

Within the Rocks, the Rose Still Blooms: Race and Gender in Narratives of Sexual Slavery

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Abstract

During slavery, enslaved women were exposed to the double exploitation of being physical and sexual laborers for white men. Sexual violence was rampant in slavery. Women were forced to endure repeated rapes, pregnancies, and childbirths. This article deals with antebellum slave narratives that include black women's testimonies of sexual slavery and explores how an author's race and gender affect the nature of a narrative's message. It covers three types of narratives: enslaved men's narratives, including those authored by William Wells Brown and Frederick Douglass, a woman's narrative dictated to a white man, *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon: A Tale of Southern Slave Life*, and a woman's self-written narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Each provides different tones and contexts. Through the analysis of these narratives, this article redefines enslaved women's resilience in the face of white violence and violation, despite socio-economic systems that made "sexual coercion" possible.

Keywords: race, gender, sexual slavery, slave narratives, enslaved women, resilience

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I was determined that the master, whom I so hated and loathed, who had blighted the prospects of my youth, and made my life a desert, should not, after my long struggle with him, succeed at last in trampling his victim under his feet. I would do any thing, every thing, for the sake of defeating him.

—Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

Introduction

Margaret Walker's novel, *Jubilee* (1965), begins with the death of an enslaved woman named Hetta, who had given birth to fifteen children, all single births, most of them being fathered by her master. When Hetta died in childbirth at the age of twenty-nine, her youngest daughter, Vyry, was just an infant. Looking at the numbers, Hetta spent nearly half of her life in pregnancy. *Jubilee* is not pure fiction: it is based on the life story of Vyry, the author's great-grandmother, and Walker heard it as a child from her grandmother, Vyry's daughter. Though the book is filled with Walker's interpretations and imaginings, it is a "true" history of her family, orally passed down by her foremothers. The book is just a single testimony to the sexual exploitation of black women forced to endure repeated rapes, pregnancies, and childbirths in slavery.

Sexual violence was rampant in slavery. Sharon Block calls white men's sexual assaults on enslaved women not just rape but "sexual coercion." Because "their masters attempted to control the parameters and meanings of sexual acts," says Block, "rape in these situations was not just an act of power, it was also the power to define an act" (136). Slave women could neither refuse nor escape from forced sexual relationships, so their obedience was tacitly coerced.

Historically, depending on their gender, slaves were handled in different ways. Men threatened the security of their conquerors, whereas women brought wealth to their captors. Feminist historian Gerda Lerner notes that there is historical evidence for "the preponderance of the practice of killing or mutilating male prisoners and for the large-scale enslavement and rape of female prisoners" (81). Masters claimed ownership of women's bodies. In Babylonian slavery, for example, the master had the right not only to a female slave's labor and her body but also to send her into the streets to work as a prostitute and then collect her pay (Lerner 87). In general, moral questions have been ignored in the practice of the enslavement of captives.

Likewise, American slavery was based on the double exploitation of enslaved women's bodies, which were the source of considerable fortune for their owners. Masters and slave traders viewed

women not just as physical workers but also as sexual laborers (Jones 20). Deborah Gray White states that it was black women's high fertility that caused "a major functional difference between male and female bondage" (69). According to demographers, the crude birthrate of black women was fifty or more births per one thousand in the pre-Civil War period, meaning that more than one-fifth of the black women aged 15–44 bore a child each year (White 69). One Georgian planter claims that "slave women multiplied 'like rabbits,'" and a reporter describes a slave girl as being able to "breed like a cat" (Gutman 76).

In sexual slavery, women were coerced into having sex by not only their masters but also anyone around them. They were sexually exploited by speculators, slave traders, and even neighbors. Elizabeth Keckley, the author of a post-Civil War narrative, *Behind the Scenes: Or Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House* (1868), writes about her past as the mistress of a white neighbor. Women submitted themselves because refusal would only bring them another trial—more threats, punishments, and sales to new masters. With no legal protection, women could not refuse male violence, whether or not the abusers were their owners.

This article deals with testimonies of sexual slavery in antebellum America recorded in what are called slave narratives, written by or dictated to various writers and narrators. The three types of narratives examined in this article are enslaved men's narratives, including those authored by William Wells Brown and Frederick Douglass, a woman's narrative dictated to a white man, *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon: A Tale of Southern Slave Life*, and a woman's self-written narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. By examining these narratives, this article explores how an author's race and gender affect the nature of a narrative's message.

I. Black Men's Perspective of Sexual Slavery

The black male writers of slave narratives were often the direct witnesses to sexual coercion inflicted on enslaved women. In their works, they narrate the details of sexual slavery from somewhat political—and thus rather objective—viewpoints. Male narrators, sometimes with guilt and sympathy, detest plantation owners' sexual motives, attacking the Southern "breeding" industry.

In black male narratives, sexual abuses are often euphemistically recorded, hinting at the inhumane and debased nature of these acts. For instance, Moses Roper, the formally enslaved writer of the narrative *Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery* (1848), describes in detail the cruel torture and incredibly barbaric methods and instruments used for punishing and murdering enslaved men. However, he hesitates to disclose the experiences of women in slavery: "Many instances, however, in respect to females might be mentioned, but are too

disgusting to appear in this narrative” (Roper 48). His reservation insinuates that slaveholders’ abuse had sexual connotations and that the deeds of perpetrators were beyond his own and readers’ sensibilities. Historian John Blassingame says that plantation owners were proud of their *noblesse oblige*, which can be defined as “the obligation of honorable, generous, and responsible behavior associated with high rank or birth” (Merriam-Webster), but their treatment of enslaved women was far from being “noble” (Blassingame 263).

