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**THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF IN THE SLAVE
NARRATIVES OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS AND
HARRIET JACOBS**

**Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of
Magister in English, Option: Literature and Civilization**

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the substance of this thesis is entirely the result of my investigation and that due reference or acknowledgement is made, whenever necessary, to the work of other researchers.

Date: December, 2010

Signed:

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I would like to thank my supervisor, Pr. Yamina Déramchia, for guiding and supporting me throughout the process of writing my dissertation.

To my husband, Riad, I know that it was tough to support someone who you didn't know how to deal with, but thank you for sticking with me.

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ABSTRACT

During the first half of the nineteenth century, slavery was at the core of a hot political debate and was instrumental in the outbreak of the civil war in 1861. Meanwhile, some slaves managed to break free. Many voices had also risen in favour of emancipation and literature eventually managed to convert many readers to the anti-slavery cause. Slave narratives were also essential in this process of conversion; they acted as testimony of the sufferings of those deprived of freedom and urged white people to react.

This dissertation compares slave narratives written by Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, both of whom were born in slavery, and who described their experiences in passionate, compelling narratives. Douglass and Jacobs are among a small number of slaves who managed to record their own accounts of their years in bondage. In a time when only ten percent of all slaves could read or write, each of them received the gift of learning from their mistresses. Their lives were certainly not identical, but both former slaves lived in the same generation and shared many similar experiences. Yet, gender becomes the one compelling difference between the two. If black men were subjugated to horrible tortures, women carried a "double burden." Like slave men, they were subjected to physical abuse, but many of these women also endured constant sexual advances from lustful white men.

Both narrators understand that in their writings they are not only revealing the horrors of slavery, but they are also creating a character evolving in time and space in quest for an identity.

Because the slave has suffered a loss of identity, the slave narrative becomes the process through which the slave can write and assert his/her identity. I shall draw upon Freud's and Lacan's theories of the formation of identity to explain how slaves' identities are damaged through slavery and how they attempt to reconstruct themselves through their narratives.

It is obvious that the slave narratives were influenced by the environment in which they came into being, and were partly shaped by literary conventions, social expectations and norms. Thus, I shall rely on the works of Philippe Lejeune and Henry Louis Gates on autobiography to define how these narratives accommodate themselves with the general definitions and norms of Western autobiography, and how they create their own.

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INTRODUCTION

Memoirs, autobiographies, life stories, whatever we may call them, usually contain human experiences, views, and crucial events that happened in the life of an individual. But what incites a person to write about his or her life? Fame? Fulfilment? Something worthwhile to share ? And what motivates us to read it? Moreover, do men and women tell their life story in the same way? The answers may vary depending on the person who answers the questions. However, one may suggest a reader elects to read an autobiography because there is an interest. This interest allows the reader to draw from the narrator's experience and to gain understanding from the experience. When the reader involves him/herself in the experience, he encounters what is known and felt by the narrator. The encounter may provide the reader an opportunity to explore a time and place long past.

Peoples of diverse ethnic backgrounds are searching like never before for a knowledge of their past, and a meaning and understanding of their heritage. Of the various races, however, Afro-Americans seem to have perhaps a deeper curiosity concerning the life and culture of their ancestors. This is particularly true with regard to their experience of slavery in the colonial and antebellum south. Much information regarding blacks under slavery is to be found in court records, letters, census reports and church documents. As early as 1620, John Rolfe of Virginia wrote letters in which he discussed the recent arrival of blacks from Africa; little was said to indicate their political and social position. However, by 1660, public records indicate that racism and prejudice were a thriving concern in America: slavery in Virginia and social discrimination in New England¹.

¹ Frances, Smith Foster, *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives*. Westport; London: Greenwood Press, 1979, p.25.

The first significant antislavery polemic was published in 1700, not by a black, but by the white Samuel Sewall of Massachusetts². *The Selling of Joseph* traces a series of events in the life of a Negro slave in New England and the hardships that befell him. This and other slave narratives as well as the antislavery tracts that were issued by white abolitionists all attacked the immorality of slavery. But by the early 1800's, changes in the antislavery writings produced by both blacks and whites became apparent; whereas the white abolitionists attacked slavery as an institution, black narratives went further and openly declared the unqualified fitness of the Negro for full political and social equality.

Whereas the slave narrative of the 1700's usually centered on a philosophical argument against slavery, the narratives of the mid- 1800's often emphasized the brutality, both physical and psychological, suffered by the blacks. Also, the narratives took on both a romantic and a Christian flavor. The heroes of these stories tended to be oppressed but noble Christians who suffered under slavery, finally escaped to the North, and never sought any revenge against their former masters. The golden age of the slave narratives was between 1831 and 1865; after the Civil War and Emancipation, people's interest in the narratives declined among the Whites but became part of the rich heritage of black people³.

The individual, social, historical and legal constituents of the slaves' identity were pervaded by the systematic negation of their existence. For instance, the Dred Scott Decision of 1857 asserted that Blacks could not be citizens. Then, it is obvious that the necessity of a black voice was not only destined to the development of

² Ibid, p. 30.

³ Ibid, pp. 52-53.

personal identity, but in addition it had the deep social purpose of finding a status. This twofold aim found its realization in the achievement of "slave narratives" that fulfilled both requirements of self definition through writing and social recognition.

Since the late 1960's, slave narratives have experienced a renaissance as thousands of them still extant have been reprinted and as scholars have published major works on them. John W. Blassingame emerged as a premier scholar on American slavery. His most important work, *The Slave Community* (1972), drew attention to the complex social interactions developed in antebellum slave culture. Blassingame argues that slaves were significant contributors to both antebellum and post-Civil War Southern culture. Frances Smith Foster's *Witnessing Slavery* (1979) traces the development of the tradition from colonial American Literature and the experience of slavery to the ante-bellum slave narratives. Foster explores the relationship between text and context as a cultural historian and sees the critic's role as primarily analytic. In *The Slave's Narrative* (1985), Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. gathered excerpts from some of the best-known narratives and essays about the narratives as history and autobiographical literature. Literary scholars such as John Sekora placed value in the slave narrative as a source of historical information. His article "Black Message/White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative" traced the history of slave narratives and their influence on colonial studies⁴. He paid particular attention to narratives written by George White, Josiah Henson, Frederick Douglass, and other ex-slave men. Sekora insisted that narratives provided the only gateway to accurately determine slave life and

⁴ John Sekora, "Black Message/White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative," *Callaloo* 32 (Summer 1987), pp. 491-493.

portray the African American attempt to survive. William L. Andrews's *To Tell a Free Story* (1987) examined the narratives as public autobiographies, at once exploring and demanding freedom. Today, hardly a book is published on American autobiography without a chapter on slave narratives.

Studies of the slave narrative have explored numerous themes. Scholars have demonstrated that while early slave narratives written during the eighteenth century drew their themes from earlier narrative forms, in the last three decades before the American Civil War, the slave narrative moved beyond the captivity narrative's emphasis on physical enslavement and the spiritual autobiography's focus on introspection to confront the moral bankruptcy of slavery itself⁵. But, scholars of the slave narrative genre have often neglected apparently gender-related distinctions between the narratives of men and women. In their introduction to *The Slave's Narrative*, for example, Charles Davis and Henry Louis Gates base their explanation for several common strategies encountered in the narratives on a preoccupation with literacy presumably found in all slave narratives⁶. Robert Stepto in his influential study *From Behind the Veil* posits that "*the primary pre-generic myth for Afro-America is the quest for freedom and literacy.*"⁷ James Olney echoes this position in his important essay "*I Was Born: Slaves Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature*". Olney states that "*the social theme [of the narratives], the reality of*

⁵ John Sekora, for example, in "Red, White, and Black: Indian Captivities, Colonial Printers, and the Early African-American Narratives" In *A Mixed Race: Ethnicity in Early America*, ed. Frank Shuffleton (New York, 1993) shows significant connections between early slave narratives and contemporary Indian captivity narratives; and in *To Tell a Free Story*, William Andrews discusses the influence of black spiritual autobiography on later slave narratives.

⁶ Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds. *The Slave's Narrative*, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. p. xxviii.

⁷ Robert Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991, p. xvi.

slavery and the necessity of abolishing it, trifurcates on the personal level to become sub-themes of literacy, identity, and freedom . . . altogether interdependent and virtually indistinguishable as thematic strands." ⁸ However, such a generalization does not extend to slave narratives written by women. Unlike the narratives written by men, women's narratives do not emphasize this factor. As male and female narrators are not necessarily moved by the same motives, do not write for the same reasons, or at times do not aim at the same recognition, the way they interpret their self differs at several levels. Though more than a decade old, theory and criticism of women's autobiography already has its own history and ways of apprehending women's autobiography.⁹ Feminist critics have focused on the way in which the dominance of male voices within the autobiographical tradition illustrates a marginalization of female experiences. It is possible to argue, following Diane Bjorklund's argument, that women's personal narratives can be thought of as part of a dialogue of domination.¹⁰ We can make a similar case about other groups whose life stories have traditionally been excluded from the autobiographical canon.

Since the slave narrative as a genre is apprehended as part of the autobiography genre, I intend to highlight the processes of the creation of identity in relation to gender in both Frederick Douglass's and Harriet Jacobs's narratives. Much has been said about the importance of the self in slave narratives, it would therefore be worth focusing on the gender distinctions that can be found in this genre. One of the aspects

⁸ James, Olney, "I was Born": Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature", in *The Slave's Narrative*, eds. Davis and Gates. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985, p. xv.

⁹ Margo, Culley, ed. *American Women's Autobiography: Feasts of Memory*. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992, p. 03.

¹⁰ Diane Bjorklund, *Interpreting the Self: Two Hundred Years of American Autobiography*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998, p. 171.

of my dissertation is that the creation of self identity, for instance through literacy, is not a similar process in all slave narratives.

Douglass's work is often viewed as the prototype of the slave narrative genre. However, his *Narrative* does not address the peculiar and particular positioning of slave women and remains a masculine-centered account of slavery. Thus, comparing it to a female slave narrative would offer an interesting perspective. I chose Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents*. Jacobs moves beyond Douglass's account of slavery to particularize the conditions of female slaves. She includes no great awakenings to selfhood as does Douglass, but rather details experiences to stir Northern white abolitionist women to action on behalf of their enslaved sisters.

The author whose real name was Frederick Augustus Bailey began life in 1818 in Tuckahoe in the state of Maryland. His mother Harriet Bailey was a slave and his father was said to be his own master Captain Aaron Anthony. Up to 1825, he worked on the plantation of Colonel Edward Lloyd, where he witnessed the cruelties of white masters. Then, he was ordered to go to Baltimore to be the servant of Hugh Auld. There, his mistress taught him to read and thanks to literacy, the key instrument in his way to freedom, he became a new man determined to be free. In 1833, he managed to escape to Philadelphia and married Anna Murray and then settled in New Bedford, Massachusetts. There, he met William Lloyd Garrison, editor of *The Liberator*. Garrison was an abolitionist who helped Douglass to become an internationally known abolitionist. In 1841, Douglass's first speech was a real success and paved the way to other successful lectures throughout the United States. In 1845, he published his first narrative and then revised it twice (*My Bondage and My Freedom* in 1855 and *Life*

and Times of Frederick Douglass in 1881). He played a prominent role in the women's rights conventions and was successful as a journalist. He died in Washington in 1895.

Harriet Jacobs was born in 1813 in Edenton, North Carolina. Her father, a carpenter, was the son of a white man and her mother was a slave. She became the slave of a cruel white man who sexually harassed her and threatened to make her his concubine. To protect herself, she entered into an affair with a white man, Samuel Tredwell Sawyer, by whom she had two children. In 1835, she escaped and remained hidden in a garret measuring "nine feet long and seven wide." She escaped for good in 1842, but still she was always living in fear of being discovered by her masters. In 1852, a benevolent woman bought her freedom. In 1861, she published her autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* under the pseudonym "Linda Brent," from her childhood till the moment her freedom is bought by her employer in the North. Later, she became involved in anti-slavery feminist movements. During the rest of her life she was very active in providing education for black people and fought for the rights of women.

The slave narrative is definitely a work of art and from the very beginning we see that it has a denunciatory function as well as an artistic aspect (with the incorporation of poetry for example). It is eventually a way to find one's voice since the act of writing signals a will to revive the past in order to recreate a self becoming a textual construct. It is the process through which the slave can write and assert his/ her identity. In writing their stories, ex-slaves attempted to create their own conditions and methods needed to develop their selfhood. This desire to define selfhood for the slave was not linked to any African cultural beliefs or codes. The slave was born and placed

in a world full of unknown ideals, religions and ways of life. Being unaccepted by society urged the slave to seek self-definition through establishing personal freedom. In gaining freedom, the slave was open to opportunities once denied them because of their once chattel status. Baker believes that "*...the slave's task was primarily one of creating a human and liberated self rather than of projecting one that reflected a peculiar landscape and tradition.*"¹¹

The ideal selfhood is often defined by the characteristics of white society. These characteristics consisted in a person being able to relate his or her parents' names, birthplace, birth date, and level of education attained. One was not deemed capable of personhood if these attributes could not be revealed. However, with the rise in publication of slave narratives, the factors that defined the self were reconstructed and selfhood redefined. Within the slave narrative, the quest for selfhood was also a quest to establish an individuality and identity despite the confinements and unfair circumstances that controlled the slaves' lives.

Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* are explicit justifications of African American selfhood. Both narrators understand that in their writings they are not only revealing the horrors of slavery, but establishing a method in which the self is constructed. Although the end result for both is freedom, there is also a need and desire to be recognized as individuals and not as chattel. In order to distinguish themselves as human beings despite their difference, both narrators intend to create a selfhood that proves them to be moral, spiritual and intellectual beings.

¹¹ Houston A Jr., Baker, "Autobiographical Acts and the Voice of the Southern Slave." In *The Slave's Narrative*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985, p.245.

The problem here is to see **how Douglass and Jacobs manage to reconstruct and convey their selves in their narratives**. By rewriting him /or herself they place that self into the tradition of American autobiography and thus s/ he provides proof of “American identity”. But in doing so, they must adhere to the norms of the culture and of what white society considers “normal”. Yet these writers also wish to remain true to their experiences under slavery, which was certainly not “normal”. The question is to see: **how to strike a balance between these two imperatives, that is how they manage to present an individual black self denouncing at the same time the horrors of slavery in the journey from slavery to freedom?**

Furthermore, black women and black men underwent different experiences in slavery, perceived them differently, and wrote about them differently. I would like to show that in spite of the fact that Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* has often come to represent the whole genre of slave narratives, literacy does not necessarily lead to individual freedom in female narratives. The themes of individuality and community seem to play decisive roles in the construction of identity in male and female slave narratives, but have different aims and purposes in each of them. My goal is to show how the gendered narratives differ in their individual or communitarian roles.

The first chapter will be about the construction of the identity through the journey from slavery to freedom. First of all, I will discuss space and time issues. Through the traditional journey from the South to the North, identity undergoes some modifications: in the plantation, which is a place of oppression, the slave's personality is undermined by a sense of inferiority, to the northern city where autonomy is at last achieved. This shows the black people's need to go beyond a space which has been

assigned to them for years and to enter a new geographical but also psychological, spiritual and social one. We will see how both narratives focus on the problem of space but also show how the characters evolve in time.

Slave narratives can be depicted as a journey back to the time of slavery, consequently the question of origins is at the core of slave narratives and the past legacy acts as a stimulating element in the quest for identity. We will see how Douglass's and Jacobs's narratives take them back to their childhood, from where the quest for identity starts. Memory is the main agent in the reconstruction of the past. Using memory so as to write one's past turns out to be deceiving at some times. We will see how Douglass, for example, tries to manipulate his own past. His narratives reveal his reluctance to accept his origins: not only does he reject his white origins, but he also denies his black origins by changing his name. Jacobs is not really concerned with the question of her origins. She rather seeks to revive the past by dwelling on historical events concerning the black community.

The second point will be about the quest for identity. First of all, I will demonstrate how speech plays an important role in the construction of the self. Being a slave is usually tantamount to being voiceless. We will see how speaking enables Jacobs to let out her emotions, to liberate her own feelings. On the contrary, Douglass's narrative does not focus on speech as an instrument of liberation: it rather enhances the importance of the written word. Speech can be seen as the expression of white authority, but black people can also use it as a means of building a culture of their own. This move from an oral to a written tradition is necessary and constitutes another important stage in the quest for identity.

The question of literacy and its link with liberation seems to be at the core of Afro-American slave narratives. The fact that these works were written by slaves denies the assumption that all black people were illiterate. Literacy can be seen as the starting point in the quest for identity and is central in Douglass's narrative. Literacy has transformed him. Not only has it helped shape his character and brought him knowledge, but it has also acted as an instrument of liberation indicating his way to freedom. The question of literacy is less important in Jacobs' narrative. Indeed, the quest for literacy is not presented as being her main concern. She does not directly associate literacy with freedom. "Linda" will rather use literacy as a weapon directed against her master.

Another important aspect in the construction of the self is the figure of the "mulatto slave." Both Douglass and Jacobs are mulatto slaves: Jacobs's grandfather is a white man, Douglass's father is also a white man. They are the results of the taboo relationship between white and black people. But even if they had white origins, they were considered as being entirely black. The problems of identity were more important for this category of slaves who were torn between their white and black origins. If mulatto slaves found it hard to shape their identity by striking a balance between their white and black origins, there was no ambiguity for slaveholders: they were all considered as inferior people no matter whether they were as black as ebony or as white as ivory. Both Douglass and Jacobs allude to the traditional stereotypes used to describe black people.

Actually, the problem of mulatto slaves is double-edged. First, like all the other slaves, they had to deal with the negative definitions imposed on them by white

people. Once they were free, they had to discard these demeaning stereotypes so as to develop a positive identity that enabled them to be both African and American. But for mulattoes, not only there is a tension on a social level, between the fact that they belong to an inferior community and the fact of being American, but a tension is also noticeable on a more psychological level, between on one hand the sense of being black and associated with nature, and on the other hand, the sense of being white and associated with culture. So the problem is to know whether Douglass and Jacobs tend to favour white or black values.

Religion can also constitute obstacles on the way to the construction of the self. Not only were black slaves denied the right to read and write, but they were also deprived of the right to have access to religion. In this section we shall see how Douglass and Jacobs reject this alienating “slaveholding religion” and how they try to reinterpret the Christian religion, a religion that can fill them with hope.

In the second chapter, I shall define how African American autobiography “accommodates” itself with the general definitions and norms of Western autobiography, and how it creates its own. In addition, we shall observe to what extent it is influenced by mainstream American literature and how it differentiates itself from it. I will discuss the slave narrative’s status as autobiography and focus on Philippe Lejeune’s different works on the subject.

Black autobiography appears as a genre distinct from white autobiography; in the nineteenth century, it was more used as a tool to assert one’s right to freedom than as a literary form to draw a picture of oneself. Now, the problem is to determine whether autobiography permits the reconstruction of the self in all its truth despite the

fact that the very act of writing involves the transformation of the account of one's life into an artistic work, the writers entering an imaginary and paradoxical space which attempts to reconstruct past events according to its own criteria. For this purpose, I will rely on the theories of Henry Louis Gates and Houston A. Baker, developed in *Figures in Black* and *The Signifying Monkey* for Gates, and *The Journey Back* for Baker.

In the third chapter, I intend to highlight the processes of the creation of identity in relation to gender in both Frederick Douglass' and Harriet Jacobs's narratives. Putting in relation Jacobs's and Douglass's narratives recalls the focus on genre and gender, in order to draw attention to the similarities and divergences between male and female slave narratives in the process of the creation of identity. The key issue in the comparison between Jacobs's *Incidents* and Douglass's *Narrative* is to be perceived primarily in terms of gender. Indeed, while redefining the inappropriate descriptions of black masculinity and femininity, Douglass and Jacobs were conscious that they needed to achieve such rethinking in their own terms, as a black man and a black woman. Slave narratives written by female slaves tell us how the different standards for women and men interfered in the process of creation, and how black women told their self differently from black men.

Notions such as gender and race can be used in *Incidents* and in *Narrative* to depict the self according to the traditional criteria. But, if Douglass and Jacobs represent themselves according to these notions, they also tend to prove that the latter are mere codes created to maintain the established order. These slave narratives show that the traditional associations of masculinity with power or whiteness with superiority are likely to be reversed. I will try to show the extent to which the authors

subvert the traditional values of gender and race in order to achieve self definition. For this purpose, I will rely on Kimberly Drake's work which draws upon Freud's and Lacan's theories of the formation of identity to explain how slaves' identities are damaged through slavery.

The themes of individuality and community seem to play decisive roles in the construction of identity in male and female slave narratives, but have different aims and purposes in each of them. My goal is to show how the gendered narratives differ in their individual or communitarian roles.

Finally, I shall sum up the elements pointing to a desire to give a positive value to the black self regardless of the traditional values associated with the social concept of race.

CHAPTER I

THE PAST AND THE JOURNEY
FROM SLAVERY TO FREEDOM:
CONSTRUCTION OF AN IDENTITY

A- Space and Time:

1- Space:

a- The Traditional Journey from the South to the North: Confinement Vs Freedom

According to the slave narrators, the greater part of the plantation South was made up of wild, desolate frontier lands. Frederick Douglass was born in Talbot County, on the Eastern shore of Maryland, a small district "*thinly populated and remarkable for nothing that I know of more than the worn out, sandy, desert-like appearance of its soil, the general dilapidation of its farms and fences, the indigent and spiritless character of its inhabitants, and the prevalence of ague and fever.*"¹ The description is typical of the areas in which most of the ex-slaves lived.

I will rely on the work of Melvin Dixon, *Ride out the Wilderness*, who by using a literary historical approach and applying cultural theory examines the relationship between geography and identity in selected works of Afro-American literature. First of all, it would be worth to define "identity". The concept of identity is commonly defined as "*the search for self and its relationship to social contexts and realities.*"² Slave narratives convey the struggles of these early writers to create and preserve a distinct identity against a white world's desire to define and dominate slave existence. This point is extremely important as the institution of slavery is coextensive with the destruction of any kind of individuality.

¹ Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. University of North Carolina Electronic Edition, 1999, p. 13.

² William Andrews, Frances Smith Foster and Harris Trudier, eds. *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 379.

Melvin Dixon describes three tropes giving a certain unity to Afro-American literature: “*Three figures of landscape appear in the literature over time with such regularity that they become the primary images of a literal and figurative geography in the search for self and home: the wilderness, the underground, and the mountaintop.*”¹

In these geographical spaces, identity* undergoes some modifications: the plantation is the place of oppression in which the slave’s personality is undermined by a sense of inferiority. So he resolves to find a refuge into the “wilderness”. During slavery the blacks depicted the wilderness as a place of refuge beyond the restricted world of the plantation, here self-esteem is established and slaves are able to secure physical mobility (escape North to free territory). The underground is the place where, Dixon says, individual strength is tested and autonomy achieved, a stage for self-creating performances and for contact with black culture. Eventually, the “mountaintop” is the place of freedom where the slaves “transcend identity through self-mastery.” These places will become metaphors for the different stages in the creation of an identity in Afro-American literature of the twentieth century.

Douglass’s use of geography is quite interesting. The minute description of some places, the stress on the distances from one place to another, betrays an obsession with geographical space. The emphasis is on the name of states, or places such as the “Great House Farm”. At the very beginning of the narrative, Douglass introduces himself in a geographical context: “*I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot County, Maryland.*”⁵ He wrote:

¹Melvin Dixon, *Ride Out The Wilderness*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987, p.03.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 04.

⁵ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written By Himself* (1845). New York, Signet Classics, 1986, p.339. Further references will appear parenthetically in the text.

