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“TO SAVE MY OWN LIFE”:
Antebellum Autobiography and the Figures for Black Ontology

by

Jared Robinson

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

English
and the Designated Emphasis

in

Critical Theory

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Stephen Best, chair

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Abstract

“TO SAVE MY OWN LIFE”: Antebellum Autobiography and Figures for Black Ontology

by

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Doctor of Philosophy in English

Designated Emphasis in Critical Theory

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Stephen Best, chair

My dissertation “TO SAVE MY OWN LIFE: Antebellum Autobiography and the Figures for Black Ontology”, directed by Stephen Best, revisits the autobiographical narrations of several canonical (formally enslaved) writers to discover in them the origins of the contemporary methods for black study—emblemized by the archival poetics of M. NourbeSe Phillip’s *Zong!* and the auto-theoretical polemics of Frank Wilderson III’s *Afro-Pessimism*. To articulate the relationship between these two poles of contemporary black critical thought—one that voices drowned slaves through a new vocabulary assembled from court documents, the other which polemicizes against coalition as it draws the reader closer and closer to its subject’s position—my project revisits their dual origin in both the production and reception of three slave narratives. These narratives and texts, by Olaudah Equiano, Phillis Wheatley, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Jacobs, make case studies for body chapters that address what lives on the other side of the constraints of a (white, abolitionist) literary market turned field of academic study. Alongside the more direct reference within each text to the author’s awareness of their narrative’s significance to their contemporary struggle for freedom, the subsequent debates surrounding Equiano’s natality, Wheatley’s proposing of initial figural position for black speakers, and crafting of a historical fiction, and the third Jacobs’s self-metaphorization and references to the archives of enslavement, make the literary (historical) evidence in negative to the positive, radical, and ultimately ontological potentials of struggling to articulate life through an oppressive and abstract medium: the autobiography and, more broadly the written word, “the dead letter.” The formally registered “self-consciousness” of these narratives—accounts of the transition between being an object who is subject to the violence of mere syntax, and the self-objectification that results through the transaction of manumission in their becoming legitimate subjects—held in turns of phrase and figure are shown in an opening chapter to prefigure the auto-theoretical and archival methods of poetic and theoretical representations of blackness in contemporary black (literary, critical) study, just as they were the foundational pieces of “factual” evidence to the lives of the enslaved that helped to ground that field in the later 1960s.

Overall, my project is aimed at recontextualizing the slave’s writing, to show it working alongside other 19th century thinkers on the displacement of universalist enlightenment categorization through the ontological propositions produced in negative by way of their phenomenological accounts of the (black) being, or more precisely of the

becoming being of the black person, in text. A description and theorization of this specific becoming that extends through (black, American) literature and theory past the floodgates of emancipation, through the failure of reconstruction and the multiple waves of black renaissance and rebellion, toward the establishment of the field of black study which has produced the very poetic ontologies the field now uses to narrate, poetically reconstitute, or politically reconcile (black) lives in general. As a result, the project includes a pointed genealogy of the contemporary investigations into the being of blackness, which carries back several poetic figures or polemical theories for a black ontology, indexed above by the work of Phillip and Wilderson, but also present in that of Frantz Fanon, Saidiya Hartman, Fred Moten, Hortense Spillers, Calvin Warren, Sylvia Wynter, et al.

This subterranean genealogy demonstrates how the phenomenological and historiographical methods of representing and theorizing blackness developed out of and alongside the more canonical trajectory for their formulation across the 19th century and 20th century—from Hegel to Emerson to Nietzsche to Husserl to Heidegger to Sartre to Fanon to Derrida and so on. Which is to say, from the heart of the critical writing of the 19th and 20th century, the beginning of the critique of enlightenment. And that the slave narrative participates in this critique, particularly, through the deployment of several literary tactics with archival or auto-theoretical consequences—spinning false yarns about their pasts, building frame narratives, and using abstract figures to describe material conditions. These early black autobiographies are, in this light, synthetic documents that help reinvent the genre and purpose of autobiographical writing, merging the historiographical inventions of archival awareness with an auto-theorist's poetic approach to self-preservation, and thus anticipating if not creating the field of black study as it moves and works and has it's being today.

To all those who chose to save their lives

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Introduction: A position in a “parallel universe”

“In the very effort to recognize the slave as person, blackness was reinscribed as pained and punitive embodiment and black humanity was constituted as a state of injury and punishment.”

Saidiya Hartman
Scenes of Subjection, pg. 101

True, this was only ever meant as a beginning. A word then on frames and positions, an outline of locations from which to write. The project as it stands is little more than an autobiographical artifact, a kind of curio, for the time I’ve been thinking about black autobiographical writing. Especially that writing done by some of America’s earliest truly black thinkers, the (formerly) enslaved. Across the several years that comprised the conceiving and haphazard execution of this first incarnation of my project, America saw the deaths of black people turned over into narrative, and almost immediately politics, over and over and over again. Nothing is new under the sun. In some ways the guiding assumption underlying my view of the entire history of American art is just such a simple magic trick: the conversion of life, and especially black life, into politics through narrative. Storytelling, like this project, is merely a way to frame events that they might be viewed, analyzed, and perhaps subsequently recombined. My interests lie in the mechanisms of imagery and mechanics of rhetoric that transmute the previously unthought and unfeeling black “thing” into a legitimate, politically actionable and metaphysically relevant entity. Language has helped to render and thus may serve in part to explain this transformation. The black is thought being that escapes, blackness names—or seems to name, if the heaps of contemporary scholarship on the concept is to be believed—the subject-object of absence, refusal, and dispersion. It is in this way the genealogical object par excellence.

There is a critical common place that assumes it to be an anachronistic to think about “blackness” in any past that is before what scholars identify as its official condensation into a critical term, likely as not sometime in the later 20th century. However, what this position fails to consider is that there would have been some conception of blackness, of what it meant to be black as discursive position, before this academic conceptualization. Even if that conception was in no way as critically developed as the one the field purports to have developed for itself in the present. My work attempts to engage this genealogical formulation of the concept of blackness by investigating how it might be read as it formed, by analyzing the ways that this formation leaves traces in the works of Phillis Wheatley, Olaudah Equiano, and Harriet Jacobs. I will address briefly however, and by way of introduction, the way that Frederick Douglas boxes himself in to discourse, how he posits a position for the critic of the concept of blackness in his own 1845 *Narrative in the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* by producing a slender frame narrative around his life, and thus a critical position from which to critique it toward conceptualization. Black life turned “black” life. A narrative which marks out the intellectual zone in which the critical concept blackness will be theorized: by a black person, perhaps a black person of the future, at a desk, sitting down to write—to write about himself, write about his blackness, and ultimately to write his way out of it or write it away from him. His work among other autobiographers and theorists of the present will make an introduction to the concerns at hand in this dissertation

But first a further word on the main figures of this dissertation, and on the work their writing. The writing of the (formally) enslaved offers a unique object to the contemporary field of black study, and the literary scholarship continuously formulating a concept of blackness. It is

a prose that is vulnerable and has been subjected to many a misreading and under reading, along with critical history that has assumed these text's immediacy to the life of the enslaved, ensnaring these writers in the world of surface, skin and flesh. And while the recent wave of thinking through the surface, of speculative thought about the past, of poetic reimagining or embodied allegorical performances of ostensibly real black life, has in response produced for the field of black studies an incredibly rich archive of methodological, radical political and socio-historical, moods for the comprehending, charting, critiquing and elaborating of blackness as a concept. It remains true as well that a study of the slave's writing whose guiding principles are attentive to these acts of self-preservation and emancipation through critiques of instances of black subject made flesh, a study that approaches the political surface tension of early African American literature with an eye for seeds of these modern methods, has yet to be performed. The writing of the enslaved, along with the immediacy of their concerns within discourse and the conceptual rigor with which they encoded their unique conceptual language of blackness into these the earliest of American literary scenes, make a vast and infinitely plumbable critical archive for the exploration of terms of the subject who happens to be black. Especially in a field so concerned at present with constructing a chorus of theorizations thereof—a field that seems to refuse singular systems in favor of democratic development for its terms of order.

The first chapter situates the complex contemporary strains and methods of black study in the wider field of the study of and uses for autobiographical narratives. Demonstrating a close connection between these current debates and the problems attending both the production and study of autobiography, both as artwork and as generic category. This chapter does two things at once. It gives a brief overview of the history of the study of African American literature, and how this study was founded in investigating the autobiographical accounts of the enslaved in a time that also saw new theories for the study of autobiographical writing in general. Along the way, it attempts to establish a problem with founding a tradition of encounter with black artworks on politically committed autobiographical accounts: that it produces for the legitimate practice of that art form what I call an "injunction to truth." The founding of the field and its foundational texts then must be revisited with this injunction in mind, and to re-see the texts after putting the prism of facticity aside.

The second chapter presents an in-depth analysis of the different approaches to Harriet Jacobs *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) to foreground how the text poses distinct problems for interpretation depending, among other things, on how a reader chooses to view Jacobs's employment of her pseudonym: Linda Brent. It works carefully through the reception history of Jacobs's work, arguing that her enigmatic text requires the development of a more capacious method of interpretation, one that both allows her writing the artistic freedom of a novel without forfeiting her work as a crucial instance of the substantial history of her bondage and freedom, in this way it becomes auto theoretical not simply autobiographical. That Jacobs's text was reintroduced to the field of literary study at a crucial moment for the development of the contemporary work of black study positions her text within the critical contemplation of blackness at a foundational moment for the contemporary theories of black being. This chapter then argues for an approach to the text that, in consideration of the way Jacobs's text would become foundational for the theories of black subjectivity, attempts to hold in view the texts facticity and fictionality, and explores the implication of this approach for both the interpretation of the text on its own terms and its reception that would place it as a cornerstone of the theory of blackness.

The third chapter develops this relation by looking at two authors whose work makes a kind of origin for African American literature—Phillis Wheatley and Olaudah Equiano—focusing on how the terms for blackness and its differences as an identity category emerge in relation to or during encounters with figures for whiteness, especially when those figures have lyrical or literal autobiographical counterparts. This chapter thinks through how 18th century black writers invented/deployed the figures for and categories of blackness and used their various mediums to query and establish this concept. While looking, alongside this, at the contemporary writing on or from the position of blackness, writing done since that condition has come to be a more stable critical category or concept. The aim being to demonstrate how the writers of the earlier century were seemingly aware of the importance of their first attempts at conceiving blackness and did so with as much ambiguity and depth as the critic of the present, even presaging his methods. Along the way, the chapter shows how the contemporary study of blackness uses a similar method of both the citation of blackness's past figuration in language and the reinhabiting or revision of language used by white people to describe their black interlocutors to generate novel theories or positions from which to write (and ultimately "be.")

And finally, the conclusion expands this development of blackness through encounters—both scholastic and social, literary and historical—by looking back at the autobiographical encounters with whiteness in Harriet Jacobs, with the previous chapter's work through her reception in mind. This conclusion is an experiment in interpretation, beginning again with Jacobs in light of the rest of the dissertation: one that proposed Jacobs's text as the most complex and compelling instance of when the injunction to truth, outlined in the first chapter, breaks down across the literary experiments of her narrative. And the other which works to intensify a reader's attention to the complexity grammar of blackness already at work in the later 18th century. A complexity that is thus seen to bookend the history of literature written by enslaved African Americans. Where Douglass, in the introduction, was seen to frame himself into his narrative, establishing a standpoint from which to observe in text and to the archive his earliest conceptions of the distinction in black life, Jacobs crafts a position from which to describe her own condition that does not admit the distance of a frame, instead engaging with the philosophies of subjectivity current to her time, specifically that of G.W.F. Hegel. Her narrative then is slotted between two of the modern world's greatest theorist of the encounter between master and slave that structures the modern conception of (black) subjectivity. Her narrative is thus reread in this conclusion to give it a place between the critique of enlightenment and the critical break of the early 20th century that accelerated towards the formation of black studies as we know it.

On the whole, it is my contention that on the one hand a transformation in the way black scholars and black studies uses archival evidence (it's capacity to speculate from very little very large and very impactful narratives of lost or obscured interiority) and it's simultaneous turn or return to the autobiographical mode for the presentation of its theories of being, sets the stage for a reexamination of those texts positioned at an ostensible or at the very least scholastically viable point of origin for the articulation of black subjectivity, which texts already make part of the foundation for the study of blackness in the present. The return this dissertation hazards is an attempt to wed the new, theoretically enriched and poetically imaginative modes of reading and reusing the past (emblemized by Saidiya Hartman, Christina Sharpe, M. NourbeSe Phillip, and Alexis Pauline Gumbs) with the assumptions of the auto theoretical or ontological turn (registered in the wider field by a figure like Fred Moten or Frank Wilderson III.) It is my aim to afford the texts of the enslaved the poetic and speculative potential as evidence that a scholar like

Saidiya Hartman affords to darkened images or names in ledgers. While, simultaneously, understanding with someone like Frank Wilderson III that these texts, poems, and narratives might have the same or at least a similar intensity of ontological engagement or theorization (born out through autobiographical scenes) as his recent work. (More on this below.)

It is my intention then in the chapters that follow to return to the questions of some 30 or 40 years ago when the black subject was first finding its academic feet to apply the developments of a more recent, theoretically dense and more intensely poetic study to the texts that helped to establish that field in the first place. An establishment that worked to unearth and legitimize a frame for African American writing founded on its positivist truth-telling and capacity for immediate, authentic, unmediated representation of black life, which has now been quibbled and questioned almost out of practicality. This dissertation extends such questioning of the necessary authenticity of black art back to the 18th and 19th century, to see what letting these authors work as artists first and representatives for the Abolitionist cause second (or not at all!) might allow them to say about blackness. A most extreme remonstrance of the position of black writer as assumed authentic black “truth teller” has come from Frank Wilderson III’s most recent work.

In fact, part of the impetus behind the pursuit of this project arises from my encounter with a reading of Frantz Fanon by Frank B. Wilderson III in his most recent work *Afropessimism* (2020). Wilderson, rounding out his autobiographical and theoretical text, uses a contrast in Fanon’s own work, between *Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skins, White Masks*, to broach his broader claim about the singularity of the black person’s, the “Slave’s” (or black written subject’s) position vis the rest of the non-black world.¹ Wilderson makes his comparison based on what he sees as Fanon’s theorization of the “Native’s” position regarding the redress of settler colonial violence and the “Slave’s” position in relation to the same. The native and the slave here, at least seemingly for his version of Fanon, denote the same position in the world, a black position, but in two different moments of Fanon’s thinking. Before detailing what interests me here, Wilderson clarifies this distinction,

There is no analogy between the native’s guarantee of restoration predicated in her need to put the settler out of the picture—the Fanon of *Wretched of the Earth*—and the Slave’s guarantee of restoration predicated on her need to put the Human out of the picture—the Fanon of *Black Skins, White Masks*.” (Wilderson, 241)

Already, the distinction that Wilderson marks here sprouts qualities of interest to this argument. The primary one being that the relation that Wilderson formulates, via Fanon, for the “native” is one that keeps them rooted in the material world, a place where “she carves out zones of respite by putting the settler ‘out of the picture,’ whether back to the Europeans zone or into the sea” (ibid.). Where, in the above formulation, the “Slave” is left to contend with a concept, that of the “Human,” which while of course also having some sort of material purchase, is twined by a set of

¹ In Wilderson’s work the coincidence of the autobiographical and theoretical is immediately noted. The connection between these two modes, specifically for the black writer or thinker, is a main interest of this project. This combination, in its many guises, between the facts of a life and the fabrications of a creative project is what will below referred to as “auto theory,” a practice that joins the first person testimony of a writer or his protagonist on the page with some elaboration of a theory about that subject position, a sort of “life writing,” that takes “life” as a conceptual object which “writing” can and inevitably will reshape on a conceptual level.

theoretical or philosophical concerns. Concerns which it is my contention, following many other in the field, that the actually existing formerly enslaved, the writers under analysis in this dissertation, negotiated—knowingly or not. These are concerns surrounding the proof of the legitimacy of their personhood at all, proof of their relevance or relation to the category of the Human, concerns that drove their texts—lovingly and forcefully—to be taken on by the nascent fields of black study and black literary study, in the later parts of the 20th century, with an approach that sought to legitimate these writer’s claims to the subject, understanding them not just as artists of repute, but as the origins of the conceptualization and archival recording of the authentic position of blackness. The support and negotiation of these scholars, largely at work from the late 1960s to the early 2000s, produced alongside their new field a need for the writing of the enslaved to report accurately and literally from the lives of the dispossessed, to tell the truths of slavery round and unvarnished. However, it is my contention that this situation, the production of this need for truth-telling to be in fact factual recounting, is a reproduction, however well meant, of the very fraught situation into which these authors originally issued their work. And that much of the work of the present configuration of black theoretical writing is responding to, at least in part, the deformation of blackness that this drive towards the proof of legitimacy created. By having had determined for them the terms of order for their new subjective position, the black scholar of the present—while attempting to maintain their more or less traditional, “radical” standpoint with regard to the academy—now works to deform that very determination. The constellation of scholars and poets who are a part of this revolution in blackness, some of whom were a part of that initial initiation of the concept of blackness, include Fred Moten, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Calvin Warren, Saidiya Hartman, Kevin Quashie, Renee Gladman, and of course Frank Wilderson III. Wilderson’s position is perhaps the most popularly received and certainly the most provocative. His writing leads this argument towards a response to some of the more despotic claims of his work, towards a more livable version of his claims.

Wilderson’s continued argument, for an absolute separation between the life-world of the black person and the life-worlds of everyone else, strikes me as a most extreme version of the reproduction of the situation of evidentiary narration, which is the autobiographical mode especially to the field of literary study—resulting in a situation for the black person in which they’re left utterly isolated in a world all their own, constantly trying to speak across some irreparable gulf to the rest of the world, and speak of course truthfully, representatively, and by virtue of the distance between the world they ostensibly inhabit and the world of the non-black person, metaphorically. Wilderson’s separation, the zone from which he speaks, is unlike the Du Boisian formulation of the “veil” or even the drama of life lived on sides of the color line. Here the black person is relegated to a separate “universe.” Wilderson continues:

...the Frantz Fanon of *Black Skin, White Masks* hits upon (but is never quite comfortable with) the idea that the violence black people face is a violence of a parallel universe. In short, Black people and non-Black people do not exist in the same universe or paradigm of violence, any more than fish and birds exist in the same region of the world...The antagonist of the Native is the settler. *But the antagonist of the Black is the Human being.* (ibid., emphasis in original)

There is no empirical way to prove Wilderson’s claim here, but my suspicion is that there’s not meant to be. Wilderson speaks theory to reality and wills it to stick. What his book draws attention to, and what this claim about Fanon contextualizes through a citation of theory, is the

discursive or figurative nature of the foundations of life for the “Black,” at least from Wilderson’s perspective, in this another of his autobiographies. If Wilderson’s thoroughly autobiographical text—the work opens with an account of a mental breakdown during his time as a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley—which attempts so ardently a theorization of this black being from this specific context, does not quite achieve the thorough or acceptable theorization thereof, it does produce a standpoint from which to argue about the conceptual nature of blackness, or rather a proof to the production thereof.

By choosing to engage in one of the black literary traditions’ oldest modes of expression—the autobiographical narrative—Wilderson puts his text at the end of a long line of black autobiographical writing that extends to the figures under analysis in this dissertation. That he forms his autobiography around references to major works of critical theory, using them to expand or contextualize his narrative while, at the same time, theorizing for himself the position from which he lives and writes, makes his a work of auto theory. A concept of “auto theory,” a mode of writing the self which is simultaneously a theorizing the self, that finds a root in the tradition of African American writing and art making will be at issue throughout this dissertation. Wilderson’s personal proof the existence of a potentially unique discursive (or literal) position for the black person that is totally outside the conception of others makes his work a restaging of the historically enslaved’s particularly extreme autobiographical feat. If a reader takes Wilderson’s premise at its word, Wilderson’s autobiographical speaker must share a task for narration that has a fascinating provenance for the enslaved narrators in American literature: that of writing to demonstrate, prove, elaborate into new syntax, and work together a new vocabulary for, and ultimately to save for the reader of the future, their own life. I want to reapproach the writing of the (literally, if formerly) enslaved with this relatively contemporary tool found here, that of “auto theory,” to begin to take seriously the claim that, as Barbra Christian will outline below, “black people have always theorized” (Christian xx). Wilderson offers a reason for how this position for the black person—as incessant, simultaneous author and theorist of their own being—came about, at least for him:

Throughout this book I have argued that the Black is a sentient being though not a Human being. The Black’s and the human’s disparate relationship to violence is at the heart of this failure of analogy. The Human suffers contingent violence, violence that kicks in when he resists (or is perceived to resist) the disciplinary discourse of civil society’s rules and laws. But black peoples’ saturation by violence is a paradigmatic necessity, not simply the performance of contingency. To be constituted by *and* disciplined by violence, to be gripped simultaneously by subjective and objective vertigo, is indicative of a life that is radically different from the life of a sentient being who is continued by discourse and disciplined by violence when he breaks with the ruling discursive codes.” (Wilderson, 245)

In this formulation, the violence of merely being black which has its root in enslavements past or—as figured in Wilderson—omnipresent, is the inescapable frame or cipher through which all blackness must pass. For Wilderson, this is a violence which has utterly divorced black people from the world of non-black people. A position he proves throughout his book with several autobiographical anecdotes.² What is curious about this, among many things, is how exactly if

² Some of which evidentiary anecdotes are hard to swallow. Take for example the one that surfaces between the above moments on pages 241-5, where Wilderson details the derailing of his friendship with a Palestinian activist,

this severing from reality has in fact occurred and is being sustained by an ever-present environment of violence against black people, could it be possible for there to be so lively a discourse of blackness, with its own developing codes of regulation? Whence could an entire field of black study, one that envelops Wilderson and his claims, have come to be? This is a rhetorical question in many senses. Take for example this passage from earlier in Wilderson's argument, as he glosses the claims of Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* (1997). Or, at least, a realization connected to that work:

[Black people] are a species of sentient beings that cannot be injured or murdered, for that matter, because we are dead to the world. No narrative arc of dispossession can accrue to us...for there to be a narrative arc the persona in the narrative must move from possession to dispossession to (the denouncement [of?]) the prospect of repossession...there is an *assumption* that the victim [of rape] had a "self" to be violated...the narrative arc *itself* is possible because there exists within the ontology of the subject the Human capacity of consent that could be restored just as it was taken away. (Wilderson, 198-9, emphasis in original)

The gloss and elaboration Wilderson provides here indexes both a fundamental misreading (or, perhaps intentional overreading) of the work of his contemporary and the way his method for doing so might be the prerogative of the position from which he speaks—what he describes, in his response to reading Hartman, as his "mind abstract[ing] in ever-widening concentric circles" (198).³ Here contact with the archive and abstraction into the mind, the blending of modes theoretical, historical, autobiographical, and poetic, give the parameters of what I've been calling Wilderson's "method." It is not so much what Wilderson may mistake about Hartman's arguments that interests me—to say the very least, his general pessimism and specifically here his lack of faith in the Black/Slave's capacity to "accrue" narrative has little to do with Hartman's claims in *Scenes of Subjection*, nor elsewhere in her work, where a rapacious, poetic, determined, and positivist optimism seems the pervasive mood, and the accrual of novel narratives (novel and archival) the order of the day.

What fascinates here is the confluence of different modes of discourse that in the above passage as throughout *Afropessimism* allow Wilderson to extrapolate from an account of Hartman's rigorous arguments about rape, to the image of a person crushing a water bottle (192), and onward through another citation of Fanon to the formulation of his own position.⁴ What

Sameer, over a description the activist gives of the "humiliation" of being frisked by an "Ethiopian Jew" (Wilderson, 242). Two things, among many, occur to me along with this anecdote. One, that Wilderson's method for the theorization of blackness is as much a writing practice (an autobiographical theorization) as it is a reading practice (how does his narrative understand Sameer's statement, and chose to instrumentalize it?) And two, that the extremity of Wilderson's formulation of the black's position, must then in some way also be tied to an act of reding or writing. Hence the argument above turns back through his very recent work, to the work of other scholars who contest or contrast him, all of whom also engage the theorization or historical description of the black person as a primarily descriptive and interpretative challenge.

³ Itself a sly citation of Rainer Maria Rilke's *Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*. The poem reads in English: "I live my life in widening circles / that reach out across the world. / I may not complete this last one / but I give myself to it."

⁴ A smearing together of genres and models for analogy that recalls both the generic mixture of Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* and Christina Sharpe's concept of "anagrammatical blackness" (*In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, 75). Where in Equiano, the *mélange* of genres is a clear connection to the English 18th centuries daring

fascinates is that Wilderson's position is thoroughly made of texts, is in fact a narrative in the life of an American "Slave." And what might appear to be a contradiction here, where Wilderson uses these citations and play in language to argue for the impossibility of narrativizing blackness, is I think Wilderson's ultimate point. That accurate or not, palatable or not, properly scholastic or no, the writing done by a Black/Slave is and ever must be, where not totally divorced from the theater of Western theory and literature, appellant for entrance thereto. That developing a position from which to articulate this divide between the Black and the Human (or narrative, or the world), must necessarily involve relying on some method of representation, or figuration—here a reliance on writing. And ultimately, that the way it, this black position from or about nowhere, will find its way into that theater only by asserting itself regardless of this actual or perceived expulsion into the field of discourse. Even the Black/Slave, even Wilderson, must tell some many stories to exist. Wilderson's theory for the impossibility of narrative accrual to the black unfolds as his autobiographical narrative.

Upon realizing this yet larger frame or project, along with the fact that despite the slave's apparent inability to accrue narrative Wilderson's book is a part of a movement of scholars (the eponymous "Afropessimists"), that those scholars publish with some of the most prestigious presses an imprints for academic or creative work in the West, and that his and their work was in fact popularized in the early 2000s through its usefulness to debate societies (a world of discourse so thoroughly regulated that it seems deeply ironic that a theory that dissociates black people from discourse could be so successful therein), forces me to reconsider the accomplishment of this book. As well as making an opening backwards through which this dissertation's own ideas will now flow. If Wilderson's project might be reintroduced as a project for and not against the possibility of the inclusion of blackness in narrative, if in fact his overall project in *Afropessimism* might be thought against its grain, against what it seems to say, yet with one of its overarching claims, about what this or other books by black people can do, then a critique of the position of the black writer or speaker might be brought into focus.

How does the writing of the black person, and the history of that writing and its reception, exist in a world like the one Wilderson describes above? Always as a critically reflective, self-legitimizing, theory of blackness's relation to the world around it. A world, at least from Wilderson's point of view, that is not only thoroughly founded upon but maintained and ordered by way of the exclusion and domination of not only black people, but their texts as well. Wilderson's position is an extreme—both in the sense that it takes a somewhat radical stance and in the sense that it is so extremely current, so apparently new. My contention is that the position that Wilderson imagines, the position of total exclusion from the world of life and especially writing, was already on display in the writing of the enslaved. And that, by attending closely to way they named and conceived of their identities, both on the page and in relation, we can come to see how between Wilderson and someone like Phillis Wheatley, there is a methodological byway. A path that, in leading the scholar back to these earlier texts, might help to clarify the felt position of extremity laid out by black scholars of the present.

intertextuality (and thus, his knowledge and manipulation of a wider literature and its tropes), for Sharpe the anagrams of blackness (specifically characterized as reorganizations of language out of preexistent language) can be read in all that seemingly innocuous words suggest somehow by proximity to black people. In all three cases, however, there exists something about black life in narration, black life figured by or in language, that inevitably calls to the spoiling or admixture of otherwise clear narration. A citational sickness, where blackness always points out towards its own otherness, its inability to maintain stability without further description. What Glissant might call its being in relation.

Such pathways between past life and present writing, between the lived experience of the black and his actual life, are also the subject of Saidiya Hartman's most recent work. She of course, approaches the problem from a totally different vantage, but not one so divorced from Wilderson as to be incomparable. Hartman outlines in the section titled "A Note on Method," "[This book] is a narrative written from nowhere, from the nowhere of the ghetto and the nowhere of utopia." Here, as above in *Afropessimism*, the position of the black scholar in the present, the position from which and about which she speaks, is a "nowhere." A "utopia" (another non-place) which is also a "ghetto," a geographical and political position outside or alongside the *topos* of neighborhood or metropolis. But the state of exception which Hartman sets out to describe and "inhabit the intimate dimensions," which she doubles as the position of "every historian of the multitude, the dispossessed, the subaltern, and the enslaved" does not, as it does for Wilderson, index any removal to a "parallel universe" (Wilderson 241). Instead, Hartman chooses to use the flexibility of language, its ability to invent convincing perspectives and to detail psychological states, to re-see the past through the eyes of those persons expelled from history, those who can now only be heard as characters, enlivened as the products of her "mode of close narration" (xiii).

Hartman references Frederick Douglass's famous formulation to elaborate: "This story is told from inside the circle" (xiv).⁵ But the place inside the circle, according to Douglass, is a location of incomprehension which is the product of total immersion in slavery. Douglass writes that from within "the circle" (of enslavement, of illiteracy, of a lack of aesthetic sensibility) the potential artistry of the slave's songs were "altogether beyond [his] feeble comprehension" (Douglass xx). Like the Wilderson above, for Douglass the world "inside the circle" is an alienated position *and* a totally engulfing environment of difference. One that deadens the senses while it gives more immediate access to an experience of the enslaved. What is remarkable in Hartman's formulation in contrast to Wilderson, and perhaps contra Douglass as well, is that she has placed herself as critic (however speculatively) in a position from which no narrative can emerge, from which no artistry can be discerned, only to begin narrating stories of artistry therefrom, insisting on the veracity of these her tales. She writes, again deliberately echoing those other "Note[s] to the Reader" that appear in the texts of the enslaved: "All the characters and events found in this book are real; none are invented" (xiv).⁶ Hartman's careful articulation of her method—a method she now teaches around the globe—rejects the limitations imposed by slavery on the black narrator or critic of the past and present. Her note on method, along with the book of "counter narrative[s] liberated from... judgement and classification" that follows from it, sidesteps the failed analogy between Black and non-Black universes for Wilderson, and the benighted world inside the circle of slavery in Douglass (which can only be perceived and narrated from *outside*.) The "beautiful experiment" of *Wayward Lives* is thus not limited to the scant histories Hartman blends with the music of her speculative chorus, but the standpoint Hartman constructs to unfold them.

Framing her counter-narratives with so many references to the archive of the enslaved—their modes of apology and reassurance, the dissonance of difference within identity (a nascent

⁵ Here is the passage from the second chapter of Douglass's 1845 *Narrative in the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*: "I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear."

⁶ Here is one example from Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of the Slave Girl* (1861): Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction. I am aware that some of my adventures may seem incredible; but they are, nevertheless, strictly true. I have not exaggerated the wrongs inflicted by Slavery; on the contrary, my descriptions fall far short of the facts." ("Preface by the Author," xx)

double-consciousness) that structures the perspective of the (formally) enslaved, puts her work too at the contemporary end of the tradition of black narrators and speakers that this dissertation takes as its object. To make a way between her and the Douglass she references and place her new method in dialog with moments like Douglass's instantiating formulations is the goal of the chapters to follow. And to hazard an initial pathway, this introduction will turn briefly by way of conclusion toward Douglass, to observe the way he crafts a frame around his *Narrative*. Here is the full passage referenced by Hartman above:

I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear. They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirit, and filled me with ineffable sadness. I have frequently found myself in tears while hearing them. The mere recurrence to those songs, even now, afflicts me; and while I am writing these lines, an expression of feeling has already found its way down my cheek. To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery. I can never get rid of that conception. (Douglass. 290)

The temporality of this passage is the first indication of the proposition it makes. This proposition concerns the immediacy of the past to the present—for the narrator and perhaps for the slave. Application of this connection, this folding, across from the narrator to the slave is possible insofar as Douglass's narrative foregrounds the formulation of the slave as a concept worthy of elaboration beyond the legal (read: racial). That Douglass conceives of the slave's position as distinguishable from a parentage that begets bondage, and posits it instead as something like "the state of bondage" in a portable (read: more generally representative, or ontological) sense is a well-documented fact both in the scholarship surrounding it and in the subsequent tradition of literature that borrows from and responds to it. One might even say the scholarship turns every subsequent piece of African American literature into either an adaptation of or response to the *Narrative*. A few authors make open parody or critique of this fact, for example: *Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, *Invisible Man*, *Song of Solomon* and more recently *An Octoroon* and *The Sellout*. That this scholastic tendency should be considered on equal footing to the artistic one is one of the underlying premises of this dissertation's argument. And that this situation, this horizontal relation, is in some way unique to the emergence and formalization of African American literature writ large, as a self-professing genre and not merely a violently othered, racially segregated, corner of the world of letters, is one of its central claims.

Douglass is an orator, an artist who knows his audience intimately. His autobiographical speaker then makes a point of subtlety, navigating the confines of the expectations put upon him by his role as public face while remaining true to the reality of the events and causes that he sought to archive and advance. He suspends his narrative in this a few other moments with quiet intent between the revealed fact of the horrors of enslavement and the revolutionary formulation of a critical position for the black person, a position that the trials of slavery, or really of its narration, create. The sensitivity of his audience—a 19th century reading public, just getting to know anything like an American literature—is well known; their impressionability, their

weakness in the face of overpowering sentiments. Affective force is the slave's biggest resource in this context, rhetorically speaking. But to transfer his emphatic speaking practice to the page Douglass is forced to tether the attention of his reader in some other way to his body. After all, embodied presence, life lived while a slave, is the thing the slave's narrative adds to the abolitionist cause—the presentation of the body, *haebeus corpus*. Here are two other instances of Douglass's interjection of a rhetorical figure for his presence into the narrative, both from the fifth chapter:

I was seldom whipped by my old master, and suffered little from any thing else than hunger and cold. I suffered much from hunger, but much more from cold. In hottest summer and coldest winter, I was kept almost naked--no shoes, no stockings, no jacket, no trousers, nothing on but a coarse tow linen shirt, reaching only to my knees. I had no bed. I must have perished with cold, but that, the coldest nights, I used to steal a bag which was used for carrying corn to the mill. I would crawl into this bag, and there sleep on the cold, damp, clay floor, with my head in and feet out. My feet have been so cracked with the frost, that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes. (Douglass 299)

...

I look upon my departure from Colonel Lloyd's plantation as one of the most interesting events of my life. It is possible, and even quite probable, that but for the mere circumstance of being removed from that plantation to Baltimore, I should have to-day, instead of being here seated by my own table, in the enjoyment of freedom and the happiness of home, writing this Narrative, been confined in the galling chains of slavery. (ibid. 301)

Through these moments, the reader meets Douglass in the narrative twice—once as the autobiographical character in the flow of a life's events, and again as the actor of a frame narrative which organizes and expresses that character. So too does the reader meet again the terrible inditement to be witnessed as both proficient and pathetic that will come to characterize the critical acceptance of African-American literature—what I call “the injunction to truth.” The proof of proficiency in writhing (and thus thought and feeling, in expression and transmission of these things) is not only then a quality of the narrative itself as object, but seen by a reader as placed within the action of the narrative as a part of its fabricated reality, a sort of quiet imposition of a literary technique demonstrates a two-fold depth to his work—one of literal emotional capacity and one of expansive literary imagination. My work is concerned with the ways the former has been made to constrain the latter.

Douglass, by drawing attention to himself seated just at the edge of the frame, eternalizes his process of self-creation. He holds his pen in the present of the frame narrative to the frozen foot of his childhood sufferings. An adult fugitive seeing himself as a child, fitting the instrument of the child's remembrance to history into the groove of his foot. It is a moment almost cinematic in its surreality—a juxtaposition of conditions that links the physical sensations of the past through the medium of figurative representation to concerns of the literary present. A link that evokes an image of the life in prose, of memory inscribed beyond the abstract representational medium of remembering, that is the cornerstone of the autobiography. But what fascinates me about this moment in the text is that it is a quiet, more aesthetically experimental move than the bold oratorical rhetoric of the famous passages of the *Narrative*. Here Douglass asks the reader to imagine a relation between the Douglass's present (at a desk, fugitive but free) and Douglass's

past (a position of unbearable vulnerability)—projecting them both as equally fabricated figures that, in their condition as made things, can connect. And, because of this, they are able to be critiqued into the generality of a portable position, that of the black critic—he who works the past into the present. Douglass here formulates an early instance of the same auto-theoretical distance that Hartman and Wilderson elaborate.

The rhetorical mastery with which Douglass uses these moments to assert himself across the two temporalities—one the observer and one the observed—smacks almost scientific, ethnographic. The aim of this early narrative is not exclusively political (although it is also this), but psychological and, by postulating a mind and a position of critique for the enslaved, philosophical. Where the merely observable disappears at the edges of his retold experience, an experiment in expression begins wherein language takes over as the sole surviving material of the object or experience in question—a thought or feeling—and thus philosophy enters the narrative. This first autobiography, for Douglass, is a case study in the development of a heretofore unrecognized mode of human life, a study in ontology he will expand upon for decades. These small moments open for this dissertation what it takes as its principal subject, that which grows at the edges of empirical explanation in history. It is my contention that despite the injunction to facticity that attend the writing of the (formally) enslaved and their contemporary critics, their awareness of and challenges to this expectation—however subtle—produces multiple standpoints from which the determination of any received concept of blackness can be escaped and ultimately reformed. Thus the construction and revision of the opening strains of a black aesthetic is what is at stake. Aesthetic in the strongest sense—both the capacity to feel and the capability to craft convincing representations of the standpoint from which that feeling is felt.

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xx,

Epigraph (an “explanation”):

There are all degrees of proficiency in knowledge of the world. It is sufficient to our present purpose to indicate three. One class lives to the utility of the symbol, esteeming health and wealth a final good. Another class live above this mark of the beauty of the symbol, as the poet and artist and the naturalist and man of science. A third class live above the beauty of the symbol to the beauty of the thing signified; these are wise men. The first class have common sense; the second, taste; and the third, spiritual perception.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Prudence” (1841)

The rationalization of man, begun in the 18th century and carried on in the 19th century, brought about a situation for thought in which new subjectivities could be created or discovered and, most importantly, elaborated and recorded. Across the interlocking discourses of law, philosophy, historiography (real or imagined), and literature (to say nothing of evolutionary science) a terrain emerged on which a more diverse population of legitimate subjects might register to History in the broadest sense. In the epigraph above Ralph Waldo Emerson, America’s greatest contributor to this systematizing of spirit, proposes a succinct typography of the most relevant “degrees of proficiency in knowledge of the world.” A ranking of “classes” in the knowing of being, or at least a knowledge of being in its environment. He registers this through three different relationships to “the symbol,” classing persons based on their attention to the “utility” and “beauty” of the symbol itself. Emerson’s examples of the former cover hypochondriacs and misers, who protect themselves from the world as it appears to be. The second class is artists and scientists who “live above” the “marks”—or material possessions and conditions—that mask the beauty of appearances, the aleatory play of symbols. And finally, the vague and unprofessionalized “wise men” whose “spiritual perception” (a widely democratic occupation if one considers what it takes to make lots of money or oil paintings!) outclasses the “taste” and “common sense” of the lower classes. These wise men seek “the thing signified.” Something like truth, or the many truths available among a terrain crafted from fallacies.

The autobiographical act, to cite Houston A. Baker citing Elizabeth Bruss in turn, grasps at “the thing signified,” that is actual life, in an attempt to accurately represent their author’s life. When the stakes of this grasping of things in themselves are cut through with proofs of the legitimacy of one’s subject position, or means to the recognition of simple, elegant *being at all*, philosophy enters the picture. Because autobiographies retain to themselves all the lessons of fabrication, excused by the screens of language and idiom, this philosophical bend in the light occurs though metaphors relating self to other, descriptions meant to capture the truths of their environments, encounters of forces and the aleatory movements of living rendered as scenes and events, actual persons personified as the “people” in their “story.” By studying autobiographies of the enslaved, this dissertation hopes to reanimate and reexamine the theories of truth and being for nascent concept of blackness that characterize the mode of some of the earliest African American writing, that is, of slave autobiography and autobiographically inflected lyric.

Chapter 1 *précis*:

The first chapter situates the complex contemporary strains and methods of black study in the wider field of the study of and uses for autobiographical narratives. Demonstrating a close connection between these current debates and the problems attending both the production and study of autobiography, both as artwork and as generic category. This chapter does two things at once. It gives a brief overview of the history of the study of African American literature, and how this study was founded in investigating the autobiographical accounts of the enslaved in a time that also saw new theories for the study of autobiographical writing in general. Along the way, it attempts to establish a problem with founding a tradition of encounter with black artworks on politically committed autobiographical accounts: that it produces for the legitimate practice of that art form what I call an “injunction to truth.” The founding of the field and its foundational texts then must be revisited with this injunction in mind, and to re-see the texts after putting the prism of facticity aside.

Chapter 1:
TO SAVE MY OWN LIFE—A SITUATION REPORT
black literary study and the metaphors of self.

Introduction—of autobiography and African American Literature

“It must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel.”
- Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*.

Autobiography is the foundation of African American Literature. African American Literature, and the criticism that has arduously labored for its inclusion in the wider formation of American Literature, is a critical archive for the theories structuring (and continually restructuring) the field of black studies. Recent interventions in this latter field are primarily concerned with negotiating the relationship between a Western conception of subjectivity and its attendant discourses (for my concerns, primarily critical theory and aesthetic philosophy) and that subject’s persistently dissident “other”, here specifically a racially marked, “black” other. This “other” is at once fugitive—a being whose ontology must find a way of expressing itself in the field of ontological discourse that follows the critique of Enlightenment understood, in one guise by Friedrich Nietzsche, as a philosophy “*without the subject*”—(to reference the work of Fred Moten.) And fabulative—that is, a being for blackness past and blackness present that finds itself on a positivist, imaginative mode of self (re)creation; where even the smallest scraps of historical presence—a name in a ledger or a grainy photograph—may be turned into the source text of a potential past life and thus a new “archival” foundation for black life in the present—(to cite the work of Saidiya Hartman.)

*

“Black study” is for my purposes construed broadly, maybe more accurately presented as “black thought” or the tradition of “black radicalism,” but ultimately is used in this chapter and throughout the dissertation to index the creation and subsequent revisions of a discourse of/representing blackness/black life, and black consciousness—specifically as something distinct from that of other forms or modes of consciousness. This then would include the slave’s narrative and almost any socially or politically engaged black art or writing created across the last 200 or so year tradition which together encompasses the study of blackness. I collect under the practice of “black study,” itself a discourse packaged and sold by universities across the nation, any writing that either is intentionally a representation of that larger formation, the black subject, or becomes, through its reception, however unwittingly a source text for the discursive theorization of black being, specifically in an American context. Or, put another way, anything that becomes a source for the present’s theorization of blackness in the academy.

Mine is a project then that on the surface deals with “reception history” in part because, in the case of black folks, that reception is also often the scholastic site of the construction of a concept of “blackness”, a concept which circulates, especially in the late 20th and early 21st century, as a politically, socially, and economically significant figure. And yet remains just that, figurative, something that can only ever have a rhetorical purchase on “The Lived Experience of

the Black.”¹ Thus, this opening chapter, a “situation report” on the field as much as a situating of my work within it, will employ the tropological strategy elaborated by Hayden White. One that borrows the tropes of rhetoric, “metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony,” to characterize the development of, for his study, the “working class.” For my purposes, this historiographical schema that traces the developments of discourses along the phases of rhetoric—which White constellates with developmental psychology and dream interpretation alongside methods of historical and dialectical materialism—will be employed to understand the development of black study constructed broadly across the later 19th and early 20th century. Here from the “Introduction” to White’s 1988 *Tropics of Discourse*:

“...insofar as we are concerned with structures of consciousness, we are acquainted with those structures only as they are manifested in discourse. Consciousness in its active, creative aspects, as against its passive, reflexive aspects...is most directly apprehendable in discourse and, moreover, discourse guided by formulable intentions, goals, or aims of *understanding*. ...It must take shape out of some awareness of difference between alternative figurations of reality in images held in memory and fashioned, perhaps out of responses to contradictory desires or emotional investments, into complex structures, vague apprehensions of the forms that reality *should* take even if it fails to assume those forms (*especially* if it fails to assume those forms) in existentially vital situations.” (*Tropics of Discourse*, 20).

I am thus interested in approaching the slave’s narrative as the ostensible origin of the contemporary expressions and methods of black study, asking them to appear as two ends of an intentional project to develop images and figures toward the broader understanding of blackness and black life, what is above termed a “structure of consciousness,” one that applies specifically to and is constructed intentionally for black people.

