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Escaping the auction block and rejecting the pedestal of virtue : slave narratives redefine womanhood in nineteenth-century America

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Escaping the Auction Block and Rejecting the Pedestal of Virtue: Slave Narratives Redefine Womanhood in Nineteenth-Century America

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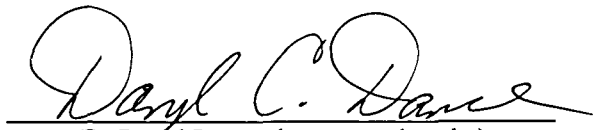

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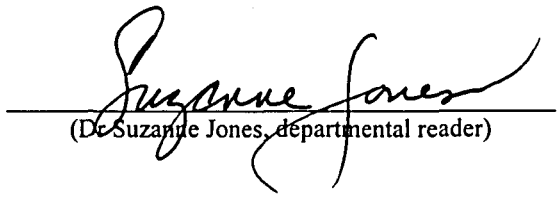

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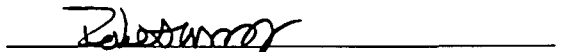

(Dr Robert Nelson, English honors coordinator)

Black women's slave narratives bring to the forefront the paradoxes of antebellum America's political and moral ideologies. These autobiographies criticize the dichotomous gender roles that were widely accepted in the nineteenth century United States. Women's slave narratives perceive the exclusion of women of color and women of the working class from the prevailing model of womanhood as indicative of an inadequate conceptual framework for understanding female personhood. In their narratives, these women reject the self-destructive prevailing model of White womanhood, characterized by self-sacrifice. These ex-slave autobiographers also refuse to define themselves according to the dominant model of Black womanhood in their refusing to be kept ignorant and illiterate. Women's slave narratives illustrate the gender and race driven power hierarchy of slavery with honest and powerful discussions of sexual abuse and oppression. In their narratives, Black ex-slave women both assert their collective personhood and use their intellect, spirit, and bodies to create themselves as individuals. In addressing common issues as female slaves and acting individually according to personal beliefs and goals, these autobiographers both rebel against and revolutionize what it is to be a Black woman in nineteenth-century America. These Black autobiographers offer poignant analyses of the intersection of race, class, and gender in the lives of American women. Their awareness of the complex social constructions of women's roles astonishingly predicts the distant revolutions of the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Rights Movement to come in the twentieth century.

Black women's slave narratives propose a new definition of womanhood by redefining all the tenets of domestic ideology that under-girded the concept of middle-class White womanhood. In an effort to understand the history and ideologies from which all Black women's fiction emerges, Hazel V. Carby looks back to the narratives of female

slaves, some of the first examples of the public voices of Black women. In *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*, Carby argues that these narratives challenge existing power hierarchies by "reconstruct[ing] the sexual ideologies of the nineteenth century to produce an alternative discourse of black womanhood" (6). It is true that Black women redefine antebellum sexual ideologies and create a new definition of womanhood that was applicable to their circumstances. However, this paper addresses how in creating a new model for womanhood, Black women confront more than just sexual ideologies; they address all of the ideological aspects of women's gender roles that, in concert, supposedly defined an ideal woman at the time. In addition to sexual ideologies, Black women in their narratives also specifically redefine spirituality and domesticity in their analysis of power hierarchies. In order to fully comprehend what these women are criticizing, it is important to understand the dominant culture of the period. This paper attempts to analyze the new model of womanhood that ex-slave women propose in their narratives by placing these narratives within the context of the dominant White culture's idea of womanhood, which Black women were referencing, adapting, and revolutionizing.

The purpose of this paper is not, as Carby states, to "establish the existence of an American sisterhood between black and white women," an overly optimistic effort, of which Carby is rightfully wary. Rather, this understanding of womanhood as an ideology existing concordantly with slavery, reveals the limits of personhood as it was defined for women in antebellum America. Although the dominant paradigm of womanhood did not articulate White as a race, it was acutely aware of "whiteness . . . as a racial categorization" in opposition to Blackness (Carby 18). Similarly, Black women were reconstructing womanhood, creating a model that empowered Black women, in relation to the model of

White womanhood. In short, the lives of Black and White women in antebellum America were inseparable, and their lives unavoidably influenced each other. Economics, politics, religion, and gender roles intertwined the lives of Black and White women in the nineteenth century so thoroughly that the history of one group cannot be understood separate from the other.

True Womanhood and Black Womanhood

In the nineteenth-century United States, separate spheres ideology idealized disparate roles for women and men. The White middle-class aspired to achieve completely separate roles for women and men, while the ideal remained impractical for the working classes and utterly impossible for the enslaved. Ideally, men personified the American icon of the self-made man, and attempted to make a name for themselves, amidst booming commerce, in the spirit of Jacksonian democracy.[1] This ambition, of course, was only realizable for free men and excluded all of the Black men who were enslaved at the time. Women, in contrast, were described by the paradigm of "True Womanhood," according to which the ideal woman practiced piety, purity, domesticity, and submission (Welter 152). Central to this moral and political construction of womanhood was Republican Motherhood. Republican Mothers ruled in the domestic realm, which was glorified as a haven of love and Christian morality separate and apart from the male-dominated public sphere.[2] This version of womanhood, although

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[1] For a complete discussion about the fear of hypocrisy that resulted from urbanization, social mobility and the malleability of the self-created individual, see Karen Halttunen, Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-class Culture in America, 1830-1870 (New Haven: Yale UP, 1982).

[2] For a discussion of domesticity, woman's sphere and the views of the Beecher sisters on these and related women's issues, see Jeanne Boydston, Mary Kelley and Anne Margolis, The Limits of Sisterhood: The Beecher Sisters on Women's Rights and Woman's Sphere (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1988).

framed in Christian morality and American nationalism, was only practically applicable for middle- and upper-class White women who did not work outside of the home.

While White middle-class women were ascending to their place on the pedestal of moral virtue, Black women slaves were being displayed on auction blocks and sold as breeders, workhorses, and concubines. Many sentimental novels, in conjunction with conduct-of-life books written by White women of the time, codified these elitist ideals of womanhood, packaged in Christian morality, motherly domesticity and patriotism, and disseminated them to the women of the emerging White, literate middle class (Rose 39). However, some White authors of sentimental fiction began to question the limitations of separate spheres ideology and its exclusion of lower class and non-White women. The immorality of classism and racism inspired these women to question existing concepts of womanhood. As we shall see, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* Harriet Beecher Stowe confronts slavery by condemning the exclusion of Blacks from personhood because of their race. Similarly, in *Ruth Hall,* Fanny Fern criticizes the classist exclusion of a working, widowed woman from society. Some White women authors began to articulate the limitations of True Womanhood, which revealed its own hypocrisy in its exclusionary politics. The narratives of enslaved women, who were eventually freed or escaped from slavery, reveal the irony of the coexistence of slavery and True Womanhood in a "free" nation. Black slave women were not only excluded from society's notion of womanhood; the circumstances of slavery resulted in these women's lives absolutely contradicting the mainstream ideal of womanhood.

Although their lives were the antithesis of idealized American individualism, Black enslaved women lived amongst the master class and therefore had access to the rhetoric of freedom, equality, and opportunity. American politics and Christianity were both steeped in

individualism and equality. Although legally excluded from such "bourgeois individualism," these notions of freedom and equality provided a discourse that men and women of color would eventually attempt to claim for themselves. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese explains that the true ideal of individualism was egalitarian and universal, not particular and hierarchical, and was therefore destined to eliminate racism and classism under the weight of its own philosophy:

> If bourgeois individualism aborning coexisted easily with—in fact, may be said to have
>
> depended upon—slavery and the domestic subordination of women, mature bourgeois
>
> individualism would, in opposition to its practical goals, generate the antislavery
>
> movement and the movement for women's rights. (Fox-Genovese 60)

Slave women lived amongst Whites and therefore understood their culture and their ideals. As slaves, Black women were a means to the end of such "bourgeois individualism." However, in their narratives, Black women revise the ideals of American individualism by creating their own version of womanhood, comprised of personal political, spiritual, and sexual freedom.

In their narratives, Black ex-slave women begin where the social criticism of Stowe and Fern leaves off and redefine female personhood in antebellum America by further revolutionizing sentimental fiction's ideals of womanhood. Black women reject the dichotomous characterization of male and female roles and present a complex conception of womanhood that incorporates their political and spiritual convictions from within slavery.

They reject the Christ-like martyrdom embodied in the ideals of True Womanhood. Self-sacrifice, giving one's life for someone else, is not the "highest human calling" in women's slave narratives as it is in White women's sentimental fiction (Tompkins 128). Instead, these ex-slave authors depict the impossibility of maintaining morally perfect piety or virginal purity within the slave system and emphasize the necessity for self-preservation and survival. Their narratives reveal how these women manipulate their status as property in order to gain power over their owners and resist submission. The priority these women give to freedom is itself evidence that freedom is a necessary precursor to the realization of human potential. Their oppressed position in a racist patriarchal society enables slave women to fully grasp the inseparability of the supposedly feminine domestic sphere and the masculine economic sphere, as many White middle-class women never could. Black women's narratives rewrite antebellum history. As women, as slaves, and as Blacks, these authors existed outside of every political and moral understanding of humanness, and so as Black women they created their own ideals for personhood.

Separate Spheres Ideology in Antebellum America

The antebellum era was a time of social and economic flux for the young United States of America. The emergence of capitalism raised questions of identity for Americans as individuals as well as for the nation as a whole. People sought identity in a culture where the market economy defined them by dollars and cents and the Evangelical revival movement defined them by their proximity to moral perfection. Due to the millenialist nature of the religious fervor of the time, there was belief in a constant threat that an act of God would bring mass destruction. Westward expansion threatened Christian civilization as Whites

came into contact with Indians, and the people relocated to the wilderness where there was no law, religious or secular. Slavery and its possible extension into the West caused tensions among the North, South and West. Cutthroat capitalism and political parties undermined the Christian community and encouraged reckless individualism.[3] The influx of immigrants threatened Protestant America with foreign views and allegiance to the Pope (McLoughlin 139). The promise of increased social mobility emphasized the limitless potential of the individual (Halttunen xv). Within all of this change and turmoil, Americans sought a stable, unifying national identity as well as individual identities as modern Americans.

Seeking order and stability in such a tumultuous time, many White middle-class Americans clung to the idea that women and men occupied separate spheres of society. Women were relegated to the realm of the domestic, which included family and friends communing in private, interior spaces. Men, on the other hand, occupied the public, economic sector of politics and business. This gendered division of labor allowed Americans to reap the economic benefits of capitalism while attempting to nullify its negative consequences. Ideally, men could work to gain wealth and improve the family's social standing while women reminded their husbands and sons of their moral obligations and Christian values. Popular culture, such as women's magazines, reflected and reinforced unattainable ideals for women that were often collected under the label of "True Womanhood" (Welter 151). This set of ideals, although never precisely codified, often highlighted piety, purity, submission, and domesticity as defining a woman (Welter 152). All of these characteristics of an ideal woman were rooted in the realm of the private sphere of society as well as the private, inner, moral selves of individual women. These ideals

[3] For a collection of speeches concerning Christianity and its intersection with daily antebellum life, see The Rise of Adventism: Religion and Society in Mid-Nineteenth Century America, ed. Edwin S. Gaustad (NY: Harper and Row, 1974).

reinforced the religious striving for prelapsarian moral perfection and absolute order in the lives of individuals as well as the nation (McLoughlin 146).

