothing can be swallowed, not even the saliva, a passage for which is made through holes in the mouth-plate (270).

On the lower right is an enlarged view of this mouth piece which, "when long worn, becomes so heated as frequently to bring off the skin along with it." The lower left shows leg shackles used on the slave ships; also spurs, used on some plantations in Antigua, were placed on the legs to prevent slaves from absconding.

## THE TREADMILL



Captioned, “An Interior View of a Jamaica House of Correction,” this illustration shows a scene during the Apprenticeship Period (1834-38). Below the title is a message from Jamaica’s Governor Lionel Smith to the Jamaican House of Assembly:

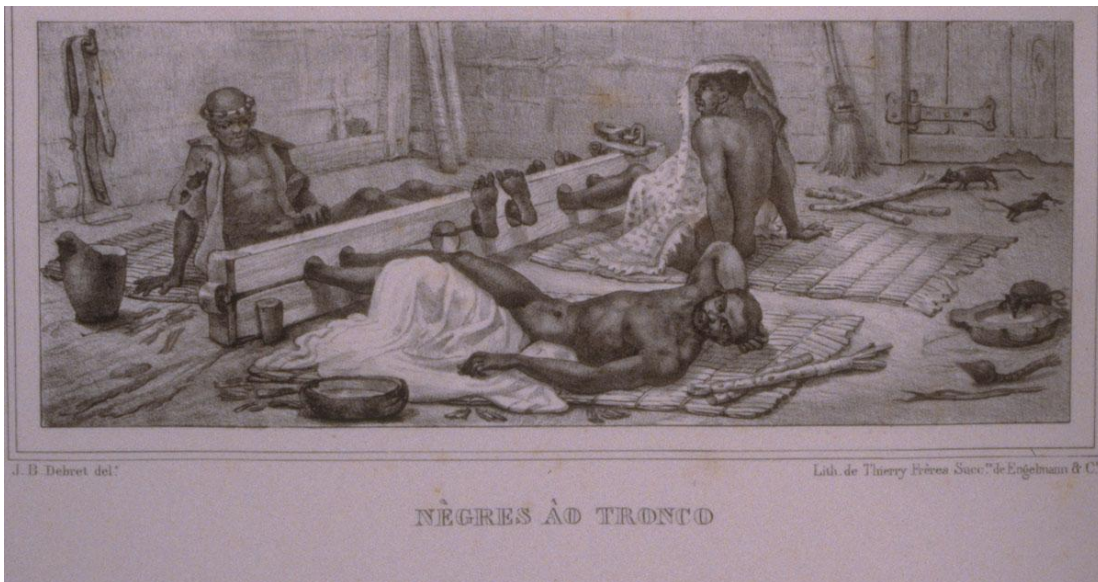
The WHIPPING OF FEMALES, you were informed by me, officially, WAS IN PRACTICE; and I called upon you to make enactments to put an end to conduct so repugnant to humanity, and SO CONTRARY TO LAW. So far from passing an Act to prevent the recurrence of such cruelty, you have in no way expressed your disapprobation of it. I communicated to you my opinion, and that of the Secretary of State, of the injustice of cutting off the hair of females in the House of Correction, previous to trial. You have paid no attention to the subject.

This engraving was first published by British abolitionists in 1837 and distributed separately. It was also found in some editions of *A Narrative of Events of Since the First of August, 1834, by James Williams, an Apprenticed Labourer in Jamaica* (1837).

## STOCKS

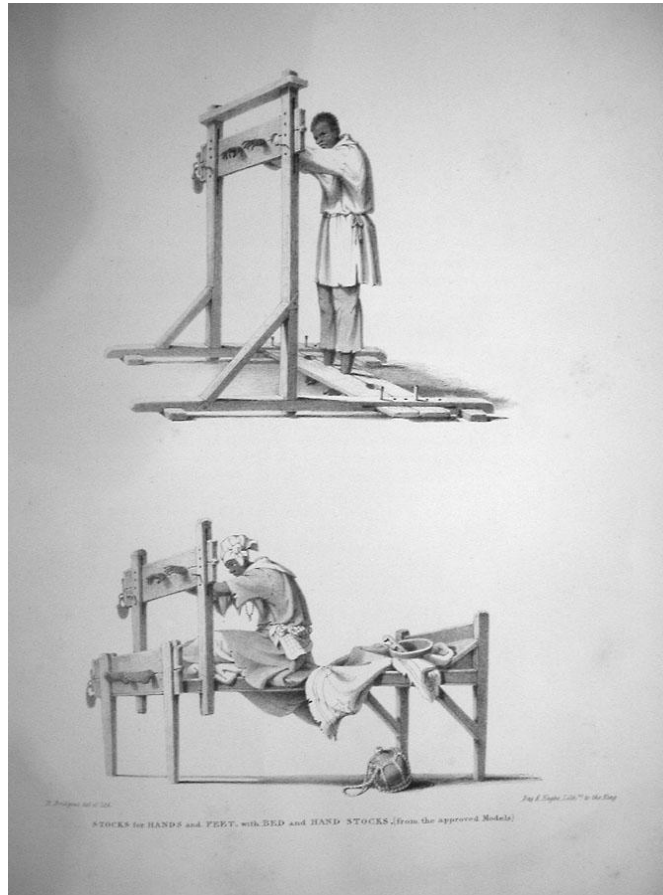


From *West India Scenery*, by Richard Bridgens, plate 17  
Caption, "Bed-stocks for intoxication, etc."



From *Voyage Pittoresque et Historique au Bresil*, by Jean Baptiste Debret  
Caption, "Negres au Tronco" (blacks in stocks).

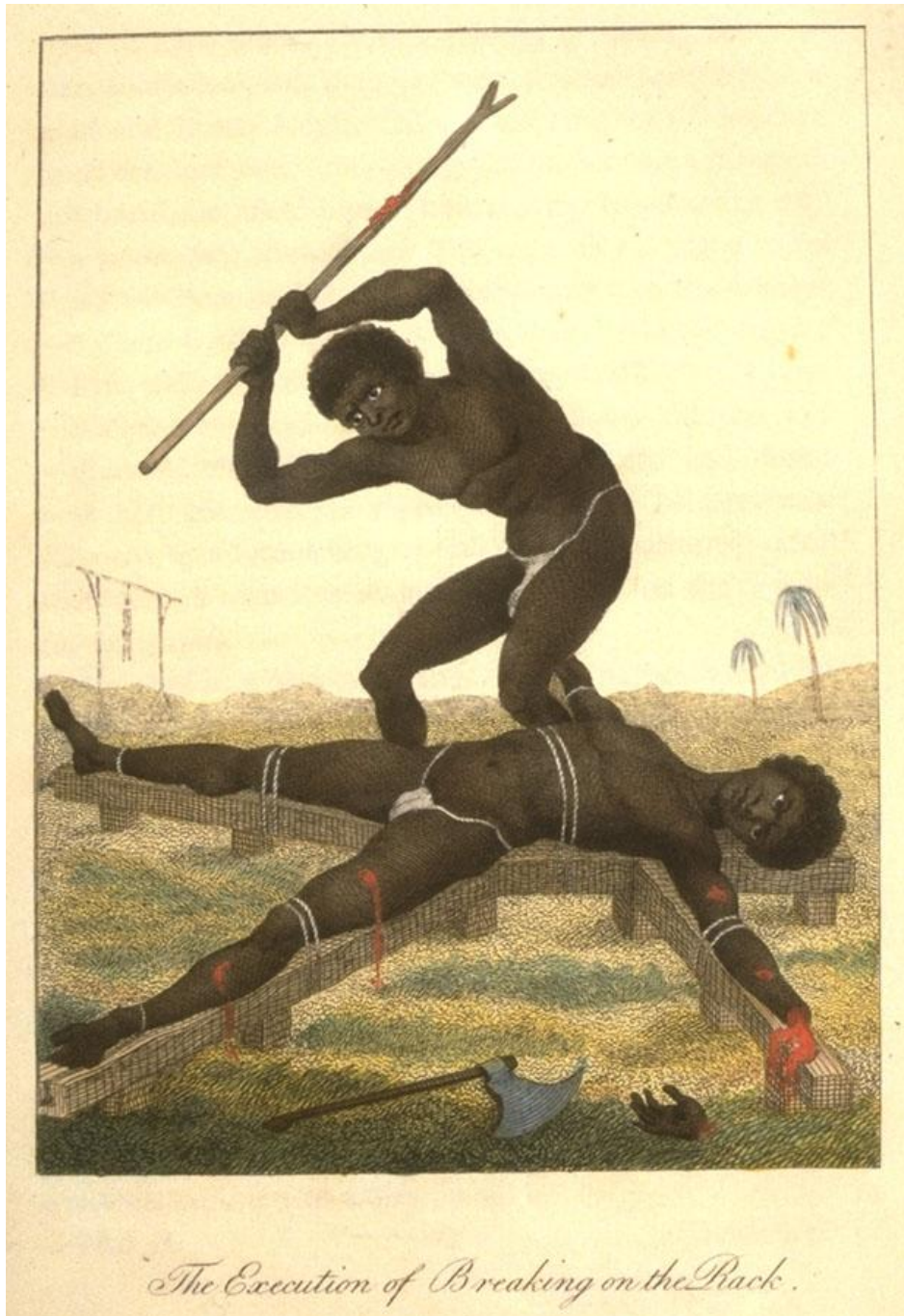




*From West India Scenery, Richard Bridgens plate 18.  
Caption, “stocks for hands and feet, with bed and hand stocks (from the approved models)”.*