I want to reexamine the history of this discourse from my particular position in the present, to begin the project of formulating a history for the methods and terms of engagement that characterize the contemporary inquiry into the condition of blackness, conceived here as much as a lived condition which has evolved through history as a discourse crafted in figures for the black being that have been inscribed concurrently into the history of black art and writing. I want to make an entry into this exploration because it is my contention, to borrow as I intend to the rhetorical framing of the development of any structure of consciousness, that black study is making a revolution towards rebirth, moving as I write from the position of ironic detachment from the vicissitudes of its object (expanding, instead, into the formulations down largely material-historical and political avenues) back toward the metaphorical starting point of such a development, a place where the auto-theoretical poetics of much of the recent impactful work in the field, from Hartman and Sharpe to Moten and Wilderson III, might be understood—as has been in the case in practice—as a new terrain in which to reformulate the structure of consciousness that governs the assumptions of more “ironic” work, work that would mobilize these as yet unrefined metaphorical methods of engaging the objects of black study, again towards studies that, while they might appear more grounded in material history or politics, address themselves as studies done at some remove from any direct and autobiographically evidenced claim to conceptual renegotiation.

¹ A reference to the chapter of the same title in Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*.

The turn in black studies towards ontological formulations, studies that proceed by poetic means rooted in the writing of Eduard Glissant or through auto-theoretical techniques of cultural analysis developed across the 20th century, that concern themselves with the more abstract expressions of blackness in the history of art or employ an interpretive method rooted in Heideggerian questioning, belie a transformation in the grounds of the discourse of blackness and black life. One that, perhaps by outgrowing an understandable allergy to Western metaphysics, has found a means to the reevaluation of the basic concepts of the older generations black study—moving art beyond propaganda, politics beyond identity, and the being of the black beyond the inherited figures for the lived experience of the black. A movement towards an evaluation of origins that inspires this study in the apparent “origin” of African American Literature, which hopes to aid in this return to the initial questions set out by the enslaved in their writing, along with their methods of historiographical emendation of and discursive engagements with the concept and lived experience of blackness.

*

What allowing black study to be thought this broadly will allow this dissertation to begin is a study of what its author is ultimately most interested in: the conceptual history, at least in the archives of literature and its criticism, of blackness. The uses and abuses of blackness as that which accrues to signification for itself, that is to the level of concept, that which holds a description of being. Descriptions at least partially, and rather significantly, recorded in various modes literature, criticism, art making, and text production. This is not a history it is possible to present entire—too much of the meaning escapes the archive. This escape is well researched and remarked upon. But the task of returning to the erstwhile origins of African American literature and retracing that development and its contexts, given the recent advances in the interpretive strategies of black scholars and the artists they describe, strikes me as necessary. If, for no other reason, than to afford to those earlier authors, authors who wrote in times of absolute forms of curtailment to the artistic and aesthetic lives of black people, of people not yet gathered under the sign of blackness, the interpretive capacity that conceptualization can offer.

Another way of saying this is that limiting our capacity to interpret the literature of the enslaved past to the interpretive tools available to black people and their artworks within the antebellum period is to sequester this literature to a scholastically reinforced marginal status, as that which—because it’s historical surround was bent on shrinking the black artist’s accomplishments to that of mere historical or anthropological reportage (where it was even believed to be accurate or valid at all!) so we must do so in the present. I invite the reader to a bit of suspension of disbelief, especially when it comes to what they have been taught to think about the literature of enslaved people. What exists in the black past is marvelous, an artistic capacity thought monstrous and largely impossible, often even illegal, which found a way into print. The rhetorical gymnastics of writing one’s way into the world of literature has never been easy. And imagining doing so as a fugitive slave, an “African” import, or a victim of sexual assault in a time closer to puritans than reproductive rights, is astounding. But so rarely does this astonishment translate into readings of these texts, their contexts, and their reception. There the scholar sits to the task of a dull rehearsal of this amazement (to the point of pedantry) or a claim which diverts the argumentative energy from the text itself, entirely to the representation of the history and structures which produces it—literary, cultural, historical, or otherwise.

My goal is to approach the texts of the formally enslaved with more attention to the way these text form or inform the methods for the study of blackness. I refer to these authors as “formally enslaved” then insofar as the texts I will discuss are written by those who found themselves at one point in bondage but in part through their writing become “free,” writer’s whose texts have been used to form the foundations of and continued contemporary engagements in the study of black life and art. These early texts herein serve to give form to blackness in the present, they are its earliest and most referenced articulations.

My argument then as a whole is not a critique so much as an observation about how the meaningful and practical arguments made to enshrine the writings of the enslaved in hard fought and well-deserved positions of scholastic importance have also obfuscated or apologized for elements of those texts which I find the most interesting and challenging to contemporary thought on blackness. Passionate desires for assimilation, the careful consideration of moral ethical injunctions, and most importantly for this study, the symbolic and suggestive power of relative freedom in artistic experimentation go largely downplayed or get ignored all together.

*

As it stands, this “black being”, whose self is theorized through the autobiographical mode, is by turns described as escaping the prescribed confines of Western (white coded) subjectivity, evading or eradicating the confines of available descriptive modes and concepts, *and* as an entity so deeply imbricated within any formulation of this Western subject as to become, ironically, the constitutive point of self-creative reference for the white world, and thus ultimately resigned to an eternal state of non-being (to cite among many others the recent conclusions of Frank B. Wilderson III).² Because African American literature, specifically autobiography, makes a substantial part of the ground on which the contemporary philosophies of blackness are built, and is a primary method of these theorizations³, a reconsideration of the

² These two positions are also, oddly, not mutually exclusive. That is it is possible to conceive of the black subject as that which both escapes the confines and considerations of subjectivity at all (and is thus a somewhat purely positive being-beyond-being, a not-yet-being running loose outside) and is that subjectivity’s point of constitution (and thus an absolutely negative entity, that which gives outline and impress and is capable of no further expressions.) This is essentially the conundrum of W. E. B. Du Bois’s idea of “double consciousness” seen from the tail end of an arc in black studies that has seen the rise of the non- or anti- coalition politics espoused by Frank B. Wilderson III but also the depthful explication of Du Bois’s work in the writing of Nahum Dimitri Chandler. (c.f. *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), *AfroPessimism* (2020), and *X—The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought* (2013).)

³ c.f. Wilderson’s *Incognegro* (2007) and the more recent *Afropessimism* (2020) and Hartman’s *Lose Your Mother* (2006) and *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (2019). The proximity of these four books to each other in time, combined with the expansions of individual arguments/methods which they stand for in the careers of these thinkers, demonstrate at least two examples of the developing poles of black (literary) studies. Both begin (with the 2006/7 works) in historically enriched accounts of their own experiences, both *Incognegro* and *Lose Your Mother* are works that take as their inciting incidents sojourns in Africa, albeit for very different reasons. With their follow up works, divergent explorations of the auto theoretical mode expand their arguments. Both books are aimed at popular audiences and more experimental in method. Wilderson shreds the autobiographical timeline to allow for the eruption of theorizations on blackness, while Hartman’s book opens with a methodological note that expands the ideas of her now landmark essay “Venus in Two Acts”, an introduction to the “fabulative” work involved with critical approaches to the archive of slavery. They diverge in both their relationships to the academy—Wilderson seems to loathe if relies on it, while Hartman appears far more comfortable with the experimentation with archival material that the remove of academic writing allows her, and as a result their relationship to source material and larger arguments are radically different. Where Wilderson collages his past experiences into a claim about the impossibility of interracial solidarity in political and philosophical struggle, Hartman’s work repositions her

earliest and most read iterations of this confluence (of life writing and their attendant theories of life) and their reception will demonstrate both exactly how these early narratives presage the present figurations of blackness as concept—elaborating and challenging the central strains of this new science—and also show how these present theorizations of blackness foreclose various approaches to the texts of this black tradition by, strangely enough, relying too heavily on the claim to truth which the autobiographical mode belies, where it does not openly and repeatedly insist on it.

This last sentence gives the lie to my overarching contention which is that the fact of the African American literary tradition's founding, in both primary texts and secondary reception, in the autobiographical mode, has resulted in an assumption of seemingly one-to-one relation between the art objects produced by black people in America and the lives of the people who produced them. An overdetermination so prevalent and so pernicious that it is as obfuscated the reading of not only the foundational texts of the discipline—*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1860), *The Narrative in the Life of Frederick Douglass. An American Slave* (1845), and *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or, Gustavus Vassa* (1789)—but also much of the subsequent art produced by African Americans. This dissertation, then, will present first an overview of the autobiographical mode in African American writing—beginning with the work of historians and scholars such as Dickson D. Bruce, William Andrews, Valerie Smith, Jean Fagan Yellin, and Vincent Carretta—before moving through two of the aforementioned autobiographies one by one to trace the ways in which their different reception histories result in different versions of the identity between the actual lives of the writers and the aesthetic objects they make to represent them.

Section 1: *The Autobiographical Strain*⁴ — African American autobiography and the problem of the representative figure.

The autobiographical strain of African American literary production is one of its oldest and most authoritative. From experiments in acculturation performed by wealthy Europeans on

autobiographical subject as the archival investigator, crafting “fabulative” (fictions with a theoretical purpose), often first person or choric accounts of seemingly lost black lives. Hartman's transposition of her own subjective position onto or through the lives of these lost personages, through the prism of historical or theoretical designs on the past lives of blackness, amounts to perhaps the most interesting proposition to be made about black autobiography in recent memory—that it might be possible, through recourse to autobiographical narrations and archival research, to recover some elements, some aesthetic to use a weighty word, of the lost lives of the people she uncovers and presents, simply by narrating from their position. It is some many ways a shattering idea—as dangerous as it is daring—that I can only liken to a project like M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong! As told to the Author by Setaey Adamu Boateng* (2008) or Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014). These are importantly poetic projects, aimed at the past (recent or distant), whose apparent desire to recount, reconstitute, and represent a set of impersonal experiences *as if* they were all the true-to-life experiences of the speaking subject—a sort of revisionist virtual reality—join the long train of black lives transformed by their contact with and manipulation descriptive language. What is crucial in this comparison is twofold: (1) that all three of these works function from an incurably small or invisible archive (Philip uses the transcription of a single court case, Rankine collects anecdotes from friends and colleagues, Hartman is often relying on extremely scant evidence—sometimes not even a name just an epithet in a loose historical document), a situation for a production of self-similar to the blank expanse Houston A. Baker describes for the slave in the second chapter of *The Journey Back*, “Autobiographical Acts.” And (2) all of them afford, of course in distinct ways, avenues of reentry to something like the “aliveness” of the past, to borrow a term from Kevin Quashie's recent book *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being* (2021) (itself an adventure into a speculative world made for and by blackness—“a black” as opposed to “the anti-black” world).

⁴ Here of course meant in both the musical and the physical sense—both a passage in a melody and a painful yoke.

captured Africans to the most radical strains of contemporary Afro-pessimist writing, autobiography is employed as the mode of emplotment for the self.⁵ A mode that is, in itself, something of a mystery to the various genre critics who have essayed some definition of it in the last century. These theorists, for my purposes primarily James Olney and Phillipp Lejeune, and the critics of African American literature alongside them, labor for deviously plain spoken definitions through complex textual analysis found their footing in an era of literary scholarship during the period known as the Theory Wars—a sort of shattering of the ever more rarified and idealized “text” that the New Criticism of the early 20th century had subtracted from the brutally transforming world of the interwar period and the dizzying sociolinguistic, economic, and philosophically dense analyses with which the post-structuralists attempted to return that text, in good faith, to the world of its own interrelation with various forms; the somewhat more isolated “structures” of the intervening structuralism. I will begin by briefly considering one of the most salient critiques of the movement in the American academy to address itself to texts, and specifically to those which index blackness, with (largely) European theory to contextualize my return to the foundations of African American literary production, in the slave’s narrative, as an extension of this historically significant redirection of scholastic attention.⁶

One of the most cogent reflections on the period in scholarship that saw the emergence of theoretically rich attention to black writing, an essay titled “The Race for Theory” by Barbara Christian, addresses itself to the problem of trying to approach life—specifically a black and female life, and yet more particularly the life of the author, the speaking subject of the essay, herself— with theory. Christian’s understandably exasperated defense of the primarily literary texts her essay understands as important to, at the time in 1987, the fraught and novel inclusion of black women writers into the critical purview of literary study—the writings of Toni Morrison, among others, whose emblematic status within the academy had begun to redirect the criticism on black art through a theory-dense and at least nominally feminist prism⁷. Although, Christian seems worried that this inclusion might have “unforeseen” consequences. Unforeseen here is rendered in scare quotes because, of course, the essay anticipates and warns the reader of what happens when a minoritarian discourse, otherwise flourishing freely for and to a its own community, becomes a center of critical attention for the academy.

⁵ c.f. Hayden White’s definition of emplotment in the early sections of *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th century Europe* (1973)

⁶ A moment that in its simplest form can be described as a movement first through a text to a theory of the text, then a movement through a theory about text, though a specific text as an example or complication of this theory, which results in some larger theory of the world. The most recent era of scholarship seeming to move in two directions a once—toward theorizing with the self in tow about the world, leveraging the immediacy of personal experience to evidence a global claim or drawing such new heuristics for the interpretation of the world through considerations that become something like impersonal collages of media—theory, cultural studies, history, visual analysis, etc. This is the difference, say, between a book like *Afropessimism* and a book like Fred Moten’s 2017 *Black and Blur*.

⁷ It is clear from the work of Christian and her black feminist contemporaries that even this characterization is perhaps overly-generous. This be not the place for a discourse of the gendered (and of course raced) politics of black or literary study. (See Patrica Hill Collins for this, *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), or more recent work by Iyko Day, for example: “Afro-feminism before Afropessimism: Meditations on Gender and Ontology” (2021).) Two different perspectives on the use and disadvantages of black study for black life are mentioned below, one by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and one by Sylvia Wynter. They could not be more different. Although it is interesting to note, when the argument arrives there, how Gates’s call for the involvement of theory with black literature is written in the banal language of the traditional academic essay. Where Wynter’s ire at the loss of legitimate purpose in black study for black life—characterized by the dissolution of the Black Arts movement, which she pins squarely on Gates—is the precis to a densely theoretical argument. This comparison is let open without comment beyond observation and sue of these thinker’s accounts as context.

The result is an attenuation of the representative quality of the work coupled with an insistence that the work, to some extent, conform to the structures of academic consideration. This consideration, Christian's argument suggests, is something like another instantiation of the seizure which produced the "wretched" condition of the minor author in the first place. A wretchedness which, ironically, produces the historical situation that calls the newly interesting artwork forward from the oppressed. After adducing this frustration and fear, the essay turns to an appeal to the self, to the speaking subject of the essay—the living critic—to cinch the problematic of the institutionalization of formally "minor" or othered literatures. Christian reveals this problematic by submitting herself to the very same scrutiny and, thus, interpretive or descriptive danger as the texts she is writing to save (and be saved by in turn.) Christian's auto-theoretical turn—a movement through the figuration of the self in discourse toward a release of the self from discourse—sums up the purpose behind this chapter's argument, and the argument of the larger dissertation:

My major objection to the race for theory, as some readers have probably guessed by now, really hinges on the question, "for whom are we doing what we are doing when we do literary criticism?" It is, I think, the central question today especially for the few of us who have infiltrated the academy enough to be wooed by it. The answer to that question determines what orientation we take in our work, the language we use, the purposes for which it is intended. I can only speak for myself. But what I write and how I write is done in order to save my own life. And I mean that literally. For me literature is a way of knowing that I am not hallucinating, that whatever I feel/know *is*. *It is an affirmation that sensuality is intelligence, that sensual language is language that makes sense.* (Christian, 61, emphasis added)⁸

This last remark—an ironically theoretical claim—is an expression of the daring proximity between language and sense, intelligence and sensuality. A proximity that activates the literalness of the word "save" suggesting both a rescuing of the endangered life through the engagement with literature and criticism (a metaphor in itself), and the formation through that very writing of a receptacle for the life which the writing itself *is*, or is meant to be. The latter, a more poetic meaning, is the sense of Christian's claim I am after here: the second saving of life in literature by means of its production and criticism.

That Christian's point occurs in the course of an argument about the reception and critical representations of several black, female authors—indeed the authors of any "minor" or "marginal" literature whatever—and is, in this way, in part a comment on the formation and stewardship of canons—institutionally assembled archives of significance and value, a sort of savings bank in their on right—makes a point about the politics of literary criticism that I would like to make differently about the poetics of literary representation, creative or critical. For me, what has been dubbed, at different times over the last twenty or so years "the descriptive turn" or, most recently, the "ontological turn" in (black) literary study, specifically where that study addresses itself to the texts of a hard-fought and ever resolving canon of African American

⁸ I owe my attention to this essay not simply to its importance to the field, but also to the presentation of colleague of mine—Dr. Ra Malika Imhotep—during the working group phase of our shared time studying with the Black Studies Collaboratory at UC Berkeley. Dr. Imhotep's presentation, along with several rich conversations had in our shared office, were deeply influential in their support of and influence on this project. I cite them here alongside Christian, this relation is as it should be.

literature, there is finally and fascinatingly another answer to Christian's question that, while it comes in a different guise, remains a critique of the way institutional academic study literally “saves” the lives of the black people whose work it chooses to grasp. An attention to figurations of and the construction of novel figures for “the lived experience of the black”—to quote one of the most profound practitioners of the figurative mode of analysis, Frantz Fanon and his *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952)—is one of the main avenues of thought for the criticism surrounding black autobiography. This is especially true of those narratives written by the formally enslaved. This particular practice of “writ[ing] to save [one’s] own life” , with its stakes at least as literal as Christian’s, makes a fitting archive for analysis for the critic who finds himself faced with answering Christian’s question for himself.

To address myself to the question of “for whom are we doing what we are doing when we do literary criticism?”, however, I will not be making recourse to myself, and the saving of my life or at least not directly. Instead, I want to explore how the lives of the black authors I study were instrumentalized *by the authors themselves* to inaugurate, however purposefully, the very separation between sensuality and intellect that Christian’s critique looks to literature to return to its rightful, immediate relation. In this way, unlike Christian, I do not write to save my own life in any more or less literal sense, but instead to interrogate how some of the earliest lives saved in language through the autobiographical medium, which would in turn become a substantial strain of black art production, as well as a primary mode of interpreting it⁹, was initially formulated *in medias res*. The fabricated selves of a burgeoning discourse which are the narratives of the enslaved become, with Christian’s invocation included, another installment in the many and various theories of blackness and black life.

Specifically, I am interested in thinking about antebellum slave autobiography alongside the autobiographical eruptions framing or constituting several recent works of scholarship on either side of the debate the intervention of the Afro-pessimist’s seems to have created. This debate has a complex history which, in some ways, is simply the history of black writing in the 20th century¹⁰—a writing which received the slave’s narrative and the historical fiction of the Reconstruction era, as one set of source texts for embarking on the institutionalization of black thought. For me then the background of my worrying over the fictionality and constructed nature

⁹ Here I am thinking to propose something like Virginia Jackson’s “lyric reading” as it appears in her work *Dickinson’s Misery* (2005) but instead this would be something more like “autobiographical reading”—a reading practice in which it is common to assert if not assume that any art produced by black people is autobiographical in nature, whether this autobiography is veiled or immediately apparent. This autobiographical content is typically reinscribed in the scholarship as the postulation of some theory of “blackness” that is latent in the work. A wonderful entry onto this thought occurs in some of the writing in art history which thinks through how abstract art comes to be limited to interpretation through the biography of the artist, especially when he is black. An account of any black person’s laboring under the tortured sign of blackness, having an entire world, to cite the recent Afro-pessimist work on the subject, that subjects one to unending, alienated servitude to the rest of the world—social, political, philosophical, or otherwise—has surfaced as a popular method for the presentation and thinking on black life. And while this field itself is various, disintegrated, and somewhat inchoate, its popularity and viability as a motivation to political action makes it hard to ignore. I will then engage the writing I am interested in in this dissertation with this group of thinkers in mind, as well as the alternative modes of conceiving of black life and ontology that have, somewhat unintentionally, lead to these conclusions.

¹⁰ I’m thinking about that history as it is rendered in texts like Harold Cruise’s *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967) or June Jordan’s *Civil Wars* (1981) or Lawrence P. Jackson’s *The Indignant Generation* (2011) among many others—books that, in different ways and through different modes of (auto)biographical/historical situating tell the story of a generation of black intellectual and cultural life. This practice of reflection through cultural criticism is, to my mind, of a piece of the social and political purposes of the slave’s narrative as well as different polemics and monographs of new approaches to the study of black life.

of early black autobiography is a consideration of the afterlives of these texts' claims to the truth of black being as they are *at least one medium of the afterlife of slavery*. That the actors I consider are forced by historical circumstance to experiment in the writing of life—to join the great pantheon of Western metaphors for self, as they are drawn out by Olney or Lejeune—affords them both the role of instantiating the tropes and figures of black literature to come *and* a unique position from which to enter on the critique of Enlightenment ideals (later to be found among in ruins as a liberal and conservative America politic). It is my contention that certain elements of the slave's figuration have bled into the new philosophies or theories of blackness that explore its particularity as an ontological foundation directly, that is, that write into and create “the black situation”¹¹. And thus, that slave autobiography along with the criticism that emerges to institutionalize its study, also affect the insertional visions of black literary studies. I would say, to use a term of importance to my argument below, that these early narratives “frame” the contemporary debates in black literary study.

I will now briefly list a spare few of the writers whose texts use autobiography to intervene to further the theorization of blackness—to widen the scope of the slave's autobiographical frame—between the antebellum and the contemporary, to demonstrate the pervasiveness of this mode in the tradition. Several things occur immediately: the autobiographical works of early studies of the conditions of black ontology such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Ida B. Wells¹², as well as the early field work of Zora Neale Hurston—when she was still a student of Franz Boaz, the autobiographical writing of Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, and June Jordan, as well as Toni Morrison's theorization of memory and historical truth across essays and novels, such as *Playing in the Dark* and *Beloved*, the conceit of which latter text is purposefully, deviously, and fascinatingly that of historical fiction. This intervening tradition of black autobiographical (where not yet explicitly auto theoretical) work makes a bridge between the text under consideration below and the theory and criticism I will employ to approach it.

The saving of life then for me is something of a double bind. For the literary critic, the rescuing of life from the maw of the brutal history of erasure which is the black tradition is, of course, always also the pasting over of that life with the figurative mask of the texts and documents which stand in evidence to it. To cite again that recent work by one of the foremost practitioners of black literary study, Saidiya Hartman, the “fabulative” fundament of the practice of literary representation distorts, however unintentionally, the life the text is made to stand for; the genre of autobiographical accounting is, as at least one critic will note below, an apt expression of Du Boisian “double-consciousness.” The fabulous and doubled quality of the African American slave narrative specifically, its well documented projection of value onto the life that it represents and the rhetorical abstraction that takes place in the generation of an artwork after life, is a central concern for me. The centrality of the relation between self-

¹¹ To quote the Anthony Reed essay, cited above.

¹² Whose work while not directly philosophical in nature, like her inheritor, Du Bois, uses formal ingenuity and a synthesis of archival material to produce documents that—in both content and form—describe the position of black people in America in the later 19th and early 20th century. The best and most concise example of this is her pamphlet *Lynch Law in Georgia* (1899) which combines three voices of accounting for several lynchings—one from the Southern newspapers that surround it, one from a ostensibly neutral white investigative journalist, and one from the author herself. The relation in this document between these three voices—of the public institution, of the individual well-meaning white, and of the impassioned black thinker—characterizes the relationship between several black artists and their work—always seen in triangulation with the white world at large and the white reader/critic/sympathizer in particular.

fabrication and subsequent alienation is informed by the attractions of several theorists of the autobiography to the “poetic” or “metaphorical” relation between the speaking subject of the autobiography and its author. Combine this with the fact that the deconstructionist, structuralist, and post-structuralist phases of the wider field of literary study occur alongside the earliest writing of black study as an institutionally practiced discipline (in the late 1960s and early 1970s, if the history of Yale University’s black studies department might stand as a watershed moment), and a picture of the descriptive or ontological turn in black literary study begins to resolve.

How the seeming injunction to signify as a member of any identity position, but specifically those that attend blackness, with all its freight and terror, has evolved over the last half decade of debate and disaster in the American academy is one of the great dramas of the 20th and early 21st centuries. The force and intensity of the debates which began black study in America, debates which arguably span centuries from enslavement and colonization to the many public forums, art exhibitions, periodical exchanges, poetry readings, international conferences, insurance trials, public concerts, civil wars and insurrections whose documentation make up a large portion the archive of this discipline, make it without a doubt one of the richest areas for study for any text based scholar. Ephemera abounds, and work extends off the page and into the life worlds of its many practitioners. The way writing touches life then, specifically any life that is meant to be saved by or in it, is a crucial concern of both black literary criticism and black literary production.

My broad interest in autobiographical texts—specifically the slave narratives that will be under analysis here—is motivated by a desire to engage with the recent developments in black literary study, arguments that often use anecdotes from lives near and far from their authors and center themselves around analysis of philosophy, the recounting of current events, and descriptions of art. By staging a critical encounter between the antebellum black autobiographies used as historical source material in many of the foundational texts by the critics of black autobiography—from Ullrich B. Phillips and John W. Blasingame, to William L. Andrews and Valerie Smith—and an interpretation of the “poetics” of black autobiography informed by the writings of recent theorists of black ontology—here ranging from the recent work of Kevin Quashie and Christina Sharpe, but also Saidiya Hartman, Fred Moten, Calvin Warren, and Frank Wilderson, III—I hope to discover what these new theorists of the black subject—themselves largely informed by Fanon and Édouard Glissant—make possible for the reading of the writings of the enslaved. And, most importantly, what these writings from the somewhat deeper past have to offer to a field that seems so intent on theorizing itself into a life unbound from its past descriptions.

Section 2: *A poetics of autobiography*—black antebellum autobiography and the ontological turn

The autobiographical account becomes the foundation of African American literature in my account not only because it was the primary medium of making for the slave, or because of the occasional (and thus evolving) political concerns that motivated the abolitionists to enlist the often “reluctant” slave to write in the first place, but because the accounting they give of the transition from slavery to freedom, from objective non being to subjective being for self, which possessed the philosophical discourse of the later 18th and 19th centuries, especially in America, was equally engaged by their quasi scientific guise of common sense, idealist, or materialist recounting of the order of things. The enlightenment desire for accurate categorization and the democratic purview of its new (political) science prompted an attention to the writing of a true-

to-life enslaved person, largely toward an evidencing of ethical and humanistic arguments (say, of the Christian Universalists) via the medium of recently “enlightened” (i.e. religiously converted) slaves. This, naturally, in the service of larger political and economic gains for the regions from which a larger part of their loudest apologists hailed—the transcendent, antebellum North. This zealous Northerners produced unsurprisingly good Christian arguments for the abolition of slavery, sometimes communicated via the penning of fake slave narratives.¹³

Arguments which were, despite their often-massive material costs, arguments confined by the conceptual matrix which was developing into the world as it was created by (white) Western thought. This was a world of democratic revolution, policy debate centered on deciding the humanity of the world’s several races of people, and colonial (disastrously Westward) expansion. It was also a world in which the black did not exist. Or rather did so only materially and not metaphysically. The shift in attention then, from the highest heights of metaphysical description to the gastric churn of legislation and war, that invites the enslaved into the field of legitimate debate within the terms of the most important discourses of the 19th century, is an entrance through autobiography (an historical, materialist, and avowedly factual recounting¹⁴) that marks the earliest critically available manifestations of creativity and imagination from the regions of an ever more isolated subject position within the broader confines of what would become “black life”, of a life otherwise and as yet ungovernable.¹⁵

The appearance of new metaphors for life which the early African American writers brought to the situation of philosophical and political history unfolding in and through the writing of the early 19th century in America was an expression that challenged the parameters of

¹³ While these narratives are not directly discussed below, they do make a wrinkle in the reception of authentically composed narratives that is worth baring in mind. For all their good intentions and sympathetic feelings, the Abolitionists were not always the most suitable sponsors of black creative and intellectual freedom, even beyond these forgeries. A vision of the recursive pushing and pulling of white allyship (to borrow a more common term) with black artistic production is one truly baffling and enraging aspect of coming to survey the history of black art and criticism in America.

¹⁴ A clarification of origins of the injunction to representativeness and empirical facticity for black art might be discovered if one considers the religious reevaluations that were concomitant to the more philosophical revelations that interest me. To think even simply of the reasons for Ralph Waldo Emerson’s resignation from the pastorate at the Second Church of Boston in 1832 largely due to his denial of the miraculous and his postulation of an ever more personal, earthbound, intuitive relation to God—and thus a more cause and effect based morality—espoused by his address to the students of Harvard Divinity school in 1838, is to grasp something of the wider transition which would occur in America ideas. Emerson’s “atheism”—really a broader conception of spirituality and its relationship to the realms of the natural and subsequently historical reality, a philosophy that apes Hegelianism where it is not literally Hegelian—works through a privileging of the singularity of spirit for the individual, a spirit which resides in all humans, yes, but also somewhat panpsychically in all creation as an expression of God. (A confluence reminiscent, in itself, of Benedict de Spinoza’s theses on the relation and near identity of God/Nature/Substance in his *Ethics* (1677), itself an influential text for Hegel’s 1803 *Phenomenology of Spirit*. That there was a massive trend across America and Europe at the time to pen more or less flat-footed, practical lives of Jesus should perhaps come as no surprise. That Hegel himself penned on in his time at seminary in the late 18th century, however, still holds a bit of a thrill.) The point being, of course, across these broad theorizations, that to claim the present of spirit beneath the guise of all things is to project it even onto the slave. (c.f. Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (2005).) The assumption of even this idealist mode of subjectivity for the slave, though he did not yet know to ask for it nor agree to it, sent that other arm of Enlightenment to work—the new science, and its method of adducing proof through control, repetition, and empirical observation. Autobiography, in all its truthiness, was the perfect medium to make such proofs. The writing of a practical and believable life of the slave, like doing so did for Jesus, sparked an unprecedented, intergenerational conflict surrounding the authenticity of black art.

¹⁵ There are, purposefully, permutations of the terms used in Michel Foucault’s reading (re-writing?) of Immanuel Kant’s paradigmatic essay “What is Enlightenment?”

those discourses with the revelation of an antinomy. Here the fallen, the benighted, the ignorant, the animal, the non or sub human seized the means of producing the self which the 19th century was perfecting—not simply narrative or lyric expression, but the task of metaphor making, of connecting the felt presence of the conscious mind (recently narrated into the glorious spiritual apotheosis of sense-certainty become self-consciousness become absolute spirit) to the feeling of other beings in the world.¹⁶ This novel connection, a new grounds or gallery for relation emanating from the seeming elsewhere of blackness, which centuries of writing had and would work tirelessly to keep disconnected from the churn toward total dominations, spiritual, political, and intellectual being practiced by the West, and specifically by severally especially important white enlightenment thinkers on whom the new nation rested, found stubborn expression in the writing of the enslaved about his life.

For some thirty years in the critical writing surrounding black, enslaved autobiography a strain of criticism with an interest in connecting the writing and the world of the enslaved with not simply the material reality they literally inhabited (although much anthropological and ethnographic work indeed exists to this end), but with the intellectual and philosophical history of the later 18th and 19th century, has labored diligently to illuminate the contribution of enslaved writers to a critique of Enlightenment philosophy—in its guise as everything from political theory to life science. The recourse to writing the self as a primary mode of black resistance to the oppressive extremes of the new racial discourse of the 18th century is well remarked.¹⁷ This representation on the part of the enslaved, occurs principally through autobiography and lyric poetry (autobiography's abstracted relative). It is meant to prove his capacity not only to offer up convincing accounts of his own humanity within the conceptual boundaries of received modes of self-expression but also to demonstrate his consistent and sometimes even unintentional ability to escape rationalization, to put pressure on the boundaries of genre and collage over the bad faith caricatures of himself in discourse, until some other grounds or terms of self should emerge to suit him. The stakes of producing a novel conceptual history of the black person, a concept which had little basis outside the monstrous curiosity of several special pets of the aristocracy in the recorded history of the West as such, are available to observation in the earliest autobiographical expression of Africans in American.

In fact, as will be seen below in the writing of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. or in the work of Sylvia Wynter, two leading voices on seemingly opposite ends of the writing on black life, the merging of discursive histories between the white and the black extends to the furthest reaches of English language writing; both seeming to constellate an origin for this merger somewhere

¹⁶ To again cite Hegel—a favorite thinker not only for Emerson, but for that other inimitable 19th century autobiographer: Walt Whitman (c.f. his poem titled simply “Hegel.”) Not merely a darling of 19th century metaphysics, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's philosophy sets the wheels in motion that will lead to one of the most potent figures in all of black literary criticism, Du Boisian “double consciousness.” W. E. B. Du Bois, who studied in Germany during a Hegel revival, would go on from the writing of his monumental 1903 *The Souls of Black Folk*, where is conception of double consciousness is crystalized, to the publication of more than 20 books across nearly every imaginable genre. That his field defining theory was published almost exactly 100 years after Hegel's *Phenomenology* his a historical coincidence with remarking. The thinker who moved on too quickly from Africa due to its “lack” of history is answered a century later by possibly the most important American to ever consider Africa so deeply, even unto an expatriation to and governance thereof.

¹⁷ c.f. Gates' “Introduction” and first essay in *Figures in Black* (1987), and Houston A. Baker's opening chapters of *The Journey Back* (1980), but also and more recently, the work of Maurice Lee's *Slavery, Philosophy, and American Literature 1830-1860* (2005).

around the Renaissance.¹⁸ My own thinking, far more locally, about the writing of enslaved autobiographers in America then makes just one among many other installments in this line of argument. What I wish to add to this movement of thought—playing itself out in the skirmishes in black literary study between what can be loosely grouped as pessimistic and positivistic stances toward “the condition” of blackness, to borrow a term from Harriet Jacobs—is an encounter with one thread of this history of recontextualization, a corner of this thought that deals largely in what I will call, following several of the foundational thinkers of this corner of the field, a poetics. This is variously a poetics of autobiography (to borrow from James Olney) and of relation (to do so from Édouard Glissant), the former a theoretical backbone for one the fields most influential books on “Afro-American” autobiography, William L. Andrews’ *To Tell a Free Story* (1986) and the latter one of the major critical poles for a recent path breaking work penned by Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake* (2016).

To make a long argument briefly, it might do to look at how John Blassingame uses *The Narrative in the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or, Gustavus Vasa in The Slave Community* (1979)—a work whose significance to the field of black autobiographical study is apparent in its consistent citation. Blassingame writes of Equiano:

“The narrative of Olaudah Equiano details the process of enslavement and some elements of the cultural baggage Africans brought with them to the New World. The general outline of these elements must be described in order to understand the nature of acculturation. *Acculturation in the United States involved the mutual interaction between two cultures, with Europeans and Africans borrowing from each other.*” (Blassingame, 20)

One of the cites for further analysis in the scholarship that I perceive is epitomized by a characterization like this. What is the contemporary scholar of the slave’s narrative to do with a tradition of thought that was evolving along with the knowledge of the veracity of the texts in question, especially when that “most famous and revealing account” is proven to be a fabrication? What is to be said of the “acculturation” it apparently performs? The answer is not an abandonment of the work done on these texts, despite its insistence on veracity and ethnographic reportage where there is instead effortful artifice and research. What I want to point out is how little it actually matters whether or not the slave’s accounting is true, as long as it is able to become famous, that in terms of literary history and the theories which borrow from its archives and methods to validate themselves, it matters more that a book is read and written about than that it is actually true.

This is of course the case with the other genres of literature and arenas of culture which these theories draw upon, except in autobiography generally, and the reception of autobiography in particular, there is, on the part of the writer and the reader, an assumption of the burden of truth. The reception of the narratives in question in this dissertation then is of interest in part because I am interested in how by being well received, able to be studied and well suited to all forms of rhetorical and historical analysis, these three narratives—despite the truth content they claim our really do possess—come to be not only canonically representative, but foundational to the theory, not just the practice, of African American autobiographical making. When Andrews or Smith or even Gates describe how one or another of these narratives is well suited as a piece of evidence to theorize about black life, in the broadest sense, or the genre of black

¹⁸ Where this origin is not thought, as for Wynter as for Glissant, a simple fact of the existence of both white folks and black on the planet *in history*.

autobiographical writing in the more contained guise of genre, their selective attention winnows the foundations of an entire historical landscape of writing and life into and through the voices of these select writers (and a few others, typically William Wells Brown, Henry “Box” Brown, and Martin Delany, to name a few). This narrowing is, of course, both a simple result of the establishing of a field and a response to the question of authorial authenticity that has plagued black writing from its deepest, obscured past to the present.

My project is searching for the traces of foreknowledge of Blassingame’s kind of scholastic reception and the claims it produces through its various and developing mode of attention. Foreknowledge that is present in the three slave narratives that I consider in different and expanding ways. For Douglass, who is just beginning his autobiographical project in 1845, a project that will span nearly a half century and most of his natural life, this movement toward reflection, toward a critical reception, I see not only in his well remarked rhetorical mastery, but in his employment of a subtle fame narrative. For Jacobs, the present moment of the presentation of her bill of sale, along with her use of a pseudonym, that perform her metamorphosis into a textual being. And finally, for Equiano, whose misrepresentation of his natality for political ends produced a tumultuous and impactful debate about his writing and the nature of autobiography that continues into the present.

Blassingame concludes: “In the process of acculturation...slaves made European forms serve African functions” (ibid., 20). If this is true, I want to ask, how might the figurations used by the autobiographer of enslavement to “deform” European artistic mediums and social codes be said to anticipate arguments observing or even advocating for the “acculturation” of the formally enslaved? And why should scholars of the present not approach these seemingly “regressive” political positions¹⁹ as if, to cite Valerie Smith’s understandable frustration, they are simply to ideologically enshrouded in pre-civil rights politics to be viable as models for thought on blackness in the present—Here the scholarship reenters as an important archive for thought.

The transition in the earlier scholarship in figures of external control marks another iteration of the transition in the consideration of black autobiography that draws my attention to the canonical works of the past. But where above, in thinking with the authors, I’m looking for foreknowledge of the intrinsic value of black autobiography to the study of blackness, in this subsequent pattern in the scholarship, the focus is turned outward, taking in the discursive field that surrounds the evaluations of the enslaved. To track again from John W. Blassingame, and his work’s attention to “the lash” as a type or character for agency in *The Slave Community* (1979)—often more effective than mere overseers and planters—to William L. Andrews’s attentiveness to the pressures of white readership (editing and recording) in his 1986 *To Tell a Free Story*, which quickly becomes a grounds for ideological critique rooted in the “limits” of the canonical slave narratives as they appear, for example, in Valerie Smith’s book *Self Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative* (1987) the year after. This transition in consideration characterizes the shift in critical attitudes surrounding the uses and disadvantages of slave autobiography for black life. Where Blassingame understood the autobiographical accounts as essentially source material, the historical recoding of a period of American history split across several factual witnesses, Andrews’s account of the autobiographies—bolstered by his contemporary theorization of autobiographical making and issued into a more

¹⁹ Examples from different poles might be Equiano’s passionate desire for Englishness and Jacobs’s refusal to be sold even into freedom, for the defamations such a selling would permanently impart onto her; both of these giving rise to outbursts from the autobiographical narrators and signaling a desire for accelerated acculturation beyond the burdens of blackness as they might be said to conceive it, if they can.

deconstructionist environment of critical attention (especially to African American literature), finds itself recasting the primary relationship for concern as the relationship between a white reading public and a black author function.²⁰ The disentangling of the enslaved writer from their autobiographical double is facilitated by, in at least one early instance for Andrews, a reference to the post-structuralist autobiography of Roland Barthes—the theorist whose writing by the late-60s had put the conception of any singularity and authority behind authorship to death.²¹

By way of this even gestural disentangling, which in fits and starts continues across the reception of slave autobiography, Andrews is already at work on the project Henry Louis Gates, Jr. tasks himself with in *Figures in Black*, a task that would become central to the forthcoming debates in the field they share: the project of critical synthesis between the white western and “Afro-American” contributions to the wider field of American historiographical, ethical, aesthetic and ultimately philosophical discourse. It is this environment of thought—circulating around the theories of autobiography, the critical reception of the earliest writings of the enslaved, and the history of enlightenment critique from the 19th century to the present—that my reconsideration of antebellum slave narratives seeks to inhabit.

*

There is a shade of course of disagreement here, a line of argument emblemized for me by the work of Houston A. Baker, that in attempting to answer—either directly or no—the call Gates makes for a more synthetic accounting of African American art production, which ends up being the primary point of contact for the critique Gates will leverage in “Black Art and the Literary Tradition”, the second essays in *Figures in Black* (1987). He seems to be referencing claims like those made in Baker’s *The Journey Back* published at the beginning of the decade, and while the two seem to have similar projects, the reason that emerges for Gates’s allergy to Baker is a point of fascination for me. To think with the reason for this will give a shape to intervention I wish to make in the field. This intervention boils down to thinking, as seen above in Anthony Reed’s recent essay, about “the black subject”—what it means in practice (which is to say in language) to elaborate while occupying this position and what this ever-new subject’s parameters within the Western figurations for subjectivity or formations for ontological ground or positioning will become. I ask then, extending the ireful query of Gates: Why would Baker or anyone go in search of traces of a black subject in a language that they claim is built to smother or oppose its existence? Why, indeed, study literature written in English at all if the goal is seemingly to detach one tradition of writing from another within the same medium. What is the goal of a kind of “separate but equal” canonization? How does the desire for this interface with the disciplinary and structural racism of the academy, and how could critical theory or literary study possibly make a worthwhile intervention toward the solving of this problem—where academic scrutiny is seemingly figured as just another practice of white western colonial seizure and interpellation. This strikes me as one of the problems of the critical approach to black

²⁰ A scene of particularly deconstructionist attention, exemplified by the many dense and useful essays penned by Hortense J. Spillers’s throughout the late 1970s into the 80s into the present, that put pressure on the institutionalization of black art and culture. Of course, in Spillers’s case, this pressure often resulted in a further inattention of the academy both to the usefulness of her style of writing and the prescience of her claims which is only now being corrected. (c.f. *Habeas Viscus* (2014) by Alexander G. Weheliye, among others.)

²¹ The essay in questions, “The Death of the Author”, appears in a late collection of essays *Image-Music-Text* (1977). It is interesting to note that it was originally published in America, not finding print in France until 1968—an auspicious year.

literature and art as it is exemplified by the work of Baker, a work that wishes, at one moment early on in *The Journey Back*, for the expressions of Douglass to reach us in “a black language” (Baker 39).²²

Either it is possible for the English language to expand to hold conceptions of blackness beyond the merely representative and figural or it isn't. And it seems to me a more profitable assumption for investigation, more likely given the conditions of the present, and more accurate to what little of the intentions of the narratives a reader can perceive (if he can be truly said to perceive any usefully), that there was felt to be room in language, in English specifically, in the “master's tongue”, for conceptions of blackness for the enslaved writers. And their prospective utterances make the context at least for a writing beyond the domination by comprehension of whiteness—where they do not eventuate in an escape from the figural *tout court*.²³ These are the results of the poetics, the making in and through language, that accompanied the writing of the enslaved into the canon of American literature through the formal aberrations the condition of enslaved life brought to the genre of autobiography. And precisely to the larger polemic of Anthony Reed's recent piece on the ontological turn in black study, I think there is a means to tracing the lineage of this poetical turn from the writing of the enslaved to the writing of the proverbially free. These are the innovations then extended to affect more recent work in black studies, work that rose to expand and challenge Baker's claims (not least among them, the beginnings of these strains of thought that are at least in part rooted in Gates' critique of Baker in *Figures in Black* that find capable expansion in the hands of Reed.) Where Gates called for the synthesis of Western traditions of thought and the method for analysis they present, Reed's own turn toward investigations of interiority and subjectivity give the lie to the “Westernization” of

²² Baker remarks, “Had there been a separate, written black language available, Douglass might have fared better [in the communication of a properly black subjectivity not “molded by the values of white America”]” (39). That Baker posits a desire for a “separate” and equal black language, in a chapter that will end in a remonstrance of the “accommodations” of Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery*, should be a suggestive enough fact for the reader to assume this writer's opinion of Baker's conclusions. (Washington was one of the most vocal proposers and supporters of the segregation of blacks in Washington at the time, in the early 20th century.) The more striking concern is how Baker himself does not seem to be aware of his own desires for the separate to be equal. His frustration with the situation of black composition is understandable, and his hesitations around the writing of the enslaved given the historical situation (i.e. white ideological and material domination) is taken heartedly. However, he seems somewhat unclear on what exactly would be afforded by this “black language”, has not yet seen all the way to something like Kevin Quashie's “black world” or to the poetical relations of Glissant—both as yet untheorized. What causes his hesitation might be something like what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. describes in his own account of the race for theory—in the first full section of *Figures in Black*. Here a black allergy to theory is proposed as a result of the politically representative injunction on black artists and critics. (c.f. section III of “Literary Theory and the Black Tradition”, pg. 24-32) I want to wed the new, fearless theories of blackness—a blackness these early critics set the stage for an imagining of, alongside the texts that seemed to fall outside the purview of such theorization due to their obvious and immediate connections to “real life”—that is, their function as autobiographies.