True Womanhood by no means represents reality for all women in Antebellum America but instead represents an ideal that was fundamental to the dominant culture of the time. As Carby explains, True Womanhood "was dominant, in the sense of being the most subscribed to convention governing female behavior, but it was also clearly recognizable as a dominating image, describing the parameters within which women were measured and declared to be, or not be, women" (23). The model of True Womanhood defined women as the moral paragons of society, responsible for curbing the outside world's inevitable corruption of their husbands and children (Welter 163). Male dominated society often perceived women as occupying a hidden, private world that was marginal to the expansion of the nation and the individual striving for improved social standing. Nonetheless, women's roles in the domestic sphere were deemed indispensable to the moral health of the Republic.

Republican Motherhood, although seemingly an embodiment of True Womanhood, actually de-emphasized the separation of male and female spheres by assigning women the roles of teacher and patriot, through which they could emerge into the public sphere without scandal. Republican Mother was the title given to these women who reared their children to resist the demoralizing effects of capitalism on the nation. The role of Republican Mother originated in Revolutionary America, placing women between a completely un-politicized class of Americans and overly politicized women who were ostracized as masculine or prostitutes (Kerber 282). The Republican mother had a duty to instill "in her sons civic interest and participation. She was to educate her children and guide them in the paths of morality and virtue. But she was not to tell her male relatives for whom to vote" (Kerber

283). These women had to walk a fine line between patriotic and moral enthusiasm and actually having opinions of their own. However benign Republican Motherhood may seem on the surface, women were able to appropriate its conventions in very public and reformative ways. For example, Nina Baym discusses women's widespread public influence as authors of historical fiction, historical non-fiction, and textbooks. Authoring such texts was considered within the bounds of Republican Motherhood because the central purpose of such books was to educate the Republic morally and academically. This intellectual presence combined with the money and self-sufficiency acquired by such enterprise, transforms Republican Motherhood into a powerful political tool that "obliterates the space between public and private spheres, between men's and women's proper areas of action" in Revolutionary America (Baym 127).

The nineteenth century version of Republican Motherhood was similar to that of Revolutionary times; however, capitalism and wealth played a larger role, and popular culture transformed the image of motherhood so that it exemplified Victorian sentimental culture. Republican Mothers of antebellum America attempted to maintain morality despite the wealth, social mobility, and general flux that characterized America at the time. Baym characterizes Victorian Republican Motherhood as "untutored effusions of the heart" as opposed to the "educated efforts of the head" that characterized a previous generation of American women (122). Baym fails to see that like the historical women authors of early Revolutionary America, some Victorian women also used writing to exert their political influence. The ideal of the female domestic sphere, which operated independently of politics and the market economy, was created as a reaction of the middle and upper-class women of antebellum America, who did not have to work for a living, in response to the materialism

and secularism being encouraged by capitalism. Some women, such as Stowe and Fern, challenged this notion of their political powerlessness in their writing, just as Baym claims occurred in Revolutionary times.

Republican Motherhood, defined by education, Christian morality, and motherhood, was a central tenet of White womanhood in nineteenth-century America. Since slaves were more often than not denied education, religious instruction, and parental rights to their children, Black enslaved women obviously could not define themselves by the standards of Republican Motherhood. Slave women could not achieve the ideals of Republican Motherhood. Yet they were stifled by the absence of opportunities in slavery that denied them education and the ability to raise and protect their children who were often sold away from them. Unable to realize their individual potential in slavery and unable to identify with the ideals of White womanhood, slave women sought after a new definition of womanhood.

Sentimental Fiction Undermines Separate Spheres Ideology

Given the applicability of religious, nationalistic, and sincerity rhetoric to the abolitionist cause, it is no surprise that White women used sentimental fiction to challenge separate spheres ideology and slavery. Sentimental fiction often codified commonly held tenets of White middle-class morality and instructed readers how to enact them. Women wrote these novels, primarily for a female readership, although men as well as women identified with the middle-class norms and ideals these novels perpetuated. Although sentimental fiction often upholds the ideal of separate masculine and feminine spheres, the economics of the material world constantly infiltrates the Christian morality of the domestic world. The walls of the White, middle-class home, which supposedly serve as the barrier

between the secular marketplace and the Christian hearth, are not strong enough to withstand the pressures of capitalism.

Fern's *Ruth Hall* and Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* exemplify the ability of sentimental novels to challenge the definition of womanhood by taking into account the realities of race and class barriers to the ideal of True Womanhood. In *Ruth Hall*, for example, Ruth's ideal loving home fades into a dream-like memory after her husband dies. His premature death leaves her with only his estate, which is barely enough to cover his debts. After all the financial obligations are met, her father and her in-laws reject her, denying any responsibility to support her and her two daughters. These same people criticize her when she is forced to enter the workforce and live impoverished, barely able to feed herself and her children. She is wrenched from her comfortable middle class lifestyle and forced to work, challenging the dominant norms and ideals for women who assume economic dependence on male relatives or husbands. Her bind is obviously also a scathing criticism of a culture that ostracizes her because she works and praises her in-laws as good Christians despite their cursing her as a bad mother and denying her any financial or emotional support.

In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the angel in the house ideal proves to be unattainable in a capitalist society infused with classism and racism. Mrs. Shelby's careful moral and domestic instruction of her slaves cannot prevent the sale of old, faithful Tom. Nor can she save the young, sweet Eliza who responds to the sale of her small son, Harry by fleeing with him. In fact all of Mrs. Shelby's Christian teachings seem a hypocritical farce when the sale of Tom and Harry proves that she and Mr. Shelby "care for no tie, no duty, no relation, however sacred, compared with money." Mrs. Shelby laments, "This is God's curse on slavery! . . . I was a fool to think I could make anything out of such a deadly evil" (Stowe 29). For both

Ruth Hall and Mrs. Shelby, the ideals of True Womanhood cannot be sustained because of the inevitable overlapping of the economic/political and the domestic spheres.

In "Getting in the Kitchen with Dinah: Domestic Politics in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," Gillian Brown proposes an interesting explanation of why neither White nor Black women can achieve True Womanhood in the presence of slavery. Brown interprets the domestic sphere as an alternative economy that operates separately from the outside market economy. Capitalism is driven by desire for money and products. Characteristic of a market driven by desire, it fluctuates and is chaotic, regulated by personal irregular moods (Brown 505). On the other hand, the domestic sphere operates under a constant surplus of Christian and motherly love, which needs only to be organized and properly distributed, or taught, to children and husbands. "Exponents of domesticity defined the home as peaceful order in contrast to the disorder and fluctuations occasioned by competitive economic activity in the marketplace," Brown argues (505). Because of its capitalistic nature that devalues human life, slavery prevents the coexistence of an economy driven by Christian love and based in the ultimate value of the individual.

Like Brown, Sojourner Truth interprets slavery as a degrading force that pervades all of society. In *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, she relates a story of a slave owner, Mr. Fowler, killing his own wife, a tragedy that shocked slaves and Whites alike. Truth says, slavery is fast undermining all true regard for human life" (57). Once able to starve, beat, or kill slaves at will, Truth seems to suggest, there is little left in a man that treasures any regard for human life, even in the form of his own wife.

In applying this theory to Stowe's sentimental abolitionist novel, Brown explains the chaos in Dinah's kitchen that so appalls Miss Ophelia. Slavery, she argues, is a capitalistic

business, driven by material desire. This desire invades the domestic sphere in homes that employ slaves, disabling the alternative economy of love that represents the moral salvation of the nation. This explains Miss Ophelia's inability to impose her anti-slavery domestic organization in Dinah's disarrayed kitchen (Brown 505). This argument can also explain Mrs. Shelby's inability to make slavery a moral institution due to its vulnerability to the market economy. Brown's argument sheds some light on the paradox in which Black slave women find themselves when attempting to define themselves by White middle-class standards of womanhood. The ideal of womanhood in America at this time presumed a substantial if not complete separation of the male economic and female domestic spheres, a dichotomy that was not achievable for slave women who were themselves goods in the market economy.

Fox-Genovese, like Brown, sees the lives of slaves and masters as intertwined. In fact, Fox-Genovese claims that slaves absorbed all the values of the master class, including gender roles. She argues that although slaves reject many of the pretensions of their masters, "they could not readily forge alternate gender conventions . . . in . . . the system of plantation households" (195). Slaves, she asserts, as well as slaveholders, "shared an ideal of the universal division between women and men" and agreed that separate male and female spheres constituted the bedrock of society, despite disagreement about the particular nature of the spheres (Fox-Genovese 195). Although slave women are clearly aware of the ideals for womanhood and observe White men and women living very different lives, Black women and men shared the same sphere. It is true that slave women on larger plantations were sometimes trained as house servants; however, much of their work, such as fetching water and laundry, was strenuous. Also, "most of the young slaves who began their working lives

in the house were moved out to the fields when they became strong enough to be useful" (Fox-Genovese 167). Slave women and slave men shared in every aspect of life, including their work, physical abuse, and powerlessness over their own bodies and those of their children. By the nature of their status as property, slaves could not inhabit separate spheres and did not idealize dichotomized gender roles for men and women. In their narratives slave women redefine womanhood as a complex individualized incorporation of gender, spirit, and physical existence. These slave women act according to their personal values and ideals so far as their situation allows. This understanding of the antagonistic relationship between selfhood and race, class, and gender, empowers enslaved women with the wisdom to reject simplified categories of selfhood based on single characteristics such as race, class, or gender.

Women's Slave Narratives Abolish Separate Spheres

The most searing criticism of separate spheres ideology came from the women who lived its negation. Slave women, unlike their White middle-class sisters, did not have the opportunity to appropriate any power by creating and identifying themselves as moral exemplars for society. Most being illiterate, slave women had no place or mode for expressing their interiority freely, and no audience that would appreciate their effort to do so. Black women had no mainstream medium through which to communicate their fears, hopes, or dreams, to an audience beyond local slaves, free Blacks and White sympathizers. They certainly could not safely criticize the society that enslaved them, as White women could criticize their own culture in their writings, although often at the cost of harsh criticism. If they were literate, slave women were often forbidden to write and could not have published

their writing while enslaved. Slaves were often forbidden from gathering in groups, even for Christian religious services, without White supervision, which further limited their ability to share their thoughts with others (Mathews 223-4). Depending upon their master and the political climate at the time, many slave women would be afraid to even discuss their private lives with family and friends. For example, Harriet Jacobs depicts a scene in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in which a master sells a husband and wife to a slave trader because the wife had told her husband who the father of her almost-White baby was. The series of marital arguments that ensued convinced the master that she had exposed him. Jacobs explains that it was dangerous for a slave woman to identify the father of her children, a crime that was only ever punished if the revealed father was White (16).

For a few Black women, their life stories became a mode for expressing their inner selves, and they found support for this expression in White abolitionists and free literate Blacks. Whether they were literate and wrote their narrative themselves, or dictated their stories to a sympathizer, these women recorded their lives, giving detailed, individual, personal accounts of slavery from within its shackles. Although the tropes of sentimental fiction provided Black women with some methods of empowerment in their writing, they could also be limiting, unrealistic and even antithetical to womanhood from the slave woman's perspective. While the capitalist economy was a constant threat to the domestic sphere of middle-class White women, for Black slave women, the economic and the domestic spheres were permanently intertwined. Slavery in and of itself can be seen as discordantly capitalistic and domestic. Peter Kolchin, in *American Slavery: 1619-1877*, describes southern slavery as a fundamentally dualistic "juxtaposition of extensive commercial activity in an economy based on non-capitalist productive relations" (173).