### THE PUMP

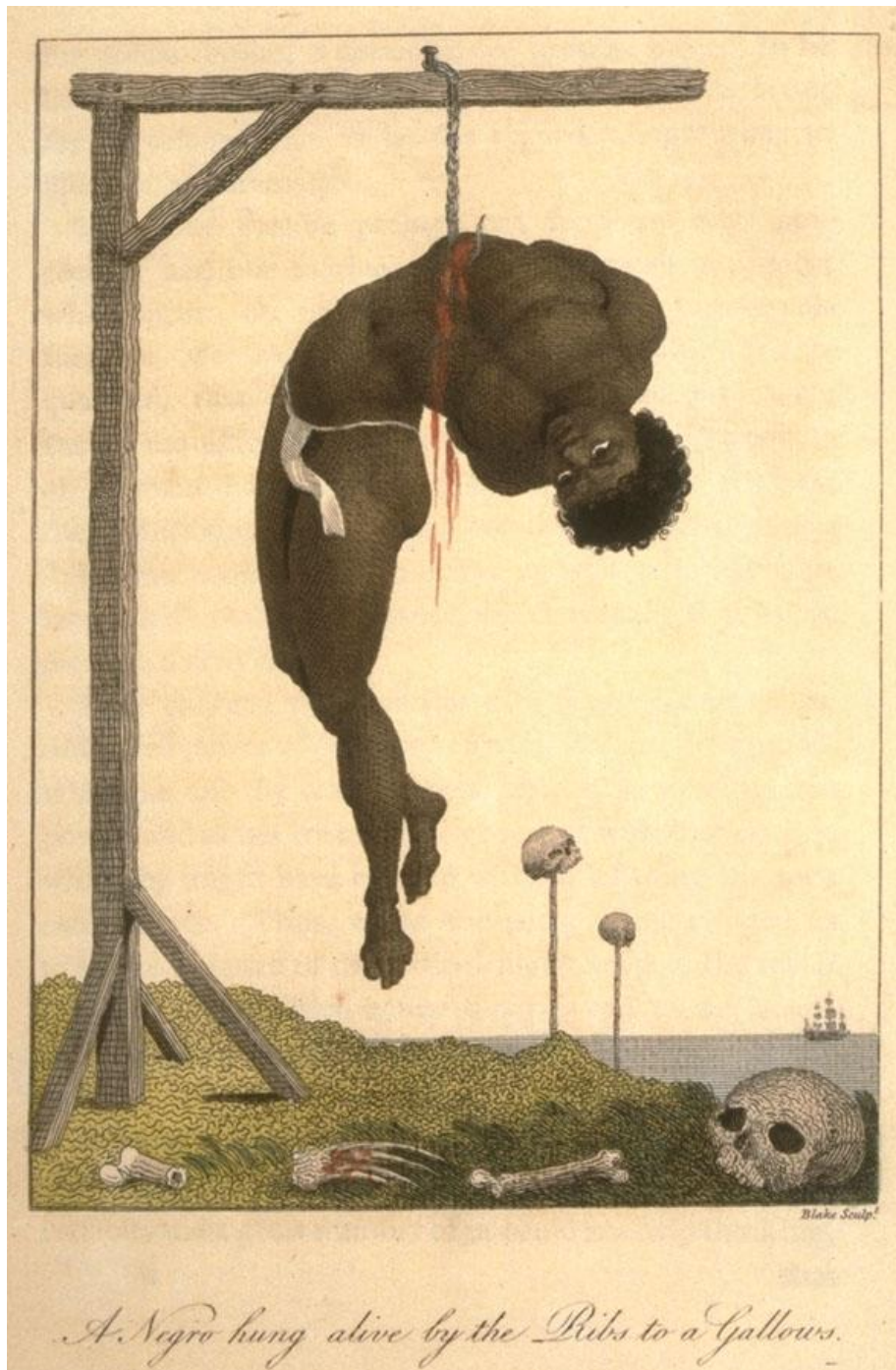
Going to the house in the evening, according to orders, my master showed me a pump, set in a well in which the water rose within ten feet of the surface of the ground. The spout of this pump, was elevated at least thirteen feet above the earth, and when the water was to be drawn from it, the person who worked the handle ascended by a ladder to the proper station. The water in this well, although so near the surface, was very cold; and the pump discharged it in a large stream. One of the women employed in the house, had committed some offence for which she was to be punished; and the opportunity was embraced of exhibiting to me, the effect of this novel mode of torture upon the human frame. The woman was stripped quite naked, and tied to a post that stood just under the stream of water, as it fell from the spout of the pump. A lad was then ordered to ascend the ladder, and pump water upon the head and shoulders of the victim; who had not been under the waterfall more than a minute, before she began to cry and scream in a most lamentable manner. In a short time, she exerted her strength, in the most convulsive throes, in trying to escape from the post; but as the cords were strong, this was impossible. After another minute or a little more, her cries became weaker, and soon afterwards her head fell forward upon her breast; and then the boy was ordered to cease pumping the water (Ball 477).

**BREAKING ON THE RACK**

*From Narrative of a Five Year's Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam,  
by John Gabriel Stedman*

Stedman witnessed this scene in 1776. The man being broken on the rack (on the orders of the white authority) had been accused of stealing a sheep and shooting an overseer who discovered the theft. This method of torture was intended to keep the victim alive long enough to endure extreme pain before his eventual death. In this case, the victim's left hand was cut off before he died as additional punishment for theft and to serve as an example to others.

## HANGING BY THE RIBS



*From Narrative of a Five Year's Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam,  
by John Gabriel Stedman  
Caption, "A Negro hung alive by the ribs to a gallows"*

The background shows skulls (presumably of beheaded slaves) on posts. This illustration was based on a 1773 eyewitness description. An incision was made in the victim's ribs and a hook placed in the hole. In this case, the victim stayed alive for 3 days until clubbed to death by the sentry guarding him who he had insulted.

# BIBLIOGRAPHY<sup>1</sup>

---

## 1. PRIMARY SOURCES

Albert, Octavia V. Rogers. *The House of Bondage or Charlotte Brooks and Other Slaves, Original and Life-like, as They Appeared in Their Old Plantation and City Slave Life; Together with Pen-pictures of the Peculiar Institution, with Sights and Insights into Their New Relations as Freedmen, Freemen, and Citizens*. New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1890.

Alemán, Mateo. *Primera parte de la vida del pícaro Guzmán de Alfarache*. Madrid: Várez de Castro, 1599.

Allen, Richard. *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen. To which is Annexed the Rise and Progress of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America. Containing a Narrative of the Yellow Fever in the Year of Our Lord 1793: With an Address to the People of Colour in the United States. Written by Himself, and Published by His Request*. Philadelphia: Martin & Boden, 1833. *Documenting the American South*. 2000. University

---

<sup>1</sup> The following bibliography includes not only the works cited, which constitute the ninety percent of this bibliographical account, but also other sources that proved useful in the elaboration of the present document. This bibliography is divided into three sections: primary sources, secondary sources, and websites. The Internet has proved to be an invaluable resource, given the special difficulty accessing slave narratives published in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many of which have not been reprinted and do not appear in anthologies of slave narratives. Many of these slave narratives *can* be found in several websites, which include the original page numbers and all the illustrations that appeared in those books, some of which have also been used in this dissertation, both in the document and its appendices. On some occasions, some of the components of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century bibliographical resources are missing. Thus, following the MLA (Modern Language Association) guidelines, the abbreviations “n.p.” (“no place!” or “no publisher”) or “n.d.” (“no date”) have been used.

Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 Sept. 2007  
<<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/allen/allen.html>>

Andrews, William L. ed. *Sisters of the Spirit. Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986.

Angelou, Maya. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. New York: Random House, 1969.

Anónimo. *Lazarillo de Tormes*. Edición bilingüe, español-inglés, en textos paralelos—  
Bilingual edition: Spanish-English, in parallel texts. Biblioteca virtual Miguel de  
Cervantes de la Universidad de Alicante. 1 Feb. 2008  
<<http://aaswebsv.aas.duke.edu/celestina/ANONIMO/LAZARILLO/LAZARO-BILI.HTM>>

Anonymous. *The Suppressed Book About Slavery*. New York: Carleton, 1864.

Ball, Charles. *Slavery in the United States: a Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, a Black Man, Who Lived Forty Years in Maryland, South Carolina and Georgia as a Slave*. Lewistown, Pa.: John W. Shugert, 1836. Rpt. in *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives. Vol. One (1772-1849)*. Ed. Yuval Taylor. Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1999. 259-486.

Bayley, Solomon. *A Narrative of Some Remarkable Incidents in the Life of Solomon Bayley Formerly a Slave in the State of Delaware, North America*. London: Harvey and Darton, 1825. *Documenting the American South*. 2001. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 Sept. 2007  
<<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/bayley/bayley.html>>

Bibb, Henry. *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave. Written by Himself. With an Introduction by Lucius C. Matlack*. New York: by the author, 1849. Rpt. in *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives. Vol. Two (1849-1866)*. Ed. Yuval Taylor. Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1999. 1-101.

- Blake, Jane. *Memoirs of Margaret Jane Blake*. Philadelphia: n. p., 1834.
- Bluett, Thomas. *Some Memoirs of the Life of Job, the Son of Solomon, the High Priest of Boonda in Africa; Who was a Slave About Two Years in Maryland; and Afterwards Being Brought to England, was Set Free, and Sent to His Native Land in the Year 1734*. London: Richard Ford, 1734. *Documenting the American South*. 1999. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 Sept. 2007 <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/bluett/bluett.html>>
- Boen, William. *Anecdotes and Memoirs of William Boen, a Coloured Man, Who Lived and Died Near Mount Holly, New Jersey. To which is Added, The Testimony of Friends of Mount Holly Monthly Meeting Concerning Him*. Philadelphia: John Richards, 1834.
- Bok, Francis, and Edward Tivnan. *Escape from Slavery: The True Story of My Ten Years in Captivity and My Journey to Freedom in America*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003.
- Bradford, Sarah H. *Harriet: The Moses of Her People*. New York: published for the author by Geo. R. Lockwood & Son, 1886.
- . *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*. Auburn, N. Y.: W. J. Moses, Printer, 1869.
- Branagan, Thomas. *The Penitential Tyrant; or, Slave Trader Reformed*. New York: Samuel Wood, 1807.
- Bridgens, Richard. *Sketches of West India Scenery, with Illustrations of Negro Character, the Process of Making Sugar, &c. from Sketches Taken during a Voyage to and a Residence of Seven Years in the Island of Trinidad*. London: Robert Jennings & Co., 1836).
- Brinch, Boyrereau and Benjamin F. Prentiss. *The Blind African Slave, or Memoirs of Boyrereau Brinch, Nick-named Jeffrey Brace. Containing an Account of the Kingdom of Bow-Woo, in the Interior of Africa; with the Climate and Natural*

*Productions, Laws, and Customs Peculiar to That Place. With an Account of His Captivity, Sufferings, Sales, Travels, Emancipation, Conversion to the Christian Religion, Knowledge of the Scriptures, &c. Interspersed with Strictures on Slavery, Speculative Observations on the Qualities of Human Nature, with Quotation from Scripture.* St. Albans, Vt.: Harry Whitney, 1810. *Documenting the American South.* 2001. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 Sept. 2007 <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/brinch/brinch.html>>

Brown, Hallie Q. *Homespun Heroines and Other Women of Distinction.* Xenia, Ohio: The Aldine Publishing Company, 1926.

Brown, Henry Box and Charles Stearns. *Narrative of Henry Box Brown, Who Escaped from Slavery, Enclosed in a Box Three Feet Long, Two Wide, and Two and a Half High. Written from a Statement of Facts Made by Himself. With Remarks Upon the Remedy for Slavery by Charles Stearns.* Boston: Brown and Stearns, 1849. *Documenting the American South.* 2001. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 Sept. 2007 <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/boxbrown/boxbrown.html>>

Brown, Jane. *Narrative of the Life of Jane Brown and Her Two Children. Related to the Reverend G. W. Offley.* Hartford: for G. W. Offley, 1860.