Slave narrative authors, often being antislavery activists, knew that female victimhood would help imprint the evils of slavery on their readers’ minds and advance the cause of abolition. Frederick Douglass writes about Aunt Esther (Hester), who was severely flogged because she met her suitor against her master’s orders (*Bondage* 67). He concludes that “a slave-woman is at the mercy of the power, caprice and passion of her owner” (Douglass, *Bondage* 66). “Had Mr. Anthony himself been a man of honor,” says Douglass, “his motives in this matter might have appeared more favorably” (*Life and Times* 27). He emphasizes that the jealous master wanted to keep the woman’s sexuality and procreation under his control. William Craft, an ex-slave author, also tells about a girl named Antoinette, who jumped to her death from a window to escape being raped by a drunken slave dealer (Craft and Craft 11–13). Her suicide was only seen as “unreasonable” or “nonsensical” in the eyes of slave traders because an enslaved woman—no more than chattel in their eyes—was destined to obey any orders.

The suffering of the enslaved men who witnessed the abuse was immense, especially when their own mothers, wives, sisters, or daughters were the victims. In *The Narrative of William Wells Brown: A Fugitive Slave* (1848), William Wells Brown, for instance, mentions his mother, Elizabeth, who gave birth to seven children, all by different men. “No two of us,” says Brown, “were children of the same father” (Brown 1). Brown does not refer further to his mother’s sexual experiences in the text, but his devotion to his mother hints at her unbearable pain: “Whenever such thoughts would come into my mind, my resolution [to escape to Canada] would soon be shaken by the remembrance that my dear mother was a slave in St. Louis, and I could not bear the idea of leaving her in that condition (10).” Brown tried in vain to take her with him as he escaped, but he finally realized the limit of a slave man’s supportive role in protecting his blood ties when his mother pleaded with him to leave her and escape alone (34–35). In his narrative, Frederick Douglass also writes about his grandmother, who gave birth to twelve children, all displaced or sold away, and who then died alone in a little hut: “She stands—she sits—she staggers—she falls—she groans—she dies—and there are none of her children or grandchildren present, to wipe from her wrinkled brow the cold sweat of death, or to place beneath the sod her fallen remains (*Narrative* 41).” Douglass shows sympathy for his grandmother’s

forced pregnancies and unrewarded motherhood.

Black male testimonies indicate their sense of guilt in their powerlessness to stop sexual slavery. They had to tolerate the slaveholders' abusive behavior toward their women, who were "beaten, insulted, raped, overworked, or starved" by overseers and masters (Blassingame 164). According to Angela Davis, violating their women was a well-known device for masters to emasculate rebellious slave men. Davis says that rape was "a weapon of domination, a weapon of repression, whose covert goal was to extinguish slave women's will to resist, and in the process, to demoralize their men" (23–24).

Some writers have perceived the financial motives—both individual and collective—of sexual slavery. Slaveholders continually took advantage of black women's bodies to increase their own wealth. According to bell hooks, "[S]ome slaveholders preferred to breed black women with white men" because mulatto children were more profitable (40). Frederick Douglass writes about a woman named Caroline, who was made a "breeder" by Edward Covey, one of the cruelest slaveholders to appear in his narrative (*Bondage* 159). Covey and his wife Susan were "extatic (*sic*) with joy" when Caroline gave birth to twins within a year (Douglass, *Bondage* 159–60). It was purely an act of investment for Covey, as for other white men in the South.

Literature shows that Southern politicians were accomplices in sustaining the slave economy. The authorities helped maintain the viability and profitability of slavery through public policies such as manumission laws and slave patrol statutes. The former restricted owners from granting slaves freedom or letting freedom be purchased, and the latter mandated local police patrols "to examine the passes of traveling slaves, monitor slave meetings, enforce other aspects of the slave code, and capture escaped slaves"; both laws served to maintain slave prices (Ewing et al. 330–34). Slave prices were an important factor in the Southern economy. After the transatlantic slave trade was legally abolished in 1807, the continuation of slavery entirely depended on the black woman's body, through which "stocks" of slaves were provided for slave markets.

Within plantations, slave owners offered incentives for enslaved women to be pregnant. Pregnant slaves were relieved of their work by their overseers and even given additional clothing and weekly rations by their masters (White 100). Women also were made to believe that childbearing raised their "value" so that they could stay on the plantation and not be torn apart from their families. English-born plantation mistress Fanny Kemble learned why slave "women always made haste to inform [her] of the number of children they had borne" during her stay on a Georgian plantation (Kemble 96); they boasted of their own fertility because it was the only means they had for self-protection.

In antebellum America, the black woman's body was a commodity that anybody could buy in the market. William Wells Brown admits that, as far as he knew,

those who raise slaves for the market are to be found among all classes, from Thomas H. Benton [a senator] down to the lowest political demagogue who may be able to purchase a woman for the purpose of raising stock, and from the doctor of divinity down to the most humble lay member in the church. (36–37)

As Brown suggests, because female slaves were accessible to anyone, no matter what their motives were, men of the non-slaveholding class also engaged in the act of “miscegenation” (Stampp 353). “Miscegenation”—the term coined by Democrats for “a mixture of race” under historical laws prohibiting interracial marriage in 1864 (Hodes 144–45)—had long been a recognized phenomenon. The consequence of miscegenation was the lightening of the skin color of the succeeding generations of the slave population. According to historian Eugene Genovese, approximately three-quarters of African Americans today in the United States have white ancestry that can be traced back to miscegenation during slavery (414). The country witnessed the increasing presence of “mulattoes”—more than half a million, according to the census of 1860, a figure representing twelve percent of the colored people in the slave states; this number had a strong impact on Northerners and drew many of them into the antislavery movement (Flexner 21–22).

