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Shedding Light Upon the Shadows:  
An Examination of the Use of Voice as Resistance  
and Reclamation of the Black Woman from Enslavement to Freedom

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A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of Liberal Studies  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

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by  
Courtney E. Brooks  
August 2006

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Keywords: Slavery, Women's Studies, African-American Studies, Nineteenth-Century

## ABSTRACT

Shedding Light Upon the Shadows:

An Examination of the Use of Voice as Resistance

and Reclamation of the Black Woman from Enslavement to Freedom

by

Courtney Brooks

My research examines the enslaved black woman's reclamation of self through the use of voice and resistance from enslavement into freedom. I argue that the enslaved black woman's voice was one that grew stronger and louder, in an effort to have her story heard, through her attempts of reclamation of self and transition from slave to a free woman. I begin with an introduction to the purpose of my research. Chapter one describes my approach to my research. Chapter two describes the conditions of slavery for black women. Chapter three describes enslaved black women's mechanisms of resistance. Chapter four examines the reclamation of self in slave-made quilts and the controversial Underground Railroad Quilt Code. Chapter five examines the reclamation of voice in Harriet Jacobs' narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, written under a pseudonym, Linda Brent, after she escaped from slavery. Chapter six examines the reclamation of womanhood in Dr. Anna Julia Cooper's text, *A Voice from the South*. My conclusion describes how these historical events are still relevant to present-day society.

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Finally, I want to thank my family, whose experiences allowed me to be receptive to the voices of the women in my research while also allowing me to find strength within my own.

I'd like to dedicate my thesis in memory of my grandmother, Erma Weaver, who dedicated her life to the constant exchange of learning and teaching. As a little girl, I would sit with my ear to the wall while she taught piano lessons in the next room. It was such an honor when she invited me into that room to sit at that piano bench, where she lovingly opened my eyes up to endless possibilities. I like to think that she guided me through the endless readings and immense appreciation of the words of these remarkable women discussed in my thesis.

*Slaves believed that their earthly shadows lingered behind unless the appropriate burial rituals were performed...Slavery continues to haunt the present because its stories, particularly those of slave women, have been improperly buried.<sup>1</sup>*

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Slavery in the American South was a complex system of racial and class oppression rooted in Western philosophical and religious traditions that reflected the economic interests of elites in the North and South. Scholars of slavery, among them John Blassingame, Kenneth Stampp, Stanley Elkins, and Eugene Genovese have dedicated their historical scholarship to the experiences of slaves, particularly the experiences of males. More recent scholarship, such as Deborah White's breakthrough book *Ain't I A Woman* and Jean Fagan Yellin's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* has demonstrated a shift in academic and public interests in the lives of slaves to include enslaved women's experiences.

A critical element in the reconsideration of the lives of male and female slaves is the slave narrative. Since their initial publication in the nineteenth century, slave narratives have offered exclusive, personal insight into lives of African-Americans. Slave narratives continue to capture the attention of Americans who have responded with interest and curiosity to sensational accounts filled with tales of adventure, drama, and emotion. Abolitionists regarded autobiographical slave accounts as crucial arguments for the humanity of enslaved people.<sup>2</sup>

Elizabeth Alexander argues that any African-American tradition begins against a backdrop of

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<sup>1</sup>Jenny Sharpe, *Ghosts of Slavery: A Literary Archeology of Black Women's Lives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), xi.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Doherty, "Harriet Jacobs' Narrative Strategies: Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl," *The Southern Literary Journal*, 19 (Fall 1986).

oppression, "as well as against a long history of denied literacy in which the legally forbidden word represented a kind of freedom."<sup>3</sup> Slave narratives and autobiographical works by former slaves collectively echo the struggle from slavery into literacy, and ultimately, self-empowerment.<sup>4</sup>

Until very recently, scholars have neglected the slave woman's particular voice, whose story has often been told through collected narratives or white-authored fictions. The absence of examination of the black slave woman's story, as told through her own voice and word, deprives readers of the opportunity to recognize a significant experience within the institution of slavery.<sup>5</sup> While accounts from former slaves have "proved their argumentative worth" through a distinctive perspective, the black slave woman's narrative stands apart as a specific act to reclaim the "self" from the disruption of her physical and metaphysical loss of life (and whose reflections upon her enslavement reveal the socially established racial and sexual dichotomies that influenced and formed her identity within the institution of slavery).<sup>6</sup> bell hooks describes the awareness with which black women experienced subjugation:

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<sup>3</sup>Elizabeth Alexander, "'We Must be About our Father's Business:' Anna Julia Cooper and the In-Corporation of the Nineteenth-Century African-American Woman Intellectual," *Signs* 20 (Winter 1995): 343.

<sup>4</sup> Joanne M. Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition within a Tradition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 16.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," in *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, ed. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (New York: The Feminist Press, 1982), 159.

<sup>6</sup> Jacqueline Goldsby, "'I Disguised My Hand': Writing Versions of the Truth in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and John Jacobs' 'A True Tale of Slavery,'" in *Harriet Jacobs and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: New Critical Essays*, ed. Deborah Garfield and Rafia Zafar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 13; and Braxton, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," 2.

Nineteenth century black women were more aware of sexist oppression than any other female group in American society has ever been. Not only were they the female group most victimized by sexist discrimination and sexist oppression, their powerlessness was such that resistance on their part could rarely take the form of organized and collective action.<sup>7</sup>

The world of white men defined the life of a slave woman. Jennifer Morgan contends that African women were enslaved in large numbers and performed hard labor.<sup>8</sup> Morgan also argues that African women served an essential ideological function, that is, their reproductive abilities made them even more valuable as they could continue the line of slavery. Prior to European invasions and exploitations, African women lived in bodies unmarked by race or foreign conquest.<sup>9</sup> The theft of the African woman from her land and body forced her to live in a world of "fragmented systems of knowledge," where she was neither a stranger nor a native.<sup>10</sup>

As a slave, the black woman lived a life of two identities that were developed and kept separate from one another. Her status as a slave reduced her to chattel, another device to perform hard labor, while her status as slave simultaneously forced her body to comply with the sexual urges of her master. Perhaps equally limiting in her role as a slave was the silence imposed upon her by whites. The nature of slavery denied enslaved black women public opportunities of voice, choice, or perspective. However, underneath the public silence of the slave woman, visible only to her fellow slaves, was her vibrancy and creativity.

Traditionally, American culture has been equated with tradition set forth by elite white males, a society that has ignored and ultimately demeaned the lives of African-American

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<sup>7</sup> bell hooks, "Black Women and Feminism," in *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 161.

<sup>8</sup> Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.



women.<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Fox-Genovese argues that the dominant culture has expressed "an arrogant disdain for the contributions of women, African-Americans, and other to their particular cultures; worse, it has been blind and deaf to their explorations of the human condition."<sup>12</sup> Judy Long argues that women's accounts, whether in the form of narratives or autobiographies, provide insight into realities unlike those authored by men. Long identifies the descriptions of daily activities included in women's narratives as essential to recounting the historical, social, and economic themes distinct to women's lives.<sup>13</sup> According to Long "daily work is a large part of the reality that shapes women's subjectivity, a reality subjects seek to convey in their writing. In making a record of their daily lives they are making a record of women's consciousness."<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Long argues the accounts of women's lives stand in contrast to those of men:

Where male subjects portray themselves as separated, women represent themselves as connected. Where men's stories are set in the public eye, women chronicle private scenes. When men prune their lives down to a terse outline, women's accounts remain "messy." where men claim a destination, women record process. Where men universalize their experience, women's narrative remain contextualized. Women's [accounts] differ from those of men in terms of plot, content, and form. The content of women's self-referential writing requires us to analyze connection, dailiness, and emotion work. These elements . . . have subversive and emancipatory potential . . . what is learned from women's lives can advance understanding of other lives.<sup>15</sup>

This thesis represents my endeavor to present the personal experiences of the enslaved black woman, as I think the subjection of slave women translates into a larger dialogue on the literal and metaphorical oppression of women. In my research, I identify specific mechanisms of

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<sup>11</sup>Elizabeth Fox Genovese, "Between Individualism and Fragmentation: American Culture and the New Literary Studies of Race and Gender," *American Quarterly*, 42 (1990), 8.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>13</sup>Judy Long, *Telling Women's Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 45-47.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

oppression of African-American women during their enslavement and identify means through which they sought to resist their masters. I argue that the enslaved black woman's voice was one that grew stronger and louder, in an effort to have her story heard, through her attempts of reclamation of self and transition from slave to a free woman.

The first chapter describes the feminist approach through which I analyzed the experiences and personal accounts of enslaved black women. The next two chapters explore collective experiences of the enslaved black woman. Chapter Two explores the confines of gender, defined by white men, within which enslaved black women existed, specifically the sexual negotiations that transpired between slave and master. Chapter Three examines the covert social, physical, and economic mechanisms of resistance employed by enslaved black women. The remaining chapters examine more specific forms of resistance. Chapter Four carefully examines the anonymous and collective voice of slave women as they subverted traditional domestic duties to create a communicative system through quiltmaking. There is no agreement among scholars of the authenticity of the quilt code. My research supports the idea of the quilt code, but I also examine the overall importance of creativity and tradition through material culture, which I think offers a greater understanding and appreciation of the domestic arts enslaved black women used as forms of expression. Chapter Five examines the communicative style of Harriet Jacobs, who published her well-known narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* under the name Linda Brent. Jacobs' text is unique in her use of the written word, a skill traditionally held by white elitists, as a means to criticize the nature of slavery and its oppression of women. Chapter Six studies the theories of Anna Julia Cooper, a woman born into and emancipated from slavery. Her writing asserts her status as a southern lady and also as a pious woman who demands that the devout nature of black women be recognized as equal, if not

superior, to other members of society. Here, Cooper demands access to the church by reclaiming her womanhood, a quality denied to black women by white society.

Collectively, the enslaved women examined in this study share the common desire to escape their social, physical, and economic oppression to better themselves and to aid other slaves. Separately, each woman attempts to extract personal freedom by reclaiming qualities stolen from them by slavery. For the anonymous women who made quilts, theirs was the effort to implement tradition, style, and even messages into the ordinary task of making utilitarian goods. For Jacobs, hers was the effort to purge her secrets of slavery on her own terms through the use of her own language. For Cooper, hers was the effort to align black women with Christian morals and principles of piety and devotion. My goal in devoting attention to the collective, as well as individual experiences of enslaved black women, is to transcend the tendency to generalize history as a universal male experience and, most importantly, to demonstrate how enslaved black women transformed their own lives through personalized action and written word.

*Feminist perspectives refine connection, empathy, and parity into the tools of a new approach to telling women's lives.*<sup>1</sup>

## CHAPTER 2

### APPROACH: A FEMINIST FRAMEWORK THROUGH WHICH TO EXAMINE AND REVEAL WOMEN'S LIVES

I have based the approach I used to examine the lives of enslaved black women on a feminist framework that encompasses an evaluation of my personal connection to the subject, a political consideration of slavery, and a sociological concern for equality. The foundation of the framework that allows my connection to the subject of enslaved black women is based on Judy Long's theory of a feminist approach explicated in her text *Telling Women's Lives*. Long argues that feminist perspective "creates a link between the regained subjectivity of the narrator and that of the subject," which serves as both the ground and product of the refined connection, empathy, and parity as new tools toward an approach to examining women's lives.<sup>2</sup>

Long argues that the subject, narrator, reader, and text are inextricably linked. Long recognizes that her approach to women's narratives is uncommon, but necessary to gain a greater understanding of women's lives and to comprehend why scholars are academically drawn to the experiences of others. Long argues that a narrator's subjectivity within a feminist framework is acknowledged, analyzed, and developed as a tool in terms of the narrator's introspection, proximity to the subject, self-analysis, and consideration of feelings as information.<sup>3</sup> I find

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<sup>1</sup> Judy Long, *Telling Women's Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 121.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 119-121.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

Long's feminist consideration of the relationship between researcher and speaker an appropriate starting point upon which to begin my own consideration of the subject I am researching.

Long contends that feelings are invaluable guides that lead feminist scholars closer to their subjects.<sup>4</sup> My closeness to the subject of enslaved black women has been an experience that has grown since I first began my pursuit of higher education. I began my academic career at Berea College in Berea, Kentucky, founded in 1855 as one of the nation's first abolitionist schools. Berea College offers students opportunity to pursue dignified work as a means to compensate for the cost of education for average to lower-income families. Dignified labor served as an opportunity for students' self-empowerment, as manual labor (as described by the school) and slavery were practically identical services during the antebellum period. When I began my education at Berea College in 1999 I was expected to complete my tenure of dignified labor while completing coursework toward my bachelor's degree. One of my classes put me face to face with the theory of enslaved black women's resistance through the use of handmade quilts. This later began as the starting point of my thesis research. I was amazed by the idea of slave women taking such a proactive role in aiding the freedom of others. I shared the information with my mother, who was beginning her new hobby of quilting to fill her time since her children were in college, and she expressed similar amazement. Later I was surprised with a handmade quilt of her own making that featured the patterns that were reportedly used by slave women to aid in the escape of fellow slaves.

Had I not had such a personal reaction toward the resistance of enslaved black women through the use of quilts, my thesis research might have turned out quite differently. Unknowingly, I followed Long's pattern of treating feelings as information, as I used my feelings

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

to shape the tools of original analysis.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, my being a native Appalachian whose upbringing most likely prepared me for my attraction to the prospect of quilts as more than utilitarian goods. My parents were born in the early 1940s and raised in rural farm areas, surviving by modest means. Their experiences, particularly my mother's, allowed me to cultivate an appreciation for handiwork for its efficacy and creativity. Had I been raised in an upper-class family, or in a family with no consideration of their family's past, my interpretation of quilts may have been quite different. My interpersonal connection to quilts supports Long's theory of a "more peer-like self-presentation of the narrator" that "facilitates reciprocity in the subject-narrator relationship" as a relationship of collaboration rather than control.<sup>6</sup>

The relationship of control rather than collaboration is explained in Kate Millett's theory of sexual politics. She uses the term "politics" to refer to "power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another."<sup>7</sup> Millett's theory accurately clarifies the relationship between master and slave. Millett argues that sex is a category with political implications, which include ideology, biology, sociology, class, economy, and force.<sup>8</sup> Millett also demands attention to socially-defined groups, among them races, castes, classes, and sexes.<sup>9</sup> By considering Millett's political implications of sex through race, caste, class, and sex, the perception of the black woman through the eyes of nineteenth-century slaveholders can be evaluated.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>7</sup> Kate Millett, "Theory of Sexual Politics," in *Sexual Politics* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 23.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Millett's arguments explained on pages 23 through 43.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 24.

Ideologically, sexual politics, according to Millett, “obtains consent through the ‘socialization’ of both sexes to basic patriarchal politics with regard to temperament, role, and status.”<sup>10</sup> The temperament, role, and status of the enslaved black woman worked cooperatively not only to objectify her, but also remind her of her sexual vulnerability to her master as his property. Sexual politics assumes the essentialist psycho-social distinctions of religion, popular attitude, and science to “rest upon the biological differences between the sexes, so that where culture is acknowledged as shaping behavior, it is said to do more than cooperate with nature.”<sup>11</sup> Slaveholders defended slavery through biblical scripture, while the popular secular attitudes maintained that the master could treat his slaves any way necessary to assert superiority, inherent through the essentialist belief of the advanced white body. The defense of slavery easily translated into the culture of the American South and helped shape the behaviors of masters, mistresses, and slaves. Sociologically, sexual politics is retained through the family, “patriarchy’s chief institution,” which elicits “control and conformity where political and other authorities are insufficient.”<sup>12</sup> Whites recognized kinship through the male for white citizens, but created a separate sociological and legal recognition of kinship through the mother for slaves and thus symbolically separated how families should be defined in the antebellum South. Tracing lineage through the slave mother negated the idea of the slave family and allowed white men to deny their offspring through their female slaves.

In terms of class, Millett claims, sexual politics forces men of lower social classes to “more often share power with the women of his class who are economically productive.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 26-27.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 36.

Millett's consideration of class depends on her interpretation of economics, where "women, as non-persons without legal standing, were permitted no actual economic existence."<sup>14</sup> Masters aligned the enslaved black woman's manual labor alongside the enslaved black man. The work of slaves was not considered in terms of age, sex, or ability, but as the work of a group whose production could be economically calculated. Pregnant women, nursing women, and injured women were expected to produce at the same levels as their fellow slaves for the master's financial profit, which in turn ensured the preservation of his own class status.

In terms of force, Millett considers sexual politics to "link feelings of cruelty with sexuality, the latter often equated with evil and with power."<sup>15</sup> The status of the enslaved black woman was one created through force: enslaved black women were placed into their socially limiting positions by force, and within those boundaries frequently were sexually violated by whites. What is most incredible in the consideration of the enslaved black woman is that despite patriarchy's radical attempts to keep her immobile in her status as chattel, she still contested the structure of society that oppressed her in an effort to be recognized as a woman.

Barbara Welter depicts white women in the nineteenth century as hostages in their own home, their social limitations reinforced by society and reflected by messages in magazines, religious convictions, and literature of the time.<sup>16</sup> She describes the attributes of "true womanhood" as maintained through piety, the source of a woman's virtue and strength; purity, the essence of a woman's innocence and femininity; submissiveness, the reason for a woman's

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>15</sup> Millett, "Theory of Sexual Politics," 44.