Brown, John. *Slave Life in Georgia: A Narrative of the Life, Sufferings and Escape of John Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Now in England.* Ed. L.A. Chamerovzow. London: W.M. Watts, 1855. Rpt. in *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives. Vol. Two (1849-1866).* Ed. Yuval Taylor. Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1999. 319-411.

Brown, Rebecca Warren. *Memoir of Mrs. Chloe Spear, A Native of Africa, Who was Enslaved in Childhood, and Died in Boston, January 3, 1815. . . . Aged 65 Years. By a "Lady of Boston."* Boston: James S. Loring, 1832. *Documenting the*

- American South*. 2000. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 Sept. 2007 <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/brownrw/brownrw.html>>
- Brown, William Wells. *Clotelle; or, The Colored Heroine*. [1867]. Kila, MT.: Kessinger Publishing, 2004.
- . "Letter to William Lloyd Garrison." *The Liberator* (January 12, 1849). Rpt. in *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*. Ed. Herbert Aptheker. New York: Citadel, 1969. 277-278.
- . *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave. Written by Himself*. Boston: Boston Anti-Slavery Office, 1847. Rpt. in *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives. Vol. One (1772-1849)*. Ed. Yuval Taylor. Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1999. 673-717.
- Burton, Annie L. *Memories of Childhood's Slavery Days*. Boston: Ross Publishing Company, 1909.
- Cary, Mary Ann Shadd. *A Plea for Emigration; or, Notes of Canada West*. Detroit: George W. Pattison, 1852.
- Child, Lydia Maria. *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*. Boston: Allen and Ticknor, 1833.
- . *Hobomok, A Tale of Early Times. By An American*. Boston: Cummings, Hilliard, 1824.
- . "Introduction by the Editor." Harriet Jacobs. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself*. [1861]. Ed. Valerie Smith. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. 7-8.
- . "Lydia Maria Child to Harriet Jacobs." August 13, 1860. *Harriet Jacobs: Selected Writings and Correspondence*. Gilder Lehrman Center. Yale University. 1 August 2008 <<http://www.yale.edu/glc/harriet/08.htm>>
- . *The Frugal Housewife*. Boston: Marsh & Capen, and carter & Hendee, 1829.



Clarke, Lewis and Milton. *Narratives of the Sufferings of Lewis and Milton Clarke, Sons of a Soldier of the Revolution, during a Captivity of More than Twenty Years among the Slaveholders of Kentucky, One of the So Called Christian States of North America. Dictated by Themselves*. Boston: Bela Marsh, 1846. Rpt. in *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives. Vol. One (1772-1849)*. Ed. Yuval Taylor. Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1999. 601-672.

Cooper, Thomas. *Facts Illustrative of the Condition of the Negro Slaves in Jamaica*. London: J. Hatchard & Son, 1824.

Cowley, Malcolm, ed. *Being A True Account of the Life of Captain Theodore Canot, Trader in Gold, Ivory, and Slaves on the Coast of Guinea: His Own Story as Told in the Year 1854 to Brantz Mayer*. [1854]. New York: Albert & Charles Boni, 1928.

Craft, William. *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery*. London: William Tweedie, 1860. Rpt. in *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives. Vol. Two (1849-1866)*. Ed. Yuval Taylor. Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1999. 481-531.

Crafts, Hannah. *The Bondwoman's Narrative*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Warner Books, 2002.

Cugoano, Ottobah. *Narrative of the Enslavement of Ottobah Cugoano, a Native of Africa; Published by Himself, in the Year 1787*. In *The Negro's Memorial, or, Abolitionist's Catechism by an Abolitionist*. London: Hatchard and Co., and J. and A. Arch, 1825. 120-127. *Documenting the American South*. 1999. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 Sept. 2007 <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/cugoano/cugoano.html>>

---. *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Humbly Submitted to the Inhabitants of Great-*

*Britain, by Ottobah Cugoano, a Native of Africa.* London: Mr. Hall & Mr. Phillips, 1787.

Davis, Angela. *Angela Davis: An Autobiography.* New York: Random House, 1974.

Debret, Jean Baptiste. *Voyage Pittoresque et Historique au Brésil.* 3 vols. Paris: Firmin Didot Frères, 1834-1839.

Defoe, Daniel. *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders.* [1722]. Ed. David Blewett. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1989.

Douglass, Frederick. *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass. Written by Himself. His Early Life as a Slave, His Escape from Bondage, and His Complete History to the Present Time.* Boston: De Wolfe & Fiske, 1893. Rpt. in *Autobiographies.* Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: The Library of America, 1994. 453-1045.

---. *My Bondage and My Freedom.* New York and Auburn: Miller, Orton, Mulligan, 1855. Rpt. in *Autobiographies.* Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: The Library of America, 1994. 103-452.

---. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself.* Boston: Boston Anti-Slavery Office, 1845. Rpt. in *Autobiographies.* Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: The Library of America, 1994. 1-102.

Drumgoold, Kate. *A Slave Girl's Story. Being an Autobiography of Kate Drumgoold.* Brooklyn: the author, 1898.

DuBois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk.* New York: Vintage Books / The Library of America, 1990.

Elaw, Zilpha. *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labours of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw, an American Female of Colour.* London: Dudley, 1846. Rpt. in *Sisters of the Spirit. Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century.* Ed. William L. Andrews. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986. 49-160.

Elizabeth. *Memoir of Old Elizabeth, a Coloured Woman*. Philadelphia: Collins, 1863.

*Documenting the American South*. 1999. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 Sept. 2007

<<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/eliza1/eliza1.html>>

---. *Elizabeth, a Colored Minister of the Gospel Born in Slavery*. Philadelphia: Tract

Association of Friends, 1889. *Documenting the American South*. 1999. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 Sept. 2007

<<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/eliza2/eliza2.html>>

Equiano, Olaudah. *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*. [1789]. Ed. Vincent

Carretta. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1995.

Foote, Julia A. J. *A Brand Plucked From the Fire. An Autobiographical Sketch, by Mrs.*

*Julia A. J. Foote*. Cleveland, Ohio: Lauer & Yost, 1879. *Digital Schomburg African American Women Writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*. 1997. The New York Public Library. New York. 24 Sept. 2007

<[http://digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/digs/wwm978/@Generic\\_\\_BookView](http://digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/digs/wwm978/@Generic__BookView)>

Forten, Charlotte L. "From *Journal One*." *The Norton Anthology of African American*

*Literature*. Gral. Eds.: Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997. 474-480.

---. "Life on the Sea Islands." [1864]. Rpt. in *Two Black Teachers During the Civil War*.

Ed. James M. McPherson. New York: Arno Press, 1969. 67-86.

---. *The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké*. Ed. Brenda Stevenson. New York:

Oxford University Press, 1988.

---. "The Slave Girl's Prayer." *National Antislavery Standard* (January 14, 1860).

Forten, Sarah L. "Lines Suggested on Reading 'An Appeal to Christian Women of the

South,' by A.E. Grimke" [1836]. In *The Norton Anthology of African American*

- Literature*. Eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Nellie Y. McKay. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997. 277-279.
- . "The Slave." *Society for the Study of American Women Writers*. 2007. Lehigh University. 9 Nov. 2007  
<<http://www.lehigh.edu/~dek7/SSAWW/writFortenThSlave.htm>>
- . "The Slave Girl's Address to Her Mother." *Society for the Study of American Women Writers*. 2007. Lehigh University. 9 Nov. 2007  
<<http://www.lehigh.edu/~dek7/SSAWW/writFortenSlave.htm>>
- . "The Slave Girl's Farewell." *Society for the Study of American Women Writers*. 2007. Lehigh University. 9 Nov. 2007  
<<http://www.lehigh.edu/~dek7/SSAWW/writFortenFarewell.htm>>
- Frost, Samuel. *The Confessions and Dying Words of Samuel Frost, Who Was Executed at Worcester, the 31<sup>st</sup> Day of October, 1793, for the Horrid Crime of Murder*. Keene, N.H.: Henry Blake & Co., 1793.
- Grandy, Moses. *Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy, Late a Slave in the United States of America*. London: C. Gilpin, 1843.
- Graham, Shirley Lola. *It's Morning*. *Black Female Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays Before 1950s*. Ed. Kathy A. Perkins. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989. 211-224.
- Green, Frances Harriet Whipple. *Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge*. Providence: B. T. Albro, 1838. *Documenting the American South*. 2001. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 Sept. 2007  
<<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/eldridge/eldridge.html>>
- . *Elleanor's Second Book*. Providence: B. T. Albro, 1839.

Green, Jacob D. *Narrative of the Life of J. D. Green, a Runaway Slave, from Kentucky, Containing an Account of His Three Escapes, in 1839, 1846, and 1848.* Huddersfield: Henry Fielding, 1864.

Green, William. *Narrative of Events in the Life of William Green, (Formerly a Slave.) Written by Himself.* Springfield, Mass.: L. M. Guernsey, 1853. *Documenting the American South.* 2000. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 Sept. 2007 <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/greenw/greenw.html>>

Grimes, William. *Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave, Brought Down to the Present Time.* New Haven: by the author, 1855. *Documenting the American South.* 2000. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 Sept. 2007. <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/grimes55/grimes55.html>>

Grimké, Angelina E. *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South.* New York: Anti-Slavery Society, 1836.

Grimké, Angelina Weld. *Rachel: A Play in Three Acts.* Boston: The Cornhill Company, 1920.

Grimké, Sarah. *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women.* [1839] New York: Source Book Press, 1970.

Griffith, Mattie. *Autobiography of a Female Slave.* New York: Redfield, 1857. *Documenting the American South.* 1999. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 Sept. 2007 <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/browne/browne.html>>

Gronniosaw, James Albert Ukawsaw. *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, An African Prince, as Related by Himself.* Bath: W. Gye, 1772. Rpt. in *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives. Vol. One (1772-1849).* Ed. Yuval Taylor. Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1999. 1-28.

Hammon, Briton. *A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings, and Surprizing Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man,—Servant to General Winslow, of Marshfield, in New-England; Who Returned to Boston, After Having Been Absent Almost Thirteen Years. Containing an Account of the Many Hardships He Underwent from the Time He Left His Master's House, in the Year 1747, to the Time of His Return to Boston.—How He Was Cast Away in the Capes of Florida;—The Horrid Cruelty and Inhuman Barbarity of the Indians in Murdering the Whole Ship's Crew;—The Manner of His Being Carry'd by Them Into Captivity. Also, an Account of His Being Confined Four Years and Seven Months in a Close Dungeon,—and the Remarkable Manner in Which He Met with His Good Old Master in London; Who Returned to New-England, a Passenger in the Same Ship.* Boston: Green and Russell, 1760. *Documenting the American South.* 2001. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 Sept. 2007 <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/hammon/hammon.html>>

Hammond, Delano. *Life and Opinions of Julius Melbourn; with Sketches of the Lives and Characters of Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, John Randolph, and Several Other Eminent American Statesmen.* New York: A. S. Barnes & Co., 1847.