I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it...My father was a white man. He was admitted to be such by all I ever heard speak of my parentage. The opinion was also whispered that my master was my father; but the correctness of this opinion, I know nothing; the means of knowing was withheld from me. (Narrative, pp.339-340)

The information which Douglass was forced to omit would have been considered essential for any of his free, white, nineteenth-century auto-biographer, as William Andrews write:

To locate oneself on a particular point in the temporal continuum gave the auto-biographer a uniqueness and a degree of self-knowledge that can only augment his status in the eyes of the reader...We might speculate that many auto-biographers engaged in this ritual of personal documentation at the opening of their narratives because they felt a need to stake out a fixed point for themselves on the mental grids of their readers. Without precise temporal, spatial and familial coordinates, an auto-biographer remained in some sense unidentified and unidentifiable to American readers.⁶

As a slave, Douglass can give no genealogical exposition, cite no antecedents and supply no birth date. Of the three "coordinates", Andrews mentions, the only means of identification Douglass can supply is an intimate topographical knowledge. His slave status negates the need for the missing temporal information: he does not have the subject's knowledge about himself. Indeed, such knowledge is both unnecessary and dangerous, for Douglass's owner, "*deemed all such inquiries on the part of a slave improper and impertinent, and evidence of a restless spirit.*"(Narrative, p.339) It is the space Douglass occupies which is the most important, for it, even more than his lack of knowledge, serves to demarcate his status. Melvin Dixon notes that by describing slave space so minutely, Douglass sets up a dichotomy between place and person:

...the place that denies him humanity is described and recreated through the exercise of an intelligence that is an unmistakable sign of humanness...this moment of reckoning and reasoning is the key to the way Douglass and other former slave narrators extricate themselves from the place that conspires to keep them ignorant and bestial.⁷

⁶ William Andrews, *To Tell a Free story The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865*. Urban and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986, p. 27.

⁷ Melvin Dixon, op. cit., p. 21.

For Dixon, the ability to describe this space is of key importance: arguing that slaves made "*metaphorical and rhythmic use of language to thwart the dehumanizing effects of slavery,*" he theorizes that slave narratives, like spirituals, used language to depict "*alternative spaces and personae slaves could assume...the singer [of spirituals] creates an aural space around him, defining a stage that is both communal and individual.*" African- American spirituals, stories and slave lore "*are filled with geographical references that parallel various states of mind. Here physical geography links the spiritual landscape; ...changes in the vernacular landscape: -- hillsides, valleys, swamp-- became references for the slave's feelings.*"⁸

Slavery was largely based upon surveillance and there was no better way for a slave to legally evade this surveillance than by hiring his own time. On Covey's farm, as on the Lloyd plantation, the field hands occupied a clearly demarcated slave space: they slept and ate in the quarters reserved for them and performed their daily tasks in the field. The field, like the quarters, the yard or any other space clearly associated with and occupied by slaves was the product of an economic system which required slave labour. It was, in part, the occupation of slave space which indicated slave status. Both Covey and the overseer Gore had policed the boundaries of this space, ensuring that slaves did not display an undue autonomy by moving beyond these boundaries. On the plantation, the surveying gaze of the absent master was substituted by that of an overseer.

Also, in Jacobs's narrative, Linda is systematically observed by her master and wherever she goes, she owes him an explanation. The plantation inhibits motion and vision. Apart from the threats of the master, nothing prevents a slave from leaving the

⁸ Ibid., p.19.

plantation. On the contrary, Linda Brent* is put in a dilemma: if she flees to the North, she will be a free woman but the awe she feels for her grandmother is so intense that she cannot make up her mind. Her grandmother often reminds her of how cruel she is in her intention to settle in the North and to leave her family. If her master constitutes a main obstacle to her plans, her grandmother is perhaps an even more powerful force of dissuasion. Doctor Flint and her grandmother constitute two figures of confinement. The mansion in which Flint, her master, lives is worse than a jail, for Linda is always assaulted by him and has to find the strength to put an end to his advances. This leads us to say that this plantation is a place of sexual oppression and Linda is not Flint's first victim:

The secrets of slavery are concealed like those of the Inquisition. My master was to my knowledge, the father of eleven slaves. But did the mothers dare to tell who the father of their children was? Did the other slaves dare to allude to it, except in whispers among themselves? No, indeed! They knew too well the terrible consequences.⁹

Linda herself has an affair with a white man, Sands, just as a means to rebel against Flint. On the contrary, the grandmother's house is the epitome of sexual prohibition, virtue being the law of her house. As a result, Linda dares not tell her all what she is obliged to endure.

Flint manages to violate the purity of the house by threatening the young girl. Wherever she goes, Linda is always trapped and thus, confinement in this narrative is the equivalent of sexual oppression. Linda is perhaps more afraid of her grandmother than of her master. She leaves Flint without any qualms, whereas a feeling of guilt

*Linda Brent is the pseudonym Jacobs used when writing her narrative.

⁹ Linda Brent, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, *Written By Herself*, 1861. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, p.34. Further references will appear parenthetically in the text.

haunts her as she attempts to break free. The most symbolic element of confinement is of course the garret:

A small shed had been added to my grandmother's house years ago. Some boards were across the joists at the top, and between these boards and the roofs was a very small garret, never occupied by any thing but by rats and mice .It was a pent roof, covered with nothing but shingles, according to the southern custom for such buildings. The garret was only nine feet long and seven wide. The highest part was three feet high, and sloped down abruptly to the loose board floor. (Incidents, p.117)

She also describes it as a “hole” inside which darkness is total. Here again, she is denied the ability to see and to move. Oddly enough, Linda finds it less difficult to live in this tiny black hole than in Flint’s huge mansion. She has managed to flee his house and its confinement (characterized by Flint’s perpetual sexual harassment) only to face confinement again. But this garret is the only place unknown to Flint. White people could control space and assigned black people to whatever space that pleased them. Linda describes her master’s ascendancy over space: *"They told me a place of concealment has been provided for me at my grandmother's. I could not imagine how it was possible to hide in her house, every nook and corner of which was known to the Flint family."* (Incidents, p.116)

The fact that Harriet Jacobs remained hidden in this garret during seven years can be interpreted as a victory over her master, because she succeeded in appropriating a space inside which her intimacy was at last respected. Also the title of chapter XXI is quite significant: “The loophole of retreat”. It enhances Linda’s will to break the ties she had with her master. She retreats into a black hole but manages to recover sight thanks to the discovery of a loophole, a peeping hole. This loophole will serve as a starting point in her battle against Flint.

Confinement is part and parcel of Harriet Jacobs's life, and Valerie Smith has noted:

*Feminist scholarship has shown that, in general, women's writing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been strongly marked by imagery of confinement, a pattern of imagery that reflects the limited cultural options available to the authors because of their gender and chosen profession.*¹⁰

This imagery of confinement can be reflected in feminine literature as a whole because women, and not especially slave women, have been associated with submission for centuries. Black women as well as white women always find themselves in a restricted place, literally speaking as well as figuratively speaking. But confinement is also to be found in Douglass's narrative. Numerous references to the word "jail" attest to it. "Jail" and "evil" are often quoted to describe the plantation. His master's plantation is a restricted place where violence holds sway. Like Linda Brent, he is trapped. Moreover, Douglass insists on elements symbolizing motion: his emphasis on boats is significant, because in a sense they hold the key to freedom since they can be means of transport travelling between slave states and Free states. He even addresses them:

You are loosed from your moorings, and are free; I am fast in my chains, and am a slave! You move merrily before the gentle gale, and I sadly before the bloody whip! You are freedom's swift-winged angels, that fly round the world; I am confined in bands of iron! O that I were free! O that I were on one of your gallant decks, and under your protecting wing! Alas! Betwixt me and you, the turbid waters roll. Go on, go on. O that I could also go! Could I but swim! If I could fly! O, why was I born a slave, of whom to make a brute! The glad ship is gone; she hides in the dim distance. I am left in the hottest hell of unending slavery. (Narrative, p.388)

The opposition between the boats and himself is in keeping with the chasm separating freedom from slavery. Freedom is characterized by motion ("loosed", "move", "fly",

¹⁰ Valerie Smith, *Self Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative*. : Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987, p.30.

“go”) whereas slavery is defined as something inhibiting motion (“chains”, “confined”).

Douglass’s autobiography hinges on an opposition between motion and confinement. His main goal is to acquire the ability to move. His ancestors have been violently taken to America; have been forced to leave their native land so as to live in an imposed restricted place. Now, Douglass has to go the other way around: he has to leave a place of confinement to reach a “promised land”. He has to get rid of the shackles of slavery so as to join a new space where he will be able to create a new identity. But flight to the wilderness is not an easy task. It can be seen as a physical ordeal. Melvin Dixon notes: “*During slavery, black people depicted the wilderness as a place of refuge beyond the restricted world of the plantation (...) the woods or the swamps were regular sites for religious meetings and conversion experiences in which slaves attained important levels of spiritual mobility.*”¹¹ The quest for spiritual space replaces the quest for physical space.

Slave narratives focus on the need to find a way out through religion. The latter endows slaves with such courage that escape will appear easier. But spiritual space is often bound to be trespassed. In Douglass’s narrative, black religious camps are destroyed by white people. Space can also be recreated thanks to songs. When they sing, slaves express their sorrows. This goes along with a physical space: slaves often express their grief amidst trees and swamps. Douglass also creates his own mental space through literacy, because it permits him to be aware of the nature of slavery.

The recreation of space is essential if slaves want to be ready to escape. However, white masters often have precedence over their slaves, whose attempts are often useless. Indeed Frederick Douglass keeps seeking a way out of the plantation

¹¹ Melvin Dixon, op. cit., p. 03.

which turns out to be a real maze. He is trapped in the plantation. His situation anticipates recurring patterns of Afro-American fiction of the twentieth century, in which characters always take flight in quest for identity and to escape discrimination (Bigger Thomas's incessant flight in Richard Wright's *Native Son* is a good example). Still, slave narratives end showing the slave on the "mountaintop", slaves succeeding in getting there either on their own, or thanks to escape routes such as the Underground Railroad. Douglass's life in the city is a success since he acquires the ability to speak: he becomes a great orator. Both Douglass and Jacobs promote the education of black people. The northern city is the place where they have recovered the ability to see, speak, move and come to terms with a new identity.

If slave narratives present a linear journey with an important focus on the dialectics of ascent-descent, confinement-release, they also demonstrate that the symbolic values usually attached to them are blurred.

b- Space and Symbolism: Subversion of Associations

The traditional values attached to space are sometimes ambiguous in these two narratives. Melvin Dixon noted:

Black survival, however, requires that those received values and cultural assumptions associating certain places with low and high status, or with moral degradation and elevation, be changed. Afro-American literature is replete with speech acts and spatial images that reinvent these assumptions about place and endow language with the power to reinvent geography and identity.¹²

In this perspective, the motive of confinement, which is usually associated with negative connotations, tends to show that received values are not always appropriate. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the symbol of confinement is the garret. A

¹² .Ibid., p.02.

small black hole is usually associated with blindness, paralysis, fear and insecurity. It also points to a sense of being cut off from the world. Linda Brent is bereft of her children. She can see them but they cannot see her; she can observe them but she cannot talk to them. Communication is annihilated. Oddly enough, she manages to break free without moving and also come to some self-understanding. The hole is the place where she becomes whole. The crippling garret becomes a place of contemplation since she dominates everything and can observe the movements of her master as soon as she makes the loophole. From there, she manipulates him. She manages to create the illusion that she is in the North by writing letters she asks someone to send from a northern city. This hiding cramped space may appear as a grave, but here she can think out her identity and protect her virtue. She develops her sense of being a woman determined to ensure the freedom of her children. This time, she has the upper hand. The more confined she is, the freer she seems. Physical immobility gives way to intellectual and psychological mobility. But if she is happy at the sight of her children, she also witnesses the sufferings of other slaves, which reinforces, in a sense, her will to be free. A great deal of patience is required since she remains concealed in this attic during seven years, but her imprisonment into the garret is just the beginning of freedom.

Jacobs's narrative tends to show the arbitrary nature of the received values attached to spatial representation. This problem is also to be found in *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Not only does the author subvert traditional symbolic values, but he also demonstrates that space can incorporate a variety of contradictory symbols. The way in which he depicts nature is a case in

point. Nature--enhanced in *Narrative*-- is both welcoming and hostile. If nature enables slaves to create their own spiritual and mental space, it also turns out to be very hostile. It acts as an obstacle during Douglass's flight: "*After lying there about three quarters of an hour, I nerved myself up again, and started on my way, through bogs and briers, barefooted and bareheaded, tearing my feet sometimes at nearly every step.*" (*Narrative*, p.391) The woods are the place where he could be "starved to death" but on the other hand, nature permits him to remain unnoticed: "*Before he could reach me, I succeeded in getting to the cornfield; and as the corn was very high, it afforded me the means of hiding.*" (*Narrative*, p.392)

A tension is at the heart of this place, which is hostile (numerous references to snakes, scorpions...) but very useful. This is a binary representation in keeping with the great American tradition structured around the opposition between the garden and the wilderness. Looking upon nature so as to flee to the northern states is a recurring pattern in Afro-American slave narratives.

The demeaning stereotype of the beast so often used to describe black slaves (a parallel between slaves and horses is drawn at the beginning of Douglass's narrative) seems to suggest that slaves belong by definition to nature. They are both prisoners of slavery and of nature. But while animals can move in nature, slaves often remain crippled. So for the slaves, the traditional association of nature with freedom is a fallacy. Wild nature and tamed nature unite their strength to run counter to slaves' plans.

Wild nature is embodied by the woods and its dangerous animals. In Douglass's narrative, tamed nature is embodied by the "gardens". Colonel Lloyd's garden (full of

fruit), is perhaps even more dangerous than wild nature. Indeed, its fence is covered with tar as a means to catch those who attempt to enter it. The fact that slaves are denied entry into the cultivated garden is quite significant. It suggests an opposition between nature and culture and underlines the extent to which black people had to remain alien to the realm of culture. They had to remain in a place chosen by white people. Still, Douglass's narrative suggests that they could give it a new significance and consequently endowed nature with positive connotations. Nature can become the place where slaves are "born again". In the woods, slaves pray for deliverance. Thanks to a renewed contact with nature, they see themselves as protected by God and are more confident about what the future has in store for them. Slaves used to think that God would show them the way to the "promised land", a kind of paradise embodied by the North. God will give them the strength to survive and leave hell embodied by the plantation. However, this "promised land" does not always come up to their expectations. Here again, the traditional association of northern states with freedom and happiness falls apart. For Linda, the north crushes her hopes:

This was the first chill to my enthusiasm about the free states. Colored people were allowed to ride in a filthy box, behind white people, at the south, but there they were not required to pay for the privilege. It made me sad to find how the north aped the customs of slavery. (Incidents, p. 168)

One of the main differences between *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass* and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is that traditional patterns are more likely to be found in Douglass's narrative. It is when he is in the city that Douglass learns how to read and comes to terms with a new identity, whereas Linda continues to give shape to an already forged self. Indeed, there is no important change in herself from the period when she was a young girl to the period she become a free woman: the sense of being

a strong woman determined to protect her virtue has always been present. This point will be examined in the last chapter of this work. Both narratives focus on the problem of space, but also show characters evolving in time.

2-Time:

Slave narratives can be depicted as a journey back to the slavery time, hence the importance of the past and its legacy. Consequently, the question of origins is at the core of slave narratives and the legacy of the past acts as a stimulating element in the quest for identity. The failure to provide the name of both parents, birth date, and birth place excludes the slave from being recognized as a person. Rafia Zafar in "The Afro-American as Representative Man" quotes Orlando Patterson's disposition of the slave:

*[The slave] was truly a genealogical isolate...He had a past, to be sure. But a past is not a heritage. Everything has a history, including sticks and stones. Slaves differed from other human beings in that they were not allowed freely to integrate the experience of their ancestors into their lives, to inform their understanding of social reality with the inherited meanings of their natural forebears, or to anchor the living present in any conscious community of memory.*¹³

Despite this truth, Douglass and Jacobs are not impeded in revealing the minimal family history that they have knowledge of. Douglass opens with "I was born" and continues with "in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot County, Maryland." He establishes a birth place, but soon shatters the ideal self by stating: "I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it." (Narrative, p.339)

Whereas space is described minutely, uncertainty or ignorance is what characterizes time in his narrative. Frederick Douglass was aware of time only thanks

¹³ Rafia Zafar, "Franklinian Douglass: The Afro-American as Representative Man". In *Frederick Douglass, New Literary and Historical Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991, p. 101.

to its circularity: “*They seldom come nearer to it than planting time, harvest-time, cherry-time, spring-time, or fall-time.*” (*Narrative*, p.339) Time and nature go hand in hand: it is thanks to the changes observed in nature that he can get some awareness of time. The opposition between work and rest also enables him to be aware of time since they correspond to day and night. Night belongs to slaves; it is the only moment when they can take the most of their family life: “*I never saw my mother, to know her as such, more than four or five times in my life; and each of those times was very short in duration, and at night.*” (*Narrative*, p.340)

Until the second part of the narrative, Frederick Douglass cannot date events. Chapter nine can be represented as the starting point of his ability to measure time: “*I have now reached a period of my life when I can give dates.*” (*Narrative*, p. 378) This points out to the link uniting time with literacy. Once he is able to read, it is possible for him to date events.

The whole narrative can be seen as an act of memory. The first part of his narrative shows that his awareness of time is nature bound, whereas the second part of it demonstrates it is culture bound. Still, it always remains impossible for him to know his date of birth.

Using memory so as to write one’s past turns out to be deceiving at some points. Indeed, it seems easy for Frederick Douglass to manipulate his own past. We can notice that in his three successive autobiographies (his 1845 *Narrative, My Bondage and my Freedom* 1855, and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* 1881), the description of his mother and father is quite different. In the 1845 *Narrative*, Douglass can barely recall his mother. The lack of maternal care left an emotional void in

Douglass that caused his disassociation from any blood relative discussed in the narrative. It is first revealed when he admits his lack of emotion upon the death of his mother, and later when he expresses the lack of resentment he felt upon leaving his brothers and sisters to go to Baltimore. Douglass also failed to have a loving relationship with his father. He fell victim of the usual circumstances of most slaves and was unsure of his father's identity. His knowledge about his father's identity is founded on hearsay, and there is no acknowledgement or confirmation from either parent. In *My Bondage and my Freedom*, however, Douglass just ten years later repeats that his knowledge of his mother is very scanty but notes that it has also become very distinct. Not only has Douglass suddenly recalled his mother, but he has also come to feel for her death a "life-long grief", when ten years earlier her death struck him as would have the death of a total stranger. The lack of knowledge and familial bond also left Douglass with an emotional void which increased his disassociation from the family structure and made his journey for freedom an individual task.

By the end of Chapter I, Douglass has established himself as a being but not as a person in the eyes of white society. Though he is still deemed a chattel, he has given the reader an opportunity to reconstruct the way in which slaves are viewed. By providing the reader with the intimate details of his childhood and the circumstances responsible for his current status, he evokes the reader's sympathy as well as interest in how he continues to develop his individuality. Frederick Douglass successfully manages to fill in the blank spaces of his past by giving it a new significance. Indeed his narrative can be seen as the story of the trials of a courageous young boy who

successfully becomes a free man, an abolitionist and an auto-biographer. His narratives reveal his being reluctant to accept his origins: not only does he reject his white origins by emphasizing the negative elements associated with white people, but he also denies his black origins by changing his name. This can be interpreted as a desire to make a fresh start, but it also conveys a will to recreate his origins. Frederick Augustus Bailey is now Frederick Douglass and his first name remains unchanged. The reason he gives is quite interesting: *“I must hold on to that, to preserve a sense of my identity.”* (Narrative, p. 425) However, his narrative often underlines the positive aspects of black people (especially as regards religion). Consequently, he wants to emphasize their courage despite their being deprived of origins. The fact that he delivers different myths of origins in his three autobiographies suggests that his past has become the object of constant creation. Even if he was denied the right to know the truth about his origins, he has acquired the power to create them.

Linda Brent is not really concerned with the question of her origins. Unlike Douglass, her childhood, at least for the first twelve years, was a happy one. However, the fate of being a chattel was soon brought to light and the reality of being a slave is revealed. Although promises were made for her safe-keeping, she found herself in the same position as Douglass years earlier. Jacobs was bequeathed as a slave, a property to a niece of her deceased mistress. The dream of being treated as a person quickly vanished and Jacobs was made aware of her status within society.

The establishment of the genealogical selfhood is different for Douglass and Jacobs, but both narrators set out to define selfhood by describing or demonstrating the transformation from chattel to person. In individual ways, they begin to create a self

that does not consist of all the traditional aspects of selfhood such as birth date and parents' names. However, their narratives illustrate the different approaches implemented in their defining of selfhood. Selfhood becomes defined by their gender and their experiences.

Jacobs's narrative, which hinges on opposition between slavery as a whole (she refers to famous events such as Nat Turner's insurrection) and slavery as a different institution for women is laden with violence, underlying the fact that the History of black people is a history of perpetual suffering. But contrary to Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass attempts to date the facts he gives as if he wanted to show his ability to memorize things.

Both of these slave narratives take the authors back to their childhood, from which the quest for identity starts.

B- The Quest for Identity:

1- Speech:

The foremost use of speech is to interact with people. As regards slavery, it reflects racial power relations. The white man is the one who speaks, whereas the black man is either reduced to silence or has to speak according to the white man's expectations. Speech seems to be definitely an instrument of domination. This is well described in Douglass's narrative. Talking about one of the overseers, he observes: *"He spoke but to command, and commanded but to be obeyed; he dealt sparingly with his words, and bountifully with his whip, never using the former where the latter would answer as well."* (Narrative, p. 355)

Slaves are constantly influenced by speech, which points to the power of speech. Speech and action are linked because by speaking, one acts on somebody to make him/her act. But words belong to those who have power and these are, as a general rule, white people.

Linda Brent keeps complaining about Dr. Flint's rude language. Oddly enough, in order to achieve his goals, her master resorts to the use of language rather than to the use of physical violence. Indeed, Linda was never whipped. Dr. Flint relies on the power of words so as to shock her. But the young girl dares to answer even if she is aware of the kind of punishment a slave can receive if she dares to speak: "*you have let your tongue run too far: damn you!*" says a master while selling one of his slaves. Linda also uses speech to defend herself. Sentences such as: "*how I despise you!*" (*Incidents*, p.38) or "*you have no right to do what you like with me*" (*Incidents*, p.39) are part of her vocabulary when she addresses Flint, and even when the latter shouts "silence!" with a "thundering voice", she is courageous enough to talk back. Their battle is limited to words. They fight through language. She seems to have inherited this boldness from her grandmother, who also holds Flint in contempt. If Linda manages to face up to her master's verbal assaults, she is deeply affected by her grandmother's injunctions. Linda fails to have the upper hand when she talks with her grandmother who always succeeds in making her feel guilty: "*Linda, do you want to kill your old grandmother? Do you mean to leave your little, helpless children? I am old now, and cannot do for babies as I once did for you.*" (*Incidents*, p. 93) As a result, it is difficult for Linda to remain totally indifferent to this web of discourses urging her not to escape. Flint's verbal threats and her grandmother's scolding constitute two

important forces of dissuasion. Moreover, Linda seems to be scared of talking to her grandmother. This fifteen-year old girl feels compelled to tell her she has an affair with a white man, but she loses her ability to speak: *“My lips moved to make confession, but the words stuck in my throat.”* (Incidents, p. 57) Soon after, she adds: *“Her reproaches fell so hot and heavy, that they left me no chance to answer”*. This inability to communicate with her grandmother puts her in great disarray. A reversal of situation is noticeable: slavery is supposed to keep black people from talking, but here Linda is almost mute in the presence of her grandmother whereas she becomes rather talkative when she is with her master. This shows that Linda is certainly more afraid of her grandmother than of her master.