Douglass called his narrative “a work of FACTS—Facts, terrible and almost incredible, it may be—yet FACTS, nevertheless” (*Bondage* 5); thus, male authors focused on facts, personal or public, as the consequences of sexual slavery because they were denied involvement, even when their women were victimized. Feeling the inability to address problems, they took to writing for antislavery causes. Along with the social, economic, and political systems sustaining sexual slavery, they shined a light on white male corruption as proof of the cursed future of the country.

II. Women's Testimonies of Sexual Coercion

The women's narratives include more direct accusations of sexual violence and emotional appeals than the men's. This section deals with two antebellum slave narratives directly from women—*Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon: A Tale of Southern Slave Life* and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*—both published in 1861. The two enslaved women protagonists, Louisa Picquet (c. 1829–1896) and Harriet Jacobs (1813–1897), had a number of things in common. Both were light-skinned, with Anglo-Saxon blood in their veins. Both were in their mid-teens when they faced the possible fate of

forced prostitution in service to their masters. They both had children who were fathered by white men, and both settled in the North to escape re-enslavement. Also, both women were intelligent and became literate, even though they were born into slavery. Their narratives detail sexual exploitation, and both works were published for antislavery causes in the same year prior to the Civil War.

Despite their similarities, these narratives provide quite different perspectives and impressions. First, Jacobs' sense of mission contrasts with Picquet's familial values. Unlike Picquet, who had agreed to tell her story mainly for personal reasons, Jacobs wrote and published her narrative with a strong antislavery motive. "I do earnestly desire," Jacobs writes in the preface, "to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse" (1). They also differed in the setting of their narratives; as advised by her editor, Jacobs uses fictitious names and renames herself "Linda Brent," whereas the people in Picquet's narrative appear under their real names. Picquet's white male amanuensis does not use assumed names because his goal was a public accusation of her perpetrators. If Picquet had written her own story, she might have retained her anonymity, as Jacobs did, to avoid possible dangers and future embarrassment. Moreover, their responses to sexual slavery differ; though both hated and resisted sexual exploitation, Jacobs made quite a different decision compared with what Picquet did when threatened by her owner.

Nevertheless, the most striking difference of all comes from their authorship: one is dictated to a white man, and the other is self-written. The following sections describe how authorship has affected the way of delivering main messages through writing.

1. *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon*

Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon is one of the few testimonies of sexual exploitation given by a formally enslaved woman who was made a concubine by her owner. The work, though not self-written, is still a valuable description of white sexual violence against blacks.

Picquet was born a slave in South Carolina and lived as a free resident of Cincinnati, Ohio, after she was manumitted by her slave owner. In 1860, she agreed to tell the story of the sexual abuse she had suffered as a slave. The interviewer was a white Methodist pastor and "a well-known antislavery agitator" named Hiram Mattison, who authored various books on astronomy, spiritualism, hymn singing, and the Roman Catholic Church (Pitts 294). As living proof of his abolitionist beliefs, Picquet motivated him to write her story. She agreed to talk to him, mostly for pecuniary reasons, about what she had experienced in slavery; she was attempting to raise the necessary funds to purchase the freedom of her mother and, if possible, her brother. About a year after the interview, *Louisa Picquet*,

the Octoroon, one of only a few women's slave narratives about the experiences of sexual slavery, was published.

Not only the pastor's abolitionist enthusiasm but also her determination to save her family from slavery made the publication possible. Prior to this attempt, she spent many years trying to locate her mother, who had been separately sold in Louisiana. Picquet would seek information about her mother from fugitives she harbored in her house, strangers on the street, fellow parishioners of her church, and whites who had traveled to the South (Pitts 297). Eleven years after they had been separated, she finally discovered that her mother and brother were both owned by a wealthy man named Albert Clinton Horton, one of the largest plantation owners in Wharton County, Texas, who owned almost two hundred slaves (Pitts 297–98). Responding to her letter, Horton quoted Picquet the prices of one thousand dollars for her mother, a forty-five-year-old enslaved woman, and one thousand five hundred dollars for her brother, a fifteen-year-old boy. These exorbitant prices were because of their light skin color. The price of her mother was reduced to nine hundred dollars through Picquet's persistent negotiation; nevertheless, as Mattison points out, Horton clearly overcharged her. Mattison asserts that Horton had purchased Picquet's mother for about six hundred dollars twenty years earlier and had earned nine hundred dollars taking advantage of her labor during that time (Mattison 53). Because of the financial affairs, Picquet decided to purchase only her mother's freedom. She thought of drawing the wages of her husband, a janitor and porter, for two years in advance, but she realized that they would not be able to live without that money (Mattison 36). She even went on a multistate tour to solicit money for her cause (Pitts 299). Publishing her past was another effort to accomplish her goal. Her act of narration, she hoped, would save her mother from life-long bondage. However, her resolution to sacrifice her privacy for her mother's rescue was in vain because, before publication, Picquet had succeeded in purchasing the freedom of her mother, Elizabeth Ramsey, with donations from the residents of Cincinnati, from elsewhere in Ohio, and from New York (Mattison 53). The profits from the narrative might have also gone toward the cost of freeing her brother, John, if the Civil War had not broken out the same year.