<sup>16</sup> Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," in *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1976), 21.



obedience and passivity; and domesticity, the perpetuation of her comfort and morality.<sup>17</sup> The attributes of "true womanhood" maintained the oppression of women, because to deny any of the attributes was unnatural or unfeminine, and relegated a woman to "some lower order" of society.<sup>18</sup> "True womanhood" forced women into dependency on males, because women could not fulfill their womanly responsibilities without fathers or husbands. Many feminist scholars have compared nineteenth-century definitions of white womanhood to slavery, and their scholarship has revealed that accessing white womanhood was appealing to black women, as it would have recognized their femaleness, protected their bodies from being violated, and provided the security of being part of a legitimized family.

Millett maintains that because certain groups have "no representation in a number of recognized political structures . . . their position tends to be so stable, their oppression so continuous."<sup>19</sup> For black women during slavery, Reconstruction, the nineteenth and twentieth-century era of Jim Crow, and into the present, sexual politics as defined by patriarchy have continued to label and demean the experience of black women as less than significant than their white counterparts. At the core of her oppression is sexual dominion, which Millett asserts is "the most pervasive ideology of our culture" through its most fundamental concept of power.<sup>20</sup> Black women recognized the injustices slavery forced upon them and demanded racial and sexual justice by subverting patriarchal power through resistance.

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<sup>17</sup> See Welter's explanation on pages 21 through 33.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

*"By looking through the prism of her actual experience, we transform our vision of the Old South and, correspondingly, our understanding of the nature of slavery and sex in the American past."<sup>1</sup>*

### CHAPTER 3

#### GENDER IN CAPTIVITY: A BRIEF EXAMINATION OF CONDITIONS UNDER SLAVERY FOR BLACK WOMEN

Slavery in the American South existed as a form of captivity that lived well into the nineteenth century. The roots of slavery grew from a desire for mastery on the part of whites and their concern for ownership was forced upon Africans to the extent that they were taken from their native countries and brought as property to a new land. Eugene Genovese describes slavery as a system of class and racial rule that rested upon the principle of subordination and that in the American South fostered a complex paternalism that grew from the need to justify a system of exploitation and represented "an attempt to overcome the fundamental contradiction in slavery: the impossibility of the slaves' ever becoming the things they were supposed to be."<sup>2</sup> An extension of the paternalistic model is evident, based on assumptions that slaves did not construct permanent marriages, establish familial ties, or value kinship networks.<sup>3</sup> Stephanie Camp describes slavery, the role of subordinate and captive, in terms of control of physical and social mobility through "cultural alienation, reduction to the status of property . . . threat of sale, denial of the fruits of one's labor, and subjugation to the force, power, and will of another human being."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), xi-xii.

<sup>2</sup>Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 3-5.

<sup>3</sup>Wilma Dunaway, *The African-American Family in Slavery and Emancipation* (Cambridge: University Press, 2003), 53.

<sup>4</sup>Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 12.

Herbert Gutman's research expands upon Genovese's description of slavery through consideration of the transformative identity of Africans to African-Americans as an attempt to understand "*what* enslavement *did to* African-Americans."<sup>5</sup> In 1700, around 26,000 Africans and their immediate descendants lived in North American colonies, a number that increased naturally through live births to 500,000 by 1870.<sup>6</sup> Between 1740 and 1780, with the addition of Africans brought to the colonies approximately 210,000 Africans entered slavery, and by 1861, the total of Africans in slave trades totaled 400,000.<sup>7</sup> Africans were initially reluctant to adapt to the role as slaves, as newly self-appointed white masters denied their right to act from the "content of mind, memory, logic, and language" of their people.<sup>8</sup> However, in order to make a new life possible, Africans-in-slavery realized that while their masters imposed denial of their identity, denial of self was not an option. Africans drew upon their old cultures to develop new patterns adaptive to their new environment and also drew upon their common experience to develop new communities shaped around the awareness of immediate family and large kin groups that assisted in the transition into the emergence of generational links between slave families and the development of their own social classes.<sup>9</sup>

Before examining how slaves resisted their oppressors, the conditions under which slaves existed must first be considered. This chapter focuses on the social, economic, and physical constraints that white society imposed upon the black woman's body as well as enslaved black

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<sup>5</sup>Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom: 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 31.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 328, 340.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 328, 338.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 329.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 329, 343.

women's personal negotiations under such conditions. Black slave women experienced a more complex system of slavery through the paradigm of perceived sexual and maternal qualities. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese describes the life of a slave woman as a compromise between her African past and her American present, which denied her consideration as a woman because of her status as a piece of property.<sup>10</sup> The model of white womanhood within the South denied the enslaved woman protection from physical and emotional exploitation and abuse delivered by their white masters or fellow male slaves and, as a consequence, slave women could not enjoy the forms of protection offered from males - white or black - as she was exploited through her status as property.<sup>11</sup>

Despite popular interest in the history and condition of slavery, the full consideration of slave women's lives has been negligible.<sup>12</sup> Angela Davis remarks that when attention is given to slave women, the only focus is on her sexual relations with white men.<sup>13</sup> Wilma Dunaway contends that there was less than one female to every male slave in the South, but in slave-selling states, there was more than one female slave for every bondsman.<sup>14</sup> Stephanie Camp argues that slave women occupied spaces and fulfilled responsibilities different from those of male slaves.<sup>15</sup> Recent feminist scholarship has looked beyond women's oppression and considered specific

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<sup>10</sup>Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 298.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 296.

<sup>12</sup>Richard Steckel, "Women, Work, and Health Under Plantation Slavery in the US," in *More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*, ed. David Gaspar and Darlene Hines (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 43; emphasis in previous scholarship has been on males. See, for example, Kenneth Stampp's *The Peculiar Institution*, Stanley Elkins' *Slavery*, John Blassingame's *The Slave Community*, and Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll*.

<sup>13</sup>Angela Davis, *Women, Class, and Race* (New York: Random House, 1981), 3-4.

<sup>14</sup>Dunaway, *The African-American Family in Slavery and Emancipation*, 123.

<sup>15</sup>Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 32.

conditions affecting her circumstances. Richard Steckel contends that the lives of women who existed within slavery, "is a topic worthy of studying in its own right, for learning, among other things, about performance under adversity and conditions that shaped life after emancipation."<sup>16</sup>

Without black women slavery would not have thrived in the South, since the Atlantic slave-trade was outlawed in 1807. Black women unwillingly maintained slavery and, ultimately, a large portion of the South's economy. African-American women bore enough children to make their population the only self-reproducing slave population in the Western Hemisphere.<sup>17</sup> Despite her reproductive abilities, motherhood was a role denied to enslaved black women by the slave master who took control of her body and her children. The black woman gave birth to children fathered by another slave and who were raised either on their home plantations or sold for a profit. She also gave birth to the children of her master, physical evidence that the black slave women served several purposes: the laborer, the producer, and the sex object.

The enslaved black woman's purpose as a sex object was perpetuated through the "Jezebel" characterization of the black woman, a woman "governed almost entirely by her libido."<sup>18</sup> The Jezebel image of black women, White contends, originated when Europeans traveled to Africa and witnessed the carrying out of many tribal and cultural traditions, among them dancing and polygamy, which were catalysts for the perception of the African woman's "uncontrollable lust."<sup>19</sup> As the myth of African women's lust traveled from Europe into America, along with captured slaves, white male slave owners came to believe that black women

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<sup>16</sup>Steckel, "Women, Work, and Health," 43.

<sup>17</sup>Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 322.

<sup>18</sup>Deborah White, *Ar'N't I A Woman?* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 29.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

“invited sexual overtures . . . and that any resistance they displayed was mere feigning.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, black slave women experienced an escalated fear of rape by white men. The presence of biracial slave children is evidence that sexual relations between black women and white men took place, but rather than recognizing sexual abuse of black women, whites “blamed them for initiating sexual relations with white men, and, as a result, portrayed black women as seducers.”<sup>21</sup> Shirley Yee relates that in 1852 the governor of South Carolina, James Henry Hammond, further perpetuated this image of black women by publicly insisting that most prostitutes were black women. Furthermore, he argued that prostitution was not degrading for black women because they possessed no moral consciousness or sensibility regarding their behavior.<sup>22</sup>

The image of Jezebel starkly contradicted the ideal image of the Southern white woman who was genteel and refined. Yee indicates antebellum beliefs concerning women's sexuality designated women as either good or evil, where middle and upper-class white women were inherently “good” and their black female counterparts inherently “evil.”<sup>23</sup> Middle and upper-class white women wore layers of clothing, as it was socially unacceptable to reveal their arms or legs; in contrast, black slave women laboring in the fields wore old, worn clothes, and often pulled up their skirts to better accommodate their physical labor, revealing their legs.<sup>24</sup> White draws comparisons between the daily images of black women laboring in the fields to white

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>21</sup> Shirley Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 42-3.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>23</sup> Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists*, 41.

<sup>24</sup> White, *Ar’N’I A Woman?* 42-3.

male slave owners exposing slave women's skin during beatings.<sup>25</sup> There are many accounts of white men's brutality toward black women during beatings, including their being completely stripped, bent over objects, or even forced to pose on their hands and knees while being whipped. These images reveal the perverse nature of white slave owners in their interactions with their female slaves. Jacqueline Jones argues that in the eyes of her master, a black woman was a worker and a female capable of fulfilling his "sexual or aggressive" desires.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, Stephanie Camp argues that the cruelty of the master twisted the intimacies of sexual contact, exposing the enslaved woman's private body into a public event.<sup>27</sup>

According to Jones, sexual maturity marked "a crucial turning point" for young slave women, "a time when their life experiences diverged quite explicitly from those of their brothers."<sup>28</sup> Slave mothers tried to warn their daughters to defend their sexuality from their masters, as their individual choice of sexual relations was the only right they might be able to protect.<sup>29</sup> Davis argues that female slaves were vulnerable to all forms of sexual coercion, while Charles Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. contend that any attractiveness possessed by a female slave "exposed them to the danger of becoming doubly victims, first, to the corrupting urgencies of the white males around them, and then to the jealous dislike of the females."<sup>30</sup> Rape then

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>26</sup>Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1985), 20.

<sup>27</sup>Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 33.

<sup>28</sup>Jones, *Labor of Love*, 32.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>30</sup>Davis, *Women, Race, and Class*, 7; and Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Slave's Narratives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 22.

emerged as an "uncamouflaged" expression of the slaveholder's profit and control over black women's bodies, according to Angela Davis.<sup>31</sup>

The sexual relationship between a black woman and white man became one of bartering. Black slave women were forced to use their bodies as a mechanism of negotiation when their masters offered them an ultimatum between engaging in sexual relations and facing another consequence, such as being sold away from their families.<sup>32</sup> Slaveholders understood their power over their female slaves and often intentionally provoked their husbands by raping their wives or impregnating daughters of slaves.<sup>33</sup> Obviously, the master's behavior created tensions between a slave woman and her husband, which often manifested itself in verbal abuse toward children.<sup>34</sup>

Blassingame classifies stories of forced submission contained in slave narratives into one of four categories: concubines, "the rape of pretty girls," forced sexual partners, and prostitution.<sup>35</sup> According to Jones, in 1860 as many as ten percent of mulatto females reported sexual assault, a very conservative number, she contends.<sup>36</sup> Blassingame argues that slave women were forced to offer themselves willingly rather than receive punishment for resistance.<sup>37</sup> Often, masters would select a female slave to be brought into the "big house" where her responsibilities of cooking, housekeeping, or nursing the children placed her within easy reach of

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 34.

<sup>33</sup>Jones, *Labor of Love*, 37.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>35</sup>Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 84.

<sup>36</sup>Jones, *Labor of Love*, 37.

<sup>37</sup>Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 84.



her master.<sup>38</sup> By sexually accommodating their masters, black women unwillingly “breathed life into the image of Jezebel.”<sup>39</sup> Blassingame asserts that the white man's lust for his female slaves was one of the most "serious impediments to the development of morality," in that slave parents were denied the opportunity to protect their children and young girls were exposed to unwilling sexual acts.<sup>40</sup> A consequence of forced sexual relations between black slave women and white slave owners was black women's lack of assurance of their destiny, despite accommodating their masters.

Pregnancy, therefore, was a condition many slave women unwillingly endured. The early nineteenth-century showed an increase in slave reproduction.<sup>41</sup> With the closing of the international slave trade in 1807, planters relied on “natural increase” of their slaves and regarded children as “crops.”<sup>42</sup> Wilma King argues that reproduction among enslaved black women ultimately placed offspring into consideration as monetary profit rather than vulnerable children.<sup>43</sup> Jones and Dunaway's research suggests that a female slave became sexually active after her first menstruation around age fifteen.<sup>44</sup> The average age of a slave girl's first birth was between ages twenty and twenty-one, with the birth of each following child spaced more than two years between pregnancies, which averaged 9.2 live births over the span of childbearing

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<sup>38</sup>Dunaway, *The African-American Family in Slavery and Emancipation*, 121.

<sup>39</sup>Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 34.

<sup>40</sup>Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 83.

<sup>41</sup>Wilma King, ““Suffer with them Till Death:’ Slave Women and their Children in Nineteenth-Century America” in *More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*, ed. David Gaspar and Darlene Hines (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 147.

<sup>42</sup>Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 205.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Jones, *Labor of Love*, 33; and Dunaway, *The African-American Family in Slavery and Emancipation*, 125, 127.

years.<sup>45</sup> In addition, King explains that pregnant slaves lacked prenatal care and resources, and the heavy work they were forced to perform in their condition interfered with the blood supply to the fetus.<sup>46</sup> One of the reasons for lack of prenatal care is that antebellum physicians held medical stereotypes held by antebellum physicians that slave women, belonging to a lower economic class, were physically and physiologically stronger than expectant mothers of the upper class.<sup>47</sup>

Masters manipulated every aspect of a slave woman's pregnancy from conception to the rearing of the child. Labor was often induced from beatings, and after delivery slave women were unable to perform hard labor due to the lack of recovery time from birth and the pain caused by lactation.<sup>48</sup> Ironically, white men warned expecting mothers they wanted neither runts nor girls born onto their plantations.<sup>49</sup> Dunaway maintains that masters intruded upon motherhood by making decisions on childcare that ultimately placed slave children at risk of "malnutrition, injury, and inadequate psychological development."<sup>50</sup> Angela Davis insists that pregnant and nursing women were expected to work and nursing mothers would have to lay their child down, leave their child with another slave, or strap the child to their back.<sup>51</sup> Dunaway's argument supports Davis' claim as her research reveals that pregnant slave women were expected

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<sup>45</sup>Dunaway, *The African-American Family in Slavery and Emancipation*, 125, 127.

<sup>46</sup>Dunaway, *The African-American Family in Slavery and Emancipation*, 148.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 129.

<sup>48</sup>Davis, *Women, Class, and Race*, 9.

<sup>49</sup>Jones, *Labor of Love*, 14.

<sup>50</sup>Dunaway, *The African-American Family in Slavery and Emancipation*, 69.

<sup>51</sup>Davis, *Women, Class, and Race*, 8.

to continue three-quarters of their labor with no relief during the first two trimesters of pregnancy and little relief during the third trimester.<sup>52</sup>

The statistics of slave-births reveal the tragic impact of white intrusion upon black life. Malnutrition, infection brought on by poor sanitation, working through pregnancy, and the quick return to work following delivery were all factors in premature births, low birth weights, and stillborn children within the slave population.<sup>53</sup> In 1850, 51% of deaths among slaves were among children under the age of nine; in comparison to white children, slave infants were twice as likely to die before the age of fourteen.<sup>54</sup> Masters continued their intrusion upon the maternal role of slave mothers by independent discipline and authority.<sup>55</sup> Denied any pre- or post-natal care, the slave woman suffered through her pregnancies, deprived of the joys of impending motherhood, as she could never be certain of the fate of her child.

Another situation that affected the status of a slave woman was the level of jealousy or hostility from her mistress. After a white male slave owner married, the new bride might develop suspicions of her husband's behavior and have the slave in question sold to maintain her husband's fidelity.<sup>56</sup> One of the most important aspects of the sexual relationship between the black woman and the white man was the complete underscoring of the patriarchal structure of white society in the South.<sup>57</sup> Another source of white women's contempt toward black slave women was the varying pigment of black women's skin. A respectable white woman was very

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<sup>52</sup>Dunaway, *The African-American Family in Slavery and Emancipation*, 129-30.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 141.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 74-5.

<sup>56</sup>Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 35.

<sup>57</sup>Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists*, 43.

pale, as dark skin was indicative of sun exposure during labor. Black slave woman's pigmentation varied from extremely dark to very light. White women regarded light-skinned slave women as an additional threat, as they resembled the white woman so closely, creating a presumed greater temptation for the white man.<sup>58</sup> Many white women simply endured their husbands' infidelity to maintain their social status and prevent outsiders any insight toward their husband's behavior. Of course, this did not stifle their collective belief that white men and black women conspired to victimize them, nor eliminate jealousy of black women by her white female counterpart.<sup>59</sup>

A contrasting, and equally absurd, stereotype of the black woman is the image of the "Mammy."<sup>60</sup> Catherine Clinton asserts that white southerners created Mammy as a counterpoint to Jezebel in an effort to "redeem the relationship between black women and white men within slave society."<sup>61</sup> Angela Davis argues that the creation of Mammy (and her more recent counterpart, Aunt Jemima) presumes to capture, however erroneously, the essence of the black woman's role within slavery.<sup>62</sup> Mammy represented an asexual, pious, domestic authority; one who maintained a household and raised children better than anyone, but who simultaneously maintained power over her community.<sup>63</sup> Angela Mitchell describes Mammy in terms of her

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<sup>58</sup>White, *Ar'N't I A Woman?* 46.