These problems of communication are also present in Douglass’s narrative. Slaves are denied the right to speak, but they are urged to speak just to be punished for having spoken. Douglass explains that a slave had been punished just because he had told the truth when he was asked whether his master treated him well. Consequently, slaves prefer to remain silent: *“The frequency of this has had the effect to establish among the slaves the maxim, that a still tongue makes a wise head.”*(Narrative, p. 353) Also white people reduce slaves to silence: *“There must be no answering back to him; no explanation was allowed a slave, showing himself to have been wrongfully accused.”*(Narrative, p. 355)

Contrary to Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass is not presented as a man who dares to talk to his masters. He does not express his desire to be free in front of his masters. However, he has a privileged relationship with his black fellow slaves. He can speak freely to them and even manages to convince them to flee the plantation. Thanks

to speech, he succeeds in winning them over to his opinion concerning slavery: “*I therefore, though with great prudence, commended to ascertain their views and feelings in regard to their condition and to imbue their minds with thoughts of freedom.*” (Narrative, p. 403) The speech he makes to them anticipates his career as a famous orator dedicated to the abolition of slavery. He is aware that speech is a necessary medium if one wants to deliver a message and to incite to action. But the message he intends to transmit to slave holders is not delivered through speech but through physical violence. The relationship he has with Covey is a good example. One day, Covey gives him an order, but Douglass made no answer. Later, Covey beats Douglass and this time Covey understands Douglass’s message since he will never attempt to whip him again.

Physical violence seems to be the only way by which slaveholders and black people communicate, for each attempt at communication through speech is a failure. Slaveholders use speech only to give orders. It is consequently an instrument of oppression. However, for the slaves it is an essential element in the quest for identity.

a- Speech and Identity:

Speech plays an important role in the construction of the self. It reflects one’s position. For example, once Linda talks to her grandmother, she adopts a very respectful tone, which becomes contemptuous when she addresses her master. Her ability to express herself before white people without any fear reveals a strong personality. She knows quite well how to handle the spoken word (as well as the

written word). She expresses herself clearly and perhaps more clearly than her master who can only curse or mutter to indicate his anger or annoyance.

The dialogues between slaves written down by Jacobs tend to show the difference existing between her speeches and some of the language used by some of her fellows. The way her uncle Fred talks is a case in point: *“You nebber gibs me a lesson dat I don’t pray to God to help me understand’ what I spells and what I reads. And he does help me, chile. Bress his holy name!”* (*Incidents*, p. 75)

Linda’s speeches can be very sentimental, but they can also be very clever: *“If he is a puppy I am a puppy, for we are both of the Negro race. It is right and honourable for us to love each other. The man you call a puppy never insulted me, sir; and he would not love me if he did not believe me to be a virtuous woman.”* (*Incidents*, p. 38) In one single sentence, she manages to express several things: first of all, she takes up Flint’s demeaning word (a parallel between animals and slaves is drawn) to describe herself and black people as a whole, but she skilfully turns this stereotype against her master telling him that her lover, contrary to him, never abused her. She implies that Flint is the one who should be called a puppy, but ironically she calls him “sir”. She also conveys the cruelty of an institution that prevents two persons from loving each other and she finally reminds him of her being a virtuous girl. Linda has definitely a gift for words. Flint is unable to find the right words to answer back, so he slaps her.

Linda’s speeches really reflect her personality: she is a courageous woman determined to be respected. Words constitute an instrument of liberation. As she is a

woman of speech, her quest for identity will be made easier. She possesses the right weapon. Speaking enables her to let out her emotions, to liberate her own feelings.

On the contrary, Frederick Douglass's narrative does not focus on speech as an instrument of liberation; it rather enhances the importance of the written word. Actually, there is a scarcity of dialogues involving black people and their masters. Douglass confesses that at the beginning, he is ill at ease when he has to talk to white people: "*The truth was, I felt myself a slave, and the idea of speaking to white people weighed me down. I spoke but a few moments, when I felt a degree of freedom, and said what I desired with considerable ease.*" (Narrative, p. 388) This clearly underlines the fact that being a slave is usually tantamount to being voiceless. Speech is an instrument belonging to the white man and this is the reason why he finds it difficult to speak in the presence of white people. However, he manages to overcome this feeling of inferiority and speaking liberates him for he will become a famous orator dedicated to the abolition of slavery. He has come to realize that speech does not exclusively belong to white people and he will use it to convey a scathing criticism of slavery.

Douglass also demonstrates that speech does not always go along with one's feelings. As regards songs he says: "*They would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone.*" (Narrative, p. 348) Only slaves can understand the meaning of these songs that are often a way to express their pain and sorrow. Speech as an artistic creation is important in the quest for identity, because these songs constitute a common culture to which slaves can identify.

Jacobs and Douglass differ widely, due to gender-related aspects of how voice is rendered, who it speaks to and how much it is present. In terms of how much voice is rendered, it seems that both Jacobs and Douglass explicitly refuse to describe certain events of their lives. Jacobs's voice is cloaked under fictional names. Whereas Douglass speaks in his own voice, with his own name and about named individuals, Jacobs speaks through a pseudonym and about individuals whose identities are coded. She has also adopted a censoring attitude, because by northern standards, she is a fallen woman, whose life story is best kept a secret. Note one example. After his battle with Covey, Douglass is triumphant: *"It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free"* (Narrative, pp. 394-395) Jacobs, however, reflects upon her triumphant defiance of Norcom with quite a different tone: *"And now, reader, I come to a period in my unhappy life, which I could gladly forget if I could. The remembrance fills me with sorrow and shame."* (*Incidents*, p. 53) This is a shame that Douglass was not subject to. Douglass speaks with considerable ease, in a clear, consistent voice, whereas Jacobs's voice is filled with lacunae, particularly when regarding sexuality. Jacobs's narrative is often evasive, shifting from personal experience to the more general problems of female slaves, constantly drawing attention to the cause rather than to her life.

Depending on whom the texts speak to, both Douglass and Jacobs actively participated in the abolitionist movement. Yet, there is one essential difference regarding to whom the respective works are directed. While one may wonder how important the female portion of his audience was to Douglass, Jacobs explicitly states

that *Incidents* is written "to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South..." (*Incidents*, p. 01)

Speech can be seen as the expression of white authority but black people can also use it as a means of building a culture of their own and achieving knowledge about themselves. However, the move from the oral to the written tradition is necessary and constitutes another important stage in the quest for identity.

2-Literacy:

The quest for authority over language is a theme common to many slave narratives. Slave narrators almost always express a direct correlation between literacy and liberation. Many former slaves credit their eventual escape and subsequent freedom to their ability to read and write.¹⁴ To write is to move from object to subject. As Houston Baker puts it, the slave narrator had "*to seize the word. Only by grasping the word could he engage in the speech acts that would ultimately define his selfhood.*"¹⁵ Thus, the attainment of literacy is a crucial part of the slave narrative genre. Yet literacy, while absolutely necessary to freedom, is also the tool used by white society to maintain slavery, for a system of legal laws, biblical rhetoric and propaganda was used to keep slaves in their place. Therefore, it is necessary for slave narrators to see that language can be used either to transform, or to serve the dominant

¹⁴ On literacy, Kimberly Drake notes: "the ability to utilize language, especially written language or literacy is crucial to [slaves'] quest for freedom, a freedom which in large part is the ability to allow the consciousness to develop without restriction."

Kimberly Drake, "Rewriting the American Self: Race, Gender and Identity in the Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs", *Melus*, 22, n°4, (1997), p. 72.

¹⁵ Houston Baker, Jr, *The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980. p.31.

social order. Slave narrators must see that literacy is both the key to freedom, and the grounds upon which slavery is justified.

Many slave narratives do reveal an understanding of the power struggles within language. Frederick Douglass, for example, understands that "*reading is the pathway from slavery to freedom*". (Narrative, p. 364) However, Douglass also acknowledges the abuses of language when he speaks of slave owners who justify slavery by invoking the Biblical passage of God cursing Ham, or who cruelly beat their slaves while quoting the scripture: "*He that knoweth his master's will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes.*" (Narrative, p. 381) Because of this, Douglass finds literacy to be a mixed blessing: "*I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing...In moments of agony, I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity. I have often wished myself a beast*" (Narrative, p.370)

"Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction," proclaims Harriet Jacobs in the preface to her 1861 narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Jacobs must have known even before releasing her narrative that the authenticity of her story would be debated. She knew there would be extreme apprehension about the truthfulness of her text, for not only was she a slave, but she was also a woman. Before Jacobs opens her preface with the plea to her audience to believe her narrative, there is a proclamation in the introduction to *Incidents* by editor Lydia Maria Child attesting to and offering several explanations for Jacobs's ability to write so well. (*Incidents*, xi)

Like Child's prefatory remarks at the beginning of Jacobs's text, Douglass's first version contains letters from William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips, both asserting the authenticity of Douglass's story. With testimonials and guaranties of the

legitimacy of the narrative and of the authorial capabilities of the narrators from well-known members of white abolitionist communities as a conventional preface to slave narratives, it is apparent from the outset of these narratives that slave narrators do not have absolute authority over language. The struggle for authority that faced most of these authors was directly connected to the perception that no person reared in slavery would ever have acquired enough education to eloquently and effectively transcribe the events of his or her life.

Jacobs and Douglass are united in their possession of something wholly uncommon in slaves, the ability to read and write. Clearly, both value this ability highly, but it is Douglass who points to his education as the defining moment in his life. After his master forbids him to continue his education and explains to his wife the dangers of educating slaves, Douglass begins to see his life in an entirely new and different way. His master claims that learning to read would spoil a slave and make him unfit to serve another man:

Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. Now, (...) if you teach that nigger (...) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy. (Narrative, p. 364)

From this, Douglass understands that language and education are the most powerful tools used by the white man to keep the slaves in chains and begins to determinedly search for an education, that he might be free of these chains. His search is not easy, and he must often sacrifice his physical well-being to increase his Knowledge, but he is content in giving up his bread to poor white children who in return offer him “the more valuable bread of knowledge.” (*Narrative*, p.368) Later, he noticed that the carpenters, after dressing pieces of timber, marked them with certain

letters to indicate their positions in the vessel. By asking questions of the workmen he learned the names of these letters and their significance. He got up writing matches with sticks upon the ground with the little white boys, copied the italics in his spelling-book, and in the secrecy of the attic filled up all the blank spaces of his young master's old copy-books. One book seems to have had a marked influence upon his life at this epoch. He obtained, somehow, a copy of *The Columbian Orator*, containing some of the choicest masterpieces of English oratory, in which he saw liberty praised and oppression condemned. He was converted to Christianity and began to read the Bible. He had dreamed of liberty before; he now prayed for it, and trusted in God.

The written language acts as a weapon and Douglass will turn the written word as well as the spoken word against his master. In this perspective, Houston Baker draws a parallel between Frederick Douglass and his master on the one hand, and Caliban and Prospero (*The Tempest*, Shakespeare) on the other hand. Indeed, Prospero has found Caliban on an island and has enslaved him. The latter, like Douglass, has learned his master's language and has realized the importance of Prospero's books since he wanted to get rid of them. The following excerpt enhances the power of language:

*"You taught me language; and my profit on't
Is, I know to curse. The red plague rid you
For learning me your language."* (*My Bondage and My Freedom*, p. 33)

Like Caliban, Douglass knows that power lies in books. From them he has learned concepts such as "abolitionism". The more Douglass learned, the more resentful he became of his enslavement. However, this gives him the determination to go beyond his status as a slave. The language he learns in *The Columbian Orator* is quite different from the language he is used to. Waldo E. Martin notes:

The libertarian and egalitarian message of The Columbian Orator jibed with the young Frederick's incipient comprehension of liberty and equality as fundamental human rights. The basic justice of that message appealed to his deep-seated ethical sensibility. The message itself invigorated his essential quest for manhood and his keen sense of self-respect and human dignity.¹⁶

Literacy transformed him. Not only did it shape his character and brought him knowledge, but it has also acted as an instrument of liberation indicating his way to freedom.

The question of literacy seems to be less important in Harriet Jacobs's narrative. Indeed, the quest for literacy is not presented as being her main concern. Like Douglass, she was taught how to read and acknowledges it is as a great privilege which "so rarely falls to the lot of a slave." Linda will use literacy as a weapon directed against her master. At the beginning, she pretends to be illiterate so as to avoid the written indecent proposals she receives from Dr. Flint, but the latter quickly discovers her being able to read. Then, literacy permits Linda to fool her master altogether. Indeed, while she is concealed in her grandmother's attic, she writes letters for her family and for Dr. Flint, and then she has them sent from the North to make her master believe that she has managed to flee the plantation. Dr. Flint's attempt to deceive her family by modifying the content of these letters is useless because the grandmother is Linda's accomplice.

Dr. Flint cannot deceive her either: when she is in the North, Linda receives a letter signed by Dr. Flint's son but she immediately recognizes her master's handwriting. However, Harriet Jacobs does not associate literacy directly with freedom. Even her bill of sale is not, in her mind, the symbol of freedom. Talking

¹⁶ Waldo E. Martin, *The Mind of Frederick Douglass*. Chapel Hill: University of South Carolina Press, 1984, p. 09.

about it she says: “*My brain reeled as I read these lines. (...) Those words struck me like a blow. I well know the value of that bit of paper; but much as I love freedom, I do not like to look upon it.*” (*Incidents*, p. 206)

The bill of sale is a mere representation of her inferiority and testifies to her status as an object that can be sold. The written word, the usual symbol of the white man's means of representation reminds Linda of the chasm existing between white and black people. It also conveys the idea that her fate is determined by white people's words. Contrary to Douglass who had attempted to write his own pass to freedom, that of Jacobs has been written by white people. The white man's written words maintain her enslaved. Jacobs is fully aware that there are still limitations to language, both written and spoken, that are imposed upon her, both because of her race, and also because of her gender. Jacobs not only has to battle and escape the degradation and victimization of her master, but, once free of Dr. Flint, she finds herself enslaved in a more subliminal institution, that of the cult of domesticity.

In examining many aspects in her life, we see that Jacobs contradicts the ideals of true womanhood defined by nineteenth-century white society. Doriani claims that Jacobs provides “...*a shared definition of personhood, one that portrays black women as shapers of their own identities and destinies, and as individuals who need not meet the standards of whites and males to achieve their own personhood.*”¹⁷ Jacobs proves the validity of this statement in her narrative and presents the reader with a fully developed selfhood created and judged by her own conditions and standards. She challenges the traditional ideal of womanhood by recognizing and revealing the role

¹⁷ Beth Mclay Doriani, “Black womanhood in Nineteenth-Century America.: Subversion and Self-Construction in Two Women's Autobiographies”. *American Quarterly* 43, 1991, p.203.

that sex plays in the dehumanization of women in slavery. She does this at a time when it was not customary for a woman to be properly educated and aware about her rights and lack of privileges as a woman.

In "African American Slave Narratives," Lindon Barret takes the concept of literacy even further, connecting it directly to issues of the body: "*what literacy affords those who acquire it is precisely the ability to some extent to do away with the body.*"¹⁸ In other words, this means to use language to subvert the authority of the oppressor.

3- Alienation and Violence: Construction of a Split Self

a) - The Figure of the Mulatto Slave:

A mulatto is defined as an individual with both Black and White ancestors. Generally, mulattoes are light skinned, though dark enough to be excluded from the white race. Both Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs are mulatto slaves: Jacobs's grandfather is a white man and Douglass's father is also a white man. They are the results of the taboo relationship between black and white people. But even if they had white origins, they were considered as entirely black. A lot of half-caste slaves were to be found in Southern plantations. The rape of black women by their master was not unusual, hence the presence of "*children of every shade of complexion.*" (*Incidents*, p.35)

According to Nancy Bentley, some Abolitionist literature was already moving beyond the stereotype that was being created. In an article titled "White Slaves: The Mulatto Hero in Antebellum Fiction," she discusses at some length *Uncle Tom's*

¹⁸ Lindon, Barrett, "African American Slave Narratives: Literacy, the Body, Authority". *American Literary History*, vol.7. 1995. p. 423.

Cabin as domestic romance, Stowe's attitude toward violence, and her portrayal of mulatto characters. She introduces the heart of her analysis:

*The tacit rules of the domestic novel, I will argue, are these: for women's bodies and black bodies the infliction of violence or abuse can be a means by which the individual achieves a transcendent grace or enriched dignity and identity. But for the body of the white male, this law does not hold . . . the physical humiliation of a white man is obscene in the domestic novel; the representation can only degrade, never redeem.*¹⁹

Thus, where females are repeatedly cast in the tragic mulatta mold, males become the mulatto hero. The poignancy of the tragic mulatta resides in her exploitation, betrayal, cumulative suffering, and ultimately tragic demise. But, Bentley points out, anti-slavery authors avoided portraying the suffering or violation of half-white men. She calls this "the mulatta's scripted fate" and the discrepancy between male and female portrayals "a fault line of gender. White male bodies are spared and female bodies sacrificed."²⁰

The mulatto woman was depicted as a seductress whose beauty drove White men to rape her. This is obviously an attempt to reconcile the prohibitions against interracial sexual relations with the reality that Whites usually used Blacks as sexual objects. In this regard, mulattoes were the very symbols of rape and concubinage. Gary B. Nash summarized the relationship between the rape of Black women, the handling of mulattoes, and white dominance thus:

Though skin colour came to assume importance through generations of association with slavery, white colonists developed few qualms about intimate contact with black women. But raising the social status of those who laboured at the bottom of society and who were defined as abysmally inferior was a matter of serious concern. It was resolved by insuring that the mulatto would not occupy a position midway between white and black. Any black blood classified a person as black; and to be black was to be a slave...By prohibiting racial intermarriage, winking at interracial sex, and defining all mixed offspring as black, white society found the ideal answer to its labour needs, its extracurricular and inadmissible sexual

¹⁹ Nancy Bentley, "White Slaves: The Mulatto Hero in Antebellum Fiction," *American Literature*, vol.65, N°3, North Carolina: Duke UP, (1993), p. 502.

²⁰ ,Ibid. p. 507.

*desires, its compulsion to maintain its culture purebred, and the problem of maintaining, at least in theory, absolute social control.*²¹

The problems of identity were more important for this category of slaves who were torn between their white and black origins. Those slaves were often disliked by white people because they represented the transgression of an important taboo. Harriet Jacobs explains that they were particularly disliked by Southern white women who did their best to get rid of them. Not only had mulatto female slaves to face the hatred of white women, but they also were more likely to be subjected to sexual abuses than the other slaves. Indeed, in Jacobs's narrative, Ellen (Linda's daughter) seems to be doomed to follow the fate of her mother, since talking about the man for whom the young girl works, Linda declares: "*Mr. Thorne's intemperance was not the only annoyance she suffered from him.*" (*Incidents*, p. 183)

If mulatto slaves may find it hard to shape their identity by striking a balance between their white and black origins, there was no ambiguity for slaveholders: all slaves were considered as inferior people no matter whether they are "*as black as ebony or as fair as their mistress*" (*Incidents*, p.26).

Both Douglass and Jacobs allude to the traditional stereotypes used to describe black people. Indeed, the latter were put on a par with animals unable to have feelings. The advertisement Linda reads, announces a "public sale of negroes, horses, & C" (*Incidents*, p.09), which suggests a close link between animals and black people. "Dog" and "puppy" are the words used by Dr. Flint to speak about slaves. For him, genuine feelings are unknown to slaves and this explains the reason why he is outraged when Linda informs him she is in love with a black man. Douglass also gives

²¹ Gary B. Nash, *Red, White, and Black: The Peoples of Early America*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1974, pp. 289-290.

examples showing evidence of the fact that white slaveholders considered slaves as animals. This explains why Douglass's master, whose motivation is economic, does not have any misgivings about urging two black people to have sexual intercourse: "After buying her, he hired a married man of Mr. Samuel Harrison, to live with him one year; and him he used to fasten up with her every night! The result was, that at the end of the year, the miserable woman gave birth to twins." (Narrative, p.387) All these negative beliefs about black people tend to alienate slaves. They come to think that they really are inferior. But, since Douglass and Jacobs are mulatto slaves, the way they view themselves is perhaps more complex. Both of them find it hard to reach self-consciousness because they are torn between their identities as black and white persons.

In his classic piece, *The Souls of Black Folk*, published in 1903, DuBois developed the idea of double consciousness, a concept which has haunted the African American since the sixteenth century. He notes:

*...the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with a second-sight in this American world,- a world which yields him no true self consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.*²²

²² W.E.B Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, New York: Signet Classic, 1995, pp.45-46.

As Du Bois explains it, his initial awareness of the separation occurred when the white classmates in his New England school decided to exchange visiting cards. His card was refused without consideration by a newcomer to the school, he realized then that he was different from the others. He notes: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He (...) simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American..."

DuBois had to draw a line between how others perceived him and his own self perception. He also had to experience and grow inside and outside of the veil, the racialized boundary created by the dominant culture of the Europeans.

Actually, the problem of mulatto slaves is double-edged. First, like all the other slaves, they have to deal with the negative definitions imposed on them by white people. Once they are free, they have to discard these demeaning stereotypes so as to develop a “positive” identity that enables them to be both African and American. In this perspective, Linda Brent and Frederick Douglass could be said to constitute a mediation between these two antagonistic concepts. It is worth considering whether Douglass and Jacobs tend to favor “black” or “white” values. In this regard, a critic, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese tries to clarify Linda’s behavior: As a result of her being a descendant of white slaveholders having an important “sense of honor”, what she says about Linda is quite interesting:

*Jacobs, in other words, endows herself with a pedigree of physical, mental, and moral comeliness. She is not like the other slaves among whom she lives. She has the capacity to rise above her condition. Her sense of herself in relation to the other slaves leaves something to be desired for an opponent to slavery; worse, it reflects either assimilation of “white” values or her determination to play the prejudices of her audience. Jacobs offers a confused picture of the relation between the identity and behavior of Afro-Americans, including herself, and the effects of slavery. If slavery is evil, it has evil consequences. If those evil consequences include a breaking of the spirit of the enslaved, then how can slaves be credited with character and will? The questions circle on and on, admitting of no easy answers. Clearly, they plague Jacobs.*²³

George M. Frederickson claimed that many white Americans believed that mulattoes were a degenerate race because they had "White blood" which made them ambitious

²³ Elizabeth Fox Genovese, “Writings of Afro-American Women”. In *The Private Self Theory*. The University of North Carolina Press, 1988, p. 76.

and power hungry, combined with "Black blood" which made them animalistic and savage.²⁴

But what is at stake is considering "will" and "character" as white values instead of seeing such qualities as something available to anybody. If Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass consider that their courage and determination are inherent to their personality and not inherited from their white origins, the potential for alienation will be less important and the quest for self-consciousness will be made easier. Both of them manage to affirm their self in a place where slaves are supposed to accept the negative characteristics attributed to them.

However, Douglass and Jacobs keep fighting to defend their dignity. They are able to transcend race by demonstrating that intelligence, courage, dignity and genuine feelings are not linked to the fact of being black or white. Both of them subvert the traditional association linking the black man to ignorance and inferiority, and the white man to intelligence and power. Indeed, during the fight between Douglass and his master, the roles are reversed since Covey "*trembled like a leaf*" (*Narrative*, p. 394) and Douglass declared: "*he had drawn no blood from me, but I had from him.*" (*Narrative*, p. 394) Also, Harriet Jacobs turns out to be cleverer than her master, and manages to evade his plans and elude his tricks.