²³ I am thinking here of the recent avant-garde poetry and novels of Nathaniel Mackey and Rene Gladman. These two poets, and their inheritors, have produced archives of texts, vast in scope and dense in significance, that are flagrant challenges to the dominion of representative language. The way these authors cling to a semblance of subjectivity as it is typically conceived—for Gladman in her use of the first person and the position of the ethnographer, and Mackey in his epistolary style—only to humiliate it at the service of demonstrating the play and potential of non-referential narratives (narratives about nothing and nowhere, non-events and unhappenings, invisible cities and imaginary friends) has pushed African American writing to the very edge of the autobiographical imperative. I have attended talks by both writers in which they are asked to explain the relation of their work to the world—explanations which, for Mackey expand to cosmography and for Gladman disappearing into an embrace of not knowing, a willful forgetting of the labor to know.

recent black thought—a thought comfortable with citing heavily from Heidegger, Arendt, and Levinas.

Baker's desire for an alternative linguistic code for blackness is of course site specific, "occasional" to borrow the word Hortense Spillers uses to describe the conditions for her own essay writing²⁴, and eventually turns on itself across the development of black study deeper and deeper into the academy. Just as Baker claims that language opened the world of Douglass's thought to the limitations of his own existence, so Baker's aside speculating on the potentials of a truly black language presages the revelations through poetic investigation of the present expressions and theorizations of blackness. To return to Douglass specifically then, it can be said that by submitting himself to alienation from the self through the figuration of autobiographical writing, and by doing so tactically, Douglass writes to expand the conceptions of blacks and blackness, adding not only rhetorical fluency and imagistic fluidity to the stream of consciousness embedded within the slave, but beginning the broader construction of a relation between such a fluency in language and the referent of blackness. The coming-into-language of black life that is Douglass's writing, and the arrival onto the broader stage of American history which results from his popularity and subsequent canonization, gives formal coordinates to the effective expression of black people to come.

These new coordinates, at least in English, proposed by Douglass's autobiographical experiments in figuration, help to popularize the association between black people, aesthetic making, and self-representation. This in turn makes the autobiographical a primary mode for all black art and expressive culture.²⁵ The catch of course being, to return to Baker's hesitation around celebrating the philosophical fallout of Douglass's work, that Douglass's work does fall into certain conventions of white writing and figuration. The saving grace is then the mailability

²⁴ Spillers is also famously the author of a densely theoretical essay: "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." The concern with blackness's coming into language, moving from a grammar of the subject toward a grammar of "flesh"—a seeming semantic argument with phenomenal (literally phenomenological) stakes—has changed the face of black literary study in recent years. Philosophies that approach blackness "without the subject" in the strongest sense, face down this shift borrowed from Spiller's black feminist deconstructive criticism to re-present the black subject (now conceived as a matrix of desire in object hood, non-being in material presence, etc.) that recast the deeply psychological and symbolic artworks of African American literature and their reception with an easy cipher for the complexities of the phenomenological experience of the enslaved. As flesh the slave is more comprehensible within the discourse available to academic study not because the characterization of the slave as flesh is "accurate" to the condition of living slavery, but because within the confines of a Western philosophical and figurative discourse, that experience cannot register without passing through a conception of inert, unfeeling objecthood, into a conception of more dynamic yet still not subjective being. The desire of Spiller's "occasional" work then, being to move on from this moment of thought, to move through it to another moment, where a synthesis of a less violent nature might be achieved. The working over and rehashing of the terrain of the subject who is also black, in subsequent considerations of the condition of blackness's origin in discourse (Spillers cites Equiano, as I will, although Wynter, Gates, and others locate this origin elsewhere—in Phillis Wheatley or the writing of 15th century religious philosophers) is the work Spillers, like Gates or Wynter, Baker or Moten, calls into being. This is the thesis I want to present and follow up on, not only in a continuation of their theoretical interventions, but in a return to the literature of the enslaved.

²⁵ Douglass performs this association within his narrative in the famous passage—which is a likely source text later for Du Bois—when he links the content of the sorrow songs to the consciousness of the slaves. There is a space, within Douglass's considerations, for no paradoxical significance to the songs—happy or sad they all express the misery and damnation of enslavement. This is an affecting argument when the goal is the emancipation of slaves or subsequently a theory of blackness divorced from itself as singular in some fundamental way. But as an account of a work of art it is a touch instrumental, propagandistic. I want to tread in the place where non-reference lives for black art making. Where there is still liberty to sing, happily or sadly, and have there be no assumed connection between what is sung and the singer. A split for critical consideration afforded to much European art.

of the autobiographical mode. Baker's assumption that this genre is formalized enough within even the white world to make Douglass's participation in it tantamount to a conscription into whiteness does not take this amorphous parameters of this genre into account. Approaching Douglass's writing, his framing of the field of black narration—which Baker claims for him by placing him in line from Jupiter Hammon to Booker T Washington—in this light challenges the claims to a whited, overdetermined quality to any of the autobiographical writing of the enslaved. Approached poetically (and slightly less historically), Douglass's writing along with that of Jacobs (whom he fails to mention) and Equiano's, make different claims on the white world of discourse Baker posits outside the black experience, to say nothing of the texts.

Another way of saying this might be that where Baker, and the critics that follow him, understand the enslaved as stranded in a barren field of white determination governed by language, I understand the enslaved, especially and specifically those that appeared more readily in history through the penning of narratives, as vastly more participatory in the fields of discourse their expressions entered. The vastness of this participation is held in the complexity of the documents they produced and the receptions these documents engendered. By folding the texts within their receptions, then, as extension of the texts themselves in some way, their language and images spread out through the writing and thinking on black life form the dates of their penning to the present. And because of this, one might say because of their canonical critical status, they are the most expansive texts of blackness available from the earliest periods of black—here specifically African American—art making.

Conclusion—how do you figure? black life in metaphor.

“To become what we are not, we can only, then, begin from what we are; but the process of becoming must be an evaluation and growth, never a disruption, from the potential and inherent being-in-the-beginning. If one conceives of the set as a circle, then it does not suddenly pop into being complete and full-blown like Athena from the forehead Zeus. In fact, it does not even, so far at least as we can see, ever *begin*: it first *appears* to human perception as a point minutely small, receding, if we try to follow, infinitely into the past where the possibilities lay in our ancestors; the self is first seen as a potential point to be realized as a circle in the process of our living selves.”

Olney, *Metaphors of Self*, pg. 33

The amorphous generic confines of autobiographical writing, its essential singularity, allow for the mode of relation which the narratives project to be understood as, in Olney's terms, “metaphors of self.” For my purposes, Olney's groundbreaking formulations about autobiography allow for a reconsideration of the texts that Valerie Smith, following William L. Andrews, claims, “...elude the domination of received generic structures and conventions” (Smith, 11). It is my contention that the current scholarship on Jacobs, Douglass, and Equiano does not adequately account for the strangeness of the autobiographical genre, and as a result misses out on the freedom this generic category—if it can even be called that—affords. My reconsideration of these texts, draws attention to the ways their authors work through the task of making metaphors about themselves and thus, for a soon coming field of black literary study, for more generalized or conceptual aspects of blackness as a whole—from the condition of being in the aftermath of enslavement at all, to the more specific intersectional and economically specific

positions addressed in the scholarship—Jacobs' status as at once victim of sexual violence and unwilling seducer, Douglass' compromised position as the hyper visible spokesman and the erudite escapee, and Equiano's contradictory status as zealous assimilationist, religious supplicant and fabricator of one of the most impactful lies ever penned by a former slave, at least for black literary study.

Chapter 2 *précis*:

The second chapter presents an in-depth analysis of the different approaches to Harriet Jacobs *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) to foreground how the text poses distinct problems for interpretation depending, among other things, on how a reader chooses to view Jacobs's employment of her pseudonym: Linda Brent. It works carefully through the reception history of Jacobs's work, arguing that her enigmatic text requires the development of a more capacious method of interpretation, one that both allows her writing the artistic freedom of a novel without forfeiting her work as a crucial instance of the substantial history of her bondage and freedom, in this way it becomes auto theoretical not simply autobiographical. That Jacobs's text was reintroduced to the field of literary study at a crucial moment for the development of the contemporary work of black study positions her text within the critical contemplation of blackness at a foundational moment for the contemporary theories of black being. This chapter then argues for an approach to the text that, in consideration of the way Jacobs's text would become foundational for the theories of black subjectivity, attempts to hold in view the texts facticity and fictionality, and explores the implication of this approach for both the interpretation of the text on its own terms and its reception that would place it as a cornerstone of the theory of blackness.

Chapter 2:
A PLUNGE INTO THE ABYSS—HARRIET JACOBS
on the uses and disadvantages of fictionality for black life.

“Jacobs’s achievement was the transformation of herself into a literary subject in and through the creation of the narrator, Linda Brent.”
(Yellin, xiv)

“I knew what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation.”
(Incidents, 54)

Section 1: “Written By Herself”

1. Jean Fagan Yellin and Black Literary Study.

The twilight years of the 1960s spelled disaster for the black community in America. The well-documented murders and subsequent protests that tore across a nation that had just seen one of its final bids for a properly reconstructed political body with the passing of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, tell of a nation quick-turned—as is so commonly the case—back on all its apparent progress, toward further government sanctioned lynching and the brutal suppression of any who chose to use their bodies in service of a recognition thereof—the FBI files of everyone from W.E.B. Du Bois to Angela Davis make a stunning backdrop to a century of apparent progress on “the race question.” From the quiet remove long-form institutional protection provides in the guise of “critical distance,” the academy cocked its head. The tidal wave of reignited protests of a far less peaceful nature lapped at the heavy medieval doors of the ivory tower. Buildings constructed in the late-19th and early 20th centuries on college campuses across the nation, designed to resemble those old cloistered English halls or the towering yet open fictive architectures of an anachronistic Greco-Roman knowledge, became riot proof. And whether out of sheer terror at a deserved retribution or a genuine desire for a rearrangement of knowledge to reflect the lived conditions of the present and the pasts which bore it, scholarship in the field of literary study began to change.

As a result of the booming black literary production of the early 20th century, one with an eye toward inherited forms and collecting records and theories of black art making, and the student protests that brought black people to the university as the objects of study in and for themselves, an amalgamated figure for the black appeared suddenly assailable within the discipline of literary study, even if largely by analytics born on the European continent. Blackness grew across the century (and especially in the academic waves that proceeded from the Civil Rights movement) from a phenotypical marker designating one’s position in the great chain of being to a discursive signifier with teeth to shred and masticate these old ideas of “being”, of “self”, and especially of “other.” Likewise, a new set of methodologies and texts to apply them to found scholars finally willing, if not always able, to profess them. And the code of literary figuration that encodes everyone from Phillis Wheatley to Amiri Baraka as “black” was born. This “blackness”, in recent scholarship (for example, in the pathbreaking work of Christina Sharpe’s 2016 *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*) opened a passage between the living blackness of the present and the lived bleakness of the past, even to the extent that it is now a

practicable method of analysis (now to cite the more recent work of Saidiya Hartman or M. NourbeSe Phillip) to imaginatively inhabit the disappeared life of one's ancestors.

There are many ways to narrate the formation of black studies in the American academy, and this is surely done better and done more thoroughly elsewhere.²⁶ I sketch this scene for my reader again to set the stage for this chapter's return to a work of scholarship written just as the cascade of socio-historical knowledge production called "black studies" was beginning. What is of interest to me here, why I turn my attention back to a book which is, perhaps rightly, thought of as anything but black study, to think through one of the multiple origins of this discipline and its consequent effects on the field of literary study is at least two-fold. The first is obvious: In white funded, populated, and protected institutions is it often white people who make the first moves toward legitimate diversification, simply because they are able, what with the goal posts of academic legitimacy closer at hand. And secondly, because the work in question, the first of the scholar Jean Fagan Yellin, makes a quiet tirade against the figure of "the black" in the mind and writing of "the white" across the history of early American literature, developing a method of analysis and an opening for new canonical texts. Yellin's is an argument that clears space and makes some tools for the soon-coming institutionalization of black literary study, helping it to emerge carrying with it the legitimacy of "critical" sanction not the sense that it is given permission but in the sense that an area of long-rooted, bad faith representation had been removed. These are not terms black scholars of the present are taught to enjoy—sanction, legitimacy, canon—but they are the terms of engagement within the fields of study that afforded their work a position of value (really, a position from which to reevaluate) in the first place, and so they are my terms here. For better or for worse, like it or not, the current predominate strain of black intellectual and cultural production, all that money and clout that is showered upon the field and its figure heads, is a direct result of the winnowing away of racist blockades to support and placement within the academy which happens not only by changes in policy, but equally and most interestingly to me at least by shifts in attention in the discursive field itself. To look at something new one must first look away from something old. Jean Fagan Yellin's 1972 monograph *The Intricate Knot: Black Figures in American Literature 1776-1863*, is just such a redirection of critical attention.

Yellin's first book of published criticism is over half a century old this year, and with it an altered academy is casting its gaze back to discover roots and revitalize revolutionary politics and practices of all shapes and sizes. I return to this work myself in search of a method or, more accurately, for one short act in the story of a method.

It is true that literary study has spent its entire history engaging with the particular objects and parameters of aesthetic representations rendered in language. Whether it be the gothic investigations of the psychological depths or the latent federalism in local color's picturesque scenes and caricatures, American literature, in a relatively short history, has developed a rich lexicon of symbols—knots of geologically layered allegory—that can be traced from Toni Morrison's *Beloved* to Charles Brockton Brown's *Edgar Huntly*. The continuous hauntings which visit any student of American letters have in common their special witnesses. Whether one

²⁶ Perhaps most notably in the essay by Sylvia Wynter "On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory..." whose analysis of the origins of black studies is central to my own understanding of this intellectual history and its historico-philosophical implications. There is not sufficient space here to give as generous and careful an analysis as Wynter's essay warrants—shattering piece of writing and thinking that it is (an effect typical of Wynter's work.) My hope is that, as with any text of her caliber, this admitted dilution and dispersal of her thought will send readers back to the source to discover more ways her thought might travel, as she so often does, across time and disciplines to touch vaster and more idiosyncratic places in the field of discourse into which it was issued with deft ferocity.

is to cite Henry James's *Governess* or William Faulkner's *Quentin Compson*, the triangular relation between the symbolic matrix of the supernatural which lives in the text, the bald facts of historically valid life that persists without the text, and the mediating witness to the non-history of the text who makes contact between them, worries a particularly American understanding of the role and consequences of literary representation for wider discourse (of law, particularly) which it disrupts. I return my attention to this work of Jean Fagan Yellin, to her book's insistent tackling of the figure of the "black" across earlier American literature, to draw attention to one consequential corner of this nation's worth of figurative language. (A nation in which, to quote one of famous bards, "All the images are on the dump.") Yellin's *Intricate Knot* foregrounds the figure of the black as it appears in first the successionist then the abolitionist points of view, crafting a genealogy of these images that abuts emancipation, effectively charting the changes in the discursive "black" until such a time as it is emancipated (at least, according to some scraps of language.)

Yellin's work is concerned with the canonical, and makes short work of the often garish when not flat out racist representations of black figures in narrative after novel after political statement—rooting her timeline of major white writers from 1776 forward with an analysis of the 14th query of Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* all the way down to Melville's *Benito Cereno*, from which it borrows its title. That Yellin's attentiveness to the fictionality of blackness in canonical American literature leads her to a recovery from fiction of the true-to-life nature of an autobiography written by a formally enslaved woman should come as no surprise. It is the same movement in interest—from a critical or external position of figuration, toward the stuff of wise men, according to Emerson—the truth of the thing signified—that interests me in Harriet Jacobs's work, mainly how does her speaker turn back and forth between figuration and truth. Below, after detailing Yellin's returning of one particular narrative to the realm of truth and fact, Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), I will consider a few of these more aesthetic moments to demonstrate how this toggling between fact and fiction effects any reading of the narrative.

2. As "Herself"

In the 1981 essay "Written By Herself: Harriet Jacobs's Slave Narrative" Yellin describes the after effects of the rediscovery of Jacobs's letters: "The appearance of Jacobs's letters has made it possible to trace her life" (Norton 204). However here, as in an expanded iteration of this argument which becomes the introduction quoted above, the emphasis is less on tracing Jacobs's life than it is on telling it. In fact, Yellin's introduction spends a significant amount of time simply re-narrating Linda Brent's fictive story as Harriet Jacobs's historical reality. Yellin names and fixes all the real places and real people which the text worked so elaborately to conceal²⁷. This is more or less to be expected, after all Yellin, like so many other scholars, had gone on for years "accepting [the] received opinion" which "dismissed [*Incidents*] as a false slave narrative" (Yellin vii). False in this case meaning penned by a white abolitionist as historical fiction. Yellin, along with her colleagues, thought of *Incidents*, if at all, as a novel—another boring imitation. It is Yellin's explanation for Jacobs's creation of Linda Brent however, beyond the stated reasons of the text and the dangers of its historical surround, which carries implicitly this chapter's fascination and worry, what will open it into an intervention. Yellin writes: "In and

²⁷ There is ample space to consider this gesture and "outing" of Jacobs.

through her creation of Linda Brent, who yokes her success story as a heroic slave mother to her confession as a woman who mourns that she is not a storybook heroine, Jacobs articulates her struggle to assert her womanhood and projects a new kind of female hero” (Yellin xiv). It is the yoking, or really the splitting it implies in this specific formulation, that must be considered further.

But what exactly is being yoked to what in Yellin’s account or, for that matter by Jacobs’s text itself? How does a reader’s decision on what proportion of either strain of narrative, the fiction of the fact, to privilege in their reading change the interpretative potentials of the text? And has Jacobs’s anticipated this attenuation of interpretive possibility? Is her text designed to be flexible or does it strain against the generic categories or literary conventions of its day (or the reader’s?) And what does any of this mean with regard to the originary status of Jacobs’s narration I the archive the present makes reference to in order to construct a historically (read: textually) grounded theory of blackness—it is, after all, the first fugitive slave narratives penned by a women identified narrator. This present-day armature of theory and criticism itself being chiefly concerned at present with then problems like blackness’s “origin” and “authenticity” in the broadest sense.

The first is a successful joining of Jacobs’s real success story to the trope of the heroic slave mother figured in her protagonist. A joining of sensible truth and sentimental trope so successful it will prompt a scholar like Annette Niemtsov to argue, seemingly through some sort of racialized formal delusion on the part of Jacobs, that “The images of the domestic novel seem to mesmerize Brent so that she seems unable to grasp the miracle—at the end of the text—of her own escape from slavery to freedom...Brent apologizes for having only freedom.”²⁸ A freedom, in her argument, which falls short of the fulfillment of the (white) domestic novel’s formal ideal of husband, hearth, and home, to which Jacobs’s narrative is apparently aspiring (Niemtzov 107). In short, Niemtsov argues that the protagonist is not a successful (slave) mother even, generically speaking. Niemtsov’s inability or unwillingness to read any irony into the famous passage she immediately quotes to prove this claim—“Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage” (*Incidents*, 186)—is what convinces me of the success of Jacobs’s critical fusion of the true with the trope. Niemtsov’s is also the kind of scholastic attitude this dissertation, in the end, aims to critique, one that misreads (willfully or no) Jacobs’s potentially ironic emulation of white cultural or artistic norms as a possible environment for anything like an attempt at sincere success within their parameters (here, “marriage” for the protagonist).²⁹ But Niemtsov’s argument illuminates again the tension in the narrative between the aspirations of the narrator-protagonist (in her view, governed strictly by the conventions of the form of the sentimental novel) and Jacobs’s actual life.

The second attempt at yoking too, as Yellin articulates it, results in the “failure” of Jacobs’s confession (and, as Yellin will go on to point out, Jacobs’s justification) of the sexual imprudence inflicted upon her by the agency of “the demon Slavery.” There is a symmetry between the failure of Jacobs’s justification and the failure of her confession that is similar the above conflict between the facts of Harriet Jacobs’s life and the story of her protagonist, Linda Bent. The two positions, in either pair, have trouble sticking to one another for the duration of an analysis. To arrive at the text, having cycled through the various ways of approaching it, is to

²⁸ A “memorization” I find both unlikely and offensive.

²⁹ It is of note that Jacobs herself does, in fact, never marry. She raises the children she has with the congressmen, Samuel Tredwell Sawyer, on her own.

arrive at the threshold of this disruptive rupture, and the differing interpretative techniques which are afforded to either a novel or an autobiography. Specifically, with in the text, this is played out as a disconnect between that which has occurred in actual fact and that which Jacobs is able or willing attach, even metaphorically, even to a figure of her own person as it is known in the world. Jacobs's use of the pseudonym, at the prompting or behest of her editor, prompts her to the active employment of a technique for representation which might be characterized as metaphorical or at least metonymic: the use of pseudonyms opening her onto the use of characters—Jacobs herself becomes the protagonist, and the transformation described by Yellin of Jacobs into a literary subject, is complete. It is the opening provided any this distancing from the truth of her life that allows Jacobs and her readers, the “antiquarians,” to consider a more aesthetically motivated approach to the telling of her truth.

The pseudonyms which *Incidents* employs, as they are described in Jacobs's letters, are used both for the normal reasons: protecting the identities of everyone involved in her escape, to ensure no libel of any person in particular is committed (reserving the most vitriolic critique for “the demon slavery,” itself a figural container for all manner of unspeakable terror.) But also, and more abstractly, to distance Jacobs's historical person from those actions slavery drove her autobiographical character to perform—actions Jacobs knows her reader will find morally reprehensible and which she needs represented as both somewhat tamer and utterly unavoidable.³⁰ Jacobs's use of pseudonyms does not produce characters in the strictest sense because such a creative activity would imply that there is a significant discernible difference between the persons as they are in real life and their representations in the text. That this fictive distinction is assumed by the text itself (presented intentionally among its paratexts, containing a moment of prediction of its own archival recovery) and its reception (the years it languishes even under the nose of Yellin as a “false slave narrative”) is further exemplified by the fact that the reader is left in that text as it is originally published clues to recognize an obvious connection between the masked persons of the text and their real-life counterparts. Child, again in the Appendix, reminds the reader in her introduction to the letter from Amy Post, that the reader has, in fact, met Mrs. Post before. “As has been previously stated, in the preceding pages, the author of this volume spent some time under her hospitable roof” (*Incidents* 187). If the reader would but turn back, he should find an obvious and exact corollary to Post. And then, it might be reasonably assumed, understand that the narrative is in fact true, if not at least, traceable.

Both uses of the pseudonym can be read as gestures of metaphorical transformation—attempts, however intentional, to turn the particular to the universal; yet retaining the particulate—a formalization which is also distancing. Jacobs's use of this formalization of her own perspective, through the character of Linda Brent, her autobiographical self or literary persona, is of primary interest. To think somewhat abstractly about Jacobs's text helps the reader to hold the complexity of her “masking” within the text, and what it has done to the reception history of the book, before the text itself as a lens. My hope is that a synthesis of the above approaches, an assemblage of them into a singular tool, might allow a reader to comprehend

³⁰ It is of note that the archive which proves Jacobs's existence at all is itself made of language, is writing penned for personal use, but remains representation. It is possible there is no way to know the actual details of Jacobs's life. This is just as well. The question some of the scholarship mentioned above asks along these lines, involving the use of fake names, is: What if the historical Jacobs could not escape her master's advances? What if she wrote a character, Brent, who could? I will not be worrying this particular question, as the work mentioned above does the problem due attention. I will however try to expand the scope of this claim to include or at least sit alongside all the other approaches to understanding the significant of Jacobs's story.

more of the complexity of Jacobs's narrative, and how it contributes to the developing tradition of black figuration in American literature. Taking all of the aforementioned modes of approaching the text at once and using them together to interpret the text, without privileging any one of them, brings the tension between Jacobs's multiple modes of narration and description to the fore for analysis. An invitation to approach her work formally, to hold it somewhat aside from the world it seems so pressing that it make impactful entrance onto, to analyze how it goes about acting on this impulse to appear, to forfeit the truth of life to representation in the service of a transformation in the world's image of herself. At the very least there is an invitation, in full knowledge of the text's ties to a true life, in fact tethered to this, to read against the reality of the text and consider it as, if not fictional at least crafted, and therefore in some sense propositional—an intentional presenting of Jacobs's relation to her own life. Even granting the pseudonym as an imposition from her editor, the fact remains that is possible for a reader to orient himself toward this text as if Jacobs exploited every parameter given to her explicitly in the construction of her text. This is the opposite of what seems largely to the current scholastic approach of assuming Jacobs is the victim of the literary history she nevertheless engages and amends.

What's more, adding to all this complexity, the expanded rhetorical atmosphere into which the text speaks, it's now republished archives of "family papers" but more importantly all those impositions on the text from outside, its paratextual apparatus, and its self-conscious archival afterlife—all its moments of apostrophe. The many letters, endorsements, and advertisements that carry the character of Linda Brent into the real world and literally publish her ("fictional") existence, along with her several turns toward her reader (who is, in her moment, present to her in a political crisis and here in the present, where she turns to us still for clarity and forgiveness), make a tempting case for terming Brent something of a "real abstraction" or to discuss the text in terms of its "aura". In whatever sense, there is generated around *Incidents* what was earlier termed an environment of language that house Jacobs's tactical indexing of her person, not necessarily the fact or fiction of the narrative's content but the acts of naming and reading, speaking and being spoken to, "sending" and "receiving", which both weave the disparate parts of her autobiography together—a thriller, whose main chase involves years of forged letters—and encircle her text in order to legitimize the particularity of the life it claims to accurately represent, the reality of which life Jacobs intentionally distorts. This relationship between environment and object is the condition of possibility for any abstraction to be legible as such. It also clarifies the environment, literary historical, critical, and textual, in which the next section of this chapter will work.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl is Jacobs's crafted (and crafty!) intervention into the field of (black) figuration of blackness around her—one that Yellin expertly details in her earlier work. Jacobs leaves evidence to her recognition of the gravity of her narrative throughout her text—but especially, as seen above, in the "Preface", "bill of sale" passage, and "Appendix". To say nothing of Jacobs's multiple claims to the representative intention of her writing. It is my contention that the problematic schism that her narrative produces, between what is made and what was lived, is a tool Jacobs uses to further her more obvious political goals. But in doing so—intentionally or no—she creates, by way of her exploration of this divide, a document theorizing black being. Jacobs's narrative is early, even at an origin point, for blackness's expression of itself into the discourse of history (to say nothing of philosophy or literary theory). I want to claim Jacobs works purposefully in the medium of history—not simply writing, but the

production of an archive, through her text and its paratexts—to leave a trace in the written record, some evidence to be witnessed by the progress of civilization.

What characterizes this being for the black person, at least as it is seen both in the particular anecdotes that make up the story and in its large discursive structure, is a sense of edge, of exhausted perception. Not just anxious or suspenseful tension, but something of a cliffside, a dangerous darkness at the border between Jacobs's narrator and the world without her from which things do not return. A sharp and often diabolical border limits Jacobs's narrator throughout her text—not just the limits of Brent's literal freedom or the edges of her knowledge of the life of someone she knew, but stranger scenes demonstrating the limitations of the body when faced by deception, of the power of false representation, and ultimately of the constructions of writing itself. The generic flux that encompasses the narrative after Yellin's activation of Jacobs's archival time capsule of paratextual evidence opens *Incidents* usefully toward richer interpretations. I will begin one early attempt to make use of this intervention and its potentials below.

3. The Edge of the Real

The narrator-protagonist of Jacobs's *Incidents*—at once public, politically engaged pseudonym and true-to-life textual apparition of the self—Linda Brent, speaks a reality whose primary characteristic is edge. Like her letters, there is a constant, nagging attention to what is just outside the writing. And the cliffs of the narrative are steep, sending a benevolent stranger off into blessings, an unsuspecting lover to Georgia, or a disobedient slave kept in a cotton gin half-devoured by rats to the grave. All equally abysses from which no knowledge is recoverable. The thick and absolute darkness of non-presence surrounds all who the narrative leaves or loses. These precipices are places where people pass beyond the borders of Brent's life, its total accumulation of knowledge and hearsay, into that disappearance which lies beneath, above, and around but always without the book: life (but never truth, which the book claims many times over to contain however tarnished.) These encounters and their ends are events which constitute the particulars that Jacobs's writing can neither give truthful account of nor leave unspoken. They mark the dark places where the revelations of the book's focalizer cannot penetrate, unassimilable kernels over which Jacobs paints with the gloss of narration as she attempts to translate herself and that which was done to her to a universal—that with which the reader can sympathize if not empathize. This is a movement, a toggling, between the viscerally sensible to the textually sentimental.

Because the precise circumstances of these disappearances are incomplete and remain unverifiable without reference to an archive (the Oxford edition's footnotes, say, or the Post family papers), these many lives and their losses lend to Jacobs's narrative a jagged shape. These sudden stops and starts, the exhausting outpacing of narrative and memory by life and history, make an edge for the text which mimics the real, looming threats of Jacobs's former, enslaved condition. The edges of Brent's story make Jacobs's feelings of terror formally identifiable, encoding the violent disconnections that slavery enacts—mother from daughter, mind from body—into the narrative's structure, a series of chapters which stop and start. The narrative's moments of limitation, of disconnect and loss, produce a textual mode for the condition of enslaved life, in Jacobs's specific case, for “the life of a slave girl.” The terror which characterizes falling out of the narrator's view, a fear made clear in chapters like “Sketches of the Neighboring Slave Holders” or “The Trials of Girlhood”, is produced as the textual impress

of an actual and ever-present threat of violence that, like the lives of the characters from the narrative referenced above, remains irrevocably outside the narrative itself. This terror can only be signaled by the starkness of the text's edge and cannot be admitted as anything other than representation. It is evidence of, what Nietzsche might call, an "affect." If *Incidents* were approached as a novel, one might say these edges produce a sort of weak structural suspense which at times waxes gothic as it guides the narrative. This suspense would be easily overcome, however, by reading the table of contents. The last chapter is, after all, "Free all Last". But where there is limitation there is also, in negative, a positive statement of capability. What interests me is the claim that is infernal to the one above, one that draws attention to how Jacobs produces this effect, this edginess, in a way that is specifically textual. The shape of the narrative is both true to the life it is intended to convey, that of the enslaved, and yet also makes a formal feature of the narrative as text, which is itself—as a feature—open to interpretation. They outline the text's aesthetic intentions simply by marking the boundary around what is and is not admitted to it.

Further these edges of the text signal the places where the narrative reveals itself generically as autobiography, where what's real in the text ducks out of the frame and back into the world, revealing the limitations of the narrator's rhetorical performance and the autobiographer's memory. As these disappearances occur and accrue across the narrative, as Jacobs's narrator circulates through topics as directly locatable as Nat Turner's rebellion, as seemingly Romantic as the accounts of slave love affairs, or as viscerally witnessed as the torture from Brent's "neighbors"³¹, this edge grows to contextualize Jacobs's metaphorical transformation of herself into the character of Linda Brent. These gaps or fissures in the narrator's knowledge that remain unresolved mark points at which the codified finesse of the storyteller meets the autobiographer's claim to truth. The closure which Jacobs adds to these subplots of Brent's story are examples of the sutures of resolution Brent's reality makes possible through its alienation from Jacob's own. This feature of Brent's life and Jacobs's text is best approached aesthetically because, for both figures, it is a trace of the limits of sense (both perception and reason) in the text. Much of the scholarship of *Incidents* remarks in some way on the narrator's address of her audience, flagging these as sites of (often, sentimental or sympathetic) contact between Jacobs and her audience (typically figured in these analyses as her immediate, historical reading public: the white Northern middle-class woman.) I want to shift this chapter toward interruption by expanding this attention to include the text's edges. These too, though not moments of direct apostrophe to a reader—a real-life person, who is intended to read and act—are also points of contact with facts, signs of the text's relationship to the world outside itself.

These opening sections have taken as their concern the conflicting hermeneutical procedures used to understand the double edged (hedged, ledged) aesthetic experience Jacobs's *Incidents* conjures. Doubled because there hangs above this reading the as yet understudied effect of the text's reception as a novel on its interpretation. The degree to which a novel is focalized through its protagonist has a similar effect on a text as the limitations of memory or knowledge for an autobiographical speaker. In the case of *Incidents*, however, the two generic procedures being more or less overlaid makes a binocular perspective on this limitation possible,

³¹ The notes to the critical edition of her text indicate that at least one of the stories was actually just something Jacobs's had heard about!

one that can afford figurative significance to the moments of unrepresentable life that crowd at the edges of the narrative without neglecting the veracity and legitimacy of the losses they index. The more direct focus then has been on how paratext, the very archive of documents and letters use to legitimize the historical veracity of Jacobs's *Incidents*, might be activated to support a reading against the very verisimilitude they establish—turning history into historiography, accounting for the discursive structure of even a “true” story. And that this mode of analysis, which attempts to confront *Incidents* in its complexity—a generic conundrum, requiring a more or less tailor-made interpretive procedure—might intervene as a useful hermeneutic logic for Jacobs's book. This given the history of reading Jacobs's text both as a novel penned either by Lydia Maria Child (or in dizzying daydreams that other Harriet [i.e. Beecher Stowe]) and, after the intervention of the Jean Fagan Yellin in the 1980s, its consideration as a true-to-life narrative written by a true in life person, Harriet Jacobs. These preceding sections were an attempt to present a justification for considering *Incidents* as an intricate autobiographical act or a metaphor for the self—after Houston A. Baker or James Olney—which reconsideration might give way to a reading of the text that does not need to privilege either of the two understandings of the book's creation—privileging either the construction of its protagonist or the reality of its authorship, the fictional or the factual. Jacobs text's historical complexity is fleshed out above to demonstrate the text's demand for a mode of engagement which requires a fusion of all of the reading practices it projects. And in terms of the larger project of this dissertation, this fusion might lead to something like a “poetics” of autobiography.³²

What immediately rushes to join this active formal attribute of edge is Jacobs's associative style, another set of leaps set to a different purpose. Primarily used to conjure the force of polemic, Jacobs's juxtapositions—often between the life of an enslaved person and one who is free (and white)—have obvious seams, across which a reader often finds herself inexorably divided from the narrator. These moments level an interpretive dare at the reader who is forced by them to reconstruct the connections between herself and the narrator, often to the same conclusion: “...we [are] alone in the world, and we [have] left dear ties behind us; ties cruelly sundered by the demon Slavery” (*Incidents* 149). And either the reader is among this “we” or she isn't. But readings which draw attention to this distinction often halt at a consideration of Jacobs's effect on the reader.

To attempt any reconstruction of the feelings, crafted shapes, and consequences of both the events of the narrative itself for the narrator herself as they are indexed by the narrative, it is necessary that any critical reader, as a reader too of history, disabuse themselves of the self-canceling motion of progress through successive modes of reading, instead accepting into the practice of critical engagement, not naively, all of the possible methods and modes, situations and styles, of reading specific this text allows. Not least because the text in question has been

³² I am purposefully borrowing this term from the writing of Édouard Glissant. The turn to “poetics” suggested here (a medium for tense relations) is a way of starting to address the concerns Houston A. Baker voices in the *The Journey Back* (1980), where he writes: “What is demanded of the literary investigator [by black autobiography] is an analysis that will reveal the intersections between the two worlds of discourse [the white and the black]. This discovery might lead, in turn, to wider inquiry into the nature of black narrative” (51). “Poetics” is especially relevant when Baker's “demand” is recontextualized in the present “ontological” turn of black studies. To my mind, “relation”, and the wider poetic project of Glissant, has become recognized as a valuable tool for understanding precisely the problem Baker suggests about the relation between white literary conventions and black writes. Glissant's work has also started to crop up in the body of scholarship I am attempting to extend here, that is itself an attempt to bridge literary criticism, literary theory, and black study.—a demand as old as Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s *Figures in Black* (1987).

constructed as both a commentary on the world without itself and as a world unto itself, with rules for relation that belie elements of Jacobs's real life experiences, especially those that, for whatever reason, are less translatable into the story form—all those autobiographical incidents bound together by cause and effect are distorted not just by deaths and disappearances, the threat of rape or a seven year confinement, but also by the authors own passionate desire to seek out politically, the intense emotions which move her throughout the narrative to turn toward her audience, and above all the use her of life as both the evidentiary basis and vehicle for a proof of her own value and values. The hope of my synthetic critical approach then is to provide thicker overall conceptions of the relation between the historical reality continually enveloping *Incidents* by arguing that the gaps or moments of tension between its various methods of presentation leave traces of the feelings and affects, the “gray” matter of genealogy (according to Foucault) that will help to interpret *Incidents* contributions to the writing on black life more clearly in the present.

It is my view that many of the critics cited above, who's invaluable work makes this perspective possible, have restrained themselves from much consideration of the rich formal and figural textures of Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* because they are unduly paranoid about seeming to dismiss the reality of the events the narrative presents. What this tense attention has elided is of course any close attention to the text itself which is at its most fundamental level an art object made of language—an extremely well-crafted narrative which, in the Du Boisian sense, could be properly sought an example of art as propaganda. Releasing readers into a less grave, though no less historical, reading allows them to translate what might be “some incidents so extraordinary”³³ in the text not out of their reality as having actually happened, but into their potentiality as metaphors or allegories for the ontological conditions produced by slavery. This mode of engagement allows Jacobs to contribute not only to her contemporary critiques of “enlightened” or idealist ways of thinking about the relation between master and slave—one that black studies struggles with to this day, courtesy of G.W.F. Hegel—but also, and as a result, to the current discourse on and (just as often) of blackness. In short, the text's initial history of general neglect followed by the assumption that it was a novel, an assumption that crumbles in the face of Yellin's archival recuperation, has created an interpretive scene for *Incidents* in which any consideration of the majority of the texts artistry has been lost.³⁴ These opening sections have attempted to suggest that a more poetic, theoretically engaged conception of the autobiographical mode—one projected by Jacobs's herself and her blending of so many generic conventions—is both a useful generic categorization to account for the method of composition for Jacobs's narrative, but also and most importantly, produces an approach more useful to the interpreting Jacobs's *Incidents* beyond its historical context, as a narrative in which the transformation of the self into a subject for literature adds a unique figure to the discourse on blackness.

³³ “This narrative contains some incidents so extraordinary, that, doubtless, many persons, under whose eyes it may chance to fall, will be ready to believe that it is colored highly, to serve a special purpose. But, however it may be regarded by the incredulous, I know that it is full of living truths.” George W. Lowther, quoted in the Appendix.

³⁴ Jacobs's text missed out historically on a period of deeply text focused, deconstructionist and formalist attention (largely in vogue from the 1930s thru the period of “the Theory Wars” in the latter part often 20th century). And anyway, its status as “fact” should also restrict its interpretation, denying it the creative and conceptual potentials of, say, a poem—which is (apparently) more easily isolated from its history.

Section 2: “DELIBERATE CALCULATION[S]”

Emplotment, the arrangement of the story into discourse, is figured early on in *Incidents* as the seemingly total power of Dr. Flint over Linda Brent’s life in narrative form.³⁵ This is true to the wider reception of Jacobs’s narrative as well—where Brent’s plotting against Dr. Flint is a subject of analysis alongside the editorial interventions of Lydia Maria Child.

In response to the pressure of this confinement, within the stricture of a slave’s life, and then again within the editorial confines of a given narrative convention, Jacobs’s narrator metaphorizes her actions into “calculations.” She describes her “injurious”, “adulterous” relationship with the congressman, “Mr. Sands”, as at once carefully measured, attuned to alleviate her specific situation³⁶ and procedural to the point of being abstract—her calculations are, after all, before they unfold, speculative. Brent plots alongside Jacobs in both the sense that she is the agent of Jacobs’s tactical maneuvers within the text and offers the objective perspective on the terrors of slavery that Jacobs needs to make her larger political arguments. And it is this “plotting”, these various calculations, that draw my attention through Jacobs’s reception back to her text, or through Brent to Jacobs and back again. Their collaborative treatment of (personal) historical events and manipulations of (literary) convention, as a pair, formulate a figure for of enslaved experience in relation to its antithesis³⁷, historical action, that is predicated on an affirmation of all those metaphysical capacities which are both requisite for any affectation of the latter and posited by the literature of their period as denied to the condition of the former. A divide which was itself produced, at least in part, by a set of recorded precedents, reinforced by everything from bald hatred to chaotic economic expansion, over the course of the 19th century (more than half over by the start of the Civil War and the publication of Jacobs’s narrative), which had, by 1861, turned over into an incredibly detailed and violent cementing of this divide in law.³⁸ *Incidents*’s cross pollination of fictional narrator and historical person, projection from the past and perception in the present, is an equation for the description for a novel ethics. A fundamental aspect of any ontological formation whatsoever that lives in a phrase like the one quoted as this chapter’s epigraph: “I knew what I did,” Jacob’s writes, be it choosing to construct a narrative or having children with a congressman, “and I did it with deliberate calculation.”

These are calculations that, although immediately referring to her thwarting of Dr. Flint, double as a way of understanding the relation between these more story-bound plots and Brent’s strategies for narrating them, which strategies—moments she chooses to describe or the form the descriptions take— it is my contention, belie a tactical undermining of racist philosophical propositions about the relations between and value of different modes of human life. Tactics that occasion revelations, through close attention to narrative in its context, of the limitations of

³⁵ I am borrowing this term from Hayden White, specifically from the introduction to his book *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe* (1973).

³⁶ By the fifth chapter of the narrative, “Trials of a Girlhood” (to be further analyzed below), wherein Jacobs’s is first forced to plot against her master (as she will do again to protect a lover, again to free each of her children, and again to finally free herself), her crisis has become so intense she is forced to injure her moral rectitude, personified in the text by the approval of her grandmother, Martha, and craft for herself and her story (for herself through her story) and ethic—the tactical, casuistry laden, aspirational morality—which can rationalize her actions (and hopefully, forgive them.) The presentation of these very scandalous acts being, naturally, one of the main reasons why *Incidents* has survived into its canonical status.

³⁷ Obverse? Something that stipulates that I think the enslaved, at least in the terms available at the time to Western conceptions of history, lack the capacity to do ought but experience, and even that in an impoverished manner...

³⁸ The one that makes an appearance in *Incidents* is “The Fugitive Slave Law,” a piece of legislation that was, in several accounts, a last straw for the polarized nation.

sentimental literary conventions and the generic distinctions that help to define them. This is a critique that applies as much to the autobiographical narrative as a representation of the historical position of the author as, from within the voice/world of the narrative, as to the formal or stylistic tendencies of the period, which emerges through the narrative to stand alongside it. The different moments in which sentimental conventions let down the narrator inter attempts to communicate her position there is another occasion for her subversive deployment thereof, and thus a moment of Jacobs's tutorial presence, her artistic touch, is impressed. In doing so, Brent's fictional decisions—both the thwarting of her master and her frequent addresses to the reader—redouble in the formulas of literary convention Jacobs receives, suspends, and revokes across *Incidents*. My point for the moment is that in order to see this refracting critique emanating from the text both Brent and Jacobs must be considered equally and simultaneously. A reader must a sort of binocular approach, divorcing the author from her text and considering her alongside her character in order to show the text of *Incidents* in its fullness as the story of Linda Brent and Harriet Jacobs's life.

This doubling—where a black subject is held apart from their represented knowledge of themselves, just as in the phrase above a strange temporality places “I did it” or, the doing, after “I knew what I did” the knowledge of the deed's competition—is no stranger to the thought surrounding African American literature.³⁹ Whether in the writing of W.E.B. Du Bois or Frantz Fanon, Hortense J. Spillers or Ida B. Wells, a figuration of doubleness or a lack thereof haunts the African American literary tradition. What is of interest in Jacobs's case is the fact of the texts anticipation of this, it's laying of the ground work for a future conceptualization of black life. Jacobs's text is not an example of the eruption and misuse of “flesh” nor a historical and formal example of “double consciousness”. Instead, it is and contains it's own theory for relation—one that focuses the student of its logics on the relation between representation and life and one that extends to make a comment of those between motherhood and enslavement, history and the individual. Through a consideration of several of Jacobs's incidents—beginning in the sections above with presentation of her bill of sale and, below, moving through a two moments of Jacobs contracts featuring different registers of representation, and ending in a closer analysis of the narrative's fifth chapter, which addresses itself through a figure to the reader, this chapter will demonstrate figural and formal means through which Jacobs's begins to formulates her own wider account of the condition of black life in antebellum America.

Simply stated: Jacobs's calculated efforts to thwart her own condition—both literally and metaphorically—*in writing* works through an illustration of the parameters of that condition, and its subsequent evaluation by the narrator. By figuring a life in slavery, Jacobs's performs an analysis on the condition of enslavement. Jacobs's text performs a reevaluation of the values of

³⁹ A reader might here an echo here of this famous passage of Friedrich Nietzsche, that echo is intentional: “Just as the popular mind separates the lightening from the flash and takes the latter for an action, for the operation of a subject called lightening, so popular morality also separates strength from expression of strength, as if there were a neutral substratum behind the strong man, which was free to express strength or not to do so. But there is no such substratum; there is no “being” behind doing, effecting, becoming; the “doer” is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything. (*On the Genealogy of Morals* I:13)

I would contextualizing this with my claims to say that, this chapter is concerned with a reading of Jacobs in which “the deed [or the narrative] is everything.” What this does not suggest, as Nietzsche makes clear, is any separation of doer and deed—Jacobs's life and Brent's narration, though they operate separately as lightening to flash, are one in the same “doing, effecting, becoming”, a singular autobiographical act, or the transformation process of producing a metaphor of the self.

the slave society that both raises and binds her. In doing so, she proposes a new mode of relation through the crafting of representations that, like her incident involving the bill of sale, disfigure or recontextualize the truths of her life. It is my contention that through this process of transformation the resultant text becomes capable, or apes the capability, of representing an ontological condition of black life. Or, at the very least, making an early, useful description of a life recontextualized and disfigured by blackness. Jacobs leaves traces of this claim in moments of her *Incidents* when both the figures of her contemporary philosophical discourse enter her own experience and meet revision, or where, as many scholars have remarked, she turns her attention away from the story at hand and toward the reader, to amend some misconception in her contemporary discourse.