Unfortunately, despite his original good intentions, Mattison's narrative is flooded with racial prejudices. His attitude was not so different from those of many white men, pro- or antislavery, of the time. When the *abolitionist* pastor first met Picquet through his fellow antislavery agitators in May 1860, he was astonished by her complexion. Mattison assumed that slaves had generally dark complexions, but Picquet completely changed his notion. He marveled at "how indistinguishable she was from any other 'white' person walking up and down Broadway" (Pitts 294). He was also impressed by her beauty and dignity, which he described as "unsuitable" for an enslaved woman: "She is a little

about the medium height, easy and graceful in her manners, of fair complexion and rosy cheeks, with dark eyes, a flowing head of hair with no perceptible inclination to curl, and every appearance, at first view, of an accomplished white lady (5).” Clearly, he, though identifying himself as an “abolitionist,” had not seen an enslaved woman of a lighter complexion. “No one, not apprised of the fact,” he continued, “would suspect that she had a drop of African blood in her veins; indeed, few will believe it, at first, even when told of it” (5). This remark is proof of the white pastor’s racist views.

His obsession with the skin color of slaves continued to be expressed throughout the interview-style narrative. He continuously asked Picquet about the color of the slaves who were close to her: “Was your mother white?” “Is she [Picquet’s daughter] as white as you are?” “Is she [her husband’s daughter] as white as your children?” With these questions, he undoubtedly intended to impress upon his readers the whiteness of the slaves who appeared in Picquet’s narration. Indeed, his deliberate choice of the word “octoroon” in the title of the narrative demonstrates his obsession with color hierarchy.

Mattison’s narrative unveils repeated sexual coercion. According to the narrative, Picquet was born to an enslaved woman named Elizabeth and her master, Randolph, around 1829 in Columbia, South Carolina. Elizabeth was only fifteen when she gave birth to Picquet. Her mother told her that because Picquet so closely resembled the mistress’s child, who had been born two weeks earlier, the mistress became “dissatisfied” and had both the mother and daughter sold to a Georgian planter, Cook (Mattison 6). Her mother was again sexually abused by her new slave master. Although Cook purchased her mother to make her work on his plantation as a wet nurse for his own child, after he failed to keep the plantation running, he moved to Mobile with only several slaves, among whom were Picquet and her mother; Cook’s wife and children were sent away to their relatives’ house in the country. In Mobile, her mother no longer nursed Cook’s children and, instead, gave birth to three children.

The way of Mattison’s questioning even effaces his noble cause of writing her narratives. Mattison asks about the relationship between Cook and her mother:

Q.—“Had she any one she called her husband while she was in Georgia?”

A.— “No.”

Q.—“Had she in Mobile?”

A.— “No.”

Q.—“Had she any children while she lived in Mobile?”

A.— “None but my brother, the baby when we were all sold.”

Q.—“Who was the father of your brother, the baby you speak of?”

A.—“I don’t know, except Mr. Cook was. Mother had three children while Mr. Cook owned her.”

Q.—“Was your mother white?”

A.—“Yes, she [was] pretty white; not white enough for white people. She have (*sic*) long hair, but it was kind a wavy[.]” (Mattison 7–8)

His persistent questioning comes out of his curiosity. The last question shows the author’s intent to relate her mother’s whiteness, or beauty, to the white man’s lewdness. Picquet sounded bothered by his questions about her brother’s fatherhood but responded to him politely, satisfying the white male’s curiosity about enslaved women’s sexuality. Picquet cooperated with the white male author who wanted to publicize Southerners’ moral corruption by adding some description of her mother’s sexual attraction: her long and wavy hair.

Picquet bravely fought her interviewer’s inquisitiveness. DoVeanna Fulton argues that Picquet “cunningly both answers and evades” Mattison’s intrusive, or offensive, questions; she seemed calm and patient throughout the interview and sought “her own subjective representation” (23). She responded to the pastor’s detailed, sometimes rude, questions in even tones, thus leading him through the course of the narration.

Picquet continually took the initiative in the narration when speaking of the first danger of becoming a victim of sexual abuse. According to the narrative, when she was hired in her mid-teens at Mrs. Bachelor’s, where Cook was boarding, Cook ordered her to come to his room alone for various reasons; one time, he was sick, and another time, he wanted salt. Cook even ordered her to come to his room at night. She managed to escape these “dangers” with the help of the landlady, Mrs. Bachelor, and the landlady’s sister, Mrs. Simpson. Both married women sensibly told Picquet that she did not need to go to Cook. Failing in every attempt to get her to come to him, the master finally tried to bribe her into submission, but she proved to be smarter than him; she took the half dollar he gave her as a “gift” and ignored his order. She said, “I had sense enough to know he would not dare [to] tell any one that he gave me the money, and would hardly dare to whip me for it” (Mattison 13). She bought a pretty dress with the money.