As mulattoes, they seem to have the ability to display a variety of different characteristics. Still, in both narratives, the writers, even if they do not consider qualities as race bound, view themselves as members of a community reflecting common values. All this proves their inability to reach self-consciousness. Even

²⁴ George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914*. New York: Harper and Row, 1971, p.277.

though the end of the narratives conveys the idea that they have come to terms with their identity, they still live in a world full of obstacles that have to be removed to ensure the construction of the self.

If the problem of race wreaks havoc in the quest for identity, religion and violence can also constitute obstacles on the way to the construction of the self.

b) - Religion and Violence:

At the beginning of slavery, slaves imported from Africa were deprived of their native religious rituals. Religion was kept away from them. Nevertheless, a minority of slaves were permitted to attend white religious services. Those who became aware of their being indoctrinated by evil ideas, decided to have their own religious services that sometimes blended Christian ideas with African practices.

Religion is made to serve white people's interests. Sermons saying things such as: "*if you disobey your earthly master, you offend your heavenly Master*" (*Incidents*, p.71), were good means to keep slaves under control. They wanted to make them believe that they were "sinful creatures." (*Incidents*, p.70) Since most of the slaves were pious believers who accepted the Holy Bible as a guide to their existence and as an absolute truth, this control came easily through manipulation of the scriptures.

Pierce points out the following proslavery arguments of the Old Testament:

*Proslavery arguments based on the Old Testament rested on four major premises. First, the story of Ham—wherein the curse of Canaan establishes the master-slave system—was interpreted as God's sanctioning of slavery. Second, the fact that slaveholding by biblical patriarchs, including Abraham, Moses, and Jacob, was never condemned in the Old Testament scriptures was interpreted in the Jewish and Christian faiths as a precedent for slavery. Third, Levitical law, outlined in the book of Leviticus, explicitly allowed for the buying, selling, holding, and bequeathing of slaves. Finally, the Ten Commandments, upon which Judeo-Christian law rests, seems to approve the slave system.*²⁵

²⁵ Yolanda Pierce, *Hell Without Fires: Slavery, Christianity, and the Antebellum Slave Narrative*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005, p.130.

By trying to demonstrate that slavery was legitimated by the Scriptures, white people wanted to make black people accept their predicament. This fear of otherworldly punishment eventually became greater than the fear of punishment by white men, thus, causing many slaves to comply and maintain this order. Such practice also explains why slaves were not permitted to read, for literacy would have enabled them to make another interpretation of the Bible.

Having a good knowledge of the Bible, Linda Brent realizes that there is a great discrepancy between white people's behaviour and God's commandments. Religion is just a weapon for slaveholders who were much more concerned with an interpretation of the Bible that suited their goals, rather than its content. Indeed, when Linda alludes to the fact that her master does not respect the precepts of the Bible, he retorts: "*How dare you preach to me about your infernal Bible?*" (*Incidents*, p.76)

Douglass and Jacobs clearly distinguish between two faces of Christianity. One can be described as Christianity as deliverance: their faith is the only thing that cannot be taken away from them, as it keeps them strong during the worst situations, and will guarantee them peace and happiness in an afterlife in spite of their struggles on earth. The other can be described as Christianity as punishment: the slave-owners' attempt to break the faith of the slaves by using the Bible to rationalize their treatment of the slaves. A perfect example of Christianity as punishment is Frederick Douglass's brutal description of the beating he received from his Christian overseer Edward Covey, "*Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul and spirit.*" (*Narrative*, p. 387)

Ferguson notes: " *Douglass and Jacobs are especially adept at demonstrating how devout Christians used theological concepts of original sin, blood sacrifice, and spiritual atonement to rationalize the moral contradictions and brutality that attended the practice of Christian slavery.*"²⁶ Each of these authors, in their own words and in their own perspective, has experienced at least one situation in which their respective master or overseer has utilized the faith of the slave as a form of manipulation. Concerning the works of Douglass and Jacobs, Ferguson gives examples of the association between Christianity and violence:

... in Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself, its renowned protagonist asserts that "of all slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst. I have ever found them the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly, of all others." Later still, at the beginning of the Civil War, Harriet Jacobs makes a similar observation in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself. "When I was told that [slave-owner] Dr. Flint had joined the Episcopal Church, I was much surprised. I supposed that religion had a purifying effect on the character of men; but the worst persecutions I endured from him were after he was a communicant."²⁷

However, as Ferguson points out: "*Divine pardons can be obtained up to the moment before death, slaveholders do not repent until on their deathbeds, where they confess sins and arrange for the release of lifelong prisoners.*"²⁸ This meant that, in spite of the slave master's actions on earth, as long as he repented for his sins and asked his God for forgiveness before dying, he would be granted a place in heaven. Even though knowledge of this deathbed repentance was quite disturbing in the eyes of the slaves, the slaves continued to hold on to the belief that because they had suffered so

²⁶ Sally Ann H. Ferguson, "Christian Violence and the Slave Narrative", *American Literature*, vol. 68, N°2, 1996, p. 297.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.298.

Besides the plights of Jacobs and Douglass, Dwight N Hopkins and George C. L. Cummings retell a number of accounts of mistreatment by white slaveholders, including slave-holding preachers who whipped their slaves just as often as other white men, others who soaked their wounded slaves in salt baths. See: Dwight N Hopkins and George C. L. Cummings, eds. *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in The Slave Narrative*, p. 08.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

much on earth, God would grant them a place in heaven as well. In the Appendix to Douglass's narrative, he distinguishes between "the slaveholding religion," Christianity as violence, and "Christianity proper," Christianity as deliverance, and gives his opinion of each:

[...] between the Christianity of this land and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, it is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. To be the friend of one, is of necessity to be the enemy of the other. I love the pure, peaceable, and Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slave-holding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial, and hypocritical Christianity of this land. (Narrative, p. 430)

Douglass's words say it all. True Christianity must be the Christianity that follows the teachings and actions of Jesus Christ and not a Christianity that is moulded to suit the purpose of a majority with no consideration whatsoever for others. Douglass articulates his understanding of the hypocrisy of Southern "Christians" who whip slaves, and prostitute female slaves while professing Christian values of humility, purity, and virtue. The final result is not just a religious or traditionally Christian exposition of the evils of human bondage, but an overtly political statement about how ideals can be easily contorted to fit the current situation.

CHAPTER II

NARRATION AND LANGUAGE :
THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF

1-LANGUAGE:

The slave narratives do not constitute a mere denunciation of slavery even though this was the white abolitionists' main objective. On the contrary, these texts reveal a strong desire to go beyond the principles of a denunciary text. Indeed, both narratives show the author's ability to handle the written word. Language and literacy were associated with white people and black people's vernacular language was often considered as a demonstration of their animosity and their writings were held in contempt.

Frederick Douglass is the epitome of what is called a "trickster slave", one who manages to fool his master with his own weapon. Just as the authors used the master's tool (literacy: Linda Brent's letters to her master, Douglass's false passes), they use it again and turn it against their masters. As trickster figures, they manage to send their message by subverting certain ideological codes so as to give a more positive value to the black self. To reach their goals, different techniques are used, among which "Signifying" is maybe the most important.

a)- Signifying:

If we focus on Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*, the rhetorical principles used by the author enable us to assert that he is a Signifier. The concept of "Signifying" has been fully studied by Henry Louis Gates. He explains that to signify is "*to engage in certain rhetorical games.*"¹ Thus, signifying is a rhetorical strategy that can be linked to the Afro-American literary tradition.

¹ Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, p.48. Gates relates the story of the Signifying Monkey. The Signifying Monkey is a crafty monkey in the jungle who, through the manipulation of language, manages to trick both the lion and the elephant into doing what he wants.

The trickster figure is the one that, thanks to words, succeeds in manipulating other characters. Manipulation of words, or rather manipulation of meaning is at the core of the concept of Signifying. In this regard, Henry Louis Gates explains that the traditional association between the Signifier and the Signified to define a sign cannot be applied to black Signification. On the contrary, in black vernacular language, the signifier can lose its traditional meaning. Gates clearly explains the difference there is between English Signification and Black Signification:

Accordingly, if in Standard English

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \text{Signification} = & \text{Signified} = & \text{concept} \\ \hline & \text{Signifier} & \text{Sound - image} \end{array}$$

Then in black vernacular,

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \text{Signification} = & \text{rhetorical figures}^2 \\ \hline & \text{Signifier} \end{array}$$

Frederick Douglass gives an example of the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified:

They would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune. The thought that came up, came out--if not in the word, in the sound; and as frequently in the one as in the other. They would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone. (...) This they would sing, as a chorus, to words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves. (Narrative, p. 348)

This is a good illustration of the way in which the signifier clashes with the signified.

The fact that slaves sing in pathetic tone rather than in a rapturous one when they are happy points to the mutability of the sign. White masters cannot have access to the real meaning of the signifier.

Frederick Douglass sometimes seems to parody the white man's speech but subverts at the same time ideological codes dear to white people. The very first chapter of his

² Id.

narrative is good testimony to this strategy. Indeed, Douglass makes a description of black people according to whites: he presents slaves as ignorant people unable to know their age, thus putting them on a par with animals (horses); they are those who live in darkness and out of time. On the contrary, white people are those who can “tell their ages”. However, Douglass manages to subvert the traditional ideological codes associating black people with ignorance and evil, and white people with good and intelligence. He does this by reversing the traditional stereotypes devised by whites: the black man is no longer associated with depraved sexuality and the white master is the father of many little slaves. Douglass notes:” *this is done too obviously to administer to their own lusts, and make a gratification of their wicked desires profitable as well as pleasurable.*” (*Narrative*, p. 341) He is also the one who forces slaves to commit adultery. (*Narrative*, pp.104-105) Frederick Douglass goes even further since he also associates white people with animals: captain Auld looks like a lion, Mr. Covey’s nickname is “the snake”. The words used by Douglass to depict them are quite significant: “hungry lions”, “ferocious beasts”, “wild beasts”, “monsters” (*Narrative*, pp. 422-423). On the contrary, he presents slaves as innocent and helpless victims. Throughout his narrative, Douglass manages to show that the traditional ideological codes do not make any sense. In this regard, Henry Louis Gates notes:

*Douglass has subverted the terms of the code he was meant to mediate; he has been a trickster. As with all mediations, the trickster is a mediator and his mediation is a trick only a trick--for there can be no mediation in this world. Douglass’ narrative has aimed to destroy the symbolic code that created the false oppositions themselves. The oppositions all along, were only arbitrary, not fixed.*³

³ Henry Louis Gates, *Figures in Black*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 93.

Just like the mythological “Signifying Monkey”, which is a trickster and acts as a mediator between two other animals, Frederick Douglass gives the reader a different version concerning the character of blacks and whites. His narrative gives him the opportunity to overcome his masters by presenting them as guilty men. Also by inscribing his self into language, he heightens his existence and to some extent the existence of black people as a whole. Thanks to language, he repeats white ideals, subverts them so as to give dignity to this self he attempts to reconstruct in the narrative. His Signifying upon the white man is successful and he carries on the reevaluation of the self by using rhetorical and stylistic figures which are actually linked to the idea “Signification”.

b -Rhetorical Strategies and Stylistic Figures:

“Signifying is a trope in which are subsumed several rhetorical tropes, including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony (the master’s tropes)and also hyperbole and litotes...”⁴

Signifying stands for rhetorical figures which actually characterize Douglass’s narrative. Irony, which aims at saying the contrary of what is truly meant, is part of his narrative and is used to describe the world of slavery. Talking about Mr. Covey, Douglass says: *“Added to the natural good qualities of Mr. Covey, he was a professor in religion --a pious soul--a member and a class leader of the Methodist church.”* (Narrative, p.383) He also presents his master Thomas as a “benevolent master”. (Narrative, p. 382) These ironical sentences are always preceded or followed by testimonies pointing to the evil nature of slaveholders. It seems that Douglass uses

⁴ Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, p.52.

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irony as a way to make people aware of the absurdity of slavery. Can a man who slays people be called a benevolent person? This is what Douglass seems to suggest in these ironical sentences.

Douglass's gift for words leads him even to play with them. Concerning his masters' names, for example, he either enhances the significance of the name "*Mr. Severe was rightly named: he was a cruel name.*" (Narrative, p. 347) or points out to the ironical effect provoked by certain names: "*At the close of the year 1843, Mr. Freeland again hired me of my master, for the year 1835. But by this time, I began to want to live upon free land as well as with Freeland; and I was no longer content, therefore, to live with him or any other slaveholder.*" (Narrative, p. 403) Not only can Douglass play with his master's ideas by subverting them, but he can also pun upon their names. He uses language to accuse slaveholders and resorts to many stylistic devices to achieve his aim. Thus, he has successfully managed to prove that he could handle the written word and use it to depict slavery as a cruel institution and to give a more positive image to the black character.

Jacobs also proves to be a trickster figure, who uses language and wit to defeat Mr. Flint. For instance, Jacobs dares to answer her master back on many occasions. She outwits him, like in the following extract:

"Well, I'll soon convince you whether I am your master, or the nigger fellow you honor so highly. If you must have a husband, you may take up with one of my slaves."

What a situation I should be in, as the wife of one of his slaves, even if my heart had been interested!

I replied, "Don't you suppose, sir, that a slave can have some preference about marrying? Do you suppose that all men are alike to her?"

"Do you love this nigger?" said he, abruptly.

"Yes, sir."

"How dare you tell me so!" he exclaimed, in great wrath. After a slight pause, he added, "I supposed you thought more of yourself; that you felt above the insults of such puppies."

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I replied, "If he is a puppy I am a puppy, for we are both of the negro race. It is right and honorable for us to love each other. The man you call a puppy never insulted me, sir; and he would not love me if he did not believe me to be a virtuous woman."

He sprang upon me like a tiger, and gave me a stunning blow. It was the first time he had ever struck me; and fear did not enable me to control my anger. When I had recovered a little from the effects, I exclaimed, "You have struck me for answering you honestly. How I despise you!" (Incidents, p.61)

Even though he has hit her, she still answers him back. Words are her weapon against his physical strength. Jacobs is more powerful than him in language use, but he has the power to strike her and abuse her whenever he wants to because the law protects him. Jacobs's final act of rebellion is another trick: her escape.

2-NARRATIVES AS AUTOBIOGRAPHY: IS IT THE STORY OF THE "I"?

While writing their autobiographies, African American writers of the nineteenth century were literally writing themselves into freedom. Indeed, the creation of a written account about the life of former slaves reveals in the first place the deliverance from bondage towards freedom. The most admirable achievement in remembering and telling the African American experience of life in bondage and the escape from it is definitely the acquisition of a written authority: the autobiographical mode used by enslaved men and women was a proof in itself of their full humanity. Indeed, this genre emphasized their ability to write and think by themselves, and then was the best weapon against all the stereotypes around blackness.

The extreme difficulty to introduce properly and fairly African American autobiography may reflect its challenging position in relation to the American literary tradition at large. In fact, it is obvious that the slave narratives were influenced by the environment in which they came into being, and were partly shaped by literary conventions, social expectations and norms. In order to have a better understanding of

the creation of this particular voice, it may be useful to contrast it with the creation of the American literary tradition at large. This contextualization should not run the risk of being reductive by describing African American autobiography as “part of” the American autobiography tradition, for it definitely has a place of its own. As many critics have asserted, the slave narrative genre can be seen as the origin of subsequent African American literary works. Initially, this genre came almost naturally, partly because it described well the African American experience, and also because it was thought by publishers to be a good means to convey the message of abolitionism. Moreover, the autobiographical form was more appropriate to draw the attention of the Northern readers to the slaves’ dehumanizing living conditions.

In this chapter, I will define how African American autobiography “accommodates” itself with the general definitions and norms of Western autobiography, and how it creates its own. In addition, we shall observe to what extent it is influenced by mainstream American literature and how it differentiated itself from it.

We can learn a lot about identity by observing slavery through the lens of gender in autobiographies written by people who experienced it. However, in order to fully understand these narratives’ complexity, it is necessary to place them in the literary context of nineteenth-century America against which they often had to stand. Thus, it is relevant to point out the connections that exist between African American literature and mainstream American literature, as explained by Shelley Fisher Fishkin:

A shift in paradigm is in order. Understanding African American tradition is essential if one wants to understand the mainstream American literary history. And understanding

*mainstream literary history is important if one wants to understand African American writing in the twentieth century. We can no longer deny the mixed literary bloodlines on both sides.*⁵

Whether we are considering early or modern African American literature, it is essential to view it within and without American literature, and reflect on the influence they have had on each other. For if African American writers have been influenced by what we call “mainstream” American literature’s conventions and norms, the shaping of an African American literature tradition was determining in the development of American writing. Nevertheless, viewing African American autobiography in its socio-historical context is only a part of its history. Indeed, it also needs to be considered as a literary tradition on its own, with its unique features, even if an overview of American literature is necessary to depict the context in which slave narratives came to life.

If we have a brief look at the history of interpreting the self, we understand that religious autobiographies that related religious conversions were a prevalent genre in the construction of America. Religion was central to the inhabitants of the colonies and the fact that conversion narratives “*compose[d] the largest single category of autobiographies from 1800 to the 1930’s*” proves it well.⁶ Jonathan Edwards is a perfect example of such a religious tendency in the early American autobiographical tradition and is representative of the predominant religious inclinations of eighteenth-century America. His *Personal Narrative* (1739) is most often studied for his Augustinian description of human sinfulness and divine all-sufficiency, but it also conveys the widely spread image of the isolated white writer, lost in his meditations

⁵ Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 670.

⁶ Diane Bjorklund, *Interpreting the Self*, Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 43.

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about self-definition and salvation. Edwards was a congregational minister who produced the most thorough and compelling theological writings in the history of America. Considered by many to be the greatest churchman and preacher in American history, Edwards was a firm believer in Calvinism, which implied the doctrine of predestination. A tendency toward belief in Arminianism⁷, whose more moderate views were adopted by the Methodists and the Baptists, however existed in the New England colonies and challenged Edwards's strict Calvinism: *"The shift in theological doctrine toward Arminianism, implying a greater faith in human potential, fostered the apparition of themes such as willpower and character in the definition of the self."*⁸

Houston Baker looks back at the Puritans' mission in the New World wilderness to find the origins of these religious autobiographies. To him, it is the emptiness of this territory, as well as the absence of institutions and traditions, that reinforced the Puritans' inclination to follow the example of their European brothers in God. Deprived of those outside reassuring structures, they had no other choice than to turn inward to find some guidance. Self-examination became the chief concern of those writers, who turned their preoccupations into meditative and deeply personal literary forms that best conveyed and reflected their inner life.⁹ Such tendency is a common trait to Christian writings that have been developed by Protestantism. In

⁷ Arminianism: is a school of theology based on the teachings of Dutch theologian [Jacob Arminius](#), for whom it is named. It stands in contrast to [Calvinism](#), with which it has a long history of debate. Arminians as well as Calvinists appeal to various Scriptures to support their respective views, however the differences remain — particularly as related to the sovereignty of God in [salvation](#) and the ideas of [election](#) and [predestination](#). See: Theopedia: <http://www.theopedia.com/Arminianism>

As an example of the differences between Arminians and Calvinists: for the Arminians, God graciously enables every sinner to repent and believe, but He does not interfere with man's freedom. Each sinner possesses a free will, and his eternal destiny depends on how he uses it. Whereas for Calvinists, the sinner is blind, and deaf to the things of God; his heart is deceitful and desperately corrupt. His will is not free, therefore he cannot choose good over evil in the spiritual realm.: <http://the-highway.com/compare.html>

⁸ Diane Bjorklund, op. cit., p. 68.

⁹ Henry Louis Gates & Charles T .Davis, eds. *The Slave's Narrative*. Oxford; New York: Oxford UP, p. 242.

America, they flourished in writers such as Jonathan Edwards, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams and Henry David Thoreau.

As Diane Bjorklund has extensively clarified it in *Interpreting the Self*, the main explanation about the self, most often designed as soul in those religious writings, was that human nature was innately corrupt. This type of autobiography demonstrates the centrality of religion in a country occupied by many religious revivals. Indeed, “*such an evangelical climate fostered the publication of conversion narratives in the United States.*”¹⁰ The thoughts about the self in these religious autobiographies were based on the belief that human nature was sinful and weak. Such ideas involved the belief that a change in the self was possible only through God’s will. Diane Bjorklund further explains how this model of the self began to be disputed, especially in the late nineteenth century, as Darwinism and advances in the behavioral and social sciences began to elaborate alternative explanations of human behavior and development.

The changes that occurred between the predominantly British colonies of the mid-eighteenth century and the United States of America of the mid-nineteenth century need to be considered, for they mirror the preoccupations of Americans, which were initially centered on the religious aspects of earthly life, and then started to integrate a more secular vision of existence. Quoting Russel B. Nye, Frances Smith Foster demonstrates this partial modification of focus in the following statement:

*Although the nineteenth-century United States remained predominantly a religious minded nation, with an emotional, pietistic, moralistic spirit that would color its social, political, and economic thinking for generations to come the theocentricity of the early eighteenth-century has been modified to accommodate selected ideas of the Age of Reason such as increased belief in the perfectibility of man, the inevitability of progress and efficacy of reason.*¹¹

¹⁰ Diane Bjorklund, op. cit., p. 44.

¹¹ Frances Smith Foster, *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives*. Westport; London: Greenwood Press, 1979, p.53.

The scenery of nineteenth-century America was therefore changing towards a more optimistic vision of society, and trusted human capacities, giving more significance to reason. America was transformed in a variety of ways during that period by its inhabitants' desire for progress. The impact of the greater availability of books, newspapers, and magazines also played a significant role for it developed literacy among an increasingly wider audience. In such a climate, literature was expected to encourage and enlighten and offered a new model for self-discovery to a larger public than ever before.¹²

Alongside the religious conception of the self, this alternative and more secular model, which promoted the optimistic idea of self-development belonging to the evolutionary theory, was starting to anchor itself in the writers' and other artists' minds. The latter model of the self underlined "*character, willpower, and the importance of taking control over one's own fate.*"¹³ The artists and thinkers that followed this new line of conduct replaced the Puritan idea of a corrupt self to be changed only by divine help and established the notion of a self to be expanded by one's will. Diane Bjorklund underlines the fact that their metaphor for understanding the self has changed: "*it was not transformation but cultivation-- with its connotations of labor, nurture and growth-- that was at the centre of preoccupations.*"¹⁴ Although it might appear that the concept of the self-made man has been the prototypical American story since the birth of the nation, this idea did not crystallize in the United States until 1830's. It is worth considering Diane Bjorklund's suggestion about the

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Diane Bjorklund, *op. cit.*, p.15.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 67.

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differing definitions of what “self-made man” meant for the nineteenth-century American:

For some persons, being self-made meant the development of character. Benjamin Franklin’s [1793] memoir, although written before “self-made” became a catchword, no doubt could be taken as a model of such character building because of his ample advice on self-discipline and hard work.

The second definition of self-made suggested here emphasized self-culture that is the “*development of a person’s intellectual or spiritual self through individual effort with the objective of fulfillment.*”¹⁵

Moreover, Franklin’s abandonment of Puritanism in favour of the enlightenment’s rationalism reflects the central shift that occurred in the American society in the eighteenth-century. His participation in the growing confidence that humanity could, through personal effort and social reform, deal with social problems reveals the optimism and self-confidence of his age. So while the eighteenth-century privileged the “we”, the nineteenth-century was with no doubt the time of the emergence of the “I” person.