I have tried to begin describing a calculus to Jacobs's narration through Brent that is often mentioned, both by her and her critics, but rarely analyzed⁴⁰. Her combinations in *Incidents*, of exact figures and reproduced documents, of intricate schemes (involving a fair amount of prediction and forgery) to thwart the authority of her master, and of fair appraisals and reproductions of the events that unfold around her, mold her collection of incidents into a discrete series of calculated efforts for freedom. It is by now a critical commonplace to address an analysis of Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, through a series of factual and fictional prisms, toward an accounting for the organization of its chapters and/or of the exact political or psychological ramifications of Linda Brent's addresses to the reader. Among these analytic filters are the fact of Lydia Maria Child's editing of the manuscript along with the politics or stylistic conventions (often described as belying some ideological substance) that motivate her revisions, and the cadre of historical events that enshrouded the narrative for a time in falsehood and obscurity: the existence of several fabricated narratives by abolitionists like Child⁴¹, the anonymity of the narrative's cast of characters as well as (in the first edition) its "author", and the country's careening toward the bloodiest conflict in American history.

The field of interpretation that has cropped up around *Incidents* focuses itself on a few key questions: what is to be thought of the historical veracity of the text—these arguments often cite the chapter on Nat Turner and Jacobs's time in the garret, and are arguments generally about the veracity of black witness/accounting⁴². They counter act the historical fact of the slave's inability to testify in court, and their conclusions offer "agency" to the author and or her speaker.

A second strain of argument interrogates the relationship between Jacobs's historical person and her narrator and altered ego Linda Brent. These are typically arguments that proceed under the guise of theoretical significance into a debate about the veracity of Jacobs's account of

⁴⁰ The essays cited in this chapter by Albert H. Tricomi and Sarah Emsley make rare exceptions. Emsley's own accounting of Jacobs's choice of character names (for her enemies, lovers, and protagonist) makes another wonderful approach to the very problems this chapter has presented: "Jacobs insists that language defines her relationships with both Dr Flint and Mr Sands. Even the fictitious names she chooses are significant, though she does not explicitly outline their symbolic value. Her own name, Brent, is related to the past tense of the German verb *brennen*, 'to burn': Jacobs is burnt by the 'scorching words' of Dr Flint, 'words that scathed ear and brain like fire' (352) and because of the fire sparked by Flint, she turns to Mr Sands as a way of extinguishing her connection to her master. The foul words of Dr Flint drive Jacobs to the relative calm of a friendship with the eloquent Mr Sands. As Foreman writes, 'it is Sands's language which provides the bridge from the discursive to the physical' (1990, 318)." (Emsley 1998., pp.155)

⁴¹ Herself the author of several sentimental novels.

⁴² For most of the 19th century, and to an increasing degree as the century waned toward the Civil War, a slave's testimony was inadmissible in court—even and perhaps most diabolically when they were a plaintiff or defendant in a case.

her sexual harassment. A common fault of these arguments involves their worrying over the relation between Brent and Jacobs without reference to their continued reference to her master as a character in a book, only mentioning his real-world counterpart in passing to double down on a claim about the terror Jacobs's narrator describes. These arguments do not fully consider the fictionalization of the text, yet neither do they worry themselves about making any proofs to the text's total veracity. The loose binaries in this line of argument with regard to the text fictionality or facticity is what interests me. This is a strain of the scholarship's overall argument about Jacobs that I want to expand in my interpretations. To make a large claim shortly: My reading of the text will try to offer Brent the full world of her fiction and Jacobs the entire world of her fact, as present to the reading of her narrative.

And a third and equally significant line of argument attends the literary and textual history of *Incidents*, with topics ranging from its use of sentimental tropes or fabricated, melodramatic dialog and use of dialect, or its being edited by the novelist Lydia Maria Child. These arguments draw attention to Jacobs's craft as the primary means of production for her narrative, and tend to conclude with laudatory deference to Jacobs as artist and activist. They are arguments that want to build an arena of interpretation in which more and more aesthetic considerations of Jacobs's narrative might be performed. This is a second strain of argument I wish to weave with the one mentioned above. By affording Jacobs the posited aesthetic intention of these more textual arguments—an intention that allows the reader to sever, at least for argument's sake, the protagonist of *Incidents* from its author, positioning the historical reality and the narrative as parallel to one another—the reader might finally approach *Incidents* in such a way that allows for the completion of Jacobs's transformation of herself into a literary subject.

One effect of these celebratory arguments on the study of Jacobs's narrative is that when comparisons to other slave narratives of the period arise, there is no doubt of *Incidents* uniqueness and, further, canonical status. Even before its reinstatement into definite historical legitimacy as the product of the hand of Jacobs herself, the stylistic admixture, risqué subject matter, and historical awareness of the *Incidents* drew critical attention. And while it is true the archival research done by Jean Fagan Yellin in the 80s, which legitimated the “written by herself” of Jacobs's text, opened the field of study surrounding Jacobs's narrative onto a richer and more complex field of questions, it also cemented the text's canonical status. As the critic Alexander Tricomi states in his 2007 essay on the narrative cited above:

“Harriet Jacobs studies have reached a new stage. No longer is the main issue corroborating the authenticity of Jacobs's narrative: instead it has become instating and celebrating Jacobs herself as a major feminist figure in the antislavery movement. Jean Fagan Yellin's compelling biography (2004) and the Notron Critical Edition of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (2001), with its publication of several of Jacobs' letters, take major steps in calling attention to Jacobs the person as well as the author” (Tricomi 2007, pp. 216).⁴³

⁴³ In this same essay, he gives his own version of my account of the field and the result for contemporary interpretation of the narrative written above, writing: “Given the available evidence—including Jacobs's letters, a number still unpublished and housed in the Rush Rhees Library at the University of Rochester, and several of Child's private letters that have not been brought to bear in this context before—I think we can now discern more about the author's intentions than previously, and in so doing reveal a somewhat different Harriet Jacobs from the one presented to the public when *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* first appeared. She is even somewhat different from the person known to modern scholarship by way of an unmediated, under complicated acceptance of Jacobs's autobiography as, in effect, wholly her own. To treat Jacobs's autobiography from this perspective will prompt us to

This shift in critical attention has allowed the interpretation of Jacobs's text to take a turn toward the more self-consciously speculative and theoretical. Some of the most commonly mentioned aspects of Jacobs's text—her strange blending of autobiographical and sentimental tropes, her presentation of the slave's ethic, her confinement and cunning outmaneuvering of her master, and her organizational and obfuscating compositional tactics—while remaining central to any understanding of her narrative, have been explored with added theoretical density since the veracity of her text's autobiographical content was established.⁴⁴ The narrative's status as history has lent its constructed quality a new interest.

An extremely schematic reading of *Incidents*, given all of what has been previously presented and argued, both here and in the scholarship, might run like this: Jacobs's text poses several of the theoretical problems of her day: of subjects and objects, insides and outsides, written accounts versus lived experiences of history, of the relation between master and slave, draws attention to her posing of these problems through apostrophes to the reader and the encounters of her narrator with real life incidents indexing these concerns, and then abruptly ends her narrative, leaving her reader with questions about her intentions "like light, fleecy clouds floating over a dark and troubled sea" (from the narrative's final paragraph). Jacobs challenges her reader to challenge her narrative, not simply for its veracity but for its stability as an aesthetic object mediating her past and the reader's present—be it in 1861 or 2024. How can an author construct a narrative that pleads desperately for its own veracity that is also demonstrably fabricated? Or, further, Jacobs asks, why is the fabrication of a strictly verifiable narrative the only means to the expression of a true to life subjectivity? Why is it not possible for her to be either fully divorced or fully wedded to her own persona? If the narrative she constructs is at least part fiction, how is it possible for it to be effective in the world of fact? And, for my purposes, what does it mean for the study of African American literature that one of its earliest and most canonical texts foregrounds a problem that has persisted through the development of the genre: the identification of the writer with the protagonist, the author and the speaker, the artist's life with the living work? Or how do is the contemporary reader meant to think about a piece of writing that works by intentionally blurring (if not flat out betraying) any generic distinctions that would normally lend easy methods to its interpretation?

A crucial point for this argument, one that Tricomi brings to the field's attention, is final turn of the screw in this approach to Jacobs's text: that the imposition of the pseudonym is not Harriet Jacobs's choice but is a result of the editorial intervention of Lydia Maria Child. Tricomi writes:

"But however we respond to these developments, one conclusion is irresistible—Child's decisions to present Jacobs as "Linda Brent" and to purge the narrative of dates, personal names, and place names have had extraordinary consequences for the reception of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and for Harriet Jacobs's own standing as the author

probe the complex mediating effects brought about by her relationship as a needy escaped slave to her fervent and strong-minded white antislavery editor." (Tricomi 2007, pg. 217-9)

⁴⁴ The primary example of this is the pathbreaking critical study *Scenes of Subjection* (1997) by Saidiya Hartman, whose own work has developed over the years since its publication to be increasingly speculative and autobiographical.

of that work, even if Jacobs herself fully consented to these editorial decisions” (Tricomi 2007, pp. 227)

What is of interest to me is how Jacobs’s text might be read in light of the reception which has clarified rather meticulously the conditions of the texts production, moving through, as Tricomi says, the phases of fiction and fact, into a arena of analysis in which the “extraordinary consequences” not only of Jacobs’s writing but of Child’s editing or Yellin’s intervention are available to combine in an accounting of the narrative’s potential significance to the larger field of black literary study. My question is: With all of this knowledge circulating about exactly which aspects of the text originate from Jacobs or Child, which aspects are associated with sentimental novels or spiritual autobiographies, and how the material and legal history that surround the text all influence and even retrospectively augment the text as it is read, what room is left for the consideration of the text in and for itself? Are all of these things not, in some way, a paratextual environment that extends the historiographical and philosophical project of Jacobs’s text—keeping its fact in contact with its fictions, bringing them together in different combinations to produce different accounts of Jacobs’s life and writing? I ask these questions not only from my own interest but because, in the “meta” moment presented in the “bill of sale” passage above, Jacobs’s narrator seems to be curious about how her text’s reception will play out across history herself. When Brent challenges her readers to think through the consequences of allowing people to be marked free and recognizably human by scribbles on pieces of paper, which scraps of legitimacy are subsequently held permanently as proof by institutions of record an higher knowledge, she also asks to have that relation—between text and world—interrogated more closely. This interrogation gives rise to the argument of this chapter and effects its interpretations of the text in turn.

What I want to contend is that the gap between Jacobs and Brent, a chasm that symbolizes the dueling forces of authorial intent and editorial authority, lived experience and autobiographical fiction, opens the text of the narrative into problem space that is more theoretically rich than most of the contexts in which it was previously discussed. The consequences of the fissure between life and language, and the way this gap is exploited by Jacobs for myriad reasons, results in the proposition of a possible ethical orientation that originates from and includes (formally) enslaved black people. Ultimately, I want to follow up on calls from Houston A. Baker and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. from the 80s as well, for a more integrated approach to black texts in literary study. One that might allow this argument to elucidate how the realization of Jacobs of a schism between actual and represented self—within the text as, Brent’s calls to the reader, and without it as the problem of the embellished autobiography as textual double of an actual life—is related to the philosophical styles and subsequent propositions of some of Jacobs’s contemporaries. Most notably: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Friedrich Nietzsche, all of whom used the actively amorphous conventions of a more theoretically or spiritually critical autobiography to philosophical ends throughout the period.

*

Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) is an infernal book. The text is riddled with hellish torture and turns on the entrapment of its protagonist. The narrative’s opening chapters detail “The Trials of Girlhood” and tales from the neighboring plantations. Much of the narrative’s second half is the provocation and deception that Linda Brent, Harriet

Jacobs's narrator, visits upon her master, "Dr. Flint", via letters sent from the attic of Brent's grandmother's shed where she hid for seven years before escaping to freedom in a space not large enough for her to properly stand. Throughout Jacobs's more autobiographical narration are interspersed moments of commentary on her present. Chapters on "The Fugitive Slave Law" and "Nat Turner's Rebellion" offer a glimpse into the world surrounding the text. And what emerges alongside this is another proof to the legitimacy of African American self-consciousness in the midst of the slave society, what would have been (and in some crucial ways remains) contemporary American life. There is a position for speculation, commentary, and critique that Jacobs's projects into the world through her autobiographical protagonist, Linda Brent. A location from which Brent (who is, of course, not exactly Jacobs herself) makes a series of propositions about the organization of everyday life. These appeals, often in a moral tenor, offer alternate modes of understanding Jacobs's position, her "condition" of relation—not only to the political and moral campaigns for the abolishing of slavery, which her narrative is certainly a part of, but several more nuanced lines of critique. These include a consideration of the education of those who have been enslaved⁴⁵, a rollicking critique of the manipulation of religion toward political ends⁴⁶, and a much remarked on exposé on the quotidian violence encompassing the sexual harassment of young, enslaved women. These things are now widely discussed in the field surrounding her text. Its status as canonical to the history of African American literature too is often remarked, especially in the scholarship of the later 90s/early 2000s. Yet the text, as it was received to the 19th century, seems to have been lost in the clamor surrounding its publication date just after the beginning of the Civil War. And though it has since be rediscovered, it was then considered as a fictional work penned by Jacobs's editor, Lydia Maria Child. It was not until 1981 that the text was reattributed to Jacobs's hand, and only then with the caveat of Child's editing.⁴⁷

To the literary historian, the fact of *Incidents's* reception history is irritating where it fails to perceive the authenticity of its object and confounded after this recognition by a deep fidelity to the truth of the text. As its author, Harriet Jacobs, writes in one of her letters, seeming to summarize this argument and the field prospectively (a prophetic position with relation to the field of literary study she will take up again!): "I meant to write you a long letter but they are waiting for me. I am so tired. I long to see you" (Norton 172).⁴⁸ The truncation of Jacobs's text by its editor Lydia Maria Child makes a major concern of the scholarship surrounding the narrative, both before and after it is verified as truly "written by herself" (i.e. Jacobs). It is thought that the narrative's bend toward fictionality, its use of sentimental tropes especially, is a result of this editorial intervention. As it is known that one crucial and fascinating (now to the less literary historian) account of John Brown's rebellion, a passage of the work now locked away in some archive if not completely lost.⁴⁹ But, now for my argument, by thinking about

⁴⁵ See Ch. VIII. What Slaves Are Taught To Think Of The North

⁴⁶ See Ch. XIII. The Church And Slavery

⁴⁷ For details on this see Tricomi, Albert H. "Harriet Jacobs's Autobiography and the Voice of Lydia Maria Child" (2007).

⁴⁸ This quote, and many of the quoted letters and primary documents, for the sake of citational clarity and ease of access, I have drawn from a single, printed source: The Norton Critical edition of *Incidents* (2001). This letter is sent to Amy Post on June 18th, 1861 a short time after the publication of *Incidents*.

⁴⁹ From Tricomi (2007) pp 245-6: "What I am saying is that had the John Brown chapter been left in place—had it survived at all—and had Child's editorial judgments been less directed toward singular "incidents" and toward a

local moments of exhaustion in the text, whether literal fainting spells of the characters or the more metatextual exhaustion of the turn toward the audience—normally an ecstatic moment of incomprehension or incommensurability between Jacobs’s narrator and her reader—help a reader to understand better exactly how and why Jacobs “long[s] to see you.” You, Amy Post, but also you—now “us”—the readers of her writing in the archive of literary study. Indeed, the chapter will ask what it means for her to express this longing to be seen by specifically us, we “historians”, in the narrative she pens to represent her life. That this longing is fundamental to the writing of African American literature, a longing to see and be seen by “you”, makes the undertow of this chapter’s argument, connecting it to the wider argument of this dissertation that the slave’s autobiography is a rich site for early theorizations of blackness and black life—presaging a more recent “ontological turn.”⁵⁰

Jacobs’s narrative is a theory of authorial presence in history, a philosophically tinted narrative that deals with the mediation which otherwise plagues direct communication of being or presence with figuration. Jacobs analyzes and then generalizes her experiences to reveal the depth of their particular parameters of otherness (to her reader, yes, but also to her editor and first audience member, a white sentimental novelist.) And in certain instances, like its fifth chapter or its use of the pseudonym (apparently encouraged by her editor),⁵¹ this work offers a few means to understanding the parameters of an early black ontology. If the archive of being might be said to be at least in part formed of its self-description, Jacobs’s autobiographical act might become a canonical text to the discourse on black life. Composed, as Jacobs indicates to her interlocutor, mostly late at night, in the small hours of the morning,⁵² or otherwise “in the

melodramatic emphasis on the maternal devastation issuing from the sexual abuse of young female slaves, Jacobs’s autobiography would be read differently today. I mean this not in the obvious sense that the inclusion of the Brown chapter and the original organization of the book would make for a different reading, but in the more profound sense that our own perspective on the entire autobiography and the weight we place on its various chapters would shift perceptibly.”

⁵⁰ See Reed, Anthony “Black Situation: Notes on Black Critical Theory Now” (2022)

⁵¹ *ibid.* pp. 227: “We may ask how it is possible to treat Jacobs’s seven years in the garret as “Linda’s” truth, or how it can be that “Linda,” not Harriet, has confused the age of her young mistress. Such a mode of formalist criticism may be unsettling to some since few critics offer an artistic motive for Jacobs’s creating this kind of discrepancy. But however we respond to these developments, one conclusion is irresistible—Child’s decisions to present Jacobs as “Linda Brent” and to purge the narrative of dates, personal names, and place names have had extraordinary consequences for the reception of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and for Harriet Jacobs’s own standing as the author of that work, even if Jacobs herself fully consented to these editorial decisions. In view of this preliminary evidence, it seems to me appropriate, even urgent, that we reconsider as well the effect of the many other alterations that Lydia Maria Child, by her own acknowledgment, made to Jacobs’s manuscript.”

Where Tricomi aims his analysis toward Child, I intend to do the opposite, and take up the claim of those “few critics” who “offer an artistic motive for Jacobs’s creating this kind of discrepancy.” But not, as is being described here, to fret out further proofs or falsities within the text, but to provoke the question: What does it mean to reflexively deny any “artistic motives” on Jacobs’s part at all, and how does this denial extend to a prohibition on any unhistorical, anti-autobiographical, or non-politically motivated “artistic” intentions on the part of African American artists and critics of the present, to say nothing of the critical receptions of such work from the past. Asked another way: Why can’t Jacobs’s goal be distortion? Even given her repeated desires to live and write differently than she was made to live and write, why do scholars maintain an allergy to attributing “artistic motives” or aesthetic considerations to Jacobs’s text and works like it?

⁵² A letter to Post from October 9th [1853?] has beneath its signature the time stamp “1 o’clock” with no indication of afternoon or night. (Norton 173)

midst of all kinds of care and perplexities” Jacobs’s letters lend this chapter its starting point because they allow for an introduction of *Incidents* in the environment of its production.⁵³ Between work and before bed, just out of sight of her employer Nathaniel P. Willis.⁵⁴ They also serve to draw attention to what this chapter will take as its primary focus: the relationship between the world within the text and the world without the text as it is mediated both by its paratextual material (its prefaces and appendices) and the work’s nearly thematic perseveration on the power of circulating texts, false or otherwise. Jacobs’s narrative, to put a long story short, makes contact with “the real world” through several manipulations of para- and metatextual appendages. Her famous addresses to the reader and her use of a pseudonym with its perhaps accidental abstraction,⁵⁵ when considered alongside the philosophically significant figures she makes throughout the text, reveal a narrative deeply concerned, among more obvious things like slavery and sexual assault, with the proposition of a novel ontological position, a way of being or being made to be in the world that was yet absent from the archive of recorded life.

The figures she makes, these “loopholes”, to borrow Jacobs’s phrase, revealing the connections beyond the factual that Jacobs makes in her narrative, between life as it really is and life as she represents it, are what allow for the works incessant presentation of or in non-presence. Whether that be the protagonist’s, Linda Brent’s, seven-year confinement wherein she gains the power to manipulate the scenes of her life through letter writing, nearly like a narrator in an epistolary novel, a novel-esque scenario which takes place *within* her own life. Or the more formal and logistical loopholes of literary persona and white patronage, *Incidents* is complicated out of consideration under any available generic category. And yet it clings to the valence of autobiography, a genre with a formal connection to truth-telling.

A strong claim might be that *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* typifies the ever vexed and vexing category of African American literature by presenting a limit case for any consideration of black art within the available generic categories for literary criticism and their attendant hermeneutic procedures. This chapter’s first part however will assay a somewhat more modest claim. Namely, that if after teasing out a fraction of the complexity of Jacobs’s text it does not stump generic classification entirely, then *Incidents* at least demands an equally intricate and delicate weave of those classifications with their different relations to language. Specifically, where whatever language is under analysis (a poem say, or a short story) is meant to stand in for the truth of some event—when it is called, through description, to represent life, and to do so truthfully. My goal is to produce a means to interpret Jacobs’s text that is more sensitive to its mechanics. And offering that one possible preexistent more flexible model might be one that approaches *Incidents* as “autobiography” in the broadest sense⁵⁶. In short, the rest of this chapter

⁵³ Letter to Amy Port, June 25th 1853.

⁵⁴ Himself a rather important bit of literary history.

⁵⁵ Although, given that Jacobs publishes in disguise at least once before the publication of her narrative, and that she allowed the title of the originally published work to be “LINDA”, lends Credence to the position that her deployment of the pseudonym for her longer work is more tactical than perhaps originally thought.

⁵⁶ To develop a specific sense of the more post-modern views on autobiography, I would suggest reading James Olney, Elizabeth Bruss, and Philippe LeJeune. While these authors and their texts might be more properly and thoroughly approached by the first chapter of this dissertation, suffice it to say here that for these thinkers, employed by historians of African American autobiography like William L. Andrews, the autobiography has, what Only describes as, a “metaphorical” relation to the self it is meant to represent. The made and meditated quality of the resultant text becomes, among these thinkers, a vital cite for the theorization of the self or the subject. I want to

will discuss how *Incidents* indexes an early occasion of an enslaved person thinking autobiographically about their own life, in and through its representation. And what this means for the study of black life as a concept today.

Section 3: The problem of approaching *Incidents*

The autobiographical experiment in Jacobs's text was made visible by the intervention of the literary critic Jean Fagan Yellin into the reception history of the narrative. The same halo of text that Yellin used to recast *Incidents* into mainstream scholastic legitimacy, calling it back from its fraudulent and fictional status, is the archive I will draw on to continue this argument about the philosophical propositions that undergird the narrative. I want to open the next section of my account with Jacobs's paratexts, and how Yellin's intervention made use of them.⁵⁷

“Yellin, employing the help of a number of archives across the country and the willing research of numerous archivists, *but in the end reviewing archival material that had been languishing under the noses of any number of researchers*, was able to piece together *the facts that subtend the narrative*, discovering the identities of all the ‘characters’ in Linda Brent’s (Harriet Jacobs’s) life.” (Cambridge, emphasis added 193)

This section begins by returning to this intervention in order to examine a problem it presents to the field of study surrounding Jacobs's text. Namely, how is a reader is meant to think about an autobiographical text that, for at least some part of its reception, was thought to be entirely fictional? What traces of this fictionality linger in the text, what figures does it contain for its confrontation with a largely white reading public, and ultimately how might approaching the text as an object concerned with itself as a representation, that is conscious of only relating to the truth metonymically—while also constantly doubling down on its veracity—allow for some portable theorizations of its author's subject position to emerge. Put simply, how might Jacobs's text be described as a metaphor for her “self,” and what does this tell her readers about the earliest ontological claims about blackness?⁵⁸

approach Jacobs similarly, analyzing the way it figures the relation between slave and master, to adduce an early black theory of the subject.

Olney says it beautifully in *Metaphors of Self* (1972): “For a billion unique and literally incomparable instances, where there is no genus but only differentia, do not lend themselves to a common grouping. It may be that the nearest one can come to definitions is to look not straight to the self, which is invisible anyway, but sidewise to an experience of the self, and try to discover or create some similitude for the experience that can reflect or evoke it and that may appeal to another individual's experience of the self. To make an attempt is an act of faith.” (pp. 29)

⁵⁷ From Genette, Gérard *Paratexts: Thresholds of interpretation*, pp. 1: “A literary work consists, entirely or essentially, of a text, defined (very minimally) as a more or less long sequence of verbal statements that are more or less endowed with significance. But this text is rarely presented in an unadorned state, unreinforced and unaccompanied by a certain number of verbal or other productions, such as an author's name, a title, a preface, illustrations. And although we do not always know whether these productions are to be regarded as belonging to the text, in any case they surround it and extend it, precisely in order to present it, in the usual sense of this verb but also in the strongest sense: to make present, to ensure the text's presence in the world, its “reception” and consumption in the form (nowadays, at least) of a book. These accompanying productions, which vary in extent and appearance, constitute what I have called elsewhere the work's *paratext*.”

⁵⁸ Olney, again: “What a writer about the self and its life, or an autobiographer, cannot give us, nor is there any reason to desire it, is a view of himself from without. In a favorite analogy of Max Planck's, even the fastest runner

Toward the end of Jacobs's text her narrator, Linda Brent, makes a request for Yellin's form of archival examination. The "record" from which "future generations will learn" are not simply an ambiguous archive of historical data, but the specific textual surround Jacobs's has constructed for the surrounds of the text she, as Brent, is speaking from within. But the pile of archival evidence Jacobs offers us does not manage to elude the touch of fictionality that tilts the whole narrative just off the course of fact. Having gone into hiding yet again to avoid being carried back to slavery, Brent receives this brief letter from Mrs. Bruce: "'I am rejoiced to tell you that the money for your freedom has been paid to Mr. Dodge.'" Jacobs's narrator is, of course, astonished. "My brain reeled as I read these lines", she informs her reader before moving, characteristically, into a reader-directed aside with the simultaneous force of sentimental outburst and abolitionist polemic. However, unlike many of these moments earlier in the text, this last grasp into the world of the also reader projects into the future—Brent seems to dare the world after her to perform the work of Yellin's archival study.

"'The bill of sale!' Those words struck me like a blow. So I was sold at last! A human being sold in the free city of New York! The bill of sale is on record, and future generations will learn from it that women were articles of traffic in New York, late in the nineteenth century of the Christian religion. It may hereafter prove a useful document to antiquaries, who are seeking to measure the progress of civilization in the United States.'" (*Incidents*, 184-5)

This moment exemplifies Jacobs's startling consciousness of her life's passage over into text. She draws the reader's attention to the monumental importance that that passage be preserved and verifiable by future generations. A work of verification which was not completed until Yellin's archival work in 1981, more than one hundred years after the publication of *Incidents* in 1861. At the same time, Jacobs claims that the text might be used to "measure the progress of civilization in the United States" (184). My interest, beyond Jacobs's seeming call for the "antiquarian" like Yellin, is to think about how such Enlightened phrases as "the progress of civilization" draw the reader's attention to Jacobs's tendency not only to request that her reader make evaluations about what she is describing, but her narrator's own tendency to "measure" and calculate herself. And how attention to her own calculating might lend some depth to a more formalist reading of her prose, given the intentionality and active evaluation "measuring" implies when applied to something perhaps more literary like the repetition of a scene in the narrative or the constructedness of its chapters.

Ultimately, my interest is in how attending to the formal and figural tapestry of Jacobs's narrative might lend some complicating figures to the discourse of blackness that developed out of the 19th century's Abolitionist/Universalist polemics into the ontologically obsessed (perhaps possessed?) black studies of the present.

The bill of sale is, for example, transformed into an index of the "progress of civilization in the United States." Brent elevates this insidious and humiliating piece of paper, a scrap that is proof of her ability to be sold, past its ability to legally protect her freedom, until it surfaces into

cannot pass himself. What the autobiographer knows, of course, or what he experiences, is all from within: a feeling of his own consciousness and the appearance of others surrounding him and relating to him more or less, in this way or that. An autobiography, if one places it in relation to the life from which it comes, is more than a history of the past and more than a book currently circulating in the world; it is also, intentionally or not, *a monument of the self as it is becoming, a metaphor of the self at the summary moment of composition.*" (ibid., 35, emphasis added.)

the literary present as an index of her condition more generally, a generalizable and thus somewhat universal article of evidence. In this moment, by implication, Jacobs also places her entire narrative into a similar position of historical exemplarity or, as stated above, index⁵⁹.

This self-conscious transformation from individual to index, what is described by the first epigraph to this chapter as Jacobs's transformation of herself into a literary subject, occurs first and foremost by way of Linda Brent. In this moment specifically and across *Incidents* as a whole, the reader witnesses Jacobs's thinking of herself through Brent's story as already historical in the writing of it, her, that is Jacobs's, apparent understanding that history happens *in writing*. Take for example the chapter on Nat Turner, the nearly ethnographic impulse of chapters like "The Slaves' New Year's Day" and "The Church and Slavery", or perhaps most strangely the one simply titled "A Candidate for Congress" wherein, although appropriately effaced, Jacobs states her narrator's connection to American congressional history (through a tactical deployment of "biblical" knowledge). Linda, while certainly the fictitious vehicle for Jacobs's life, is also the medium for her entrance into (literary) history—one area of the "the record" she speaks of above.

Yet Linda Brent is not Harriet Jacobs—a disjunction of the historiographic and the historical. Jacobs signals an awareness of this more general distinction as well, for example in the now hilarious accounts of "What Slaves are taught to think of the North". However, unlike the accounts given by these slaves, whose ignorance is both satirical and unnerving and whose historical reality is at once likely and unverifiable, Jacobs's use of Brent never threatens the revelation that Brent is a fiction of Jacobs. What is alluded to across the text and most powerfully in the moment quoted above is a sort of uncomfortable indication that this particular schism between the real and the written is present in, though it may not simply be discoverable from, the text. If just one of the scholars Jacobs interpolates into existence were to go to an archive in New York looking for the bill of sale of "Linda Brent", they would find nothing but a coincidence: a document for a slave named Harriet Jacobs whose middle name happens to be Brent.

The bill of sale directs the reader's attention through the somewhat overdetermined literary figure of Linda Brent, her fictive world of reworded runaway slave advertisements and lost letters, toward the actual person of Harriet Jacobs and her retrievable history. As the above passage projects into the future, speaking directly to the reader from within the text, it indicates an inconsistency which is only able to be recuperated by that reader without it. However, due to the purposeful obfuscation of the *Incidents*'s paratextual frame, even the impulse for the (re)establishment of a solid historical connection between Linda Brent and Harriet Jacobs by way of reference to the archive requires a scholar who understands Jacobs's remark, and in fact

⁵⁹ The point of the finger which makes a metonymy for the body form which it extends, that which guides attention away and toward what it in itself is, is connected to. Index, in my argument, holds the calculative as well as the indicative functions it is offered by the Oxford English Dictionary—it functions to suggest the display (of a set of incidents, of a moment of violence, of a vocabulary prickling with particularity) with purpose. My use of it is meant to characterize Jacobs's narrative as a mode of autobiography that accrues to a wider argument about the position of the slave through citation of the moments in a life that combine into her proposed mode of figuring her own condition. It is also then a term meant to hold the figural accusation of the first finger of either hand, pointed. The accusatory tone Jacobs's writing takes on when she addresses her audience is too a mode of the indexical, for my purposes. A writing that points. In the broadest sense then my use of "index" to describe moments in Jacobs's narration, indeed what might be understood as the larger project of her *Incidents*, aligns with the idea from Margaret Fuller that opens this chapter, the movement of the passions of the soul to the indication of the hand—both in literal pointing out and in this case in the discursive pointing which is an index—producing the demonstration with wants for by merely indicating that it might be necessary or desirable.

her work as a whole, to anticipate the necessity to legitimize the content of text through reference to an archive which was purposely left outside it such that such a recuperation might occur. How to discover the life that hides behind a representation of life? The reader is dared by Jacobs, through Brent, to look closer, to piece together “the facts that subtend the narrative,” to find her, and her life. And further, to perhaps rebound because of the force of this discovery to return to Jacobs’s text with a more aesthetic or “artistically motivated” approach. This would be an approach that understands the narrative as the prosthesis of a living person, one that allows Jacobs a more aesthetically minded vantage on her own life and the text she makes to represent it. The text becomes then like the pseudonym: a mask for truth—not wholly fact or fiction, but certainly a figure. Jacobs’s metatextual (but fictionally shrouded) dare asks her reader both to verify her life’s narrative and, in doing so, invites them to register and account for the discrepancies—the places where, for my purposes, artfulness (and not misremembering to lies) is introduced to strengthen Jacobs’s representation of the truth of her life.

As if to confirm this, in the original “Appendix” of *Incidents* is a letter from Amy Post apparently added by Lydia Maria Child as a form of legitimating documentation. In it, Post recalls “I immediately became much interested in *Linda; for her appearance was prepossessing, and her deportment indicated remarkable delicacy of feeling and purity of thought*”. Post goes on to quote from a second letter, apparently a reply to one much like that of “Mrs. Bruce”—who is in reality Nathaniel P. Willis’s (remember him?) second wife, Cornelia (*Incidents* 187, emphasis added).

All this to say that the second consequence of the above passage, beyond its indication of Jacobs’s self-conscious passage over into text, is the suggestion that Jacobs crafts her text *in anticipation of its being legitimized* through archival research with the same “deliberate calculation” she employs to thwart her master. Jacobs disappears herself into plain sight and proximity—into the attic, behind the pseudonym, and then into the archive. The incredible proliferation of documents which seek to perform this very operation, either from within or without the text, speak to the veracity of what it contains and the reality of its conditions of authorship as they make equal evidence for a different approach to the text that scholars have not considered fully: that is, a consideration of the text outside of its historical embeddedness, as a piece of art.

Jacobs uses “the bill of sale!” moment to flag her “presence” in the text. Of course, this presence is textually mediated in at least two senses: it both appears in the text as text, is part of the story *and* is meant to index a piece of archival reality that, with any luck, will persist outside it. To this end, and too account for the autobiographical aspect of Jacobs’s narrative, there is a separation here not between story, the chronological events of the life, and discourse, that which rides upon it—a commentary on the former and a contradiction of its timeline—but something stranger⁶⁰. In fact, the figurative expression that is Linda Brent is a stranger to the archive of fact

⁶⁰ From Puckett, Kent *Narrative Theory: A Critical Introduction* (pp. 6): “What, though, do narrative theorists really mean by story and discourse? As the represented events as opposed to a representation of those events, story tends in mimetic or classic or “natural” narratives to follow certain rules of chronological and spatial order: effects follow causes, one day comes before or after another, you cannot be in two places at the same time, some things – birth, death, April 1, 1987, the first moon landing – happen once and only once. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan writes that “the notion of story-time involves a convention which identifies it with ideal chronological order, or what is sometimes called ‘natural chronology.’” As the representation of events as opposed to the represented events themselves, discourse follows an entirely different set of rules: where story is limited by certain apparently “natural” laws, discourse is relatively unbound in how it can arrange, attend to, and manage events; unlike story, discourse “can expand and contract, leap backward and forward.” A whole narrative is in that case the relation and tension that exist

that Jacobs reaches toward. Thus, this is the problem that predated Yellin's intervention to secure the texts facticity, and remains a problem open to analysis even despite this reversal in the text's interpretive context.

Despite the truthiness of the narrative, Jacobs's narration is still as storied as it ever was. Her writing is writing and therefore abstracted, alienated from reality in the special tenor of the autobiographical. And what's more, Jacobs seems to signal knowledge of this. Her autobiographical presence lurks infernal to the story of Linda, and within the incidents of index Jacobs draws figures for her knowledge of the conundrum attending all written language meant to communicate reality, of all representation. Jacobs's solution is a triangulation that her narrator traces and presents for the reader to transpose through history into the present. The bill of sale is printed in the text, "reprinted" with every successive edition, but it is still an object, a moment, in Brent's story. The tension between the two positions is heightened here as the bill becomes both an artifact of the nonbeing of Linda Brent, proof of her status as character, and a crucial part of an archival proof to the fact of Harriet Jacobs as a formally enslaved person. The discursive element of this (re)presentation, what shapes this moment into an anomaly within the story, is Jacobs's advance toward the world of the reader through the sentimental outburst of her enslaved protagonist. Brent's passionate response to the index of her unfreedom, her abstraction into property (which she faces in a uniquely distasteful form as a simple slip of paper) bespeaks, as all of her previous outcries, a proposition about the relations of the characters in the text to those same relations as they are actually lived in the world outside the text. Here, between a slave and her articles of freedom. The difference between this case and Brent's earlier asides is that Jacobs's narrator siphons the barrier between text and world to a sheer pseudonym, a false proper name, the emendation of her editor, Lydia Maria Child. In a moment of utter outrage, the narrator decries the writing and the paper that mark her objectification. In the same moment, the intervention of Jacobs's editor renders her round unvarnished tale opaque to the very archive the narrator commands her reader to search to find her.

If the bill of sale is printed in the text, and will be reprinted successively, bearing the name of a character—Linda Brent—then conducting the search the narrator demands will result in a failure, Jacobs's life would continue to languish undiscovered. So, what might be the result of drawing so much attention to this scrap of paper and the writing upon it? It is my contention that Jacobs gives her reader an opportunity to consider the power of writing over her life, its obfuscation and even domination thereof, broadening her claim to the case of the enslaved in general. Jacobs gives her reader an opportunity to examine their understanding of the absurdity of this particular mode of domination by description—the bill of sale on her own life and its value—but also a broader dominion of description—the one that named her "slave" in the first place. What Jacobs's narrator bemoans in this passage is her permanent transformation into a slave to the historical record, as is indexed by the bill of sale. The narrative itself then is the creative response to this former, false inscription. Jacobs's writes to disprove the legitimacy of her "provenance"—not only her status as a slave, or of the wider condition of enslavement, but the archival recuperation of her life as one who was enslaved. "You have seen how a man was made a slave," Frederick Douglass famously informs his readers. He then demonstrates, as Jacobs attempts to show as well, the ease with which the opposite procedure might be performed, here and now, in language. "Now you will see how a slave becomes a man."

between these two different levels; it is the fact that we can read back and forth between them and follow the different rules that organize them."

Jacobs's fugitive philosophical propositions subtend moments in her narrative, like the one above, where passion overwhelms her narrator, pressing her into the space beyond the text. (As if she were Emily Dickinson's speaker going out "Beyond the Dip of Bell"!)

Many scholars have remarked on these moments of the exhaustion of figuration in Jacobs's narrative—places where the text drops its pretext of being about someone other than the author herself or, from another vantage, doubles down on the fiction that populates the narrative. However, unlike previous scholarship, I will not be attending to these moments with reference to the editing that shaped them nor the reader who must riddle them out, but with reference to the text itself, its forms and figures. My interest in the abstracting gesture of the metatextual moment highlighted above is meant to open *Incidents* for re-reading, specifically a reading that takes on the later 20th centuries amount of autobiography with eyes toward the "ontological" turn in black studies today. That is, a reading that allows for poetics to corrupt or complicate fact.

This chapter will concern itself first with the ways in which scholars of Jacobs's have built out several readings of the text towards different ends which all seem to indicate the same fundamental paradox. This is the paradox indicated mostly by the ever-slippery relation between Harriet Jacobs's historical objectivity and Linda Brent's narrative subjectivity. Readings of the narrative by scholars Alexander Tricomi and Saidiya Hartman, as well as accounts of it in Valerie Smith and William L. Andrews will be considered briefly and in chronological fashion to paint a picture of the larger developments in the reception of Jacobs's narrative, and how they come to suggest the need for a reconsideration of this fundamental conflict of interests—those of Brent and those of Jacobs. Perhaps the most striking of these critical trends in the one that attempts to use close readings of the narrative to decide the veracity and exact perimeters of the sexual abuse that appears in the text. After all, the reality of this sexual violence and the revelation of its extent and intensity, is the political goal of Jacobs's narrative in its own time. Or so the story goes.⁶¹

While it is true that many a different chapter might explore this or perhaps, like Yellin, dig through this archive and the now rich histories of African American literary production⁶² to adduce the material surround of Jacobs's book as a means of exploring its position on the eve of the American Civil War, or the way it complicates the genre of slave narrative by giving the perspective of a female slave in the midst of Frederick Douglass' immensely important and triumphantly masculine autobiographical project (which was at the moment of Jacobs's publication already on its way to a third iteration, or perhaps use this collection of documents to tease the complexity of Jacobs having borne the (illegitimate) mixed race children of a U.S. senator towards a reading of her narrative as an off-shoot of congressional history, this chapter attempts nothing of the sort.)⁶³ There is instead a yet more concerning element embedded even above in Valerie Smith's rather parochial scholastic summation of the *Incidents's* reception history quoted above. An element that is both made more apparent by a consideration of the

⁶¹ c.f. Whitsitt, Novian "Reading between the Lines: The Black Cultural Tradition of Masking in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*" (2010)

⁶² I recommend Dickson D. Bruce, Jr.'s *The Origins of African American Literature 1680-1865* (2001), but there are many such books.

⁶³ The publication of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) and *My Bondage, My Freedom* (1855) bookend Jacob's appearance on the literary scene in the pages of the *New York Tribune* on June 21st, 1853. Cf. Annette Niemtow's contribution to *The Art of Slave Narrative* (96-109).

anticipatory quality of Jacobs's text and characteristic of the way the text is treated even after the Yellinian intervention, which seems to place any such intervention on unstable ground: "Linda Brent's (Harriet Jacobs's) life."

This seemingly harmless designation of possession bespeaks, intentionally or not, the crux of the interpretive difficulty surrounding *Incidents* and the reason why attending to the way it waited to be studied with its archive is so pressing. Namely: Whose life is actually one display really? To answer this question asserts immense pressure on the answers to basically any other question to be asked about the book, especially the question this chapter will end up asking, about Jacobs's "ethics", or, how Jacobs's text reevaluates the relationship between subjects (masters) and their presumed objects (slaves). Lines of questioning which consequently place a reader or critic on one of what are essentially two sides of the historical problem of the text's authorship which Yellin attempted to end. At bottom, this is the problem of considering *Incidents* as either purely fiction or astutely fictive.

Although much of the scholarship points to the problem of the text's fictionality and the ethic it espouses, almost none of it addresses the relationship between these two things—the falsehood inherent in representation and the propositions the slippage between the real and the represented affords. Ethics is a practice of fictional narration; it names the desires for a mode of action but is neither an example of such an action nor is it strictly speaking actionable except in the medium in which it presents itself⁶⁴. An ethic is a description that precedes or follows an act, but it has no bearing on that act outside of this description. This is what is meant by describing it as "fictional" or "false." A statement of an ethic does not contain the truth of the action it circumscribes as ethical. Hence, to claim for Jacobs the presentation of an ethic through the narration of her life is to say something redundant. But this doubling reframes the claims made by the narrative that allows the reader to engage their propositional content as philosophical. Philosophical in the sense that they are propositions directed at a world which is *not yet*, a world which recognizes the capacity for ethical description in the slave. A world that recognizes the self-consciousness of the slave.

It follows that the method of Jacobs's ethical descriptions is comparison, that this comparison is performed through metatextual outcroppings, and that this metatextuality might extend to our consideration of the "calculated" nature of the autobiography's paratextual threshold. Or, said simply, how in Jacobs's outbursts, focalized through or concealed by Linda Brent, the narrative's renounced fictionality leaks, attempting to enter its story into the world as fact.

Approaches

1. As Fiction

⁶⁴ Take, for example, Immanuel Kant's elegant argument in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) and its "categorical imperative". The main premise of Kant's argument is a definition of this later concept which, variously but most consistently, details an injunction to act *as if* one's actions would be used as the source texts for a now moral axiom. In Kant's argument, life becomes the text one is meant to interpret as ethic. Here, I want to do something similar, but work the process somewhat in reverse—using Jacobs's moral proclamation and worry over consequences to adduce an ethic—an account of what she thinks the proper relation between persons is, or should be. Her moments of confronting character with representations in the text, and the way the text itself turns toward the reader and marks itself as representative, will be my points of entry into this question through the text.

If *Incidents* tells Linda Brent's life then that "life" can't be real because Linda, every character in the book, and in fact Linda's entire world become representations penned by Jacobs to mime after or allegorize the real in the form of autobiographical fiction. A reader might consider her constant reference to "the demon Slavery" which is part abolitionist speechifying and part allegorically figured antagonist.⁶⁵ Or how Jacobs's mature writing in *Incidents* might be said to work through a mode of "self"-representation-in-somewhat-fictional-circumstances that is much like that of her letters to the New York Tribune from the 1850s.