<sup>59</sup>Victoria Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 37.

<sup>60</sup> White, *Ar'N't I A Woman?* 47. According to White, the term "Mammy" is believed to have originated in records kept following the Civil War.

<sup>61</sup>Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 202.

<sup>62</sup>Davis, *Women, Class, and Race*, 5.

<sup>63</sup>Angelyn Mitchell, *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 25.

“cultural currency” and “power to socialize and to condition [her] viewers to identify Black women in specifically circumscribed ways.”<sup>64</sup>

The image of the black woman as Mammy sets her apart from other slaves. Mammy's characteristics denote exaggerated domestic qualities necessary for any successful household and, moreover, for successful rearing of white children entrusted to Mammy's care.<sup>65</sup> Clinton also asserts that Mammy is a figment of the romantic imagination of southern ideology, that Mammy's image did not validate a notion of closeness between blacks and whites but rather placed her at the lowly status of an animal being milked by nursing the white children of the household.<sup>66</sup> In actuality, slave women were responsible for the production of two households, that is their masters and their own.

Stephanie Camp describes enslaved black women's work following their daily requirements of slave labor as a “second shift,” a greater burden than responsibilities to their masters' production.<sup>67</sup> Bondswomen were solely responsible for the cooking, cleaning, sewing, washing, mending, and producing household goods for their own home.<sup>68</sup> The inability to dedicate the desired or even necessary amount of time to maintain her private home prevented the enslaved black woman from fully developing her own family, while she fully developed the family of her master.

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> White, *Ar'N't I A Woman?* 48.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 201-2.

<sup>67</sup>Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 32.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 32-3.

Both stereotypes of the black woman denied her protection from exploitation, experiencing true motherhood, discovering feminine qualities, or defining herself.<sup>69</sup> As Jezebel, the black woman was an exploited object of lust; as Mammy, the black woman was a misused object of motherhood. Gender constructs of either Jezebel or Mammy allowed whites to easily define and categorize qualities of enslaved black women, rather than recognizing the complexities of human nature, even among slaves. The role of slave women as either Jezebels or Mammies depended on the gender construct imposed upon them by whites.<sup>70</sup> The desire to escape a lifestyle where oppression is one's only life experience is natural and necessary; resistance by female slaves became inevitable, despite any threats or fears imparted to slaves from their master. Angela Davis contends that subjugating women to exploitation laid the groundwork for black women to assert their equality through an aggressive challenge to the institution of slavery and an advocacy of resistance to their fellow slaves.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> K. Campbell, "Style and Content in the Rhetoric of Early Afro-American Feminist," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 72 (Spring 1986).

<sup>70</sup> Bynum, *Unruly Women*, 5.

<sup>71</sup> Davis, *Women, Class, and Race*, 19-23.

*“You cannot do that to me,  
whatever the price I must pay to prevent you.”<sup>1</sup>*

## CHAPTER 4

### STEAL AWAY: ENSLAVED BLACK WOMEN'S MECHANISMS OF RESISTANCE

Antebellum white society denied all black women access to “womanhood” and did not place them in the category of the “weaker sex.”<sup>2</sup> Scholars, however, argue that black women never lost their female identity. At times, black women worked, ate, slept, and sang exclusively alongside each other, fostering an interaction that inevitably forged strong bonds of allegiance and communication to one another. Deborah White argues, “rather than being diminished, their sense of womanhood was probably enhanced, and their bonds to one another made stronger.”<sup>3</sup> This chapter focuses on mechanisms of resistance that manifested themselves among all slaves and specific forms of resistance that were unique to black women. Resistance by black slave women manifested itself as a result of the solidarity encouraged by their unique sense of community. Judy Long identifies interpersonal connection, empathy, and care, and investment in relationships as significant links with female culture and socialization that are easily applied to the consideration of solidarity among slave women.<sup>4</sup> White describes enslaved black women's community as a unique network:

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 329.

<sup>2</sup> Deborah White, *Ar’N’t I A Woman?* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 120.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>4</sup> Judy Long, *Telling Women's Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 50.

Treated by Southern whites as if they were anything but self-respecting women, many bonded females could forge their own independent definition of womanhood through the female network, a definition to which they could relate on the basis of their own notions about what women should be and how they should act.<sup>5</sup>

Marion Kilson describes the socioeconomic conditions that led to slave rebellion as the results of the type of system used to supervise slaves: ease of communication between slaves; population shifts on the plantation among slaves; revolutionary ideas within the culture of slaves; forceful individual leadership among slaves; economic conditions among slaves; and religious trust among slaves.<sup>6</sup> William Cheek describes a creative-destructive impulse as the primary reason why the slaves revolted: "The man who cannot or is not allowed to create, who has been prevented from developing his potential – as the slave was systematically and deliberately prevented from developing his, - needs to destroy."<sup>7</sup> While Stephanie Camp identifies slave resistance as covert and short lived, she argues examining mechanisms of resistance helps to understand the level of oppression slaves, particularly enslaved black women, experienced, while reinforcing the importance of continuing to work toward a greater understanding of the conditions of slavery.<sup>8</sup>

Black women were denied consideration as "true women" by their masters, which benefited them somewhat, as white men's attitudes toward slave women reduced their ability to recognize acts of rebellion.<sup>9</sup> Slave women's resistance was an exclusive mechanism of defiance

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 141.

<sup>6</sup> William Cheek, *Black Resistance Before the Civil War* (Beverly Hills: Glencoe Press, 1970), 21.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 3.

<sup>9</sup>Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 303.



that evolved into its own group identity. Wilma Dunaway describes slave group identity as a counter-hegemonic culture.<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Fox-Genovese describes the resistance of enslaved black women as a part of a larger consideration of women's oppression worldwide:

Slave women resisted their enslavement, as women and as individuals, in all the ways available to them, according to their particular situations and their particular temperaments. Like other women of oppressed groups everywhere, they participated in their people's struggle for national liberation and self-determination. Like other women in comparable struggles, depending on specific conditions, they were found in almost any role from leadership to armed combat to spying to a variety of less dramatic ones. As in other struggles for national or class liberation, at least some women resisted with no regard for their ascribed gender roles.<sup>11</sup>

Cheek details two unique forms of resistance - cultural resistance and rhymes of fooling. Cultural resistance took form as folktales that implied inflicting harm upon their master. Stories such as "Dreaming," "Uncle Israel," and "The Sad Fate of Mr. Fox," symbolically allow the storyteller to reclaim power by being the one who hurts the master, rather than being the recipient of pain.<sup>12</sup> Rhymes of fooling took form in clever verses of fooling the master. Verses such as "Judge Buzzard," "Promises of Freedom," "Master is Six Feet One Way," "Nobody Looking," "I'll Eat when I'm Hungry," "The Funniest Things," and "White Man gets the Money" create scenarios where the slave undermines the master.<sup>13</sup> Slaves also maintained their heritage and traditions by using storytelling as a method of oral tradition to preserve African cultural tradition concerning kinship, marriage, birth, and death. In addition, slaves participated in

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<sup>10</sup> Wilma Dunaway, *Slavery in the American Mountain South* (Cambridge, UK: University Press, 2003), 206.

<sup>11</sup> Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 330.

<sup>12</sup> Cheek, *Black Resistance*, 51-3.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 56-60.

alternative religious practices by holding services where they created liberation theology and held traditional African “shouts.”<sup>14</sup>

According to Jones, a survey of the Federal Writers’ Project slave narrative collection identifies women as more likely to engage in verbal and physical resistance, rather than in attempts to flee, because of responsibilities to their families.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the conflict between master and slave over control of space and body was even more confining for enslaved black women.<sup>16</sup> Slave women used their confinement to their advantage by often considering their confrontations with masters and overseers as a collective problem. One of the main efforts among slave women to establish a distinct culture of resistance was through their network of gossip. Gossip provided a means of socialization and censorship among the slave community and also helped to monitor the behavior of women, to share information of household activity, and to maintain cultural folklore.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, slave women resisted their masters’ attempts to ignore the personal histories of their slaves by maintaining tradition amongst each other, which included sharing genealogical information, critiquing their owners, and discussing the value of black solidarity.<sup>18</sup> Slave women engaged in daily acts of sharing each other’s resources, adopting children, stealing food, and offering skills to the sick or pregnant as attempts to relieve at least some of each other’s trials

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<sup>14</sup>Dunaway, *Slavery in the American Mountain South*, 235-40.

<sup>15</sup>Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1985), 21.

<sup>16</sup>Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 7.

<sup>17</sup>Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 317.

<sup>18</sup>Dunaway, *Slavery in the American Mountain South*, 208.

and troubles of daily life.<sup>19</sup> Productive workers shared their harvests with the young, old, and pregnant so the overseer would not punish them for being slow workers.<sup>20</sup> After each day's work, slave women privately continued their resistance by socializing their children at night, while they completed their chores within their own households. Female slaves also created a secret communication systems to spread messages about hiding places, learning to read, and code names and words to describe fellow slaves and actions.<sup>21</sup> There is even evidence that a slave woman in Natchez, Louisiana, ran a midnight school to educate slaves.<sup>22</sup> Of course, female slaves caught engaging in any collective behavior were punished, which encouraged slave women to be extremely secretive and guarded in their actions.<sup>23</sup>

Slave women's collaboration on health issues presented a unique form of resistance. Informal gatherings, often sparked from the desire simply to have free time away from their labors, offered supplemental opportunities to learn and share natural medicinal treatments and a "larger system of beliefs about womanhood."<sup>24</sup> Marli Weiner argues that slave women benefited from not having access to the "primitive arsenal of contemporary medicine" available to whites; rather, slave women relied on folk knowledge and instinct to treat and tend other slaves.<sup>25</sup> Many slave women administered herbal remedies and became familiar with aids for health-related

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 223-7.

<sup>22</sup>Angela Davis, *Women, Class, and Race* (New York: Random House, 1981), 22.

<sup>23</sup>Dunaway, *Slavery in the American Mountain South*, 193-4.

<sup>24</sup>Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 318.

<sup>25</sup>Marli Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves: Plantation Women in South Carolina, 1830-80* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 20.

concerns such as relieving menstrual cramps and inducing abortion.<sup>26</sup> Black midwives also lied for female slaves by denying their pregnancies. Midwives even aided female slaves by placing newborns on the outskirts of their master's property, where the infant would undoubtedly die, but ultimately never experience the tortures of slavery.<sup>27</sup> Fox-Genovese argues that behind slave mothers' sorrow at the self-inflicted loss of their child was the knowledge that by killing "an infant they loved, they would be in some way reclaiming it as their own."<sup>28</sup>

Female bonding created a separate female-dominated community among slaves. Young slave girls often helped care for older female slaves and slave mothers helped look after young slave children. Kinship networks extended beyond direct relatives; slave women literally created a new family among each other. In fact, familial terms were used to describe other slave women: "Aunt" and "Granny" described older slave women, while female slaves referred to other slave children as their "children."<sup>29</sup> Obviously, this unique network of female-oriented communication and kinship proved the female slaves' reclamation of a female identity that denied the identities imposed upon them by white society.

Slave women who performed domestic duties held a unique position. Slave women who had access to their masters' kitchens through domestic work fed runaways and those who had been beaten.<sup>30</sup> Domestic slaves also behaved more openly in the attempt to make the life of their mistress an "unending war of nerves."<sup>31</sup> Mistresses and slave women disagreed on

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<sup>26</sup>White, *Ar'N't I A Woman?* 124-5.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid, 125-6.

<sup>28</sup>Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 324.

<sup>29</sup>White, *Ar'N't I A Woman?* 132-3.

<sup>30</sup>Jones, *Labor of Love*, 31.

<sup>31</sup>Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 309

appropriate standards of work and slave women openly defied their mistress by not fulfilling all their responsibilities or pretending they did not hear or understand certain instructions.<sup>32</sup> In addition, housemaids dusted houses inattentively, while nurses pulled the hair of their mistress' children.<sup>33</sup> Fox-Genovese argues that slave women knew their mistress did not represent the highest authority and therefore pushed the boundaries of their roles within the household.<sup>34</sup>

Slave women were considered less mobile than male slaves, as they carried and raised children.<sup>35</sup> Immobility encouraged slave women to find ways to slow down production on the plantation, or to do as little work as possible, often by feigning sickness or “by becoming conveniently irresponsible or stubborn.”<sup>36</sup> Insubordination, in the form of “sassing,” was the most common form of female resistance, at a rate Dunaway claims was 1.3 times more frequent than male insubordination. Illness, however, allowed slave women more latitude. Cheek argues that slave women's health conditions that could not be detected by external symptoms allowed room for deviance to limit their work.<sup>37</sup> Slave women even feigned pregnancy to avoid work.<sup>38</sup> Fox-Genovese argues that some slave women were permitted more liberties than slave men in regard to claiming illness, not because of consideration of their “female delicacy,” but rather, “because the condition of slavery was passed on through the mother, all children born to slave

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 313.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 193.

<sup>36</sup>Cheek, *Black Resistance*, 81.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 86.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 19.

women were slaves,” and while some slaveholders considered their pregnant slaves without regard, other slaveholders did not treat their female slaves so carelessly.<sup>39</sup>

Revenge particularly suited slave women, as they had easier access to household items because of their status as domestic servants.<sup>40</sup> For instance, some slave women poisoned their masters and their family members by putting arsenic, laudanum, ratsbane, and seed of jimson weed into their masters food. One slave woman poisoned her master's three children once she discovered she was provided for in her master's will if there were no heirs to his estate.<sup>41</sup> Other cases of poison include the story of Cassilly, a slave in Fayette County, Kentucky, who in 1849 mixed powdered glass with gravy, and the ten-year-old slave who in 1858 poisoned members of her master's household after being brutally whipped.<sup>42</sup>

Revenge was not limited to covert forms of resistance. Female slaves even resorted to physical violence against their master and his property. Slaves often expressed feelings toward their master by damaging his property, which often resulted in the cruel treatment of stock animals.<sup>43</sup> Other outward forms of resistance included physical assault. A female slave, Cicely, reportedly used an ax to kill her master and his wife and child.<sup>44</sup> An older slave woman was so upset by her punishment from the overseer that she “chopped him to death with a hoe.”<sup>45</sup> Irene Coats recounted a fellow female slave chopping the head off the overseer after he intentionally

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<sup>39</sup>Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 322.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 20.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

<sup>42</sup>Lowell Harrison, *The Anti-Slavery Movement in Kentucky* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1978), 82.

<sup>43</sup>Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 81.

<sup>44</sup>Cheek, *Black Resistance*, 20.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

struck her as she worked; the slave apparently went temporarily mad and chopped up and mutilated the body, killed his horse, then calmly went and told her master what she had done.<sup>46</sup> Slave women also aided in collective efforts of physical revenge. Slaves of Lewis B. Norwood held him down and poured boiling hot water down his throat while holding a cloth over his mouth and nose; two slaves, including a woman named Massey were sentenced to hang for the 1857 murder.<sup>47</sup> Clara, a female slave who was a cook for the Chambers family in 1860, commented on the omens of death by the crow of a hen, and soon after Mr. Chambers was found beaten and shot on his own property; Clara was later convicted of using her position as a house servant to provide bullets to her son to shoot Chambers.<sup>48</sup>

While some female slaves inflicted harm upon their owners, other female slaves inflicted harm upon themselves in order to escape the horrors of slavery. Male and female slaves at times engaged in self-mutilation by, for example, cutting the tendons in the leg or ankle or amputating fingers and hands in order to make them worthless for labor.<sup>49</sup> In her narrative, former slave Sophia Word told the stories of two female slaves committing suicide; the first was found across her bed with a penknife in her hand, while the other drowned herself after being beaten for forgetting to put onions in the stew.<sup>50</sup> In an attempt to escape a “rape-minded slave catcher,” one female slave hurled herself through a window.<sup>51</sup> Another slave, Elizabeth, reportedly

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<sup>46</sup>Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 317.

<sup>47</sup>Victoria Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 114.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 115-6.

<sup>49</sup>Harrison, *The Anti-Slavery Movement in Kentucky*, 80.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 80-1.

<sup>51</sup>Cheek, *Black Resistance*, 20.

smothered her own child.<sup>52</sup> Female slaves committed violent crimes in efforts to protect their families from their masters or to protect themselves from sexual exploitation.<sup>53</sup>

The most common mechanism of resistance for slave women was temporarily running away or “stealing away.” Stephanie Camp argues that stealing away, or truancy, was a significant method of resistance for enslaved black women, because it truly was a female form of subversion.<sup>54</sup> As female slaves were less mobile than male slaves, truancy became a distinct mechanism of resistance for enslaved black women to reclaim personal and physical spaces. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese describes running away as an important safety valve for slave women to escape the frustrations and demands within their lives.<sup>55</sup> Temporarily Running away provided opportunity to escape work, avoid punishment, and reclaim personal time. Moreover, slave women who felt their labor responsibilities were too burdensome often temporarily ran off, as their owners ultimately would have to make up the lost time and production.<sup>56</sup> Women healers who used herbs, leaves, and roots for medicines often became truant simply to collect the necessary supplies for treatment.<sup>57</sup> Although truancy was short-lived as enslaved black women returned to their masters’ farms to reunite with their families and kinship networks with other women, it provided a distinct outlet through which to escape temporarily the hand of their masters.