This notion of self-made man is indeed perfectly embodied by the figure of Benjamin Franklin, who partly inspired it and stressed perseverance, hard work, sacrifice and success as the values of an emerging American culture. Franklin’s *Autobiography* had a determining influence in the shaping of the American literary tradition, as it was one of the capital texts of the eighteenth-century and a prevailing example of the autobiography genre during its shaping phase in America. Like the religious conversion narratives, autobiographies of self-development such as Franklin’s were stressing their didactic purposes “*to serve as a model of self-culture or*

¹⁵ Ibid

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exemplary development of character.”¹⁶ Such an educational intent was significant for Henry Adams, as he claimed in his autobiography, *The Education of Henry Adams*: “*This is a story of education, not of adventure! It is meant to help young men but it is not meant to amuse them.*”¹⁷ One of the images that emerged from the white American writers of that period was that of “the man alone fascinated by self- definition and seeking salvation lost in his contemplations and meditations.”¹⁸ Douglass had this gendered model in mind while elaborating his autobiography. Like Henry Adams, Douglass was describing himself as the man *alone* who aimed at “educating” himself in order to be recognized as a man among black and white men. The whole process of mastering language described throughout his *Narrative* follows the patriarchal models created by writers such as Franklin and Adams. There do appear to be many similarities between the autobiographies of Douglass and Franklin, namely the struggle and the rise from obscurity to renown and the quest of a young boy for education. Like Franklin, Douglass includes in his narrative extra documents and letters.

Franklin’s contribution to the creation of an American national identity is a fact that needs to be emphasized. The oldest and one of the most famous signers of both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, Franklin was thought of by many to be the first prototypical American. This status of Founding Father and model to be imitated led Franklin to be idealized by a large number of American citizens and conferred him a great influence upon them. When placed in context with the works of

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 85.

¹⁷ Id.

¹⁸ Henry Louis Gates & Charles. T Davis, op. cit., p.243.

St John De Crèvecoeur and Thomas Jefferson, Franklin's *Autobiography* helps us understand how, in the late eighteenth century, the religious tradition was put aside in favor of a national identity based on shared ideas, seen by many progressive intellectuals as a way to free themselves from a restrictive past. All these elements not only played a decisive role in the formation of an American identity, but also nourished and shaped the literary landscape of nineteenth-century America.

Now that the literary and ideological settings of American autobiography have been delineated, it is possible to describe the experience of African American men and women within the inhumane institution of slavery, as well as the elements that made the creation of their autobiographies possible. By defining themselves as "I" narrators and thus creating an "I" person, African American autobiographers were creating and giving themselves an authority that no one had ever given them.

a- Creating an African American Authority:

The inhumanity of slavery should be highlighted for it negated the enslaved men's and women's right to live and possess a humane self. Then the initial distinction that can be formulated here between white writers and enslaved African Americans is that while the former were trying to interpret their self, the latter were searching for ways of survival by escaping slavery and creating an identity of their own. These profoundly dissimilar experiences are reflected by the motivations that pushed those authors to narrate their life in autobiographies. The driving force that engendered the process of turning inward could not have been the same for enslavers and enslaved. The black slaves did not share the white man's sense of a new world opening

boundless perspectives and possibilities for everyone who wished it and worked for it. On the contrary, they were denied the birthright to exist as human beings and were given the status of chattel, deprived of any kind of right. The white world therefore did not make sense to them, as they could not think of themselves as part of a society that did not consider them as human.

The dehumanizing effects of slavery permeated the identity of blacks, then, it is obvious that the necessity of a black voice was not only destined to the development of personal identity, but in addition it had the deep social purpose of finding a status. This twofold aim found its realization in the achievement of “slave narratives” that as autobiographies fulfilled both requirements of self-definition through writing and social recognition. However, the dehumanizing effects of slavery were not highlighted in eighteenth-century slave narratives yet. Those narratives primarily focused on the loss of physical freedom and depicted physical violence only as occasional occurrences. In those accounts, *“there was opposition to slavery on moral, religious, economic and social grounds, but the prime object of attack during the eighteenth-century was the slave trade and not the owners of slaves or the institution itself.”*¹⁹ It is only in the nineteenth-century, when the narratives became the products of sociopolitical concerns, that the struggle for freedom and the subsequent abolition of slavery became the centre of attention. Abolitionists acknowledged the might and the influence of earlier slave narratives and used them as a weapon for the abolitionist movement.

It is clear that in such a climate it was extremely difficult, not to say impossible, to find a source of inspiration in the white world’s ideology that negated the existence

¹⁹ Frances Smith Foster, op. cit., pp. 51-52.

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of a black self and which therefore seemed empty to those enslaved men and women. Indeed, Blacks were confined between two unreachable worlds from which they were equally excluded: the white oppressor's world and their lost land from which they had been taken. Houston Baker interestingly suggests that Blacks were left with at least two alternatives to this vision:

There was the recourse of gazing idealistically back to "Guinea". A small, but vocal, minority of blacks have always employed this strategy. There was also the possibility of adopting the God of the enslaver as a solace. A large number of blacks chose this option and looked to the apocalyptic day that would bring their release from captivity and vengeance on the oppressors.²⁰

In both cases, their situation was not favourable for the development of an autonomous consciousness, freed from the restricting chains of slavery. However, the necessity of a black voice overpowered the rules, laws, conventions and expectations of the white ruling society of the time.

The first step toward the acquisition of authority for black men and women was necessarily the possession of the word. The written word itself, as the narrative itself, was a material proof of the humanity and equality of the slaves in the context of the period. Indeed, *"the slave narrative arose as a response to and refutation of claims that blacks could not write."*²¹ A black person who could write was to be considered fully human, challenging therefore the claims that regarded black people as an inferior race at several levels. For slaves, mastering the word and writing their self into freedom therefore meant having authority over their life and image, and over the means of diffusing them. Slave narratives were therefore the acquisition of this patriarchal language that allowed Blacks to express themselves, and the vehicle of

²⁰ Henry Louis Gates & Charles. T Davis, op. cit., p. 245.

²¹ Ibid., p. xv.

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their first attempt at an autonomous “I”. Then, the first step towards emancipation was to free oneself from the language that created and authorized slavery, before an actual emancipation was made possible. According to Jennifer Fleischner, critical emphasis between literacy and power illuminates other aspects of the confrontation between master and slave. She explains:

...in the discursive system, being able to master texts could be literally liberating: to use the famous example of Douglass, he escapes, traveling North by train, using a borrowed sailor’s protection, a certificate that both described the person holding it and asserted that he was a free American sailor.²²

A preceding episode of escape involved traveling passes written by Douglass who was denounced, supposedly by one of his traveling mates.

Slaveholders were well aware of the threat of the slaves’ education for the institution of slavery, and forbade most of the time that they learn how to read and write. In his narrative, Douglass soon realizes that the process that would eventually lead him to freedom starts with the mastery of language, which he glorifies, and he makes this realization a key moment in his narrative. Douglass is also conscious that keeping Blacks in ignorance ensured the enslavers could maintain their domination over them, and that being learned was totally incompatible with the status of chattel.

In slave narratives, the prospect for a slave to acquire a legal authority often depended on his chance to own a narrative voice. Moreover, “*the curious and direct relation between reading and writing, on one hand, and legal freedom, on the other, was evident to both the slave narrators and to their reviewers.*”²³ It is evident that both enslavers and slaves were well aware of this interdependence and fought in opposite

²² Jennifer Fleischner, *Mastering Slavery: Memory, Family, and Identity in Women's Slave Narratives*. New York : New York University Press, 1996. p. 17.

²³ Henry Louis Gates & Charles. T Davis, op.cit.,p. xvii.

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directions in order to defend their interests. Proclaiming oneself an author was a revolutionary act for enslaved Africans who had never before been considered as individuals. The creation of the slave narrative, the fact of becoming an orator, an author gave political and social credit to African Americans. So when Rafia Zafar describes early African American writers such as Henry Bibb and William Wells Brown, she underlines the fact that: “*when they subtitled their narratives Written by Himself, they were deliberately breaking Southern laws and literary custom alike, for a black man, much less a slave --who was juridically speaking not a man but a thing-- was not supposed to be able to write.*”²⁴ By subtitling their narratives “Written by Herself”, women narrators were facing the same prejudices as men, but in addition they were breaking the behavior expected from women.

Creating an “African American” authority might have seemed an oxymoron for black slaves who were trying to find a voice of their own. Like Douglass who entitled his writing *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, considering himself at the same time as an American and as a slave was totally antithetical. Indeed, by defining himself as an “American Slave”, he was also proclaiming himself an American in spite of the annihilating might of slavery. Writing his narrative meant that he was writing, and thus creating his identity the way he wanted it to be understood. He was maybe proposing an alternative vision of what being an American meant, other than the representative white man.

Blacks’ voices have been heard thanks to these narratives, nevertheless women voices have also often been silenced by patriarchal hegemony. It is essential to

²⁴ Rafia Zafar, *We Wear the Mask: African Americans Write American Literature, 1760- 1870*. New York: Columbia UP, 1997, p. 69.

remember what it meant to write an autobiography for a black woman, for it often had a double emancipatory aim. Women were not only trying to find an African American voice to vehicle their racial concerns, they were also involved in their quest for rights as women. Being a black woman often meant to be excluded from the discourse, in a society dominated by whites and by men. As many critics have noticed, women's emancipatory narratives differed from men's in several aspects, as their experience of slavery was not similar. However, what needs to be underlined is the complementarity of male and female narratives in the effort of remembering and telling the experience of life in bondage, and therefore their collaboration in the creation of an African American voice.

b- Definitions and Characteristics of Autobiography :

According to the *Literary Encyclopedia*, the English word autobiography was first coined in the late eighteenth century when the genre began to flourish in Europe and North America, notably in Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* (1784), Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782), or Gibbons' *Memoirs* (1796). The term "autobiography" is most commonly defined as the biography of a person narrated by that person, or the story of a person's life as told by him or herself.

Many critics of the genre feel it necessary to set limits to the application of the term "autobiography". Within these limits some would include long poems such as William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* and Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself*, while others, more restrictive, limit the use of the term to prose works that aim to give a clear account of the author's life. It might be useful to individuate some of the most common features shared by such works. Truthfulness is one of the most important expected virtues of autobiographers, for the audience "generally assumes the writer of

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an autobiography, by definition, has attempted to tell a true story."²⁵ Even though the "truth" of autobiographies has often been at the heart of discord among critics, it is still an essential condition of self-writing wished by readers. Indeed, the point is not so much to argue about the veracity of their narrative, but really to try and understand the way in which they turned their realities into biographies and what strategies they used to interpret their selves.

Beyond this individual act of interpretation of the self, writing an autobiography is also a social self-interpretation. Indeed, an autobiography can be thought of as a trace of how people have interpreted their existence, as a social act and as a cultural product. It is true that the writer who writes his autobiography is in interaction with those who read him, and whom he tries to influence. The reverse effect is also evident, for *"not only have autobiographers learned what it means to be a self, they also are well aware of the standards by which persons evaluate selves and they are positioning themselves in relation to these standards."*²⁶

To be more precise, we could also quote Philippe Lejeune's famous definition of autobiography: *"Récit rétrospectif en prose qu'une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence, lorsqu'elle met l'accent sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier sur l'histoire de sa personnalité."*²⁷ Lejeune's emphasis on the need of the identity of the author, the narrator and the character to talk of autobiography corresponds to the characteristics of slave narratives. Indeed, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs (whose pseudonym is Linda Brent) are officially the authors, narrators and characters of these narratives. In the preface to her book, Jacobs asks the reader "to be assured this narrative is no

²⁵ Ibid., p. 27.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 42.

²⁷ Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte Autobiographique*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1975, p.14

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fiction," and in the introduction, L. Maria Child, refers to the life of Harriet Jacobs, thus proving the identity of the author and the narrator.

According to the elements composing the word autobiography: "autos" as self, "bios" as life, "graph" as writing, and the focus of autobiographical texts on the evolution and the personality of somebody and the fact that one's life is transcribed into language point to a need to look back at the origins of the self and to reconstruct it. In this regard, Philippe Lejeune has often tried to show the motivations of the writings of biographies and notes as regards the French lower class of the nineteenth century: "*D'autre part, le fait de prendre en main son propre récit sera plus ou moins volontairement un acte d'ascension sociale et d'assimilation à la culture dominante (...)*"²⁸ Clearly, autobiography was tantamount to a bid for power. It was a means of asserting one's position in society.

In the United States, autobiography was a genre which was at the beginning reserved for the dominant upper class. Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* (1771) in which he retraces his rise to success, for example, was also a way to spread ideas and to be understood by the American nation. Ex-slaves (under the influence of white abolitionists) then came to realize that autobiography was the real tool to denounce slavery. Just as the white elite used autobiography to relate their life and spread political ideas, slave narratives present the journey back to slavery interwoven with abolitionists' ideas. Later, some critics attempted to analyze the status of *Slave Narratives* as autobiography. James Olney has tried to define autobiography in general and to link it with slave narratives. Here is how he describes autobiography:

²⁸ Philippe Lejeune, *Je est un Autre*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1980, p.254.

*autobiography may be understood as a recollective/narrative act in which the writer, from a certain point in life – the present, looks back over the events of that life and recounts them in such a way as to show how that past history has led to this present state of being.*²⁹

The author contrasts Augustine's *Confessions*, where the author's memory plays an integral role in the text, to the slave narrative. The slave narrative is largely episodic in nature, and typically does not use memory to reflect on the events, but merely to recall the events as fact. Olney makes an interesting analogy between classic autobiography and the slave narratives as autobiography: "*The slave narrative, with a few exceptions, tends to exhibit a highly conventional, rigidly fixed form that bears as much the same relationship to autobiography in a full sense as painting by numbers bears to painting as a creative act.*"³⁰

I think this is quite an oversimplification. There are exceptions, and not all slave narratives should be lumped together. However, supporting Olney's assertion, Frederick Douglass's *The Life of Frederick Douglass*, is probably regarded as the finest slave narrative, because it deviates the most from the typical slave narrative. Despite its difference, Douglass's narrative can fit into the "pre-formed mould" that Olney outlines. Olney illustrates how the typical slave narrative can be "fitted to a pre-formed mould" with "obligatory figures, scenes, turns of phrase, observances, and authentications." Olney presents the reader with what he calls the "master outline" for the slave narrative, showing the features they all have in common.

A. *An engraved portrait, signed by the narrator.*

B. *A title page that includes the claim, as an integral part of the title, "Written by Himself" (or some close variant).*

C. *A handful of testimonials and/or one or more prefaces or introductions written by a white abolitionist friend of the narrator (William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips)*

²⁹J ames Olney, "I was Born: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature." *In The Slave's Narrative*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985, p.149.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

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or by a white amanuensis/editor/author actually responsible for the text, in the course of which the preface tells the reader[sic] is told that the narrative is a “plain, unvarnished tale” and that naught “has been set down in malice, nothing exaggerated, nothing drawn from the imagination” – indeed, the tale, it is claimed understates the horrors of slavery.

D. A poetic epigraph, by preference from William Cowper.

E. The actual narrative.

Under E., “The actual narrative” Olney gives twelve types of content that are often found within the narrative. As the first type he lists, “I was born,” to cruel masters or overseers, to descriptions of escape. It would take too long to repeat Olney’s twelve types. I think this is where Olney’s argument runs into trouble. These similarities of content all relate to a slave’s experience. Because all slaves had masters, were auctioned, were whipped, or witnessed whipping, had difficulties with the barriers to becoming literate does not mean it is not literature, it just means that those are common features of the institution of slavery. For example, one could make a comparable list regarding war literature. In war literature one could find a description of weapons, descriptions and the brutality of death, contact with superior officers, contact with the enemy, and the questioning of war, etc.

F. An appendix or appendices composed of documentary material – bills of sale, details of purchase from slavery, newspaper items, further reflections on slavery, sermons, anti-slavery speeches, poems, appeals to the reader for funds and moral support in the battle against slavery.³¹

In the case of Douglass’s *The Life of Frederick Douglass*, there is a preface written by William Lloyd Garrison, an abolitionist who praises Douglass’s qualities as a fellow human, and denounces the institution of slavery, calling for readers to be moved by the narrative. Following the

³¹ Ibid., pp. 152-153.

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preface, is a letter from Wendell Phillips to Frederick Douglass commending him for writing the narrative, and comparing Douglass's story to a declaration of freedom, not unlike the Declaration of Independence. At the end of Douglass's narrative there is an appendix explaining Douglass's stance on Christianity, so readers will not get the wrong idea from reading his narrative. Douglass states that he loves Christianity, but hates the false and corrupt Christianity practiced by the slaveholders. Douglass includes a couple of poems, and concludes by stating that he hopes his narrative will help the cause.

Olney cites the reason for these conventions; the preface, letters, appendices, photographs, signatures, as in Linda Brent's *Incidents* the expression "Written by himself," or "herself", is needed to provide an authentication of the author. Olney states that Franklin, as well as all other white autobiographers, did not need to authenticate themselves. Olney remarks, with the exception of Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*, it is doubtful that we should claim the other slave narratives are autobiography or literature. However, he does acknowledge that the slave narrative marks the beginnings of black literature, and that future black authors like Richard Wright, DuBois, Johnson, Ellison, and Maya Angelou borrow from, and expand on the slave narratives.

Olney's article is important for pointing out similarities that most slave narratives have in common, but I think he goes too far concluding that these similarities make the slave narratives not literature. The letters A through F, in Olney's "master outline," with the exception of E. the narrative itself, all refer to

items that authenticate the slave's narrative. The idea that a person's writing would need to be supported to be believed, does not point to a failing on the part of the writer, but rather indicates there is a problem with the reading audience's acceptance of a black author. However, Olney does regard Douglass's *Narrative* as the exception, and considers it literature.

Telling the past events of one's life seems to be the main goal of an autobiographical text. But, it does not mean that everything has to be said: autobiographers may leave out whatever they wish or emphasize certain elements of their life they find more relevant for their work. It can be telling to inquire about the reasons why authors choose to silence or enhance some parts of their history, and how they proceed in this subjective selection. In the case of Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass, it is obvious that they emphasized certain aspects of their slave life according to the trials they underwent as men and as women. Harriet Jacobs does not want to make her private life public because she cannot write her life without including her sexual experience: "*It would have been more pleasant to me to have been silent about my own history. (Incidents, p. 02)* She writes her story not as a way of attracting attention to her own life, but as a political statement, a way of "*arousing the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South.*" (*Incidents, p.04*)

Written for the specific cause of abolition, *Incidents* is more a political work than an autobiography, and thus Jacobs must negotiate the tension between her private life and her political purpose. While the cause of abolition is acceptable to her audience, the story of sexual sin is not. Writing directly to an audience of white,

northern women, Jacobs must find a way of establishing a sisterhood of all women who will fight for abolition, without sacrificing her own self respect to her cause. *Incidents* is mainly about female suffering in slavery, and as a necessary part of this political issue, Jacobs must confess her own sexual experience. But while she promises to add her testimony to convince the people of the Free States what slavery is, she never promises to tell her readers the details of her own suffering; in fact, she tells them that her autobiography selectively covers parts of her life. The title she chooses for her narrative reveals that she is not going to tell all: as Hazel Carby suggests: "...the use of the word *incidents* ...directs the reader to be aware of a consciously chosen selection of events in Jacobs' life."³²

Jacobs's story is not a "Narrative of the life of..." as in the case of Frederick Douglass for example. Jacobs chooses to describe specific incidents as they relate to her political subject. Her title is also unusual among slave narratives in that "a slave girl" is substituted in the space commonly reserved for the proper name. Thus, her story is not necessarily "the Autobiography of Harriet Jacobs", but a selection of dramatic incidents that might have happened to any slave girl. However, Jacobs knows that many of the things she lives through, the seven years she lives in an attic, for example, are actually unique, and thus cannot be exactly representative of the slave girl's life.

The incidents about which Jacobs writes evasively are the abuse she encounters from Dr. Flint and her relationship with Mr. Sands. These parts of the narrative would certainly shock the white female audience and undermine Jacobs's credibility. As a

³² Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of Afro-American Woman Novelist*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987, p.51.

political writer, Jacobs needs not only to capture her readers' attention, but to establish a sisterhood of women and to inspire them to act in aid of abolition. Jacobs writes so that northern women will identify with slave women through universal female concerns of identity, love and motherhood. But because it would be difficult to develop an easy identification between the experiences of white women and the sexual experiences of a slave girl, Jacobs evades the details of the sexual relationship, concentrating instead on women's oppression and female power. As Elizabeth Fox Genovese comments: "...Because Jacobs writes to a very specific audience, and because her aim is to motivate them to fight for a cause, she must be careful about the way she presents herself." ³³

Jacobs writes to Amy Post of her story: "...dear Amy if it was the life of a Heroine with no degradation associated with it." ³⁴ She wishes that she were a virtuous heroine, that there were no sexual transgression in her past. Thus, rather than systematically detailing instances of abuse and sexual experience, she distances herself from these aspects of her life, focusing instead on her heroic response and action after the sexual incidents. Franny Nudelman believes that the shared experience between white women and slave women is the experience of suffering and victimization. She asserts that "*suffering is meaningful precisely because it is not singular, not aberrant, but the sign of collective experience.*" ³⁵ But *Incidents* is not just about white women sympathizing with the suffering of slave women. In order to inspire northern women Jacobs must show them both the injustice of the condition of slave women and the

³³ Elizabeth Fox Genovese, "Writings of Afro- American Women". *The Private Self Theory*. : The University of North Carolina Press, 1988, p.169.

³⁴ Autograph letter, signed; Isaac and Amy Post Family Papers, Isaac and Amy Post Family Papers, University of Rochester Library.

³⁵ Franny Nudelman, "Harriet Jacobs and the Sentimental Politics of Female Suffering". *ELH*, Vol.59, N°4, 1992, p. 947.

strength of her own actions. Jacobs writes first about the injustice of women's suffering, showing that slave women share the concerns of white women. For example, whereas other slaves write about the punishments of deprivation, starvation and whipping, Jacobs writes about the cruel punishment inflicted on the Flints's cook: *"This poor woman endured many cruelties from her master and mistress; sometimes she was locked up, away from her nursing baby, for a whole day and night."*(*Incidents*, p. 14) Punishment inflicted on the individual pales in comparison with a mother's agony over the suffering of her child. Jacobs again relies on the mothering instincts of her readers when she contrasts "the happy free women's" New Year's Day with that of the slave mother. For northern women, this season is a blessed time shared with their friends and families. The slave mother's New Year's Day, however, *"comes laden with peculiar sorrows, for she knows that all her children may be sold the next morning."* (*Incidents*, p. 15) In emphasizing the differences between white women and slave women, Jacobs identifies similar concern for their children's happiness.

Then, the reader is introduced to Jacobs' affair with Mr. Sands in the following passage:

"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, let it cost me what it may" (*Incidents*, p. 46)

The act that Jacobs refers to is her love relationship with Mr. Sands. Immoral by conventional standards, when viewed within the context of Jacobs's situation, the relationship principally serves to dramatize one woman's attempt to maintain control over her own body. Indeed, Jacobs demonstrates her own strength by choosing to resist the pre-determined fate of the slave girl. She takes responsibility for her choice,

and although she sees it as a source of shame, she is willing to defend her action. Jacobs insists that "*It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion.*" (*Incidents*, p. 47). She defends her integrity by insisting that larger forces influenced her situation, and that it is slavery that must be judged by her readers, not her life.