In the first of these letters Jacobs, under the pseudonym "A Fugitive Slave," recounts what is nearly a fable. It goes: The speaker's mother begets two children, the speaker and her sister ("Innocent and guiltless child, light of our desolate hearth!"). As they begin to grow up the sister becomes the object of a ruthless harassment by their master ("the monster"). Like the narrator of *Incidents*, this harassment of the fugitive's sister begins at the age of fourteen after her having been sold into the monster's family. This "sister" then, seeking shelter, flees to the arms her "mother". Thus: "On that bosom with bitter tears she told her troubles, and entreated her mother to save her" (Norton 168). Though the character of these fabrications will be obvious to any reader of *Incidents*, Jacobs's correspondence with Amy Post allows her to describe the artifice in her own words: "I had no time for thought but as soon as everybody was safe in bed I began to look back that I might tell the truth. And every word was true except my mother and sisters. It was one whom I dearly loved" (Norton 170, emphasis added).

A reader invested in a reading of *Incidents* as a fiction might then conclude via this evidence, and reference to the passages in Jacobs's book where a similar scene is wished for ("I longed for someone to confide in. I would have given the world to have laid my head on my grandmother's faithful bosom, and told her all my troubles") that what is being witnessed here is something like a drafting of the novel to come (*Incidents* 30). The letter to the tribune would then be a kind of experiment towards the larger confessional if concealed project of the *Incidents*. Conversely, a critic like Yellin who is invested in a reading of Jacobs that restores the objects of her textual life to the facts of her actual life would argue in the opposite direction. Understanding the progression from lived experience to editorial intervention to narrative fabrication not as the emergence of a novelist whose emboldening artistic expressions challenge social, political, and literary historical reality but instead as the concealment, and abstraction of "A Fugitive Slave" who feels obligated to speak yet fearful of the consequences. The next section explores this latter line of thinking.

2. As Fact

If *Incidents* merely tells Harriet Jacobs's life with "the names of places" concealed and its persons, herself included, merely appearing in a true-to-life rendering of their own lives under "fictitious names," which Jacobs as Brent tells us in the "Preface By The Author", the reader is yet faced with a fictiveness that makes the form of literary technique, these metaphorical transformations of autobiography—self into name, event into description. Whether that be the tangle just presented: Jacobs's writing an author's preface signed by a fictitious author, Brent,

⁶⁵ An especially beautiful example of this comes of page 149, just after Brent has been spirited away to Philadelphia with Fanny. "Before us lay a city of strangers. We looked at each other, and the eyes of both were moistened with tears. We had escaped from slavery, and we supposed ourselves to be safe from hunters. But we were alone in the world, and we had left dear ties behind us; ties cruelly sundered by the demon Slavery."

which preface is commenting on the textual emendations “Brent” made (actually Jacobs, as author) to her own, that is Brent’s, “true” autobiographical artifact (which is actually Jacobs’s). This is an entanglement that complicates the “by herself” of Jacobs’s book before any consideration of the actual and ever-looming editorial hand of Lydia Maria Child could intervene. This could be understood as set of transformations of fact into narrative much in the way Gérard Genette describes with regard to the narrator-protagonists of Lawrence Sterne or Marcel Proust in *Narrative Discourse*. Or the much remarked on imposition of the formal and stylistic elements of the sentimental or “domestic” novel.⁶⁶ Or a kind of hyperbolic and impossible attention to detail which somehow gives the almost decades removed Jacobs access to the sounds of ice on trees and the qualities of light, occasionally in places she has never traveled. Or the full conversations which the narrator couldn’t have heard which she (and ostensibly Jacobs) receives second hand⁶⁷. There must, after all, be admitted some doubt about the “strictly true” adventures whose descriptions nevertheless the speaker admits “fall short of the facts” (*Incidents* 3).⁶⁸

To take a specific example from the scholarship, in his essay on the use of dialect in *Incidents*—“Dialect and Identity in Harriet Jacobs’s Autobiography and Other Slave Narratives” (2006)—Albert H. Tricomi uses Jacobs as a case study for a discussion of the uses of “dialectical” language in slave narratives more broadly versus its use in sentimental novels about slavery penned by white abolitionists. This account leads him to the claim that Jacobs’s use of dialect is utterly unique, substantially different from both traditions of use.

For Tricomi, this difference signals a distinct (and ethically inflected) orientation toward the enslaved which Jacobs’s is both included in and proposes. He claims that the way Jacobs’s deploys dialect for both enslaved and non-enslaved characters, good or bad—having the rare character who actually speaks in dialect do so without respect to the narrative’s moral judgments on their actions. Dialect then neither marks class nor character but seems to be added simply to critique a system of education that allows some people to pass over into standard English and others to not. Ultimately, for Tricomi and thus for Jacobs, standard English is not the bearer of simple moral or class superiority mapped onto or described through a representation of speech. Instead, the represented speech, especially the dialect, signal the cruelty of the non-discursive systems that bind and keep ignorant those who cannot or do not manage to pass over into the use of standard English. That is, Jacobs’s stylistic choices, about when and how to deploy dialect, open Tricomi onto an analysis that allows him to perceive a critique in Jacobs’s narrative.

Tricomi’s approach to Jacobs’s narrative as an object for thought, a work of art capable

⁶⁶ Perhaps using them as something like the “language shields” described by Emsley, Sarah “Harriet Jacobs and the Language of Autobiography” (1998)

⁶⁷ Or, to cite simultaneously scholarship and text, a glaring example identified by Valerie Smith, whose chapter “Three Slave Narratives” gives an account of *Incidents* on the way to discussions of the black fictional autobiographies. Of Jacobs’s dialog Smith simply states: “Characters speak like figures out of a romance” (Smith 40). But one might see also: Tricomi, Albert H. “Dialect and Identity in Harriet Jacobs’s Autobiography and Other Slave Narratives” (2006) for a more comprehensive accounting of Jacobs’s use of overheard, imagined, or reported speech.

⁶⁸ For more on the debate surrounding the truth of Jacobs’s account of her own sexual harassment see Whitsitt, Novian “Reading between the Lines: The Black Cultural Tradition of Masking in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*” (2010) or even stranger, the pathologizing of Jacobs in a piece like: Cobb Moore, Geneva. “A Freudian Reading of Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*” (2005). All references to the actual text of *Incidents*, and not its paratexts, will come from the Oxford World Classics edition (2015).

of making propositions through the formal organization and stylistic presentation of its content, is the approach this chapter will expand. I am interested in adapting this approach to an account of the work as a whole as it intervenes in what has become the history of 19th century American literature. Specifically, I am interested in the philosophical literature of the antebellum 19th century, the environment produced by the work of writers like Emerson, Fuller, and Thoreau. It is a commonplace in the field to include, for example, Frederick Douglass among these thinkers. This chapter will demonstrate the potential benefits of making a similar extension to Harriet Jacobs. It will also think broadly about the 19th century's philosophical revelations, considering the slave narrative penned by Jacobs as a work in conversation with others across America and Western Europe that instantiate the critique of enlightenment. It is my contention that Jacobs is writing in a moment and for a cause that illuminates a severe limit to the thinking of the enlightenment. For America, the Revolution made the actualization of its enlightened ideals and the Civil War their catastrophe. Like the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 had done on the continent for an era of religious stranglehold, the Civil War would dispel the last embers of the enlightened way of thinking, heralding an era of arid Utilitarianism and Pragmatism. Jacobs's narrative, published in 1861, arrives the year the war that will transform America from revolted colony to industrialized nation begins, it straddles the shift between enlightened critique and analytic determination.

To follow Tricomi's line of analysis toward a thinking on *Incidents* in the discursive environment of its composition the somewhat obvious conflict is opened between something like "the real" and "the true", which can be mapped back onto the earlier, passing distinction between history and historiography—things that happened and the way those things are organized and represented⁶⁹. For Jacobs's narrative, the factual presentation of that which actually occurred for the conveyance of information (i.e. history) comes into conflict, both in the text of *Incidents* and its paratextual surround/reception, with the embellished representation of that same information stylized to conjure sympathy and promote action (i.e. historiography). In most of the scholarship, this conflict is resolved by attributing these flourishes to the tradition of sentimental literature to which Jacobs undoubtedly belongs. A literary historical observation which is locatable also in the text's editor, Lydia Maria Child, herself a novelist of the same genre, who was thought to be the author of the text long after its publication and initial reception, despite all evidence to the contrary. For Valerie Smith this tension, between the real-life experience of the author and the allegorical representation thereof, locates *Incidents* as a precursor to a history of African American autobiographical fictions and for Annette Niemtzwow the tropes of this genre cheat Jacobs's narrative out of recognition as a successful emendation of the tradition of slave narrative (although she claims this authorial effect for Brent). In both cases, the fictional qualities of the narrative are still more or less the focus. In the former, they place the work into the hands of a tradition of African American self-representation that sees its fruition in historical allegories and personal fictions. And in the latter, when it is granted that Jacobs's narrative makes a crucial part of the factual history of slaves in America, there is a denial of *Incidents* its capacity for a properly immanent cultural critique due to a blindness to the text's own unconscious conscription into the ideological trap of whiteness, figured as the invasion of literary form.

3. As Farce

⁶⁹ Another permutation on the "story/discourse" distinction encountered above, but one that helps to deal with the legitimate facticity of autobiography—something a novel is generally without.

And finally, to present the third and by now scholastically untenable alternate that mentioning Child's name invokes. There is, of course, that old argument that Jacobs actually had no hand in the writing of her *Incidents* at all. That it is neither concealed autobiography nor autobiographical fiction, but a yet less real novel merely based on her life, perhaps taken down and shuffled about by Lydia Maria Child—much like *The Confession of Nat Turner*, Child becoming something of a Thomas Gray if not a full-on Harriet Beecher Stowe (the author of the most popular novel of the American antebellum period: *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.)⁷⁰ Or maybe *Incidents* is simply one of the many false slave narratives penned by abolitionists in the years leading up to the Civil War.⁷¹ This would make every choice in the narrative an aesthetic one—from the “Preface” down to the “Appendix”, the critiques of the horrors of daily life, of holidays and religion, to the suspenseful, epistolary escape plot. While this claim about the text, this vantage that understands it as a novel is obviously untrue, in terms of the reception history of Jacobs's work it was the primary argument for dismissing the text from serious consideration for at least some of its history, and the is present in that history as a mode of reading the text.⁷² That is to say that for all intents and purposes this way of understanding the text is “true,” or for my purposes a better word might be “available.”

To consider this mode of approaching *Incidents*, even for a moment, is to create for the text a palpable if not plausible situation for its autonomy as merely an art object. To allow a critic to imagine a time in which some artistic autonomy was offered the text, for better or worse. A situation in which one might understand Jacobs's book as discontinuous, however slightly, with her other self-concealed writings, her letters, and perhaps even with her actual life. A situation in which a critic might finally approach a reading of *Incidents* as an aesthetic experience. And while any possibility of this approach is by now a merely archival fact of the text, the power of this suggestion made by the text's history directs a reader's attention toward the why and how of it. That is, it sends the reader looking for features of the text which would have made this reading even vaguely a possibility in the first place. And further, asks that reader to confront and assimilate the text's multiple vantages for reading. A synthesis which might begin to account for not only the parameters of Jacobs's aesthetic, but the rich (and occasionally ethical, occasionally historical) ramifications of her narrative as a whole.

This new reader might find that this other, pervious reader is someone who neither had access to or interest in the text's archive, nor any knowledge of the biography of Jacobs (whose name became synonymous with the narrative immediately upon its publication as she became active in her community of abolitionists, running the bookstore beneath the headquarters of Frederick Douglass's newspaper.) It is precisely in that archive where he might have found articles that make the connection between Jacobs and her book inarguably apparent. For example, this unsigned advertisement for the book, published in the *Christian Recorder* on January 11th, 1862:

⁷⁰ Given the proximity of this event to Jacobs in history, and that Jacobs sees fit to pen a whole chapter on the event in her narrative, it is likely the case that Jacobs had even read Gray's pamphlet. One can only imagine what seeing such a document must have been like for an author who, some 30 years later, was writing an account of her enslavement in her own words. I can only speculate on how suspicious seeing such a document, which paints Turner “in his own words” as a fanatical baby-killer, might make a formally enslaved author feel about working with a white editor. But this speculation, I think, is a worthy one.

⁷¹ See Bruce, Dickson D. *The Origins of African American Literature* for more on these.

⁷² A dismissal which has caused the creation of scholarship on the book to lag, and the many essays on the book which were published before 1981 to go unconsidered for now except as fantasy.

“LINDA: This is the title of a new work put into our hands by the author, Mrs. Jacobs, of New York, a colored lady, who was born a slave in North Carolina, but managed to wend her way to the so-called Free States. It is a work of more than three hundred pages, giving a history of her life in slavery, and the various transactions which came under her notice.” (Norton, 165)

Perhaps this previous reader was blinded by something other than lack of interest or access, silenced by some larger force. A full and faithful accounting of his situation this chapter cannot give.

However, if that newer reader now on the other side of the Yellinian intervention were to aspire to an approach like that of his predecessor, ostensibly attempting to avoid the attendant baggage of that previous state of the text, he would have to do so in a purely tactical or subterranean way, working underneath but not against the strategic repositioning of the text in history. In fact, his eyes would be fixated not on the archive but at its edges—the places where fact and fiction seem only a razor’s edge apart. Or, where memory fails and making begins. This is what I intend by, for example, drawing attention to the paratextual and contextual material which, working under Jacobs’s own aegis, intentionally obscures or confuses the author’s relationship to the narrator of the text. Somewhat perversely, I draw these examples from the same archive of materials that scholars like Jean Fagan Yellin, Stephanie or Valerie Smith, and Annette Niemetzov point to refute this reading and come down strongly on the side of one of the two previous modes of understanding the text. My approach will try not to be so overdetermined.

I have described the “Preface By The Author” signed Linda Brent, and now I will consider it alongside the narrative’s original Appendix. Note, by way of beginning, the strangeness of these statements of authentication provided, the former for its masked author the latter for its own tiny preface by the editor, “LMC”. Special attention, in the latter, falls to the letter that makes most of the Appendix, penned by Amy Post who is “well known and highly respected by friends of the poor and oppressed”. This letter is directed to Post’s contemporary community of abolitionists, “the author of this volume”, and now by figure of its inclusion in the text, the reader himself. The reader, who has been witness to Post’s kindness “in the preceding pages”. While Post lends her name to a proof of the veracity of Jacobs’s narrative, she does not appear under a pseudonym. Yet, when she goes to make mention of Jacobs, she writes “I immediately became much interested in *Linda*...” (187, emphasis added). In fact, many of the advertisements and letters either printed with the original text, like the one just quoted, or in subsequent editions make constant reference either to the narrator herself or the book as a whole, eerily, as “LINDA”.⁷³ To give another immediate and literary historical example, I might cite a letter to John Greenleaf Whittier from Lydia Maria Child, dated April 1861, where she writes: “I am glad you liked ‘LINDA’” (Norton 163-5), referring to the text as if it were the person. And while it is true that, at least for the first edition, the title of the work appears to have included “Linda”, the confluence of Jacobs’s actual person with her text is rampant throughout the reception of the narrative. This coincidence of character and creator, and the environment of confused reception history this confluence occasions—of obfuscation and revelation, fiction and

⁷³ This was, it seems, either part of the narrative’s original title, or simply a convenient shorthand for the book.

fact—demands of the reader a synthetic approach to the interpretation of the text, an approach that attempts to account for Jacobs’s writing along with all the complexity it contains.

4. Another approach

What does it mean to ask a reader to consider all of these positions simultaneously as they approach Jacobs’s work? Not to place them on equal footing historically, but hermeneutically. To do this would require that a critic be sensitive to and make active in their work an understanding that any reading of *Incidents* must involve, as is often the case in the existing scholarship to some degree, a passage through each of these ways of considering the text. Unlike these previous scholars however, this scholar would demonstrate a more active sensitivity to Jacobs’s reception history not by presenting it as a means of detecting and dismissing the various “bad” ways of approaching *Incidents* and its accompanying archive on the way to a truer reading of it via one specific mode of reading framed either in facts or fictions. (A kind of approach normally exemplified by and culminating in an argumentative gesture that is a sharp movement out of Jacobs’s work and into some commentary on American (literary) History or a sweeping ideological critique.)

Instead, this new critic would seek a way further into the strangeness of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, written by herself*, perhaps by redirecting attention toward the very fact of Jacobs’s ability to conjure so many conflicting ways of reading and interpreting a single narrative. To use Yellin’s terms, a critic using this approach would take as their goal a fuller consideration of “Jacobs’s achievement,” which was, in Yellin’s wonderfully complex phrase, “the transformation of herself into a literary subject in and through the creation of the narrator, Linda Brent” (Yellin, xiv).

One such critic, of course, is Jacobs’s text itself. A text that, already in 1861, attempted to signal to its readers that its most useful indexing of history or ideology was to be formulated through the consideration of the relationship it has with that which has fallen outside it. The “bill of sale” passage, detailed above, is the opening of Jacobs’s critique of her present and its “condition”, which grows up through the disparity between her narrative’s universally transferable “characters” and its particular points of historical reference (like the Turner rebellion or the Fugitive Slave Law, or the congressmen who father’s both of Jacobs’s children). *Incidents* is then a text which demanded consideration with and among its “Contexts” from the very outset. This chapter’s perhaps tedious arguing for another turn through the archive generated by the paratext of *Incidents*, through to the presentation of the problem this archive presents, is not a way out of Jacobs’s book and into history (political, literary, or otherwise), not a call for attention to the literal or non-textual record, but a means of further entry into the text’s entanglement with itself. The invocation of and attention to the paratext is meant to demonstrate how Jacobs’s narrative generates an atmosphere of language in which the text asks for consideration. The pretext then is a sort of solution in which to develop the narrative’s strangeness, a frame—as in Frederick Douglass’s earlier narrative—that presents its particular method of representation in and as the medium through which the content of the narrative appears. Less metaphorically, approaching Jacobs’s text, having accounted again for its reception, might be a way of elucidating the formal logics and stylistic patterns which Jean Fagan Yellin cites, in the introduction to her landmark 1987 edition of *Incidents* and elsewhere, to authenticate the “by herself” of Jacobs’s work. In Yellin’s own words:

“Both its style and its content, however, are completely consistent with Jacobs’s private correspondence and with her pseudonymous public letters to the newspapers—which unquestionably she wrote by herself. However inappropriate these readers may find the form of Jacobs’s narrative, the language and syntax of her letters make gratuitous the suggestion that Incidents was written by anyone else.” (Yellin xxi, emphasis added)

But Yellin’s intervention does not occur in a vacuum. The last pieces of the critical context for *Incidents* at present is made of up a history that is often understood, within literary study, as parallel to the work of a 19th century Americanist, like Yellin. Briefly, before moving into the text for the duration of the chapter, one last angle on the text’s surround is necessary. One that contextualizes Yellin’s recovery of *Incidents* and, by virtue of this, my ultimate argument about its significance to the field today.

Section 4: “TOO MUCH LIKE REALITY”

“The image of one’s body is solely negating. It’s an image in the third person.”

Black Skin, White Masks
Frantz Fanon (pg. 90)

Jacobs’ narration, throughout *Incidents*, dramatizes the intervention of the third person perspective Frantz Fanon is describing in the epigraph—that the “I” of the autobiographical fiction alienates, obverts the “I” of the world is just one of the many metaphors used to describe the relation between a narrative, like Brent’s, and a world, like Jacobs’s. But the particular condition of Jacobs’s world, her status as a (former) fugitive slave, as a woman, and on a somewhat broader scale of analysis, as a black person, a piece of ungendered flesh, to conjure Hortense Spiller’s American grammar book. For Fanon, this “third person” is the production of a self that renders one legible to a world that is itself based around the exclusion and subjection of the very person the productions of this other perspective makes legible. For Jacobs, her projection of an autobiographical narrator gives her an “I” to witness from: the position of an almost omniscient narrator. Brent see and hears things that she describes with authority that it would don’t have been possible for her to remember or even have known, as “Jacobs” in “real life.” The use of a pseudonym, to say nothing of the way Brent’s body appears in the text, when it appears at all, are further evidence to the “solely negating” image of herself her narrative produces. It is one scene of this self-negating, a production of a negated self *as the work of autobiography*, that the scene below dramatizes.

“Dr. Flint had sworn that he would make me suffer, to my last day, for this new crime against him, as he called it; and as long as he had me in his power he kept his word. On the fourth day after the birth of my babe, he entered my room suddenly, and commanded me to rise and bring my baby to him. The nurse who took care of me had gone out of the room to prepare some nourishment, and I was alone. There was no alternative. I rose, took up my babe, and crossed the room to where he sat. "Now stand there," said he, "till I tell you to go back!" My child bore a strong resemblance to her father, and to the deceased Mrs. Sands, her grandmother. He noticed this; and while I stood before him,

trembling with weakness, he heaped upon me and my little one every vile epithet he could think of. Even the grandmother in her grave did not escape his curses. In the midst of his vituperations I fainted at his feet. This recalled him to his senses. He took the baby from my arms, laid it on the bed, dashed cold water in my face, took me up, and shook me violently, to restore my consciousness before any one entered the room. Just then my grandmother came in, and he hurried out of the house. I suffered in consequence of this treatment; but I begged my friends to let me die, rather than send for the doctor. There was nothing I dreaded so much as his presence. My life was spared; and I was glad for the sake of my little ones. Had it not been for these ties to life, I should have been glad to be released by death, though I had lived only nineteen years.” (*Incidents*, 75-6)

The above passage, from Ch. XIV “Another Link to Life”, describes one of two scenes in Jacobs’s *Incidents* in which a character faints. The other, to be reproduced below, is presented only a few chapters later and involves not Jacobs’s semi-autobiographical protagonist, Linda Brent, but that character’s grandmother, Martha. In the above scene, Dr. Flint’s “heap[ing] upon [Brent] and [her] little one every vile epithet he could think of” appears to cause Brent’s unelected lapse from “consciousness.” This assault in language, along, the reader is certain, with the physical strain left in the body from childbirth, mingle as the narrator is made to stand and suffer—unhitching her for a moment from the present and sending her, newborn in hand, to the ground before her master, asleep. “In the midst of his vituperations I fainted at his feet.” And it is the extremity of Brent’s reaction which, the reader is told, “recalled [Dr. Flint] to his senses.”

This moment is the meeting of at least three key aspects of Jacobs’s narration: the body, the mother, and descriptive language. As can be seen, in this passage Brent’s body, some four days after the birth of her second child, Ellen, collides with Dr. Flint’s “epithets” and “vituperations.” And this collision separates or draws attention to the separation, for a moment, of Brent’s body from her mind. The expressions of the wicked doctor are characterized by Jacobs’s narrator with names too specific to be accidental on the part of the writer, they are so literary as to draw attention to themselves—the “epithet” with its classical connections to the body and its metonymic naming and the precision of “vituperations” which suggests both the quality of bitterness and the activity of abuse. This subtle invasion of perhaps self-consciously elevated or “literary” language accentuates for the reader a complex relation among master and slave, writer and character, description and action, autobiography and fiction—all in this context, facilitated by said “literary” language—that is actively signaled by the author several times over the course of the narrative.⁷⁴ Here specifically, Jacobs crafts a moment in which descriptive language, hurled at the body of her main character, causes for that character a momentary lapse in consciousness and subsequently a desire for death, for suicide—a disconnection from her capacity to experience and thus to narrate further.

The passage opens with Flint’s re-description of Brent’s decision to have a second child with Mr. Sands—a decision that most critics find difficult to explain, given the narrator’s intense feelings of abjection after consenting to having her first child (Jacobs’s son, Joseph). The child she is holding in the above scene is her second, Ellen (Louisa Mathilda in real life). Indeed, Brent’s description of this scene is introduced through several layers of Flint’s language—the baby marks “this new crime against him, as *he called it*” a crime for which “*Flint had sworn that*

⁷⁴ A vehicle for the reproduction of life as it feels or was felt to be and thus a language capable of producing life beyond facts, perhaps, Fanon even suggests, of a life lived or now livable beyond one’s exclusion for the world of given values.

he would make [her] suffer.” Before Dr. Flint even physically (and “suddenly”) enters the scene, Jacobs has connected “his power” to “his word”—“as long as *he had me* in *his power* he kept *his word*... On the fourth day after the birth of my babe, *he entered* my room suddenly.” The promise Dr. Flint makes to terrorize Brent should she birth another child, produce “another tie to life”, is carried out in secret, in an isolation that reiterates Brent’s compromised life. It is worth recalling here that the threat which has initially driven Brent to an affair with Mr. Sands is Dr. Flint’s vow to confine her to a house in the woods, where he and he alone would have access to her. A kind of gothic nightmare, that is as sexual as it is symbolic, that would have been familiar to Jacobs’s 19th century, Anglo-phone readers from the likes of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* or Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*.

In terms of Jacobs’s own plot, it is important to remember that after the birth of her first child, Brent is banished from the master’s house, where she had been working. Despite this banishment, she is allowed a life that, while it affords her shelter in her grandmother’s house, does so only due to the jealousy of her mistress, a jealousy that just as often saw slaves sold “down the river to Georgia” (i.e. sent to their deaths.) That Flint happens to enter at an opportune moment for his harassments only makes the scene more tense. He slips in, just as the nurse who is meant to watch Brent, slips out—terror replaces care, a man for a woman, a white for a black. Jacobs has Brent leaves her revelation of Brent’s isolation to the end of the clause, reiterating the fact that Brent is cornered syntactically. As she tells her reader when Flint demands, to continue the scene, that Brent rise with the child and cross to him, “There was no alternative.”

All Flint seems to want is to gaze upon her in disgust. Brent tells us he commands her: “Now stand...until I tell you to go back!” The banal cruelty of this scene to this point is excruciating—a reader is made to imagine the exhausted Jacobs herself forced to stand before her master that he might spitefully take in her full visage. And a reader’s attempt to imagine this scene as actually happening helps to turn it over into a yet more symbolic register, the scene snaps back from the absurdity and cruelty of its reality to redouble this horror in its symbolic significance. This scene is an encounter of master and slave that has as its sole end goal the recognition on the part of Flint of the completion of Brent’s crime, master must reckon the insubordinate actions of his slave, and for whatever reasons is made to do this through a face-to-face encounter.

What complicates this encounter into a symbolic confrontation, one that engages the two characters is a struggle not unlike the violence of G.W. F. Hegel’s idealist figure for this encounter in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) or the social embrocation of W.E.B. Du Bois’s more materialist version which opens *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), are the small signals Jacobs leaves for her readers, in the eruption in this scene within the narrative of Brent’s desire for her own death, and the language used to describe the action that leads her to this wish. (More on this connection below.) These two poles, and their framing of Jacobs’s narrative, will make the topic of this dissertation’s conclusion. For now, suffice it to say that Brent’s encounter with Dr. Flint in this scene finds Jacobs experimenting with her own representative genius. Jacobs has already told her reader’s the scandalous facts of her affair, already confessed to it as wrong, and already defied those readers to extend their moral code to the enslaved that they might witness its implosion and pass judgement upon her from her own newly proposed, ethical standpoint. Such was the scene of her first child’s birth. For this second incident, this double—a sibling scene—Jacobs refocuses her reader on the dynamic her relationship with Sands has developed between herself and her master. Jacobs draws the reader’s attention namely to how Brent has—even before her going into hiding—fashioned for herself a loophole of escape—the edge that self-

consciousness, ethically (as opposed to morally) minded action affords. Or, what Jacobs has Brent describe as “another tie to life.”⁷⁵

In the terms of the “Preface by the Author” it would seem that the author’s fantasy would be that the critique of this relation, between the world of masters and the worlds of the enslaved, remain always held away from Jacobs’s historical person, here as elsewhere shielded by a pseudonym. As Brent informs her readers: “I have not written my experiences in order to attract attention to myself; on the contrary, it would have been more pleasant to me to have been silent about my own history.” She goes on to elaborate exactly how she intends her writing will affect the world, despite the necessary if humiliating inconvenience of adducing the relation she wishes to critique from her lived experience, for seemingly no other reason than that it cannot be critiqued as effectively otherwise. Such that when the reader happens upon a moment of “literary” embellishment, of attention drawn through the use of language to itself, she might be taken aback.

If the opening sentences of Brent’s preface are to be believed, where she informs her reader: “I have not exaggerated the wrongs inflicted by Slavery; on the contrary, my descriptions fall far short of the facts”, then a reader might assume that in this passage, where the “wrongs inflicted by Slavery” are expressed in “descriptions”, the descriptions offered of those descriptions, what Brent calls Dr. Flint’s “epithets” and “vituperations”, might be understood both as accurate and insufficient, such that the only accurate metric to evaluate their intensity is the response of the protagonist—specifically the part of her that, like it or not, falls somewhat out of language, of narration, that is the protagonist’s body. Brent’s fainting is a temporary detachment from her consciousness that mimes after death. Indeed the event of Brent’s fainting is subordinated in the sentence in which it occurs, which is inverted so as to almost tip over into a passive mood. Jacobs narrates this singular occurrence in her protagonist’s life with a syntax that points to the master’s feet as it places her protagonist there. The clause opens “In the midst” of the master’s speech, and only then does Brent appear, in the middle of the clause, “his vituperations”, directed specifically at her “I” which, having been thus abused, “faint[s] at his feet.”

I worry this arraignment and this singular moment in the text to open this argument into a mode of consideration that allows for these details to rise to significance and speak, to demonstrate the tactical care with which this scene and the narrative as a whole is constructed, and to begin, through small examples, to suggest what I think are the ramifications, literary and philosophical, of the encounter here staged. I do not use the word encounter flippantly. I mean it to suggest at least two other famous encounters, both formulated at about an equal “slave” in G.W.F. Hegel’s 1807 *Phenomenology of Spirit* and W.E.B. Du Bois’s 1903 extension and deformation of this encounter in the opening chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*. Published in 1861, Jacobs’s *Incidents* intercedes nearly in the middle of these two formulations, and her descriptions of the relation between slave and master, her demonstration of the relation between the black world and the white, blend the philosophical positions of Hegel and Du Bois.

Without forfeiting Jacobs’s text to an anachronistic conception completely, I want to say she writes in a mode we might today dub “autofiction”—a genre which has come to straddle fact, fabulation, and philosophy. And while obviously unavailable as such in her time, reading back over her narrative with this generic mode in mind and worrying a scene like this one, might

⁷⁵ Where, in Jacobs’s case, morality is about the accept, set of rules governing behavior—especially sexual behavior. And ethics names the tactical, constructed, even personal code of right and wrong that at least of Nietzsche, will designate something closer to an active interpretation of the word rather than a stale pronouncement upon it.

allow for a different perspective on Jacobs's text that lends it a more significant connection to these philosophical texts of its time, works (like *Walden*, for example, that blend the autobiographical with the economic and philosophical—folding time and seasons into fact and figures, in the strongest sense of both terms.)

Jacobs works within the form available to her, that of the “fugitive slave narrative”, but as has been observed elsewhere in the text—famously in her multiple addresses to the “virtuous reader!”—Jacobs's writing demonstrates both a frustration with this form and its conventions, and a deft ability to tactically subvert them. This often-observed quality of the text, along with its historical coincidence between Hegel and Du Bois, seems ground enough on which to propose its consideration among them and their theories of relation between slaves and masters, whites and “Negroes”—both genre defying texts themselves. So, as I continue to work over this scene, to narrate it again, and contextualize it with Hegel and Du Bois, my hope is that this novel encounter between master and slave, Negro and white, be granted access to consideration as another, mid-19th century model for a similarly weighty drama of recognition. And further, that this reconsideration and inclusion would occasion the formulation of a theory or frame for Jacobs's writing, and the writing of the enslaved, that the canonical status of her work makes her stand in for more broadly, that might help to further complicate the critical movement between all three of them: between a critique of Enlightenment and a critique of that critique. Or, more scholastically put, between one critical foundation of literary theory and one critical foundation of black study.

In the above passage, Brent is nearly struck dead by Dr. Flint's language some four days after she brings into life another slave. She is, in fact, nearly struck dead because she has just given birth. And it is only this near-death experience, this seeming death, that warms Dr. Flint back into sympathy, as Brent tells us: “This brought him back to his senses.” The moment of ecstasy here is therefore doubled. It is not just that Brent momentarily escapes her body, but it would seem according to the narrator, a similar abstraction has occurred for her nemesis. This doubling follows now the more meta-textual doubling of the addresses to the reader—a double that pits the white against the black, the free against the enslaved. Brent describes this moment of doubled ecstatic experience as mediated by the child literally at hand. Although, of course, the problem for both is actually Brent's motherhood. In this moment Brent's language contains a moment of intense description (Flint of Brent) which occasions as its end a momentary lapse in mental presence, the occasion for which lapse is the arrival of another of Brent's “ties to life,” what hooks her consciousness back to her body and determines her to keep it there, the birth of a daughter, another potential mother, and mothering on Brent's own part that will lead little Ellen to her one readiness for motherhood herself.

All of this amounts to a seemingly benign statement of two crucial facts, one metaphysical and one material. However, these two facts are also the main point of augmentation that Jacobs makes to Hegel's or Du Bois's scene of recognition. Jacobs's situating of her character within the scene disrupts its significance, this happens in two ways. The first is a description of Brent's connection to life through her children—echoing the title of the chapter—and the other a statement of her age: “Had it not been for these ties to life, I should have been glad to be released by death, though I had lived only nineteen years.” The selfless responsibility expressed by this statement cuts both ways. It is both selfless in the sense that Brent expresses a responsibility tethering her to life which extends beyond herself through her children, and in the sense that it demonstrates the desire for self-annihilation that subtends this very generosity. Jacobs gives Brent the desire to die herself at such a young age due to her enslaved condition

along with the knowledge that, by becoming again a mother, she has doomed another life to this same enslavement, and force her to express these sentiments in a single thought.

The symbolic drama of this is further characterized by sharpness of the distinction Jacobs's narrator draws between "struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery" (Ch. X A Perilous Passage in a Slave Girl's Life") when she is yet a girl, responsible only to herself where she is not the responsibility of others—primarily another mother, Martha, her grandmother—and the bittersweet sensation of "ties cruelly sundered by the demon Slavery" once she has escaped to freedom, leaving her son behind and her daughter in the care of strangers, free as they might seem to be. The feelings expressed by these remarks in reference to the largest, socially significant symbol in the text, "the deamon Slavery"—responses to the "struggle" or the "sundered ties"—are transformed by Brent's status as a mother. That motherhood being, the narrator is well aware, the primary cause of subordinated ontological condition of the children it produces, i.e. their status as slaves and the determinate brutality and corruption that, in the narrator's eyes, attends this condition.

In this scene then, it is Brent's discovery of her capacity to transfer her condition to others, *partus sequitur ventrem*, which rekindles her determination to live to free herself and her children. (A transference of condition that disrupts that happy idealism of Hegel and leans more toward the pervasive, social "problem" of blackness in Du Bois.) In the broadest sense, in this scene, the letter of the law presses in on the text, on Jacobs's character. And Jacobs's narrative becomes a demonstration of the counter force to this imposition, elaborating the law into consequence and thus pressing back against its disembodied determinism. The detail with which Jacobs renders the affect surrounding her position, what she often also calls her "condition", draws attention all the while to the powerful privileges of the master's capacity to describe and re-describe. Her writing makes a reevaluation of the condition of enslavement by introducing to the new figuration of the antebellum period the body, not in abstraction but in the flesh—a literal slave before and actual master, not the idealist phantasmagoria. And in the above scene, Jacobs uses the world she built to populate with experiments in historiography and narrative, to say nothing yet of ethics or politics, to stage a meeting of the master and the slave that carries with it an elaborate condition of slavery—cruel in its inequality but perhaps crueler in its ambivalence as an aleatory condition of life. The casual brutality of the scene, its dramatic staging as a face off, the impress of the legal and historical position of Jacobs's narrator—which realization seem occasion her losing consciousness—and the moment itself of collapse, make a much richer allegory for the relation of the slave to her master than anything in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.

The way this encounter is embedded in the unobstructed social relations of the antebellum period makes the moment feel more like Du Bois than Hegel. As well it should, Hegel's account is an experiment in idealistic explanation of mind, one where figures appear to name and enact (often with tremendous errors) moments in the development of such fundamental concepts as the Absolute or the Real. Where Du Bois stages the encounter of (erstwhile) master and (the formally) enslaved closer to the world of the contemporary reader's present—one where, for lack of better terms, the active, subordinating encounters—like the one depicted by Jacobs—has gone underground, reemerging in the form of "the ear unasked question."⁷⁶ Jacobs's scene erupts into the middle of these two encounters and their attendant theories of relation, abstract or otherwise. It is my contention that Jacobs's text must be considered among these

⁷⁶ Which "unasked question" Du Bois reveals to open "Of Our Spiritual Strivings": "How does it feel to be a problem?" For more on this moment see *X—The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought* (2013) by Nahum Dimitri Chandler.

texts, as a part of their history, because the figurative encounter which she creates both anticipates the more properly historical text of Du Bois, while it clearly takes on the idealized situation of encounter dramatized in the Hegel. And while it is not the perhaps more readily available scene, famous from Douglass, of his biblical struggle with Covey the overseer—another ripe candidate for consideration in this developing black critique of enlightenment—Jacobs’s attention to permutation on the scene of encounter, one that draws attention to the social positioning of her character, the law that binds her, and most importantly for my purposes, the descriptive language or the production of life in discourse that on a more quotidian level overdetermines her through its forceful figuration, lends *Incidents* ample credence for consideration as an incident in the life of the concept of blackness. And considering her text so leads to the revelation of the elaborateness of Jacobs’s theorization of her own condition. A theorization which presages the work of much contemporary black study.

When considering her first love to a free black man (not her eventual white attorney beaux), Brent informs us of her knowledge of the fact that her condition is distinct even from other black folks, quoting a translation of the legal language that forces that marriage of her social or biological reproduction with the reproduction of the condition of enslavement, Brent describes how she chooses to forfeit this early love:

Again and again I revolved in my mind how all this would end. There was no hope that the doctor would consent to sell me on any terms. He had an iron will, and was determined to keep me, and to conquer me. My lover was an intelligent and religious man. Even if he could have obtained permission to marry me while I was a slave, the marriage would give him no power to protect me from my master. It would have made him miserable to witness the insults I should have been subjected to. *And then, if we had children, I knew they must “follow the condition of the mother.”* What a terrible blight that would be on the heart of a free, intelligent father! *For his sake, I felt that I ought not to link his fate with my own unhappy destiny.* He was going to Savannah to see about a little property left him by an uncle; and hard as it was to bring my feelings to it, I earnestly entreated him not to come back. I advised him to go to the Free States, where his tongue would not be tied, and where his intelligence would be of more avail to him. He left me, still hoping the day would come when I could be bought. With me the lamp of hope had gone out. The dream of my girlhood was over. I felt lonely and desolate. (*Incidents*, 42-3 emphasis added)

Jacobs makes her knowledge of the law clear: “And then, if we had children, I knew they must ‘follow the condition of the mother.’” This “condition” to her mind, as she makes immediately clear to her reader as well, rises to affect all involved on the highest terrains imaginable, including those not bound legally by its implications: “What a terrible blight that would be on the heart of a free, intelligent father! For his sake, I felt that *I ought not to link* his fate with my own unhappy destiny.” And her use again of that phrase, the “linking” to her condition is the same as her children’s, demonstrates some connection in her narrative between the “link” her children make between her and her own life, and the “link” described here. The fact that the word link—to a modern as well as a 19th century reader—conjure images of chains and fences, should not come as a surprise. The linkage between her denied lover, of a free black, and her realization in the scene quoted above, of her other links to life, is Jacobs’s aesthetic intent again at work.

What is of broader interest is the elaborateness of Brent's critique of her condition, elided somewhat by the content of this chapter on "The Lover", but present in the contour of Brent's consideration of her potential husband, as it is demonstrated perhaps more fully by the progression in both passages through the relation Jacobs posits between the body of her protagonist and its legal status, to that protagonist's mothering of children and the legal status that her condition extends to them and anyone who consents to abet her mothering of them, and then the subsequent effect that Dr. Flint's words, to say nothing of "his presence" asserts on all the above.

Jacobs makes clear to her reader time and again that her protagonist is not subjected to physical abuse or torture in the way that she witnesses or hears about. The veracity of this claim with regard to Jacobs's own life is negligible. To consider it as the condition of a character who herself insists on it, keeping the reader reminded of this fact, draws attention to the alternative methods used to abuse and torture Brent—Dr. Flint's many whisperings, his seeming omnipresence, his manipulations of Brent's space and hindering of her movements, and most importantly given that the narrative is at least in some way a work of fiction, his control over Brent's narrative, the way he describes her to herself, the way that—quite like Prospero in Shakespeare's *Tempest*—he insists on her heeding to his version of events and any and all discourse—legal, romantic, domestic, or otherwise—he produces to surround her life. The incident of Jacobs's denial of herself her first love, is just one in the series of these kind of denials that make up the narrative. A recognition of the discursive or descriptive mode of torture Dr. Flint subjects Brent to, as opposed say to the treatment of the slaves encountered in "Sketches from the Neighboring Plantation", is crucial for a larger understanding of the text and lends credence to my attempt at presenting the text's seeming consciousness of itself as writing. Unfastened from any claim historical veracity, for the moment, Jacobs's text describes a relation among master and slave—an already 50 years theorized relation—that occurs in the same field as the narrative itself, that is in writing. The above scene, from "A New Link to Life", is a figural encounter between the two positions, of master and slave, black and white, and thus enters into homology with the similar scenes, equally important to the discourse on African American literature, mentioned above in Hegel and Du Bois. And as the chapter on "The Lover" demonstrates, this power of the master's word, his emplotting of Brent's life, affects all aspects, not only of the true life of Jacobs, but of the Romance, or potential romances, of Brent. A consideration of the second instance of fainting in the text will further complicate this claim.

In this second scene there is another fainting slave mother, this time Brent's grandmother, Martha.

"My grandmother was told that the children would be restored to her, but she was requested to act as if they were really to be sent away. Accordingly, she made up a bundle of clothes and went to the jail. When she arrived, she found William handcuffed among the gang, and the children in the trader's cart. *The scene seemed too much like reality.* She was afraid there might have been some deception or mistake. She fainted, and was carried home." (*Incidents*, 101 emphasis added)

Before considering this instance, it is important to recall a strange qualification Jacobs's narrator makes in her final words to the reader, a qualification that has a retrospective effect on the narrative of Brent's life she has just concluded:

“It has been painful to me, in many ways, to recall the dreary years I passed in bondage. I would gladly forget them if I could. *Yet the retrospection is not altogether without solace; for with those gloomy recollections come tender memories of my good old grandmother, like light, fleecy clouds floating over a dark and troubled sea.*” (*Incidents*, 186, emphasis added)

I remind my reader of this closing dedication of the narrator to lend the above passage, a moment from earlier in the work, an equal weight to that of the narrator’s own experiences previously described. Simply put, the narrator describes her grandmother’s presence in her narrative as if it is of equal importance to her own, using this final moment of reference to Martha’s memory to orient and comfort herself at the close of her own traumatic story. Indeed, Martha serves throughout the narrative as the highest moral authority, both in Jacobs’s life and in the life of their surrounding community. Many times over the course of the story her presence or knowledge is cited by Brent as grounds for an authoritative judgment of some situation, for example, in the moment immediately after Brent herself faints, here is the conclusion of that scene: “[Dr. Flint] took the baby from my arms, laid it on the bed, dashed cold water in my face, took me up, and shook me violently, to restore my consciousness before any one entered the room. Just then my grandmother came in, and he hurried out of the house.” His “hurrying” is characteristic of his, and most white folks, response to Brent’s grandmother. Paragraphs later, Martha insisted that the newborn be christened, and though Brent is sure that Flint would never allow this, Providence makes a way, and Martha gets what she wants. In this way, through her special relationship to the community and to God, Martha is Jacobs’s ideal. Like her lost lover, Martha is free and capable, her presence populates Brent’s memory like the weather: pervasive, entire, occasionally forbidding. And yet for all this donation and control, Martha’s presence is utterly distinct from the dreaded, atmospheric presence of Dr. Flint. A comparison between them, between their different roles in the two scenes of fainting in the text, allows the link between them to be complicated and Jacobs’s allegory for the crisis of representation of the enslaved to expand.

In the scene from the narrative quoted above, Martha is set the task of feinting the role of distraught slave mother on auction day⁷⁷ to trick a slave auctioneer, and the doctor, into thinking he has sold Jacobs’s children. The verisimilitude of the scene overwhelms her and she faints. The narrator informs the reader Martha found the scene “too much like reality”, that is was the likeness of the dumbshow to real life, indeed to her own experiences of having her children sold one by one, that caused her to, temporarily, lose consciousness. What is fascinating to me about this passage is that seems to expand on the earlier instance of fainting in the text. If there, the representation that causes the unhitching from consciousness is language, those “epithets” and “vituperations”, here it is an embodied performance, a feint, that forces the detachment. And just as before it is, in part, the presence of and threat to Jacobs’s children—those hard won “ties to life”—that exacerbates the impact of the scene. Of course, this event is likely a terrifying and all too real moment of intense danger for Jacobs’s actual children, one that very justifiably may have lead to the fainting of Jacobs’s grandmother. But what interests me about it, and about its double in the previous scene, is both Jacobs’s sequential inclusion of these dissociative incidents and what they might say, about her aesthetics and ultimately her ethics, if considered as figures as much as facts.