Similarly, Fox-Genovese describes the economy of the South as an agricultural society amidst industrial capitalism, making southern society "'modern' relative to European feudalism, and . . . 'retrogressive' relative to emerging capitalism" (55). Slave women's entire existence as humans, women, and mothers was within the economic system. They themselves were things to be bought, sold, and owned, making moral perfection, such as the Christ-like self-sacrifice idealized in the cult of True Womanhood, impossible for slave women.

Slave women were well aware of the different factors that determined their economic value in the eyes of the master or potential owner. Their strength, health, and attitude often determined their monetary value as workers and breeders in the slave market. Beauty and youth often made slave women valuable commodities as concubines and sex slaves for their masters. In *Aunt Betty's Story: The Narrative of Bethany Veney A Slave Woman*, Veney uses her property status to manipulate the system and prevent her being sold down river. Employing some tricks learned from an older slave woman, Veney makes her tongue look coated and sickly when the doctor examines her on the auction block. She also answers all the potential buyers "in the ugliest manner [she] dared" (Veney 30). Determined to be sickly and cross, Veney maintains her place in the community where she was well known and tolerably treated.

Often the slave women who earned the trader the most money were the light-skinned Black women marketed solely for concubinage and prostitution. Such "fancy girls," who commonly sold for up to $1,500, constituted a large, profitable "fancy trade" in cities like New Orleans and Charleston, among others (White 37). The role of mistress or concubine sometimes gained the woman and her children freedom, or at least saved her from heavy

fieldwork. Sadly, just as often, the jealous wife or economic necessity forced these women back onto the auction block where they were once again vulnerable to the fluctuations of the market. Although Veney escapes sale, her acquaintance, Eliza, has many bidders and is sold for a high sum because "the demands of slavery were insatiable" for young beautiful Black women (Veney 30). Women sometimes managed to gain some type of advantage from sexual liaisons with their masters, but any power gained was unstable and often fleeting. Also, "voluntary" affairs with masters perpetuated the Jezebel stereotype of Black women, reinforced White men's claim on their bodies, and made it more difficult for other slave women to resist the sexual advances of their masters (White 38).[4] Their monetary value and role as breeders, who propagate White male property, established a perception of Black women as non-human objects, a perception that they rail against in their narratives.

In *The Story of Mattie J. Jackson*, Mattie Jackson reveals how the value of slaves, like that of any goods, fluctuated with the market. In 1861, a trader bought her whole family for nearly nothing since her owner was about to lose everything to the Union forces. The trader smuggled them into Kentucky and sold each of them for over $800. Slaves were as valuable as ever in Kentucky since many Kentuckians assumed the state's "neutrality" in the war would protect their human merchandise (Jackson 20).

Slave women rightfully objected to the notion that they could be bought and sold, but were understandably well aware of the monetary value of all the labor their owners stole from them. Jacobs, although grateful for her freedom, resents the fact that it had to be bought.

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[4] According to White, the Jezebel stereotype of Black women originated from European ethnocentric interpretations of African culture. This myth of Black women as lustful, abnormally strong, and unfeminine was perpetuated by the practice of slavery. Slave women's reproduction and strength was appropriate public conversation, creating a culture that viewed these women as breeders. The Jezebel image also served the purpose of White males, who could blame their interracial liaisons with and/or rape of Black women on the seductive, corruptive nature of the women (27-32).

She does not like to look at the bill of sale affirming her freedom because of the sickening hypocrisy in the idea that she was "A human being *sold* in the free city of New York!" (Jacobs 155). Labor, however, is owned and the laborer should be compensated for its use by anyone else. She laments that Luke, a friend from "the black pit" of slavery, steals money from his deceased master (149). Yet, Jacobs thinks it unfair to expect more honesty from a slave who is robbed than from the master who robs him. She comes to agree that Luke "had a *right* to that money" (Jacobs 150). Jackson also thinks her "wages" that she takes from her master when fleeing slavery were rightfully hers. Providing much needed comic relief in her story, Jackson relates that she writes an unanswered letter to her former master thanking him for his generous financial help in her time of need (38).

Female slaves were clearly a cornerstone of the trade in people, a trade that for many Americans revealed the market economy as hypocritical and undermining the ideals of individualism, Christian morality, and sincerity that comprised the ideological basis for the young nation. Assigning monetary value to humans was an undeniable hypocrisy in a supposedly free nation. Hypocrisy was considered an immoral force that contributed to the disintegration of the social fabric. The fear of such insincerity can be seen in the mythical figures of the confidence man and the painted woman, who threatened to lure America's youth into lives of lying, stealing and licentiousness (Halttunen 34). This fear of insincerity and moral degradation undermined the individual's ability to trust other individuals. Such distrust threatened the foundation of a free American society based on the honest interaction among free individuals. The enslavement of an entire race in a nation attempting to embody sincerity and promote individual freedom as well as social mobility created quite a paradox. Slavery, for many, became a shameful example of the hypocrisy embedded in the economy

and conscience of America. Slavery could be morally opposed within two established belief systems of the time. Slavery exploited women so that they could not uphold the Christian, motherly, or patriotic duties of Republican Motherhood. Also, slavery undermined the culture of sincerity by flouting all the basic Christian and American doctrines of equality, compassion, sympathy, and love.

Christian Morality and Slavery in Antebellum America

The two divergent interpretations of Christianity that emerged over the issue of slavery reveal the absolute incompatibility of slavery with American political and religious ideologies. The Second Great Awakening of the nineteenth century revitalized Protestant theology and philosophy, creating a religious basis from which Americans interpreted their present culture and envisioned the future of their young nation. This mass religious movement evangelized, spreading the New Testament gospel from the mouths of Christians to unbelievers, attempting to convert groups of people. In the 1820's and 1830's this religious resurgence united the nation, bridging distances and differences among the varied people of the United States. However, by the 1850's and until the Civil War, schisms within the church combined with national, political, religious, and racial tensions to weaken the ties that had previously strengthened the United States.[5] By the late nineteenth century the sentiments of the Great Awakening were embedded into the American way of life, making Christianity a pervasive influence on daily life (McLoughlin 134).

Slavery, like all issues, personal or political, was defined in terms of nationalistic religious rhetoric, and therefore its treatment had widespread moral consequences (Goen 12).

[5] For a complete discussion on evangelicalism and politics, see Carwardine's Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America.

Everyday decisions became important in determining one's own salvation as well as the future of the nation. McLoughlin notes, "National progress and personal perfection were moving forward together" (145). Many White Christians believed in their ability to perfect themselves and in turn the entire United States in the eyes of God. Most White Christians in the nineteenth century prior to the Civil War were post-millenialists. This meant that they believed that there would be one thousand years of peace, harmony and perfection, the Kingdom on Earth, and then Christ would return, ending history. Later, most Christians would come to be pre-millenialists, believing that Christ would return, destroy the existing society and then one thousand years of peace would commence. The important difference between these beliefs is that post-millenialists, the revivalists of the nineteenth century in antebellum America, believed that God works through revivalists, who will save individuals, who will then save society. Post-millenialists believed that they could perfect themselves and others, eventually perfecting all of American society, thereby calling forth the second coming of Christ. Antebellum nineteenth century revivalists believed that they were creating the Kingdom on Earth and that the millennium was coming within their lifetime. Charles Grandison Finney, famous author of an instruction book for revivalist preachers, wrote, "If the church will do her duty the millennium may come in this country in three years" (qtd. in McLoughlin 145).

Enslaved Americans interpreted evangelical revivalism very differently than did the free. Despite the missionaries' promise that religion would pacify and humble the slaves, Christianity in many ways did the opposite. Blacks tried to be more Christian than the Whites by using the same religious standards to claim "common humanity and moral accountability" (Mathews 226). In the Black church were leaders who wielded enough power in the

community to cause White officials to complain in the 1850's about the unsupervised church gatherings of the slaves (Mathews 216). In God the slaves found the promise of true freedom. Unlike Whites, many Blacks were pre-millenialists, believing that Christ would come to destroy the current society and then begin the Kingdom on Earth. This most likely resulted from the condition of their bondage, from within which reform and moral perfection seemed impossible. The slaves who embraced Christianity were not pacified or humbled; instead they found a sense of worth and a basis for their equality with Whites. The disparate views of Christianity as an opiate for the slaves or, conversely, as an empowering force for the slaves, resulted in the first national institutional schism over slavery. The three major Protestant churches, Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian, all split their national organizations into Northern antislavery and Southern proslavery factions. Two radically different interpretations of Christianity emerged from this schism, depending upon whether people interpreted the function of religion as conservative or radical (McLoughlin 125).

Just as the domestic sphere attempted to curb the demoralizing influence of the market economy on individuals without changing the market itself, southern slaveholders attempted to alleviate the evils of slavery by interpreting slavery as a patriarchal and benevolent institution, embracing the conservative interpretation of Christianity. Southerners developed a slaveholding ethic to morally validate slavery, since it was now obvious that many in the northern counterpart to their church saw slavery as a national sin. The resulting slaveholding ethic had two premises. The first was based on the political argument of the inherent inequality in man, which necessitated the benevolent instruction and guidance of inferiors by superiors, creating mutual obligations between slaves and masters (Mathews 168). Augmented by pseudo-scientific racism, slavery was promulgated as beneficial for

masters, slaves, and the entire nation (Kolchin 193). The second premise was the religiously based notion that the world and the people that inhabit it are fallen. God has put hierarchies in place so that people do not destroy themselves or each other. The higher classes had more self-restraint. Slaves, women, and other lower classes were like children who had no self-restraint and needed external restrictions placed on them (Mathews 168). Southern slavery guaranteed the exposure of slaves to Christianity and supposedly ensured that the material necessaries of life would be provided for. Claiming responsibility for the spiritual and physical well-being of their human property, slave owners argued that slaves were better off in slavery than free. Pro-slavery arguments combined all of these paternalistic factors of slavery and argued that America's slaves were much better off than the industrial "wage slave" laborers of the North and England, and obviously living much better than the peasants of Italy and Ireland (Kolchin 192-94). While half of the Protestant churches interpreted slaveholding as a Christian duty, half of the churches condemned the institution. These disparate views of slavery reveal a national schism largely rooted in personal interpretation of Christianity and its role in politics and the public realm.

The northern churches and many enslaved Blacks embraced a radical interpretation of Christianity as a leveling, egalitarian force that equalized all people before the judgment of god. Many slaves had their own brand of Christianity and worship practices known as "the invisible church" that served to supplement and often undermine the religion of obedience they heard from their masters or the sermons at the White run churches to which they belonged (Kolchin143-44). There were three significant distinctions between the religion of many slaves and that of most Whites. First, Blacks focused less on innate depravity and more on the celebration of god as a close friend and savior (Kolchin 144). Second, African

tradition informed the slave's perception of the future as imminent and the spiritual and physical worlds as constantly interacting (Mathews 222). Third, Blacks' worship services were more informal, and often included impassioned singing, dancing, clapping, and shouting (Mathews 215).