Harper, Frances E. W. *Atlanta Offering: Poems.* Philadelphia: George S. Ferguson, 1895.

---. *Iola Leroy: or, Shadows Uplifted.* Philadelphia: Garrigues Brothers, 1892.

---. *Light Beyond Darkness.* Chicago: Donohue and Henneberry, n.d.

---. *Moses: A Story of the Nile.* Philadelphia: Merrihew & Son, 1869 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition).

---. "Our Greatest Want." *Anglo-African Magazine* vol. 1, no. 5 (May 1859): 160.

---. *Poems.* Freeport, N.Y.: The Black Heritage Library Collection, 1895.

---. *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects.* Boston: J. B. Yerrinton and Son, 1854.

- . *Sketches of Southern Life*. Philadelphia: Merrihew & son, 1872.
- . *The Martyr of Alabama and Other Poems*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. [1894?]
- . *The Sparrow's Fall and Other Poems*. N.p.: n.p., n.d.
- . "The Two Offers." *Anglo-African Magazine* vol. 1, no. 9 (September 1859): 288-291; vol. 1, no. 10 (October 1859): 311-313. Rpt. in *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*. Ed. Frances Smith Foster. New York: Feminist Press, 1990. 105-113.
- Hening, William Waller, ed. *Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of all the Laws of Virginia from the first session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619*. 13 Vols. New York: for the editor, 1819-1823.
- Henson, Josiah. *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada, as Narrated by Himself*. Boston: Arthur D. Phelps, 1849. Rpt. in *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives. Vol. One (1772-1849)*. Ed. Yuval Taylor. Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1999. 719-756.
- . *Truth Stranger Than Fiction. Father Henson's Story of His Own Life*. Boston: John P. Jewett and Company, 1858. *Documenting the American South*. 2001. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 Sept. 2007 <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/henson58/henson58.html>>
- Hildreth, Richard. *The Slave; or, Memoirs of Archy Moore*. Boston: John H. Eastburn, 1836.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1942.
- . *Mules and Men*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1935.
- . *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1937.

Jackson, Mattie J. *The Story of Mattie J. Jackson; Her Parentage—Experience of Eighteen Years in Slavery—Incidents During the War—Escape from Slavery. A True Story. Written and Arranged by Dr. L. S. Thompson, (Formerly Mrs. Schuyler,) As Given by Mattie.* Lawrence: Sentinel Office, 1866. *Documenting the American South.* 1999. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 Sept. 2007

<<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/jacksonm/jackson.html>>

Jackson, Rebecca Cox. *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress.* Ed. Jean McMahon Humez. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981.

Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself.* [1861]. Ed. Valerie Smith. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

---. "Harriet Jacobs to Amy Post." [1852?]. *Harriet Jacobs: Selected Writings and Correspondence.* Gilder Lehrman Center. Yale University. 1 August 2008  
<<http://www.yale.edu/glc/harriet/03.htm>>

---. "Harriet Jacobs to Amy Post." June 21, 1857. *Harriet Jacobs: Selected Writings and Correspondence.* Gilder Lehrman Center. Yale University. 1 August 2008  
<<http://www.yale.edu/glc/harriet/07.htm>>

---. "Harriet Jacobs to Amy Post." October 8, 1860. *Harriet Jacobs: Selected Writings and Correspondence.* Gilder Lehrman Center. Yale University. 1 August 2008  
<<http://www.yale.edu/glc/harriet/docs.htm>>

---. "Letter from a Fugitive Slave." *New York Daily Tribune* (June 21, 1853): 6. *Documenting the American South.* 2004. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 20 May 2008.

<<http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/jacobs/support16.html>>



- Jea, John. *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, the African Preacher. Compiled and Written by Himself*. Portsea: for the author, 1815. *Documenting the American South*. 2001. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 Sept. 2007  
<<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/jeajohn/jeajohn.html>>
- Johnson, Georgia Douglas. *Safe*. In *The Plays of Georgia Douglas Johnson*. Eds. Georgia Douglas Camp Johnson and Judith Louise Stephens. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006. 154-161.
- Joyce, John. *Confession of John Joyce, Alias Davis, Who Was Executed on Monday, the 14th of March, 1808. For the Murder of Mrs. Sarah Cross; With an Address to the Public and People of Colour. Together with the Substance of the Trial, and the Address of Chief Justice Tilghman, on His Condemnation*. Philadelphia: n.p., 1808.
- Keckley, Elizabeth. *Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House*. New York: G. W. Carleton & Co. Publishers, 1868. *Documenting the American South*. 1999. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 Sept. 2007 <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/keckley/keckley.html>>
- Lee, Jarena. *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel. Revised and Corrected from the Original Manuscript, Written by Herself*. Philadelphia: by the author, 1849.
- . *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, A Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel*. Philadelphia: printed for the author, 1836.
- Levering, Sarah R. *Memoirs of Margaret Jane Blake, of Baltimore, Md., and Selections in Prose and Verse*. Philadelphia: Innes and Son, 1897. *Documenting the American South*. 1999. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 Sept. 2007 <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/levering/levering.html>>

- Marrant, John. *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black (Now going to Preach the Gospel in Nova Scotia) Born in New York, in North America. Taken down from his own relation, Arranged, Corrected, and Published by the Reverend Mr. Aldridge.* London: by the author, 1785. Rpt. in *Held Captive by Indians: Selected Narratives, 1642-1836.* Ed. Richard VanDerBeets. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1994. 178-201.
- Mars, James. *Life of James Mars, a Slave Born and Sold in Connecticut. Written by Himself.* Hartford: Case, Lockwood & Company, 1864.
- Morrison, Toni. *A Mercy.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008.
- . *Beloved.* London, Vintage, 1997.
- . *Song of Solomon.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977.
- . *The Bluest Eye.* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970.
- Mott, Abigail. *Biographical Sketches and Interesting Anecdotes of Persons of Colour. To Which is Added a Selection of Pieces in Poetry.* New York: Mahlon Day, 1826.
- Documenting the American South.* 2001. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 Sept. 2007
- <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/mott26/mott26.html>>
- , and M. S. Wood. *Narratives of Colored Americans.* New York: William Wood & Co., 1875.
- Mountain, Joseph, and David Daggett. *Sketches of the Life of Joseph Mountain, a Negro, Who Was Executed at New-Haven on the 20<sup>th</sup> Day of October, 1790, for a Rape, Committed on the 26<sup>th</sup> Day of May Last. [The Writer of This History Has Directed That the Money Arising From the Sales Thereof, After Deducting the Expence of Printing, &c. Be Given to the Unhappy Girl, Whose Life is Rendered Wretched by the Crime of the Malefactor].* New-Haven: T. and S. Green, 1790.
- Naylor, Gloria. *The Women of Brewster Place.* New York: Viking, 1982.

Nazer, Mende, and Damien Lewis. *Slave: The True Story of a Girl's Lost Childhood and her Fight for Survival*. London: Virago, 2004.

Neilson, Peter. *Life and Adventures of Zamba, an African Negro King; and His Experience of Slavery in South Carolina. Written by Himself. Corrected and Arranged by Peter Neilson*. London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1847.

Northup, Solomon. *Twelve Years a Slave. Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853, from a Cotton Plantation near the Red River, in Louisiana*. Auburn, Buffalo, and London: Darby and Miller, 1853. Rpt. in *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives. Vol. Two (1849-1866)*. Ed. Yuval Taylor. Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1999. 159-317.

Offley, Reverend G. W. *A Narrative of the Life and Labors of the Rev. G. W. Offley, a Colored Man, Local Preacher and Missionary; Who Lived Twenty-Seven Years at the South and Twenty-Three at the North; Who Never Went to School a Day in His Life, and Only Commenced to Learn His Letters When Nineteen Years and Eight Months Old; the Emancipation of His Mother and Her Three Children; How He Learned to Read While Living in a Slave State, and Supported Himself from the Time He Was Nine Years Old Until He Was Twenty-One*. Hartford: for the author, 1859. *Documenting the American South*. 2000. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 Sept. 2007  
<<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/offley/offley.html>>

Pennington, James W. C. *The Fugitive Blacksmith; or, Events in the History of James W.C. Pennington, Pastor of a Presbyterian Church, New York, Formerly a Slave in the State of Maryland, United States*. London: Charles Gilpin, 1849. Rpt. in *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives. Vol. Two (1849-1866)*. Ed. Yuval Taylor. Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1999. 103-158.

- Perkins, Kathy A., ed. *Black Female Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays Before 1950s*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.
- Pickard, Mrs. Kate E. R. *The Kidnapped and the Ransomed. Being the Personal Recollections of Peter Still and his Wife "Vina," after Forty Years of Slavery*. Syracuse: William T. Hamilton, 1856. *Documenting the American South*. 1999. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 Sept. 2007 <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/pickard/pickard.html>>
- Picquet, Louisa, and Hiram Mattison. *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon: or Inside Views of Southern Domestic Life*. New York: the author, 1861. *Documenting the American South*. 2003. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 Sept. 2007 <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/picquet/picquet.html>>
- Pierson, Emily Catharine. *Jamie Parker, the Fugitive*. Hartford: Brockett, Fuller, and Co., 1851.
- Plato, Ann. *Essays; Including Biographies and Miscellaneous Pieces, in Prose and Poetry*. [1841] New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Prince, Mary. *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave. Related by Herself. With a Supplement by the Editor. To Which Is Added, the Narrative of Asa-Asa, a Captured African*. London: F. Westley and A. H. Davis, 1831. *Documenting the American South*. 2000. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 Sept. 2007 <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/prince/prince.html>>
- Prince, Nancy. *A Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Boston: by the author, 1853. *Digital Schomburg African American Women Writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*. 1997. The New York Public Library. 30 Sept. 2007 <[http://digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/digs/wwm97263/@Generic\\_BookView](http://digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/digs/wwm97263/@Generic_BookView)>
- Pringle, Thomas. "Preface." Mary Prince. *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave. Related by Herself. With a Supplement by the Editor. To Which Is Added,*

*the Narrative of Asa-Asa, a Captured African*. London: F. Westley and A. H. Davis, 1831. *Documenting the American South*. 2000. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 Sept. 2007 <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/prince/prince.html>> i-ii.