⁷⁷ A role she is all too familiar with as the reader finds out. See also, Ch. III “The Slave’s New Year’s Day”—which chapter, like the one about to be presented, describes the terror of the auction block.

If in the first instance, Jacobs demonstrates how the intensity of a mischaracterization (after all, what are insults if not bad faith or ill intentioned, overly schematic descriptions?) can unhitch the mind from the body, here it is the practice of dissembling, of flinging reality—of representing a scene *as if* it were its opposite, fiction as if it were fact, causes the disconnect. The children are, after all, being sold into freedom and indeed into the protective custody of none other than Martha herself, where they will live with relative ease for the remainder of the narrative, until they too—eventually, and through no less desperate struggle than the narrator—escape to more secure lives in the North.

What Jacobs describes in her retelling of this incident, serves to foreshadow two crucial elements of the text, first as aesthetic object, then as political polemic. By demonstrating to her reader her own understanding, and even witness, to the power of representation, of things which are “too much like reality”, Jacobs foretells Brent’s outwitting of her master through the circulation of false information in the form of letters—of texts. Texts that are of the very same quality to those that will be brought to bear on her narrative, such that it might be brought back into consideration as a marker for “the progress of civilization” (Jacobs’s very wish from the “bill of sale” passage.) The letters Brent circulates, some of which she reproduces in the text itself, are further evidence of Jacobs’s own understanding of the power that writing and representation can assert on a life, that of a living person or a literary subject. And while the construction of Jacobs’s narrative cannot be entirely attributed to her, the inclusion and repetition of her descriptions—these twin moments of fainting, or linkage—moments that carry the stylistic uniqueness both Yellin and Tricomi claim for the text, can be relied upon to evidence my subsequent claim about Jacobs’s rich understanding of representation for her own life and work. These incidents make a loophole for Jacobs’s aesthetic sensibility to escape from the obfuscation of her text’s production and reception. A sensibility that comprehends the power of representation over the body in theory, as it activates its own purposeful representations to the liberation of “two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what [she] suffered, and most of them far worse” (*Incidents*, 3) in practice.

The moments of metatextual expression, when Jacobs’s narrator turns away from her story and toward the world of her audience, make a final, larger, and more formal component of this more granular expression of Jacobs’s aesthetics—her demonstration of the knowledge that representation effects the senses. To conclude, in the next chapter, I will look again at one of these moments, from a crucial point in the story of Brent’s life.

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Jacobs’ text makes at least two figures that anticipate its reception: the first, is a double image of what occurs when the terror and confinement of one’s condition are represented to that person, in a sort of post-traumatic moment of aestheticism (the verbal abuse and the slave auction dumb show make one discursive and one embodied example of this), the second, an argument about the force of descriptive language and plotted action that culminates in the moment the text turns itself into a representation of a document of fact—i.e. the bill of sale passage, or this more recent example of “The Trials of Girlhood.” The dramaturgy of the slave auction’s misdirection (a plot for misinformation and deceptions not unlike the works wider letter writing scheme, itself a drama of false descriptions meant to locate and define a body), calls for a capacity to a willful disfigurement of reality. The Brent’s demonstration of Jacobs’s understanding of the “epithets and vituperations” of the master, the violence of his shorthand for

her as a non-being, ironically names and binds the person it seems to free (through fainting) from the confines of such descriptions, by demonstrating, in the “bill of sale” passage, their permanent status as attached or attachable to a person (however formally) enslaved. And it is through these moments that Jacobs’s participation in the American tradition of historical allegory, tales often with socio-political, not to mention ontological, subtexts take its most effective form. Alongside this is Jacobs’s well documented subversion of the sentimental outburst, present in the passage above described, that turn toward the audience to mark the difference which her text uses to dissociate, by degrees, her condition from that of her fellow persons. My contention has been that within their historical contexts, philosophical or literary, present or past, Jacobs’s fleeting figures for the overwhelming power of (false) representation and the potential byways between the moral orientations of white and black people, especially women, should give us pause.

It is not often that a narrative like Jacobs’s, one penned “as fact” by a former slave, is considered for its contributors to the theory of representation. But given the hyper-visible status of Jacobs narrative, the intensity of its figures for and condemnations of the moral code its content disrupts, and it’s contested history as a verifiable document of historical record, it occurs to me that pausing and worrying the text in search of the earliest moments of something like a black American philosophy of recognition, of presence, of performance, and of the power of language is a worthy pursuit.

Seen within the context of its construction, at a period in western thought in which such concerns—the relation of subject to object, of being to non-being, of life to history, and ultimately of language to reality—were gaining in relevance and expanding their purviews, it seems only natural to seek within the canon of African American writing of this time a contribution. These two short instances—one an image or act, the other a more formal figure—are not the only possible moments for analysis, and much good work has been done to expand the reading of the text through more speculative means. For example, on the editing of the overall work to include chapters of one or another political stripe, or the perspective Jacobs offers on the Nat Turner rebellion or on religion, not to mention the lost chapter on John Brown’s uprising. Similarly, a substantial body of work exists on the psychological and sexual politics of Jacobs’s narrator. However, very little of this work touches on the claim this chapter has attempted to make about Jacobs’s aesthetics and their attendant ethic, specifically her representation of the relation between blackness and description. This is especially visible in how Jacobs’s text is, eventually, picked up in the theories of blackness written in its wake. My attention then to these small moments is meant to suggest a wider set of concerns for Jacobs’s text, and a broader scope in which to consider its significance to the present, one that returns to Jacobs’s *Incidents* for an antebellum theorization of black life.

This is the work, to borrow from Hegel, of “thinking abstractly” about Jacobs’s text.⁷⁸ Allowing the field of scholastic engagement that has grown around the narrative, through a desperate desire to care for and champion one of the rare voices from a largely lost past (how many verifiable narratives of this complexity and stylization exist from the antebellum period? how many per enslaved person?), to open itself on a set of concerns the consideration of which demands a release from the tether of verifiable truth. To think speculatively, as recent work by Maria Holmgren Try and Caitlin O’Neill does, about Jacobs’s text then in my argument is to address it as a representation crafted by a person who is assumed to be sensitive to the psychologically rich, allegorical morality tales of a text like that bible—to say nothing of reading

⁷⁸ c.f. Hegel’s 1808 essay “Who Thinks Abstractly” (trans. Walter Kaufman), appears in the *Existentialism: Dostoevsky to Sartre* (1956).

Poe or Emerson.⁷⁹ The two moments extracted for this argument, marked in the text by their seriality, their “links” to each other, their similarities in embodied response, and their escalation of the domestic scene of misrepresentation between master and slave to the public display of the auction block, from intimate descriptions of sexual violence to a staged performance of potential relation, thus make a small offering to the rich field of aesthetic relations whose real life analogs in the historical surround of antebellum America might be glimpsed in profile in Jacobs’s text. Just as at its close, the culmination these aesthetic efforts, in the presentation of the bill of sale, Jacobs wrests a theory of description, of the power of autobiographical writing, performance, and description out of this erstwhile purely representational artifact, so this chapter wishes to close with a proposition: that through closer attention to the aesthetic aspects of the slave’s narrative, a novel theory of the historical and philosophical consequences of the writing of the enslaved is born.

⁷⁹ For examples of this strain of analysis see: Troy, Maria Holmgren. “Chronotopes in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*” (2016) and O’Neill, Caitlin: ““The Shape of Mystery’: The Visionary Resonance of Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*” (2018).

Chapter 3 *précis*:

The third chapter develops this relation by looking at two authors whose work makes a kind of origin for African American literature—Phillis Wheatley and Olaudah Equiano—focusing on how the terms for blackness and its differences as an identity category emerge in relation to or during encounters with figures for whiteness, especially when those figures have lyrical or literal autobiographical counterparts. This chapter thinks through how 18th century black writers invented/deployed the figures for and categories of blackness and used their various mediums to query and establish this concept. While looking, alongside this, at the contemporary writing on or from the position of blackness, writing done since that condition has come to be a more stable critical category or concept. The aim being to demonstrate how the writers of the earlier century were seemingly aware of the importance of their first attempts at conceiving blackness and did so with as much ambiguity and depth as the critic of the present, even presaging his methods. Along the way, the chapter shows how the contemporary study of blackness uses a similar method of both the citation of blackness's past figuration in language and the reinhabiting or revision of language used by white people to describe their black interlocutors to generate novel theories or positions from which to write (and ultimately “be.”)

Chapter 3:
VASSA, OR, JACOB, OR, EQUIANO, OR, THE AFRICAN:
ON TRUTH AND LYING ON THE AFRICAN PAST

Section 1—Equiano, the “Liar”

“What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity.”

Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”.

The publication of Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative in the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or, Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* in 1789 instantiates one of the longest running single author debates in all of African American literary history. A debate that Equiano’s title forewarns—the at least doubly meaning “interest”, the designation of the document to follow as a “narrative” that either bubbles up from or imposes itself “in the Life”, the teetering between names (which does not include the Christian name, Jacob, he is given and later attempts to give himself), the designation of African descent, the claim to authorship. Fought fiercely now by himself and others for more than 200 years, this debate centers on a question of origin, specifically Equiano’s own place of birth: *Equiano, or...the African*.

In the narrative, Equiano claims to be from somewhere in a seemingly central part of Africa (the southeastern portion of Igboland, Nigeria), to have been born rather wealthy, and to have been stolen from a life of blissful, idyllic, communitarian African living into the progressively more dangerous, horrific, capitalist life-form being propagated by the West, specifically England and America. And as we know, Equiano (or Equiano’s idea of himself) transforms from a tree-climbing, free African noble into a Christian cog, a wig wearing slave trader. A transformation routed through an as-literal-as-possible cognitive colonization that occurs as Equiano’s becoming first literate in English and then converted to Christianity. What’s more, this coming to knowledge is wedded to the spiritual transformation, a formula that formally equates the passionate desire to become English which attends a recognition of the English as a definitively superior race with the revelations of Christ quite literally through miracles and visions. (We are skeptical of this equation, perhaps, but there it is.)

Yet at the root of the long debate is Equiano’s origin. Was Equiano *really* African? To not even hazard a description of our more contemporary end of this debate, to stay within Equiano’s lifetime and perhaps strangely more or less within the text, is still to be bombarded with loud and vehement testimony to the African-ness of Equiano. A massive list of subscribers rounds out an ever-growing series of letters, sent on the author’s behalf among powerful white folk for signatures and then to newspapers for distribution, that positively assert Equiano’s claims about his natality. Claims that work to raise Equiano to the status of representative African, native informant, at once empiricist and abolitionist whose claims about the spiritual potentials of Africans writ large are both born of and borne in experience. Claims which more recent archival work has attempted, maybe even succeeded, to debunk. If we agree with Vincent Carretta, as is just as well we might, we know that Equiano is not African but American. Or anyway we can say we “know” that he is from South Carolina. But what do we make of this, in terms of reading Equiano’s text? What is the relationship between this debunking and the political force of the text in the late 18th century? What is being defended in the defense of Equiano’s African-ness? This

is a transformation in the question from “Was Equiano *really* African?” to “Does being *really* African, for Equiano’s text, really matter?”

Equiano’s narrative is the foundation of an entire tradition of life writing to follow. It fuses the wrecking genre distinctions of later 18th century English literature, melding nautical narratives with spiritual narratives and in the process helping to popularize and thus likely formalize slave narratives. His *Interesting Narrative* received nine editions in the eight years of his lifetime that remained after its publication. From its radical othering of the white world (c.f. the talking book section) to its odd containment of its scenes of torture to a single chapter (a “polite” practice that will reappear at least up to Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents* in the middle of the 19th century), Equiano’s narrative is an imitable literary standard for the genre that coheres in its wake.

But, of course, his text wasn’t produced in a vacuum. This chapter is interested in what occupies the literary surrounds of early African American texts like Equiano’s—everything from ship narratives and Graveyard poetry to Enlightenment philosophy and political pamphleting. It seeks to investigate the points of contact between, for example, Immanuel Kant and Olaudah Equiano—both of whom were titans of the later 18th century literary world who will find a strange synthesis in the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson where Abolition finds a genuine believer in transcendental metaphysics, a proclivity that will turn over again into the writings of W. E. B. Du Bois.

My task to open this chapter is to identify and present a literary precedent for the fabrication of the origin that may or may not be happening in *The Interesting Narrative*, and as a result to attempt to ask a genealogical question about the relationship between black life and a Western, specifically American, tradition of literary representation. A question couched in a question we might ask of *The Interesting Narrative* itself. What does it mean to allow the two statements: *Equiano’s autobiographical narrator begins his life in Africa* and *Equiano however was not himself African, but American* to be true, and what might the tension in them produce for later African American literature, especially those texts written after the possibility of living the atrociously ambiguous slave past has long passed? In other words, How can one write truthfully about what has not been experienced, and what does the necessary figuration of truth in this writing do to the concept of Life?

To even grope towards a question like this is to tip the discussion, for however slight an assistance, to the realm of philosophy. And who better than Nietzsche to ask about the relationship between the long-form development of rigorous and pervasive formal structures and their oftentimes catastrophic effects on “Life” as a concept.

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The 12th section of the second essay of Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887) opens: “Yet a word on the origin and the purpose of punishment: two problems that are separate, or ought to be separate: unfortunately, they are usually confounded.” This section identifies a way in which we can think about the forces from within preexisting literature that might pressure Equiano’s alleged, fictionalizing fib. Nietzsche’s suggestion is, of course, also “for historiography of any kind” (of which autobiography is certainly kin) the “more important proposition than the one it took so much effort to establish.” The proposition Nietzsche refers to is the strangely transcendental evaluation establishing the value of a hunt for singular, definite

origins—i.e. the one that hides in the quasi-religious belief that they exist at all. The more important proposition “which really *ought to be* established now” is this:

“...the cause of the origin of a thing and its eventual utility, its actual employment and place in a system of purposes, lie worlds apart; whatever exists, having somehow come into being, is again and again reinterpreted to new ends, taken over, transformed, and redirected by some power superior to it: all events in the organic world are a subduing, a *becoming master*, and all subduing and becoming master involves a fresh interpretation, an adaptation through which any previous “meaning” and “purpose” are necessarily obscured or even obliterated” (*On the Genealogy of Morals*, 77).

Following this, a way to repose the earlier question—Why does Equiano’s claim to African birth *matter*?—might be: What “interpretations” of black life does Equiano’s lie eat? The digestive metaphor here is intentional. The necessity of bodily involvement in Nietzsche’s proposed form of critique and historical account appears in Giles Deleuze and Michel Foucault’s accounts of the *Genealogy*’s method, as well in Judith Butler’s perseveration on bad conscience in *The Psychic Life of Power*. Where these dominating “interpretations” are competing representations (to the self, later as society) of a form of Life in its entirety.⁸⁰ Perhaps call this a “*Narrative in the Life*.” These representations can be understood as a synthesis of the Rational and the Experiential, or more precisely a refusal of the terms of their initial disarticulation, which constitutes the *lived*.

So, we might ask: What does Equiano’s intervention into the discursive network establishing what “African Life” is do? And how might this help us understand what is important, even radical, about his fabulation? In the next section I discuss a compelling candidate for the demonstration of the kinds of “interpretations” of black life being revised in the life of the historical figure Leo Africanus (who may or may not be the inspiration for Shakespeare’s *Othello*).

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Before wrapping up this introductory literary contextualization, I will present an earlier instance of what we might begin to call the “myth” or “lie” of the African past as a literary trope. This earliest instance is suggested by Dickson D. Bruce Jr.’s *The Origins of African American Literature* (2001), and provides another example of both something that looks like ethnography

⁸⁰ Interpretation is here rendered in scare quotes to flag that this is a translation of a German word used in a work of philosophy written by a well-trained philologist. That is to say, this word holds at least words like “affect” and “sensation”, with which “interpretation” is often used interchangeably in Nietzsche’s writings, and a distillation of a Spinozan understanding of the way matter is related to all other matter by way of a primary relation to an origin-thing—God, Nature, Substance—at the center of all relations, of which say a chair or a particular eyelash is merely a more or less knowledgeable “mode” with specific attributes. What we might hear Nietzsche revising here is Spinoza’s or anybody’s claim to origin itself as a site of deterministic purpose. He is on his way to totally undoing the idea indefinable, empirical origin at all. What Spinoza would have understood as the process of gaining knowledge of and thus proximity to the One, an ultimately impossible achievement resulting in the realization of one’s very literal if immanently limited godliness—a process we might call experiencing in time—Nietzsche understands as a myth masking the often violent and eradicating force of domination. If there is no “God” then towards what would one be striving? What’s the excuse for the powerful Christian colonial apparatus to be systematically geocoding the world if there is not salvation, no source code for the metric of evaluating the value of another people based on their spiritual potential at all? Well then, wasn’t it all always just about power? And we should hear the Francis Bacon here too: Knowledge-Power.

and something that is most certainly “life-writing” about a person “of African descent”, or at the very least instances another scholastic debate about the legitimacy of its author’s connection to Africa, thus returning us to the question of writing the life “not experienced”.

The Grenadian born diplomat dubbed Leo Africanus, as the adjective suggests, was a Spanish Moor, a Berber Andalusi. And “according to the usual legend” the English translator of his *The History and Description of Africa* (1550), African diplomat John Pory, in 1600 writes, “nearly all that we know of his career is derived from the incidental remarks he chooses to vouchsafe in the course of his work” (“Introduction”, vi.) Born al-Hasan ibn Muhammad al-Wazzan al-Fasi, and baptized Giovanni Leone (Joannes Leo in Latin) *de Medicis* in 1520 after being captured by the Spanish in 1518 and presented to Pope Leo X, he becomes known as Leo “Africanus” because of the ten volume *Description of Africa* that he produces. Written in Latin, and subsequently translated into Italian and French before being rendered in English, each of these three subsequent editions, we are led to believe by our English translator, begins with an attempt at reconstructing Africanus’s biography. This is the fabrication our translator refers to as the “usual legend.” There is a quibbling, for example, about Africanus’s exact date of birth: “That he was born in 1491 is a statement which writers have copied from one another, without taking the trouble to ascertain on what foundation this assertion rests” (iv). Pory claims to render the life of Africanus with more clarity, as a response to this carelessness, by tracking in a more scholastic fashion Africanus’s references to historical events and personages:

“I hope to prove, he was born, not in 1491 but in 1494-95 ;... Leo affords us some safe guidance in this difficulty...he tells us that when he was fourteen he knew ‘Sidi Jeja’, who was there as captain of the country about Saffi engaged in collecting the revenues of King Emanuel the Fortunate. *Now this man is well known to history.*” (“Introduction”, v)

The problem Africanus’s life produces stems from history’s lacking knowledge of him. His life is reconstructed on faith in his memory of his own relation to historical events. Yet the primary debate that surrounds this text centers on whether or not Leo Africanus ever actually went to Africa. That is, about his truthful recounting of the very relation being relied on to reconstruct his life at all. And it is with a question about the strangeness of the existence of this scholastic debate and the manipulation of historical data that, one way or another, proves *a* claim about Africanus’s relation to Africa, or African-ness, that I want to end.

Thus, this final question is a permutation of our initial question about Equiano, a meta-discursive question that will lead this chapter to a discussion on the broader relationship between historically provable identity or fact and literary representation in African American literature, and ultimately to a problem of citation. That is, again, what, if anything, beyond the factual claims themselves is at stake in the debate around whether or not Leo Africanus really experienced, really saw the things he writes about in the *Description of Africa*? And does trying to answer these questions assist any in our asking a perhaps less historically and more aesthetically concerned question about Equiano’s little fib? Is his lie not only a politically astute choice but an ingenious manipulation of a preexistent literary trope—a last step along the way, as Nietzsche would say, between *origin and purpose*.

In short, how might we be led to reconsider the development of the literary, to say nothing of the ethical, legal, or ontological, subject of African American literature, or for that matter the concept of blackness, if its disperse terrain of origin is considered as a response to the difficulty of mediating the political efficacy of authentic historical or ethnographic recounting,

with the injunction to representativeness that this engenders (to a fault), and the terrific if perhaps dangerous potentials of the aesthetic imposition that attends any form of representation of Life at all?

Section 2—What to the field is the writing of the enslaved?

“Certainly one quality which nowadays has been best forgotten—and that is why it will take some time yet for my writings to become readable—is essential in order to practise reading as an art—a quality for the exercise of which it is necessary to be a cow, and under no circumstances a modern man!—rumination.”

SILS-MARIA, UPPER ENGADINE, July, 1887.

In the first section of her field defining essay, “Mama’s Baby Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book”, Hortense Spillers puts a fine point on the problem or question at the core of this chapter. As she describes the position from which she writes, one overdetermined by a list of “marks” she opens the essay in confrontation with, she writes:

“In order for me to speak a truer word concerning myself, I must strip down through layers of attenuated meanings, made an excess in time; over time, assigned by a particular historical order, and there await whatever marvels of my own inventiveness. The personal pronouns are offered in the service of a collective function.” *Black, White, and In Color* (2003), pp. 203

The “layers of attenuated meaning” Spillers must remove in order that she might “speak a truer word concerning” herself are the layers of interest to me in this chapter and dissertation as a whole. Not so specifically as Spillers does here, to adduce a theory of black (ungendered) subject. But to go in search of something she assumes in this essay, what she describes as a lost “figurative possibility” for the study of blackness through text, which she unearths out of her own investigations into the gender binary, as its properties have been denied to the figural “black person” (as well, a more importantly for her perhaps to the literal black person.) I take Spillers to mean “figurative possibility” here in at least two senses. The first understands these possibilities as available descriptions within a given descriptive archive (of literature or art) which are denied to a person existing already under the sign of blackness—both rhetorically (as the narrator, say, of a slave narrative) or “literally” as a person marked visually by what is called “blackness”. These could be anything from a word like “person” which need not, for a class of persons, be augmented by the adjective “black,” as in, “a black person” (“Look, a Negro!”) And secondly that potential other set of yet unknown or unable to be articulated “possibilities” for description or conceptualization which could or might emerge in relation to or from the expressions of “black” people were the historical/ontological position of these persons not so overdetermined by the already extant code of representation that holds and governs their lives. Another way of saying this might be: if slavery were not encountered as a social and historical fact before the living fact of the person who descended from it.

I want to describe and interpret black literature with an eye for this latter mode of figurative possibility which, throughout its reception in the West, has been all but denied, on the grounds of attending to the more immediate concern of the black artwork's relationship to the lived experience of blackness. It is of course not possible for the writers who penned the primary texts at the center of this and other chapters in this dissertation to speak directly to or about these developments in black criticism and western theory, nevertheless this dissertation is an attempt to place these texts next to these enslaved writers, to give them the chance to theorize as, Christian says, people of color always have.

The use of quotes here and throughout this dissertation should be linked to another of the useful theories positively frothing out of Spiller's highly carbonated prose, which pops and sparkles in a way only Alexis Pauline Gumbs seems to really address in anything like its fullness. I want to activate Spiller's own theoretically minded use of the punctuation—where citation, suspension, undecidability, and irony meet in the speech-like reliance on inflection, even here and especially here in writing, where “the real” plays out for the future as history, or at least, historiography.⁸¹ Spillers concludes, rounding out her first section with this realization: “The captive body, then, brings into focus a gathering of social realities as well as a metaphor for *value* so thoroughly interwoven in their literal and figurative emphases that distinctions between them are virtually useless” (ibid., 208, emphasis in original).

I could not hope to unravel all the complexity of Spillers' claims here. Leave that to a book like *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (2014) by Alexander G. Weheliye, where he tackles the great revisions of Foucault and Agamben made by Spillers and Sylvia Wynter. The intermingling of the “literal” and “figural” is for Spillers the condition of the black person (body, subject, man, or otherwise) in the wider field of (at least) academic discourse. To dislodge the literal black person from the figural slave is the goal of her essay, it's central claim—the establishment of the slave as ungendered flesh—can be understood as construction of a concept in discourse that could abstract the condition of enslavement far enough from the actual person of the writer that she might be able to critique it. Perhaps another way to understand the list of bad names Spillers calls herself to open the essay is as a sort of airing out of the absurdity of the fact that someone at the podium where she delivered this essay was first delivered as a talk might describe her this way. An absurdity approached on her way to a questioning of why such categories of person were ever formulated, and why after their inception they were generalized. One of the central claims of my dissertation is that black theory works largely by estrangement from blackness through

⁸¹ A similar tonal choreography of critique permeates the writing of the so called “queer theorists”—writers like Lee Edelman and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick deploy tone, and often something closely linked to innuendo (when it is not literally a sex joke) to activate a similar mode of critical engagement—one that not only concerns itself with the study of things like affect and positioning (a rejoinder to the determined location of “subjectivity” that is more relational, more “dynamic” to borrow the terms again of Barbra Christian) but that wants to project the affect of its new critical identity category (the queer theorist or the black feminist as discursive type.) A style emerges here as a set of rhetorical moves, a template for reference that expands the more “neutral” critical lexicons inherited from the European philosophy these writers all cite and elaborate. It is my contention that something like the origins of the critical personality of black studies, the position in discourse from which any writer or artist marked by blackness will inevitably be made to speak, is found in the narratives of enslavement. Especially those that have become classroom classics, texts taught and debated and theorized alongside for almost two centuries (a relatively short time in terms of the development of “discourse” which, to return the concept in Foucault, develops out of long-form, institutionally instantiating repetitions. Repetitions that take time.

description of this kind. A description which abstracts in the guise of authoritative description. The autobiographies of the enslaved make the archive for this study because they make an example of exactly this kind of estranging description, the telling of the story of coming to freedom being the final act in the dispelling of the discursive curse of enslavement. Or so they thought.

The dressing down which Spillers describes to open her essay and claims to attempt in the speaking on it is rendered in my analysis strictly and intentionally proverbial. For it is ultimately not possible for Spillers to denude herself of the conceptual and descriptive baggage encoded in the language in which she must not only write but be understood. Spillers forces her auditor or reader to hear/read from the outset all that she knows she cannot escape without some admission. Like the speaker of Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*, she must name herself as a character in the discourse of blackness before she can uncover herself in life from the language which would otherwise have clouded her from view. *J'accepte*, Césaire's speaker says over and over. The figuration that occurs in Spiller's written/spoken language abstracts the conditions she describes from her literal/historical person, allows for the position from which she speaks/writes to be, momentarily, as long as the essay continues under the assumption of these categories' possible suspension, the disinterested and unmarked position of critique. Spillers weaves the literal and the figural here, where "social realities" blend with "a metaphor for value" such that, when it comes to theories and writing on "the captive body," a body which is uniquely America's, or at least American literature and its academy's determining figure for the black person:

"...dominant symbolic activity, the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of the naming and valuation, remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, show movement, as the human subject is 'murdered' over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise." (ibid., 208)

The relation between "the captive body"—a more general idea, which for my purposes is confined to the image of the antebellum black body as it is rendered by the enslaved writer, one of the world's many glaring captives—and the register of figurative language, of metaphor and valuation via evaluation *through description* that makes the coincidence this dissertation wishes to explore. In the specific case of this chapter where the origins of African American literature, held in the writings of Phillis Wheatley and Olaudah Equiano, are in question, the guiding assumption will be that the attempt to permanently effect such an impossible to maintain schism—between the literal and the figurative, as Spillers describes it—was already at work for the literal and then figured captive bodies of Wheatley and Equiano (doubled in their respective texts as the poetic Speaker and "Olaudah Equiano, or, Gustavus Vasa, the African" the autobiographical protagonist of Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*.)

It is my contention that the recent poetic excavation into he only ever speculatively or subjectively availed past, into the world around the objects left to us in the archive, has abandoned too hastily the merely literary evidence of the figurative innovation that characterizes the archive of enslaved autobiography. While, in doing so, formulating a novel mode of interpretation, inspired by the methods of these very documents and their absences, that offer new ways of approaching these more stable textual objects. This chapter intends, by observing this rumination and the method by which it works across the long-form history of African

American cultural production, to reapproach one of the most cited works of black literature with fresh perspective, a perspective that looks more closely at the gaps and receptive, philosophical, and ultimately figural surrounds of these texts, to fabulate critically not about the life of their authors, but the wider genealogy of the artistic strategies they employ to revise the concept of blackness. To reapproach even the ostensibly stable texts of the poems/autobiographies of the black literary traditions young cannon as if they were more pressurize scraps of lost life—like those at the center of Saidiya Hartman or Christina Sharpe’s recent work, or the quotes employed by Alexis Pauline Gumbs, to show how they challenge the legitimacy of any claims to an isolated or pure concept of black life.

The rumination this chapter identifies and seeks to perpetuate takes the form, in the archive of black literary study, of a chain of citations that lead back inevitably to the autobiographical texts of the (formally) enslaved, and ultimately to the black body, which it formulates as essential evidence or of expression of a particular mode of being in and for the world.⁸² It is, as Spillers wrote in 1987 and as Chandler reiterates in 2013, seemingly impossible to activate or define any concept of blackness that does not pass through the proverbial “blood stained gate” of reference to slavery or its after effects. History will not yet release the black person, alive and present, from the accumulated sign of blackness, a dead letter, a sentencing.

One of the best examples of the intensity to which poetic rumination on the being of blackness and tis deep connection to textuality has captivated some in the field, see Nahum Dimitri Chandler’s long and loving relationship with the archive of W.E. B. Du Bois. The density and care of his readings of Du Bois, their voyages into the mad poetry of one of the greatest black intellectuals of the last century, should give any scholar seeking the opaque mystery of black life, black particularity, black poetics, and so on an apt model for method. Chandler’s readings are close, almost claustrophobically so, and as they turn over and over whatever text is at hand seem to turn the texts themselves inside out.

“We shall try, then, to read with Du Bois; writing. In this scenography, nothing comes on the scene punctually. Nothing comes on the scene on its own terms; which is to say, it comes on the scene on other terms. Distinctions move laterally or obversely vibrating through chains and networks of associations. It is in this lateral, or obverse, movement that we can describe the formation of form. Everything in this paragraph moves by indirection. Nothing settles down. Form would be deflection as indirection; for each movement is inflected back into itself, doubled and redoubled by the differences that organize its formation. The prose itself, by its syntax and the confusions of its meanings, remain not only the site of a question, but the very movement or form of a question.”

Here Chandler describes his method, what he calls “read[ing] with Du Bois; writing,” before proceeding through a painstaking, and somehow almost sublimely complex, reading of the first paragraph of du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*. His “anacrusis” positions this reading, and the book that follows form it, as a response, or at least an argumentative move, that proceeds from the writer’s observations of the protests and riots in Los Angeles following the acquittals of four policemen in the Rodney King trial in 1992. Approaches of this kind ought to be afforded to all black texts, untangling the philosophical complexities that reside in their use of image and figure.

⁸² The best example of this is likely to be form Simone White, the essay which closes her 2018 book of poems *Dear Angel of Death*. Here is the passage in full:

Not simply for further revelation of the beauty of the texts themselves or the project of the black scholar, but for the transformations in potential meaning of the black person as they are figured in the literature and thinking black people produce. Especially in the cases of the autobiography, where the life of a black person is intentionally and purposefully figured. So much black art which chooses to represent blackness misses out on more careful attention of this kind. And as a result, the claims the texts or artworks have to authentic representations of blackness go largely unquestioned. And more to my point, the strategies though which ironic or critical accounts of the relationship, between black life and representation, rhetorical and figurative tactics that destabilize this relationship and thus shake the foundations of the theory built in order to represent or explain blackness, are thus similarly unremarked.

In his first chapter Chandler elaborates the use he makes of this slow and close method of analysis; its cause is a situation in the field of black study that he seeks to destabilize.

“This situation, or more precisely problematization, yields for African American thinkers what I call the problem of purity, or the problem of pure being. To inhabit such a discursive formation, perhaps in a structurally contestatory fashion, one cannot, under the premise of the ultimate incoherence of such a presupposition or proclamation of purity, of the (im)possibility of the pure, simply declare in turn the status (as prior, for example) of a neutral space or position. One must displace or attempt to displace the distinction in question. This necessity is perhaps all the more astringent when the distinction in question is a claim for a pure origin, a pure identity, an ultimate ground of identification. Such a displacement can be made general or decisive only through the movement of the productive elaboration of difference—as articulation—perhaps even according to necessity as the performative announcement of a differential figure. Such a production makes possible a delimitation of the claim of purity and prepares the ground for an elaboration of its lability.” (16)

This chain of citation is the tradition which has founded the scholarly practices of black study, and it is also one of the primary methods of that mode of study in the present. To say that scholars use citations is of course rather banal. What makes the citation of the black (and typically feminist) scholar more exciting and somewhat critically elusive is how this citation turns over into the very practice of scholarship and art making. The capacity for language to index experience, and specifically for black experience to find expression in typically white Western languages, which was at the outset the substantial political and ultimately ontological goal of the enslaved writer, would eventuate in a scholastic practice of interwoven allusions to and direct citations of the differ texts and figures which has been used to describe blackness. An encoding of the figures for authentic black experience into a language which had denied its descriptions for so long, favoring instead the sentimental novels of white folks where a tortured silence was not the preference. A picking and choosing, a wresting and culling, that has formed the contemporary view of what blackness is and what it is not, or more broadly what is gathered under the sign of blackness in a critical context, and what escapes from the academy into the world as the contemporary conception of blackness in the wider socio-political sphere.

This chapter wants to begin by examining the importance and expansion of citation as a method of black feminist world making in the present—a line of thinking detailed by Simone White and Alexis Pauline Gumbs, to name this chapter’s primary exemplars. Then move backward in time, through the debates surrounding Olaudah Equiano’s natality, to discover how

a citation of a disappeared or otherwise dispersed referent like that of “blackness” in the contemporary literature is prefigured by Equiano’s alleged fraud. Which alleged fraud is not a single lie but a proliferation of false, or otherwise fictional narratives and documentation, attestation and veneration, that circulates around the citation, not of the apparently extant and more recently availed (and perhaps always known about by Equiano!) birth records, but the text of Equiano’s narrative itself.⁸³ This cyclical structure—where a dispersed origin is recreated through narrative which is presented as fact only to be delegitimated by its reception only to be vehemently reasserted by the author and different writers across hundreds of years, whose primary citation is the text, which text is either true or isn’t but is certainly and finally an artwork and, however unfortunately, a direct picture of the past—makes for the ruminative structure that I see governing the history of black intellectual engagement with its own archives which constantly cycles towards what it claims is a richer or somehow more portable theory of blackness.

Black scholars of the present generation are living the eternal return of their advisors, forefathers, inspirations, and inciters to discourse. The long durée of black writing is a cycling b(l)ack around always to the question and subsequently the proof of (black) being and (black) life. One way to exemplify this is through a tracing the recent citations of Martin Heidegger, a philosopher whose major work turns on a return to the question of being and Being. Or better yet, Fred Moten’s extensive treatments of Immanuel Kant, and the origins of critical philosophy. Moten argues, synthesizing the work of several Kant scholars:

...Kant uses race and the raced figure to ground the distinction between natural history—the production and discovery of purposive and singular, if internally hierarchized creation—and natural description’s cataloging of a diverse set of observed natural facts potentially attributable to different origins. **The regulative discourse on the aesthetic that animates Kant’s critical philosophy is inseparable from the question of race as a mode of conceptualizing and regulating human diversity**, grounding and justifying in equality and exploitation, as well as marking the limits of human knowledge through the codification of quasi-transcendental philosophical method, which is Kant’s acknowledged aim in the critical philosophy. Similarly, **the racial and racist conceptualization and, therefore, regulation of blackness is inseparable from its naming, so that the precritical impulse to categorize and catalog supposedly natural facts, above which critical philosophy would rise, or over which it would conceptually leap in its use of teleological principle, casts a sleepy and dogmatic shadow over that which newly awakened criticality is supposed to illuminate.** *What if* the ones who are so ugly that their utterances must be stupid are never far from Kant’s mature and critical thoughts? *What if* they, or something they are said and made to bear alone, are the fantastical generation of those thoughts? *It is as if* the exclusive property they are and have is the generative facticity that constitutes and solicits fact and grasp, having and being. (Moten, “Knowledge of Freedom” 2. All emphasis mine.)

Fred Moten takes his time in “Knowledge of Freedom” building a case that is already present in fullness at the opening of his essay: “Nonsense is fugitive presence” (1). A pause over this phrase in a return to it opens my argument about the relationship between black (literary) studies’ new critical turn and the origins of the black radical tradition in antebellum autobiography as it is Moten’s essay that synthesizes much of the critical and cultural archive, I am interested in

⁸³ C.f. Caretta, Vincent *Equiano, The African* (2005).

analyzing, including and centrally the main text of this chapter. “Nonsense”, in Moten’s argument, takes on the rich sense of a deconstructed concept—holding at once the literary definition (as that which defies the order of things), and it’s sonically available if not literally associated meanings, meanings that accrue across the essay’s “...present experiment in distorted articulation universality and particularity, totality and difference—” and experiment with a Derrida influenced prosaic style (similar to the speaker of Moten poetry) “which attempts, by way of a neurotic oscillation as a method of truth, critically to extend, to tend, to end, the relation between the black radical tradition and enlightenment...” (58).

To elaborate on this relation, “to extend” it, Moten cites heavily from Equiano’s narrative, performing one of the richest engagements with the philosophical content/context of Equiano’s narrative to date. An insightful treatment that rivals the treatment of the same text by Hortense Spiller, whom Moten cites several times, or those Harriet Jacobs by Saidiya Hartman, of Phillis Wheatley by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. or Frederick Douglass by Paul Gilroy. Each of them uses the slave’s narrative or poetry to ground arguments about (or at least essentially aimed at) the description of black being, a practice of close reading that produces claims about ontology. I am interested here in several things which the proceeding case, and those that follow this one, will engage. The first is the simplest: the use of a slave narrative as evidence to an ontological claim, especially one like Moten’s which is demonstratively aimed at the present.⁸⁴ What this says about how black scholars are developing a conception of history, or a practice of historiography, that functions on a distinct conception of temporality is also at issue here. I will revisit this claim below when considering Friedrich Nietzsche’s “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life” but consider, as a quick example, the temporality implied by Christina Sharpe’s “wake work” --wherein the all-time of black being shifts and floats behind the prow of that being’s present expression, almost to haunting. For Sharpe, time’s endless periodic development turns on traumatic revisiting and revision, redaction, and revelation. It is not teleological, in the sense Moten will critique in Kant and through him the wider Western project of Enlightenment. The wake is flat, triangular, expansive—more like a ray of light than a laser, it is imprecise, messy, and complex. Michel Foucault, who describes the foundations for the method for conceiving time Sharpe develops as wake work, in his essay on “Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History” (1977) calls it “gray” yet “meticulous”—this is the work of genealogy.

A recourse to the method of genealogical analysis and the recursion to the Heideggerian question of Being has coincided with a broader reevaluation of the field, the likes of which meta-discourse are also at the roots of institutional black study in the late 60s. Only in recent years has this study begun to criticize itself again, as it did in the late 70s and 80s. This is especially in the work of black feminist scholars. And the innovative and mind-bending ways in which these scholars, especially the poet and scholar Alexis Pauline Gumbs—an oracle in the community of this method—whose work enters and excavates the texts of the black feminist tradition. Gumbs’s work, considered in this chapter alongside that of Simone White and Fred Moten, makes an

⁸⁴ “So what I’m interested in, here, is freedom and the relationship of certain narratives of slavery to the question of freedom not only in the historical context in which they were written but in the no-less-desperate context of our fiercely urgent now. We know something—narratives and under-standings of narrative and understandings of the relation between narrative and freedom—that we need to know we know. Where does that knowledge comes from and what are the im/possibilities and theoretical and political problems regarding our access to its source?” (“Knowledge of Freedom,” 43).

example for this chapter primarily because she, unlike the two aforementioned scholars, does not compromise form to express its content. Instead Gumbs assays the reading and interpretation of the past and the scholarship that has transformed its figurative possibility in the present as a practice of ekphrasis. Gumbs's trilogy of works makes its poetry after or in the wake of reading. Her citations—often hidden in the back of the book, in a scholastic looking apparatus of citations—lead the reader back into the language of her inspirations. Gumbs's poetry activates the past through citation, producing works of literature that are built form within study. Her writing indexes a moment or practice of reading, literalizing the relationship between not only black art and black theory, but the way that a linkage is formed from the past of black writing to its present through the practice of citation.

The work arrives to the reader in the form of prose poems, prose poems which are at once exegetical and expressive, positioning themselves in a clear line of aphoristic and poetic philosophical writing from Friedrich Nietzsche and Theodor Adorno to Sawako Nakayasu and Lyn Hejinian. This return upon itself of the field, signaled by a recent resurgence of energetic engagement and “practical” employment of just such black feminist ideas, (and Gumbs's example makes an extreme form of this, where the work of other scholars is more or less literally put to work, made prismatic, become a type of passageway or window for thought) has occasioned at least two paths forward for the study of African American art making. One that steadfastly holds to some essential (even mystical) identity among black persons, in relations of every scale—person to person, region to region, continent to continent—and one that has worked over the past 100 year, slowly and tediously, to decry just such identifying. A trajectory that seeks to sever the conception of blackness from the living being of the persons meant to live under its tortures sign, as not only an identity but a historical and discursive mode of figuration. Her work demonstrates how art can both transform this relationship between black people and “black people” by choosing to literally expand poetically the new conceptions of blackness proposed theoretically by Spillers. Gumbs's manipulation of scholastic material—vatic as it may at first appear—seems aimed at the disassociation of the theoretical working on blackness from the living text of black life. To denude the “black body” of its discursive/conceptual overdetermination, and to finally begin to write from a lyrical position delivered to the other shore of the black feminist scholar's imagined space of immediate relation to and of black life. Where Spiller's, to return to the beginning of her essay, might be allowed to stand at the podium as something other than “the black woman at the podium,” a world where she and her emendations of philosophy might simply be allowed to stand.

And while it is true the language and texts, theories and practices, used to explore these two paths have diversified significantly, especially in black literary study, it appears as if the problem remains largely in the same form as it was when posed by Douglass in his 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*—a problem of insides and outsides, past and present, social versus self-determination. In describing what Du Bois would later term the sorrow songs, Douglass outlines a change in positioning that will come later to be conceptualized, again by Du Bois, as the movement within and without the veil. Douglass writes:

“I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. **I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear.** They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish.”

The perceptual shift, a change in the relation to “see[ing]” and “hear[ing]” which Douglass alludes to here and elaborates throughout his *Narrative* and career as a writer and lecturer, marks an ontological discontent between the condition of enslavement and that of the freed man. A distinction in positioning that changes or engenders an aesthetic sensibility or really an ironic distance from the lived suffering of the enslaved. Douglass indexes here, as do the other authors in this chapter and larger dissertation, the nascent reconceptualization of blackness that must follow not simply emancipation, but the discursive space afford by writing and publication, the circulation of images written and made, which would come to transform the condition of blackness not simply by changing it material surrounds and materials, but by shifting the conceptual narrative or framework which structures how black people are capable of being described, how they choose to describe themselves, and their own lives and being. That Douglass locates this schism, between the condition of the enslaved black and the free person, within a moment of aesthetic experience, in fact in a moment of reading, of trying to interpret the content of the songs, a moment then too of art or literary criticism, when Douglass’s autobiographical narrator trains his attention toward the critique and ultimately defense of black artistry, makes a early justification both for the problem this dissertation seeks to address and its possible solution. If the generalization of black representation towards a constant, if embattled, state of constant ontological representation, it is because in part of the way that art is being put to use by critics for the justification of black humanity and capacity.

What this account of Douglass’s formulation fails to consider, and what I am interested in teasing out, is that this reading might have some ironic or subversive unpinning’s, after all her Douglass’s astute and rhetorically gifted speaker performs a state of ignorance for his reader. He aligns his position with the person who does not understand that sorrow songs, but then removes himself to a terrain on which they might be understood. The place within the circle, that location of ignorance where one is unable to read the songs is the location of those enslaved—but it is similarly the zone of the enslaver, the white northerner or foreign emissary, who does not understand how to comprehend the aesthetic capacity of black people. In other words, Douglass’s famous formulation, in aligning enslavement with an incomprehension of black art, makes a zone of consideration that—given that eventually all the slave’s would be free, would become rather quickly “Negroes” or “Afro-Americans” and would set out on the formulations of their own aesthetic principles, derived from these songs, that the only folks left in the circle that binds the listener from his comprehension of the music of the slaves, is a ultimately a bad reader. A reader trapped in the very incomprehension that made Douglass unable to appreciate the aesthetic qualities of enslaved life, an inability which is not in itself bound to the condition of enslavement, but to the existence of that mode of subjugation which is itself impoverishing to art, culture, and life more generally. Douglass here imagines a third way, between illiterate slave and ignorant auditor, which position of analysis, a new perspective on the artworks before him, allows a synthesis of anguish of the enslaved and a comprehension of that anguish as aesthetically coherent. This is a position, in my view, that constellates enslavement with a longer tradition of Western theories of disinterested appraisal of art, reframed by Douglass so as not to exclude the problem of having once been an object in the judgment of the subject.