The interaction of the spiritual and physical world in Black faith reveals the most about slave life and the influence of its daily realities on religion. One of the biggest hypocrisies inherent in the slavery system was its inevitable prevention of the slaves from acting morally. Slaves often had to act contrary to their Christian beliefs in order to survive slavery by stealing, lying, or possibly using violence against their masters. Christianity offered hope of salvation and eventual freedom from enslavement either in this lifetime or the hereafter (Chireau, "Conjure" 175). However, it did little to assist slaves in surviving the physical realities of their daily lives. Just as middle-class Whites supplemented religious morality with more secular advice literature and sentimental novels, Blacks augmented traditional Christianity with African traditions. For daily trials, slaves utilized what Chireau calls "supernaturalism" ("Conjure" 175). This often involved using physical objects that had spiritual power to address problems within the physical world. For example, some slaves would carry amulets or charms, perform rituals, or use roots or potions to ward off beatings or be better able to survive them (Chireau, "Conjure" 175).

The religion of the slaves uniquely combined American Protestantism, African tradition, and the realities of slave life, resulting in a truly African-American Christianity. The cultural borrowing of ideas about spirituality and religion was reciprocal between the Black and White communities throughout the history of the United States. By the time of the Second Great Awakening of the nineteenth-century, enslaved and free Blacks had developed

a religion that in many ways reflected mainstream White Christianity (Chireau, "Supernatural" 174). The interaction of American Christian morality and politics in the lives of women reveals some interesting connections between White women's fiction and Black women's slave narratives. The discord between these ideologies and the realities of the lives of slave women, however, also exposes the need for a new paradigm in which American Christian morality is a relevant and positive energy in the lives of Black women.

Sentimental Fiction and Christian Morality

Sentimental fiction had the potential to critique Christianity's role in the limiting definition of womanhood, but instead often reinforced it, naively insisting that social change could occur within the existing religious and political frameworks. In *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790- 1860,* Jane Tompkins argues that by using self-sacrifice, sentimental heroines can effect widespread social change. According to Tompkins, individual morality is what then determines the morality of the whole society. Religious conversion becomes the only way to effectively change society because unless the hearts of individuals are behind the change, no real change has occurred. Tompkins uses slavery as an example of this concept. If slavery were to be abolished legally, "the moral conditions that produced slavery in the first place would continue in force" (Tompkins 133).

While changing the moral beliefs of individuals is certainly consistent with the goals of women's slave narratives, the Christ-like self-sacrifice that is central to Tompkins' argument is antithetical to Black women's redefinition of womanhood. Although religion plays an important role in women's slave narratives, it does not subsume physical, material reality as Tompkins suggests occurs in sentimental fiction (Tompkins 155). Slave women

often turn to God for strength to survive their physical torture as well as their emotional suffering. Whippings, beatings, and sexual abuse combined with malnutrition and overwork create a physical reality that is inescapable for Black women slaves. Rather than the spiritual displacing the physical, the physical becomes another dimension of the spiritual. In sentimental fiction, the "ethic of sacrifice" predominates, according to Tompkins (128). The pinnacle of heroism is for an innocent character to die, thereby acquiring "a spiritual power over those who loved her beyond what she possessed in life," which, Tompkins argues, is exemplified in the death of Stowe's Eva (128). Death is the much-preferred alternative to becoming corrupted by the immoral influences of the world, thereby preserving the innocence and purity of the heroine.

Tompkins oversimplifies and overly dichotomizes gender roles in sentimental fiction. She describes women as having power only in the spiritual realm and males in the physical realm. Stowe complicates women's roles by endowing women with the power to use physical objects to bring about change. Although she gives us Eva, the ultimate Christ-like martyr, she endows Eva with the ability to affect change in this world using physical objects. She grants similar power to Rachel Halliday. Stowe utilizes African religious beliefs that the physical and spiritual worlds interact in order to empower women in her story. Interestingly, the concept of the "efficacy of holy objects" was not foreign to White Christianity. Popular ideas about the invisible spiritual realm and holy objects originated in post-Reformation Europe and survived in the Colonies (Chireau, "Supernatural" 173). Astrology and fortune telling attracted Blacks to White imaginings of spirituality and Whites adopted Black ideas of ghosts and witches (Chireau, "Supernatural" 174). Lynn Wardley argues that the belief of a spirit living in everything was a commonly held tenet of domestic ideology by 1852 when Stowe

was writing (205). However, I would argue that Stowe implements this idea outside of the domestic realm and addresses consequences also outside of the domestic sphere, by endowing characters like Rachel and Eva with the power to access the spiritual and utilize it in social reform, specifically abolitionism.

Stowe enables individuals to confer their Christian faith to objects, which then act upon other individuals. The ability to access such supernatural power is known in African traditions as conjure, hoodoo, voodoo, rootworking, mojo, or gofer. Once harnessed, the supernatural could be used for many purposes such as healing, harming, predicting the future, and influencing individuals or events (Chireau, "Supernatural" 172). In the nineteenth century these concepts would not have been all that foreign to White Christian religious leaders who drew on popularized notions of the supernatural when they claimed that they possessed divine gifts or the ability to work miracles (Chireau, "Conjure" 234).

Stowe endows Rachel Halliday's food with the power of conversion when it serves as a physical embodiment of peace and comfort for George. Food in this scene officially converts George from his atheistic doubt "to a belief in God, and a trust in providence" (Stowe 122). Stowe describes Rachel's manner as having "so much motherliness and full heartedness . . . that it seemed to put a spirit into the food and drink she offered" (122). That spirit proves to be a Christian spirit that awakens George to "the light of a living Gospel" (Stowe 122). Food is one of the many objects in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that women have the power to charm for the purpose of converting nonbelievers to having faith in Christianity.

Eva also has the power to influence people with her charmed objects. When she is dying, Eva gives all of the slaves and her family a curl of her hair and tells them, "when you look at it, think that I loved you and am gone to heaven, and that I want to see you all there"

(Stowe 251). This lock of hair is wrapped in paper with George's dollar, together forming Tom's "witch thing" that helps Tom survive Legree's beatings. Eva's hair not only helps Tom but also causes Legree's demise by spurring him to commence a fatal drinking binge. As Legree opens Tom's "witch thing," Eva's hair, "like a living thing, twine[s] itself round Legree's fingers" causing him to stamp on the floor and "[pull] furiously at the hair, as if it burned him" (Stowe 322). Stowe explains to the reader that Eva's charmed hair was so effective because Legree first thought that it was his mother's hair, which he had burned years ago. Legree is haunted by the memory of his mother because he consciously rejected her Christian goodness and forgiveness for a life of vice. His fear of damnation is revived when he burns Eva's hair. This action collapses the past and the present, causing Legree to flashback to his burning of his mother's lock of hair. Stowe purposely constructs the description of the flash back so that the reader is unsure if Legree is remembering burning his mother's hair or is actually watching Eva's hair burn in the present. "Legree burned the hair, and burned the letter; and when he saw them hissing and crackling in the flame, inly shuddered as he thought of everlasting fires" (Stowe 23). The ambiguous construction allows "them" to be interpreted as the letter and hair of Legree's mother in the past or Eva's hairs of the present, allowing the reader to experience the magical working of Eva's charm.

Clearly Stowe does not confine women's power to the spiritual or domestic realm, but portrays women as social reformers with supernatural powers that allow them to access the spiritual and channel its power to social reform. Stowe's Christian supernaturalism spreads Christian sincerity in the physical world. The spiritual efficacy of objects in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* converts nonbelievers, enabling them to rise above the hypocrisy of the world. The faithful are strengthened and the evil are condemned. Hypocrisy in Stowe's novel is

eliminated by the justice of Christian sincerity, manifested in people and objects of the physical realm. Stowe validates the African traditions of the slaves. In doing so she creates a truly African-American moral system that embraces the multicultural nature of American society. Stowe insists that the celebration of the amalgamation of these two cultures in American religion will end the hypocrisy that plagues the nation in the nineteenth century.

Although not applicable to all sentimental fiction, and especially not *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Tompkins' argument does apply to some novels of the time. For example, Mattie Griffith's pseudo-slave narrative, *Autobiography of a Female Slave* does idealize Christ-like self-sacrifice, idealizing death as the ultimate moral dedication. Mattie Griffith was a White, former slave-owning woman. This pseudo-slave narrative provides a useful point of reference because Griffith employs the sentimental tropes of virginal purity and self-sacrifice, without challenging these ideals as they apply to female slaves. Only in Griffith's fictional narrative does a slave actually kill herself. After being beaten repeatedly for two missing silver forks that she did not take, Amy, a young slave girl hangs herself. Griffith describes her as dangling, "with clotted blood, bruised and mangled . . . a bleeding, broken monument of the white man's and white woman's cruelty!" (219). None of the authentic slave narratives discuss any slaves taking their own lives. In fact it is unlikely that Black writers seeking to empower their characters would invoke suicide at all, given its implications of a broken spirit.

Although slave women sometimes pray for death to end their suffering or prevent the suffering of their children, the ultimate heroic act in women's slave narratives is not to die, but to escape slavery. Escaping slavery demonstrates power over the slave system and the resulting freedom grants these women power in society that is inaccessible in bondage. In

the abolitionists of the North. She addresses all Americans, declaring, "Ye cannot, I know ye cannot be easy in your consciences; I know that a secret, unspoken trouble gnaws like a chancre in your breasts!" (Griffith 127). Griffith attempts to convince Whites of the wrongs of slavery by drawing out their guilt. This is counterproductive to her cause for two reasons. First, it frames slavery as a White problem that needs to be addressed by Whites. This undermines the true evil of slavery, which is its holding in bondage Blacks simply because of their race. Second, it reinforces existing power structures, leaving Black women powerless and dependent upon Whites. If slaves are freed because of the efforts of Whites alone, they will still be indebted to Whites and will gain no power, respect, or autonomy. Although supportive of abolition, Griffith's approach to abolition, like that of much sentimental fiction, does not challenge the larger sexist, racist, classist hierarchies, and would, if enacted, leave Black women's doubly oppressed status largely unchanged.

In *Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities*, Laura Browder argues that inauthentic slave narratives are a negative consequence of White-led abolitionism. In an effort to make the individual slave's experience representative, abolitionists demanded a very formulaic narrative that coincided with their perceptions of the reality of slavery. Narratives that deviated from the formula, such as Harriet Jacobs', were often deemed inauthentic or suspiciously atypical (Browder 42).[6] Ironically, fantastic tales like Griffith's were praised. One reader wrote a letter to the editor in the *Boston Traveler*, describing Griffith as "'an Eva who has grown up'" giving "'a testimony . . . which cannot be

[6] Until recently, Jacobs' *Incidents* was thought to be inauthentic and was accepted as the work of a White abolitionist. Jean Fagan Yellin's research of some of Jacobs' letters has undoubtedly proved the narrative's authenticity. See Yellin, Jean Fagan, "Written By Herself: Harriet Jacobs' Slave Narrative," Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, ed. Nellie Y. McKay and Frances Smith Foster (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2001) 203-9.

gainsaid'" (qtd. in Browder 41-42). Browder explains that fictional slave narratives are usually characterized by obvious "fissures between the styles that usually make up a slave narrative—the documentary, the sentimental novel, the account of pornographic violence, and the testimony of Christian redemption." Also, in pseudo-narratives the slave "usually has an epiphany and discovers that slavery is wrong," expresses disgust with the Black body, and obsesses over physical pain that is extremely sexualized (Browder 26). Griffith also emphasizes the pattern of slaves completely internalizing White racism in unbelievably sadistic scenes such as when Nace, the oldest slave and the master's driver, gains sardonic pleasure from watching whippings of his fellow slaves (Browder 37). Nace has been a slave the longest and in Griffith's fictional world has most internalized the White racism of his master and loathing of his fellow slaves.