Picquet managed to keep her composure until she spoke of one specific incident. Picquet’s sudden reticence indicates that the memories still pained her, even many years after the incident. According to Picquet, enraged by her repeated mockeries and disobedience, Cook severely flogged her “with the cowhide, naked” (Mattison 14). By whipping her, Cook possibly meant to teach her

lessons about hierarchal order and patriarchal customs in Southern society. When questioned further by Mattison, Picquet simply ended the episode with one comment: “That was the worst whippin’ I ever had” (Mattison 15). Mattison tenaciously questioned her, but Picquet denied him a further explanation. Mattison explains parenthetically, “[Here Mrs. P. declines explaining further how he whipped her, though she had told our hostess where this was written; but it is too horrible and indelicate to be read in a civilized country.]” (Mattison 15). Though he fully understood her agony, Mattison persistently asked her, “Did he cut through your skin?” Then, she quickly recovered her poise and skillfully changed the subject from her whipping to what happened to her after the incident.

Picquet’s dodging continued, but despite her level tone, what is dictated to the white man was painful to read. After the incident, Cook gave her up. Her real trial began when, at the age of thirteen or fourteen, she was sold to a man named Williams, a nearly fifty-year-old man living in New Orleans. This bachelor with three boys bought Picquet “to end his days with” (Mattison 18). Separated from her mother and brother, only in her mid-teens, Picquet was made his mistress. During the years that she lived with him, Picquet had four children by Williams, two of whom died in infancy. Looking back on her days with him, she said that she had had no peace at all and that she would rather have died than been forced to live in that way (Mattison 19).

Picquet’s testimonies indicate her virtuous character. In the narrative, she states that she had been tormented by the guilt of having committed “adultery.” Williams had no wife then, but she thought that their relationship was sinful because their union was sanctioned neither by law nor by God. She stayed with him, fearing he would kill her if she ran away. Picquet thought that “it was of no use to be prayin’, and livin’ in sin” and began to “pray that he might die” (Mattison 22):

If Mr. Williams only knew *that*, and get out of his grave, he’d beat me half to death. Then it was some time before he got sick. Then, when he did get sick, he was sick nearly a year. Then he begin to get good, and talked kind to me. I could see there was a change in him. He was not all the time accusin’ me of other people. Then, when I saw that he was sufferin’ so, I begin to get sorry, and begin to pray that he might get religion first before he died. I felt sorry to see him die in his sins. (Mattison 22)

Both her curse and wish were granted by God; as she had hoped, Williams died after he got “religion.” Although she remained silent on exactly what he did to her, her continuous praying for his death speaks volumes about their relationship.

Picquet was lucky in some respects. First, the heir, Williams’ brother, was not greedy or cruel.

He wanted only to collect the money he had lent his brother for Picquet's purchase. After selling his brother's property and collecting his debt, he let her go. Second, on the advice of a colored friend, Picquet quickly left town. The chances for her freedom would have decreased if she had stayed in New Orleans, which was a city famous for its "fancy-girl" markets. In these markets, light-skinned slave girls, selected for their grace and beauty, were sent to New Orleans from all over the country, and "the majority became the mistresses of wealthy planters, gamblers, or businessmen" (Sterling 27). First-class blacksmiths were sold for two thousand five hundred dollars, and prime field hands were sold for about one thousand eight hundred dollars, but a beautiful "fancy-girl" could bring five thousand dollars (Genovese 416). Fourteen-year-old Picquet had been bought for one thousand five hundred dollars by Williams—about twice the going price for a slave her age.

Fortunately, she settled down in Cincinnati, where there was a large community of free blacks. There, she met someone who had been a friend of her mother's in Georgia. Picquet was still young enough to start a new life: she was in her late teens when she was freed by her dying master. She married a free black man named Henry Picquet in Cincinnati on September 15, 1850, three years after she had reached Cincinnati (Pitts 297).

The narrative may not be what Picquet had desired it to be. Instead of focusing on her sufferings and devotion to her family, the white male interviewer was absorbed in picturing "*the deep moral corruption*" (Mattison 50, emphasis in original) of the licentious slave owners. Her speaking was often interrupted and distracted by the male author's voice, and the book ended up being Mattison's antislavery pamphlet rather than a true life story of a hapless but dutiful woman. Although Mattison mentioned Picquet's wish to save her enslaved mother and solicited contributions for her, he was more interested in white men who had kept fair-skinned black women such as Picquet, her mother, her coworker Lucy, her husband's mother and first wife, and so forth. In one place, he even summarized Picquet's story in this way: "There is not a family mentioned [in the narrative], from first to last, that does not reek with fornication and adultery" (Mattison 51). He severely censured his fellow countrymen, who could so easily become lechers and indulge in immoral behaviors.

Mattison even went further than this. He ends the narrative with Chapter XXVII titled "Slave-burning, or the Barbarism of Slavery." In this last chapter, he describes the various atrocities performed on the enslaved, such as burning them alive or cutting their lungs and hearts out of their living bodies (53–60). The chapter is irrelevant to Picquet's story because these barbaric acts were different evils from the sexual exploitation she suffered.

In sum, the narrative is full of the white man's race and gender prejudices. Sharing the proslavery theory of black inferiority, Mattison firmly believed in "her inability to read and write,"

though it is evident that Picquet was literate; for example, she exchanged letters with Horton concerning the price of her mother (Mattison 5). When Picquet said, “I wrote a letter,” he took the trouble to parenthetically explain that “[she] got one written,” denying her literacy (Mattison 30). In fact, Picquet’s literacy or semi-literacy was demonstrated by the fact that she signed papers for her illiterate husband, Henry, when necessary (Pitts 303n). Mattison was only one of a great many Northern abolitionists laden with persistent and subtle racist views.