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>Dunaway, *Slavery in the American Mountain South*, 194.

<sup>54</sup>Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 39.

<sup>55</sup>Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 319.

<sup>56</sup>Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 40.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 46.



Collectively, stories of resistance are both remarkable and horrifying. Individual stories, accounting a slave's escape experience became a source of inspiration and strength for blacks still enslaved. Some black women donned masculine clothing to aid in their escapes. Clarissa Davis, Mary Milburn, and Maria Weems are a few of the women who disguised themselves as males and escaped to freedom.<sup>58</sup> The story of Ellen and William Craft, one of the most incredible escape stories, is told in their 1860 book *Running a Thousand Miles to Freedom*, which includes testimony, letters, reports, and accounts from others. Ellen, a light-skinned slave, disguised herself as a white male slave owner. Her husband, a dark-skinned slave, accompanied her, disguised as her slave. Together they boarded rail cars and steamers headed from Georgia to the North in 1848.<sup>59</sup> Ellen had difficulty behaving as a southern gentleman because of her challenges with literacy and social etiquette. After landing in Boston, accompanied by William Wells Brown, they were able to begin a new life and attain a legitimate marriage license.<sup>60</sup>

Black slaves used a couple of methods through which to communicate messages of escape. One of the most frequently studied aspects of communication of escape among slaves has been Negro Spirituals, argued as being "the first true American music."<sup>61</sup> While singing spirituals has long been a familiar aspect of slave-life, most are unaware of the meanings within these songs. When learning amongst slaves became illegal following Nat Turner's rebellion in 1831, singing spirituals became a surrogate form of education. Songs such as "Dry Bones," describing how the bones are connected within the body, taught slaves anatomy; songs such as

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<sup>58</sup>McCaskill, Barbara, "Yours Very Truly: Ellen Craft – The Fugitive as Text and Artifact," *African American Review* 28 (Spring 1994), 509-10.

<sup>59</sup>Shirley Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 24.

<sup>60</sup>McCaskill, "Very Truly Yours," 510.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

“Children Go Where I Send Thee,” describing how many children will be sent to spread God’s word, and rhyming with parables in the Bible not only taught slaves how to count, but also taught them biblical stories.<sup>62</sup> Slaves also used congregational singing as a method through which to communally recognize their struggles. Many spirituals told the biblical story of Moses and his people being oppressed by Pharaoh; the parallels between biblical stories of slavery and the present forms of slavery among blacks were undeniable, which made these spirituals all the more valuable.

Dunaway argues that spirituals were a unique form of resistance because they were a way for slaves to lament collectively their struggles and strife, while singing in such pronunciations that whites could not always understand their words.<sup>63</sup> As spirituals began to take multiple forms of communication among slave communities, singing became even more subversive, as whites could not decode the messages within the songs. Spirituals were a way for slaves to publicly declare political injustice and also connect with other slaves, building a strong community.<sup>64</sup>

Spirituals began to take a different form when the Underground Railroad became a reality. Spirituals became a way of communicating a code to tell slaves when and where they should go to escape. Harriet Tubman, who made numerous trips from the North to the South to help slaves escape, came back to large plantations where she could easily blend in among the numerous slaves, work alongside slaves, and sing spirituals to indicate times and places where

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<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>Dunaway, *Slavery in the American Mountain South*, 219.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid.

escape was possible. When she sang “Steal Away,” the slaves knew to meet her at noon at a particular place to begin their journey to the North.<sup>65</sup>

The unique fellowship that African-American Christianity offered was strengthened through mechanisms of internal resistance. The solidarity among slave women helped to reduce feelings of isolation and simultaneously strengthened slave women's self-identity and offered them a significant place within their community.<sup>66</sup> Christian faith pronounced that while earthly devices would eventually fail them, slaves had unchanging love and support through a higher power. Until slave women received their heavenly rewards, they offered each other support through sharing resources and inspired others through their brave attempts of resistance.

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<sup>65</sup>*Flight to Freedom The Underground Railroad*, dir. John Overlan, 120 min., WXXI Television, 1995, videocassette.

<sup>66</sup>Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 328-9.

*“With sturdy hands and a strong cord,  
she sewed them together into a quilt,  
a thing of beauty and power and culture.”<sup>1</sup>*

## CHAPTER 5

### With Just a Needle and a Thread: The Underground Railroad Quilt Code as Autobiography

In 1999 Dr. Jacqueline Tobin published a book that presented evidence of a secret code communicated through slave-made quilts to aid in the escape of slaves on the Underground Railroad. The story of the Underground Railroad Quilt Code, as it has come to be known, was told to Tobin by a descendent of slaves, who apparently still had in her possession fragments of the quilts of which she spoke. The academic community received Tobin’s book with as much acclaim as disdain. As an undergraduate I was exposed to Tobin’s work shortly after its publication. My interest in the quilt code led me to continue to learn about the topic and in 2005 I attended a conference where I presented my own research on the code.<sup>2</sup> Members of my conference panel argued against the existence of the quilt code, criticized Tobin’s legitimacy as an author, and scoffed at the overall gullibility of readers and scholars who believed such a claim.<sup>3</sup>

I share this information not to divert attention toward the author, but rather to demonstrate my interest in presenting details surrounding the Underground Railroad Quilt Code in a way that audiences from all disciplines may be able to accept. I think there is a need for interdisciplinary evaluation of slave-made quilts during the nineteenth century. My

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<sup>1</sup>Gladys Marie-Fry, *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 1.

<sup>2</sup> The conference I attended was the 2005 American Folklore Society Conference in Atlanta, Georgia. The name of the panel was “The Underground Railroad Quilt Code,” where I presented my research “Contravenes, Quilts, and Codes,” on October 22, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> The panel questioned the research presented in Tobin’s book, *Hidden in Plain View*.

consideration of slave quilts assumes the role of material culture as representation of autobiography. I propose that the enslaved women who created these quilts did so with efforts that extended beyond utilitarian purposes to preserve African culture, explore their own creativity, and quite possibly, to aid other slaves in their escape to freedom.

The history of quilts largely has been dominated by interest in the artistic abilities of white, upper-class women. But, during the past three decades scholars have demonstrated an increased interest in black quilters. Eva Grudin contends that texts published before 1970 hardly mentioned the existence of “black made quilts.”<sup>4</sup> Gladys-Marie Fry argues that:

To date [2002], no formal study has been undertaken to determine the extent of the involvement of slave women in the design or craftsmanship of mid-nineteenth-century quilts, or to determine the influence of African culture on African-American quilting styles. Thus, for too long have slave women been denied recognition or acknowledgement – or even a history.<sup>5</sup>

The publication of Tobin’s book, which elaborates the specific role black women had in the intersection between domesticity and subversion, increased scholarly interest in the history of slave-made quilts. Cuesta Benberry, for instance, argues that quiltmaking among slaves was widespread, and examples of slave-made quilts have been found in every former slaveholding state in the Union.<sup>6</sup>

Fry contends that two myths have hindered suitable scholarship on slave-made quilts. The first myth is that quilt making by slaves was not an important task; the second myth is that quilts were made under the supervision of the mistress.<sup>7</sup> Both myths deny African-American

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<sup>4</sup>Eva Ungar Grudin, *Stitching Memories: African-American Story Quilts* (Williamstown, Massachusetts: Williamstown College Museum of Art, 1990), 7.

<sup>5</sup> Fry, *Stitched from the Soul*, 1.

<sup>6</sup>Cuesta Benberry, *Always There: The African-American Presence in American Quilts*. (Louisville, Kentucky: The Kentucky Quilt Project, Inc., 1992), 21.

<sup>7</sup> Fry, *Stitched from the Soul*, 7.

women individual talent, creativity, or invention. Floris Cash has indicated African-American quilts were marginalized during slavery, making it quite difficult to document slave-made quilts and even more difficult to access African-American quiltmakers, who were placed outside conventional quilting traditions.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Benberry argues that historians have dismissed slave-made quilts that display the skills of the quilt-maker as not true African-American quilts. For example, she asserts that quilts of skill were believed to have been created under the instruction of a mistress or were disregarded as black women were not considered to possess mechanical means to create complex quilts.<sup>9</sup>

Quilt making during the antebellum period was a common practice among both white and black women of all classes, and as Ramsey contends was a “matter of necessity and economy.”<sup>10</sup> For enslaved black women, quilt making served as a means of creating what sociologist Wilma Dunaway calls a counter-hegemonic culture.<sup>11</sup> Floris Cash contends:

Quiltings were both labor and leisure activity. Slaves created their own culture or way of life as a means of liberating themselves from an oppressive environment. Quilting accompanied by eating, story telling, games, and singing, offered the slaves unique opportunities to socialize without supervision.<sup>12</sup>

Quilting was an honored tradition within slave culture. In certain parts of Africa quilting bees frequently took place.<sup>13</sup> In Africa, both males and females took part in quilting; quilting

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<sup>8</sup> Floris Barnett Cash, "Kinship and Quilting: An Examination of an African-American Tradition," in *The Journal of Negro History* 80 (Winter 1995), 31.

<sup>9</sup> Fry, *Stitched from the Soul*, 23.

<sup>10</sup> Bets Ramsey, "The Land of Cotton: Quiltmaking by African-American Women in Three Southern States," in *Quiltmaking in America: Beyond the Myths*. ed. Laurel Horton (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1994), 186.

<sup>11</sup> Wilma Dunaway, *Slavery in the American Mountain South* (Cambridge: University Press, 2003), 206.

<sup>12</sup> Cash, "Kinship and Quilting," 32.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

was an egalitarian cultural practice.<sup>14</sup> In the United States, however, quilting was associated with feminine domesticity, and as plantation owners “adhered to the European system of labor division,” black women became “the principle weavers, seamstresses, and quilters in southern society.”<sup>15</sup> Enslaved black women made use of everyday material to create quilts. Young girls, particularly black girls, learned how to quilt at a young age either making quilt blocks or sitting at the quilt frame piecing together the quilt.<sup>16</sup> Quilts were made of scraps and pieces of material that were easily assembled, and because many slaves worked on cotton plantations, filler was easily available.<sup>17</sup> The tops of quilts were created from recycled cloth, scraps, rags, old blankets and thick cloth exchanged among slave women.<sup>18</sup> The backing for the quilt was often made from feed, flour, sugar, and tobacco sacks, which were sometimes dyed with “walnut, oak, or red mud to give color and show less soil.”<sup>19</sup>

Slave-made quilts inevitably convey meaning by the ways in which the quilt was made or in the creativity of the patterns. In her book *Telling Women’s Lives*, Judy Long argues that writers of autobiography impose a pattern upon their lives, involving “repertoires of narratives, access to them, and the related question of discourse as a community based on similar liking.”<sup>20</sup> Slave-made quilts tell a story, or send a message, through specific patterns; a quilt maker, in

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Maude Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African-American Quilts* (New York: Studio Books, 1993), 21.

<sup>16</sup> Ramsey, "The Land of Cotton," 186.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Cash, "Kinship and Quilting," 32.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Judy Long, *Telling Women’s Lives*. (New York: New York University Press), 18.

terms of material culture, is an artist, a creator who sends a message to the recipient. In this case, the message is how to follow the road to freedom.

Just as the handmade quilts of a slave tell a story, so does the body of the slave. The bodies of slaves were seen as empty space upon which a master could impose his own text. Scars from whippings, physical assaults, and even branding left the imprint of a slave's master. Karen Sanchez-Eppler argues:

The bodies of women and slaves were read against them, so that for both the human body was seen to function as the foundation not only of a general subjection but also of a specific exclusion from political discourse. For women and slaves the ability to speak was predicated upon the reinterpretation of their flesh.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, the master controlled every aspect of production through the slave's hands including what was to be produced, which slaves would produce, and how materials would be produced. Everything slaves made was in their master's name; the slave held no right to authorship over any textile created, crop harvested, or duty performed.

One arena in which enslaved black women could have authorship was the making of their own goods. Fry argues that quilting offered slave women an outlet as a means to develop hidden talents, a sense of control, a time for personal reflection, as well as a kind of emotional stability and independence.<sup>22</sup> Fry argues that as slave women were denied "opportunity to record their thoughts on paper, slaves unconsciously left careful records of their emotional and psychological

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<sup>21</sup> Karen Sanchez-Eppler, "Bodily Bonds: The Intersecting Rhetorics of Feminism and Abolition." *Representations* 24 (Winter 1988), 30.

<sup>22</sup>Fry, *Stitched from the Soul*, 1.



well-being on each surviving quilt."<sup>23</sup> Fry encourages scholars to look for clues within quilts that could range from consistency of quilting to "time markers" such as blood or tear stains.<sup>24</sup>

Scholars of slavery contend that slave resistance is often seen as a mechanism of defying the master through forceful means. I want to reconsider the purpose of resistance beyond rhetorically meeting the master at his level of force and control by identifying the body without the master's mark. A feminist standpoint allows the slave body, particularly the body of the slave woman, to reclaim authorship by using the body as a "means of gaining rhetorical force."<sup>25</sup> One of the ways a slave woman reclaimed authorship of her body into her own hands was producing quilts that potentially carried secret messages of escape. The methodology of coding presented by Folklorists Joan Radner and Susan Lanser will be used to explain how authorship in quilting inverted the patriarchy of slavery. Radner and Lanser base their theory upon the works of scholars in folklore, language, literature, art, history, and feminist philosophy.<sup>26</sup> They define coding as the "adoption of a system of signals – words, forms, signifiers of some kind – that protect the creator from the dangerous consequences of directly stating particular messages" that particular audiences may be able to decode, but are nonetheless ambiguous.<sup>27</sup> In regard to the quilt code, the audience is both black and white, but only black audiences were meant to decode any messages in the quilts. Slave women's use of signals through quilt patterns served as an innocuous text through which to communicate messages to slaves wishing to escape.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Sanchez-Eppler, "Bodily Bonds," 30.

<sup>26</sup> Joan Radner and Susan Lanser, "The Feminist Voice: Strategies of Coding in Folklore and Literature," *The Journal of American Folklore* 100 (Spring 1987), 414.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

Radner and Lanser identify six mechanisms of coding. The first, appropriation often was demonstrated by distortion, achieved by adapting feminist forms or materials normally associated with male culture.<sup>28</sup> In the case of slave women who were forced to work as chattel under male domination, the creation of quilts as subversion disenfranchised the white master as the dominator. The second mechanism is juxtaposition, the arrangement of texts in an unremarkable manner that represent powerful meaning in another environment.<sup>29</sup> Formulas created for the quilt pattern's arrangement as a symbolic text for escape to freedom were easily disguised under the premise of creating functional materials for domestic use. The nonsensical code message that was passed between slaves also represents how subversive communication would have been unremarkable to whites. The third mechanism is distraction, a method of keeping a subversive message difficult to hear by some, while easy to hear by others.<sup>30</sup> Quilt patterns used in the quilt code represented a subversive message directed at only those escaping slavery. Again, the actual message used to share the code of escape would have been a message that whites could not have easily decoded. The fourth mechanism, what Radner and Lanser consider the most common, indirection, employs the use of metaphors, impersonations, and hedging as strategies of indirection or distancing.<sup>31</sup> The specific metaphorical phrases associated with each quilt pattern created distance between slaves and their masters, as the master would be unable to comprehend the meanings behind each metaphor. In addition, the use of spirituals as a mechanism to explain further the quilt patterns created a greater distance between slaves and their masters. As slaves were only given the option to worship the same God as the white man,

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 415-6.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 417-8.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 418-20.

whites would have assumed that sacred songs were evident of their success in "civilizing" their slaves. Slaves were able to reclaim the authorship of their bodies by using spirituals as subversive messages or warnings. The fifth mechanism, trivialization, used a mode or genre considered by the dominant culture to be irrelevant.<sup>32</sup> Sewing quilts represented a common domestic task performed by females of all races and classes. Every household used and needed quilts, so the immediate association with quilts was as utilitarian products. Enslaved black women's quilting was not regarded as anything more than a functional chore. Also, airing out quilts would not have been a conspicuous activity. The patterns on the quilt and even the untraditional knots would have been disregarded by whites, who most likely would have assumed that slaves were attempting to create attractive coverlets. The sixth mechanism, incompetence, served as an appropriation employed by females in completing traditionally feminine activities.<sup>33</sup> Incompetence was a behavior that took advantage of the master's belief that slaves were unskilled. In the application of Radner and Lanser's methodology to slave-made quilts as a text of subversion, the consideration of the Quilt Code as an autobiographical work begins to take form.