Conversely, in authentic women's slave narratives, Black women are not martyrs but strong individuals who survive abuse, deprivation, and sexual exploitation. For slave women, death is not a noble sacrifice, but an escape or a fact of life that should be in God's hands. Slave women do not hate their bodies; they hate the beatings and rape that desecrate their bodies. Although they often use the sentimental genre to gain entrance and acceptance into the literary world and appeal to their readers, slave women just as skillfully place themselves within the genre in order to criticize its tropes and the definition of womanhood it professed.

Women's Slave Narratives Redefine Womanhood

Black women's slave narratives bring to the forefront the paradoxes in antebellum American women's lives that some sentimental fiction only hints at. These ex-slave women highlight the racism and hypocrisy inherent in the political and religious ideologies of the

time. By analyzing the ironic coexistence of True Womanhood and slavery in the same nation, Black women's slave narratives create a new definition of American womanhood using American political rhetoric and Christian moral ideology. These authors utilized the genre of sentimental fiction to present their new vision for Black women in America for two reasons. First, sentimental fiction was a publicly acceptable genre in which women could write without being ostracized. This acceptability aided Black women in portraying themselves as representatives for the humanity of their race. Second, the tenets of White middle-class womanhood were prominent themes in sentimental fiction. Sentimental fiction, therefore, provided fertile ground in which ex-slave women could cultivate their criticisms of middle-class womanhood. Also some White women novelists such as Fern and Stowe had begun to expose the limitations of True Womanhood as a universal standard in the presence of antebellum American classism and racism, providing at least some precedent for Black women to follow.

Ex-slave authors directly address their readership of primarily White middle-class women and also the authors of sentimental novels, of which only a few question True Womanhood. This appeal evokes sympathy for the slave woman's condition, but also reveals sentimental fiction's exclusionary politics in addressing the classist racist implications of True Womanhood. Jacobs addresses the reader, "But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection . . . do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely!" Jacobs explains that she is not battling temptation or evil, which every Christian must face. She is struggling against "the demon Slavery; and the monster proved too strong" for her (Jacobs 46). It is slavery, not her inability to fight evil that prevents Jacobs from abiding by the Christian morals that her

grandmother has taught her. Michelle Burnham explains that, "it is the disjunction between the cultural ideal embodied in the cult of True Womanhood and the impossibility that Jacobs could ever conform to such an ideal that leads her to suggest the need for an alternate standard for the slave women" (291). Direct addresses to the free White women of the North appeal to the ideal of True Womanhood, as it supposedly exists outside of slavery. The image of these free women in their domestic havens also serves to contrast the realities of their lives with those of the slave women. The disparity between the two existences of free White women and enslaved Black women illustrates the need for a new standard of personhood that can encompass slave women.

Slavery not only prevents women from maintaining their chastity, but also denies women the opportunity of Republican Motherhood. Slave women have no home in which to create a safe haven and certainly do not have the material means to make their quarters a comfortable place for their children. Moreover, slave mothers could not even ensure that their children would be under their care. Although most antebellum slave children grew up in "nuclear" families with their mothers, and less often, their fathers, the separation of children from their mothers occurred often enough to be referred to in many women's slave narratives.[7] Veney addresses this issue in her narrative by speaking directly to her readers, saying, "My dear white lady, in your pleasant home made joyous by the tender love of husband and children all your own, you can never understand the slave mother's emotions as she clasps her new-born child, and knows that a master's word can at any moment take it

[7] As Kolchin explains, "Southern slaves usually lived in nuclear (or 'simple') households: father, mother, and children. In the most recent study of slave families, Ann Patton Malone, who examined a sample of 19,329 slaves in Louisiana between 1810 and 1864, found that 73 percent of these slaves lived in simple households composed either of married couples with or without children or of single parents with children, and an additional 18.3 percent lived alone; only 8.7 percent . . . lived in . . . 'extended' or 'non-nuclear' households" (139).

from her embrace" (Veney 26). Veney values and desires a "nuclear" type of family with a husband and children that will never be suddenly taken from her. She serves to represent her race as having the same parental love and desire for a happy family as Whites, while bitterly criticizing the system of slavery for preventing the existence of such families among the slaves.

Whether slave women attempted to uphold White Christian morals or live by ethics of their own design, they often could not uphold their moral beliefs within the system of slavery. Burnham provides the useful metaphor of the loophole as one way in which to understand slave women's place in the ironic and hypocritical system of slavery. In an analysis of Jacobs' narrative, which has implications for our understanding of all women's slave narratives, Burnham describes Jacobs' hiding in her grandmother's garret as a physical loophole inside the slavery system. She hides in her grandmother's house, the first place Dr. Flint looks for her, but the only place he is unable to find her (Burnham 290, Jacobs 94). She uses this tangible loophole as a metaphor for Jacobs' concurrent embracing and critiquing of sentimental fiction from within the genre. Jacobs is somewhat outside the culture of sentiment as a slave, but places herself within it in order to validate her criticisms (Burnham 290). Burnham writes that Jacobs' "employment of sentimental discourse, associated especially with the fiction of white feminist-abolitionists, opens loopholes within that discourse that allow her to critique it" (290).

Although slavery was created and defended in America by Whites who identified as Christians, they created within the slave community a "loophole," of immorality, in which it was impossible to live a Christian life. I argue that this loophole metaphor offers a powerful way in which to understand women's slave narratives as creating their own loophole, from

within which they redefine womanhood. Women's slave narratives reveal this loophole of immorality, created by the slaveholders, which prevents the slaves from enacting the Christian morality taught by the master class. Slavery itself is the loophole in which slaves, often people wholly committed to the religion, could not uphold their Christian morals. By revolutionizing the role of personhood for Black American women, these ex-slave authors portray themselves as conscious members of society with the power to define, create, and improve themselves according to their own ideals. Writing in the celebrated genre of the slave narrative and the acceptable women's genre of sentimental fiction, these ex-slave authors create a new genre, a loophole within accepted literary conventions, from which to criticize America's construction of womanhood. These narratives redefine womanhood so that it is inclusive of and meaningful to the lives of Black women by criticizing traditional womanhood's piety, domesticity, chastity, and submission, and the embodiment of these ideals, self-sacrifice.

The Impossibility of Piety

Piety, domesticity, chastity, and submission are all interrelated in their contribution to the notion of ideal womanhood. Women's slave narratives therefore understand and interpret all the tenets of womanhood as related and inseparable. However, each narrative emphasizes different aspects of womanhood and the inapplicability of White middle-class womanhood to the protagonist's life. Since each narrative redefines womanhood slightly differently, it is useful to compare the various critiques of each component of womanhood in order to more easily identify the similarities while appreciating the individualistic approaches these women take in defining their selfhood and proposing a new model of Black womanhood.

As we have already seen, slave women did not have access to the roles of Republican Mother or the angel of the domestic realm. Slave women, then, could not achieve piety as the White middle class traditionally defined it. Spirituality was central to the identities of many of the heroines in women's slave narratives, but it was often not perceived, achieved, or nurtured through institutionalized religion, written scripture, or traditional worship services. Black women's religion in their narratives emerges as a unique combination of mainstream White Christianity and African traditions. God is portrayed as a close friend and savior and original sin is de-emphasized, if not entirely absent (Kolchin 144). These women have a very individualized understanding of God and distinct ways in which they communicate with or worship God.

The resistance Black women face to their spiritual development, combined with the inability of White Christian ethics to address their lives, highlights the need for an alternative approach to spirituality. Veney's narrative is an example of the perplexity Black women often faced when attempting to live morally within the corrupt system of slavery. As a small child, Veney is instructed by her mother about God and is told never to lie or she will suffer damnation (8). As she gets older, she receives conflicting messages from her master, who prohibits her from attending church. She repeatedly sneaks in to service without his permission and, exasperated, he finally relinquishes and allows her to go. Her insistence on attending church is a bold statement declaring that she is as needful, deserving, and appreciative of spiritual guidance and development as any White child. She has decided that Christianity is to be a central part of her life as a woman, and she will not have that denied to her because she is Black and a slave.

Veney is a religiously honest slave to her master. She never steals or lies and for her trustworthiness is granted some privileges that other slaves do not have. She is trusted to leave her master's land on errands and to see her lover, and is generally less supervised than others. The sale of Jerry, Veney's lover, to a slave trader headed south, reveals the trap that such White-encouraged honesty can be for slaves. The slave trader, Mr. White, releases Jerry from the string of chained human property, and allows him to go see Veney, hoping Jerry can persuade Veney to join him, thereby adding to the trader's property. Veney and Jerry realize that the trader allowed him to visit her because they were both well-trusted slaves. However, they also realize that despite his promise, the trader would make no effort to keep them together once further south. They wanted to run away together, but "Then [they] remembered that White had trusted [them], in letting him come to [her], and [they] felt ashamed, for a moment, as if [they] had tried to cheat" (Veney 21). This situation exemplifies the impossibility of piety within slavery. In slavery, even honesty could prove to be a vice, separating lovers and condemning a man "to be worked to death in the rice-swamps or cotton-fields" (Veney 21). When confronted by the slave trader, Veney feels guilty and writes, "It was true he had trusted us, and I felt very badly; but what else *could* we have done? Kind reader, *what* think you?" (Veney 22). In lying she, ironically, acts morally because the White value system in this case is antithetical to the reality of her life. Within slavery, morality is not only difficult to uphold, but often results in evil rather than good. This paradox reveals the need for a new set of ethics that is practical in the lives of slaves.

In *Memoir of Old Elizabeth, A Coloured Woman*, Elizabeth also faces opposition to her religious development:

> One day as I was going to my old place behind the hay-stacks to pray, I was assailed with this language, "Are you going there to weep and pray? what a fool! There are older professors than you are, and they do not take that way to get to heaven; people whose sins are forgiven ought to be joyful and lively, and not be struggling and praying." With this I halted and . . . went off to play; but at this moment the light that was in me became darkened, and the peace and joy I once had, departed from me. (8)

Written like a conversion narrative, Elizabeth's story relates her constant struggle with her faith.[8] However, her doubt and lapses in belief do not come from within, the result of original sin. Instead, White authorities always externally impose the opposition. She is freed at age thirty and begins preaching at age forty. Although free, she now faces opposition because she is a woman, and is not supposed to preach. Several religious leaders tell her that "there was nothing in the Scripture that would sanction" her preaching (Elizabeth 9). The restrictions of organized religion threaten to prevent Elizabeth from realizing her calling, not only as a Black slave, but also as a free woman. Elizabeth's story is a poignant example of the restraints organized Christian religion placed on womanhood for Whites as well as Blacks.

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[8] Frances Smith Foster defines the conversion narrative as a sub-genre of the spiritual autobiography. Revived in the Second Great Awakening of the nineteenth century, spiritual autobiography portrayed a more benevolent God than the earlier Puritan God, and grace rather than predestination, was the means of salvation (59-61). Foster also discusses two well-known spiritual autobiographies: *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, A Coloured Lady* and *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labour of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw, an American Female of Colour.*

Restrictions on the speech of free women serve to hinder Elizabeth's efforts to execute her duty as bidden by God. Such blasphemous regulations reveal the immorality of the confines that True Womanhood placed on women.