Moreover, she was exposed to Mattison’s sexual curiosity throughout the narrative. Although Mattison’s inquisitiveness and intrusiveness demonstrated his passion for fulfilling his abolitionist mission, Picquet was, for him, just one representative of enslaved women being made “concubines” by licentious slave masters. The unreserved author was a representative voice of white male readers who were curious about female slaves’ sexuality.

Nevertheless, *Louisa Picquet* can be seen as a valuable testimony of female slavery. Urged and pressed by the pastor, she reluctantly described part of their experiences of sexual slavery. Her hatred of her past experience and anguished conscience hint at the extent of what she had given up in the first twenty years of her life.

2. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

Unlike the former narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is a woman’s self-written narrative. The chapters “The Trials of Girlhood” and “The Lover” in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* explain how Brent (the fictitious name of Jacobs) reached her decision to have sex not with her master but with a wealthy white man living near her master’s house—a very bold measure for a woman to take in Victorian America. It is her loathing of her master that prompted this audacious step. When Brent turned fifteen, she found herself the target of her licentious master, Dr. Flint (the fictitious name of James Norcom), who was already “the father of eleven slaves” (Jacobs 35). He began to whisper foul words in her ear and met her at every turn, reminding her that she was his property (Jacobs 27–28). Like Cook in Picquet’s narrative, the “respectable” doctor stalked, chased, and threatened a girl of fifteen, pressing her to become his concubine. The memories were disgusting enough for her to be unable to forget for three decades after the incidents. Moreover, Brent was enraged at Dr. Flint’s interventions in her love life, which again induced her to take revenge on her master. When she fell in love with a young colored carpenter in the neighborhood and hoped to marry him, Dr. Flint told her that he would not consent to their marriage and even threatened her by claiming that he could kill her whenever he liked (Jacobs 39). Therefore, she gave him up, reasoning with herself as follows:

Even if he [her suitor] could have obtained permission to marry me while I was a slave, the marriage would give him no power to protect me from my master. It would have made him miserable to witness the insults I should have been subjected to. And then, if we had children, I knew they must “follow the condition of the mother.” What a terrible blight that would be on the heart of a free, intelligent father! For *his* sake, I felt that I ought not to link his fate with my own unhappy destiny. (Jacobs 42, emphasis in original)

Thus, Brent did not want to become the source of her beau’s future miseries. All of the children she bore would be cursed by life-long slavery, no matter who the father was. Therefore, she decided to end the relationship with the free black man of her own accord. She urged her lover to leave for Savannah, which he did. Both her indignation against Dr. Flint’s moral corruption and frustration at losing her first love caused her to make a decision to seek a white lover who would be wealthier and in a higher position than her master.

In the narrative, Brent tries to justify and excuse herself when explaining her decision to use her sexuality as a weapon in her attempt to retaliate against her licentious master. She believed that she could betray and fool Dr. Flint by giving her body, the thing he had coveted, to another white man. Her choice was a wealthy young man from a distinguished neighborhood family, Samuel Tredwell Sawyer, whom she called “Mr. Sands” in the narrative. Brent was conscious that her “experiment” would challenge Victorian morality. She explained her “passage” with Sands as “less degrading” than becoming her master’s sexual slave, and she noted that she saw “something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment” (Jacobs 55). Her pride and self-esteem were exploited by the white man who had wanted a colored companion for pleasure. Nevertheless, she made her choice and refused to be a passive victim of someone whom she despised. Once again, she took the initiative in making decisions on how to make use of her sexuality, just as she had in her first relationship with the black man.

Her act of retaliation clearly flew in the face of the sexual ideology of her time. In *Dimity Convictions*, Barbara Welter writes that people in the nineteenth century assumed “innate” differences between the sexes and expected women to follow the four cardinal virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity as part of the “Cult of True Womanhood” (21). In the antebellum sexual ideology, slave women, though not considered True “Women,” were invariably expected to adopt the same virtues as white women. At least overtly, Brent was challenging purity and submissiveness. Welter notes that purity was essential to a young woman; its absence was “unnatural

and unfeminine,” and without it, she was “no woman at all” or was “a fallen woman” (23). Brent’s determination to “do any thing, every thing for the sake of defeating him [Dr. Flint]” (Jacobs 53) was the antithesis of the feminine virtue “submissiveness,” which, in Welter’s words, was “the most feminine virtue expected of women” (Welter 27). In Victorian America, women who could suppress their emotions and endure suffering in silence were praised and glorified (Welter 30–31). The enslaved woman’s rivalry with her master was against the sexual ideology of the time.

Brent chose the life of single motherhood; she was aware of her “guilt” of violating sexual norms. In the text, she pleads for sympathy from her readers by attributing her decision to the evils of slavery and explaining the reason for taking that step: “You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another” (Jacobs 55). Accidentally, Brent’s guilt was made clear in her explanation. Her sense of guilt was mostly caused by the fury of her grandmother and surrogate mother, “Martha” (Molly Horniblow). Martha reacted to Brent’s moral “sin” just as white mothers would to their daughters’ transgressions. She wailed over her lack of morality, reproached her misconduct, and never expressed forgiveness (Jacobs 56–57). Martha represents the voice of “virtuous” white women in the North. Her sternness, along with Brent’s sense of guilt, demonstrates that nonwhite women were practically under the same obligation to abide by the female virtues as white women.