Randolph, Reverend Peter. *Sketches of Slave Life; or, Illustrations of the "Peculiar Institution."* By Peter Randolph, an Emancipated Slave. Boston: for the author, 1855. *Documenting the American South*. 2000. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 Sept. 2007 <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/randol55/randol55.html>>

Richardson, Samuel. *Clarissa, or, the History of a Young Lady*. London: Samuel Richardson, 1748.

---. *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded*. London: C. Rivington and J. Osborn, 1740.

Roper, Moses. *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper from American Slavery, with a Preface by the Reverend T. Price*. Ed. Thomas Price. Philadelphia: Merrihew & Gunn, 1838. Rpt. in *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives Vol. One (1772-1849)*. Ed. Yuval Taylor. Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1999. 487-521.

Shakur, Assata. *Assata: An Autobiography*. Chicago: Lawrence Hills Books, 1987.

Shange, Ntozake. *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf*. New York: Macmillan, 1976.

Sheldon, George. *A History of Deerfield, Massachusetts*. Somersworth: New Hampshire Publishing Company in collaboration with the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, Deerfield, 1972.

Simpson, John Hawkins. *Horrors of the Virginian Slave Trade and of the Slave-Rearing Plantations. The True Story of Dinah, an Escaped Virginian Slave, Now in London, on Whose Body Are Eleven Scars Left by Tortures Which Were Inflicted*

by *Her Master, Her Own Father. Together with Extracts from the Laws of Virginia, Showing That Against These Barbarities the Law Gives Not the Smallest Protection to the Slave, But the Reverse*. London: A. W. Bennett, 1863. *Documenting the American South*. 2001. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 Sept. 2007  
<[docsouth.unc.edu/neh/simpson/simpson.html](http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/simpson/simpson.html)>

Sloane, Hans. *Natural History of Jamaica*. 2 vols. London: for the author, 1707-1725.

Smallwood, Thomas. *A Narrative of Thomas Smallwood, (Coloured Man:) Giving an Account of His Birth—The Period He Was Held in Slavery—His Release—and Removal to Canada, etc. Together With an Account of the Underground Railroad. Written by Himself*. Toronto: James Stephens, 1851. *Documenting the American South*. 2001. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 September 2007 <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/smallwood/smallwood.html>>

Smith, Amanda. *An Autobiography. The Story of the Lord's Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith the Colored Evangelist; Containing an Account of Her Life Work of Faith, and Her Travels in America, England, Ireland, Scotland, India, and Africa, as an Independent Missionary*. Chicago: Meyer & Brother, Publishers, 1893.

Smith, Venture. *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa: But Resident above Sixty Years in the United States of America. Related by Himself*. New London: C. Holt, 1798.

Stedman, John Gabriel. *Narrative of Joanna; An Emancipated Slave, of Surinam. In Narrative of a Five Year's Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*. Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838. *Documenting the American South*. 2001. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 September 2007 <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/stedman/stedman.html>>

Steward, Austin. *Twenty-Two Years a Slave, and Forty Years a Freeman; Embracing a Correspondence of Several Years, While President of Wilberforce Colony, London, Canada West*. Rochester, N.Y.: William Alling, 1857.

Stewart, Maria W. *Meditations From the Pen of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart (Widow of the Late James W. Stewart), Now Matron of the Freedman's Hospital, and Presented in 1832 to the First African Baptist Church and Society of Boston, Mass., First Published by W. Lloyd Garrison and Knap, Now Most Especially Dedicated to the Church Militant of Washington, D. C.* Washington, D. C.: Enterprise Publishing Co., 1879.

---. *Productions of Mrs. Maria Stewart*. Boston: Friends of Freedom and Virtue, 1835.  
*Digital Schomburg African American Women Writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*. 1997.  
 The New York Public Library. 30 Sept. 2007  
 <[http://digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/digs/www9722/@Generic\\_BookView](http://digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/digs/www9722/@Generic_BookView)>

---. "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality: The Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build" [1831]. *Maria Stewart: America's First Black Political Writer. Essays and Speeches*. Ed.: Marilyn Richardson. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987. 28-42.

Still, William. *The Underground Railroad*. Philadelphia: Porter and Coates, 1872.

Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *Uncle Tom's Cabin: Authoritative Text; Backgrounds and Contexts; Criticism*. [1852]. Ed. Elizabeth Ammons. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994.

Taylor, Yuval, ed. *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives*. 2 Vols. Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1999.

Terry, Lucy. "Bar's Fight". Josiah Holland. *History of Western Massachusetts*, vol. 2. Springfield, Massachusetts: S. Bowles and Co., 1855. 360. Rpt. in *The Norton*

*Anthology of African American Literature*. Eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997. 137-138.

*The Slavery Code of the District of Columbia, together with Notes and Judicial Decisions Explanatory of the Same*. Washington: L. Towers, 1862.

Thompson, John. *The Life of John Thompson, a Fugitive Slave; Containing His History or 25 Years in Bondage, and His Providential Escape. Written by Himself*. Worcester: by the author, 1856. Rpt. in *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives. Vol. Two (1849-1866)*. Ed. Yuval Taylor. Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1999. 415-480.

Thompson, Matilda G. *Aunt Judy's Story: A Tale from Real Life. Written for the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Fair*. Philadelphia: Merrihew & Thompson, Printers, 1855. *Documenting the American South*. 2001. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 September 2007  
<<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/auntjudy/auntjudy.html>>

--- "Mark and Hasty, or, Slave Life in Missouri" [1854]. Rpt. in *The Child's Anti-Slavery Book: Containing a Few Words about American Slave Children, and Stories of Slave-Life*. New York: Carlton & Porter, 1859.

Tilmon, Levin. *A Brief Miscellaneous Narrative of the More Early Part of the Life of Levin Tilmon, Pastor of a Colored Methodist Congregational Church in the city of New York*. Jersey City, N. J.: W. and L. Pratt, 1853.

Truth, Sojourner, and Olive Gilbert. *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern Slave, Emancipated from Bodily Servitude by the State of New York, in 1828. With a Portrait*. Boston: for the author, 1850. *Documenting the American South*. 2000. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 Sept. 2007 <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/truth50/truth50.html>>



---, and Frances W. Titus. *Narrative of Sojourner Truth; a Bondswoman of Olden Time, Emancipated by the New York Legislature in the Early Part of the Present Century; with a History of Her Labors and Correspondence Drawn from Her "Book of Life."* Boston: for the Author, 1875. *Documenting the American South*. 2000. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 Sept. 2007 <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/truth75/truth75.html>>

Turner, Nat. *The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Va. As Fully and Voluntarily Made to Thomas R. Gray*. Ed. Thomas R. Gray. Baltimore: Lucas & Deaver, 1831. Rpt. in *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives Vol. One (1772-1849)*. Ed. Yuval Taylor. Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1999. 240-257.

Upham, Mrs. T. C. *Narrative of Phebe Ann Jacobs*. London: W. and F. G. Cash, 1850? *Documenting the American South*. 2000. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 Sept. 2007 <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/upham/upham.html>>

Valades, Didacus. *Rhetorica Christiana*. Perusiae: Petrutius, 1579.

VanDerBeets, Richard, ed. *Held Captive by Indians: Selected Narratives, 1642-1836*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1994.

Various authors. *The Child's Anti-Slavery Book: Containing a Few Words about American Slave Children and Stories of Slave-Life. Ten Illustrations*. [1859]. Kila, MT.: Kessinger Publishing, 2004.

Virginia General Assembly. *Virginia Slavery Act (19 March 1705)*. Rpt. in *Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of all the Laws of Virginia from the first session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619, vol. 3*. Ed. William Waller Hening. Richmond, Va.: Samuel Pleasants, 1809. 333-335.

Voorhis, Robert and Henry Trumbull. *Life and Adventures of Robert Voorhis, the Hermit of Massachusetts, Who has Lived 14 Years in a Cave, Secluded from Human Society: Comprising, an Account of his Birth, Parentage, Sufferings, and Providential Escape from Unjust and Cruel Bondage in Early Life, and His Reasons for Becoming a Recluse. Taken from his own mouth, and published for his benefit.* Providence: for Henry Trumbull, 1829. *Documenting the American South.* 1999. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 Sept. 2007 <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/robert/robert.html>>

Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple.* London: The Women's Press, 1983.

Walker, David. *Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America, Written in Boston, State of Massachusetts, September 28, 1829.* Boston: David Walker, 1830.

Walker, Jonathan. *Trial and Imprisonment of Jonathan Walker: at Pensacola, Florida, for Aiding Slaves to Escape from Bondage. With an Appendix, Containing a Sketch of His Life.* Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1848.

Walker, Margaret. *Jubilee.* London: Wyndham, 1966.

Warner, Ashton and S. Strickland. *Negro Slavery Described by a Negro: Being the Narrative of Ashton Warner, a Native of St. Vincent's. With an Appendix Containing the Testimony of Four Christian Ministers, Recently Returned from the Colonies, on the System of Slavery as It Now Exists.* London: Samuel Maunder, 1831. *Documenting the American South.* 2001. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 Sept. 2007 <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/warner/warner.html>>

Watkins, James. *Narrative of the Life of James Watkins, Formerly a "Chattel" in Maryland, U. S.; Containing an Account of His Escape from Slavery, Together with an Appeal on Behalf of Three Millions of Such "Pieces of Property," Still*

*Held Under the Standard of the Eagle*. Boston: Kenyon and Abbott, 1852.

*Documenting the American South*. 2001. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 Sept. 2007

<<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/watkin52/watkin52.html>>

Wells, Ida B. *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*. Ed. Alfreda M. Duster. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970.

Wheatley, Phillis. *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. London: A. Bell, 1773.

Wheeler, Peter, and Charles Edward Lester. *Chains and Freedom: Or, The Life and Adventures of Peter Wheeler, a Colored Man Yet Living. A Slave in Chains, a Sailor on the Deep, and a Sinner at the Cross*. New York: E. S. Arnold & Co., 1839.

White, George. *A Brief Account of the Life, Experience, Travels, and Gospel Labours of George White, an African; Written by Himself, and Revised by a Friend*. New York: J. C. Tottle, 1810. *Documenting the American South*. 2001. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 Sept. 2007

<<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/whitegeo/whitegeo.html>>

Williams, Daniel E. *Pillars of Salt: An Anthology of Early American Criminal Narratives*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1993.

Williams, Isaac. *Aunt Sally; or The Cross the Way to Freedom. Narrative of the Life and Purchase of the Mother of Reverend Isaac Williams of Detroit, Michigan*. Cincinnati: American Reform Tract and Book Society, 1858. *Documenting the American South*. 2000. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 Sept. 2007 <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/sally/sally.html>>

Williams, James. *Narrative of Events Since the First of August, 1834, by James Williams, an Apprenticed Labourer in Jamaica*. London: William Ball, 1837.