Another way to consider quilts as an autobiographical work is through the lense of material culture. While definitions of material culture vary among scholars and disciplines, the following considerations of material culture are ones I have found most useful in regard to slave quilts. Folklorist William Ferris defines folk art, which he later relates to material culture, as "the product of unschooled craftpersons," where "color is often arbitrary, proportions and spatial

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 420-1.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 421-3.

relations awry, shapes generalized and details emphasized.”<sup>34</sup> The acknowledgement of the creators of slave quilts introduces a new way of regarding slave women as folk artists and their quilts as part of material culture. Material culture is identified by Diane DuVaul as a study of “past human activity through existing physical evidence” that offers evidence lacking from written records and allows the interpreter to experience “cultural manifestations of ideas and actions.”<sup>35</sup> DuVaul emphasizes that material culture studies present a contradiction in that while artifacts provide valuable cultural information, they are more difficult to interpret.<sup>36</sup> One way to deepen interpretation of artifacts is through Thomas Schlereth's approach. Schlereth uses Melville Herskovits' definition of material culture as "the totality of artifacts in a culture . . . used by humankind to cope with the physical world, to facilitate social intercourse, to delight our fancy, and to create symbols of meaning," to emphasize the importance of material culture's connotation of physical manifestations and cultural statements expressed through the belief systems of a community within a society.<sup>37</sup>

Schlereth presents a structuralist view as an attractive method of considering material culture as structuralists argue "that all cultural systems should be treated as languages" in order to uncover covert or overt meanings, as well as to derive meaning from "unconscious and careful decoding of signs [to] allow a full understanding of human culture."<sup>38</sup> Using a structuralist approach that considers quilts created by slave women as bearing a language and signs reflective

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<sup>34</sup> William Ferris, *Afro-American Folk Art and Crafts* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 69.

<sup>35</sup> Diane DuVaul, “Mother Work – Quilts and Art: A Material Culture Study” (Ph.D. diss., University of Maryland, 1998), 55-6.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 63

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Schlereth, "Material Culture Studies in America; 1876-1976" in *Material Culture Studies in America*. ed. Thomas Schlereth (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1982), 2.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

of their culture helps make the connection between the material artifact and the authorship of its creator.

Similarities between slave quilts and African quilts provide an interesting link for material culture and history. Ferris describes five elements of African-American aesthetic quilt principles: "(1) strips to construct and to organize quilt top design space; (2) large scale designs; (3) strong, highly contrasting colors; (4) off-beat patterns; (5) multiple rhythms."<sup>39</sup> For the purpose of my research, I will compare contemporary African-American and traditional African quilting aesthetics through woven or pieced strips, designs and colors, and patterns and rhythms, as presented by Ferris and other scholars.

Woven or pieced strips found in slave quilts possibly derive from the African Mande peoples, who used the strips as a form of currency.<sup>40</sup> Other African groups, such as the Tuareg and Asante, used strips of cloth in the production of banners as well as clothing.<sup>41</sup> The use of strips is "the most basic and easily apparent characteristic of Afro-American quilt," according to Ferris.<sup>42</sup> Wahlman suggests that black women maintained the strip aesthetic in America and passed down the tradition without an explanation. She also indicates that this tradition would have appeared earliest in Charleston, South Carolina, "when West Africans were in demand due to their knowledge of rice cultivation."<sup>43</sup> Ferris argues that African-American women have maintained African quilt aesthetics and traditions, specifically with woven or pieced strips, and

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<sup>39</sup> Ferris, *Afro-American Folk Art and Crafts*, 86.

<sup>40</sup>Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols*, 25.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ferris, *Afro-American Folk Art and Crafts*, 86.

<sup>43</sup> Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols*, 25.

that these women describe the correct measurement of strips of material as the width of one's hand.<sup>44</sup> Strips can be used for making a bed-length quilt, adding a border, or creating a pattern.<sup>45</sup>

The large shapes and strong colors prominent in slave quilts have derivations in West African tradition. Large shapes and strong colors are important to West Africans to recognize a greeting from a distance in strong sunlight.<sup>46</sup> Ferris maintains that large shape designs were created from small patches and scraps of similar colors that created the illusion of a large design.<sup>47</sup> Ferris argues that color combinations lay the foundation for multiple rhythms within quilts, particularly through the way quilters couple colors, such as "purple-green, purple-yellow, red-white, orange-green, and black-pink."<sup>48</sup> Color combinations give the illusion of multiple or fragmented patterns, as well as add an individual style that is distinctive to the particular quilt maker.

Multiple patterning, seen in the varying colors in slave quilts, appears to derive from Africa and the Caribbean.<sup>49</sup> The number of patterns denote a person's significance in African culture and also indicate "wealth, occupation, social status, and history."<sup>50</sup> Multiple patterning also reflects African religiosity. Africans believed if the patterns were not symmetrical, or did not "line up," evil spirits would become confused and slow down.<sup>51</sup> Asymmetrical patterns

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<sup>44</sup> Ferris, *Afro-American Folk Art and Crafts*, 86.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Whalman, *Signs and Symbols*, 35.

<sup>47</sup> Ferris, *Afro-American Folk Art and Crafts*, 88.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Whalman, *Signs and Symbols*, 48.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

created a protective quality to African quilts.<sup>52</sup> The quilt code's "Shoofly," "Flying Geese," and "Bowtie" are distinctive multiple patterns. Patterns of crosses, circles, and diamonds prominent in slave quilts have significant connections to African tradition. Crosses in slave quilts bear a resemblance to Yoruba depictions of sacred crossroads or Kongo symbols for the four points of the sun.<sup>53</sup> The quilt code's "Crossroads" might be a direct reference to Yoruba pattern symbolism, while "Bear's Paw" might refer to the Kongo pattern symbolism. Circular designs, as seen in "Wagon Wheel," evoke images of the Kongo cosmogram, a symbol of rebirth into the bodies of grandchildren.<sup>54</sup> Diamonds hold protective qualities in African tradition, similar to the symbolism of shapes and colors in quilts, but might also reflect African script.<sup>55</sup> "Bear's Paw," "Crossroads," "Shoofly," "Bowtie," and "Flying Geese" all reflect diamond patterns, indicating a significant emphasis on protection, which is appropriate considering escaping slaves' need for security.

Teachers of African-American and women's histories have used the excitement of the quilt code as a channel through which to teach material culture of black women. Wahlman asserts the uniqueness of African-American quilts that results "from mixtures of various African, Native American, and European traditions that took place as a result of trading in Brazil, Surinam, Haiti, Cuba, other Caribbean islands, Mexico and the southern United States."<sup>56</sup> Elsa Brown at State University of New York in Binghamton argues that studying the African-American quilt tradition encourages students to center their reality within a central tradition of

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 91

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 21.

black women.<sup>57</sup> Hood argues that “African-American quilt art also functions as a material artifact that affords African American women the opportunity to struggle with their own self-concepts and to define and re-define themselves as African-American women.”<sup>58</sup>

The importance of slave-made quilts entered the spotlight when Jacqueline Tobin traveled to Charleston, South Carolina, in 1994 to conduct research on the sweet-grass baskets unique to the area, and to hear personal accounts from African-American women who made the baskets.<sup>59</sup> She met Ozella Williams, who revealed pieces of information concerning a secret code within quilts during the Underground Railroad; three years later, Tobin returned to South Carolina and Ozella revealed the entire story her mother and her grandmother had imparted to her. Tobin recorded Ozella’s story and published Ozella’s account, along with her own personal research in her 1999 book *Hidden in Plain View*. Ozella's account relates to Ferris' description of quilt making as the "intermediate steps which must have occurred as women adapted their remembered aesthetic preferences to their needs for warm coverings."<sup>60</sup> According to Ozella, the secret code for the Underground Railroad was, indeed, found within the quilts. Ozella shared with Tobin the messages she believed were communicated through slave quilts. Following Ozella’s story, Tobin conducted research in African-American and African history and tradition to find supporting evidence. Her research uncovered additional symbolism in quilt patterns, offering supportive evidence of the quilt code's existence, since historical connections could be

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<sup>57</sup> ElsaBrown, “African-American Women’s Quilting: A Framework for Conceptualizing Teaching African-American Women’s History,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14 (Spring 1989), 921-9.

<sup>58</sup> Yolanda Hood, “The Culture of Resistance: African American Art Quilts and Self-Defining,” *Uncoverings* 22 (Spring 2001), 142.

<sup>59</sup> Tobin, *Hidden in Plain View*, 15.

<sup>60</sup> Ferris, *Afro-American Folk Art and Crafts*, 82.



made. The code connected African symbols to quilt patterns. The code, recorded by Tobin, is as follows:

The monkey wrench turns the wagon wheel toward Canada on a bear's paw trail. Once they got to the crossroads, they dug a log cabin on the ground. Shoofly told them to dress up in cotton and satin bow ties and go to the cathedral church, get married, and exchange double wedding rings. Flying geese stay on the drunkard's path and follow the stars.<sup>61</sup>

The first pattern displayed was the Monkey Wrench, which told slaves to symbolically gather their "tools" for their journey of escape; the tools varied depending on the messages delivered from other slaves or conductors of the Underground Railroad. For instance, a tool could mean a compass or a tool one could use for self-defense.<sup>62</sup> Wagon Wheel, the second pattern to be displayed, was an alert for slaves to pack provisions for their journey, as if they were symbolically packing a wagon.<sup>63</sup> Bear's Paw Trail, the third pattern, often meant to literally follow the bear's paw tracks into the woods, which created a trail to food or water.<sup>64</sup> Crossroads, the fourth pattern displayed, referred to Cleveland, Ohio, which was conveniently located at many crossroads that led to freedom.<sup>65</sup> Log Cabin, the fifth pattern, alludes to the phrase "they dug a log cabin."<sup>66</sup> A log cabin was typically built upon the ground, rather than dug into the ground. Tobin's research led her to an African ritual in which sticks are used to dig out patterns on the ground as a means of nonverbal communication.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, escaping slaves

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<sup>61</sup> Tobin, *Hidden in Plain View*, 22-3.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 99-104.

might have to draw figures on the ground, as using their voice was unsafe for the slave and the person aiding them in their escape.<sup>68</sup> Shoofly, the sixth pattern, is believed to represent a Prince Hall Mason or a free black familiar with the secret language.<sup>69</sup> Satin Bow-Ties, the seventh pattern, is a message telling slaves to find clothing, such as worn and tattered clothes, that would not automatically reveal their escape status.<sup>70</sup> Double-Wedding Rings, the eighth pattern, is believed to have a dual meaning by literally getting rid of chains (as double rings could symbolize shackles) or mentally shedding their status as slaves to better survive as free blacks.<sup>71</sup> Flying Geese, the ninth pattern, is a message to use nature as a compass and follow the geese that fly North.<sup>72</sup> Drunkard's Path, the tenth and final pattern, was a warning to move on a staggered path, to elude entrapment by any slave hunters.<sup>73</sup>

Tobin contends that African symbols and slave stories were passed down through oral tradition, as most slaves were illiterate and would not write down such information.<sup>74</sup> The punishment for being caught using an escape code for slaves was ominous enough to prevent anyone from attempting to record this code. Tobin also contends that slaves who were hired out to shops were able to collect and spread information of escape. Churches were also used as “post offices” where slaves could go and gather information that provided information of escape routes

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 105-6.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 63-4.

and instruction for survival.<sup>75</sup> Tobin argues that the Underground Railroad similarly used a system of codes and secret messages and that “the Quilt Code gives access to some of the secrets still remaining about the early years of escape from the plantations.”<sup>76</sup>

Tobin writes, “according to Ozella, there were ten quilts used to direct the slaves to take particular actions. Each quilt featured one of the ten patterns. The ten patterns were placed one at a time on a fence.”<sup>77</sup> Airing out quilts was common practice by many slave housekeepers, so this action was inconspicuous to whites. The quilts provided metaphors of preparation, action, and location; the quilts also coordinated with spirituals sung, providing a repetitive method for the slaves to learn the accurate pattern of escape.<sup>78</sup> In addition, quilts used in the quilt code displayed knotting, rather than stitching, applications. White women considered knotting an undesired quilting practice, but slaves saw in it signified specific messages. Tobin found that five knots in the quilt was symbolic, as the number five is tied to African and African-American tradition, but she was unable to accurately uncover the meaning behind this number.<sup>79</sup>

Following its publication, Tobin’s book of the alleged quilt code appealed to lay readers, and to satisfy curious minds, libraries as well as schools began collecting and publishing information regarding Tobin’s research.<sup>80</sup> Some scholars have been alarmed at society’s quick acceptance of Tobin’s retelling Ozella’s story as fact, and have urged teachers to learn about

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 70-1.

<sup>79</sup> Tobin, *Hidden in Plain View*, 71-80.

<sup>80</sup> Patricia Cummings, “The American Quilt Myth? The Secret of the Underground Railroad,” *The Quilter* (September 2004), 74-5.

quilt history, rather than teaching the quilt code in the classroom.<sup>81</sup> In her article criticizing the quilt code, Patricia Cummings contends that there are “no diaries, journals or letters that have been located that would support the theory that quilt blocks were used in a secret code.”<sup>82</sup> One of the reasons there is little physical evidence of the quilt code is that practically no slave quilts have survived. They wore out quickly and at the time were not regarded as historical artifacts, but as household ones.<sup>83</sup> Additionally, two great handicaps that have prevented scholars from learning about slave quilts are the scarcity of testimonies by slave women about quilts and the lack of documentation on quilts.<sup>84</sup> Tobin’s research intentionally focuses on both African and African-American tradition and culture that support the stories that were passed down to Ozella Williams from the matriarchs of her family. Tobin's approach provides more legitimacy to the ways in which the story of the quilt code was preserved.

Contemporary African-American quilters are middle-aged to elderly women who reside mainly in the South. Despite their similarities, Ferris warns that “individuals who quilt cannot be lumped together or generalizations made about them.”<sup>85</sup> Each quilter’s style is reflected through her own use of her quilt as her text, her own autobiographical sketch told through her mood, her flexibility, her innovativeness, and her use of material that can be identified as her own despite the use of common patterns.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>83</sup> Pat Ferrero, *Hearts and Hands: The Influence of Women and Quilts on American Society* (San Francisco: The Quilt Digest Press, 1987), 14.

<sup>84</sup> Fry, *Stitched from the Soul*, 3.

<sup>85</sup> Ferris, *Afro-American Folk Art and Craft*, 85.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

Harryette Mullen argues that “Africanisms” in the work of southern folk artists, including quilters, still exist:

African cultural systems were not utterly destroyed by slavery, but rather survived in fragmentary dispersed, and marginalized forms that continue to exist alongside dominant cultural traditions that also significantly influence African-American cultural production.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup>Harryette Mullen, “African Signs and Spirit Writing,” *Callaloo*. 19.3 (Fall 1996): 677

*Some people are mere nonentities, or, are merely negative quantities. They leave no very clear or marked impression upon those with whom they are associated. It was not so however, in her case. She was always a positive quantity, easily recognizable, and always sure to be felt wherever her lot was cast. She rose above the dead level of mediocrity, like the mountain peaks that shoot above the mountain range.*<sup>1</sup>

-Rev. Francis J. Grimke's Eulogy for Harriet Jacobs, 1897.

## CHAPTER 6

### SOMETHING AKIN TO FREEDOM, SOMETHING AKIN TO CHOICE: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF HARRIET JACOBS'S *INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL*

Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* constitutes what is arguably the most significant slave account from the antebellum South. Her story has emerged as one of the most widely-studied texts in women's, African-American, and American history. Moreover, scholars have drawn comparisons between her autobiography and those of her historical and contemporary counterparts, among them Frederick Douglass, author of his own account as a slave; Henry David Thoreau, advocate of civil disobedience; Anita Hill, protester of her own sexual abuse within a specific institution; and Toni Morrison, author of fictional novels centered on non-fictional social handicaps faced by black women.<sup>2</sup> What places Jacobs and her text in the canon of the slave's experience and social resistance is the incredible story of her life as a slave and her use of mechanisms of self-empowerment within an institution of complete confinement.

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<sup>1</sup> William Smyth, "O Death, where is Thy Sting?: Reverend Francis J. Grimke's Eulogy for Harriet A. Jacobs," *The Journal of Negro History* 70 (Winter-Spring 1985), 37.

<sup>2</sup> Lauren Berlant, "The Queen of America Goes to Washington: Harriet Jacobs, Frances Harper, Anita Hill," in *Feminisms*, ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Daine Price Herndl (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 931; Anita Goldman "Harriet Jacobs, Henry Thoreau, and the Character of Disobedience," in *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), 234; Joanne Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography*, 206; and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 375.