The bitter irony of honesty and morality in the context of slavery becomes most apparent in the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*,[9] when Isabella sacrifices the well-being of her own children and then her own freedom in the name of Christian duty. Truth explains, "In obedience to her mother's instructions, she had educated herself to such a sense of honesty, that, when she had become a mother, she would sometimes whip her child when it cried for bread, rather than give it a piece secretly, lest it should learn to take what was not its own" (Truth 34). Isabella's sacrifice is not idealized as a sign of true Christian morality; rather, it is portrayed as the internalization of the master's "*religious duty*" to teach his slaves to be honest. Truth laments with irony, "Oh consistency, art thou not a jewel?" (Truth 34). Isabella internalizes the Christian morality embedded in White mainstream womanhood and she enacts this ideal by sacrificing her children in submission to the wishes of her master. Ironically, submission and piety, as defined by White middle-class True Womanhood, results in Isabella forsaking her role as mother, letting her children cry in hunger so as not to be accused of disobeying her master or the rules of Christian honesty.

The same strict honesty later places Isabella's own freedom at risk. Her master promises to free her one year earlier than the state mandate requires if she would "do well"

[9] Like many of these slave narratives, Truth's was transcribed by a White woman as she related it orally, and therefore the particular language and interpretations of her actions are often questioned. This narrative is in third person for two reasons. First, the author is not Truth. Second, Isabella was Truth's given name and represents Truth before she was enlightened by religious revelation. She renamed herself Sojourner Truth, representing her role as an itinerant preacher. Truth often refers to her younger self as Isabella, as if she were a wholly separate person. The centrality of her religious awakening makes it possible to read Truth's narrative, like Elizabeth's, as a conversion narrative.

(Truth 39). Isabella worked tirelessly despite an injured hand, yet when the time came, her master refused to free her. In an ironic twist of fate so common in slavery, her honesty and trustworthiness actually make her more valuable as a commodity, a slave, than as a moral person who deserves the actualization of her master's promise. Truth explains, "Her very faithfulness probably operated against her now, and he found it less easy than he thought to give up the profits of his faithful Bell, who had so long done him efficient service" (39). Isabella internalizes White middle-class standards of morality, specifically truth and honesty. However, these prove to be deceitful guides to her conduct in slavery. She places White approval above the welfare of her children, later grieving, "The Lord only knows how many times I let my children go hungry, rather than take secretly the bread I liked not to ask for" (Truth 38). Since the same honesty made her such a valuable and trusted slave, her master will not free her, which in turn forces her to run away, deceiving her master despite her attempt to remain honest. Truth looks back on her time in slavery and sees herself in a state of "ignorance and degradation" although at the time, she thought she was acting morally and was receiving praises from her master. Only outside of slavery does Truth feel that she has made progress "from a state of chattelism towards that of a woman and a mother" (Truth 37). In slavery, it is impossible to be a good mother and a true woman because the system does not allow anyone in its grips to act morally without simultaneously acting immorally.

The narratives of Veney, Elizabeth, and Truth all highlight the incompatibility of White religious, spiritual, and moral beliefs with the realities of slave life. In response to the inability of the mainstream ideal of womanhood to guide their spiritual actions, Black women, in their narratives, create a whole new approach to spirituality and religion. These women's slave narratives describe an individualized religion that is free of the imposition of

White-led or monitored organized religion and addresses their daily needs as slaves. These women's direct contact with the spiritual is evident in their visions as well as their conviction and ability to speak, often despite their inability to read the Bible.

Elizabeth has an elaborate vision in which she encounters Christ and God. She explains that a director, "led [her] down a long journey to a fiery gulf and left [her] standing upon the brink of this awful pit" and then "a voice told [her] that all the hope [she] had of being saved was no more than a hair; still pray, and it will be sufficient" (6). Then Christ takes her to God, who shows her "the world lying in wickedness" and tells her she must go "and call the people to repentance" (7). After being told by religious leaders that she could not preach because she was a woman, she turned to the Lord and followed the Spirit (10). When she spoke at a meeting in Virginia, she was threatened with imprisonment because she spoke against slavery. When asked with what authority she spoke and whether she had been ordained, she answered, "not by the commission of men's hands: if the Lord had ordained me, I needed nothing better" (17). Elizabeth has an individual relationship with God and gains her spiritual strength directly from God, without the intermediation of organized religion or an understanding of the Bible. Elizabeth defines her spirituality, a crucial part of her womanhood, in terms of her own personal experience. She carries out her faith as she feels best, sometimes defying the typical understanding of the Christian religion and women's roles in society.

Isabella, in Truth's narrative, also has a very personal relationship with God and challenges normative womanhood in her religious work. In Isabella's vision, "God revealed himself to her, with all the suddenness of a flash of lightning, showing her, 'in the twinkling of an eye, that he was *all over*' –that he pervaded the universe—'and that there was no place

where God was not.' She became instantly conscious of her great sin in forgetting her almighty Friend and 'ever-present help in time of trouble'" (Truth 65). After renewing her commitment to God and Christ, Isabella seeks to develop her own understanding of religion. She is illiterate, and employs children to read the Bible to her, because they will read verses to her as many times as she asks, without attempting to interpret the scripture for her like adults: "She wished to compare the teachings of the Bible with the witness within her; and she came to the conclusion that the spirit of the truth spoke in those records, but that the recorders of those truths had intermingled with them ideas and suppositions of their own. This is one among the many proofs of her energy and independence of character" (Truth 109). Isabella develops her own personal understanding of Christianity without the intervention of others' interpretations.

Isabella challenges True Womanhood in two ways when she takes her personalized brand of Christianity and begins to travel, preaching and singing to various groups of people. First, she is a Black woman preacher, not typically condoned by religious or legal authorities (as illustrated in Elizabeth's narrative). Secondly, Isabella leaves her children and travels alone. Her children fear that she is delusional and has "been left to commit suicide" (Truth 109). Isabella decides that her greatest good will be achieved not with her children, as Republican Motherhood insists, but instead in the public sphere, converting people to the truth of Christianity. Isabella's commitment to reaching her own personal understanding of religion without the interference of accepted interpretations, parallels her decision to travel and preach, rejecting the interfering norms of True Womanhood that would otherwise confine her to her home and children.

Veney, Elizabeth, and Truth attest to the difficulty of acting morally within slavery by conveying their own struggles with Christian morality in their narratives. In *From the Darkness Cometh the Light; Or Struggles for Freedom*, Lucy A. Delaney expresses her appreciation for the moral triumph of her mother within slavery. She addresses her mother's memory in heroic terms, "Your patient face and neatly-dressed figure stands ever in the foreground of that checkered time; a figure showing naught to an on-looker but the common place virtues of an honest woman! Never would an ordinary observer connect those virtues with aught of heroism or greatness, but to me they are as bright rays as ever emanated from the lives of great ones of earth, which are portrayed in historic pages" (Delaney 51). Carby interprets Delaney's description of her mother as carrying "an understated irony, for the 'commonplace virtues' were those denied to black women within the dominant ideology of womanhood. Gaining recognition as an 'honest woman' was the struggle of Delaney's mother throughout the text" as she attempted to prove that she and her daughter were free, since she had been kidnapped into slavery (37). Delaney realizes the magnitude of her mother's triumph not just because of the plot of the story and her mother's trials in the judicial system, but because of her mother's achievement in the context of slavery. Delaney knows what a monumental triumph it is that her mother lived in slavery and managed to remain an honest woman. Only someone who knows the trials that slavery imposes on women could see that this woman deserves to be recorded in history for her moral triumph over such a corrupt system.

Slavery often threatened to stunt Black women's spiritual development and often thwarted their attempts to act morally within the smothering system. Piety, as defined in the context of White womanhood, was not accessible to Black women because they were unable

to maintain chastity and domesticity and rejected the submission necessary to be pious according to the conventions of True Womanhood. Efforts to achieve this type of piety resulted in the pathetic violation of other aspects of womanhood, such as motherhood or submission. Many Black slave women identify themselves as Christian in their narratives, but they redefine religion. These women develop their own religious theory combining what they know from the master class and what they know of the Bible with the reality of their lives. Their analysis of Christianity results in an individualistic, democratic approach to religion, in which they cultivate personal relationships with their God and reject interloping interpretations from the establishment.

Escape Over Death

Rather than the spiritual displacing the physical, in women's slave narratives, the physical becomes another dimension of the spiritual. These autobiographies go further than Stowe's appropriation of the physical to influence the moral, and equate the physical and spiritual in importance and relevance. This perspective portrays slavery as an unbearably sinful circumstance, escape as an equivalent to salvation, and death, as something to be avoided at all costs. This new understanding of physical life as a blessing to be celebrated, rather than a sinful fallen existence, undermines submission and especially its pinnacle, self-sacrifice of one's life.

In Jacobs' narrative, death is portrayed as preferable to the life of a female slave, but it is never framed in self-sacrificial terms. On New Year's Day Linda[10] explains how many

[10] Although Jacobs' narrative is autobiographical, she originally published under the pseudonym Linda Brent, also the name of the protagonist.

mothers often spend that day of human auctions and agonizing separation wishing that they and their children would die rather than be split up. The pain of separation is not the only motive for such thoughts. Linda's lover attempts to buy her and her children, but Mr. Flint refuses to sell them. This powerlessness over the fate of her own children's existences causes Linda to swear, "God being my helper, they should never pass into his hands. I would rather see them killed than have them given up to his power" (Jacobs 66). During her long hiding in the crawlspace of her grandmother's house, the hope to help her children is the only motive for Linda to stay alive (101). Linda wishes to ensure her children's freedom so that they may live out the Christian morality that she was unable to uphold in slavery.

Similarly, Veney wants her daughter to be assured of loving family relationships and the ability to maintain her sexual dignity. As she holds her newborn baby girl, Betty knows that at any time the master can take her and that eventually she will end up ministering to "the unbridled lust of the slave-owner." She "would have been glad if we could have died together there and then" (27). Here death is portrayed as a less painful alternative to the inevitable sexual abuse her daughter will suffer at the hands of her future masters. Veney feels that her separation from her daughter is just as inevitable, denying her any ability to afford her child motherly protection, or at least loving comfort. Because Veney knows all too well the horrors of slavery for a woman, she feels it would be kinder and more just to remain together with her daughter in death than subject her to the loneliness, degradation, and humiliation that lie ahead.

Death wished upon oneself as a relief from the misery of daily existence is not martyrdom like Eva's resignation to God's will. For slaves, it is not God who determines whether they live or die, but their masters. In her narrative, Jackson gives a poignant example

of the devilish abuse of the god-like power that slaveholders have. Mattie's mother had to keep her baby brother in a box because the mistress thought that it would take too much of her mother's time to watch the baby if he was allowed to crawl around. As a result, he is paralyzed by age two. He was evidently dying but the mistress was unaffected until one day she "saw his life fast ebbing away, then she put on a sad countenance for fear of being exposed" (Jackson 12). At first glance Jackson seems to be evoking the ethic of sacrifice. However, in sentimental fiction the ethic of sacrifice involves an innocent death that in turn exerts spiritual influence over the living people who loved the departed person. In this case, Jackson uses her brother's death to exert influence over those who did not love him. The death plagues the mistress with the guilt of murder, condemning the system of slavery.