It is clear that Brent knew the consequences of her deed: she had rationally calculated the value of her sexuality and reward for maintaining a relationship with a wealthy white man. She willingly risked herself and sacrificed her sexuality in exchange for the possibility of future freedom. Though her conduct was not supported by the blood relations who surrounded her, she did what she could do to better her fate. Her dutiful relatives, after all, continued to protect her, despite her inappropriate decision.

Brent’s plot was not as absurd as it may seem. Her biographer, Jean Fagen Yellin, cites a woman’s success story that was probably famous among enslaved people in Edenton, where Brent lived:

Auguste Cabarrus made Rose [a slave woman] his mistress when she was sixteen, and after the birth of their son and daughter, he freed her and gave her both Charlotte and Leon. Cabarrus’s high status eased his petition to emancipate his children through the North Carolina assembly, and more recently, he made Rose a present of her mother, Mary Sue. By becoming Cabarrus’s mistress, Rose had freed her entire family. (Yellin 26)

Yellin suggests that Rose had acted knowingly, and Brent wanted to follow suit. Historian Eugene Genovese maintains that the courts handled many divorce cases of white plantation owners who wanted to marry the black women they had manumitted (415). Many of these slaveholders were ultimately trapped by the slave women's sexuality, with which they had toyed in the beginning. However, the result of her actions was not what Brent had expected. After enjoying a period of time during which she had "a feeling of satisfaction and triumph," she was betrayed by Sands, who had never thought of marrying an enslaved girl, as Cabarrus had. By sacrificing her sexuality, Brent made a bet to win her own and her children's freedom. She lost the bet, but she got a dutiful daughter, "Ellen" (Louisa Matilda Jacobs), who devotedly supported her mother throughout her life.

Despite her deep hatred for Dr. Flint, Brent attributed the cause of all slavery's evils to the system, not to the slaveholders. That was an important piece of rhetoric often used by ex-slave narrators to obtain more white readers. About thirty years after the incidents in her book took place, the by-then middle-aged author still viewed "the widespread moral ruin occasioned by this wicked system" (Jacobs 52). She tried to persuade "a wide, predominantly white audience" that the whites were also the victims of slavery: slavery was "a curse" to both whites and blacks because "[i]t makes the white fathers cruel and sensual; the sons violent and licentious; it contaminates the daughters, and makes the wives wretched" (52). Brent attacked its serious influence on whites' mentality, asserting that the family structure collapsed because of the father's or son's uncontrolled sexuality. Their easy and unrestrained lives, surrounded by their "paramours," numbed slaveholders' sense of morality, solidifying their corruption. Although she never overcame her anger toward Flint, she understood he was something the hideous system of slavery had brought into existence.

Brent's fight with her master and against slavery was exceptional because of her unusual intellect and the sensibility she acquired thanks to the "kind" mistress who had owned her in her childhood. Literacy was not only the source of her strength but also her hidden weapon to fight her destiny.

Brent's audacity contrasts Picquet's and other slave women's passivity and submissiveness. Authoring her narrative, she had command throughout the story. Nevertheless, her life was pathetic (rather than inspirational) and painful, as was Picquet's; if Brent had been born free, she would not have sought such a strained relationship with Sands. In a sense, that liaison was also a "forced" sexual relationship. Despite her final "victory" over Dr. Flint, Brent admitted that she faced "wrongs which even the grave does not bury" (Jacobs 196). Both Brent and Picquet suffered from the memories of their earlier days—memories haunting them for the rest of their lives.

Brent and Picquet voiced their exploited sexuality for millions of enslaved women who had the same experiences. In her postbellum narrative, *Behind the Scenes*, Keckley suffers through the memories of sexual coercion: even after she lost her son, a child born out of the relationship, in the Civil War, she still observes that “he [the white man in the neighborhood] persecuted [her] for four years” and that “God knows that she did not wish to give him [her son] life” (16). Enslaved women’s eloquent testimonies demonstrate how sexual exploitation degraded them and robbed them of dignity.

III. Sexual Slavery and Women’s Resilience

In slavery in the South, sexuality was in the political domain because childbearing was a way of empowerment. In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault maintains that in eighteenth-century Western countries, sexuality had developed a socially defined connotation for the first time in history. With the birth of modern nations, sex was no longer a couple’s private concern; it instead became a “police” matter because sex, the act that results in an increase in the population, concerned “the internal power of the state,” so the authorities justified regulating and policing sex (Foucault 24–25). Foucault explains how the emergence of the concept of “population” in the eighteenth century caused this change:

Governments perceived that they were not dealing simply with subjects, or even with a “people,” but with a “population,” with its specific phenomena and its peculiar variables: birth and death rates, life expectancy, fertility, state of health, frequency of illnesses, patterns of diet and habitation. . . . Of course, it had long been asserted that a country had to be populated if it hoped to be rich and powerful; but this was the first time that a society had affirmed, in a constant way, that its future and its fortune were tied not only to the number and the uprightness of its citizens, to their marriage rules and family organization, but to the manner in which each individual made use of his sex. (25–26)

Any increase in the population provides gains in political and economic power because, with a greater population, each state obtains more citizens, taxpayers, soldiers, and voters. Each person becomes an entity related to the country’s power, and the country’s wealth and power depend on its population; so the government begins to intervene in people’s sexuality. In this context, the state interpreted the “sexual conduct of couples” as “a concerted economic and political behavior” (Foucault 26). Those in power justified their intervention by citing the cause of nationalism, and sexuality became a national topic of discussion affecting the country’s future.