The period of institutionalization for black study, from the middle/late 60s to the later 80s, was rounded out by the publication of one of the strongest arguments for a study of this potential third way between what would become, in the academy’s consideration of blackness and black art, a more or less black nationalist and deterministic, nearly to the point of naturalistic, total

indemnification with blackness and the more wilily, typically isolated and queer, black aesthete's willing negation of blackness (an especially popular move in the early 20th century, see especially the narratives of passing, the poetry of Countee Cullen, and the lives of literary figures like Jean Toomer), this is the publication of Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* (1987) which contains the promise of a book Gates never wrote. A book about how to conceptualize and contextualize slave narratives and other black art within the wider context of the enlightenment and its critique at the end of the 19th century. It is in this spirit, with the advances made between the late 80s and now in view, that this chapter proceeds to think through the problem at the heart of the reception of Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* and the interpretation of the poetry of Phillis Wheatley, a problem of origins, genealogy, and what constitutes true history for black art.

To conclude this section, I will revisit the overarching argument of *Figures in Black* as it comes to articulation here, in a passage from its introduction. In discussing an early African philosopher, Amo, Gates surmises:

“Amo and his fellow writers, Othello's countrymen, suffered under the sheer burden of literacy: to demonstrate that the person of African descent was indeed a human being. Amo was not competing, as it were, with Newton; he was distinguishing himself from the apes. How curious, how arbitrary that the written word, as early as 1700, signified the presence of a common humanity with the European. **Any serious theory of the nature and function of writing in the Western tradition must, to put it bluntly, take the critical reception to this unique genre into full account. What more meaningful example of the eighteenth century's theories of writing can possibly exist? What a profoundly burdensome task to impose upon the philosopher such as Amo—indeed, to impose upon the human being. What an ironic origin of a literary tradition! If Europeans read the individual achievements of blacks in literature and scholarship as discrete commentaries of Africans themselves upon the Western fiction of the "text of blackness," then the figure of blackness as an absence came to occupy an ironic place in the texts of even the most sober European philosophers**” (Gates, *Figures in Black*, emphasis added).

Gate's conclusion here is the question which opens this chapter: How can a scholar turn the “absence” that Gates formulates as “the figure of blackness” in the Western mind, especially the of the enlightenment and pre-Civil War era, into a presence? How can that scholar go in search of the meaning of what *was* in fact written, published, circulated, and read about black people in the Western World of the later 18th and early 19th century? And how does refiguring this blackness, registered through the writings of “African” slaves who were born or ardently sought to become Americans, as a presence, a positive claim about the limits of lived blackness and the non-abstractable or non-representative elements of these lived experiences in a time before black study or even a concept of blackness, change the way the field approaches these texts, now wrestled however anachronistically into the present through their continued presence in the scholarship which formulated that very black study and concept of blackness?⁸⁵ Gates concludes in another framing formulation for this project along these same lines:

⁸⁵ Darby English puts a fine point on a tendency in the opening pages of the 2007 book *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* that fascinates me. A mode of approaching black art that reduces its artistic or aesthetic potential to its ability to be thought of as representative of blackness in general. This is a tendency in my terms to abstract all art made by black people, through description in scholarship or museum catalogs, into representative figures for an

“It is incumbent upon those of us who respect the integrity of the black tradition to turn to this very tradition to define self-generated theories about the black literary endeavor. But we must, above all, respect the integrity, the tradition, of the black work of art by bringing to bear upon the explication of its meanings all of the attention to language that we may learn from several developments in contemporary theory. By the very process of application, we re-create, through revision, the critical theory at hand.” (Ibid, xx-xxi)

I want to follow in both Christian and Gates’s footsteps in at least this one regard, to apply the new theories generated by the field of black studies which has expanded in the wake of this work to the canonical texts which literary study begrudgingly admitted into the ambit of value for study while failing, in its political exigencies, to attend closely to the artistic elements of the texts. And to deepen the critique of enlightened discourse that Gates’s work registers in its formulation of “black, text-specific” theories from encounters between black art and Western theory.

Section 3—*On Being Brought*, or, an “origin” for “the African” in American Literature.

To begin with the reality of enslavement as a given, in all the scholastic complexity afforded to it as a material and metaphysical position, and still register the aesthetic intent of the artist—this is the task of this dissertation broadly construed. Obvious as this registration may seem, the reception histories of the literary artworks of the enslaved studied herein—primarily autobiographies written in antebellum America—tell a story of refracted agency, a perception of limited artistic merit, accusations of white -washing or outright forgery, political hectoring from all sides of any imagined aisle (the accusation that a slave’s narrative is somehow not radical enough is perhaps some of the most ill-aged writing done on the subject), where there is not outright dismissal of them as literary objects. It is my contention that all these approaches and concerns revolve around a seemingly invisible paradigm: an unjust expectation of or injunction

apparently absent positive concept of blackness in general. (An absence variously registered through analogies to the color black as an absence of color or dark benighted conditions of life, all metaphorical figures.) I am interested, like English and other contemporary scholars, in the history and method of this abstraction by studying how enslaved writers seemed (in their texts as well as their lives) aware of this abstraction, seemed in fact to capitalize on it and put it to work for their own artistic or historiographical purposes. This dissertation will examine and elaborate these early African American figurative strategies, their speculative attempts at the manipulation of the negative conception of blackness in order to produce a positive position for the black artist, one here she is able to be and speak as herself, and herself only, as she and she alone is or feels herself to be. And ultimately that the continual formulation and protection of this position is and continues to be the work of black studies. Here is English on the lamentable tendency in scholarship to overdetermine the artworks of black people:

“It is an unfortunate fact that in this country, black artists' work seldom serves as the basis of rigorous, object-based debate. Instead, it is almost uniformly generalized, endlessly summoned to prove its representativeness (or defend its lack of same) and contracted to show-and-tell on behalf of an abstract and unchanging "culture of origin." For all this, the art gains little purchase on the larger social, cultural, historical, and aesthetic formations to which it nevertheless directs itself with increasing urgency. And in the long term, it runs the risk of moving beyond serious thought and debate. Viewed this way, the given and necessary character of black art—as a framework for understanding what black artists do—emerges as a problem in itself” (English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* 8).

English’s work engages in the analysis of a group of artists who were tutored by the twined formations of black radical thought, from the mid 20th century to the early 2000s, and the development during this same time of the edifice of critical theory. Indeed, he informs us early on that the artists he is working on mentioned the major figures from each of these histories in interviews.

to truth-telling, to fidelity to the real as a principle of valuable (black, and somehow always-already racially committed) art. Combined with a sense that the aesthetic—as a consideration or a practice—is the provenance of white Europeans. To cite an at best ambivalent statement of Du Bois, to consider and only be interested in black as insofar as it functions in the wider culture or discourse as “propaganda.”⁸⁶

This critical appraisal, laid out in more detail from Du Bois to the present in the preceding chapter, now leads to what might be called case studies; episodes in the earliest moments of recorded (and, importantly, widely studied) African American literary history. These studies are of texts that make both that history’s origin, and the foundation on which at least one avenue of black expression emerges in the nascent America, the America in which there is currently something of a renaissance of black (autobiographical, poetic, theoretical, Marxist, queer, environmentalist, agricultural, etc.) study.

There are several reasons for the metastasization of this injunction to truth: the obsession, among the critical writers of the 19th century with “clarity” and “transparency”, the invention of photography and its documentary practice, and the new fields of psychological and phenomenological studies finding their way out of the study of phrenology and a more formal idea of metaphysics, all form inroads toward the ingraining of a wider desire in the media of the later 19th and early 20th century to turn from a more scientific to a more imaginative historical fiction, a movement through Naturalism to Realism. A transition seemingly away from narratives governed by scientific fact and toward a more phenomenological story aimed at a more abstract and often less determinative truth. The latter tendency which becomes, perhaps oxymoronicly given its categorical “realism”, emblemized by a literature that employs figurative and grammatical flourishes to evermore metaphorical and imagistic ends. Ultimately, the securing through writing of real-world stakes for its representations—the production of “truths” understood as facets a shattered conception of Truth—that halt at the conceptual, meeting the world there, refracted through the mediums of a thoroughly modern art.

The role of the black artist in this transition is complicated, to say the least, by the social and political history of the 20th century, a period which would witness on the earlier end the nadir of American race relations after the collapse of Reconstruction policy in the late 19th century and on the other, the establishment of the field of black studies. Indeed, from within the academy of the later 20th century there arose, through protest, ingenuity, and sheer toughness, a literary critical field that could answer the desire to simultaneously establish a canon of African American literature in dialog with the extant 20th century concepts of American Literature and to theorize modes of aesthetic and historical production that were outside or were able to otherwise combat the domination of the repressive, ruling, highly regular, and regulatory “high” Modernist literary, figural, conceptual tradition and the philosophies of culture and state formation that

⁸⁶ The precise quote is as follows:

“The apostle of Beauty thus becomes the apostle of Truth and Right not by choice but by inner and outer compulsion. Free he is but his freedom is ever bounded by Truth and Justice; and slavery only dogs him when he is denied the right to tell the Truth or recognize an ideal of Justice.

Thus all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent.” “Criteria for Negro Art” in *The Crisis* (1926), 28-9

grew alongside it.⁸⁷ A tradition that had seen to the purification of many artistic forms before collapsing in over its own theory turned practice in the earlier half of the century.

Black scholars and scholars of African American art stole their dear artworks away from the hegemonic white critical frame only to find the most useful means to this refusal, typically a refusal of the Western metaphysical tradition, were in fact more canny implementations of its best tools: historiography, poetics, and the study of being. And just like that, in the early 1970s, new canons formed, counter-history and counter-philosophy found purchase, and the great wheel of academic institutionalization turned the radicals who advocated within and around the academy for the study of black thought and black life, into a more compact and uniform framework for thought: the Black Radical Tradition. A new brand of institutional critique or cultural analysis and a watch word for a certain stripe of theoretically and historically minded black writing—from Ida B. Wells to Calvin Warren. And while the institutionalization of black study might sound like a betrayal, a forfeiture of the radical potentials of para-institutional work—as someone like Sylvia Wynter famously describes it (blaming Henry Louis Gates Jr.)—from my perspective, thinking about the narratives of the formally enslaved, it strikes me as more of a return. A situation for the writing of black life that might have more in common with the literary market for abolitionist literature in the 19th century than one might consider at first blush—a contemporary market which, at least, continues to trade on claims to the veracity and authenticity of black expressive arts. Whether these come from the artists themselves, or their publishers and critics.

The preceding potted history of American literature and criticism opens my next section on the question of “origin” and “identity” in Olaudah Equiano and Phillis Wheatley, both of whom worked in the later 18th century, in part because these two figures are broadly considered by that literary history the earliest and most important contributors to the development of African American literature. And they are both artists whose careers, along with their artwork, revolve around questions of origin. In the case of Phillis Wheatley, it is not just her famous account of middle passage “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” referenced by the title of this section, but the question of the origin of her capacity for art making at all. Where does the language of and for blackness come from, and how might a scholar read the formulation of that category in her work?

⁸⁷ As the interwar period had been hugely important for the scholastic establishment of an American literary tradition, so the period between the Korean War (1950-53) and the Gulf War (1990-91) saw the scholastic restructuring of that earlier scholarship. And while the scholarship of the latter generation tends not to look approvingly on their predecessors, it remains true that the ability to think America as a cite of art-making worthy of the critical appraisal afforded to figures like Shakespeare or Aeschylus, remains crucial to the work of the black scholars of the late 20th century. It is a byway like this one, between generations of scholars who are perhaps strange bedfellows, that this dissertation concerns itself. If America can be characterized by a tendency toward disjunctive thinking, a thinking in ruptures and hinges that signal more or less absolute historical transformations—from colony to nation, from secession to union, from isolationist to neocolonial foreign policy, from democratic to republican governments (categories whose politics also invert across the late 19th and early 20th century)—this tendency also seems to in fact the thinking on the writing and art practices of Americans—where genius wanders out of a cornfield to make its way in the big city or aboard, sometimes erasing or effacing its past. The scholar in the American scene must resist the urge to entertain such disruptions. The history of African American art is the history of American art. The scholastic and philosophical thinking about it thus must also be a cite of admixture, a forced encounter between forces—intellectual and aesthetic—which are trying to succeed sometimes in simply changes the past, oftentimes to disregard it entirely.

For Olaudah Equiano, the question is not less poetic, though it is certainly less lyrical. After all, as stated above, his 1789 *Interesting Narrative in the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavas Vasa, an African* instantiates one of antebellum African American literatures most infamous debates, a debate about the exact origin of Equiano's person, his natality, that has followed his *Narrative* from its first publication into the present. A debate which is structured by what I call the injunction to truth in African American art and its reception. For Equiano, Cathy Davidson has famously charted and bemoaned the problem of his work's reception. In her 2006 essay, fulminating at what is registered as the absurdity of the debate, Davidson writes:

"If my tone sounds exasperated, it is because I am. Fundamentally, I don't understand what the fuss is about and find it astonishing that a very few miscellaneous records in the life of one of the most successful and visible black men of the eighteenth century would "count" against the weight of a powerful text as well as against the implicit and explicit testimony of almost everyone who was there at the time. This included men like Equiano's friend Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, who wrote his own account of the Middle Passage (apparently with the aid of Equiano) in *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Humbly Submitted to the Inhabitants of Great Britain, by Ottobah Cugoano, A Native of Africa: 1787*. If Equiano had lied about being African, surely men like Cugoano and many others would have known. Equiano was a prominent figure. He was certainly as famous - and, in Ralph Ellison's sense, as visible - as any other black man in England" (Davidson 37).

The frustration here seems fueled by what Davidson might consider the absurdity of denying Equiano's claims to his natality given that he was so "visible" and imbricated in the abolition politics of the later 18th century in England. What she does not stop to consider are the various passages of thinking and theory that might follow from such a fib. As she proceeds, her essay lists a series of historical questions that Equiano's lie might inspire, questions about how he gets from one real event in his life to another, about his early life in South Carolina for example or his coming to be aboard certain ships, while her prose seems to scoff at the thought of Equiano's having performed any apparently ingenious manipulation of a reading public. That Equiano would lie is unthinkable not only because he was so well known, studied, heckled, and surveyed but because the idea that he would think to fabricate a past for himself for publicity or even simply his own privacy or fascination with Africa, is apparently ludicrous.

Davidson continues, a few pages later, to put an ever finer point on the essay's chagrin at the assumptions and arguments which allowing for Caretta's archival work to cast doubt on the legitimacy of Equiano's African past might make possible:

"But how could a well-known and controversial figure, writing an abolitionist memoir in a contentious and racialized world, claim he was born in Africa and grew up speaking Igbo if he wasn't and couldn't? It is simply too big a rabbit to pull out of the literary hat. And it seems especially unlikely given the cautious, ever-documenting, careful, and even paranoid (with good reason) narrator we see revealed throughout *The Interesting Narrative*- in the footnotes he appends when he borrows from other sources, in the documents he quotes or reproduces, in the various dates he gives and even corrects in subsequent editions. More to the point, the imputation that he would lie in his autobiography in order to have lucrative and proprietary victim-rights over the narration

of the Middle Passage before that was an established trope seems anachronistic, a reverse engineering of a literary genre” (Davidson 40).

Davidson concludes with the ultimate result of the possible fabrication of Equiano’s past: “If the two documents Caretta has found turn out to prove that Equiano was born in South Carolina, we are at the beginning of a mystery, not the end” (Davidson 42.) I agree with Davidson, but my curiosities move in the opposite direction: What is the quality of black writer who, perhaps being from South Carolina and not Africa, thinks that the fabrication of an African past is a plausible to say nothing of a more convincing trajectory for a slave narrative? What texts precisely would this writer have consulted as his source materials for information on the African continent and how would he have thought about their synthesis or recombination? Might he have known about these texts regardless or imagined a reader who, certainly English, would have been familiar with a different archive of “African” images? What literary precedents did this author have to formulate his African-ness and how did he go about assembling it? How does an awareness of the fact of Equiano’s narrative’s being sold and read in a specific moment for the figure of the black man effect its interpretation? What would it mean to assume Equiano participated in this figurative negotiation knowingly? And how do citations of these previous literary figurations of black persons manifest in his text? What is the literary genealogy of Equiano’s autobiographical protagonist? How is his lie, if it is a lie, connected to the 18th century practice of affording sociological or historical legitimacy to pseudo-ethnographic, fabricated works about Africa?

How would reading Equiano’s narrative with an eye towards this environment of possible intertexts, stretching back to some of the earliest writing done in the West on Africa, writing which served as the image for Africa in the West, transform the meaning or possible significance of the lie he may have told and adamantly defended? Most importantly, what does it mean for a foundational writer from the archive of enslavement, whose work has become a cornerstone in the field of African American literature, to have such a crucial portion of its representative narrative be questioned, and perhaps recast as a fabrication collaged of source materials not experiences? Especially in a contemporary expression of the field that grew up after it, built itself by staging a chain of intertextual collusions, not merely scholarly but often poetic, creative-critical, or as it has been termed more recently, “fabulative.” In short, what does blackness as a conceptual object have to do with the literary practice of lying, or really being thought to necessarily essay the telling of the truth *while obviously lying*—fabricating, fabulating, what have you, about life.

*

The average 18th century American was not waiting for Phillis Wheatley. Before Emily Dickinson was born, before she would have her speaker declare, “Publication is the auction of the soul,” Phillis Wheatley was purchased out of pity. Young and alone, a present made to a young lady of the family, Wheatley arrived with mischievous, cerebral poetry into the state of exception that defines her position as the ostensible originator of African American literature. One of her most famous and most elegant poems can stand as testament to this. I will approach the question of black poetics, citation, and the origins of blackness as a concept by spending time in its complexity:

Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand

That there's a God, that there's a *Saviour* too:
 Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
 Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
 "Their colour is a diabolic die."
 Remember, *Christians, Negros*, black as *Cain*,
 May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train. (13)⁸⁸

Wheatley's perhaps most famous poem is a lyric of deliverance and a reminder. Her speaker opens with a reference to divine mercy, whose impersonal agency has removed "me from my." Of course, Wheatley's speaker is more directly recounting a removal from her "Pagan land," but the way the line delays this revelation allows a reader to notice it was not simply the continent of Africa from which she was delivered but the property of ownership over it, or anything. Dispossession is thus here figured rhetorically in being brought not only from a place, but along with this geographical dispossession a perhaps more philosophical one, where the capacity to own ("my") has been brought away from the subjective standpoint ("me"), leaving it—the speaker—in the vacated position of a novice, ready to be taught. That "brought" is rhymed in the next line with "taught" gives the lie to the tension, perhaps the irony, that underpins the poem. Any reader, 18th century or contemporary, knows that this "mercy" is the speaker's recasting of a slaver, and "being brought" is often in fact being stolen, sold, or won. (Wheatley's book as a whole is prefaced by a document written by her master, John Wheatley, where he recounts this purchase with a glow of pride.) That "mercy" goes uncapitalized in the same line where pagan is given the dignity of a proper noun, suggests the corrosive double meaning in the speaker's statements. After all, the Greeks Wheatley would have encountered in her study of Latin and the Bible were a "pagan" people, whose historical "refinement" thru Roman occupation and Christian reformation is the cornerstone of Western literature, especially as it comes to be charted in the lyric poem, from the Psalter to the *Prelude*. Elsewhere in her *Poems on Various Subjects Religious and Moral* Wheatley signals her knowledge and indeed intimacy with the muses nine, with whom her speaker converses with the free authority of John Milton or Alexander Pope, poets she would have read and has even been accused of merely imitating. In the traditional apologia for Wheatley's capacity as a writer which her master pens to open the volume, he details the course of her study being sure to mention the fluency with which Wheatley moves between the classical and the Christian. A humble brag about his slave's blossoming grasp at Latin closes the letter. Wheatley's speaker, however, a perspective she constructs through her poetry, does not in this poem realize the confinement of the writer by assigning the agency of the bringer to her master. Selecting instead the word "mercy" as the subject of the verb, a word perhaps coincidentally beginning with the same consonant.

In several ways "On Being Brought from Africa to America" is a revision of the letter John Wheatley writes to Wheatley's publisher. It is hardly a coincidence that the first line of this letter reads: "Phillis was brought from *Africa* to *America* in 1761..." And it may well be the case that Mr. Wheatley was himself writing in homage to Wheatley's work, to a poem which might have caught his attention as he read the poems "Phillis" (and not properly a Ms. Wheatley) was penning in her off hours. However, as the two texts, the letter and the poem, reside in the same volume, and as this letter claims the authority of ownership over Wheatley's person, to say

⁸⁸ All Wheatley texts quoted from the Penguin Classic edition of her *Poems on Various Subjects Religious and Moral* (2001).

nothing of her pen or her mind, it seems just as well to assume Wheatley's capacity for irony and read back over this prefatory document in light of the poem.

In the letter, Mr. Wheatley can assert the lived and historical fact of his ownership of Wheatley, registering possession both in the 1770s and in the present. But in a similar way, to different effect, Wheatley's poem—traveling under the sigil of this endorsement into the field of contemporary literary study—can only now be afforded the potential for rebuttal. This signals a change in the critical characterization of Wheatley's poetry, allowing it the capacity for irony implies a sympathy to her task as an artist rarely extended to her. To perform a reading in this certain slant of light requires an assumption about Wheatley or about words in general, that they are able to be isolated from their intended historical contexts, especially when those contexts have shifted to such a degree that it becomes possible to think new things about a text's "original intent." Here of course it is clear that the letter is not a poem, yet it remains true that for the time in which the poetry was published, the letter would have a compelling effect on the legitimacy of the poetry. An effect which has all but waned, leaving the letter as a seemingly vestigial part of the book. And yet it is a part of the work of Wheatley's poetry collection, a spot of tarnish or a screen to the poetry that she would have been aware of and perhaps appalled by, since it reports on her as if she were a prized monstrosity. Said another way, if the letter names the poet as property—forces her historical person to be subjugated by the fact of having once been property, marking Wheatley both on the page and off it, the poem claps back by depersonalizing the poet, transforming her into a speaker built of pronouns and housed in clauses. By poetic means Wheatley liberates her speaker from the position of the "Phillis" John Wheatley owns into the field of the page, where such possession is no longer possible. It is this detachment, this movement towards abstraction, that fascinates this chapter.

My point is that a capacity to read Wheatley this way, to be able to conceive of doing so anyway, marks a shift in the approach to African American art over the past 100 years which is worth remarking, along the way to more speculative and syntactically interested readings of the poems themselves. This detour into Phillis Wheatley poses a question about one facet of the "injunction to truth" in African American art. It is intended to demonstrate that from the "beginning" of that tradition there are traces of the more ironic, abstracted relationship to blackness that has gained prominence and momentum in contemporary black study. Ironic in the sense that it projects a distance between blackness as a concept and black life as it is and has been lived by black people, without enforcing the separation of these two life worlds. It is a black study that has realized its rhetorical power, and simultaneously returned to a frustrated impasse with the wiles and whims of rhetoric, of merely discoursing, and what becomes of a thought in language—its inert institutionalizing in the dead letter.

Wheatley's speaker repopulates the land vacated in the first line of the poem with the sole possession which cannot be removed "my...soul", which possession is broken over the condition of that soul, "benighted." And again, Wheatley draws attention to the "brought" of the first line, not this time with a rhyme but consonance. The full rhyme that closes the second line weds property to knowledge, cementing the complex set in motion by being "brought...me from my"—"land" is rhymed with "understand." Wheatley's speaker betrays the condition of Wheatley's historical person with this opening couplet in two senses; she both informs the reader of her status as one dispossessed of land and custom, and reminds them that, this diaspora aside, she retains—even if darkened—a soul. A soul that, benighted though it may be, can still be taught after being brought (i.e. bought.) The poem thusly moves in two directions, following

Marx, reading the first time as tragedy the second as farce. Sincerity and irony emanate from the tensions in the utterance of the speaker taken at face value, and the syntax that is employed to convey that apparently clear message. A similar tension to the one that appears when John Wheatley employ's the language of the poem's title, muddling the borders of the poem's claim to independence while also seemingly asserting the poem as a an independent, perhaps even revisionist, creation.

Wheatley's speaker continues with the statements of her new land's understanding: "That there's a God, that there's a *Saviour* too," reproducing the parsing of godhead into a patriarchal succession from the nominal and abstract "God" to the active, and pronominal "*Saviour*." And again, her speaker divides her thought grammatically, both inserting a comma to weigh the two assertions of the line equally in the breath of the line, and again to end the line containing these twinned declarations not with an end stop (finality, surety) but with a colon, a doorway into a list and just as often a command, some sort of substantive solution. The solution is the beginning of a story: "Once I redemption neither sought nor knew." This story returns the speaker to her initial position, now accessible only through the telling of tales—the knowledge, a "mercy" of her new land, which intelligence transports her physically and spiritually beyond herself, has at the seam of the poem disappeared again. But the cost of this magic trick is the fabrication of retrospection. The true curse of diaspora rears its ugly head: the disappearance of the root, the homeland, the knowledge of your homeland, and the subjective position which it afforded, unmarked by race. A mark which the poem will brandish immediately, replicating the words used to describe the "sable race" from the phenotypical to the figurative: "color" begets "die" begets "Negro" and "black" before landing on the biblical allusion "Cain."⁸⁹

Along the course of this enumeration of the names for blackness—words that clog this small poem, until the penultimate line becomes essentially a list—Wheatley's speaker performs the same deracination which has been propagated against her on the object of "some." These "some" who look upon the "sable race" with "scornful eye" find themselves reduced from the metonymic yet not totally impersonal "some" to a single organ, an eye, which is noticeably not the "I" of lyric utterance. That Wheatley does not make "eye" plural, disallowing "some" to maintain the implication of a number of persons (or things!), performs a similar grammatical reduction, even a perhaps more dramatic one, than the "some who view" her and her race have performed by shoving them into the many square concepts of blackness. The collectivity of which people is maintained by the specificity without enumeration in the word "race"—i.e. a race is always of many. The passivity of the eye as organ, regardless of its scornful viewing, is also at play here. When the "view" of some eye is articulated by the next line it arrives as untagged speech, the speaker characterized by their ignorant, overzealous pronouncement: "Their colour is a diabolic die."

Wheatley, whose verse is attentive to metrical and syllabic consistency and patterning, shortens the number of words she allows this voice to utter by weighing the line down in a four syllable word, not coincidentally the word that damns "their colour" to become "die," diverting the aforementioned process of abstraction through progressively metaphorical naming of the "sable race" once again through an external agent, the "some" who speaker—now in this new land—again describing the speaker out of her own terms. The second half of the poem marks a reconceptualization of the properties of "my" from the first line, which were stolen from the

⁸⁹ A reference the poet makes to a point of biblical evidence used to justify the enslavement of Africans.

speaker, from “me,” by being brought from her “Pagan land.” This time the seizure is not performed by the invading, Christian “mercy,” which robs the speaker of everything but her soul (which it will also take, just in a different manner of speaking,) reconstructing Wheatley’s speaker—as the poet might have felt herself to be reconstructed upon becoming John Wheatley’s prized human article, or feeling the need to solicit some article of legitimization from him in order to have her work read and read seriously—by being spoken about, and more importantly described.

The poem turns again on one of Wheatley’s famous remonstrances—throughout *Poems on Various Subjects* her speaker seems to revel in its capacity to indite, to condescend, and ultimately in the great tradition of didactic poetry, to command obedience from its audience. The poem ends in a conscription of the reader into the position of he who must “Remember”! But who exactly or what is he meant to be remembering, if it is truly this reader who is called into remembrance? The line’s punctuation is ambiguating—if the line is not a command directed out of the poem it is either that Christians must be reminded that Negroes do something or that Negroes need be reminded that Christians can, and indeed it could be both. To take the lower hanging fruit first, it is likely the case that the line is intended to read as a remonstrance to Christians, reminding them that black folks are capable of salvation, are indeed included in a world by the tenants of Christianity itself that implies this wider purview of grace, and thus perhaps also citizenship or subjectivity (the pathways into moral subjugation which might be opposed to a slave’s more material subjection.)

But, to my ear, the line could also read the other way: as a reminder to Negroes that Christians, despite their terrible misdeeds and betrayals to the human community—quite like those of the jealous Cain—might be “refin’d,” and hence joined to the graceful and devoted black folks in their own “angelic train.” And of course, the line might be as I originally posed it, a command to the reader, perhaps imploring him to remember something more syntactically expressed than said outright. That is that all these words, these categories: “Christians, Negroes, black as Cain” can refer to any number of people, only some of whom are in “our sable race.” The ending of the poem’s ambiguous pronouncement seems to open the poem towards its widest possible audience. Addressing a race which is besmirched, rendered “sable,” both in its condition as (fallen) human, and by its implied exclusion of black people from the rest of humanity. To say nothing of the sympathetic eye it throws towards those “Negroes, black as Cain” whom the poem could and certainly is in service of. Regardless, the poem seems to suggest, that it is a falsehood in descriptions made by a group of “some” people, whose brainless singular eye views “our sable race” as “colour[ed]” by a “diabolic die,” that occasions the speaker’s reminder. The lists of names is therefore misapplied, or perhaps more broadly the poem suggests that the names, those marks which—like that of Cain—are ostensibly earned and permanent, will and must shift. Especially in a world governed by the Enlightenment logic of perfectibility. Wheatley’s speaker admits no exclusions from refinement. And similarly, the poem maintains, this inaccurately perceived dye-job, these names a viewer has assigned in their ungracious, myopic, singular spectating, along with the viewer himself, might be “refin’d” as well, allowing the formally biased viewer to join up with the object of his scorn in heavenly locomotion.

And yet the command form that opens the penultimate line may be aimed at the reader, who could ostensibly be either Christian or Negro (or both!), and who is certainly dyed by the unchristian acts of daily life, one of which the poem ensures is the denigration and dispossession performed in any reading of Wheatley’s poem. The transportation of the speaker who is

recollecting the poem occurs over and over again as the poem is re-read through time—in the name of mercy, God, or the *Saviour*. Wheatly's poem then is a meditation on the permeance of the dispossession of slavery, an early example of a black artist wrestling with the seemingly permanent state of having been brought. As Wheatley's career came to function, in the words of Henry Louis Gates, as the origin of African American literature, this poem might be made to stand as one of the first poetic renderings of the psychological and discursive effects of middle passage—an experience which deracinates totally, both from the earth and from language. It is not simply that the poem draws attention to the fickle nature of description, especially when these descriptions, like that of the interjecting speaker in the poem, are rendered by a person who sees the slave as a sort of household technology, if not an irredeemable blight. It sets in motion a history of references to Africa and the middle passage in American literature that will function by way of a simultaneous citation and negation of the "*Pagan* land[*'s*]" influence over the black artist working in America, where it looms as an ever-disappearing point of reference, something that lives in stories, worlds fabricated in language. At the same time, Wheatley's poem makes an index of terms for blackness, terms that were beginning to constellate into a premonition of the concept's errant flexibility.

Wheatley's seeming awareness, as projected through her speaker, of the coming waves of bad descriptions, and of the sheer weight of appearing black at all, comes through with even more clarity in her poem "To the Right Honorable Earl of Dartmouth." To end this section, and by way of introduction to the interpretative questions sparked by Equiano's "lie," careful attention will be given here to the poem mentioned above. The poem, before coming to an end, turns its attention from the Earl to the world:

No more, America, in mournful strain
Of wrongs, and grievance unredress'd complain,
No longer shalt thou dread the iron chain,
Which wanton Tyranny with lawless hand
Had made, and with it meant t' enslave the land. (40)

Wheatley's address to the not yet nation is an easy articulation of the freedom she inhabits on the page, freedom she apparently hopes to inhabit in life. A reader eager for revolutionary sentiments might enact a slip of the comma, reading an inversion to this imaginative act, the address of command folding over into the command proper that there might be "No more America". And while there are reasons to be skeptical of this emendation, the fact remains that those words do appear in this poem in that order making available to the eye what the ear might hear. Properly punctuated the line retains to it an address that is as speculative as it is suspicious. Wheatley will dine with the first president of these united states, without surviving to see the nation the revolution would foster. (she died just 16 months after the signing of the Treaty of Paris on September 3, 1783. Wheatley died the next December, 1784.) Regardless, at this point in the early 1770s to speak of an America that as yet is not—that is both here, on the page, and not yet in the world as a nation—is to risk deaths that would prevent its ever being in the first place. The death of the revolutionary come too early. This is the risk of revolutionary articulation. The line's end in a conflation of musical with physical work, the former productive, music to be heard, the other exhaustive, the taxing of strength, mirrors this productive-destructive tension. One that also requires a doubled sense the plays between the aural and physical. This tension is the tension of possibility, potentiality: of the nation not yet extant but expected. America *in potentia*. The song

of grievances sung into the ocean to no one that America must cease and begin to fight, or of a revolution that will fail to accomplish the redress of the wrongs these songs bespeak. The work this fight will entail of mourning to be done for lives lost in the struggle, and the work of this dying itself “in mournful strain / Of wrongs.”

In any case, and strangely given the medium of this message, it is time, according to the speaker, to stop all the talking, yield the simpler task of complaint in favor of facing that which it belies, the dread. Because the real content of the complaint is negative, a reaction to the biblical fear of un-freedom. Therefore, thou shalt no longer dread that “which wanton Tyranny with lawless hand / *Had made*”. Even the tyrannical creation of the Christian God is thankfully over. He rests that we might make. The same past making is true of the King, whose “wonton Tyranny” effected the colony in the first place. This double past signals the ending that is presaged in Wheatley’s call for the end of pointless articulation, what can already be denied out of happening across another comma, the enslavement of the fundement, the seat of capital accumulation for any new nation, the land, which enslavement this Tyranny “meant” to be accomplished but has yet to fulfill. The depersonalization Wheatley’s speaker carefully manipulates—where specific persons are lumped under Tyranny and the land is a metonym for the erstwhile Americans, figured as all in chains (some more literal than others)—is a tactical abstraction of the real human problem. Because those real Americans will yes have to kill to solve that problem, they must go to war to be free, but this speaker seemingly can’t say so. Why? What would it mean to have a slave call directly for the death of her master? The only thing this slave can put down are ideas. She is bound here on the page in the unfreedoms yet present in an aesthetic representation of her argument. But she would have them put down. As she does here and elsewhere Wheatley *executes*. As there is no escape for her in life that she would take without permission there is no escape from her on the page.⁹⁰

And now that she’s got both a reader’s and specifically the Earl’s attention, and she has had her words with the nation, her speaker would like to say a few things about herself, “my lord”, speaking of slavery:

Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song,
Wonder from whence my love of Freedom sprung,
Whence flow these wishes for the common good,
By feeling hearts alone best understood,
I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat:
What pangs excruciating must molest,
What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?
Steel'd was that soul and by no misery mov'd
That from a father seiz'd his babe below'd:
Such, such my case. And can I then but pray
Others may never feel tyrannic sway? (40)

What’s horrible to realize is Wheatley’s speaker doesn’t even expect its audience to read this. On a whim “should you, my lord...peruse” you might begin to “wonder.” Another doubling down, a

⁹⁰ Recall that by the time Wheatley makes her way to England to sue for the publication of her book, she is free as soon as she sets foot on the isle. Free if she wants to be. But she chooses against this. I am fascinated by this choice.

chance interest in the poem chancing an interest in the speaker. But Wheatley's speaker is not so demure, or, how does one "peruse" a "song"? The clash in this unable-to-be-literalized encounter, aside perhaps from the reading of sheet music, indexes another line like the above that doubles back into paradox. Wheatley's speaker is toying with the reader's attention, specifically with their senses. Like the songs of America mentioned above, the speaker's song though, perhaps equally in uselessness, continues to be sung. It is, whether aural or written, available to perusal at any time should you, "my lord", decide even to glance over it for a second. It is solid, happened, extant, eternal. And so, at any time this song might beget this wonder. The begetting of this wonder apparent too in the development across these first two lines of the speaker's possessive sealed in a slant rhyme suggestive of the past tense action of singing, that which has been sung: "my lord...my song / ...my love of Freedom sprung." Another address, this "my lord" mirroring "America", that invites the reader in, occasions a transformation across a repetition, and moves the speaker's deference to the master over into her defiance thereof. For what else is a slave's love of freedom to anyone she would be addressing as "my lord"? The reader might recall that the writer producing this speaker has, in fact, at this point met a few lords in title, not merely politesse. To say nothing of dining with a man who would become the first president of the United States. And further, what will the speaker's love of freedom be in the "America" to come?

This poem is written as a performance of proof of its own possibility before this particular lord's emissary, sent to him attached to a letter with an attestation of the veracity of this performance. What it indexes in the terms of this dissertation is an early moment of an aesthetic object that contains both a representation of a violent encounter: that "snatching" and "seizing" which stands in, however politely, for the slave trade that is doubled by the galling injunction to proof that creates the poem, a theft of a different kind of offspring. And a claim about the fungibility of sentiment between Wheatley's speaker and her reader, which presumes some similarity in the grounds of that feeling. What this ability to be exchanged, though perhaps not equally, implies is an ontological claim. Put simply, that being in the same position that Wheatley's speaker is in, would make that other being—the reader, the white man, anyone—respondent in the same way. The key to this comes when that seemingly sentimental "feeling heart" is ensured that, upon being made to witness again the violence done against the speaker, it will perform an act of consciousness: "under[standing]." So, while it is true that the lesson of the imaginative act of changing places with Wheatley's speaker moves first at the level of feeling, within the same line that feeling touches the mind. The circuit adduced by the poem is that pathway—mind to mind.

It is, in this way, a poem that enacts recognition in the strongest Hegelian sense—where sense always proceeds understanding to consciousness. The encounter that the archive gives as context to this poem's creation then, the meeting of slave poet with white emissary, and the encounter the poem stages, between slave poet and Earl, double and triple this scene of recognition, occasioning the careful analysis of representativeness this chapter wants to perform. How can we discuss this poem in a way that faithfully attends to the complexity here adduced? How does this particularly fraught coincidence of black life and art production help us to understand their connection more generally? Is it possible to be "recognized" (particular) and "representative" (general) at the same time?

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I have argued, following several contemporary scholars, that it is nearly a trope in the field of African American literature and art production more widely that a work need trade on some authentic tie to blackness—a verifiable origin story, one that places the maker at a known or novel site of black life (in the hood, on the plantation, in the inner city, in the deep south, on an island, in a train car—real or imagined—heading north or, more recently, west.) This injunction to traceable pasts, specifically those that lead back through slavery to Africa, is a direct result of much writing and thinking across the last 200 or so years. Since the first registered traces of black writing entered the wider world of the Anglophone academy—through the work of one Phillis Wheatley, according to Henry Louis Gates, jr., where it is not Jupiter or Britton Hammon (no relation) or Lucy Terry (see Dickinson D. Bruce)—the vision of the black artist as one who is taken, “young in life, by seeming cruel fate /... snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat” has guided the critical understanding of the parameters of a properly black art work. It must be a, or simply is, in some ultimate or fundamental way, a reflection of or on “stolen life,” to borrow a phrase from Fred Moten.

However, it occurs to me that there exists a strain of the more recent work done in the field of black studies, especially where this field overlaps with something like critical theory or literary study even specifically, that is dominated by attempts, in varying registers and to various ends, to untether blackness from this point of origin or, indeed, any particular point or discernible aspect at all—aside perhaps from the theorization thereof. In the recent work of Frank B. Wilderson III, blackness expands to its largest scale of abstraction yet, seeming to coat the world or make a foundation for it, as a total alien and disconnected force of almost exclusively negative potential (i.e. it makes the world as it's negative, or the world makes itself as the negative to it.) And on the side of a less resolved, more perhaps “fugitive” theorization of blackness, in the work of folks like Saidiya Hartman and Fred Moten, two thinkers who don't truly make comfortable opposites to Wilderson, as they seem to be playing in an entirely other field or register of discourse, there is a more positive formulation that turns blackness into, at bottom, an expressive idiom of continually emergent, active and positive creation. One whose past lives invite, in the case of Hartman, the probing reparations of fabulative criticism, a criticism that works by imagining a world otherwise to the loss and emptiness of the archive.

In a short piece in The Racial Imaginary Institute's publication, *On Whiteness*, Hartman extends this fabulous method of poetic and psychological scholarly narration to a scene from Walker Evans and James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1936). Her revision and expansion of Agee's section “Near Dark” begins with the title, which she emends to “Near a Church at Dusk”—imposing already a different darkness onto the scene which presages the unknowable yet utterly familiar psychic space Hartman is about to adduce. Working along the sympathetic (if not sentimental) chord that Agee strings between himself and a couple of negroes walking along the road at dusk, Hartman traverses Agee's connection into an elaboration of the interiority of one of the scene's characters, a woman who James Agee tells the reader he frightens. Hartman uses some of Agee's language to populate her expansion, twisting the scene through its own phrases not totally to the point of reversal, i.e. a scene from the woman's perspective, but something closer to the perspective of a limited omniscient narrator. The method of analysis which this short piece, and parts Hartman's larger book *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, performs works from within, through, and in reference to the language of Agee's text. It is a method of citation and poetic retooling that is reminiscent of M. NourbeSe Philips landmark *Zong!* (2008). Save that here, the license of poetical revision is not invoked, is in fact rendered unnecessary.

Hartman's appropriation of Agee's language and narration to shift or answer the psychological register that Agee himself had narrated on his own part and assumed on the part of the couple is an example of the kind of citational poetics that fascinates me in contemporary black writing. It is a reinhabiting of a scene or perspective from the past, formulated and transmitted to the present through language that, employing her specific method of historical narration—what has been called by her and others “critical fabulation”—allows her to renegotiate the terms of the woman's fear. Her method is an almost audacious experiment in the historiographical tool of anachronism. Hartman fills in the terrified blanks Agee cannot but observe in the people he is accosting. She describes the couple's position in the terms of contemporary theory as she extends or offers those terms to the couple themselves, a black people without such language, trapped in the prism of a past which a white writer has cast them. Assigning them, or the scene, or both new theoretical (and, arguably historical) significance. Hartman opens her rebuttal to a direct quote from Agee: “This chance encounter is structured by the color line,” citing Du Bois quietly before expanding Agee's language into a description of the matrix of significant affect apparently latent therein. She writes, (re)describing the racially encoded and thus inexorably fraught sympathetic connection between Agee and his interlocutors, and perhaps also her own relation to Agee's text:

“[Their] intertwining, [their] intersubjective union is not belabored but assumed, we might even say taken for granted, less because of what he can imagine than for what she enables. She is available in the flesh; she is the threshold, the portal, the platform, the point of passage between worlds. She is not one in the way he is one, one man. Dispossession has opened her to the world” (153).

With another subtle citation, Spillers' argument from above finds a repetition. Where above I cited her description of the layers of attenuated meaning that she, Hortense Spillers at the podium, must strip down through in order to speak as herself, so too upon softly citing Spillers does Hartman reassign a set of significant descriptors to the ostensible person on the other side of Agee's text. And being as this “person” is really nothing more than a collection of words herself, an archival blur in the background of a white man's anecdote, these descriptions seemingly rebound, returning to the reader in the present as a new series of descriptors mean to reconfigure the way he thinks about blackness here and now. That this language could also describe Hartman's own position as the intercessor between Agee and the woman on the road, which itself can only occur out of time, gives the availability of the “she” of this passage an ominous tenor. Hartman the scholar, which is also to say Hartman the concept, Hartman the written idea, the method, makes also a passage between two worlds—ours and that of Agee's interlocutor—and she too then is threshold, portal, and platform. The objectification of the self which is writing, making one's mind over into books, into ideas, into thoughts as things, to say nothing of the way Hartman here gives her own voice and language over to Agee, allowing him to speak through her again, to describe this couple again, so as to redescribe them with the better appellations of the present, gives this small piece of Hartman's work an incredible weight. It makes an object lesson in the new poetic grammar of black study, a syntax which this dissertation approaches with fascination.