Williams, Sherley Anne. *Dessa Rose*. New York: Morrow, 1986.

Wilson, Harriet E. *Our Nig; Or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in a Two-Story White House, North. Showing That Slavery's Shadows Fall Even There*. Boston: George C. Rand & Avery, 1859.

## 2. SECONDARY SOURCES

Andrews, William L. *African American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1993.

---. "The Changing Rhetoric of the Nineteenth-Century Slave Narrative in the United States." *Slavery in the Americas*. Ed. Wolfgang Binder. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1993. 471-486.

---. "The Representation of Slavery and the Rise of Afro-American Literary Realism, 1865-1920." *African American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1993. 77-89.

---. *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986.

---, Frances Smith Foster, and Richard Yarborough, eds. "Literature of the Reconstruction to the New Negro Renaissance, 1865-1919." *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. Gen. eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997. 461-72.

---, Frances Smith Foster, and Trudier Harris, eds. *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Anonymous. "Linda: Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl Written by Herself. Edited by Lydia Maria Child. Boston: Published for the Author, 1861." *The Anti-Slavery Advocate*, no. 53, vol. 2 (1 May 1861): 1. Rpt. in *The Slave's Narrative*. Eds.

Charles T. Davis, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. 33.

Anzaldúa, Gloria. "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter To 3<sup>rd</sup> World Women Writers." *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Eds. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa. New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983. 165-173.

Aptheker, Herbert, ed. *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*. New York: Citadel, 1969.

Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. London & New York: Routledge, 1999.

Baker, Houston A., Jr. "Autobiographical Acts and the Voice of the Southern Slave." *The Slave's Narrative*. Eds. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. 242-61.

---. *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984.

---. *The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980.

Bakhtin, Mikhail M. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986.

Ball, Edward. *Slaves in the Family*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1998.

Bambara, Toni Cade. *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays, and Conversations*. New York: Vintage, 1999.

Barrios, Olga. "Formulating the Aesthetics of African American Women Playwrights: The Resonance of the Black Liberation and Black Theater Movements." *Gender, Ideology: Essays on Theory, Fiction and Film*. Eds. Chantal Cornut-Gentile

- D'Arcy and José Ángel García Landa. Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1996. 121-130.
- . "La mujer afronorteamericana en la historia: una trayectoria de discriminación, resistencia, supervivencia y creatividad." *La igualdad como compromiso: estudios de género en homenaje a la profesora Ana Díaz Medina*. Coord. Esther Martínez et al. Salamanca: Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, 2007. 51-74.
- , and Frances Smith Foster, eds. *La Familia en África y la Diáspora Africana*. Salamanca: Ediciones Almar, 2004.
- , and Bernard W. Bell. *Contemporary Literature in the African Diaspora*. Salamanca: Universidad de Salamanca, 1997.
- Bates, Gerri. *Alice Walker: A Critical Companion*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2005.
- Baym, Nina. *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978.
- Beaulieu, Elizabeth Ann, ed. *The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2003.
- Bennett, Michael. *Democratic Discourses: The Radical Abolition Movement and Antebellum American Literature*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005.
- Berri, Faith. *From Bondage to Liberation: Writings by and About Afro-Americans from 1700 to 1918*. New York: Continuum, 2006.
- Bhabha, Homi. "The Location of Culture." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. Malden (Mass.) & Oxford: Blackwell, 1999. 936-944.
- Blasing, Mutlu Konuk. *The Art of Life: Studies in American Autobiographical Literature*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977.

- Blassingame, John W. "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems." *The Slave's Narrative*. Eds. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. 78-98.
- Blewett, David. "Introduction." Daniel Defoe. *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1989. 1-24.
- Bloom, John. "Literary Blackface? The Mystery of Hannah Crafts." *National Review Online*. July 26, 2002, 9:00 a.m.  
<<http://www.nationalreview.com/comment/comment-bloom072602.asp>>
- Brathwaite, Edward Kamau. "Creolization in Jamaica." *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*. Ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. London & New York: Routledge, 1999. 202-205.
- . *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica 1770-1820*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971.
- Braxton, Joanne M. *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989.
- . "Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: Re-definition of the Slave Narrative Genre." *The Massachusetts Review* 27 (1986): 379-387.
- . "Symbolic Geography and Psychic Landscapes: A Conversation with Maya Angelou." *Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: A Casebook*. Ed. Joanne M. Braxton. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. 3-20.
- , and Sharon Zuber. "Silences in Harriet 'Linda Brent' Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*." *Listening to Silences: New Essays in Feminist Criticism*. Eds. Elaine Hedges and Shelley Fisher Fishkin. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994. 146-155.
- Brevard, Joseph. *An Alphabetical Digest of the Public Statute Law of South Carolina*. 3 vols. Charleston: John Hoff, 1814.

- Brooks, Daphne A. *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006.
- Bruss, Elizabeth. *Autobiographical Acts*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976.
- Bush, Barbara. *Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650-1838*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.
- Byrd, P., and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, eds. *Traps: African American Men on Gender and Sexuality*. Rudolph Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001.
- Campbell, Donna M. "The Plantation Tradition in Local Color Fiction." *Literary Movements*. 2007. Washington State University. 20 April 2008. <<http://www.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/plant.htm>>
- Carby, Hazel V. *Race Men: The Body and Soul of Race, Nation and Manhood*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998.
- . *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Novelist*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- Carrera Suárez, Isabel. "Feminismo y postcolonialismo: estrategias de subversión." *Escribir en femenino: poéticas y políticas*. Eds. Beatriz Suárez Briones, M<sup>a</sup> Belén Martín Lucas, M<sup>a</sup> Jesús Fariñas Busto. Barcelona: Icaria, 2000. 73-84.
- . "Towards a Female Language of Childbirth." 179-190. *Shades of Empire in Colonial and Post-Colonial Literatures*. Eds. C. C. Barfoot, Theo D'haen. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993.
- , and M. S. Suárez Lafuente. *Narrativa postcolonial / Post-Colonial Narrative*. Oviedo: KRK, 1995.
- Carretta, Vincent. "Introduction." Olaudah Equiano. *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1995. ix-xxviii.



- (Charles), Helen. "The Language of Womanism: Rethinking Difference (1997)." *The Womanist Reader: The First Quarter Century of Womanist Thought*. Ed. Layli Phillips. New York: Routledge, 2006. 361-378.
- Chinosole. *African Diaspora and Autobiographics: Skeins of Self and Skin*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Incorporated, 2001.
- Clarke, J. H. and V. Harding, eds. *Slave Trade and Slavery*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1970.
- Clemons, Walter. "A Gravestone of Memories." *Newsweek* (28 September 1987): 74-75.
- Cooley, Thomas. *Educated Lives: The Rise of Modern Autobiography in America*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1976.
- Cornwall, Andrea. *Readings in Gender in Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005.
- Cowper, William. *The Poetical Works of William Cowper*. Edinburgh: William P. Nimmo, 1863.
- Dalton, Anne B. "The Devil and the Virgin: Writing Sexual Abuse in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*." *Violence, Silence, and Anger: Women's Writing as Transgression*. Ed. Deirdre Lashgari. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995. 38-61.
- Darling, Marsha. "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves." *Black Scholar* 3, no. 4 (December 1971): 2-15.
- Davies, Carole Boyce. "Mobility, Embodiment and Resistance. Black Women's Writing in the US." *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994. 130-151.
- . "Migratory Subjectivities." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. Malden: Blackwell, 1999. 996-1015.

- Davis, Angela. *Women, Race and Class*. New York: Vintage, 1983.
- Davis, Charles T. *Black is the Color of the Cosmos: Essays on Afro-American Literature and Culture, 1942-1981*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1989.
- , and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. "Introduction: The Language of Slavery." *The Slave's Narrative*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. xi-xxxiv.
- , eds. *The Slave's Narrative*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Davis, Cynthia J. "Harriet E. Wilson (1827?-1863?)." *Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*. Eds. Denise D. Knight and Emmanuel S. Nelson. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997. 484-489.
- Diedrich, Maria, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Carl Pedersen, eds. *Black Imagination and The Middle Passage*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Dixon, Melvin. "Singing Swords: The Literary Legacy of Slavery." *The Slave's Narrative*. Eds. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. 298-317.
- Doody, Terrence. *Confession and Community in the Novel*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980.
- Dundes, Alan, ed. *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ.: Prentice-Hall, 1973.
- Eaton, Kalenda C. *Womanism, Literature, and the Transformation of the Black Community, 1965-1980*. New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Ellis, R. J. *Harriet Wilson's Our Nig: A Cultural Biography of a "Two-Story" African American Novel*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2003.

Erno, Richard. *Dominant Images of the Negro in the Antebellum South*. Ann Arbor: Xerox Company, 1961.

Escott, Paul D. "The Art and Science of Reading WPA Slave Narratives." *The Slave's Narrative*. Eds. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. 40-48.

Ewbank, Thomas. *Life in Brazil*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1856.

Fanon, Franz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. London: Pluto Press, 1986.

---. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, 1963.

Ferguson, Moira. "Introduction. The Voice of Freedom: Mary Prince." *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave. Related by Herself*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997. 1-41

Ferguson, Russell, et al., eds. *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990.

Finkelman, Paul, ed. *Slavery and the Law*. Madison: Madison House, 1997.

Fisher, Dexter and Robert B. Stepto. *Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction*. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1978.

Fleischner, Jennifer. *Mastering Slavery: Memory, Family, and Identity in Women's Slave Narratives*. New York: New York University Press, 1996.

Foreman, P. Gabrielle. "Manifest in Signs: The Politics of Sex and Representation in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*." *Harriet Jacobs and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: New Critical Essays*. Ed. Deborah M. Garfield and Rafia Zafar. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 76-99.