Control of the Body Displaces Chastity

Virginal purity, an ideal of womanhood propounded in sentimental fiction, is an option often denied to slave women. Their status as property subjects them to sexual harassment and rape by White men as well as Black men. Although their masters usually inflicted this violence, slave women had no recourse no matter who the offender was. Slave women had been forced into the role of breeder and their bodies were male property, available for public viewing and comment. Discussion of their fertility and sexual activity, combined with the indelicate use of their bodies in the fields and the indecent exposure of their bodies on the auction block, denied slave women access to any of the virtues of True Womanhood, depriving Black women of any morality or decency in the eyes of the White public (White 30-32). Southern slaveholders identified these women as Jezebels, who tempted, entrapped, and defiled all men in their path.

In response to the negative Jezebel stereotype, which is perpetuated by the public exploitation of the Black female body, Black women aspire to the sentimental ideal of virginal purity in their narratives. However, death is not presented as more desirable than losing one's purity. Rather than die, slave women rebel against the sexual oppression of their masters, and as a result gain power over their own lives. In Jacobs' narrative, Linda confirms that she has the same Christian values as White women, but asserts that she is unable to uphold them. Her "soul revolted against the mean tyranny" of Dr. Flint's sexual harassment and his attempts to compel her to sexual submission (Jacobs 26). Yet she is aware that White women's standards of morality cannot withstand slavery because "That which commands admiration in the white women only hastens the degradation of the female slave" (Jacobs 26). Linda chooses to have an affair with Mr. Sands, a White man, in order to have some protection from Dr. Flint and, she hopes, to have her children freed. Although she is happy in her "triumph" over her master, Linda is "humiliated" that her family will find out about her affair and loses her self-respect because she had promised herself she would remain virtuous until she died (48). The ideal for Linda was to be courted and "married" to a slave man or a free Black man, not to become the concubine of a White man.

Linda's grandmother at first believes Mrs. Flint's presumption that Linda has succumbed to Dr. Flint's sexual demands. Linda's grandmother orders her from the house, never to return, after saying, "I had rather see you dead than to see you as you are now" (Jacobs 48). Once she learns the truth, Linda's grandmother still never says that she forgives her but does express pity for her "poor child" (Jacobs 49). Linda's grandmother represents the ideals of True Womanhood espoused by White women in sentimental fiction. As Carby notes, "In a number of ways, Jacobs's figure of the grandmother embodied aspects of True

Womanhood; she was represented as being pure and pious, a fountainhead of physical and spiritual sustenance for Linda, her whole family, and the wider black community" (Carby 57). In accordance with the ethic of sacrifice, she would rather that Linda die with her purity than be corrupted. Her inability to completely condone Linda's choosing of Mr. Sands implies that she wants for Linda a slave man to whom she could be "married" and have a more stable life. This idea of marriage and stability, as practical as it may be for a White woman, is not realistic for a slave woman. There are no legal marriages for slaves, and the slave fathers provide no protection for their wives or control over the fate of their children. Also, either mother or father can be sold at any time, providing no stability. Linda sees the mockery that slavery makes out of such ideals and chooses Mr. Sands because he treats her well and may be able to free her children. Linda's grandmother represents the ability for the sentimental self-sacrificing ethic of virginal purity to arouse pity for slave women, and at the same time its inability to empower the bondwoman or change the realities of her bondage.

Linda not only rejects the womanly ideal of submission, she rejects the notion that sacrificing her life would be better than losing her purity. Carby argues that "Linda Brent's decision, as a slave, to survive through an act that resulted in her loss of virtue, placed her outside the parameters of the conventional heroine" (Carby 59). She chooses to invert the power structure of her master-slave relationship with Dr. Flint by actively rebelling against his oppression. She chooses with whom she will have her children, thereby exerting possession and control over her body. In doing so, she rejects the sentimental tropes of virginal purity and self-sacrifice in death, consequently creating for herself sexual freedoms that even White women do not have. For Linda, choosing to have an affair with a man of another race, and having a lover outside of marriage, was the most moral path she could

choose. For a White woman, having a lover with no intention or possibility of marrying would have degraded her to the status of a prostitute in the public eye and would have been the most immoral course of action she could have taken. In creating a moral system that is viable within slavery, Jacobs endows slave women with more freedom than White women. This irony illustrates that the ideals of True Womanhood are created for White middle-class women, and consciously or not, by embracing this model of morality, men and women reinforce existing racist and patriarchal structures, including the system of slavery.

Like Jacobs, Mary Prince also rejects the ethic of self-sacrifice by acting for her own personal survival rather than giving her life, Christ-like, for the moral care of others. Although Prince's story is a West Indian narrative, her experiences in slavery are very similar to those of American narratives and her story offers a powerful critique of womanhood worth noting. In *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave*, Prince not only preserves her own life by rebelling, but also helps her mistress survive the patriarchal system of slavery by interrupting typical sentimental plot development. Mary intervenes, suffering from some injuries herself, when Mr. D— is beating one of his daughters in a drunken rage (Prince 13). Mary is compassionate towards even her mistress in the face of violent abuse of patriarchal power, of which they are both victims. She sees her mistress as undeserving of the severe beating she is receiving from her father, and stops the injustice.

This incident perfectly reveals the parallel between the oppressed roles of White women and Black slave women in the nineteenth century. Mary's own fiery personality prevents one of the two other possible outcomes of this situation. Had the daughter survived the beating, she would have gained strength from her ability to once again subject herself to her father's authority, better able to valiantly withstand the submission, and asked God to

help her forgive him. Had the daughter died from the beating, she would have been the ultimate sentimental heroine: the innocent victim who dies and is able to affect the moral constitution of the living, enacting the ethic of sacrifice. Mary's intervention interrupts the typical sentimental plot development and unites the two women in rebellion against the abuse of patriarchal power.

Prince also acts on her own behalf by rebelling against her master. He often would call Prince to bathe him, which repulsed her much like Dr. Flint's propositions repulsed Linda. Prince aligns herself with the ideal of virginal purity and self sacrifice by explaining that having to bathe her master "was worse to [her] than all the licks" (Prince 13). She suffers physical punishment for upholding her moral ideals. Although she is attempting to enact an aspect of True Womanhood in preserving her chastity, she is not willing to die and never wishes to die as an alternative to the abuse. Rather than die from a beating, or constantly submit to the degradation, she eventually refuses to live with her master anymore, declaring that he is "very spiteful, and too indecent; with no shame for his servants, no shame for his own flesh" (Prince 13). After this moral chastisement and Prince's running away, her master hires her out, and she pays him a portion of her wages each week. Like Linda's choosing the father of her children, Prince's rebelliousness results in an actual change in her circumstances to her benefit. Both women are able to exert power over their masters and take control over their bodies and situations by rejecting submission or death as solutions to their abuses.

The ability of these women to exert power over their masters and control over their circumstances rests in their understanding of their status as property in the system of slavery. Linda knows that Dr. Flint will not challenge another White man over the sexual possession of one of his slaves because, "as a professional man, [he] deemed it prudent to keep up some

outward show of decency" (Jacobs 27). By choosing a lover and preventing Dr. Flint from taking any action to prevent this without making known his "villainy", Linda asserts power over Dr. Flint, despite his delusion that she does not have the power to manipulate him in any way because she is his property and "must be subject to his will in all things" (Jacobs 26). Mr. D—'s response to Prince's rebellion is to hire her out. This implies that her resistance threatens him. Prince's power may derive from Mr. D—'s fear that she will make public his sexual impropriety or that she may arouse discontent in his other slaves by running away, criticizing his morality, and degrading his authority as a Christianly moral and thereby political authority.

Annihilation of the Idyllic Domestic Sphere in *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, In a Two-Story White House, North. Showing that Slavery's Shadows Fall Even There*

The women's slave narratives previously discussed illustrate the exclusion of Black women from the White middle-class construct of True Womanhood, thereby denying them their humanity and their claim to their existence as women. Throughout these narratives, Black women redefine personhood for women in antebellum America, creating a new paradigm that provides meaning for their lives within and after slavery. Focusing on the inseparability of their existence from the public sphere of the economic and political, individualistic Christian spirituality, and the preference to escape and /or gain control of their bodies rather than die as martyrs, these ex-slave authors create an entirely new definition of womanhood. However, these narratives often still idealize the domestic realm of free White ladies in the North, clinging to the image of a Republican Mother who uses her education and freedom to educate, moralize, and protect her children.

In *Our Nig*, Harriet E. Wilson destroys the fantasy of the Northern woman's home as a safe refuge and the ideal manifestation of free womanhood. Through the narration of Frado, a mulatto child serving as an indentured servant to the Bellmont family, Wilson provides the most scathing criticism of True Womanhood by revealing the failure of domestic ideology, even in the North, outside of slavery. The antithesis of the domestic realm, the two-story white house in Massachusetts is ruled by a sadistic mother and the heart of the domestic realm, the kitchen, is a torture chamber. [11]

Our Nig is clearly a hybrid of the slave narrative and sentimental novel. Julia Stern, in "Excavating Genre in *Our Nig*," describes Wilson's effort as "a transitional moment in the

[11] The writings of the Beecher sisters provide a representative picture of the ideal woman-run northern home and kitchen. See Jeanne Boydston, Mary Kelley, and, Anne Margolis, The Limits of Sisterhood: The Beecher Sisters on Women's Rights and Woman's Sphere (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1988).

history of American women's narrative, which until the late 1850's used the sentimental form to mask a gothic message." Stern sees the "sentimental frame" as flawed because "it cannot quite suppress, and indeed underscores, the gothic protest seething beneath the narrative's surface" (439). The constant explicit violence that Mrs. Bellmont inflicts on Frado, is not beneath the surface, but is in fact interwoven into the sentimental plot. Wilson's use of the tropes of sentimental fiction to relate a slave-type narrative is not an effort to suppress the protest, but rather to augment it. Wilson, like Jacobs, Veney, Jackson, Truth, and others, utilizes sentimental fiction because of its popularity and acceptability as well as to criticize the ideal of womanhood that was often codified in sentimental novels. Carby asserts that, "the use of these particular conventions can be found not only in the novel but also in many slave narratives" and argues, "that *Our Nig* can be most usefully regarded as an allegory of a slave narrative, a 'slave' narrative set in the 'free' North" (43). As do other women's slave narratives, Wilson's narrative utilizes and criticizes sentimental fiction and its tropes. However, Wilson's critique is more radical because it eliminates the myth that an ideal for Black womanhood can exist at all in her contemporary American society. The racism, that is the true evil behind slavery, is prevalent throughout society. So society must fundamentally change, even the women of the North, in order for Black women to truly achieve personhood in antebellum America.

I argue that Wilson's novel is not an allegory for slavery, but rather a sentimental novel that provides a searing condemnation of True Womanhood, rooted in domestic ideology, to combat the racism that permeates all of American society, North or South. This novel exposes the racism, hate, and violence that form the philosophy, which allows an atrocity like slavery to exist in American society. The co-existence of racism and capitalism

inevitably create slavery-like conditions for people with any trace of Black blood. Mrs. Bellmont excludes Frado from womanhood by exploiting the racism inherent in the concept and accentuating Frado's Blackness. Mrs. Bellmont also attempts to smother her femininity and stunt her spiritual development, alienating her more and more from womanhood. Much like women slaves, Frado lives the contradiction of separate spheres ideology, has to fight for control of her body, and struggles to nurture her spirituality. In so doing, Frado creates a new model for womanhood, rooted in the public sphere where she exerts control of her body through speech; ultimately gaining power over her pain by writing and publishing her autobiography.