That a former slave subtitled her work as self-authored indicates the importance of using her voice as a mechanism for individual identity. What places Jacobs and her text in the canon of literature is not that she was a larger than life character, but that she was, as Jean Fagan Yellin contends, “a woman like other women,” who allowed readers to easily relate to her and the struggles within her story.<sup>3</sup>

Jacobs was born into slavery in Edenton, North Carolina, around 1813 and orphaned at a young age. At age eleven she was willed to three-year-old Mary Matilda Norcom by her former owner, Margaret Horniblow, a sister-in-law to the Norcom family (called the Flint family in Jacobs's narrative).<sup>4</sup> According to Yellin's research, Jacobs was twelve when she entered the Norcom household and Dr. Norcom was nearly fifty.<sup>5</sup> By age fifteen, her mistress' father, Dr. Norcom, who happened to own her brother John had been verbally harassing Jacobs for quite some time. During her teenage years, in the midst of Norcom's harassment, Jacobs became sexually involved with an unmarried, white lawyer Samuel Sawyer (called Mr. Sands in her narrative) who lived near the Norcoms. Following the birth of her two children with Sawyer, Norcom moved Jacobs to a plantation in Auburn after she refused to become his concubine.<sup>6</sup>

After learning of threats to sell and move her children, Jacobs went into hiding for seven years, hoping her absence would dissolve Norcom's desire for her children's relocation.<sup>7</sup> In 1842, Jacobs left from hiding, went North, and reunited with her children and brother, who had

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<sup>3</sup>Jean Fagan Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs: A Life* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2004), 261.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Jean Fagan Yellin, Introduction to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, by Harriet Jacobs (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), xvii.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

already escaped. But apparently Norcom traveled to the free states in an attempt to reclaim Jacobs, who had escaped to England to avoid Norcom. After ten months in hiding in England she returned to America in March 1849 and moved to Rochester to join her brother to fight for the abolitionist cause.<sup>8</sup>

During her involvement in the abolition movement, Jacobs became acquainted with Amy Post, who urged Jacobs to write her life's story.<sup>9</sup> Following her former mistress' attempt to reclaim Jacobs as a runaway under the sanction of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, Jacobs returned to hiding until Post could use the American Colonization Society as a liaison to purchase Jacobs for \$300.00 from Mary Matilda Norcom.<sup>10</sup> Her emancipation through Post's aid encouraged Jacobs to begin writing her life story, which, at Jacobs's request, was edited by Lydia Marie Child, and published in November 1860 under the title, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* under the name of Linda Brent as author. The book was sold at one dollar per copy.<sup>11</sup> It was not until the 1970s that Jacobs was revealed as the real author of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* through the diligent scholarship of Jean Fagan Yellin.<sup>12</sup>

While Jacobs's account contributes to the large numbers of works that reveal slaves' experiences, her work extends beyond traditional slave narratives for several reasons. First, Jacobs's text is written by herself, rather than told to and transcribed by a second party. Jacobs asserts her authorship of her autobiography in the subtitle, "Written by Herself." Her editor Lydia Marie Child bases her introduction on the validity of Jacobs's authorship and defends her

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, xviii-xix.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, xix.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, xx.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, xx-xxvi.

<sup>12</sup> Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 374.



participation as editor of the text as occurring only at Jacobs's request.<sup>13</sup> Second, Jacobs's text intentionally reveals sexual exploitation by her master and details her personal journey toward mental and physical control of her body. The titles of each chapter reveal their contents, "The Trials of Girlhood" and "The Jealous Mistress," for example, which leave her readers with no reservations as to what will be revealed.<sup>14</sup> Third, Jacobs's text is told from a distinctly female standpoint and departs from traditional male slave narratives. Typically, male slave narratives follow a man's dual rites of passage from childhood into manhood and from slavery into freedom.<sup>15</sup> Jacobs's text, however, details daily interactions with Mr. and Mrs. Norcom that reveal why her experience as a slave was so horrifying. Fourth, Jacobs's text is directed toward a distinctly female audience. In her preface, Jacobs openly diverts attention from herself to "arouse the women of the North," by allowing her own discomfort at sharing her story to shed light upon the conditions of slavery to those living in free states.<sup>16</sup> Finally, Jacobs's text has no "predecessor to overshadow it;" her text stands apart as an independent and distinctive contribution to slave accounts.<sup>17</sup> Yellin argues that Jacobs's autobiography is the first full-length female-authored text to be published in the United States.<sup>18</sup> A focused analysis of the ways in which Jacobs used her voice lends valuable consideration to her text. My intent is to identify examples within Jacobs's narrative to allow readers to evaluate her text from a feminist

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<sup>13</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents*, 3-4.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-30, 31-36.

<sup>15</sup> Patricia F. Barbeito, "'Making Generations' in Jacobs, Larson, and Huston: A Genealogy of Black Women's Writing," *American Literature* 70 (June 1998): 369.

<sup>16</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents*, 1-2.

<sup>17</sup> William Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 267.

<sup>18</sup> Yellin, "Text and Contexts of Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*," in *The Slaves Narrative*, ed. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 263.

standpoint. Jacob's control of her narration, control of her voice, and control of her body must be regarded as key elements in Jacobs's self-empowerment through her assertion of choice within an institution that attempted to deprive her of control of her identity.

A focused analysis of the ways in which Jacobs used her voice lends more valuable consideration of her text. Jacobs's control of her narration is defined through her first-person narrative, which grants her complete authority over how her story is told, what events are shared, and to whom her story is directed. Jacobs's voice, while speaking from her own familiar perspective, faces the challenge of how to best express her perspective to others.<sup>19</sup> Her account is deeply personal and also entwined within politics of sexuality and equality, spaces Jacobs had no social control to navigate; still, her text is an assertion of her reclamation of control, which must first occur through the direction of her narrative. In this consideration of Jacob's text, the control she exerts over her narration becomes apparent. Jacobs's choices expressed in her narrative, which also affect her master and her lover, are her own, and although she did not choose to be a slave, she did assert as much individuality as one could in her circumstances.

The most important consideration of Jacobs's control over her narration is the fact that she is selling her story, not her body, in an attempt to reclaim her voice and identity.<sup>20</sup> Jacobs does not have to negotiate with her audience by compromising her body. She asserts authority over her story when she tells her audience:

You never know 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 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 shuttered at the sound of his footsteps, and trembled within hearing of his voice.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 394.

<sup>20</sup> Foreman, "Manifest in Signs," 80.

<sup>21</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents*, 55.

Jacobs's control over her narration occurs after the silence forced upon her through slavery and the silence she forces upon herself during her escape from slavery. Jacobs also recognizes the importance of her ability to share her experiences with her audience, as she says that other slaves are “too much brutalized by slavery to feel the humiliation of their position; but many slaves feel it most acutely and shrink from the memory of it.”<sup>22</sup> Breaking her silence after so many years would inevitably create a space where Jacobs felt compelled to use her voice in her own way while speaking for those who have suppressed their own voices.

Of course, while revealing such an intimate story to an abolitionist society thirsty for any accounts that might serve as ammunition in the war against slavery, Jacobs certainly encountered fear and mistrust toward the rest of her audience who would not accept her story as truth.<sup>23</sup> She requests her readers' confidence in her narrative in her preface: “I trust my motives will excuse what might otherwise seem presumptuous.”<sup>24</sup> Jacobs identifies potential reasons for her audience's lack of faith in her narrative by requesting her readers to “excuse deficiencies in consideration of circumstances,” as her time as a slave “has not left [Jacobs] much leisure to make up for the loss of early opportunity to improve [herself].”<sup>25</sup> To resist any of her audience's reservations, Jacobs encoded her narrative to preserve her own authority so that she could reach the empathy of her audience.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid, 28.

<sup>23</sup> Foreman, “Manifest in Signs,” 78.

<sup>24</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents*, 1.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid

<sup>26</sup> Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography*, 79.

In her consideration of Jacobs's voice and control of her narration, Jocelyn Moody identifies the conflation between Jacobs's self-assertion and her lack of self-identification through the use of pseudonyms.<sup>27</sup> Robin Dizard's attributes the lack of identification to Jacobs's need to "hide her own name, and the name of her children's father and his other family."<sup>28</sup> Jacobs asserts in her narrative that concealment is necessary in order to understand the harsh truth of slavery. She tells her readers:

If you want to be fully convinced of the abominations of slavery, go on a southern plantation, and call yourself a negro trader. Then there will be no concealment; and you will see and hear things that will seem to you impossible among human being with immortal souls.<sup>29</sup>

Jacobs echoes her own challenge by rewriting her own appearance and creating a separate identity in order to reveal the most honest representation of slavery as possible.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, one may infer that Jacobs's need to use pseudonyms extends to her own physical and emotional protection and reclamation of control, as she is unveiling a desolate past with which she has not yet fully come to terms. Jacobs opens her narrative with a preface concerning her control of her narration: "I have concealed the names of places, and given personal fictitious names. I had no motive for secrecy on my own account, but I deemed it kind and considerate towards others to pursue this course."<sup>31</sup> Jacobs's utilization of pseudonyms also allows her to

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<sup>27</sup> Jocelyn Moody, "Ripping Away the Veil of Slavery: Literacy, Communal Love, and Self-Esteem in Three Slave Women's Narratives," *Black American Literature Forum* 24 (Winter 1990), 634.

<sup>28</sup> Robin Dizard, "Native Daughters: My Place and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl," *MELUS* 22 (Winter 1997), 154.

<sup>29</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents*, 52.

<sup>30</sup> Goldsby, "I Disguised My Hand," 12.

<sup>31</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents*, 1.

exist outside her narration as herself and allows her memories and recollections to take place through Linda Brent, her alter ego.<sup>32</sup>

Through the creation of Brent, Jacobs also is able to elevate her alter ego as a social and racial equal to her master.<sup>33</sup> Brent serves as shield against two specific experiences exposed on a national level through Jacobs's narrative. Lauren Berlant identifies the first experience "through the many conscriptions of her body" and the second experience as a "psychic rage at America for not even trying to live up to the conditions of citizenship" promised in law and ethics.<sup>34</sup> Brent also can be considered as a "stand in" for both Jacobs and the multitude of other oppressed countrywomen, not only within the confines of slavery but also within the confines of any other socially constraining construction.<sup>35</sup> Hazel Carby argues Jacobs's use of pseudonyms ultimately functioned as a mechanism of self-protection and defiance of convention.<sup>36</sup> Jacobs's self-exile from her sexual exploitation transcends the inner conflict of whether to tell or not to tell, as Jacobs is not placing herself within her own narration.<sup>37</sup>

Similarly, Jacobs prefaces her narrative by telling her readers she is improvising her text in another manner by entitling her text, "*Incidents*," rather than a more inclusive title, such as

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<sup>32</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents*.

<sup>33</sup> Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 381.

<sup>34</sup> Berlant, 93.

<sup>35</sup> Rafia Zafar, "Introduction: Over-exposed, Under-exposed: Harriet Jacobs and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," in *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), 3.

<sup>36</sup> Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of Afro-American Woman Novelist*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 50.

<sup>37</sup> Deborah Garfield, "Earwitness: Female Abolitionism, Sexuality and Representation in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," in *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), 106-7.

"accounts" or "commentaries."<sup>38</sup> Immediately, the reader is alerted to the inclusion of certain events and instances that have occurred in Jacobs's life and the recognition that Jacobs is in control over which "incidents" she will divulge. Jacobs's choice of the title of her text is another means of self-preservation and control of her narration that creates a safeguard between herself and her audience and that is essential in her reclamation of her life as told through her own words. In addition, Jacobs uses partial self-concealment as an additional control of her narration. Jacobs saves room for her own self-validation by hiding information from her audience.<sup>39</sup>

Jacobs's narration is told within the confines of the "Cult of True Womanhood," a social standard from which not even an author as skilled as Jacobs can escape. The discussion of one's sexuality was off limits to all women within the cult of true womanhood. One can easily infer that as a slave girl Jacobs was forced into the role of female slave, which included involuntary reproduction of slaves through sexual intercourse.<sup>40</sup> Jacobs's narration is filled with her own personal conflict between revealing all that was denied to her as a child, a woman, a mother, a lover, and a slave and concealing the actions she initiated as well as the actions inflicted upon her by others. In order to prevent her own embarrassment, Foreman suggests Jacobs is not explicit and "undertells" her story.<sup>41</sup>

Braxton asserts that Jacobs's development of self-awareness and gendered consciousness represents an important development "in the formation of her black and female identity, as well as her public voice."<sup>42</sup> Jacobs's text is a journey traveled by both Jacobs and her readers to

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<sup>38</sup> Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 51.

<sup>39</sup> Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography*, 27.

<sup>40</sup> Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography*, 27.

<sup>41</sup> Foreman, "Manifest in Signs," 81.

<sup>42</sup> Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography*, 205.

uncover her powerful narrative. Furthermore, the passage from silence into public self-expression allows Jacobs to break free from concepts of womanhood that once caused inner conflict and to stand apart as a strong, independent woman. Jacobs asserts her reasons for writing her narrative: "I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is."<sup>43</sup> While her contention of slavery's violation of "the principles of individualism" for women jeopardized having her story dismissed, Jacobs persisted with her criticism of enslavement on behalf of those women who had yet to use their own voices, and for this reason, Jacobs's text stands as rhetorical dissection of the cult of true womanhood.<sup>44</sup>

Jacobs's use of her voice is equally defiant of the cult of true womanhood and her role as a slave. This control of her voice is defined through her tone, which is used to uncover her experience as a slave, refute her master, and speak directly to her audience. Upon taking up her account, Jacobs's reader is immediately handed the responsibility to listen to her story and accept her challenge of action. Her accounts of her sexual exploitation within Norcom's house are only a few pages long. Although Jacobs is criticized for her lack of description of her mental torture, her narrative is concentrated and meant as a swift delivery to her reader's psyche, as hazy revelations are useless and do not serve her purpose.

Jacobs's narration is spoken from a gender-specific perspective, which allows her experience as a female to stand apart from male experiences and to raise awareness of the mental and physical abuse faced by enslaved women.<sup>45</sup> She describes Norcom's aggressions as stormy, "that made his victims tremble," and also as gentle. Both approaches were designed were

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<sup>43</sup>Jacobs, *Incidents*, 1-2.

<sup>44</sup> Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 375; and Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 47.

<sup>45</sup> Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 59.

designed to subdue his victims.<sup>46</sup> Jacobs demonstrates insight into Norcom's psyche in her consideration that he "loved money, but he loved power more."<sup>47</sup> Jacobs recognizes that Norcom's attempts of control over Jacobs are his attempts at complete power over another human being. Jacobs relates that once she turned fifteen, her master whispered "foul words" into her ear and "peopled [her] young mind with unclean images" that were apparently so distasteful that even her naïve mind could impart their meaning.<sup>48</sup> Norcom's verbal assaults were so venomous that Jacobs describes her days and nights as filled with sorrow and shame that would damage her pride should she reveal "such impure things."<sup>49</sup>

The suppression of Jacobs's racial and sexual identity ultimately influences her appropriation of language included in her narrative; an example of Jacobs's assertion of her own voice is evident through her "sass" toward Norcom.<sup>50</sup> According to Braxton, "sass," or verbal insolence, should be examined as "a mode of verbal discourse and as a weapon of self-defense."<sup>51</sup> The "sass" Jacobs directs toward Norcom is as aggressive as his verbal insults toward her. One of their first wars of words occurs when Norcom discovers her desire to marry her first lover, a neighboring black slave. Norcom cannot comprehend Jacobs's desire to have a husband. Moreover, Norcom cannot comprehend Jacobs's assertion of choice in her potential spouse. Jacobs responds to his shock by inquiring, "Don't you suppose, sir, that a slave can

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<sup>46</sup>Jacobs, *Incidents*, 27.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid, 80.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>49</sup> Please see Jacobs, *Incidents*, pages 29 through 34 for more examples of Jacobs' "sorrow and shame."

<sup>50</sup> Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography*, 10.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.



have some preference about marrying? Do you suppose that all men are alike to her?""<sup>52</sup> When she reveals her love for the black slave, Norcom strikes Jacobs, to which Jacobs responds, ""You have struck me for answering you honestly. How I despise you!""<sup>53</sup> Their altercation possesses the characteristics too familiar in domestic assaults. But the conclusion of their verbal and physical struggle reminds Jacobs's readers that this is no lovers' spat, but rather a master asserting his total control over his slave:

"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."<sup>54</sup>

Again, Jacobs reiterates the explanation for her impudence in the form of a calm apology: ""I know I have been disrespectful sir, but you drove me to it; I couldn't help it.""<sup>55</sup> Jacobs sheds any responsibility for her behavior by citing her master as the instigator and perpetrator of their arguments.

Similarly, Jacobs denies any allegiance to Norcom as his slave in her behavior; she remembers that without Norcom's torment upon her, she ""might have been a virtuous, free and happy wife."<sup>56</sup> Her deeper consideration of the predicament Norcom has inflicted upon her causes Jacobs to tell her master that her sins are indebted to God and herself, but not against

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<sup>52</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents*, 39.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid

<sup>54</sup> Ibid

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 58.

him.<sup>57</sup> She later continues her socio-religious consideration of her circumstance with Norcom concerning his membership in the Episcopal Church, where she asserts not only her voice, but her biblical knowledge as well:

“You would do well to join the church, too, Linda.”  
“There are sinners enough in it already...If I could be allowed to live like a Christian, I should be glad.”  
“You can do what I require; and if you are faithful to me, you will be as virtuous as my wife,” he replied.  
I answered that the Bible didn’t say so.<sup>58</sup>

What is unique to Jacobs's Thoreauian disobedience is her consciousness of her status as a slave, a status that strips her of citizenship. The consciousness of her lack of citizenship as an American bars her from any civil space by creating social invisibility that leaves her mute.<sup>59</sup> However, Jacobs's “sass” to her master represents her assertion for visibility and her reclamation of her own voice as an individual, not as slave or woman or any other category to which her master, her readers, or her critics seek to limit her.<sup>60</sup> Also unique to her concept of disobedience is what Anita Goldman identifies as a “persistent effort to negotiate between the competing claims of liberalism and sentimentality as contradictory but equally necessary value systems” of representation.<sup>61</sup> Ultimately, Jacobs's negotiations of representation grant her the space to speak openly and honestly, making her narrative a significant contribution and inspiration to the rhetoric of oppressive circumstances.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 74-5.

<sup>59</sup> Anita Goldman, “Harriet Jacobs, Henry Thoreau, and the Character of Disobedience,” in *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): 237.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 242.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 236.