All this shows that ex-slaves' autobiographical writings are oriented toward specific issues. Contrary to autobiography in general, slave narratives are built along the same pattern (the journey from slavery to freedom) and they all aim at denouncing slavery. Black autobiography appears as a genre distinct from white autobiography, and in the nineteenth century, it was more used as a tool to assert one's right to freedom, than as a literary form to draw a picture of oneself. It remains to be seen whether autobiography permits the reconstruction of the self in all its truth despite the fact that the very act of writing involves the transformation of the account of one's life into an artistic work.

c- Paradoxical Aspects of Autobiography:

The autobiographical act can be seen as the process in which ex slaves write themselves into an existence recognized by the dominant American society. Kimberly Drake proposes that the system of slavery attempts to eradicate the identity of the slave. Because the slave has suffered a loss of identity, the slave narrative becomes the process through which the slave can write and assert his/her identity. The slaves' very writing can be seen as writing themselves into existence. Drake explains that the slaves use the American form of autobiography, and adhere to the norms of the culture to give themselves an "American identity." She draws upon Freud's and Lacan's

theories of the formation of identity to explain how slaves' identities are damaged through slavery. She explains that slavery has the effect of destroying the slaves' identity formation. Drake applies Elaine Scarry's theory of pain's effects on the victims of torture. She explains the theory, quoting Scarry: "*Pain destroys the victim's voice, his /her ability to express him or herself in words, in doing so, it also destroys the contents of the consciousness, or the victims' sense of self.*"³⁶

The slaves' families are disrupted. Some slaves did not know who their parents were, and others only had a sketchy recollection. For example, in Frederick Douglass's case, he only sees his mother a few times, and his father is said to be a white man. Drake concludes that as a result of the destruction of the black family under slavery, black fathers are replaced by the slave owner and master. Because of the psychological association of the human father with the voice of the father, or language, "*the child enters into society not as a subject but as an object, a slave, and thus is deprived of the ability to use language to speak for him or herself.*" She asserts, "*slaves are by definition feminized, prevented from entering the patriarchy as speaking subjects...slaves owners reminded male slaves of their status by addressing them as boy long into old age.*"³⁷ The deprivation of the father and the prohibition to learn how to read and write constrict the formation of identity in the slave. In the object's attempt to become a subject, literacy is the key. She points out that literacy is the important first step in Douglass's acquisition of identity.

Drake presents Douglass's *Narrative* as an example of a slave writing his identity that is modelled after a recognized and American form of autobiography. She

³⁶ Kimberly Drake, "Rewriting the American Self Race, Gender, and Identity in the Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs." *Melus*, vol.22, N°4, 1997, p.92.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.99.

cites Rafia Zafar's work that discusses the similarity between Benjamin Franklin's autobiography and Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*:

The Franklinitan model of autobiography, however, portrays the self as unique, revolutionary, Oedipal in its ability to throw off the restraints of the past and father a new man. Frederick Douglass consciously models himself after the man most exemplary of the American ideology of self-creating individualism, Benjamin Franklin – “the Philadelphia founding father, who by the self-conscious act of writing his life, began the all-American genre of rags to riches.”³⁸

Zafar's points of similarity can be seen in Douglass's adopting the role of the self-made man, his portrayal of himself as “atypical yet also representative,” and his understanding of the significance of his autobiography for those still enslaved.

It is an interesting notion to think that the slave narrator is literally and figuratively writing his identity, and writing himself into existence through the narrative. However, the very act of writing also involves a splitting since there is the person writing distinguishing himself/herself from the written person. This raises a paradox because as the author tries to convey a unified self thanks to the act of writing, he increases its duality. Frederick Douglass, the abolitionist orator and writer, is different from the enslaved "Fred", Frederick Augustus Bailey. In the same way, Harriet Jacobs differentiates herself from the girl she has named Linda Brent. But "Linda" and "Fred" who were supposed to be representations of the authors paradoxically become their creation, or as we see later other people's creation. In this perspective, Houston A. Baker writes:

The voice of the unwritten self, once it is subjected to the linguistic codes, literary conventions, and audience expectations of a literate population, is perhaps never again the authentic voice of black American slavery. It is rather the voice of a self transformed by an autobiographical act into a sharer in the general public discourse about slavery.³⁹

³⁸ Ibid, p .95.

³⁹ Houston A. Baker, *The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980, p.43.

What is at stake is that under the influence of white culture and abolitionists, the black author is likely to represent a self that does not convey his real personality as a slave. Frederick Douglass, for instance, sometimes identifies himself with his fellow slaves, but he also presents himself as someone different from them. Indeed, after his staying in the city with the Aulds, he gives a negative picture of them, saying that he "*envied [his] fellow slaves for their stupidity*", and he immediately adds: "*I have often wished myself a beast.*" (*Narrative*, p.340) recalling the traditional association between the slave and the animal.

Moreover, many times, he acts as a mere observer, describing the customs of his fellow-slaves (their songs, their beliefs, their maxims,...etc) and does not seem to take part in their activities. On the contrary, he seems to project elements of his personality as a famous abolitionist and orator into "Fred", his character. Indeed, as we read the narrative, we have the impression that "Fred" had always had the makings of an orator and abolitionist. Henry Louis Gates believes in this idea of self given identity conveyed by the narrative when he says: "*This fiction, of course, was forged by Douglass himself, who would have his readers believe that he fully possessed his identity within the matrix of his slave past.*"⁴⁰ The narrative which was supposed to retrace the life and feelings of a slave, paradoxically presents the life of this slave intertwined with ideas of a black orator. Douglass manipulates the character which should have been the mirror of his life. Also the fact that he has written three different autobiographies reinforces the idea of manipulation since he makes a different description of himself in each of them. For example, his concern with his mother in the

⁴⁰ Henry Louis Gates, *Figures in Black*. New York: Oxford University, 1987, p. 111.

second autobiography emphasizes his identification with the black people whereas in the first one, even if he rejects white values, his mother appears as a stranger and he tends to present himself as a member of white abolitionists. All this points to the difficulty of conveying the “truth of the self” in language. The latter is not a reliable apparatus and is always likely to recreate it rather than to make a true copy of it. In this perspective, Henry Louis Gates draws a very clear conclusion about the inability of autobiography to depict the self:

With the publication of these volumes, we must now insist upon the recognition and identification of the black autobiographical tradition as the position of fictive black selves in language, in a mode of discourse traditionally defined by larger claims for the self. The self in this sense, does not exist as an entity but as a coded system of signs, arbitrary in reference. This is not to argue against the existence of the self but only to argue that any attempt to recreate or represent a historical self in language is marked from the start by burdensome ironies.⁴¹

Autobiography, what Gates calls "the figure of a figure", is a way to recreate a self according to certain circumstances and influences. As Philippe Lejeune notices, the "I" becomes someone else, hence the impossibility of autobiography. Moreover, this recreation of the self involves aesthetic considerations. Consequently, the writing of an artistic work seems to give way to the simple writing of one's life. Lejeune, concerning this paradoxical situation notes: *“Le paradoxe de l'autobiographie littéraire, son essentiel double jeu, est de prétendre être à la fois un discours véridique et une œuvre d'art.”*⁴² Entering the space of literature, the autobiographer, to meet certain literary criteria, tends to give a new shape to the self; the result is that autobiography sometimes resembles fiction.

⁴¹ Ibid., p.213.

⁴² Philippe Lejeune, *Moi Aussi*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1986, p. 26.

Also responsible for the reshaping of the self, is memory. James Olney puts the stress on the role of memory in the writing of an autobiography and emphasizes its creative faculty: "*Exercising memory, in order that he may recollect and narrate the autobiographer is not a neutral and passive recorder but rather a creative and active shaper. [...] memory creates the significance of events in discovering the pattern into which those events fall.*"⁴³ The fact that the authors of slave narratives dwell on anecdotes while they sometimes omit to refer to other periods of their life is quite significant. For example, Harriet Jacobs devotes only eight chapters out of the forty one chapters of the narrative to evoke the time of her staying seven years in a garret. This shows that the autobiographer has also the power to reshape time to bring out or to conceal some events. Memory seems to situate events out of time, and the time of the narration sometimes intertwines with the time of the past. Harriet Jacobs, for example, keeps addressing the reader, and her past feelings interact with her present ones. For instance, talking about the woman who in a sense has rescued her she declares: "*The tears are in my eyes while I write of her.*" (*Incidents*, p. 199) The tears of the present are interwoven with the tears of the past, suggesting the difficulty there is in writing about certain events.

In both narratives, the authors waver between the description of past feelings and present feelings. The narration keeps moving from the point of view of the "character" to that of the "narrator". In this regard, one of Frederick Douglass's most famous and often quoted sentence is a case in point: "*My feet have been so cracked with the frost, that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes.*" (*Narrative*, p. 359) The association of the past cracked feet with the present

⁴³ James Olney, op. cit., p. 149.

pen is significant. Indeed, the cracked feet symbolize Douglass's predicament as a little child who was forced to sleep almost naked on the cold floor, whereas the pen stands for literacy, the instrument of success. This sentence illustrates the distance there is between the time of slavery and the time of freedom. It is a way to remind the reader of his rise from an enslaved man to a famous orator. This very subtle way to show the chasm existing between the narrator and Douglass as a slave, also points to his wonderful mastery of language: a single sentence is enough to convey his acquisition of literacy and freedom and to suggest his new status as a writer who can denounce slavery.

All this leads us to assert that autobiographical works, written by ex-slaves, constitute a genre different from the dominant white autobiography. Indeed, there are common characteristics specific to slave narratives: the incorporation of testimonials, sermons, poems and a scathing criticism of slavery constitute the essential characteristic of these autobiographies. As a result, slave narratives look alike. While pretending to relate their life, they paradoxically relate a part of American history and illustrate it with personal accounts of their life, and turn the whole thing into a work of art. This presents another paradox: the story of the "I" can become other people's story.

d- Authorial Control: Is one the master of one's autobiography?

Creating an African American authority might have seemed incongruous for black slaves who were trying to find a voice of their own. Like Douglass, who entitled his writing: *Narrative of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, considering himself as an American and as a slave was totally antithetical. Indeed, by defining himself as

already said, he was also proclaiming himself an American in spite of the annihilating might of slavery. Writing his narrative meant that he was writing, and thus creating his identity the way he wanted it to be understood. He was maybe proposing an alternative vision of what being an American meant, other than the representative white man. This brings forth the difficulty of enslaved men and women to find the proper way of defining themselves.

Another dimension of the creation of an African American voice through slave narratives is the problem of authenticity. The subtitle "Written by Herself/Himself" underlines the need to claim the authenticity of the writings of slaves who were thought to be uneducated. Being systematically put in question, it was part of the slave narrative genre conventions to rely upon authenticating documents such as prefatory letters, prefaces or notes by abolitionists or editors. Such documents served as a protective shield against the ceaseless attacks directed at the precarious emerging black self. The slave narrative played against severe odds regarding their veracity. As Andrews argues:

*The skepticism and resistance of the white audience, and thus the need of authentication of the experiences told in the slave narratives, are grounded in the fact that free blacks in the South were seen as an alien population recognizably depraved, vicious, and for the most part incorrigible.*⁴⁴

It is as if the reader had to go through a series of authenticating documents to reach eventually the heart of the slave's narration. Even before we start reading the narrative, we have someone else's voice to testify the veracity of the narrative. One can wonder whether the narrative would have been able to stand on its own and exist without this support, and whether it would have been considered as true. It might even be argued

⁴⁴ William Andrews, ed. *African American Autobiography, Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993, p.03.

that the white abolitionists who were writing those testifying texts were lending the slaves a voice. Without going so far, editors and abolitionists can be thought of as catalysts for the black voice, shaping it without altering it. William Lloyd Garrison and Lydia Maria Child played this authenticating role in Douglass's and Jacobs's narratives, and as editors they had a decisive part in authorizing such accounts.

Abolitionists used to urge ex-slaves to write down their life because it was the only way to provide the reader with a clear picture of what slavery was. Consequently, abolitionists were instrumental in the writings of their autobiographies. What is at stake then in the writing of slave narratives is that their voices may have precedence over the author's voice, the writer then becoming a mere creation of abolitionists. Many critics have noted the fact that abolitionists used ex-slaves in order to serve their own interests. James Olney insists upon this idea: *"Thus in one sense, the narrative lives of the ex-slaves were as much possessed and used by the abolitionists as their actual lives had been by slaveholders."*⁴⁵

Indeed, in slave narratives the descriptions of the reality of slavery are more important than those concerning the slave's personality. What abolitionists wanted above all, was to denounce slavery hence the necessity to place such descriptions above the psychological evolution of the slave. Abolitionists in a sense, tended to give their own significance to the life of ex- slaves, even if they claimed that the voice of the narrative belonged to the author. This is what Garrison declares in the preface of Douglass's narrative: *"Mr. Douglass has very properly chosen to write his own Narrative, in his own style, and according to the best of his ability, rather than to employ some one else. It is therefore, entirely, his own production."* (Narrative, p.329)

⁴⁵ James Olney, op. cit., p.154.

But Garrison, throughout this preface, seems to be much more concerned with abolitionists' matters than by the past life of Frederick Douglass. His very last sentence was: "NO COMPROMISE WITH SAVERY! NO UNION WITH SLAVEHOLDERS!" (*Narrative*, p. 334). Garrison presents his ideas as regards slavery instead of making a presentation of Douglass's narrative as a story into which he tries to reconstruct his self. Still, Garrison points to Douglass's ability to use language as the "eloquence", "power", and "pathos" of certain passages show it. Indeed, the rhetorical strategies used by Frederick Douglass permit him to achieve a certain amount of authorial control. As a slave, Douglass strove to achieve control over the written word. The passage in which he is seen to write his own pass is a good example of his ability to control the written sign. In this regard, Robert Stepto sees this episode as a "*primary trope for acts of authorial control over text and context.*"⁴⁶ Moreover, just like William Garrison who had authenticated the author's narrative in his preface, Douglass in the appendix authenticates a white man's text. It is a way to gain control over his own narrative, which is according to Stepto "*the best portrait in Afro-American letters of the requisite act of assuming authorial control.*"⁴⁷ Douglass's voice, though undermined by the influence of abolitionists, is brought out by means of perpetual resort to rhetorical strategies which enhance his ability to describe his life and feelings. In the case of Jacobs, abolitionist and feminist writer Lydia Maria Child appeared as editor of *Incidents* while Jacobs hid herself as an author behind the subtitle "written by herself." As a consequence, the authenticity of her slave narrative was questioned and denied until 1981, when Jean Fagan Yellin discovered letters from Jacobs to Child

⁴⁶ Robert B. Stepto, *From behind the Veil*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991, p. 173.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

which discuss Child's editing of the former slave's manuscript.⁴⁸ Yellin had to establish the text's authenticity and restore Jacobs's authorship due to the significance of *Incidents* as the first instance in which a slave narrative presents a female slave pleading against slavery and the sexual exploitation of slave women. Child's interventions were rather intrusive. In this perspective, Professor Albert Tricomi has tried to explore the tensions and not just the collaboration between Jacobs and Child. He did not minimize the substantial contributions Child made to Jacobs's manuscript, but he tried to restore as fully as possible the original voice of the author. He discussed four issues asserting Child's intrusiveness:

- 1- The selection of the book's title.
- 2- The use of a pseudonym and the suppression of names, places and dates.
- 3- The reordering of narrative sequence.
- 4- The excision of the John Brown chapter.⁴⁹

For the title, and unlike most other slaves' narratives which bear such titles as *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave; The Narrative of William W. Brown, : A Fugitive Slave, ...etc*, Jacobs's autobiography is called: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. The use of the term "Slave Girl" is very curious because half of the narrative treats Jacobs' adult life in the North, a life that began when Jacobs was about thirty. Under these circumstances, it seems unlikely that Jacobs would identify herself in the title as a "girl" or even characterize her life story as the experience of a "slave girl". The use of the word "incidents" for the title seems to be

⁴⁸ For an account of the discovery of Jacobs's letters, see Jean Fagan Yellin, "Written by Herself: Harriet Jacobs's Slave Narrative," *American Literature* 53 (Nov. 1981): 479-86. The correspondence includes letters from Harriet Jacobs to Amy Post, from Lydia Maria Child to Jacobs and from William C. Nell (a black writer who supported Jacobs's publication of her narrative), to Post. The letters are in the Isaac and Amy Post Family Papers acquired by the University of Rochester Library.

⁴⁹ Albert H. Tricomi, "Harriet Jacobs' Autobiography and the voice of Lydia Maria Child". *ESQ*, Vol. 53, 2007, p. 218.

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equally questionable. *"This term, in coordination with the designation "slave girl", directs the reader toward the more sensational features in the autobiography, particularly sexual abuse."*⁵⁰ However, in her private letters, Harriet Jacobs never names or describes her narrative in terms of "incidents". When she first proposed the project to Amy Post, she told her that her plan was to compose a "history" of her life. Her original idea, as revealed in the same letter, was to approach Harriet Beecher Stowe, whom she hoped might write her story down. It was to be a two-volume work: *"I should want the History of my childhood and the first five years in one volume and the next three and my home in the northern states in the second."*⁵¹

Lydia Maria Child, on the other hand, repeatedly characterized Jacobs's manuscript as a series of incidents. Her introduction in the narrative focuses on the manuscript for its objective events, stating: *"I have not added any thing to the incidents, or changed the import of her very pertinent remarks."* Even the first paragraph of Child's introduction employs this term: *"I believe those who know her will not be disposed to doubt her veracity, though some incidents in her story are more romantic than fiction."* (*Incidents*, p. 03) Her editorial interest is very clear in a letter she sent to Lucy

Osgood:

*I also have been very busy for an interesting Fugitive Slave, who wanted advice and assistance about her Memoirs. I was desirous to aid her, because she tells her story in a very intelligent, spirited manner, and the details seem to me well calculated to advance the cause I have so deeply at heart.*⁵²

Here again, "the details" like "the incidents" seem to be what Child identified as most "calculated" to assist in the antislavery cause.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 222.

⁵¹ Jacobs correspondence with Amy Post, IAPFP, letter n°.84.

⁵² Albert H. Tricomi, op. cit., p. 223.

Concerning the excision of the John Brown chapter, Child wrote to Jacobs: "*I think the last chapter, about John Brown, had better be omitted. It does not naturally come into your story, and the M.S. is already too long. Nothing can be so appropriate to end with, as the death of your grandmother.*"⁵³ This excision heavily discounts Jacobs's vision of the world and her obvious wish to extend the reach of her autobiography in light of momentous events affecting the nation and Jacobs herself. In a letter to Amy Post, she clearly expressed her resentment:

*...for this reason my dear friend I could not attend to my own business as I should have done I know that Mrs .Child will strive to do the best she can more than I can ever repay but I ought to have been there that we could have consulted together, and compared our views, although I know that hers are superior to mine yet we could have worked her great ideas and my small ones together I have sent her your letter to read it is best for me to be straight forward.*⁵⁴

It is interesting to know that at the time Child was revising Jacobs's manuscript, John Brown had become a polarizing figure among abolitionists. But, being a Garrisonian abolitionist with principles of non-violent abolitionism, Child may well have felt that preserving Jacobs's chapter on Brown would further divide the cause and weaken the book's effect. Therefore, her decision was a political as well as an artistic and emotional one. Had it been kept, the John Brown chapter would have changed our perception of Harriet Jacobs: we would still see her as the sexually oppressed yet resourceful slave, but we would also see her more as the reformer and polemicist that she was.

Thus, the slave narrative is a genre giving Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs the opportunity to relate their life and denounce slavery. However, the self

⁵³ Ibid, p. 238.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p.241 (It should be observed that Jacobs often uses spaces and dashes to indicate the ends of sentences; she seldom capitalizes the initial letter of new sentences)

written is bound to be affected by the presence of abolitionists and even by the new self writing.

CHAPTER III
GENDER AND RACE

GENDER AND RACE

*"The construction of the self in the American context and in its literary tradition, and in any other, begins within one or more given and heavily ideological categories."*¹ For African American writers in particular, such as Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass, it starts in the constructs of race and gender. In this chapter, I will compare Jacobs's and Douglass's narratives in order to draw attention to the similarities and differences between male and female slave narratives in the process of creation of identity. I will rely on the model of psychological development developed by Freud and revised by Lacan. This model charts a progression from a moment before identity is developed and language has been mastered to the possession of both a unique identity and language. I want to examine the norms which Douglass and Jacobs draw upon in their attempts to create textual or fictional identities for themselves. In doing so, I argue that nineteenth-century norms of masculine and feminine identity development mirror the psychoanalytic constructions described by Freud, Lacan and their revisionists. I will also show the extent to which the authors subvert the traditional values of gender and race in order to achieve self-definition.

A- GENDER

Douglass and Jacobs wrote their autobiographies after they had experienced the dominant culture's ideologies: "self-made man" for Douglass and "cult of domesticity" for Jacobs. These authors must describe themselves as adhering to what the white society considers "normal", and both attempt to depict models of selfhood likely to be acceptable to white readers. Yet, these writers also wish to remain true to their experiences under slavery, which was certainly not "normal". In balancing these two

¹ Margo Culley, ed. *American Women's Autobiography: Feasts of Memory*. Madison Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992, p. 09.

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goals, I want to examine the ideologies each manipulates in his / her autobiography and see how they transgress the strict divisions between gender roles found in Western ideology.

Society playing a prominent part in the construction of sexual identity, a certain type of behaviour is expected from men and women. Thus, gender could be defined as:

*Something that society constructs on top of biological facts. This constructionism implies that masculine and feminine traits are not expressions of any natural, universal, eternal essence of men and women, but rather conventionally accepted fictions [...]*²

Through their narratives, both male and female fugitives and ex-slaves strove to counter the racial stereotypes that bound them even in "free" societies. Black men and women, however, faced different stereotypes. Black men fought the stereotype that they were "boys" while black women contested the idea that they were either helpless victims or whores. For a male fugitive, public discourse served to claim his place among men; for a female her relationships--as a daughter, sister, wife, mother, and friend--demonstrated her womanliness and her shared roles with women readers.

In common with most male narrators, Douglass emphasizes his ability to speak in public as well as to read and write. Through their use of language, male narrators strove to demonstrate their place as men among men, that they had a *right* to autonomy in a political democracy based on a voter's ability to understand and debate the issues. On the other hand, in common with other women narrators, Jacobs emphasizes her womanliness. Women narrators related to the feminine culture of their time, and that involved telling their stories in terms of relationships.

² Cathy N. Davidson, Linda Wagner-Martin, Elizabeth Ammons, Amy Ling, Janice Radway. Eds, *The Oxford Companion to Women's Writing in the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 342.

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In *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, Deborah Gray White outlines a series of ways in which slave women's lives differed from those of men. White discusses the networks women slaves developed among themselves. She details, for example, “*the ways that being a woman added burdens to a slave's life but also furthered the cooperation and interdependence necessary for a woman's survival.*”³ When they joined the men in field work, they still had to finish their own domestic work at home while the men rested. Slave women passed work skills on to one another. Even more crucially, slave women depended on one another in all that had to do with childbirth and child-rearing. For health care they depended on midwives and “doctor women”. As a consequence of these different experiences, men and women slave narrators tell different stories of resistance to their enforced servitude.

Traditional Gender Identities:**a- Men and Power:**

In the American society of the nineteenth century, masculinity was always related to the idea of power and superiority. Both narratives draw a similar picture of gender roles. Plantations are always watched by powerful men whose wives' duty is to stay indoors.

Both Douglass and Jacobs give a central place to the examination of the unmanly effects of the peculiar institution on male slaves. Indeed, they both emphasize the manner in which slavery destroys manly independence and punishes those who try to assert their masculinity. Douglass uses his own character, before the fight with Covey,

³ Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I A Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*. New York: WW Norton & Company, 1985, p. 124.

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as the example of this unmaning. Likewise, the best expression of physical violence as a firm resistance and manly assertion is probably Douglass's decision to resist physically his master. Douglass pictures it as the day of his actual resistance that elevates him to manhood, and at the same time as the starting point of his journey towards freedom. Douglass introduces the scene of his emancipation with the often quoted sentence: "*You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man.*" (Narrative, p. 389) With such an explicit statement, he exhorts the readers to be the witnesses of the steps that lead him to his double emancipation: first, he makes a huge intellectual step from being a slave to acquiring literacy and freedom of action, then he moves from being a piece of property to being a subject. Douglass relates the moment of his emancipating fight as follows:

Mr. Covey seemed now to think he had me, and could do what he pleased; but at this moment-- from whence came the spirit I don't know--I resolved to fight; and, suiting my action to the resolution, I seized Covey hard by the throat; and as I did so, I rose...My resistance was so entirely unexpected, that Covey seemed taken all aback. (Narrative, pp.393-394)

Rather than remain a docile slave, Douglass decides to defend himself and to fight even if his action might result in his own death. His resolve took Covey by surprise, and Douglass could see for the first time fear and uncertainty in his master's eyes. The two struggled for over two hours until Covey finally gave up.