Wilson denies the existence of separate economic and domestic spheres by illustrating the inseparability of the economic and the domestic in the Bellmont household. Frado herself is a commodity. To her mother, Mag, and stepfather, Seth, she is a financial burden to be disposed of.

> "It's no use," said Seth one day; "we must give the children away, and try to get work in some other place."
>
> "Who'll take the black devils?" snarled Mag (16).

Seth then assures her that Frado is pretty and would "be a prize somewhere" (17). Frado is an object that needs to be disposed of and might be tolerated by someone else because of her beauty. Frado is abandoned by her mother, and left to the care of Mrs. Bellmont, who never feels that Frado is worth her room and board, although she does "the work of two girls" and swears she will "beat the money out of her if [she] can't get her worth any other way" (Wilson 90). A burdensome object to her mother, to Mrs. B. Frado is a workhorse out of which Mrs. B. needs to violently extract her labor value.

This scene in which Mrs. Bellmont swears to beat her money's worth out of Frado in "free" Massachusetts provides a striking contrast to Mrs. Shelby's grief over having to sell Tom and Harry. Mrs. Shelby laments, "I was a fool to think I could make anything good out of such a deadly evil" while Mr. Shelby insists "they must go or *all* must" (Stowe 29). The gender roles are reversed in *Our Nig*. While Mrs. Bellmont promises to beat Frado, Mr. Bellmont lightly scolds his wife for giving Frado enough "whippings for two" (Wilson 90). Wilson proves that a "free" woman is subject to abuses that rival those of slavery, making Stowe's image of the benevolent mistress seem overly idealistic. Although she is free, Frado has less power to manipulate her situation by using her economic value to her advantage. Unlike Veney, who makes herself seem sickly and cross at auction, Frado has no control over where she works. She is trapped with the Bellmonts until she is eighteen years old. Frado is a commodity like a slave, and is treated like a possession, but as an indentured servant, she is isolated from the market, unable to manipulate her situation.

Mrs. Bellmont is threatened by Frado because she has the potential to be every bit as much of a lady as Mrs. Bellmont's two daughters. In attempts to transform Frado into a creature inadmissible into the realm of womanhood, Mrs. Bellmont manipulates Frado's spiritual beliefs and physical person. Mrs. Bellmont wants to prohibit Frado from going to church. Seeing her hypocrisy, Mr. Bellmont says, "I thought you Christians held to going to church." Mrs. B. replies, "Yes, but who ever thought of having a nigger go, except to drive others there? Why, according to you and James, we should very soon have her in the parlor, as smart as our own girls. It's of no use talking to you or James. If you should go on as you would like, it would not be six months before she would be leaving me; and that won't do" (89-90). Religion and education would inevitably lead to Frado's understanding herself as a

woman, as a person. No longer able to stand for the abuse of Mrs. Bellmont, she would then promptly leave. Frado is forbidden to attend church because in Mrs. B.'s mind this would bring her one step closer to equality with her own daughters. If she were to claim personhood, i.e. womanhood for herself, she would not only leave the Bellmont household. She would also destroy the racist classist definition of womanhood by which the Bellmont women define themselves.

Frado begins to understand Christianity but chooses to abandon religion in order to free herself from the oppression of Mrs. B. and begin resisting her. Although Frado enjoys church when her aunt takes her and swears her seriousness to the minister, Mrs. B. "hardly believe[s] she [has] a soul" (86). After Frado is finally able to believe that she is welcome in heaven and will one day be able to join her beloved James there, Mrs. B. tells her that she should not bother attempting to join James, because even if she does get to heaven she will never be "as high up" as James (Wilson 100). After concluding that Mrs. B. could go to heaven, Frado decides that "If she should be near James, even she could not be happy with those fiery eyes watching her ascending path" and resolves "to give over all thought of the future world" (104). Frado does not develop an individual relationship with God enabling her to apply religion to her daily life, like Truth and Elizabeth. Instead, she decides not to think about the afterlife and focuses on the present. This new frame of mind enables Frado to take ownership of herself in her physical, temporal existence. Only three paragraphs following her decision to reject hope in the afterlife, Frado rebels against Mrs. B. for the first time. Mrs. B. is about to strike her and Frado shouts, "Stop! Strike me, and I'll never work a mite more for you." Frado then drops the wood she had gathered and stands "like one who feels the stirring of free and independent thoughts" (105). Frado triumphs over the roadblock that Mrs. B.'s

racist interpretation of Christianity had placed in front of her, and is then able to speak up for herself, challenging Mrs. B.'s authority.

Mrs. B.'s effort to ultimately dehumanize Frado, relegating her to the realm of the non-human and therefore non-woman, is most obvious in her physical domination of Frado. "In addition to Frado's ambiguous racial heritage, the child's gender and sexual identities become battlegrounds upon which Mrs. Bellmont wages her campaign of terror" (Stern 443). Frado's beauty threatens to place her visually in the same category of personhood as Mrs. B.'s daughters: "She was not many shades darker than Mary now; what a calamity it would be ever to hear the contrast spoken of." Mrs. B. never allowed her to wear a hat or bonnet to shield her skin from the sun, "determined the sun should have full power to darken the shade which nature had first bestowed upon her as best befitting" (Wilson 39). Naturally, Frado's light skin rivals that of Mrs. B.'s daughter, Mary, but the thought of Frado looking the same as Mrs. B. or her family threatens her concept of womanhood. Mrs. B. also attempts to strip Frado of her femininity by shaving her head and dressing her in Jack's old clothes. The attempts to physically erase Frado's sexuality, beauty, and femininity, combined with the severe beatings she suffers, serve to dehumanize her. Mrs. B. sees her as a "man, boy, housekeeper, domestic" and attributes Frado's ability to survive abuse to debased nature (Wilson 116). Mrs. B. explains to her husband that Frado is nothing more than an animal. "You know these niggers are just like black snakes; you *can't* kill them. If she wasn't tough she would have been killed long ago" (Wilson 89). This racist logic degrades Frado to a bestial level, justifying the violence, which serves to further degrade her.

The violent abuse Frado suffers at the hand of Mrs. B. dehumanizes her by silencing her and at the same time humanizes her by invalidating the ideology that Mrs. B. uses to

degrade Frado. Frado's torture often includes her literal silencing by Mrs. B. Once after whipping her, Mary and Mrs. B. "prop her mouth open with a piece of wood, [and] shut her up in a dark room, without any supper" (Wilson 35). Mary also silences Frado by threatening her with her life. Mary has just hurled a knife at Frado, missing her by inches, so her words carry a real threat, "Tell anybody this if you dare. If you tell Aunt Abby, I'll certainly kill you" (Wilson 65). The sadistic natures of Mary and Mrs. B. allow Wilson to humanize Frado by degrading the ideology of womanhood that these two women are supposedly adhering to. Stern notes, "The most horrific violence Frado endures takes place, quite designedly, in the kitchen. It is not simply private maternity that comes under explicit attack here but a larger institution – the Cult of Domesticity" (454). The northern home, especially the kitchen, was considered a Christian haven of abolitionist women. Wilson's placing the most violent abuse in the kitchen illustrates that racism and the resulting objectification of individuals is at the heart of American beliefs and lifestyle.

Frado/Wilson finally triumphs over the oppression of the racist Bellmont household by rejecting the domestic and embracing the public realm, where she is empowered and achieves womanhood. Stern argues, "Wilson privileges the public sphere as an arena of safety and freedom, in contrast to the private, which is figured as a gothic realm of violence and mortal danger" (448). Writing and publishing the story of her degradation and abuse enables Wilson to regain control over her body and simultaneously have a voice. Ronna C. Johnson argues that there is a hidden subtext of sexual abuse in *Our Nig*: "Tropes, eccentric signifiers, and narrative discontinuities palpably signify the repressed material . . . and the subtext's detectable referent of sexual abuse" (Johnson 98). Regardless of whether Frado is the victim of sexual abuse, Wilson chooses to emphasize her non-sexualized pain. The focus

on non-sexualized pain acknowledges Frado's physical existence as a Black woman without evoking stereotypes about the sexualized Black body. Cynthia J. Davis argues that, "*Our Nig* provides an alternative to representations of nineteenth-century Afro-American women as either disembodied saints or wanton bodies" (402). In short, Wilson creates an individual woman, separate and apart from the stereotypes of Jezebel, Mammy, and Eva. Davis offers additional explanations of why Wilson may have chosen to focus on generalized physical pain as opposed to sexualized suffering. She suggests that sexual violence is more likely to arouse in some readers an urge to blame the victim, whereas all people, regardless of gender or race, can sympathize with the pain of a beating and "crucially . . . we each could feel capable of doing something to ease that pain" (Davis 397-8). Sadistic beatings like those doled out by Mrs. Bellmont and Mary Bellmont cannot be justified, and are more difficult to rationalize as "domestic" or "private" problems as sexual abuse is often ignored.

Wilson redefines womanhood radically differently from women's slave narratives. She not only emphasizes the need for dramatic social change in order to eliminate the racism and violence that permeates all of American society, but she divorces womanhood from the stereotypical characteristics of sexuality and motherhood. Rather than reclaiming sexuality in order to gain control over her body, Wilson portrays Frado as a human without specific female sexual consciousness. Frado is a person suffering unjustly. It is her status as a person, a woman, who needs physical and emotional love, that makes her deserving of womanhood. She is not a mother, a lover, or a wife for most of the story, but instead becomes the hero because "she is a thinking, feeling *human* being, and . . . it is the white woman who, because of her cruel actions, is inhuman(e)" (Davis 400). Wilson does not reclaim her body by redefining the appropriate expression of female sexuality. Rather, she empowers herself by

maneuvering from the object of abuse to the subject of narrator: "By documenting, by testifying again and again to her pain, Wilson effectively takes control of that pain, wresting power from her torturer and appropriating it for herself" (Davis 399). That Wilson is finally able to appropriate power by writing and publishing a novel, disseminating her suffering to the public, undermines the notion that female empowerment originates in the domestic realm. Wilson redefines womanhood as a mode of being that can only begin to grant a woman her potential in the public realm.

Antebellum women's slave narratives keenly realize that the hypocrisy and oppression of racism permeates all of American society, although it may be more visible within the system of slavery. These women, in their narratives, insist that abolition is necessary, but assert that abolition alone will not grant Black women the status of women, i.e., humans, in American society. Rather, the larger patriarchal and racist power hierarchies of society will have to be transformed in order for Black women to realize their potential. In their narratives, Black women insist on being defined not by their race or their sex, but rather by how they individually identify themselves in terms of their spiritual, physical, and sexual lives. In order to be truly free, and be able to develop themselves as individuals, these ex-slave women also insist that they cannot be confined to the domestic realm. These narratives bring to the forefront the reality of the personal influence of racial and sexual politics on individual lives, a notion central to the women's liberation movement in twentieth century America. Sojourner Truth once described herself, saying, "I am a self-made woman," identifying herself with the nineteenth century ideal of the self-made man (Truth v). Black women's antebellum slave narratives created alternative definitions of womanhood in response to the White middle-class ideal of womanhood that was dominant at the time.

However, these women knew that they needed more than just their freedom to achieve their potential as self-made women. They were transforming the American understanding of personhood, demanding a revolution in the American definition of citizen, woman, and person.

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