Similarly significant to the examination of Jacobs's control of her voice, her first-person narration allows her to speak directly to her audience, another rhetorical angle from which her text is considered revolutionary.<sup>62</sup> She constantly reminds her reader of the authenticity of her voice: "I have spoken plain English. Pardon me. I cannot use [milder terms]."<sup>63</sup> By detailing the corruption of her emotional and physical well being, Jacobs intentionally tells her reader to consider her condition within the confines of the master-slave relationship, not "predilection or propensity for sexual excess."<sup>64</sup>

While establishing a relationship of trust with her reader, Jacobs also criticizes her audience, namely her northern readers, for their lack of response to the slave's plight. She boldly places the responsibility of the subordinate social status of black people upon her northern readers:

What would *you* be, if you had been born and brought up a slave, with generations of slaves for ancestors? I admit that the black man *is* inferior. But what is it that makes him so? It is the ignorance in which white men compel him to live; it is the torturing whip that lashes manhood out of him; it is the fierce bloodhounds of the South, and the scarcely less cruel human bloodhounds of the north, who enforce the Fugitive Slave Law.<sup>65</sup>

Jacobs also offers less severe criticisms as she calls attention to the social power her white northern readers hold in comparison to her social powerlessness and laments over the actions she would take against slavery, if she had more ability.<sup>66</sup> She also attempts to summon her readers'

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<sup>62</sup> Yellin, "Text and Context," 270.

<sup>63</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents*, 43.

<sup>64</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 106.

<sup>65</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents*, 44.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

recognition of the realities of slavery as she insists, “Reader, I draw no imaginary pictures of southern homes. I am telling you the plain truth.”<sup>67</sup>

In the midst of her altercations with Norcom and her personal reflections of her circumstance, Jacobs steps away from her “self” in order to speak intimately with her reader as if they exist within the same scene with her. During an argument with Norcom concerning Jacobs's level of disrespect, she refutes any responsibility for her actions. She pauses and rhetorically turns to her audience to ask, “Reader did you ever hate? I hope not. I never did but once; and I trust I never shall again.”<sup>68</sup> Here, Jacobs rhetorically holds Norcom responsible for the pain he has inflicted upon her, but holds herself accountable for the hatred she feels toward her master. She thus demonstrates her profound ability to step inside and outside a situation in order to allow her readers and herself to reach a greater understanding of her circumstances.

One of the most significant addresses to her reader comes before she reveals her relationship with Sawyer, the neighboring white lawyer with whom she has two children:

And now, reader, I come to a period in my unhappy life, which I would gladly forget if I could. The remembrance fills me with sorrow and shame. It pains me to tell you of it; but I have promised to tell you the truth, and I will do it honestly...I will not screen myself...Neither can I plead ignorance or thoughtlessness...I knew what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation.<sup>69</sup>

Here, the reader is personally confronted with Jacobs's struggle between disobedience against her master and the guilt she feels from her actions, specifically, her sexual relationship with Sawyer. Asserting the reclamation of her voice and the control of her narration, Jacobs suppresses her embarrassment of her circumstance, from which her readers understand there is no avoidance,

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<sup>67</sup>Ibid, 36.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 53-4.

and reveals her love affair with a man from an entirely separate racial, economic, and gendered background. Significant in her disclosure is the fact that Sawyer, an affluent white lawyer, looks beyond their socially limiting circumstance and is able to care for Jacobs, even to have children with her. However, her honesty to her readers does not allow Jacobs to misrepresent her relationship with Sawyer as a romantic whimsical tryst; rather, she recognizes the emotional connection she shared with Sawyer, even though she entered into the affair to upset her master. The transition from Jacobs's control of her narration to the control of her body is made apparent in her distinctive relationship with Sawyer.

The idea of consent in relation to Jacobs's ability to choose, and ultimately control, her sexual relations elevates Jacobs as her own arbiter.<sup>70</sup> Jacobs's control of her body is defined through her use of her body, which is evident in her physical refusal of Norcom, her physical consent to Sawyer, and her removal of her physical self from slavery. Slavery in America represented a “hybrid experience of intimacy and alienation” in relation to black enslaved women’s sexual experience.<sup>71</sup> A slave woman existed within a role predetermined because of her lack of choice or control, but for Jacobs, who has asserted control over her narrative and voice, taking control over her body is the next step toward the reclamation of her self. Her choice of whom to share her physical self with is another example of Jacobs's reclamation of legal entitlement; when Jacobs refrains or offers herself to anyone, she is exerting a degree of autonomy not available to her as a slave or as a woman, thus making her "deliberate calculation" all the more significant to her account.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Goldsby, “I Disguised My Hand,” 21.

<sup>71</sup> Berlant, “The Queen of America . . .,” 935.

<sup>72</sup> Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 110.

According to her account, Norcom substitutes sexual acts with foul suggestions whispered to Jacobs.<sup>73</sup> Norcom attempts to assert his own perversions into Jacobs's mind's eye, which at the age of fifteen, is most likely only acquainted with vague notions of sexual relations. Norcom manipulatively obliterates the possibility of Jacobs learning about sexual relationships on her own accord and instead aims to create images of vulgarity in her mind. Reasons for his efforts could lie in his overarching goal, the mental and physical control of Jacobs that demands she submit to his will by creating negative perceptions of behaviors or curiosities he did not wish for her to explore on her own.

Jacobs recognizes Norcom's perversions as an attack upon her soul and realizes, "the war of my life had begun; and though one of God's most powerful creatures, I resolved never to be conquered."<sup>74</sup> The tense relationship between speaking, by Norcom, and listening, and ultimate refusal, by Jacobs, becomes what Deborah Garfield considers, "the discursive ploy through which she attempts to reverse the roles of master and slave in her text, as well as the corresponding hierarchy of coddled reader and writer-victim."<sup>75</sup> Norcom's attempt to suppress Jacobs's natural sexual inquisitiveness by creating representations of sex through fear and repulsion is unsuccessful in that Jacobs directs her repulsion toward Norcom.

Patricia Barbeito argues that Jacobs asserts her "sexual transgression" as a "symptom of slavery," and by doing so thus negates her previously stated acceptance of responsibility for her actions and denying her reader the honesty she promises early on in her account.<sup>76</sup> However,

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<sup>73</sup> Garfield, "Earwitness," 109.

<sup>74</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents*, 19.

<sup>75</sup> Garfield, "Earwitness," 109.

<sup>76</sup> Patricia Barbeito, "'Making Generations' in Jacobs, Larson, and Huston: A Genealogy of Black Women's Writing," *American Literature* 70 (June 1998), 367.

Barbeito is mistaken in her consideration that Jacobs masters her own slavery by literally surpassing her master's intentions for her by giving her body and mind to another man of her choosing.<sup>77</sup> Equally significant are the politics that emerge from Jacobs's relationship with Sawyer, an affair that becomes "a weapon, either of oppression or rebellion" but, ultimately, as an experience that leaves Jacobs only with memories of their affair.<sup>78</sup>

Jacobs describes the contrast between her voluntary relationship with Sawyer and Norcom's would-be relationship with her as liberating:

But to be an object of interest to a man who is not married, and who is not her master, is agreeable to the pride and feelings of a slave, if her miserable situation has left her any pride or sentiment. 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.<sup>79</sup>

Hartman argues that while Jacobs gives herself to Sawyer without the "coercion of violent threats," the patriarchal system ultimately structured the relationship between Jacobs, a black slave woman, and Sawyer, a white free man.<sup>80</sup> Still, in order for Jacobs to give of herself, to have "something akin to freedom," she must "assume the self" in the effort toward the reclamation and control of her body, even if such an act exists only within a space of limited freedom.<sup>81</sup> In another effort to offer "something akin to freedom," Jacob flees from her master to protect her children, and as Fox-Genovese maintains, she raises the level of her resistance rather

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<sup>77</sup> Garfield, "Earwitness," 110.

<sup>78</sup> Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story*, 252. Berlant; and "The Queen of America . . .," 936.

<sup>79</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents*, 54-5.

<sup>80</sup> Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 104.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 112.

than submitting to the will of her master.<sup>82</sup> In this instance, Jacobs's children represent an extension of her body, and her escape with intent to protect them reflects another component of the control she exerts over her body.

Unique to Jacobs's assertion of her control of her body is, Yellin argues, Jacobs's recognition of unsanctioned female sexual activity as a “mistaken tactic in the struggle for freedom.”<sup>83</sup> Again, Jacobs's responsibility for her awareness of her actions and “deliberate calculation” are called to her reader’s attention.<sup>84</sup> Denied any sort of legal or social protection, Jacobs surrenders her innocence, hanging in the balance with Norcom, for her love affair with Sawyer. The fact that she could have drawn such advanced conclusions concerning her negotiations of her master’s control over her and her self-produced sexual initiation illustrates her feminist consciousness and, moreover, her black feminist consciousness.<sup>85</sup>

Jacobs's chronicle demonstrates her conscious act of choosing to control her narrative, her voice, and her body. Jacobs's autobiographical narrative of her experience through the horrors of slavery is worthy of academic consideration because of her assertive authority and reclamation of her own voice. Jacobs's reclamation of her voice, as expressed through her narrative, and literary patterns found within the narrative recur in later works of autobiographies and fictions, and demonstrates the impact and importance of Jacobs's text.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 384.

<sup>83</sup> Yellin, Introduction to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, xxxii.

<sup>84</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents*, 53-4.

<sup>85</sup> Yellin, Introduction to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, xxxiv.

<sup>86</sup> Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography*, 206.



Upon her death in 1897, Reverend Francis J. Grimke, nephew to famous abolitionist sisters Sarah and Angelina Grimke, delivered Jacobs's eulogy.<sup>87</sup> His homage included his recollection of Jacobs, specifically during her abolitionist years, and his own recollection of his encounters with her.<sup>88</sup> He describes Jacobs as a woman with a spirit of generosity and “marked individuality,” without “the slightest trace of insincerity about her.”<sup>89</sup> Grimke claims that Jacobs was “thoroughly alive to all that was transpiring;” indeed, more than one hundred years past her death, as her worn, but emancipated, body lays in rest, Jacobs voice is still heard as a channel through which to convey her self-made language of power.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Smyth, "O Death, where is Thy Sting?" 35.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid, 36-8

<sup>89</sup>Ibid, 36-8.

<sup>90</sup> Berlant, "The Queen of America, . . ." 939.

*Cooper stepped inside the minds of her audience and quietly laid a foundation to change their convictions...She implicitly created the audience she wanted to speak to and remade the black woman in society's eyes.<sup>1</sup>*

## CHAPTER 7

### MAKING SPACE WHERE THERE ONCE WAS NONE: ANNA JULIA COOPER'S REDRESS OF BLACK WOMEN'S SOCIAL ROLES AND THE CULT OF TRUE WOMANHOOD

The life and works of Anna Julia Cooper are an appropriate ending to the examination of the voice of the enslaved and free black woman. Cooper's experiences from childhood and into her adult life took her from the bonds of slavery into emancipation and through the racist cultural climate of the post-bellum nineteenth-century and early twentieth century. Cooper channeled her experiences into considerations of social progress for the black woman within the context of society's social and ethical standards. She wrote with personal dedication and conviction on the social emancipation of the black woman and, as Charles Lemert claims, "it is impossible to read even a few paragraphs of any of Cooper's writings without knowing that this was a woman who knew exactly who she was."<sup>2</sup> Cooper's insight has provoked critics to consider her work even if they wonder why such a remarkable woman is found at the margins of the history of black feminism, the very movement many believe she founded.

Criticism of Cooper's essays contained within her renowned text *A Voice from the South* have focused on a select few pieces, notably "The Higher Education of Women" and "Woman versus the Indian," both of which address issues of race and gender. Cooper's 1886 essay "Womanhood" has received little attention. I find "Womanhood" to be one of the most thought-

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<sup>1</sup> Todd Vogel, "The Master's Tools Revisited: Foundation Work in Anna Julia Cooper," in *Criticism and the Color Line: Desegregating American Literary Studies*, ed. Henry B. Wonham (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 158-9.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Lemert, "The Colored Woman's Office," in *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper*, ed. Charles Lemert and Esme Bahn (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1998.), 4.

provoking and symbolic of Cooper's essays and think it serves as the foundation upon which she constructed her argument for black women's access to womanhood. "Womanhood" specifically demonstrates Cooper's spiritual quest to redress the church to include black women.

Cooper was born Annie Julia Haywood around 1858 in Raleigh, North Carolina. The child of Hannah Stanley Haywood, she most likely was fathered by her white master George Washington Haywood.<sup>3</sup> Karen Baker-Fletcher argues that Cooper never recognized Haywood as her father and that in her refusal "to acknowledge indebtedness to her slavemaster father," Cooper implicated him as a perpetrator of the horrors of slavery and "turned stereotypes of promiscuity so often levied against black women upside down."<sup>4</sup> Five years after the Emancipation Proclamation freed Cooper's family on January 1, 1863, she was able to enter St. Augustine's Normal School and Collegiate Institute for newly-freed slaves in 1868.<sup>5</sup> She was nine and a half years old.<sup>6</sup> In 1877, at age nineteen, she married George Cooper, a priest at the Protestant Episcopal Church.<sup>7</sup> Their marriage ended with his unexpected death two years later.<sup>8</sup> Cooper never remarried, nor did she have any other relationships; rather, her solitary life became part of her vocation, according to Lemert.<sup>9</sup> The death of her husband allowed Cooper to pursue a

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<sup>3</sup>Mary Helen Washington, foreword to *A Voice from the South*, by Anna Julia Cooper (New York: Oxford University Press), xxxi.

<sup>4</sup>Karen Baker-Fletcher, *A Singing Something: Womanist Reflections on Anna Julia Cooper* (New York: Crossroad Press, 1994), 35.

<sup>5</sup>Hutchinson, *Anna Julia Cooper*, 14.

<sup>6</sup> Washington, foreword to *A Voice from the South*, xxxi-xxxii.

<sup>7</sup> Lemert, "The Colored Woman's Office," 13.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

career of teaching, which she would not have had opportunity to pursue as a married woman.<sup>10</sup> She attended Oberlin, where she earned bachelor's and master's degrees, and found work as a teacher in Washington, D.C. at Dunbar High School.<sup>11</sup> As a teacher, she led courses of "the classics, the modern and ancient languages, literature, mathematics, and the sciences."<sup>12</sup> Around 1892, Cooper published *A Voice from the South*. She also raised seven children, "two foster children when she was young and the five orphans she adopted just shy of her sixtieth year."<sup>13</sup> In 1925, at age sixty-seven, she earned her Ph.D. from the University of Paris, the fourth American black woman ever to have earned such a degree.<sup>14</sup> She died in 1964 in her home in Washington, D.C.<sup>15</sup>

The accumulation of her work in *A Voice from the South* is a "great service" for her people and "one of the strongest pleas for the race and sex of the writer that has ever appeared," contends N.F. Mosell.<sup>16</sup> What is unique and distinctive about Cooper's work is she uses her real name to claim authorship of her essays and she has no reservations expressing her opinion, criticizing others, or claiming access to society. According to Elizabeth Alexander, her work "considers questions of race and gender, separately, and as they intersect."<sup>17</sup> Alexander stands out as a scholar who identifies Cooper's work as a significant contribution, if not foundation, of

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<sup>10</sup> Washington, foreword to *Voice from the South*, xxxii.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., xxxii-xxxiii.

<sup>12</sup> Lemert, "The Colored Woman's Office," 5.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>14</sup> Washington, foreword to *Voice from the South*, xxix.

<sup>15</sup> Lemert, "The Colored Woman's Office," 4.

<sup>16</sup> N.F. Mosell, *The Work of the Afro-American Woman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 61.

<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Alexander, "'We Must be About our Father's Business:' Anna Julia Cooper and the In-Corporation of the Nineteenth-Century African-American Woman Intellectual," *Signs* 20(Winter 1995): 337.

black feminist thought. She contends that in her work Cooper "creates an unprecedented self: the African-American female intellectual at the end of the nineteenth-century, little more than a generation beyond slavery and two generations before the unimaginable changes to come."<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, Kathy Glass argues, "Cooper shaped the parameters of late nineteenth-century black feminist thought."<sup>19</sup>

Kathy Glass astutely observes, "Cooper was one of the first black feminist writers to theorize about the diversity of women's voices. Contemporary critics correctly observe, however, that Cooper's nineteenth-century writings reflected many of the conventions of her time."<sup>20</sup> Cooper's work reflects an acute awareness of the society in which she lived and an equal awareness of how best to present the need for recognition of the black woman. *A Voice from the South* presents Cooper's wit, wisdom, boldness, and intellect which, Vivian May claims, "creates a multivoiced text by combining first and third-person narration and by using parody and irony to vary her analytic voice."<sup>21</sup>

Most scholarship on Cooper's work focuses on her argument for education and black women's relationship to the women's movement. Cooper's dedication to individualized education is worthy of recognition, as she believed that access to education would aid in the balanced social structure of gender roles, as she asserted in her essay, "The Higher Education of

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 338.

<sup>19</sup> Kathy Glass, "Tending to the Roots: Anna Julia Cooper's Sociopolitical Thought and Activism," *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* 6 (Spring 2005), 25.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>21</sup> Vivian M. May, "Thinking from the Margins, Acting at the Intersections: Anna Julia Cooper's *A Voice from the South*," *Hypatia* 19 (Spring 2004), 76.