Many interesting insights may be brought if we bring Douglass's narrative into conversation with Hegel's discussion of what is commonly called the master/slave dialectic. For Hegel, the master/slave relationship comes into existence when one person chooses to preserve his life rather than fight the other and risk his life. The one

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opting for life over death becomes the slave⁴. Contrary to Hegel's account of the docile slave who surrendered himself to his master's will, Douglass confronts his master and is willing to risk his life in order to gain freedom. In his narrative, Douglass himself interprets the fight with Covey as a decisive moment in his struggle for freedom:

The gratification afforded by the triumph was a full compensation for whatever else might follow, even death itself.... It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact. I did not hesitate to let it be known of me, that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing me. (Narrative, p.395)

In other words, Douglass's narration of this event suggests that not only was some form of physical resistance or force needed for his own sense of freedom, but it was also needed so that Covey might recognize him as another, as a *human* being with rational faculties capable of producing deliberate and purposeful acts of resistance.

In Douglass's narrative, this evolution is impossible for a woman, as he sees all women as physically too weak to defend themselves. The double emancipation he undergoes is therefore unthinkable for women, who are unable to defy their master on a physical level.

Douglass responds to the dehumanization of which slaves are victims by describing how he became a man, and by his transformation from a mere animal into a

⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by A.V. Miller, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977, p. 179. Hegel devotes several paragraphs (178-196) in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* to the master/slave or, as Miller translates the terms, the "lord" and the "bondsman" relationship. Recognition by the other is central to Hegel's account of the actualization of self-consciousness. As the struggle for self-consciousness unfolds, a problem arises because at first each "I" sees the other "I" only as an object, a thing external to itself and to be used for its projects and plans. As Hegel puts it, at this stage they exist as two conflicting manifestations of consciousness; "one is the independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be for itself, the other is the dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for another. The former is "lord", the other is bondsman."

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human being, moreover a man who finds his true manhood: *"I have found that, to make a contented slave, it is necessary to make a thoughtless one. It is necessary to darken his moral and mental vision, and, as far as possible, to annihilate the power of reason. [And] he can be brought to that when he ceases to be a man"*. (Narrative, p. 415)

Holding on to their masculinity was also one of the only ways slaves could maintain their dignity, especially when they were punished in front of other slaves. But it was also one of the ways they maintained their strength and determination to gain freedom. Selfhood is thus linked to manhood (with the notions of courage and physical power related to it). However, the fact that Frederick Douglass equates manhood with power shows that he is influenced by white gender conventions.

Jacobs also explores the idea of unmaning in the chapter entitled: "The Slave Who Dared to Feel Like a Man", based on the story of her uncle Joseph, called Benjamin in the narrative. This episode recounts Benjamin's perilous struggle to escape from the South, his initial attempt, his recapture, his imprisonment, and eventually his successful flight. After having fought with his master, he decides to flee away, but gets caught on his way to New York. As in Douglass's fight with Covey, there is also a physical fight between the two men. His mother advises him to humble, so that his master would forgive him, but Benjamin answers: *"Forgive me for what, mother? For not letting him treat me like a dog? No! I will never humble myself to him. Here I will stay till I die or till he sells me."* (Incidents, p.21) Unlike Douglass's description of his fight with Covey, Jacobs's description includes her womanly reaction to her uncle's resistance.

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The principal goal of a slave narrative is to reveal the "truth" about slavery by describing a representative personal history, one which might stand in for the experiences of all slaves. The Franklinian model of autobiography, however, portrays the self as unique, capable of throwing off the restraints of the past. Rafia Zafar underlines the way that Frederick Douglass consciously models himself after the man most exemplary of the American ideology of self-creating individualism, Benjamin Franklin, "*the Philadelphia founding father, who by the self-conscious act of writing his life, began the all-American genre of rags to riches.*"⁵ Zafar finds that Franklin's life can be viewed as parallel and progenitor to many of the slave narratives, "especially Douglass's first autobiography, in which he "*adopted the role of the self-made American man, already a powerful trope by mid-nineteenth century.*"⁶ In his three autobiographies, Douglass strives to portray himself as representative of not only black but also white America in order to disprove the myths of black inferiority and to claim for himself and his race the ability to achieve success. He understands the significance of his autobiography for those still enslaved, and must not over-emphasize his differences from them, yet at the same time must prove himself worthy of admiration from the white society if he is to attract attention to his cause. Like Franklin, he recognized the power of the written word to affect society.⁷

Harriet Jacobs must also make use of this masculine model of autobiographical representation. However, she must mediate between, on the one hand, her need to portray a masculine self who throws off societal restraints and breaks with the past and

⁵ Rafia Zafar, "Franklinian Douglass: The Afro-American as Representative Man". In *Frederick Douglass New Literary and Historical Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991, p.99.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 101-102.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

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"the mother" (or the maternal slave community) in order to free herself and start a new life, and, on the other hand, her desire and need to maintain a connection to that community. The male model of self creation proves almost impossible for Jacobs to achieve, because her children are living reminders of her slave past, and they present an unbreakable tie binding her to her home on the plantation. Jacobs's escape begins with a seven-year confinement in a garret, in which she watches over her children while awaiting the chance to escape. For Jacobs to attempt to represent the slave woman in her autobiography in the same way Douglass represents the slave man is to place herself in the rank of "true women", who were not supposed to enter the public sphere. Thus Jacobs must at once emphasize her dependency and femininity, her adherence to standards of womanly behaviour, while also insisting that she, as a representative African American, has the right to be free, and has actively pursued that right.

The universal American desires for freedom and autonomy, when looked at as psychological and ideological constructions prove to be somewhat in tension with other goals of the slave narrative--those focusing on community, interdependence, and culture. Sidonie Smith suggests that the "*ideology of individuality may derive from a decidedly male resolution of the tension between individuation and dependency.*"⁸ As Nancy Chodorow notes: "*the child's ego is initially relational and fragmented because s/he is dependent on the recognition of others for his or her self perception.*"⁹ Freudian analysts agree that the son develops a stronger sense of individuality because he must recognize his difference from the mother and separate from her; the daughter has a less

⁸ Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography*, op.cit., p. 12.

⁹ Nancy Chodorow, "Gender, Relation and Difference in Psychoanalytic Perspective". In *The Future of Difference*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987, pp. 35-36.

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clear differentiation from the mother because she is the same gender as the mother, thus, "*unlike the son's experience of the self, the daughter's is characterized by more flexible and permeable ego boundaries,*"¹⁰ which means that women have more the tendency to rely on friends and family than men. The interpretation of this reliance might be that these groups protected women from the psychological and physical violence of patriarchal culture. This interpretation corresponds to Carroll Smith Rosenberg's study of white women's "female communities, considered just as "normal" as their dependence on men. She notes that in the nineteenth century, these "*supportive networks*" provided "*a milieu in which a woman could develop a sense of inner security and self-esteem.*"¹¹ Similarly, slave communities provide a strong support within an environment of the worst degradation imaginable.

The community is certainly a cultural form of resistance to oppression, one which Douglass makes use of but is reluctant to emphasize because of its "feminine" implications. On the other hand, Jacobs's position as a black woman complicates Smith Rosenberg's vision of (white) female communities. Jacobs sees the value of female interdependence, but makes clear her unwillingness to rely on white women too heavily (she insists on writing her narrative by herself): she shows that communities are necessary for her survival but must not obstruct her freedom and individuality.

Jacobs's autobiography constitutes an implicit critique of the Freudian model of female sexual development. Desires of autonomy and self fulfilment "normal" in males are viewed in females as deviations, yet Jacobs emphasizes that without a

¹⁰ Ibid., pp.126-127.

¹¹ Carroll Smith Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct in Victorian America*. New York: A. Knof, 1985, pp.60-64.

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measure of autonomy, women of all colours are easily enslaved. For Jacobs, the community serves to protect her in her search of freedom. Chodorow's model of ego development makes this clearer:

*the factor which allows the self to develop a quality of wholeness is the experience of continuity that the mother or caretaker helps to provide, by protecting the infant from continually having to react to and ward off environmental intrusions and from being continually in need.*¹²

Hortense Spillers discusses how this protective function of the mother or the slave community is prevented under slavery, so that communities themselves become transgressive. The relation between the (slave) child and the mother (community) must be destroyed in order for the child to fulfil its function in society; in the slave's case, that function is property. Slave owners recognized the potential of black cultural bonds and sought to destroy any sense of family in slaves.¹³

The destruction of the slave family, especially the father, and the resulting effects on ego development are described by Douglass and Jacobs in the accounts of their childhood. According to Jameson, Lacanian theory states that the child discovers the Name of the father, or language and learns "*the new and menacing abstraction of the paternal role as the possessor of the mother and the place of the Law. It is the separation, through language, of the paternal function from the biological father which permits the child to take the father's place in his turn.*"¹⁴ In other words, the father's duty is to help his child develop a public identity by introducing him or her to society's "Law". Yet under slavery, the black father is suppressed in order to allow the white father to perpetuate the slave system. Both Douglass and Jacobs emphasize the

¹² Nancy Chodorow, op. cit., pp.35-36.

¹³ Hortense Spillers, *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book, Diacritics*, vol.17, N°2, 1987, p. 75.

¹⁴ Kimberly Drake, op. cit., p.99.

black fathers' disappearance while insisting that the "Name of the father" is the name of the master. For Douglass, as well as most other slave-children, the most powerful patriarch is the white master, and his entry in society occurs not through the black father but the white father-master. In this case, the child enters into society not as subject but as an object, a slave, and thus is deprived of the ability to use language to speak for him or herself. The position of the slave then does not follow his or her biological gender in determining his or her entry into society. Slaves are by definition "feminized", prevented from entering the patriarchy as speaking subjects.

Douglass also describes the destruction of his maternal connection, and reveals his belief that had he had more contact with his mother, more of her "*striking words...treasured up*," his agony under slavery would have been lessened.¹⁵ In other words, her function as shelter could have allowed him an easier development. Douglass's description of his mother in *My Bondage and My Freedom* is much more detailed and sentimental than that in the earlier *Narrative*, where Douglass stresses his physical and emotional disconnection from his mother: "*I received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger,...*"¹⁶ Douglass recalls. At the time of writing the *Narrative*, Douglass seems to be more comfortable drawing on the cultural myth which states that male identity is predicated on a break with the mother, with family and community. Douglass's belief in the importance of independence is implicit throughout his account of escape and emergence into society in both works. He has to break from communities with which he can bond and senses himself to be lonely in moments when he should be feeling

¹⁵ Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, op. cit., p.57.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

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autonomous. For example, in describing his pending escape, he acknowledges "*the painful sensation of being about to separate from a circle of honest and warm-hearted friends.*" This separation, he believes, hinders thousands from escaping slavery. "*The strong cords of affection that bind [slaves] to their families, relatives, and friends cannot be sundered without a great deal of pain.*" (Narrative, p. 421)

Harriet Jacobs relates a different story of "happy childhood". Her family approached the "nuclear model", with her father (who, though a slave, was allowed to manage his own affairs), her mother, her younger brother, and her maternal grandmother, all together in a "comfortable house". Jacobs notes that "*she was so fondly shielded*" that "*she never dreamed*" she was "*a piece of merchandise, trusted to them for safe-keeping and liable to be demanded of them at any moment.*" (Incidents, pp. 05-07) At the death of her mother when she was six, Jacobs began to live with her mistress, who was like a mother to her, ensuring that the young Harriet had "*a heart as free from care as any free-born child.*" At age six, her enslaver becomes her mother; at age twelve, when her mistress dies, Jacobs's grandmother takes over the maternal role.

In the subject's search for access to patriarchy, the acquisition of language is crucial. A key moment in Frederick Douglass's search for freedom and autonomy is his acquisition of literacy. He is moved to Baltimore to work for Mrs. Auld, who begins to teach him how to read before being stopped by her husband. Believing that "*the sheer literacy of writing was the very commodity that separated animal from human being, slave from citizen, object from subject.*" (Narrative, p. 146) Douglass secretly continues to read against the will of his master, who claims rightly that "*if you*

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learn him to read, he'll want to know how to write; and this accomplished, he'll be running away with himself." (Narrative, p.146)

Learning to write, or gaining "language" in the Lacanian formula, comes at the hands of the father and is the child's entry into the patriarchal order; for Douglass, this is reversed: his master (father) must prevent Douglass's entry into society, knowing as he does that this entry is inevitably followed by the quest for freedom. For the slave, learning how to read and write provides an implicit claim to self-ownership and self-possession that is the basis for any claim to autonomy.

Douglass prefigures his entrance into patriarchy in his fight with Covey the overseer, in which he physically overcomes the overseer, and consequently undergoes a transformation: "*I was nothing before; I am a man now,*" he claims. In achieving his masculine self-definition through physical power and a resulting measure of autonomy, "*Douglass turns away from both the maternal body and the maternal line, rendering them nothing.*"¹⁷ Douglass suppresses his mother when he changes his name once a free man. Although done to avoid being traced, the name change also represents the way he "self-consciously" abandons a strong matrilineal black heritage of five generations.

Upon his arrival in New York, Douglass realizes that he cannot survive without some support and finally finds the right man. This man listens to Douglass's story "with a brother's interest", and then directs him to a community of friends. Douglass's last autobiography, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, differs from his previous self-portrayals as a "self-made man", by explicitly showing his reliance on community. In a chapter called "Honor to Whom Honor", Douglass writes: "*I have*

¹⁷ Kimberly Drake, op. cit., p.102.

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often been considered the architect of my own fortunes...[yet] I am compelled to give [my friends] at least an equal measure of credit...for my success;"¹⁸ what follows is a list of the many people who helped him, blacks and whites alike. While the omission of these names in the former autobiographies might be simply the product of Douglass's desire to protect his friends and accomplices, the fact remains that in *Life and Times* (1881), Douglass is no longer compelled (for either political or psychological reasons) to present himself as a self-creating individual. This final autobiography reveals that for Douglass, the formation of the autonomous individual cannot accurately describe his experience in escaping from slavery.

b-The Ideology of True Womanhood:

Harriet Jacobs's "escape" into freedom is a seven year self imprisonment in her grandmother's attic. Her reliance on her grandmother and other family members throughout her enslavement and escape is in direct contrast to Douglass's portrayal of autonomy. While Douglass places his first realization of his enslavement at the moment of acquiring literacy, Jacobs's literacy is down-played in her text. Instead, her literacy is used by her master, Dr. Flint, to confront her with the brutality of her enslavement during fifteen years.

Refusing to become Flint's sexual property, she takes control of her body in order to give herself a degree of freedom and security and chooses her own mate. This was extremely risky for her given her readership, so she devoted page after page to confessions about her sorrow and shame, mixed with assertions of the deliberate

¹⁸ Frederick, Douglass. *The Life and Times Frederick Douglass*, University of North Carolina Electronic Edition, 1999, p. 466.

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calculation of her actions and the unfairness of white readers judging the slave woman by their own moral standards. (*Incidents*, pp.53-54) Clearly, the concept of true womanhood does not apply to black women. A virtuous white woman is considered as a "true" woman whereas a black woman is held in contempt by her masters because not only is she expected to breed property, but she is also expected to satisfy her master's lustful desires. Moreover, the negative stereotypes stressing the overt sexuality of black women, increases the idea that black women could not be seen as virtuous women. Jacobs enacts her resistance by deconstructing the stereotype of the black inclination for limitless sexuality, and thus by exposing slavery's perversion as the source of female slave's impossibility to reach sexual purity. Jacobs recognizes that female slaves were mainly seen as victims, sexually abused and thus incapable of attaining the expected model of purity, however, she offers an alternative to this situation: she suggests various models of resistance within her narrative.

Describing her resistance against Dr. Flint, her master, Jacobs figures her struggle in masculine metaphors of warfare: "*the war of my life had begun; and though one of God's most powerless creatures, I resolved never to be conquered.*" (*Incidents*, p.17) To resist the physical conquest of her body, Jacobs uses masculine devices to face and defeat her opponent; she beats Flint at his own game. She has plotted against him by remaining hidden in her grandmother's attic, but had never allowed him to touch her. Jacobs is rather perceived as a maternal figure. She has taken care of Dr. Flint's children and in the North, she has been employed as a nurse by Mrs. Bruce. Also, the image of Jacobs as a mother is enhanced in her relationship with her two children to whom she was totally devoted. However, motherhood alone does not shape

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Jacobs's femininity. Indeed, she constructs her own femininity by discarding traditional female slave sex-roles and breaking the traditional codes of feminine submissiveness. In other words, what she rejects is the system under which women (whether free or bond) are inferior to men. She refuses to accept the traditional gender roles demanding male supremacy and female inferiority. Not only does she want to be a free woman, but she also wants to develop her opinion about the way in which a woman should behave. First, she refuses to adopt the codes of true womanhood. Indeed, she is not the kind of woman ready to repress her feelings and be silent as women were expected to. She always answers back her master and does not hesitate to express openly the contempt and hatred she feels for him. Refusing to be silent is an important element in Jacobs's definition of womanhood, and the writing of her autobiography can be seen as an attempt to break the silence imposed on women.

The influence of the sentimental novel is mainly noticeable in Harriet Jacobs's narrative. But, sometimes, sentimentalism is not really adequate to describe all that she has endured, so if some elements in her narrative recall the tradition of the sentimental novel, she also subverted them. Indeed, Linda Brent, under the mask of sentimental heroine, turns out to be a very strong woman. What makes it impossible to transform her life into a sentimental story is obviously the fact that she was a slave.

Jacobs ends her autobiography with a further subversion of female models for development, stating: "*Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage.*" (*Incidents*, p. 201) Her mention of the "usual way" reveals her awareness that she has not followed the usual path for women, but rather that for men. In this perspective, Valerie Smith notes: "Although she certainly draws on the conventions of

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sentimentalism when they suit her purposes, she is also capable of replacing the self-indulgent mythicization of death with the moral practical solution of freedom."¹⁹

Contrary to traditional sentimental heroines, marriage is not what she is longing for.

The only time she wanted to get married was to a free black man she loved.

Thus, the whole narrative can be interpreted as an attempt to create a new ideology of "black womanhood", as a response to that of white "true womanhood".

This womanhood truly belongs to her for she rejects the principles of true womanhood as well as the "myth of the bad black woman,"²⁰ deprived of any sexual morality.

However, contrary to Frederick Douglass who seeks to enhance the individuality of the self, Harriet Jacobs establishes connections with other women, with whom she shares a collective identity.

c- Masculine Self-reliance Vs Feminine Communal Assistance:

Following the individualist model made famous by Benjamin Franklin and others, Douglass "*exhibits a peculiar, perhaps American, form of short-sightedness; some might call it egomania.*"²¹ Both Franklin and Douglass present their striking accomplishments as those of an autonomous first-person narrator that differs widely from Jacobs's fictional main character, Linda Brent. Philippe Lejeune would define the latter narrative as a first person biography, allowing Jacobs to be a witness of her own story while Douglass, narrating in his own name, is the actual actor of it.

¹⁹ Valerie Smith, *Self Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative*, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1995, p.43.

²⁰ Gerda Lerner, *Black Women in White America*. New York: Vintage, 1972, p.163.

²¹ Rafia Zafar, *We Wear the Mask: African Americans Write American Literature, 1760- 1870*. New York: Columbia UP, 1997, p. 107.

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Jacobs's *Incidents* and Douglass's *Narrative* represent different models of self-naming. Indeed, Douglass renames himself as a proof of his own authority over his life and his life narrative. As a result, the creation of his individual voice represents for him a significant step toward both complete manhood and political involvement. Though Jacobs seems to hide behind the character of Linda Brent, she actually envisions her narration as *Incidents* that may happen to any *slave girl* or woman. Jacobs's communitarian concerns are obvious, while Douglass's *Narrative* appears mainly to be an account of *his own* life and of his *extraordinary* achievements.

Because of his status of slave, Douglass is confronted to the deprivation of his manhood, and "he offers a narrative about its ultimate attainment through a form of Emersonian self-reliance, and about how manhood functions as a vital expression of his full humanity."²² By confronting dehumanizing racial stereotypes he demonstrates his capacity to be considered as a man. "In this respect, his narrative is an already familiar one, even canonical one, a form of conversion narrative or a success narrative of becoming and self-fulfillment akin to the *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*."²³ His story relates his self-construction. His narrative ends with the development of his individual political consciousness through his reading of the *Liberator*, and with his speaking at an abolitionist meeting.

In the *Narrative*, Douglass appears to have beaten Covey only thanks to his own courage and strength, relying exclusively on his own resources. However, his second autobiography *My Bondage and My Freedom* reveals that Caroline, a strong slave woman could have tipped the balance in his opponent's favor, but she chose to stay out

²² Karen. L. Kilcup, *Soft Canons: American Women Writers and Masculine Tradition*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999, p.83.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

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of the fight and was later punished for not helping Covey. Douglass's first attempt to flee North with two other slaves by using the passes he has written almost ends in disaster because someone, presumably a slave, has warned the owners. The *Narrative* thus gives the impression that neither slaves nor whites can be trusted. Thereby, Douglass primarily emphasizes his uniqueness, and the other black characters in his narrative interact only either among themselves or with whites. Then the theme of individuality, depending on oneself alone, predominates largely over the theme of community.

Jacobs's community does not only play an important role in her escape from bondage, but her relationship to this community also determines the development of her self. Through characters such as Aunt Martha, Miss Fanny, Mrs. Flint, and Linda, Jacobs offers various examples of women's responses to their social situation. This tendency manifests itself in her writing through the large space she devotes to these women's stories.

Relationships play a central role in women's novels of the period. According to Beth Maclay Doriani, Jacobs and her contemporary, novelist Harriet Wilson, both reshaped the slave narrative as it had been written by men in order to show "*the world of the black woman--as a person inextricably bound up with others yet responsible for her own survival, emotionally, economically, and politically.*"²⁴ While male fugitives stressed their individuality, their ability to stand alone and assume adult male responsibility for themselves, women fugitives generally saw themselves as part of their communities. So women like Jacobs and Wilson, according to Doriani, stress

²⁴ Beth Maclay Doriani, "Black Womanhood in Nineteenth-Century America: Subversion and Self-Construction In Two Women's Autobiographies". *American Quarterly* 43, 1991, p. 207.