Fort, Bruce. "American Slave Narratives: An Online Anthology." *The American Studies Program at the University of Virginia*. 1998. Randall Hall. University of Virginia. 30 Sept. 2007 <<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/wpa/wpahome.html>>

- Foster, Frances Smith. "Historical Introduction." *Behind the Scenes. By Elizabeth Keckley, Formerly a Slave, but More Recently Modiste, and Friend to Mrs. Lincoln or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998. ix-lxvii.
- . "Resisting *Incidents*." *Harriet Jacobs and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: New Critical Essays*. Ed. Deborah M. Garfield and Rafia Zafar. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 57-75.
- . *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives*. Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1994.
- . *Written by Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746-1892*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.
- , ed. *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper*. New York: Feminist Press, 1990.
- Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth. "My Statue, My Self: Autobiographical Writings of Afro-American Women." *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Meridian, 1990. 176-203.
- Franklin, John Hope. *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980.
- Fulton, DoVeanna S. *Speaking Power: Black Feminist Orality in Women's Narratives of Slavery*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006.
- Garfield, Deborah M. "Earwitness: Female Abolitionism, Sexuality, and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*." *Harriet Jacobs and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: New Critical Essays*. Eds. Deborah M. Garfield and Rafia Zafar. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 100-130.
- , and Rafia Zafar, eds. *Harriet Jacobs and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: New Critical Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. "In Her Own Write." Harriet Jacobs. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Ed. Valerie Smith. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. vii-xxii.
- . "Introduction." Hannah Crafts. *The Bondwoman's Narrative*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Warner Books, 2002. ix-lxxv.
- . "James Gronniosaw and the Trope of the Talking Book." *African American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. William L. Andrews. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1993. 8-25.
- . *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- , ed. *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*. New York: Meridian, 1990.
- , and Nellie Y. McKay, gen. eds. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997.
- Genovese, Eugene D. *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. New York: Vintage Books, 1976.
- Gernes, Todd S. "Poetic Justice: Sarah Forten, Eliza Earle and the Paradox of Intellectual Property." *The New England Quarterly*, vol. 71, no. 2 (June, 1998): 229-265.
- Gibson, Donald B. "Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass, and the Slavery Debate: Bondage, Family, and the Discourse of Domesticity." *Harriet Jacobs and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. New Critical Essays*. Eds. Deborah M. Garfield and Rafia Zafar. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 156-178.
- Giddings, Paula. *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women in Race and Sex in America*. New York: William Morrow, 1984.
- Glassman-Hersh, Blanche. *The Slavery of Sex: Feminist-Abolitionists in America*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978.

- Goldman, Anita. "Harriet Jacobs, Henry Thoreau, and the Character of Disobedience." *Harriet Jacobs and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. New Critical Essays*. Eds. Deborah M. Garfield and Rafia Zafar. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 233-250.
- Goldsby, Jacqueline. "'I Disguised My Hand': Writing Versions of the Truth in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and John Jacobs's 'A True Tale of Slavery'." *Harriet Jacobs and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. New Critical Essays*. Eds. Deborah M. Garfield and Rafia Zafar. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 11-43.
- González Groba, Constante. *On Their Own Premises: Southern Women Writers and the Homeplace*. Valencia: Universitat de Valencia, 2008.
- Goodell, William. *Slavery and Anti-Slavery: A History of the Great Struggle In Both Hemispheres; With a View of The Slavery Question In The United States*. New York: William Harned Pub., 1852.
- . *The American Slave Code in Theory and Practice: Its Distinctive Features Shown by Its Statutes, Judicial Decisions, and Illustrative Facts*. New York: American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, 1853. *Classics on American Slavery*. 2003. Dinsmore Documentation. 30 Sept. 2007  
<<http://www.dinsdoc.com/goodell-1-0a.htm>>
- Grasso, Linda M. *Artistry of Anger: Black and White Women's Literature in America, 1820-1860*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.
- Greeson, Jennifer Rae. "The 'Mysteries and Miseries' of North Carolina: New York City, Urban Gothic Fiction, and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*." *American Literature* 73 (June 2001): 277-309.
- Gwin, Minrose C. "Green-eyed Monsters of the Slavocracy: Jealous Mistresses in Two Slave Narratives." *Conjuring: Black Women Writers and Literary Tradition*. Eds.

Marjorie Pryse and Hortense Spillers. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985. 39-52.

Hadden, Sally E. *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001.

Hamilton, Cynthia S. "Dislocation, Violence, and the Language of Sentiment." *Black Imagination and The Middle Passage*. Eds. Maria Diedrich, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Carl Pedersen. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. 103-116.

Handler, Jerome S. *The Unappropriated People: Freedmen in the Slave Society of Barbados*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974.

Hauss, Jon. "Perilous Passages in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*." *The Discourse of Slavery: Aphra Behn to Toni Morrison*. Ed. Carl Plasa and Betty J. Ring. London: Routledge, 1994. 144-165.

Hedges, Elaine and Shelley Fisher Fishkin, eds. *Listening to Silences: New Essays in Feminist Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Heglar, Charles J. *Rethinking the Slave Narrative: Slave Marriage and the Narratives of Henry Bibb and William and Ellen Craft*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2001.

Hernandi, Paul. *Beyond Genre: New Directions in Literary Classification*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1972.

Herskovits, Melville. *The Myth of the Negro Past*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1941.

Hirsch, Jerrold. *Portrait of America: A Cultural History of the Federal Writers' Project*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003.

hooks, bell. *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. Boston: South End Press, 1981.

---. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. London: Pluto Press, 2000.

- . *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Boston, Ma.: South End Press, 1989.
- Hovet, Theodore R. "Mrs. Thomas C. Upham's 'Happy Phebe': A Feminine Source of Uncle Tom." *American Literature*, vol. 51, no. 2 (May 1979): 267-270.
- Hull, Gloria T., and Barbara Smith. "Introduction: The Politics of Black Women's Studies." *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*. Eds. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith. New York: The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 1982. xvii-xxxii.
- , and Patricia Bell Scott, eds. *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*. New York: The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 1982.
- Jarret-Macauley, Delia. *Reconstructing Womanhood, Reconstructing Feminism: Writings on Black Women*. New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Jaynes, Gerald. "Plantation Factories and the Slave Work Ethic." *The Slave's Narrative*. Eds. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. 98-112.
- Johnson, Yvonne. *The Voices of African American Women: The Use of Narrative and Authorial Voice in the Works of Harriet Jacobs, Zora Neale Hurston, and Alice Walker*. New York: P. Lang, 1999.
- Jones, Anne Goodwyn. "Engendered in the South: Blood and Irony in Douglass and Jacobs." *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts*. Eds. Anne Goodwyn Jones, and Susan Van D'Elden Donaldson. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997. 201-219.
- Jones, Jacqueline. *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family, from Slavery to the Present*. New York: Basic Books, 1985.



- Kaplan, Carla. *The Erotics of Talk: Women's Writing and Feminist Paradigms*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Kilcup, Karen L., ed. *Soft Canons: American Women Writers and Masculine Tradition*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999.
- King, Deborah K. "Womanist, Womanism, Womanish." *Women's Studies Encyclopedia*. Ed. Helen Tierney. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999. 1486-1487.
- Knight, Denise D., and Emmanuel S. Nelson, eds. *Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997.
- Lashgari, Deirdre, ed. *Violence, Silence, and Anger: Women's Writing as Transgression*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995.
- Lerner, Gerda. *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1979.
- . "Women and Slavery." *Slavery and Abolition* 4, no. 3 (1983): 173-198.
- Lockard, Joe. "Afterword." *Autobiography of a Female Slave*. Mattie Griffith. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998. 403-418.
- Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. London & New York: Routledge, 1998.
- Lyons, Mary E. *Letters from a Slave Girl: The Story of Harriet Jacobs*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992.
- Manuel Cuenca, Carme. *Guía bibliográfica para el estudio de la literatura de los Estados Unidos*. Valencia: Universitat de Valencia, 2001.
- . "Estudio crítico." Harriet Jacobs. *Peripecias en la vida de una joven esclava escritas por ella misma. Junto con "Un relato verdadero de esclavitud" de John S. Jacobs*. Castellón: Ellago Ediciones, 2005. 339-370.

- Marable, Manning. "Groundings With My Sisters: Patriarchy and the Exploitation of Black Women." *Traps: African American Men on Gender and Sexuality*. Eds. Rudolph P. Byrd and Beverly Guy-Sheftall. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001. 119-152.
- Mason, Alpheus Thomas, and Donald Grier Stephenson, Jr. *American Constitutional Law: Introductory Essays and Selected Cases*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1999 (12<sup>th</sup> edition).
- Mason, Theodore O., Jr. "Signifying." *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*. Eds. William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster, and Trudier Harris. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. 665-666.
- Matas Llorente, Manuela. "Introducción." Harriet Ann Jacobs. *Incidentes en la vida de una esclava [selección] [texto bilingüe]*. León: Universidad de León, 1997. 9-42.
- Matterson, Stephen. "Shaped by Readers: The Slave Narratives of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs." *Soft Canons: American Women Writers and Masculine Tradition*. Ed. Karen L. Kilcup. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999. 82-96.
- McDowell, Deborah. "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism." *Black American Literature Forum*. 14 (Winter 1980): 153-158.
- McKay, Nellie Y. "The Souls of Black Women Folk in the Writings of W.E.B. Du Bois." *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Meridian, 1990. 227-243.
- McPherson, James M., ed. *Two Black Teachers During the Civil War*. New York: Arno Press, 1969.
- Mead, Rebecca J. *How the Vote Was Won: Woman Suffrage in the Western United States, 1868-1914*. New York: New York University Press, 2004.
- Merish, Lori. "Domesticating 'Blackness': Harriet Jacobs, Sojourner Truth, and the Decommodification of the Black Female Body." *Sentimental Materialism:*

- Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000. 191-228.
- Mitchell, Angelyn. *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002.
- Mitchell-Kernan, Claudia. "Signifying as a Form of Verbal Art." *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore*. Ed. Alan Dundes. Englewood Cliffs, NJ.: Prentice-Hall, 1973. 310-328.
- Monteser, Frederick. *The Picaresque Element in Western Literature*. Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1975.
- Moody, Joycelyn. *Sentimental Confessions: Spiritual Narratives of Nineteenth-Century African American Women*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001.
- Moraga, Cherrie, and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983.
- Morrison, Toni. "The Site of Memory". *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture*. Eds.: Russell Ferguson, et al. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990. 299-305.
- Nelson, Dana D. *The Word in Black and White: Reading "Race" in American Literature, 1638-1867*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Nichols, Charles H. "The Slave Narrators and the Picaresque Mode: Archetypes for Modern Black Personae." *The Slave's Narrative*. Eds. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. 283-298.
- O'Brien, John, ed. *Interviews with Black Writers*. New York: Liveright, 1973.
- Ogunyemi, Chikwenye Okonjo. "Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English (1985)." *The Womanist Reader: The First Quarter*

- Quarter Century of Womanist Thought*. Ed. Layli Phillips. New York: Routledge, 2006. 21-36.
- Olney, James. "‘I Was Born’: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature." *The Slave’s Narrative*. Eds. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. 148-175.
- . "The Value of Autobiography for Comparative Studies: African vs. Western Autobiography." *African American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. William L. Andrews. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1993. 212-223.
- Olwell, Robert. *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects: The Culture of Power in the South Carolina Low Country, 1740–1790*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998.
- Ousby, Ian, ed. *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- Page, Yolanda Williams, ed. *Encyclopedia of African American Women Writers*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2007.
- Painter, Nell Irvin. "Introduction." *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth; A Bondswoman of Olden Time, With a History of Her Labors and Correspondence Drawn from Her ‘Book of Life’*. New York: Penguin Books, 1998. vii-xx.
- Peterson, Carla L. "Doers of the Word:" *African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830-1880)*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995.
- Phillips, Layli, ed. *The Womanist Reader: The First Quarter Quarter Century of Womanist Thought*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Plasa, Carl, and Betty J. Ring, eds. *The Discourse of Slavery: Aphra Behn to Toni Morrison*. London: Routledge, 1994.