Women."<sup>22</sup> Hazel Carby describes Cooper's dedication to education as a goal to empower women "to develop a new concept of the future where expressions of sensitivity and sympathy toward the poor and oppressed" would be used.<sup>23</sup> May argues that Cooper maintained that sex and race had been used to reinforce social norms, while bell hooks contends that Cooper viewed education as a mechanism to enhance sex roles assigned to women by patriarchy.<sup>24</sup> She promoted equal access to education for all people, regardless of gender or race; she considered both vocational and liberal arts education equally valuable.<sup>25</sup> Obviously, she based her opinion on the value of education upon her own personal experiences because she was a black woman who pursued learning and education until her death. What is unique in Cooper's argument for equal access to education is her belief that women's knowledge would enhance women's roles as contributors in the world and to also explore opportunity outside the traditional ones of home and family.<sup>26</sup>

Black women in particular faced difficulties in accessing education and in finding public venues that would allow them to express openly their frustrations about, and solutions to, the oppression of women. Because most white women could not empathize with their black women counterparts, a rift separated black and white women within the women's movement. According to hooks, Cooper is recognized among black women as one of the first black activists "to urge

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<sup>22</sup> Anna Julia Cooper, "The Higher Education of Women," in *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper*, ed. Charles Lemert and Esme Bahn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 72-87.

<sup>23</sup> Hazel V. Carby, "'In the Quiet, Undisputed Dignity of my Womanhood:' Black Feminist Thought after Emancipation," in *Reconstructing Womanhood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 102.

<sup>24</sup> May, "Thinking from the Margins," 82; and bell hooks, "Black Women and Feminism," in *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 168.

<sup>25</sup> May, "Thinking from the Margins," 82; and Frances R. Keller, "An Educational Controversy: Anna Julia Cooper's Vision of Resolution," *NWSA Journal* 11.3(Fall 1999), 58.

<sup>26</sup> hooks, "Black Women and Feminism," 168; and Eugenia c. DeLamotte, Natania Meeker, and Jean F. O'Barr, ed., *Women Imagine Change* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 425.

black women to articulate their own experiences and to make the public aware of the way in which racism and sexism affected their social status."<sup>27</sup> In her essay, "Woman versus the Indian," Cooper openly criticizes racist viewpoints held by many white suffragists.<sup>28</sup> Cooper argues that white women essentially have created their own social status by perpetuating a caste system to suit their purposes.<sup>29</sup> Shirley Logan argues that Cooper places the concerns of black women within a global context to unify women beyond race and color in order to recognize the continual neglect and disrespect towards all women.<sup>30</sup> Cooper considered women's issues as universal concerns that should not be collectively defined, but since white suffragists did not encourage black women's participation within the movement, Cooper thought that black women needed to express and negotiate the politics of their bodies within the confines of their own separate causes.<sup>31</sup>

Cooper formulates her argument for the cause of black women by boldly accessing the social construct of womanhood. Cooper expresses the roles of black women as occupying separate social spheres than men through the "cult of true womanhood." Many scholars have presented her essentialist pattern of thought as a unique lense through which to examine her assertion of equality. Kathy Glass argues that Cooper simultaneously rejects and embraces

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<sup>27</sup> hooks, "Black Women and Feminism," 166.

<sup>28</sup> Anna Julia Cooper, "Woman versus the Indian," in *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper*, ed. Charles Lemert and Esme Bahn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). Cooper explains her argument on pages 88 through 108.

<sup>29</sup> See also, Cooper's arguments on pages 90 through 97.

<sup>30</sup> Shirley W. Logan, *We Are Coming: The Political Discourse of Nineteenth Century Black Women*, Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999, 126.

<sup>31</sup> May, "Thinking from the Margins," 87; and Claudia Tate, "Sexual Discourses of Political Reform of the Post-Reconstruction Era," in *Domestic Allegories of Political Desires: The Black Heroines Text at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 132.

essentialism, depending on the context of the argument at stake.<sup>32</sup> Cooper used stereotypes of gender and sex as a foundation upon which to plead her case for the social equality of black women; Cooper did not seek to invalidate social norms, but rather to modify the manner in which society viewed such roles. Elizabeth Alexander contends that attacking stereotypes was significant in Cooper's agenda, but that some of her arguments were expressions of essentialism.<sup>33</sup> She argues that womanhood is the ideal solution for black women's definition in society. Cooper maintained women appropriately complimented men as binary halves of one whole in their social and economic relationships to one another through women's contributions of love and men's contributions of supply and demand.<sup>34</sup> Cooper asserted that black women possess what Claudia Tate describes as "inherently sympathetic and virtuous nature that makes them exceptionally suitable for effecting social reform."<sup>35</sup> While aligning black women alongside their white female counterparts, Cooper also defends the morality of the black woman, creating a new definition of womanliness, one that emphasizes the "transformative influence" of women upon society.<sup>36</sup>

Cooper's rhetorical argument for black women to access the realm of womanhood is found in her redress of the church. Hazel Carby argues that initially Cooper based her argument for universal womanhood, or collective femininity beyond any racial lines, upon the assumption

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<sup>32</sup> Kathy Glass, "Tending to the Roots: Ann Julia Cooper's Sociopolitical Thought and Activism," *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* 6 (Spring 2005), 33.

<sup>33</sup> Alexander, "'We Must be About our Father's Business,'" 341.

<sup>34</sup> Glass, "Tending to the Roots," 34-8.

<sup>35</sup> Tate, "Sexual Discourses," 156.

<sup>36</sup> Vogel, "The Master's Tools Revisited," 167; and DeLamotte, *Women Imagine Change*, 425.



that a society should be considered through the way women are treated.<sup>37</sup> I want to examine Cooper's association of black women with American history through her essay, "Womanhood," as a distinctive argument for black women's valuable contribution and ultimate uplift in society. She uses her belief in the "cult of true womanhood" as a channel to defend all women's piety as justification to reconsider black women as valuable members of society.

Cooper places black women within the annals of American history by way of the most obvious connection, the institution of slavery. She argues the need for equal opportunity for black women to gain access into society, as they are an integral part of their country's history, and challenges historical scholars to argue otherwise.<sup>38</sup> She reminds her readers that her race "is just twenty-one years removed from the conception and experience of a chattel, just at the ruddy age of manhood," and obviously still has the opportunity between the country's symbolic young adulthood and maturity to learn from the past and work toward a more progressive future.<sup>39</sup> She compares the institution of slavery to a wound, similar to a disease that doctors could easily diagnose. In this case, however, Cooper considers social neglect as an infection from not recognizing the individuality of the black man or developing black womanhood, "as an essential fundamental for the elevation of race."<sup>40</sup> The mark of slavery, a wound upon American history, can be healed by recognizing the oppressed race and, through womanhood, can offer black women opportunity to step from their role as chattel into valued citizens.

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<sup>37</sup> Carby, "In the Quiet, Undisputed Dignity of My Womanhood," 97.

<sup>38</sup> Anna Julia Cooper, "Womanhood," in *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper*, ed. Charles Lemert and Esme Bahn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 61.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

The most inherent quality upon which womanhood is celebrated is the ability to give birth, and Cooper used the symbolism of birth as a literary device to place within "Womanhood." Cooper uses wordplay to present her argument for black women to access womanhood with metaphors of motherhood. She rhetorically builds her argument through the prospect of conception in her evaluation of the benefit of women's influence upon society: "Life is too busy, too pregnant with meaning."<sup>41</sup> She continues her metaphor through the symbolism of labor by arguing that progress "is never made by spasms. Real progress is growth. It must begin in the seed."<sup>42</sup> Cooper relates progress to conception, a slow process of growth, that only a woman could truly understand through her inherited knowledge of motherhood. Cooper recognizes that the black woman, while neglected and denied, is aware that "the cycles [of life] wait for her."<sup>43</sup> Cooper asserts that the black woman has potential to offer a valuable contribution to society if she would only be allowed to stand alongside her white female counterparts to equally contribute to society. However, if denied the opportunity of womanhood, her efforts will "prove abortive."<sup>44</sup> Cooper is deliberate with her words, as the elimination of a pregnancy in the nineteenth-century would have been viewed as a reprehensible act, an assault upon society. Symbolically, denying black women the opportunity to access womanhood and contribute to society and civilization terminates social growth and progress.

Cooper's Christian sentiment, while noticeable throughout *A Voice from the South*, is expressed with careful deliberateness in "Womanhood," as an effort to elevate black women and to redress the church. Ann DuCille criticizes Cooper for her exclusivity of Christianity, which in

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

fact does not support collective suffrage, arguing that her essays are "tinged with Christian ethnocentrism," and support Social Darwinism through her marginalization of Asians and non-Christians.<sup>45</sup> According to DuCille, Cooper's Christian sentiment excludes women who do not espouse similar ethical beliefs. Criticisms of this nature are all too familiar when a person places his or herself in the public eye as someone who openly recognizes social injustices and attempts to provide a remedy for him/her. Critics often question an activist's focus to one group, people, or incident when in fact it would be impossible for one person to eradicate marginalization of all peoples in one attempt. Cooper certainly did not intend to exclude other social and ethnic minorities. Rather, her intent was to challenge society to make space for the black woman who was immediately affected by the political climate at the time, while leaving room for other groups to move into their own spaces by way of their own social liberation. Cooper simply used the climate already in place, that is, a religious climate, to create the space she considered appropriate for the black woman.

Cooper's Christian faith is genuine and her sincerity makes her arguments for womanhood even more convincing. Cathryn Bailey contends that Cooper's religiosity "conditioned her thinking," for her argument for the redress of the church to include black women.<sup>46</sup> Karen Baker-Fletcher does a remarkable job in her interpretation of Cooper's religiosity, asserting that Cooper's "theological themes are foundational to her concept of human development."<sup>47</sup> It seems apparent that Cooper does not believe that humans can progress without religious conviction.

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<sup>45</sup> Ann DuCille, *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 52-3.

<sup>46</sup> Cathryn Bailey, "Anna Julia Cooper: 'Dedicated in the Name of My Slave Mother to the Education of Colored Working People,'" *Hypatia* 19 (Spring 2004), 58.

<sup>47</sup> Baker-Fletcher, *A Singing Something*, 18.

In addition to understanding the religious climate of the nineteenth-century, Cooper also identified with the interpersonal struggles black women encountered with womanhood. Baker-Fletcher explains that Cooper recognized that black women's experiences would have been "inauthentic to the experience of work and survival in the midst of socio-economic suffering" most of them encountered during and following slavery.<sup>48</sup> Cooper could easily understand personal conflict, as she had been born into oppression as a slave and was emancipated by law, but still subjugated to stereotypes and prejudices by society. Baker-Fletcher applauds Cooper's use of employing, "moral elements in the image of True Womanhood as descriptive of Black Women to gain an audience supportive of providing educational opportunities for Black women."<sup>49</sup> Cooper's source for morality is, again, found within her deep religious convictions. In her essay "Womanhood," Cooper asserts:

The idea of the radical amelioration of womankind, reverence for woman as woman regardless of rank, wealth, or culture, was to come from that rich and bounteous fountain from which flow all our liberal and universal ideas – the Gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>50</sup>

Hazel Carby argues that Cooper interpreted the Gospel as what is now called "liberation theology," a set of ideals which argued for equality not only for women, but also for the poor, the weak, the starving, and the dispossessed.<sup>51</sup> Cooper stated that the word of Christ is egalitarian in nature, and that society falls quite short of Christ's principles of encompassing love.<sup>52</sup> Cooper also argues against the corruption against woman, the "Bride of Christ," and in spite of her

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>50</sup> Cooper, "Womanhood," 56.

<sup>51</sup> Carby, "In the Quiet, Undisputed Dignity of my Womanhood," 98.

<sup>52</sup> Bailey, "Anna Julia Cooper," 59.

struggle "has kept, through many vicissitudes, the faith once delivered to the saints."<sup>53</sup> As Christ suffered, so did women Cooper considered brides of Christ. What is convincing in this argument is Cooper's identification of the suffering of Christ's bride, an experience particularly significant in the consideration of the history of the black woman and her role as slave, mistress, laborer, and victim. Cooper uses the suffering of the black woman as a source of her strength and piety rather than the catalyst of her weakness.

Cooper's comparison between black women and Christ is quite convincing. Baker-Fletcher identifies the characteristics shared between Christ and the black woman: both were "the least of these;" identified with strangers, outcasts, and poor; were socially mute; were vital elements in regeneration of civilization; emerged as leaders; were ever present; suffered emotionally and physically; had their messages ignored by society; lacked an appropriate audience; and demonstrated motherly/fatherly qualities.<sup>54</sup> Baker-Fletcher argues that to Cooper women's anonymity is "one of the gravest sins of patriarchal systems of injustice" and compares women's rejection as a form of violence.<sup>55</sup> To deny women was to deny Christ and as Glass contends:

It is therefore incumbent on the church to devote itself to uplifting black women, whose sexuality and womanhood had suffered tremendously under the regime of slavery, by teaching them religious principles and values. Thus Cooper asks her audience not only to study religious principles, but also to live them. Criticizing the organized church for failing to protect black women, she implores the male members of the church to follow the example of Christ.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Cooper, "Womanhood," 56.

<sup>54</sup> Baker-Fletcher, *A Singing Something*, 68-70.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>56</sup> Glass, "Tending to the Roots," 35.

Cooper asserts the equality of women to men by virtue of their traditional piety and closeness to Christ. May argues that Cooper rhetorically "pokes holes in hallowed American ideals of free choice and rugged individualism to further undermine assumptions of a universal, and uniformly free, subject."<sup>57</sup> In addition to calling the attention to male-dominated society, she also calls to her fellow women: "Woman, Mother, - your responsibility is one that might make angels tremble and fear to take hold,"<sup>58</sup> But as Cooper has already asserted, women exist alongside Christ as the perpetuators of life and love, and black women specifically should therefore not be afraid to claim their rightful space within the realm of womanhood to celebrate the qualities Christ bestowed on women.

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<sup>57</sup> May, "Thinking from the Margins," 85.

<sup>58</sup> Cooper, "Womanhood," 59.

*African-American women, whose voices are largely unknown, have often unconsciously created their own lives and are the voices of authority on their experiences.<sup>1</sup>*

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSION

Fry argues against the stereotypes of African-American quilters, asserting that these myths deny black women access to individual talent, creativity, or improvisation.<sup>2</sup> This was not the case in any of the circumstances examined in the lives of slave women who were the subjects of this research. Enslaved black women possessed an acute talent and ability to creatively express themselves, either through deed, art, or word. The slave woman resisted her master through a variety of means, demonstrating her resourcefulness and strong will to protect herself and her family. As a result, she redressed herself and her heritage, as demonstrated through the examination of slave-made quilts, the enslaved black woman expressed her tradition and craft through the domestic arts, perhaps so cunningly that she was able to aid in the escape of her fellow slaves to freedom. As shown through the works of Harriet Jacobs and Anna Julia Cooper, while the enslavement of black women involved the restriction of the body, the peculiar institution did not necessarily involve the enslavement of the mind.

What I have found interesting (and disheartening) in my research is that many of the racist and sexist stereotypes that were created in the nineteenth century are still prevalent in today's society. Vivian May argues, "racial and gender hierarchies assumed to signify intrinsic superiority and inferiority are, in fact, fabricated inequalities that have become accepted as

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<sup>1</sup>Floris Barnett Cash, "Kinship and Quilting: An Examination of an African-American Tradition," *The Journal of Negro History* 80 (Winter 1995), 30.

<sup>2</sup>Gladys-Marie Fry, *Stitched from the Soul* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 7.

natural and true through reception over time."<sup>3</sup> Despite laws enacted to protect, liberate, and recognize women and minorities, American society has not yet reached a point where it wishes to move forward and leave these detrimental stereotypes behind. If there is anything we should take from the history of the enslaved black woman, it should be her desire to resist her oppression and, as Elizabeth Alexander argues, to align "herself with a group larger than her own"<sup>4</sup>

Black women's collective resistance has since evolved into its own social movement. The black woman's voice is one that has not been silent because of enslavement and has become louder as a result of the efforts of such women as Harriet Jacobs, Anna Julia Cooper, and the anonymous quilters. Alexander argues the importance of continuing to use the voice, as she contends speaking out from silence is a "physical act, one that first announces the existence of the body of residence and then trumpets its arrival in a public space."<sup>5</sup> Alexander goes on to explain, "the African-American female body is thus a concurrently speaking and thinking body that remains intact even when consciousness appears fragmented."<sup>6</sup>

Floris Cash argues that enslaved black women experienced cultural duality.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, black women who lived within the confines of slavery were forced to live as property of another human being while they attempted to silently redress themselves as mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters within their own communities. I hope this research has demonstrated the necessity

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<sup>3</sup> Vivian M. May, "Thinking from the Margins, Acting at the Intersections: Anna Julia Cooper's A Voice from the South," *Hypatia* 19 (Spring 2004): 85.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Alexander, "'We Must be About our Father's Business:' Anna Julia Cooper and the In-Corporation of the Nineteenth-Century African-American Woman Intellectual," *Signs* 20 (Winter 1995): 355.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 345.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 346.

<sup>7</sup> Cash, "Kinship and Quilting," 34.



upon which enslaved black women acted in order to preserve their identity. Moreover, I hope this research allows a space for each reader to identify with the universal crisis that exists within stereotypes, oppression, and bigotry while encouraging an examination of the dualities in which we all live.

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