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connections among members of their communities rather than their isolation. Female narrators envision themselves as striving with and for others.²⁵

The focus on community often distinguishes black women's autobiography from that of black men, black men's autobiography being more obviously individual-centred celebrations of heroism and freedom won. This is not to suggest that black male autobiographers were unconcerned with the struggles of the black community, for many--Frederick Douglass, for example--dedicated much of their free lives to elevating the position of blacks in American society. My point, however, is that the emphasis in their narratives was on the need for the black man to be strong, independent, and heroic, and his struggle was presented as being one neither supported nor hindered by ties to the slave community from which he was escaping. Enslaved black women, on the other hand, routinely demonstrate their ties to family and community in their autobiographies, which made their decisions to escape the bonds of slavery more difficult and complex. At one point Linda muses about escaping slavery: *"I could have made my escape alone; but it was more for my helpless children than for myself that I longed for freedom. Though the boon would have been precious to me, above all price, I would not have taken it at the expense of leaving them in slavery."* (*Incidents*, p.89)

Harriet Jacobs's narrative differs significantly from Douglass' narrative in the manner they apprehend the relationships to other people of both the black and the white communities. While Douglass's narrative emphasizes his acquisition and development of written language, Jacobs depicts a network of relationships devolving

²⁵ Jacobs's interdependent community echoes that of Toni Morrison's Sethe in *Beloved*; part of the lesson Sethe learns is that the community has the power to protect her children

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from bonds of love. She respects and fears but, above all, she loves her grandmother, her children, her brother, her uncle, her aunt. Her feelings for her employer, Mrs. Bruce and later, as revealed in her letters, for abolitionist Amy Post, derive from affection, acceptance, and a sense of worth rather than from patronage. In contrast with Douglass, Jacobs does not find language much of a weapon. Female as well as male, slave narrators desired and strove for literacy. Nonetheless, being literate never saved women fugitives from the burdens of slavery, racism, or sexism and they knew it. Jacobs's most important relationship, of course, is with her children, and this keeps her in place when she might otherwise have fled or even committed suicide. Jacobs feared that if she ran away, the Flints, as retribution, would sell her children. Even as her children's welfare undermines any desire she might have had to run away, they also strengthen her resolve "*that out of the darkness of this hour a brighter dawn should rise for them.*" (*Incidents*, p.85) For them, Jacobs stays alive even during her seven years hiding in "a dismal hole", the crawl space over her grandmother's storage shed. Jacobs's physical separation from her children, despite her knowledge of their proximity and occasional glimpses of them, proves almost as difficult for her as the physical rigors of life in her "hole."

Jacobs's relationship with her northern, white, middle-class women readers, her primary audience, was somehow problematic. She found some of these women trustworthy, some untrustworthy, but few capable of genuine empathy. Jacobs feared that publishing her story might scandalize some of her new northern friends. They had no way of knowing the reality of her life and might misinterpret her experience and condemn her unwed motherhood. Although her support for the abolitionist cause

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impelled Jacobs to make her story public, she worried about public acknowledgment of her teenage pregnancies. In addition to the experiences Jacobs details in the text, Jacobs's encounters with such anti-slavery advocates as Harriet Beecher Stowe had taught her not to depend much on the help or the understanding of her northern Audience. Jacobs did ask for Harriet Beecher Stowe's help, but Jacobs's dealings with Stowe convinced her that Stowe would appropriate her story and use her but never allow her to tell her own story. So Jacobs refused entirely Stowe's help.²⁶

Yet given her avowed purpose, to persuade northern readers to the abolitionist cause, Jacobs sought to engage and thus to place some reliance on her white audience. Indeed, both Jacobs and Douglass encountered overt as well as covert opposition from a part of that audience, white fellow writers who wanted to "help".

Jacobs needed her white audience and she knew it. Valerie Smith makes the interesting points that while Jacobs flees from "*one small space to another*" in her slow progression toward freedom, she leaves each "*only with the aid of someone else*."²⁷ Smith further notes that by underscoring a reliance on other people, Jacobs reveals an alternate way in which the story of slavery and escape might be written. While male narrators, including Douglass, emphasized their own heroic daring, a

²⁶ Her brief involvement with Harriet Beecher Stowe was decisive in the genesis of *Incidents*. When Jacobs first agreed to a public account of her life, she did not plan to write it herself, but to ask for Stowe's aid in helping her produce a dictated narrative. To this end, Jacobs asked Post to approach Stowe with the suggestion that Jacobs be invited to Stowe's home so they could be acquainted. Then, reading in the papers of the author's plan to travel abroad, Jacobs persuaded Mrs. Willis to write suggesting that Stowe permit Jacobs's daughter Louisa to accompany her to England as a "representative southern slave". Harriet Beecher Stowe responded by writing to Mrs. Willis that she would not take Jacobs's daughter with her, by forwarding to Mrs. Willis Post's sketch of Jacobs's sensational life for verification, and by proposing that if it was true, she herself use Jacobs's story in the Key to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which she was rushing to complete. Reporting all this to Post, Jacobs suggests that she felt denigrated as a mother, betrayed as a woman, and threatened as a writer by Stowe's action." (see Jacobs letter to Amy Post in: Autograph letter; Isaac and Amy Post Family Papers, University of Rochester Library.

²⁷ Valerie Smith, *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987, pp. 31-32.

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woman like Jacobs remains aware of the role of her compatriots in her escape.²⁸ She relates her own courage, but she also includes the considerable courage her escape demanded of her grandmother, her uncle, as well as the white friends of her family. Throughout her account Jacobs values relationships because they have sustained her. Her loving relationships in the South are based on ties of kinship, affection, and mutual interdependence. In contrast with Douglass's *Narrative*, which is the story of an individual's finding and using language as the key to get his freedom, Jacobs structures her narrative with incidents that illustrate her place within personal and communal relationships. Their different emphases grow out of gender differences.

For Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass, the construction of the self involves gender considerations. Douglass defines his masculinity according to traditional criteria and puts the stress on his individuality. On the contrary, Jacobs refuses traditional gender roles; she borrows some traditional values that she subverts so as to redefine femininity and points to the existence of a “black womanhood”. This leads us to the question of race which also plays an important part in the construction of the self.

B-RACE

The ideology of white supremacy in Douglass's time encompassed attitudes, beliefs, behavior, and thought on a group. It was predicated upon the assumptions of black biological and cultural inferiority.²⁹ Socially speaking, even as mulattoes, Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass were considered as black people. During

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 31-32.

²⁹ Waldo E. Martin, *The Mind of Frederick Douglass*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984, p. 10.

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slavery, black people, no matter how fair their skin could have been, had the lowest status in American society to which they did not actually belong. However, Jacobs and Douglass successfully managed to acquire their freedom and then were urged to write their autobiographies. This gave them the opportunity to denounce slavery and give a new value to the black self. But race was an arbitrary socially constructed concept. Thus, the problem is to see how this “black self” is represented in these narratives. So, in this section, I shall examine the way in which Douglass and Jacobs reevaluate this black self and see how their narratives reflect blackness, thus paving the way for the development of a black literary canon.

Reevaluation of The Black Self

Race has become a trope of ultimate, irreducible difference between cultures, linguistic groups, or practitioners of specific belief systems, who more often than not have fundamentally opposed economic interests. Race is the ultimate trope of difference because it is so arbitrary in its application. The sanction of biology contained in sexual difference, simply put, does not and can never obtain when one is speaking of “racial difference”. [...]who has seen a black or red person, a white, yellow or brown? These terms are arbitrary constructs, not reports of reality.³⁰

Consequently, “race” was by no means a biological concept. When the first African slaves were imported to Virginia in 1619, dark-skinned as well as fair-skinned persons were all together put to work on plantations. Africa was not constituted by a united people, but by different villages having their own customs and their own dialects. But when African slaves arrived in the southern colonies, those differences were not taken into account. For southern planters, African people constituted a common black race inferior to white people. They were urged to forsake their native culture and they were made to internalize a variety of stereotypes that will later be encountered in literature.

³⁰ Henry Louis Gates Jr, ed. “Race”, *Writing and Difference*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 05.

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Words such as “Sambo” or “Uncle Tom” were used to characterize black people. These terms implied that black slaves were obedient, ignorant, irresponsible and lazy. Pro-slavery people even tried to demonstrate that slavery was something good for slaves and encouraged the development of derogatory stereotypes.

Ever since Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence that "*all men are created equal*," America has struggled with the chasm between this Jeffersonian ideal and the realities of the American experience. Jefferson himself was the author of some of America's earliest ideas about race and science. In 1787, little more than a decade after the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson suggested in his work “Notes on the State of Virginia”, that the difference between the races is fixed in nature:

*The first difference which strikes us is that of colour. Whether the black of the negro resides in the reticular membrane between the skin and scarf-skin, or in the scarf-skin itself; whether it proceeds from the colour of the blood, the colour of the bile, or from that of some other secretion, the difference is fixed in nature.*³¹

Jefferson further hypothesized that blacks were originally a distinct race:

*...whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, the blacks are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind. It is not against experience to suppose, that different species of the same genus, or varieties of the same species, may possess different qualifications.*³²

The contradiction between the *Declaration* and *Notes* may be understood, however, by Jefferson's view of humanity itself. If blacks were of a separate creation, and set apart from the definition of "all men," then the equality set out in the Declaration did not apply to all.

³¹ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library, p. 264. URL : <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/JefVirg.html>

³² *Ibid.*, p. 270.

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Harriet Jacobs's and Frederick Douglass's narratives also give us an idea of the significance of "race" in the nineteenth-century. They both allude to dominant white ideological codes depicting whiteness with positive connotations (purity and superiority) on the one hand and blackness with negative connotations (evil and inferiority) on the other hand.

Although his narrative focuses on the individual self, Douglass is also concerned with the question of race: *"I taught them, because it was the delight of my soul to be doing something that looked like bettering the condition of my race."* (*Narrative*, p. 402) Frederick Douglass's narrative constructs a man, a hero, reflecting the values of black people as a whole. In this perspective, Henry Louis Gates notes: *"Not only has an idea made subject of object, but creature has assumed self, and the assumption of self has created a race. For, as with all myths of origins, the relation of self to race is a relation of synecdoche."*³³ By trying to convey an individual black self, Frederick Douglass is also trying to describe a whole community of black people. The latter are linked by shared experiences on southern plantations. Their African background is also what holds them together.

African literature was oral and was mainly constituted by short tales, proverbs and legends. It was brought to the American continent in the seventeenth century and transmitted from one generation to the other. This oral tradition was still present in the nineteenth century and slave narratives always let the reader have an idea of its characteristics. Frederick Douglass's narrative, for example, shows us that black slaves have developed their own culture, the fact which played a prominent part in Afro-American literature.

³³ Henry Louis Gates, *Figures in Black*, op. cit., p.95.

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Frederick Douglass also enhances the importance of culture in his narrative. As regards the relationship between black people and slaveholders, he shows that they have their own maxims, such as “a still tongue makes a wise head”, which implies silence and resignation. However, if humility is what seems to characterize black slaves’ personality, it is only on the surface that they were docile. Indeed, many slaves used to show respect to their masters so as to win their confidence and then escaped. This is what Frederick Douglass did with Master Hugh before escaping to the North:

My object in working steadily was to remove any suspicion he might entertain of my intent to run away; and this I succeeded admirably. I suppose he thought I was never better satisfied with my condition than at the very time during which I was planning my escape. (Narrative, p. 420)

Douglass’s narrative points out the fact that contrary to certain ideas spread by white slaveholders as well as plantation writers, black slaves did not enjoy their condition. By relating his personal experience, Douglass offers a picture of what slavery really was: an institution which, for economic motivations, used the concept “race” to serve its own interests. White ideologies affirmed that black people embodied bestiality and ignorance and thus that slavery was good for them. Writers of slave narratives will then try to give a positive value to the self in order to redefine the qualities of black people as a whole.

As a Negro and a mulatto, in a white racist society, Douglass’s responses to the omnipresent issue of race were rather complex. The penalty of having a white father, he recalled, was very heavy. “A man who will enslave his own blood may not be safely relied on for magnanimity.” (*My Bondage and My Freedom*, p. 59) This non-relationship with his master-father reinforced both his Negro identity and his sense of racial ambivalence as a mulatto. It also heightened his ambivalence toward whites in

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general and white paternal figures in general, such as William Lloyd Garrison, his mentor.

Whereas Frederick Douglass experienced difficulty identifying with his white ancestors, principally his father, he intimately identified with his Negro ancestors and mother. He observed: " *My knowledge of my mother is very scanty, but distinct. Her personal appearance and bearing are ineffaceably stamped upon my memory.*" (*My Bondage and My Freedom*, p. 52) Douglass would later know that his mother was the only slave in Tuckahoe who could read. To him, the news came as a revelation. Besides ascribing to her "an earnest love of knowledge," he claimed to have inherited his own love of letters from her instead of his white father. This argument for the inheritance of intelligence from his Negro mother had to exclude his lost white patrimony.

Whereas Harriet Jacobs attaches a lot of importance to the question of gender, Frederick Douglass tries to give a new significance to the notion of "race". He has demonstrated the arbitrary nature of this concept by subverting the dominant ideological codes that were created by white people who want to keep black people under control. The process devised for re-evaluating the self consists in establishing a sharp contrast between himself and white people. He does this for instance by inverting the traditional stereotypes. For example, talking about a white overseer named Mr. Gore, he notes: "...his savage barbarity was equalled only by the consummate coolness with which he committed the grossest and most savage deeds upon the slaves under his charge." (*Narrative*, p. 356)

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In slave narratives, white people are attributed characteristics that are usually associated with black people: cruelty, heathenism, inability to have feelings...etc. Frederick Douglass describes them as hypocritical people having no mercy on black slaves. The fact that he underlines all their flaws enables him to enhance the positive aspects of his personality. He wants to show that he is different from them and also from the traditional images linked to black people. Paradoxically, Douglass himself was thought to be culturally “not black enough”. In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass recounts the words with which Garrisonian abolitionists tried to bind his public speaking to racist stereotypes: “‘*be yourself,*’ said Collins, ‘*and tell your story.*’ It was said to me, ‘*Better have a little of the plantation manner of speech than not; ‘tis not best that you seem too learned.*’” (*My Bondage and My Freedom*, p. 362) Douglass implies here that the abolitionists thought his authentic self (as opposed to his superficial, eloquent self) was somehow typical of slave culture and not “too learned.”

This racist criticism that culturally Douglass was “not black enough” is echoed in the writings of many modern Douglass scholars, including Waldo Martin who argues that Douglass was “blind” to African-American culture, and that his blindness was a result of his “bourgeois tastes”:

*Douglass’s blindness to Afro-American culture illustrated a critical intellectual weakness resulting from his Americanism. Embracing the Euro-American and hierarchical bias endemic to American culture, he neither adequately appreciated nor understood Afro-American culture and the Afro-American roots of American culture. Clearly, he underestimated the complexity of both American culture and the Negro’s relationship to it. His bourgeois tastes found the rural, folk, and often unpolished quality of black expressive culture, like ecstatic religiosity, sorely wanting.*³⁴

³⁴ Waldo Martin, op. cit., p.282.

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Martin goes on to suggest that Douglass's low opinion of African-American culture caused his ambivalence towards race as a category. This is a disputable claim but it is supported by the descriptions in *My Bondage and My Freedom* of Douglass's childhood resistance to slave culture and pursuit of white culture, and his adult embracement of white "bourgeois" culture and a transcendent "American" ideal. At the same time, however, the descriptions of Douglass's early interactions with white and black culture make Martin's criticism problematic, and they also complicate the commonly enforced assumptions that racialized individuals should identify with the "colour" of racialized culture that matches their own. Douglass's experience suggests the arbitrariness of matching racialized cultures and individuals in this way.

His account of his life as a slave contradicts racist assumptions by suggesting that it is and was impossible for Douglass to "be himself" and remain a typical member of African-American or slave culture. Douglass, unlike his modern critics, identifies African-American culture with illiteracy and slavery, just as he identifies white culture with literacy and freedom. In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, the existence of a separate African-American culture is presented as an unfortunate result of the system of slavery, and slave or "black" culture, is presented as a frustrating limitation that Douglass must transcend.

Douglass's failure to sufficiently identify or be identified with "black" culture is described most brutally when his escape plan fails and he and the men he was to have escaped with are in captivity. His master's mother yells at him, "*You devil! You yellow devil! It was you that put it into the heads of Henry and John to run away. But for you, you long legged yellow devil, Henry and John would never have thought of*

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running away.” (*Narrative*, p.408) Douglass, the failed member of black culture, is here not perceived as black, or white, or human. He is a diabolical freak who somehow has access to ideas that are inaccessible to other members of his cultural group, and who infects the members of his culture with these alien ideas.

Throughout *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass reacts to racialist views of culture by supporting transcendent free culture rather than racially specific culture. He asserts the equality, even the sameness of the races, and resists the temptation to ascribe cultural differences to a racial foundation. Thus, Martin’s concepts of “Afro-American culture” and “Euro-American culture” do not make sense. Instead, Douglass sees the meaningful categories as “slave culture” and “free culture.” Douglass’s so-called “blindness” to black culture is thus a response to racialist views of culture, and an expression of his own experience in both black and white cultures.

The new Frederick Douglass is no longer alienated by the white man’s definitions. He is no longer the one who accepted to be inferior to his white masters. He seems to heighten the necessity of individuality in the process of the shaping of one’s identity. He thus became the most important spokesman for blacks, slave and free, in the United States. He would function in that role until his death in 1895.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study has been to show the way in which slave narratives tried to enhance the primacy of the black self. However, a paradox was found at the heart of the construction of the self: by constructing a black self, the authors also alienated it to white modes and codes of literary representation.

The quest for identity was an important aspect in the process of writing these autobiographies. Indeed, reviving the past became tantamount to representing a past identity through the traditional journey from slavery to freedom. The resort to autobiography enabled the authors to depict their former personality during slavery, but also their present state of mind. Also, autobiography was likely to present a variety of paradoxes. Indeed, this genre, which was supposed to describe the past life and personality of the author, often departed from its original goal for ex-slaves were constantly under the influence of white abolitionists. Slave narrators knew they could not say everything, and they did not, but their silence tells us a lot.

These narratives manifest the narrators' deliberate and at times provocative assertion of will to redefine and thus recreate themselves in literature as no slave owner would have permitted them to do. This is especially true for black women autobiographers who had to redefine themselves in their own terms, according to their own standards. Enslaved both by race and gender, they had to come to terms with both slavery and patriarchy while rethinking their mode of communication.

In contrast to most male narratives, such as Douglass's, which is the story of an individual's finding and using written language as the key to freedom, Jacobs structures her narrative with "incidents" that illustrate her place within personal and communal relationships. These differences grow out of gender difference; while most

male narratives reflect the nineteenth-century “individualism”, the proportionally few female slave narrators, on the other hand, were hostages to nineteenth-century America’s cult of domesticity that demanded a standard of feminine purity that slavery denied them. Unlike men, women were excluded from the public recital of stories in a culture that, at least publicly, insisted on an ideal of purity for women. Since women narrators could not show that they had been the “perfect wives” that the cult of domesticity demanded, they emphasized instead the ways in which their relationships with their families allied them with their white reading audience.

Writers of slave narratives had to resort to a certain number of strategies so as to reveal the “truth” about their life and personality. They did not construct the self in a direct way but they were laden with encoded messages. Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass created the illusion that they had integrated traditional white discourses, but they actually subverted them. Their dealing with gender and race provided another testimony of the will to grow away from the white man’s system of representation. Not only did slave narrators have to find their own definitions of what being a black woman and a black man meant, but in so doing they also had to adapt to the pre-existing paradigms of womanhood and manhood. In this process of redefinition, Jacobs rewrites every narrative convention that inspires her text in order to provide her own story of slavery, the particular story of a slave girl. Jacobs’s narrative is particularly provocative as it transgresses the expected behavior of a woman in the nineteenth century, which is exactly what makes her narrative so singular. Jacobs rewrites the conventions of “sentimental fiction whose heroine’s fate is marriage”, and demonstrated, in spite of her lack of a husband and home, that freedom was the central

element in women's quest. She concludes her narrative with the celebration of freedom. "*I had objected to having my freedom bought.*" she writes, "*yet I must confess that when it was done I felt as if a heavy load had been lifted from my weary shoulders.*"³ Thereby, she also rewrites the conventions of the male slave narrative which assumes the representative privilege of the male slave's experience of bondage and escape. Unlike Douglass who, in the three versions of his narrative, acknowledges neither the woman who helped him to escape, nor other networks of assistance, Jacobs avoids coming up with an isolated representation of herself, and instead represents herself as dependent on the support of her relatives and friends.

Both Douglass's and Jacobs's narratives paved the way for the development of Afro- American literature and actually acted as springboards for the incorporation of Afro-American work into the American literary canon. While pre-war narratives focused mainly on blacks' struggle against slavery, the post-war publications emphasized the necessity for the freedman to integrate into American society. Many, especially the works of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B Dubois., also stressed the need and value of education as the means for such a task⁴.

In the twentieth century, the slave narratives are sometimes viewed as curious stories of a time and an era long forgotten. But their power and essential truth give

³ Linda, Brent, op. cit.,p. 226.

⁴ The most heated controversy in Negro leadership at this time raged between two remarkable black men—Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois. The major spokesman for the gradualist economic strategy was Washington. Dubois was the primary advocate of the gradualist political strategy. In his autobiography *Up From Slavery*, Washington advised blacks to remain in the South and avoid politics and protest in favour of economic self-help and industrial education. See: Booker T Washington, *Up From Slavery*. Dubois believed that Washington's program produced little real gain for the race. In chapter entitled, "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others," DuBois said that Washington's accommodationist program asked blacks to give up political power, insistence on civil rights, and higher education for Negro youth. Dubois firmly believed that political action and academic education would be the means to achieve full citizenship rights for black Americans. See: W.E.B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Classic Signet , 1995.

them a living quality that is timeless. Three centuries of oppression, the constant quest for freedom, and the continuing struggle for real equality all serve to reveal the soul and spirit of the black heritage, and they provide as well an excellent anthropological and sociological context from which to view the antecedent years of the black experience.

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ملخص

كانت العبودية خلال النصف الأول من القرن التاسع عشر من أقوى القضايا السياسية الساخنة المثيرة للجدل و التي لعبت دورا حاسما في اندلاع الحرب الأهلية سنة 1860م. خلال ذلك الوقت ، تمكن بعض العبيد من التحرر و قد تعالت كذلك الأصوات الداعية إلى التحرر و خصوصا العديد من الكتابات التي ساهمت في تبني العديد من القراء لمبدأ " ضد العبودية " . فروايات العبيد كانت أيضا عنصرا مهما في عملية التحول، فهم يستشهدون بمعانات الذين حرّموا من الحرية و حرّضوا الأشخاص من الجنس الأبيض إلى الانتفاض .

هذه الأطروحة تقابل روايات العبيد لفيدريك دوغلاس و هاريات جاكوبس اللذان و لدا و ترعرعا في ظلال العبودية ، ووصفا تجربتهما في روايات مؤثرة و مثيرة للعاطفة ، فدوغلاس و جاكوبس ينتميان إلى أقلية من العبيد اللذين نقلوا بكلماتهم الخاصة لوصف سنوات العبودية . و في عصر كانت 10 % فقط من العبيد يستطيعون القراءة و الكتابة ، كان كل واحد منهم يستلم هبة التدريب من طرف صاحب العمل فكانت حياتهم غير مماثلة بالتأكيد ، لكن العبيدين كانا من نفس الجيل و تقاسما العديد من التجارب المتشابهة ، لكن أصبح نمط الاختلاف الوحيد و الواضح بينهما. إذا تعرض الرجال السود إلى عمليات التعذيب الشنيعة، تتحمل النساء ضعف هذا العبء. كغيرهم من الرجال العبيد ، يخضع النساء إلى الأعمال البدنية لكن الكثير من هؤلاء النساء تعرضن أيضا لانتهاكات جنسية مستمرة من طرف البيض.

و بفقدان لهويته أصبحت الرواية وسيلة يستطيع من خلالها العبيد كتابة و تأكيد هويته. و سأسند على نظريات تكوين الهوية لفرويد و لاكان لإظهار كيفية تأثر هوية العبيد بالعبودية و كيف يحاول هذا الأخير أن يعيد تشكيل هويته من خلال روايته . إنه من الواضح أن روايات العبيد كانت متأثرة بالمحيط الذي نشأ فيه و التي كانت متأثرة جزئيا بالنظريات الأدبية و التوقعات و القوانين الاجتماعية . سأسخدم أعمال فليب لوجون و هنري لويس غايتس حول السيرة الذاتية من أجل تحديد مطابقة هذه الروايات مع التعريفات العامة و السيرة الذاتية للغرب و كيفية إنشاء قوانينهم الخاصة .