Similarly, nineteenth-century American patriarchs considered reproduction as being a part of their economy, where women's bodies were the source of wealth and power; citizens were produced through the white woman's body, and slaves were multiplied through the enslaved woman's body. In the slave market, the value of a slave woman was measured by her fertility, and women of reproductive age were sold and bought at higher prices. Barren women were punished by their slave owners based on the same theory; sterility meant a possible sale away from the plantation. Thus, slave women came to be convinced that their destiny depended on their reproductive ability.

In the mid-nineteenth century, childbirth was still a life-threatening event, and neither death in childbirth nor death after delivery was uncommon (Jones 20). Catherine Clinton notes that women in the South faced a higher possibility of death in childbirth than women in the North: according to a comparison of two equally populated regions from the 1860 United States Census, 246 deaths in childbirth out of a population of 1,725,843 occurred in District II (Michigan, Wisconsin, Nebraska, and Minnesota) versus 401 deaths in childbirth for Southern women in District VII (South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, and Alabama), here out of a population of 1,504,190 (Clinton 139–40). As this shows, in the South, deaths in childbirth were almost twice as many as those in the North. Clinton guesses that both the lack of effective birth control and the tradition of praising a high birth rate among the planter class contributed to the increased possibility of their wives getting pregnant and then dying in childbirth (Clinton 153).

Historians have found enslaved women to be more resilient than they were first thought to be. One example is their resistance to forced pregnancies and reproduction. Black women, who were often forced to deliver more children than white women, had higher risks of death in childbirth, and it was natural that they sought means to survive childbirth. Modern historians suggest that enslaved women shared knowledge about how to abort a child or have a child die soon after its birth (Genovese 496–97; Giddings 46). Abortion and infanticide were, for slave women, a means of silent resistance against white male violence.

In slavery, the sexuality of black women was distorted and arbitrarily defined by white males. According to Deborah Gray White, the two well-known stereotyped images of black women in the nineteenth century were those of either a “Jezebel” or a “Mammy.” Jezebel appeared in the Bible as a sensual woman “governed almost entirely by her libido,” whereas a Mammy was a part of the Southern household, “a woman completely dedicated to the white family,” especially to the children of that family, who sacrificed herself for their sake (White 28–29, 46–49). As White notes, in both cases, black women were defined only by their sexuality, either by excessive amounts (as a “Jezebel”) or by a lack of it (as a “Mammy”) (46). The consumers of women's bodies, either sexually or asexually, thus

attributed the source of all female tragedies in slavery to black women's natural dispositions: for them, enslaved women were either over- or undersexed. Then, they justified the system of slavery, where they denied reproductive health and rights. Slaveholders devised a "myth" that enslaved women "enjoyed" their ways of living; a young woman would seek sexual relationships with white men, and an old slave woman would willingly sacrifice herself for the sake of her "ole Massa" and his family.

Slave women were peripheral beings not only in a racial hierarchy but also in sexual ideology. Without physical and sexual autonomy, slave women were placed on the border not only between humans and nonhumans but also between women and nonwomen. Judged by the "Cult of True Womanhood" shared by Victorian Americans, they were "fallen women" or "prostitutes" who would threaten the marriages of "virtuous" white women as seducers of their husbands. The idealization of the white woman coincided with the degradation of the black woman: black women were given the image of "sexual temptresses" when "the growing economic prosperity" elevated white women to the position of "a symbolic Virgin Mary," who was a virtuous, pure, innocent, asexual, and sacred being (White 31–32). The prevalent notion that black women sought out interracial sexual relationships was effective in uniting suspicious and "virtuous" white women with "innocent" white men in racism. Thus, the white men divided women not only by race but also in terms of sexuality, forcing white and black women to confront each other.

Conclusion

As we have seen above, race and gender in authorship determined the nature of the testimonies relating to sexual slavery. In men's narratives, enslaved women were powerless in the economy of slavery and victimized by men in power. They had fewer options than white women and had to decide how to live with their sexuality at a younger age. By assuming the role of breeders, enslaved women in their early teens found themselves being cogwheels in the slave economy, where only fertility determined their value. Even though they were given no options, they faced reality and sought a way out, albeit with troubled consciences. They were in great agony, being caught between forced sexual relationships and overdemanding servitude.

However, unlike the victims described in men's narratives, women's testimonies contradicted the prevailing myths concerning black women: they voiced/unvoiced themselves, being neither Jezebels nor Mammies. They secretly and inwardly cursed their abusers, prayed for their tormenters' deaths, and fought their own fates. According to a systematic survey of the Federal Writers' Project (FWP, 1936 to 1940) consisting of approximately two thousand nine hundred documents (life stories) compiled and transcribed by more than three hundred writers from twenty-four states, women were

“more likely than men to engage in ‘verbal confrontations and striking the master but not running away’” (Library of Congress). Jacqueline Jones suggests they stayed and fought against their fates “probably because of their family responsibilities” (21). Their testimonies show that they were resilient women with the hope of fulfilling domestic roles as a wife and mother. The slave women’s acts of speaking and writing about their sexuality show their determination not to bury the facts of white men’s moral sins and the history of sexual slavery. Although the women were aware of the possible risk of relating their sexual history to the public—that is, of their credibility and virtue being questioned (Santamarina 232–33)—they still took the step of bringing their sexual vulnerability and suffering to light.

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