- Pryse, Marjorie, and Hortense Spillers, eds. *Conjuring: Black Women Writers and Literary Tradition*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985.
- Reyes, Angelita Dianne. *Mothering Across Cultures: Postcolonial Representations*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001.
- Ripley, C. Peter, ed. *The Black Abolitionist Papers*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985.
- Rivkin, Julie and Michael Ryan, eds. *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Malden (Mass.) & Oxford: Blackwell, 1999.
- Ronda, Bruce A., ed. *Letters of Elizabeth Palmer Peabody: American Renaissance Woman*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1984.
- Rose, Willie Lee. *Slavery and Freedom*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982.
- Sánchez-Eppler, Karen. "Bodily Bonds: The Intersecting Rhetorics of Feminism and Abolition." *Representations* 24 (Fall 1988): 28-59.
- Scott, Patricia Bell. "Debunking Sapphire: Toward a Non-Racist and Non-Sexist Social Science." *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*. Eds. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith. New York: The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 1982. 85-92.
- Sedano Vivanco, Sonia. "Literary Influences on Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself*." *thirdspace*, vol. 2, issue 2 (March 2003): 20 pars  
<<http://www.thirdspace.ca/articles/vivanco.htm>>
- . "Representación de los niños mulatos esclavos y sus relaciones con personas de raza blanca en la literatura norteamericana." *La Familia en África y la Diáspora Africana*. Eds. Olga Barrios and Frances Smith Foster. Salamanca: Ediciones Almar, 2004.
- Sharpe, Jenny. *Ghosts of Slavery: A Literary Archaeology of Black Women's Lives*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

- Sieber, Harry. *The Picaresque*. London: Methuen, 1977.
- Sievers, Stefanie. *Liberating Narratives: The Authorization of Black Female Voices in African American Women Writers' Novels of Slavery*. Hamburg: LIT, 1999.
- Simmonds, Lorna. "Slave Higglery in Jamaica 1780-1834." *Jamaica Journal* 20, no. 1. (February-April 1987): 31-38.
- Sizer, Lyde Cullen. *The Political Work of Northern Women Writers and the Civil War, 1850-1872*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000.
- Smith, Barbara. *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*. Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000.
- . *The Truth That Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender and Freedom*. Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998.
- Smith, Valerie. "Introduction." *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Harriet Jacobs. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. xxvii-xl.
- . "'Loopholes of Retreat': Architecture and Ideology in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*." *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Meridian, 1990. 212-226.
- . *Not Just Race, Not Just Gender: Black Feminist Readings*. New York: Routledge, 1998.
- . *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987.
- Smitherman, Geneva. *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997.
- Sorisio, Carolyn. "'Never Before Had My Puny Arm Felt Half So Strong': Corporeality and Transcendence in Jacobs's *Incidents*." *Fleshing out America: Race, Gender,*

*and the Politics of the Body in American Literature, 1833-1879*. Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2002. 202-225.

Southern, Eileen, and Josephine Wright. *African-American Traditions in Song, Sermon, Tale, and Dance, 1600s-1920: An Annotated Bibliography of Literature, Collections, and Artworks*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1990.

Starling, Marion Wilson. *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History*. Boston: G. K. Hall and Co., 1981.

Stepto, Robert B. *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1979.

Stetson, Erlene. "Studying Slavery: Some Literary and Pedagogical Considerations on the Black Female Slave." *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*. Eds. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith. New York: The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 1982. 61-84.

Takaki, Ronald. *Violence and the Black Imagination*. New York: Capricorn, 1972.

Tate, Claudia. *Black Women Writers at Work*. New York: Continuum, 1983.

Taylor, Yuval. "Introduction." *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives*. 2 Vols. Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1999. xv-xxxviii.

Tierney, Helen, ed. *Women's Studies Encyclopedia*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999.

Tillyard, E.M.W. *The Elizabethan World Picture*. London: Chatto, 1960.

Tompkins, Jane. *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Toppin, E. A. "The Journal of Charlotte Forten." *The Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 22, no. 4 (Autumn, 1953): 498-500.

- Traylor, Eleanor W. "Naming the Unnamed: African American Criticism." *Black Books Bulletin: Words Work* 16.1-2 (1993-1994): 64-75.
- Tushnet, Mark V. *Slave Law in the American South: State v. Mann in History and Literature*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003.
- Twagilimana, Aimable. *Race and Gender in the Making of an African American Literary Tradition*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1997.
- Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens. Womanist Prose*. London: The Women's Press, 1984.
- . "One Child of One's Own: A Meaningful Digression within the Work(s)—An Excerpt." *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*. Eds. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith. New York: The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 1982. 37-44.
- Wallace-Sanders, Kimberly. *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008.
- Warner, Anne Bradford. "Carnival Laughter: Resistance in *Incidents*." *Harriet Jacobs and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: New Critical Essays*. Ed. Deborah M. Garfield and Rafia Zafar. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 216-232.
- . "Santa Claus Ain't a Real Man. *Incidents* and Gender." *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts*. Eds. Anne Goodwyn Jones, and Susan Van D'Elden Donaldson. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997. 185-200.
- Washington, Mary Helen. *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women 1860-1960*. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1987.
- . "'The Darkened Eye Restored': Notes Toward a Literary History of Black Women." *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Meridian, 1990. 30-43.



West, Traci C. *Wounds of the Spirit: Black Women, Violence, and Resistance Ethics*. New York: New York University Press, 1999.

White, Deborah Gray. *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*. New York: Norton, 1985.

Wideman, John Edgar. "Charles Chesnutt and the WPA Narratives: The Oral and Literate Roots of Afro-American Literature." *The Slave's Narrative*. Eds. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. 59-78.

Wilentz, Gay. *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992.

Williams, Heather Andrea. *Self-taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005.

Williams, Sherley Anne. "Some Implications of Womanist Theory." *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Meridian, 1990. 68-75.

Winks, Robin W. "The Making of a Fugitive Slave Narrative: Josiah Henson and Uncle Tom—A Case Study". *The Slave's Narrative*. Eds. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. 112-146.

Wise, Steven M. *Though the Heavens May Fall: The Landmark Trial that Led to the End of Human Slavery*. Cambridge, Ma: Da Capo Press, 2005.

Woodward, C. Vann. "History from Slave Sources." *The Slave's Narrative*. Eds. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. 48-59.

Yellin, Jean Fagan. *Harriet Jacobs: A Life*. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2004.

- . "Text and Contexts of Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*." *The Slave's Narrative*. Eds. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. 262-282.
- . "Through Her Brother's Eyes: *Incidents* and 'A True Tale'." *Harriet Jacobs and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: New Critical Essays*. Ed. Deborah M. Garfield and Rafia Zafar. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 44-56.
- . *Women and Sisters: The Antislavery Feminists in Moral Choices*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.
- , and Cynthia D. Bond. *The Pen is Ours: A Listing of Writings by and about African-American Women Before 1910 with Secondary Bibliography to the Present*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

### 3. WEBSITES

- Africans in America*. 1998. WGBH Educational Foundation. 9 Nov. 2007  
<<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/home.html>>
- An Online Reference Guide to African American History*. 2007. BlackPast.org: Remembered & Reclaimed. 20 March 2009. <[www.blackpast.org](http://www.blackpast.org)>
- Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*. 2001. The Library of Congress. 1 Aug. 2008. <<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml>>
- Digital Schomburg African American Women Writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*. 1999. The New York Public Library. 30 Sept. 2007  
<[http://digital.nypl.org/schomburg/writers\\_aa19/](http://digital.nypl.org/schomburg/writers_aa19/)>
- Documenting the American South*. 2004. University Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 24 Sept. 2007 <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/index.html>>

*Fugitive Slave Act (1850)*. 2006. The National Center for Public Policy Research. 30 Sept. 2007 <[www.nationalcenter.org/FugitiveSlaveAct.html](http://www.nationalcenter.org/FugitiveSlaveAct.html)>

Handler, Jerome S., and Michael L. Tuite Jr. *The Atlantic Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Americas: A Visual Record*. 2006. Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and University of Virginia. 10 Jan. 2008.  
<<http://hitchcock.itc.virginia.edu/Slavery/index.php>>

*Harriet Jacobs Papers Project*. 2008. Pace University. 3 March 2009.  
<<http://www.harrietjacobspapers.org>>

*Harriet Jacobs: Selected Writings and Correspondence*. Gilder Lehrman Center. Yale University. 1 August 2008 <<http://www.yale.edu/glc/harriet/03.htm>>

Karkavelas, Will. *African American Resources: A Library of African American Culture, Education, History and Literature*. 2000. Osaka University. 15 Dec. 2008.  
<<http://www.lang.osaka-u.ac.jp/~krkvls/afroindex.html>>

“Literature in the United States 1734-1860.” *CSADP (Cultural Studies in the African Diaspora Project) Research Topics*. 2007. University of California, Los Angeles. Center for African American Studies. 1 July 2007.  
<[http://www.bunchecenter.ucla.edu/diaspora/research\\_topics/american\\_literature.htm](http://www.bunchecenter.ucla.edu/diaspora/research_topics/american_literature.htm)>

*Oxford African American Studies Center: The Online Authority on the African American Experience*. 2006-2008. Oxford University Press. 17 April 2008.  
<<http://www.oxfordaasc.com/public/>>

*Slavery Today*. National Underground Railroad Freedom Center. 2009. Cincinnati, Ohio. 16 April 2009 <<http://www.freedomcenter.org/slavery-today/>>

“Slaves and the Courts (1740-1860).” *American Memory*. 2002. The Library of Congress. 30 Sept. 2007  
<<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/sthtml/sthome.html>>

---

*Society for the Study of American Women Writers*. 2007. Lehigh University. 9 Nov. 2007 <<http://www.lehigh.edu/~dek7/SSAWW/index.htm>>

*The Declaration of Independence*. 2006. The National Center for Public Policy Research. 14 Oct. 2007  
<[www.nationalcenter.org/DeclarationofIndependence.html](http://www.nationalcenter.org/DeclarationofIndependence.html)>

*The Harriet Wilson Project*. 2003. The Harriet Wilson Project. 28 Nov. 2008  
<<http://www.harrietwilsonproject.org/>>

*The Underground Railroad*. 2006. The National Center for Public Policy Research. 30 Sept. 2007 <[www.nationalcenter.org/UndergroundRailroad.html](http://www.nationalcenter.org/UndergroundRailroad.html)>