In Moten's case, the new grammar for black scholarly activity at all which seems to be his underlying project, is one that is—however it comes to its own expression—entirely practical and ends orientated (as long as that “end” is really the opening onto another arena or score for

improvisation, further becoming, clearer articulation.) It is distinct from Hartman in that it does not reapproach archival flickers of black life to reinspire them with the critical possibilities of the present, but it renegotiates the language surrounding blackness on a different terrain, that of the philosophical. Here is Moten quoted at length laying out the relation between his project and the project of Kantian critical philosophy. Notice how the speculative questions that close his comparisons, those “What ifs...”, reach into the grammar of Enlightenment discourse and renegotiate the present of the concept of “critique” by ceding “blackness” to the conceptual whim of Kantian philosophy, setting his system against “the ones”, “they” with “their utterances.” A factual historical otherness turned over into a concept of “the Other,” borne back into the present by the race for theory:

The regulative discourse on the aesthetic that animates Kant’s critical philosophy is inseparable from the question of race as a mode of conceptualizing and regulating human diversity, grounding and justifying in equality and exploitation, as well as marking the limits of human knowledge through the codification of quasi- transcendental philosophical method, which is Kant’s acknowledged aim in the critical philosophy. Similarly, **the racial and racist conceptualization and, therefore, regulation of blackness is inseparable from its naming, so that the precritical impulse to categorize and catalog supposedly natural facts, above which critical philosophy would rise, or over which it would conceptually leap in its use of teleological principle, casts a sleepy and dogmatic shadow over that which newly awakened criticality is supposed to illuminate.** *What if* the ones who are so ugly that their utterances must be stupid are never far from Kant’s mature and critical thoughts? *What if* they, or something they are said and made to bear alone, are the fantastical generation of those thoughts? *It is as if* the exclusive property they are and have is the generative facticity that constitutes and solicits fact and grasp, having and being. (Moten, “Knowledge of Freedom,” 2, all emphasis mine).

Fred Moten takes his time in “Knowledge of Freedom” building a case that is already present in fullness at the opening of his essay: “Nonsense is fugitive presence” (1). A pause over this phrase in a return to it opens my argument about the relationship between black (literary) studies’ new critical turn and the origins of the black radical tradition in antebellum autobiography as it is Moten’s essay that synthesizes much of the critical and cultural archive I am interested in analyzing, including and centrally the main text of this chapter. “Nonsense”, in Moten’s argument, takes on the rich sense of a deconstructed concept—holding at once the literary definition (as that which defies the order of things), and it’s sonically available if not literally associated meanings, meanings that accrue across the essay’s “...present experiment in distorted articulation universality and particularity, totality and difference—” and experiment with a Derrida influenced prosaic style (similar to the speaker of Moten poetry) “which attempts, by way of a neurotic oscillation as a method of truth, critically to extend, to tend, to end, the relation between the black radical tradition and enlightenment...” (58). To elaborate on this relation, “to extend” it, Moten cites heavily from Equiano’s narrative, performing one of the richest engagements with the philosophical content/context of Equiano’s narrative to date. An insightful treatment that rivals the treatment of the same text by Hortense Spillers, whom Moten cites several times, or those Harriet Jacobs by Saidiya Hartman, of Phillis Wheatley by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. or Frederick Douglass by Paul Gilroy. Each of them uses the slave’s narrative or poetry

to ground arguments about (or at least essentially aimed at) the description of black being, a practice of close reading that produces claims about ontology.

I am interested here in several things which the proceeding case, and those that follow this one, will engage. The first is the simplest: the use of a slave narrative as evidence to an ontological claim, especially one like Moten's which is demonstratively aimed at the present. Reed, describing his work, adduces evidence to the ahistorical or presentist mood of Moten's theorizations:

Ironing out historical differences, his work leaves the impression that Black aesthetics develop according to an atemporal logic that allows discrete moments—a representation of Aunt Hester in Frederick Douglass' 1845 Narrative and Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* (1997) and a Marvin Gaye recording from 1976—to appear both simultaneous with one another and unmediated. (Reed, "The Black Situation," 288)

I would not go as far as Reed does here to claim that Moten's use of examples from across history is "unmediated," nor do I understand it as a "ironing out of historical differences." Though this position seems just as likely true. What I see in Moten's work is something like the eternal present of the elaboration of blackness—a present that is characterized by constantly and consistently insisting on the truth or authenticity of the writing/writer (who is typically black) at work in the prose. Take for example, this passage from "Knowledge of Freedom," the essay under consideration here for its account of Equiano:

"It is usually around three o'clock in the morning when one comes to realize that fact(icity), reflection, and phenomenality are all bound up with one another; that the capacity to overturn is not given in nothingness but in animated thingliness, to which blackness corresponds; that what is at stake in that correspondence is a matter of (is the *materiality* of) relation— between things and thingliness, blacks and blackness— and study, determined by the protocols of improvisation and review, invention and inventory. The anticipation of what one is tempted to call either or both Deleuzean and Derridean protocols, operating at the animative intersections of minority and exhaustion, deferral and distancing, is brilliantly illuminated in Nahum Dimitri Chandler's steady insistence..." (Moten, "Knowledge of Freedom," 11).⁹¹

Here Moten makes a strange autobiographical turn, a turn towards the reader and into a particular time and place—he gives his critical voice a temporal marker. "It is usually around three o'clock in the morning..." suggests that time was or perhaps even is passing for the critical position from which Moten writes. His writing is given a night in which to wake or drink itself into realization, and that realization is the embodiment of blackness—its need for or strict confinement within an "animated thingliness" which correspondence to matter gives it the necessary material to "overturn." A revaluation in relation—proposed here as a relation between "fact(icity), reflection,

⁹¹ I have retained Moten's citation of Chandler in his essay at least partially about Equiano in this chapter about the poetics of citation which seems to emerge from Equiano's text, which can be unearthed using Chandler's particular brand of close analysis upon that text in relation to Moten's ideas about the consequences of Equiano's fib to leave showing the threads of intertextuality that produce the field of black study. Not just citations of scholastic materials written and published by one another, but the invocation of the critical personalities and methods of these other scholars whose addendums to the theory and practice of actually existing blackness are called upon equally. Said another way, Chandler's "steady insistence" is both method and mode of being for blackness's elaboration.

and phenomenality,” “between things and thingliness, blacks and blackness” which here requires the realization of the body’s, of life’s, enmeshing with the theorization of blackness.

The special responsibility then, for the critic of blackness or black art, becomes the negotiation of the fact that blackness was at work in the world before the theorization of blackness. But that accounting for exactly how and to what effect this can be, with the full knowledge that the freedom to do so is implicated in the production of just such a position as blackness, imbricates the writer too—his realizations and his sleeplessness—into the text of such an analysis. And finally, that one method for doing this is the deployment of such an intimately human scene, the midnight realization, the body awake in the dark, drenched in the dawn of thought, a thought of the persistence of the body to one’s own thinking. Etc. Moten summarizes what becomes of blackness in his account on the next page:

What remains there [in what Moten via Chandler dubs “the Du Boisian field of paraontological difference”] to be discovered and inhabited, serially and in the insistence of its previousness as an anarchic fact underground, is blackness, which, rather than the hole that negatively bodies forth corrosive force, is continually reconceived as a binding and universal general disturbance—the differential (w)hole at the bottom of (not just the African’s) being. (12)⁹²

What Moten’s definition here says, which Reed gingerly rebuffs, about how black scholars are developing a conception of history, or a practice of historiography, that functions on a distinct conception of temporality is also at issue here. If blackness does have the anoriginal livelihood that Moten assigns it above, then it becomes even more possible to turn, as this chapter does, back into the archive of antebellum writing to discover theories or conceptualizations of blackness that remain relevant and perhaps even slightly revise, the current conceptions of blackness. These two ends of the apparently teleological history would then be bent together, or really relocated into ambit of thought in which it was possible that they addressed an identical, and thus unmediated, object—that is blackness as concept, as concept lived or living which is *at the same time* made of writing or written.

I will revisit this claim below when considering Friedrich Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887) but consider, as a quick example, the temporality implied by Christina Sharpe’s “wake work” —wherein the all-time of black being shifts and floats behind the prow of that being’s present expression, almost to haunting. For Sharpe, time’s endless periodic development turns of traumatic revisiting and revision, redaction, and revelation. It is not teleological, in the sense Moten will critique in Kant and through him the wider Western project of Enlightenment. The wake is flat, triangular, expansive—more like a ray of light than a laser, it is imprecise, messy, and complex. Michel Foucault, who describes foundations for the method for conceiving time Sharpe develops as wake work in his essay on “Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History”, calls it “gray” yet “meticulous”—this is the work of genealogy. Here is Moten again to articulate his major concern in “Knowledge of Freedom,” a question which is also the ultimate concern of this dissertation:

I am concerned with the extent to which it could be said that the black radical tradition, on the one hand, reproduces the political and philosophical paradoxes of Kantian regulation and, on the other hand, constitutes a resistance that anticipates and makes

⁹² Again, note the chain of citations—Du Bois to Chandler to Moten.

possible Kantian regulation by way of the instrumentalization to which such resistance is submitted and which it refuses. A further elaboration of those material figures is demanded such that we understand the strife that ensues in the space between two fantasies— the black (woman) as regulative instrument and the black (woman) as natural agent of deregulation— as a turmoil foundational to the modern aesthetic, political, and philosophical fields. (3-4)

An analysis of the use of autobiography to cut across the “aesthetic, political, and philosophical fields” is what is called for here as “A further elaboration of those material figures.” The autobiography is a material figure, word made flesh, or really, flesh made world. Moten elaborates, with direct reference to Equiano and the debates surrounding his natality:

That Equiano’s claims regarding his birth and early childhood are falsehoods easily detected is, of course, far from easily established, as Caretta’s meticulous research shows. It is, at the same time, equally difficult to establish their veracity despite the string of letters from gentlemen of good standing who vouch for Equiano both before and after the 1792 attacks on his character. What remains, however, is the possibility of a more thorough consideration and inhabitation of the distance between the “man of plain understanding” and the abolitionist “cause” that the *Oracle* is emboldened to dismiss. **That Equiano is not such a man, that he is an other such man, or such that is other than man, and that his is a writing that emerges from something profoundly other than a plain understanding, must be interarticulate with his allegiance to such a cause and this gives us reason to investigate the necessity of the relationship between the imagination in its lawless freedom— more particularly, the imagination’s fugitive comportment toward names and local habitations— and the drive or cause (for freedom) that animates Equiano’s text even as that text makes its adamant and contradictory claims to divergent national appellations and the very abstract equivalence that he would deploy to bridge the gap between them.** (Moten, *Knowledge of Freedom*, 54)

Here again the rhetoric surrounding blackness as concept and the actual historical person, between writing and the position of the writer, are severed. What Moten observes is the conundrum of black writing as a product of black imagination allowed free reign and black writing as driven by, produced as an extension of, and ultimately reducible to, the cause of abolition, of freedom—both from the system of chattel slavery but also more broadly construed, as the freedom from or perhaps the freedom to life lived (black.) A position of free writing, of writing without the subject, without the self, black or otherwise, that is yet questioned after in the writing and theory of Moten and his contemporaries.

What fascinates me in this current situation, where discursive or lived position free of blackness is not yet extant, between Hartman and Wilderson especially, is the employment of a method that retains what Equiano is forced to assume: the position of the critic as text, what I have generally termed the autobiographical mode, as their chosen tool for analysis. Across both their careers, these thinkers have moved further and further along the spectrum of critically novel writing towards a method of theoretical narration that is contingent upon some form of autobiographical representation. From Hartman’s early work on Harriet Jacobs’s autobiography (and the attendant theories of the subject which arose alongside it) and Wilderson’s expanding

autobiographical project—which spans *Incognegro: A Memoir of Exile and Apartheid* (2007) and the more recent *Afropessimism* (2020), and back again to Hartman’s divergence from herself, from *Lose Your Mother* (2006) to *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (2019). These most recent works, of Wilderson and Hartman, for my purposes demonstrate two larger tendencies in the writing on black life and art that is coming from the more “literary critical” corner of the academy. Namely, a move closer to the idiosyncrasies of autobiography (for Wilderson) and a pulling away from the necessity of verifiable truth as the basis of literary/historical analysis (this now a reference to Hartman.) For the present engagement, I want to hold on to an observation of this distinction in the present of black study, while looking back on the debate over Equiano’s natality and his own literary contexts. The purpose being to query the origins of the relation between a factual and a fabulative mode of perhaps more accurately termed “auto theoretical” writing on blackness, or at least to locate one possible point of early expression for this relation. Equiano’s lie, his perhaps knowing obfuscation and subsequent fabrication of his origin story, and the problem this potential fib imparts to his narrative’s reception history, makes one particular angle at which to approach the larger questions which underlie the rift in method between Wilderson and Hartman. What does it mean to tether blackness, and the theorization thereof, to truth-telling or facticity? And what happens to blackness, to a concept or a zone of subjective expression, when it is no longer required to be representative—of truth, of self, of actual black people, or anything.

*

This chapter will now proceed by asking again that deceptively simple question: What does it mean for Olaudah Equiano to lie about his natality? And as it does this it will also attempt to ask a question which generalizes this first, a more scholastic question which undergirds this chapters opening sections through the writing of Fred Moten and Alexis Pauline Gumbs: What does it mean to detach blackness from any claim to representative truth? Or, said another way, what does Equiano’s perhaps lying about being “truly” African *do* to the world of representation that huddles around blackness, a field of description that brings blackness into history? Gumbs says it like this, citing Sylvia Wynter:

Wynter says we are not *Homo sapiens*, we are *Homo narrans*, **not the ones who know, but the ones who tell ourselves that we know.** She says we therefore have the capacity to know differently. **We are word made flesh. But we make words. So we can make ourselves anew.** Inspired by Wynter, I conducted an experiment on the scale of one life connected to all other lives, on the scale of three hundred individual mornings connected to every dawn of existence. I made myself a dare. **What if I go to my own veins, the origin stories that I think precede me, what if I go there and say that all the blood that ever spilled can now become paint. What then? And by then I mean now.** (*Dub: Finding Ceremony*, xi)

The question Gumbs lands in, “...what if I go [to my veins] and say that all the blood that ever spilled can now be paint[?]” is the clearest articulation of the provocation I wish to continue probing. What happens if the past, now in Hortense Spillers’s phrase, became “usable.” A past as an object of use, as a point of reference that is not bound to fact or horror, but to its potential usefulness to living in the present. What if thinking about the historical past that built and maimed blackness, in Nietzsche’s coinage, was allowed to take another turn toward the critical?

And more specifically, what if writing about the enslaved, writing about especially the writings of the enslaved, became, as Barbara Christian asks, writing meant and used to “save [our] own life” instead of merely to document its degeneration, opacity, or intergenerational traumatic milieu?

To snatch back from the maw of accuracy and direct reference, from the parade of eviscerated bodies and police actions, a sense of the ironic in the archive’s representations of black life, or rather, to broach the question is there anything ironic about or in them? Their claims to validity as points of reference for actual life already essentially only metaphorical, in the field of literary study, because they are here taken first and foremost as literature. What if we trusted the slave to be ironic, to manipulate the instruments of a Casandra-like ironic discretion in their artistic displacements of their lives into texts that they might finally escape themselves into life or, at the very least, to being thought of as having lives more important, more rich, and more relevant to them than whatever quantity of it they were forced to turn over into the hands of their bloodthirsty masters, abolitionist or not? In this light, in a present which was erased them except as texts, their narratives might become instrumental not as propaganda for the feeling-sensing subject position of black people in general or be thought of as principally motivated by a desire to dismantle institutions of power, although they are certainly also this, but as works of art whose radical potential to propose new forms of engagement with or thought about blackness might be better sought in an analysis of the formal and stylistic aspects of their texts, aspects which propose methods for writing blackness that the present condition of black studies has expanded and elaborated mightily, but has not departed from entirely. Christian writes: “Black people have always theorized,” I contend that slaves then were theorists too.

These last are large questions built out of relatively humble archives, and they are meant to be largely suggestive to further study. So my goal for the ends of this chapter are more humble: to approach again, and from the perspective of the above concerns, the questions Davidson posed in the debate around Olaudah Equiano’s origin story in his *Interesting Narrative in the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or, Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789)—a debate that has drawn lots of attention and generated virulent discussion both in person and in print in the past—and to hazard a frame of references and citations lingering beside Equiano’s text, to offer it a bit of creative freedom in the form widened intertextual allusions. Along the way, this chapter will draw attention to a few choice moments in the text that have gone un- or under remarked in this scholarship. Episodes in the text like the infamous passages about Equiano’s passionate desire to assimilate to Englishness (and his claim that Englishmen are a superior race) and the less well-remarked moment in the narrative when Equiano beats another black man, a slave, so brutally that his master seeks retribution in court. Careful attention to these moments, alongside the “falsehood” that is attested to by a growing list of significant white folks over the nine editions of Equiano’s text, and the collateral damage of this little lie (i.e. Equiano’s sister, and his account of slavery in African society), will culminate with tentative answers to the questions above.

Section 4: A “True” History—Equiano, or another origin for “the African”

“One day you’d think misfortune would get tired, but then time is your misfortune Father said. A gull on an invisible wire attached through space dragged. You carry the symbol of your frustration into eternity. Then the wings are bigger Father said only who can play the harp.”

William Faulkner, *The Sound and The Fury*

“For, in reality, Relation is not an absolute toward which every work would strive but a totality—even if for us this means disentangling it, something it never required—that through its poetic and practical and unceasing force attempts to be perfected, to be spoken, simply, that is, to be complete.”

Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*

“some mourn / the dead we / the facts”

M. NourbeSe Phillips, *Zong!*

In the last section, I outlined how Phillis Wheatley’s poetry details and abstracts a position through poetry that is marked by or particularly interested in describing blackness. This consideration was meant to evidence a claim that, from its outset, the writing of the enslaved instated this mode of evidencing the subjectivity of black persons, and that the autobiographical method which is used to convey these philosophical propositions is now a primary mode of black philosophizing. Black autobiography then as a historical category makes a theoretical claim about the foundations of black life as a concept. The writings of the enslaved come to form then the dreams of undisciplined scholarly engagement that black studies as a contemporary formation attempt to realize. To begin again, here’s Equiano:

It was now between two and three years since I first came to England, a great part of which I had spent at sea; so that I became inured to that service, and began to consider myself as happily situated; for my master treated me always extremely well; and my attachment and gratitude to him were very great. From the various scenes I had beheld on shipboard, I soon grew a stranger to terror of every kind, and was, in that respect at least, almost an Englishman. I have often reflected with surprise that I never felt half the alarm at any of the numerous dangers I have been in, that I was filled with at the first sight of the Europeans, and at every act of theirs, even the most trifling, when I first came among them, and for some time afterwards. That fear, however, which was the effect of my ignorance, wore away as I began to know them. I could now speak English tolerably well, and I perfectly understood everything that was said. I now not only felt myself quite easy with these new countrymen, but relished their society and manners. **I no longer looked upon them as spirits, but as men superior to us; and therefore I had the stronger desire to resemble them; to imbibe their spirit, and imitate their manners; I therefore embraced every occasion of improvement; and every new thing that I observed I treasured up in my memory.** I had long wished to be able to read and write; and for this purpose I took every opportunity to gain instruction, but had made as yet very little progress. However, when I went to London with my master, I had soon an opportunity of improving myself, which I gladly embraced. Shortly after my arrival, he sent me to wait upon the Miss Guerins, who had treated me with much kindness when I was there before; and they sent me to school. (Equiano, 56)

The opening to the fourth chapter of Olaudah Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* is appalling in the literal sense. It is a description of the narrator’s new relation to Englishmen, an orientation characterized by an admiration of the English superiority and a strong desire to “resemble”, “imbibe”, “imitate” and “embrace” them and their ways. This becoming English, itself described in terms of “improvement”, “treasure”, and “gain”, is enmeshed with a becoming literate, an extending of the narrator’s limited knowledge of a spoken language to a knowledge of

the written. Another way to encounter this passage then is to think about it as an account of the narrator's illiteracy. The coincidence of the narrator's illiteracy and his desire for Englishness is, I want to argue, anything but a chance encounter. To begin an investigation of this is to draw attention toward another trope which is on display in this passage—the slave's education. Learning to read is an almost universal component of the enslaved's narrative. Here that education is recast in the guise of acculturation. And thus, the question becomes acculturated into what exactly?

If it is safe to assume that no desire for a somehow phenotypical transformation is called for here, there is yet the lingering question of what it would mean—given Equiano's status as an "African" abolitionist figure—to seek acculturation into English society so publicly. Especially given the fact that it will largely be on his honor as a gentleman that subscribers append their names to the ever-elongating list of men who believe that Equiano's claims about his past are true. As stated above, the interest that I maintain in the question of Equiano's natality is largely about what the question itself implies about the way black people are thought about in anglophone (literary) contexts. Especially where those contexts pre-exist a modern conception of blackness, a conceptualization that associated being black with certain national and structural positions, certain forms of exposure and expectation that while likely at work in Equiano's context, where up to him to narrate and explain. What are the stakes of Equiano's repeated assertion of his African-ness, especially to the 21st century. Why does arguing over the legitimacy of a late-18th century abolitionist's claims to being African matter, and more importantly what is the kind of rhetorical field or environment in which such a question inspires essays that feel the need to protect and reestablish the truth of Equiano's claim? Why does Equiano's natality merit more attention than his narrative, and what does it say about the history of black writing that arguments about the truthfulness of their authors take precedent over arguments about the rare beauty of their composition? This passage fascinates then not only for the strangeness of the desire it espouses to contemporary ears, but for the shifting sense of identity it assumes so early in the history of black writing. Equiano describes filling his mind with his observations of England, crowding out his spirit with the spirit of an Englishman, and compares "us" unfavorably to his newfound countrymen. And naturally this desire for cultural transformation is coupled with a desire for literary, and most importantly the desire to be a writer.

Comparisons, citations, and an equation between literacy and legitimacy—I read in Equiano's desires here the knowledge of how producing a past for yourself in writing allows a certain latitude for actual life in the present. This is not an argument about whether or not the above desire is "real" or whether it contradicts or reinforces Equiano's African past, but about how Equiano appears aware that by making a transition into English letters, he has also increased his proximity to English morals. Here he weds the acquisition of the medium of his crafting, writing and speechifying, with the assimilation into the culture in which that craft has significance for life, even the capacity to change it. Equiano's capacity for advocacy is concomitant with his proximity to Englishness, and by virtue of this, to whiteness. But he is careful to wed that transcultural identification with a technique for the invention and reinvention of the self—that is, literacy, the capacity to read, and ultimately the capacity to cite texts as evidence to the legitimacy of one's cultivation beyond the concept that had previously bound him. It is no wonder that "fearlessness" is also bound up in this desire for self-definition through literacy. Fear, according to Equiano, is a product of ignorance, just as stable identity is a product of the oversimple methods for identification. To become other one must first recognize otherness

as non-threatening, and to learn this one needs proximity, lived experiences as well as the records thereof. And indemnity, here an “English” one then is constructed out of both that which, in life, makes one fearless—having done things one was afraid of—and having learned to read and communicate the capacity to survive those life-threatening, or at least fearfully so, situations. The abolition of the silence from the African slave that is helping the perpetuate slavery, by giving white people the grounds on which to claim a dumbness on the part of the entire population, which translate just as often to a sense of the slave as unfeeling or less feeling flesh, is undone through one’s capacity to ape the expressive medium of legitimate presence—writing, and ultimately history, here the history of the self. The Self bound up in, speaking through, and ultimately making history.

Writing for the enslaved was a production of evidence aimed toward the undoing of the conditions of enslavement—conditions not themselves wholly physical, but equally or at least substantially, discursive; conditions produced and maintained by language and concepts. Equiano published his book through intimate contact with royalty (the Countess of Huntington was, as for Phillis Wheatley before him, a crucial contact on his way to publication), he assimilated into British society, as this retrospection shows, by speaking and writing, by becoming first able to read, then reading. His deidentification with the essential staying power of blackness, its indelible marking of the flesh, is one with his realization of the method of historical reevaluation, their production and stewardship of an archive of existence which moved beyond the literal into the literary. His copying not only from ship narratives telling mythical stories of the article and of a single method to his use of the British sources on Africa to produce his autofiction, or what could be even stranger, to produce the feeling thereof which is always conjured by the writing of early life. Equiano crowds his memories with figurations of social organization and kinship. Showing his reader the queer passiveness of the master who sleeps between two embracing sibling slaves, to his revelations of the Christ and accounts of prophetic vision. He is an 18th century author in the truest sense, in that he borrows ruthlessly and without direct citation (although often with copious notes), melding a coherent, historically grounded, and unalterably “true” narrative out of the archive of assailable literature, alongside his life. His narrative preforms an act of original research, a sort of dissertation through practice of the many genres of 18th century prose—religious and warlike. And of course he does this for a cause. But as to what that cause exactly is, especially to modern readers, one might assume murky given his admissions to a passionate desire to be English, which given another turn of the screw may strike a reader as his desire to (somehow, culturally or discursively) become “white.” Or otherwise, to change his descriptors, from Equiano “the African” to Equiano “the Englishman.”

Equiano’s narrative makes the second case study in my investigation of the injunction to truth in African American art making for this reason: that his establishment of this trope is two-faced. It both displays the political efficacy of identifying under the sign of “the African”—Equiano’s writing helps to bring about the abolition of the slave trade in England and by extension in America. While it demonstrates one of the crucial strategies of representing blackness in and to the white world, that of “signifying” or “storying”, in other words the telling of lies, fabrications that code as true without in fact being the case, fabrications on the archive of a life.

Equiano’s “lie” as it has traveled down to us through archival study and in a context of deeply speculative writing on blackness, allows a reader to contemplate the ramifications of considering identification as black as a rhetorical advantage that allows a writer to approach the

problem of nonbeing, of living despite a lack of any full recognition as being alive, with the reader's understanding that follows truth are speculative. In turn allowing a contemporary reader to speculate about the political, historical, and autobiographical upsides of any claim to identarian authenticity, specifically of being more authentically black. Not in a way that defies the truth-content of the narrative or its history, but in a way that approaches this truth-content as precisely that, "truth" which is to say, unfixed, discursively situated, purposive, aesthetically considered and utterly crafted "reality." A representation meant to influence how representations function when they inevitably come to screen the "truth" of any individual person, black or African, or otherwise. Equiano's narrative and its reception help to establish the particular manner of representation's intervention in the more socially available scene of recognition, between subjects and ultimately across racial lines. His lie, like Wheatley's phenomenological poems, establish the means to the contemporary black "poetic" theory, theories that engage in similarly archival fictions, equally aimed at deliberately reimagining the past in order to discern the possibility to different conditions for black life in the future.

Conclusion *précis*:

The conclusion expands this development of blackness through encounters—both scholastic and social, literary and historical—by looking back at the autobiographical encounters with whiteness in Harriet Jacobs, with the previous chapter’s work through her reception in mind. This conclusion is an experiment in interpretation, beginning again with Jacobs in light of the rest of the dissertation: one that proposed Jacobs’s text as the most complex and compelling instance of when the injunction to truth, outlined in the first chapter, breaks down across the literary experiments of her narrative. And the other which works to intensify a reader’s attention to the complexity grammar of blackness already at work in the later 18th century. A complexity that is thus seen to bookend the history of literature written by enslaved African Americans. Where Douglass, in the introduction, was seen to frame himself into his narrative, establishing a standpoint from which to observe in text and to the archive his earliest conceptions of the distinction in black life, Jacobs crafts a position from which to describe her own condition that does not admit the distance of a frame, instead engaging with the philosophies of subjectivity current to her time, specifically that of G.W.F. Hegel. Her narrative then is slotted between two of the modern world’s greatest theorist of the encounter between master and slave that structures the modern conception of (black) subjectivity. Her narrative is thus reread in this conclusion to give it a place between the critique of enlightenment and the critical break of the early 20th century that accelerated towards the formation of black studies as we know it.

Conclusions: Reading the figures for blackness

“To judge a thing that has substance and solid worth is quite easy, to comprehend it is much harder, and to blend judgement and comprehension in a definitive description is the hardest thing of all.”

G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, “Preface” (1806)

“Could we, indeed, say what we want, could we give a description of the child that is lost, he would be found. As soon as the soul can say clearly, that a certain demonstration is wanted, it has it in hand.”

Margaret Fuller, “The Great Lawsuit” (1843)

“Slavery was not new. What was new was a relation.”

Sylvia Wynter, “Jonkunnu in Jamacia” (1970)

Between the writing of Lucy Terry’s 1746 “Bar’s Fight,” the publication of G.W.F. Hegel’s 1806 *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and the theory of W.E.B. Du Bois’s 1903 *The Souls of Black Folk*, the recorded conditions of African American personhood—a matrix that extends, in the available archive, from bills of sale and fugitive autobiographies through to modern accounts of philosophically-minded works of sociological analysis—are charted in a figurative transformation from object to subject. And the writing of the enslaved in America, largely produced from the mid-18th century to emancipation, makes a crucial inroad into this larger conceptual shift in the ontological status, not simply of black characters or narrators, of figurative “bondsmen”, but of the entirety of the (previously) enslaved population. A population which makes myriad and ongoing attempts to cohere into and under a single representative concept (as Ethiop, Negro, “New” negro, Afro-American, African American, and somehow at its most metaphorical in the present, simply “black”), and whose status as a potentially representable whole, emerges and diversifies accordingly. This at least hundred-year long, discursively registered, and therefore conceptual emergence occurs not for any individual consciousness, but broadly for the communal and political project of (racialized) representation.⁹³ And this development has been at the core of the above chapters. Part of my wider argument has been that the 18-19th century, specifically the slave narratives of the antebellum period, make a recorded performance of self-fashioning intended to affect a dramatic change in the grounds or appearance of any “self” for the black at all, and ultimately resulted in a concept of blackness still in circulation today. These narratives are an entry into the conceptual history of “blackness” as it comes to further conceptualization in academic discourse across the

⁹³ i.e. Not the emergence of a lived community—a yet more dynamic development which is frankly the purview of the historian where it isn’t that of the anthropologist or social scientist, but the emergence of a field of images, descriptive language and art, which coalesces across the later 18th and 19th century into the tradition of black art and writing that is referred to by the writers of, say, the Harlem Renaissance who, in turn, form the basis of the mid-20th century civil rights era practice (c.f. June Jordan and Amiri Baraka, James Baldwin and Lorraine Hansberry) which turn over again into the more formal, institutionalization of black study.

20th and 21st centuries, where these texts have been activated disproportionately (though understandably) as primarily historical documents. Documents of the living facts of blackness, autobiographically rendered.⁹⁴

The preceding chapters have explored this development by two means. The first, a reception history of Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of the Slave Girl* (1861) that ultimately argued for a more capacious method of reading Jacobs's narrative, which disrupts the typical evidentiary purpose of citing a slave narrative, a historically verifiable proof from the immediacy of the slave's world. The second, a more conceptually focused chapter that observed the emergence of a concept of blackness in the ironic poetry of Phillis Wheatley, and the similarity in citational practices that disrupt stable concepts of indemnity between Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative in the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789) in a similar manner to contemporary critics. The larger argument of which, sketched in the first chapter on the connection between autobiographical metaphoric and the writing of slave narratives, were aimed towards a new lens through which to read the narratives of the enslaved. One that is sensitive to the complex poetics of the autobiographical mode while attending to the extreme conditions of representation for the enslaved writer. A writer who wrote in a world where their testimony was inadmissible in the court of law, and their bodies were freely available to seizure and violence, and what the pressure of this environment does to a conception of identity.

Both avowedly aimed into their political present, presented as literal and true, and aimed at the archive, analogical, and constantly fallen short of the truth, these narratives skirt the lines between fact and fiction at a level that is often read as merely generic. My work was to lean into a reading of the oft overlooked fictionality or, in my terms, "figurations" of these texts.⁹⁵ This is primarily the case because I am interested, on a larger timeline, in the way blackness itself—as condition and concept—becomes a figure for poetic and, just as frequently, broad ontological formulations. Formulations which, to put it another way, rely heavily on the work of historically recurrent figures—the Venus hottentot or "sambo", for example, or the relation between Lord and Bondsman. Thus, more pointedly, the slave's autobiography in this dissertation has been seen to perform a self-figuration that, at once, is meant as a testament to their actuality in the archive and a testament to the abstract condition of the black and enslaved more generally. It has been my contention that figuration and not fact is the realm in which their will to transformation from object to subject is most impactful, at least to start, in part because it is in the realm of

⁹⁴ "Conceptual history" both in the sense of the historiographical concept proposed, in at least one instance, by the work of Reinhart Koselleck, but also in a more 19th century context, what Friedrich Nietzsche referred to as "genealogy." A kind of nascent, affectively grounded, and utterly subjective encoding of history that understands itself as in competition with other rich (or not so rich) "interpretations" (here meant in his richest sense as something almost like Hegel's "explanation", a wager against the chaos of existence that forms an ethical relation in negative by attributing certain effect (and affects) to certain causes), of time, cause and effect, the fact of any event, etc.

⁹⁵ Here I am thinking specifically of Erin Auerbach's "Figura" (originally published in German in 1944, translated and reprinted in the 1973 essay collection *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*. Across this essay, a reader encounters a long-form study of the uses of "figura" that eventuates in the point I'm borrowing for this chapter. Describing the birth of "figural interpretation" in Tertullian Auerbach writes: "... *figura* is something real and historical which announces something else that is also real and historical. The relation between the two events is revealed by an accord or similarity" (29); "He [Tertullian]...refused to consider the Old Testament as mere allegory; according to him, it had literal meaning throughout, *and even where there was figural prophecy, the figure had just as much historical reality as what it prophesied. The prophetic figure, he believed, is a concrete historical fact, and it is fulfilled by concrete historical facts.*" (30, emphasis added). The relation proposed here, between figure and fulfillment, the image and the immanent act, is one this conclusion picks up on in a different context.

figuration, in the “image-sphere” to cite a useful phrase from Walter Benjamin—a place where the text that touches its reader, even marks him, helps to produce the discursive surround to all works of art that proceed from it—where these authors and their texts gain direct access to the discourses that describe and confine them. It is from within a consideration of this more figurative aspect of the text, this history of written images affecting and effecting their respective historical situations, that the writing of the enslaved, written both to produce and to justify the production of its subject—a person turned protagonist, an image—can better accomplish its dual (and perhaps, à la Du Bois, dueling) intentions.⁹⁶ And that this consideration must be held in the same frame as the consideration of the historical/critical need writing for the enslaved’s claims to historical legitimacy to be valid. (How else would we learn the truth of the demon slavery? How else establish a discursively legitimate subjectivity for black people?)

For the black writer in antebellum America, penning an autobiography means both communicating the conditions of a single life and representing the plight of a larger community. A plight not uncomplicated in the era before emancipation. A world where the value of black life was tabulated and traded on, translated into property. The writing of the (typically actually no longer) enslaved then is surely also an argument for the reevaluation, political representation, and recognition in subjectivity of the writer while, simultaneously, extending that subjectivity, representation, and reevaluation to the wider population of (typically still) enslaved persons. The dual temporality even this widely accepted formulation entails—the lag between a life of enslavement and a life otherwise than enslaved—gives a sense of the division that will come to haunt black writing into the 20th century. The “two warring ideals in one dark body” that Du Bois figures in his sociological images for double-consciousness are genealogically connected to these author’s divided condition as a subject “once enslaved” and newly “free” or, just as often, as in the case of Frederick Douglass’s 1845 narrative, as a “fugitive”—a location “without the circle” of slavery, as he terms it in his autobiography, and yet still, legally and therefore literally bound to it.

The writing of the enslaved autobiographer then, as has been demonstrated for Douglass specifically in Paul Gilroy’s field defining book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), charts a narrative course between this condition of enslavement and the fact of freedom, at least nominally⁹⁷. At the same time, as an archival object, the text of the narrative marks the intention laden presence of an unrepresentable absence, the writer herself, just another “dead” author⁹⁸. As another of the principal theorists ungirding this line of thinking, Houston A. Baker, Jr., has observed:

⁹⁶ C.f. The famous opening of Du Bois’s “Of Our Spiritual Strivings”: “One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self.” (*Souls* 1)

⁹⁷ See pages 38-40 for Gilroy’s initial formulations of this.

⁹⁸ À la Roland Barthes, who reencodes the author as merely a scribe, arranging the past. See this moment from his essay entitled “The Death of the Author” (1968), where Barthes calls for the reconceptualization of the author function as such:

“Having buried the Author, the modern scribe can thus no longer believe, as according to the pathetic view of his predecessors, that this hand is too slow for his thought or passion and that consequently, making a law of necessity, he must emphasize this delay and indefinitely 'polish' his form. For him, on the contrary, the hand, cut off from any voice, borne by a pure gesture of inscription (and not of expression), traces a field without origin - or which, at least, has no other origin than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins. We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological'

“The voice of the unwritten self, once it is subjected to the linguistic codes, literary conventions, and audience expectations of a literate population, is perhaps never again the authentic voice of black American slavery. It is, rather, the voice of the self transformed by an autobiographical act into a sharer in the general public discourse about slavery.” (*The Journey Back*, 43)

Baker extrapolates his claim from a reading of Douglass’s 1845 *Narrative in the Life of Frederick Douglass*, a broader claim about the relationship between the autobiographical speaker in the slave’s narrative and the “general public discourse.” To do this he draws his reader’s attention toward the way in which “Douglass transmits the ‘heroic fugitive’ message to an abolitionist audience *that has made such a figure part of its conceptual, linguistic, and rhetorical repertoire*” (42, emphasis added). In this process the authenticity of the particular enslaved life is forfeited in service to the cause of Abolitionism.⁹⁹

In this way, Baker characterizes the writing of the enslaved as a speculative, political writing that, through narrative, turns the production of art into a political or at the very least social action—these texts are social acts not merely in the sense of their “activism”, although they are surely Abolitionist in their intentions and often situations of production—propositioned, distributed, and advertised as part of a struggle for congressional action—but also simply “active” in the sense that they are statements of a positive claim of subjective presence into a world. This is particularly relevant in America, a new nation still in the 19th century, writing itself into the history of ideas, the record of consciousness, History. A sure example of this is the

meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture.” (*Image-Music-Text*, 146)

This functionary analytic, that looks at art and sees process and production rather than inspiration and sublimity, was the calling card of Barthes’s (post) Structuralism. A movement that would transform the literary criticism of the era immediately surrounding the beginnings of black studies. What is funny about considering, say, Phillis Wheatley as a “dead” author is that she, her writing, and her entire time, precede any conception of the author in this way. In fact, Barthes seems, in his essay, to be speaking to and for his present, almost in the tenor of a manifesto. The application of his concept is, admittedly then, anachronistic. But seeing as the origins of a such a subjective dispersal are felt throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, where most historians locate the birth of “modernity” as such, especially in the rapidly industrializing and war-torn America of this period, it seems an apt retrojection. After all, it is arguable that the slave’s status as, apparently, “socially dead” on their arrival in the Americas, makes an even stranger and more poignant substitution possible. Something like the assumptions underlying the recent work of Saidiya Hartman in which the smallest scraps of text are made the delicate outlines *for* the body or group of bodies they represent, however feebly (and often violently.) Part of the larger concern of this dissertation is that the writing of the enslaved misses out, critically speaking in terms of academic research, on being considered in the realm of inspired, sublime art. It occurs to me that the turn in the American academy toward deconstruction and structuralist thinking, across the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, and the “theory wars” this entailed, came just as, in 1969, Yale was hosting its now famous conference on the institutionalization of black study. In fact, Barbra Christian, a deeply influential figure in the writing that would come to transform the current state of this field, black feminist (literary) criticism, famously observed this coincidence in her essay “The Race for Theory” (198x). The coincidence of, on the one hand, the theoretical movement toward the diversification of the discursive environments in which the critique of art occurs (the interdisciplinarity that was begot by Social Research; the consideration of the means of production of art, etc.) and the institutionalization, to borrow from Sylvia Wynter (herself borrowing from a structuralist critic, Sam Weber), of “black study” as such meant that a methodological shift toward the “New historical” (and away from the New Critical) ushered the canonical texts of the black literary tradition into wider academic consideration.

⁹⁹ One might hear here the words of James Baldwin from his 1955 “notes of a Native Son”: “A devotion to humanity is... too easily equated with a devotion to a Cause, and Causes, as we know, are notoriously bloodthirsty.”

story surrounding the writing of Phillis Wheatley's "To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth" penned by the poet in 1773 in front of a servant to the Earl as proof to Wheatley's factual embodiment of her own artistic capacities. In this anecdote the act of black artistic production, the white legitimizing gaze, and the literal presence of the black body in and to history triangulate into a poem-as-proof.

The slave's writing then, seen thoroughly within an environment that could formulate a request like the above, is a doubled proposing of subjectivity for the self and for the slave in general—a text that looks within being made of memory and reaches out to change its condition in the present. A text that is, therefore, a mediator not only between self and world but between the lived experience of the black and the available figuration of black's condition. They are autobiographical acts that seek the witness of scholarship and metaphors of the self that propose a reevaluation of the value of black life. And their mode of figuration, the use of descriptive language to outline a life, the making of a situation into a metaphor or symbol, etc. places these narratives in the long tradition of American symbolist and allegorical literature. From Washington Irving's diabolically significant delicacies in "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (1819) or his accounts of the "lunatics" in *The History of New York* (1809), through Edgar Allen Poe's furniture and haunted houses, Nathaniel Hawthorne's immaculate play of symbol and exegesis, and Herman Melville's ambiguous, epic style, the slave narrative inherits the full figurative capacity of the American Renaissance—at least as the environment for their initial reception. And they must be considered as a part of this facet literary history just as they have been previously observed to digest those literary traditions and genres more traditionally afforded them—that of spiritual autobiography and sentimental literature. These are, of course, genres more closely associated with the expectation of verifiable truth-telling and the formulations of portable morality than any of those employed by the above-mentioned writers. And here is to be found the underlying concern of my project, what I have termed the injunction to truth in African American art making. But any direct address to this claim is always off. This dissertation works instead among more reasonable assumptions.

This dissertation takes it as a given that the (former) slaves issued their writings into an American literary landscape that was fraught with a tangle of figures.¹⁰⁰ Take for an example, the play of light with dark, white with black, that grows to a predominate theme of American literature in the 19th century. I take this thematic not only as a yawning hangover from the reign of very "enlightenment" ideas which produced America as an idea to begin with but also as an indication of the growing concern with race relations in the young nation as it hurdled toward the

¹⁰⁰ This assertion or assumption makes an apt moment to note that arguments for the consideration of black art and writing in the larger (typically white coded) Western context abound. Since I have already cited Houston Baker, it seems only right to cite one of the other major champions for this ode of consideration—Henry Louis Gates, Jr. these scholars perspective on this question which develop across their work, but especially in that writing they do in the 80s (*The journey Back*, cited above, was published in 1980 and has an opening chapter, titled "Terms of Order", which makes a striking comparison between the writing of Phillis Wheatley and Olaudah Equiano, that abuts both of their works, for better or worse, to their American (really, English) contexts, and Gates's seeming rejoinder to and extension of this enmeshing of the two traditions of literature (which grow distant in Baker's later work) which rests at the other end of the decade as the book *figures in Black* published in 1987. Here Gates takes the claim even further calling for specific scholastic work to be down that situates the black tradition within the critique of enlightenment. He even promises to write a book which, at least to my knowledge, was never published on exactly this topic. My work hopes to pick up this thread of seemingly neglected research, with the added context of the last 50 or so years of black study. The obvious irony here being that, at least according to Sylvia Wynter, it is Gate's work that occasions the death of the political project of black study as such, through his calls for and enacting of exactly this synthesis of West and "rest".

bloodiest conflict in its history to date: the Civil War. All the writer's studied in this dissertation make some reference or use of this theme.

In this conclusion, in reapproaching of Harriet Jacobs's 1861 *LINDA: Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, I will read the figurative parable Jacob's crafts to describe the plight of two young girls in light of the investigations of her own reception and the textuality of blackness established by the chapter on Equiano and Wheatley. Jacobs's is a tale in which a young girl's life is speculated upon, a speculation which expands in to a theory of the relation between white girls and black. In the parable, a girl either finds herself on the path of light or darkness--one leading to happy life and holy matrimony, the other to the dark ruin of rape and harassment—and both figured through images that speculate on the distinctions in the condition of the enslaved from that of their (white) counterparts. That Jacobs so deftly draws upon a theme so prevalent to the literature of the 19th century, and that in doing so she proposes a figure for race relations in America which equally enters the symbolic matrix constellating around an emergent conception of the condition of blackness in the literature of the antebellum period, is part of the evidence this conclusion will use to close its argument. And just as the most popular novel of the American 19th century, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), opens with a young black child taking on the several guises of blackness as it is trope'd on the plantation, so Jacobs's autobiography is the fabrication of an imagined (and thus, hopefully more generally imaginable) being for the black in lived experience, hers an autobiography built out of explorations of the figurative in all its inhabited consequence. Jacobs's autobiographical narrator, the metaphor she crafts for herself, occupies a similar position to that of Frank Wilderson III or Saidiya Hartman—working from a zone of seeming total exclusion, form a small piece of evidence snatched seemingly directly from her “life” to craft a theory for the relation of blackness to the trials for the world.

Across this dissertation, the writings of the enslaved has been seen to make the first theories of blackness in the form of graven images, images meant to elevate these black narrators and speakers not to godhead but selfhood, or at least to offer their community the (black) self as potential. What Anthony Reed identifies as the “ontological turn” in contemporary black studies,¹⁰¹ seen from this vantage, is a repetition within difference, a turn insofar as turning also implies an encircling, a circling back, a return. It is my contention that, for African American writing, there has never been any recognized mode of expression beyond this ontological turning, the tradition of African American literature makes, at least within the present critical frameworks provided by black (literary) studies. The literature of the enslaved and the literature of the “Black/Slave” (in Wilderson) makes a constant philosophical rumination on the value and condition of (black) life. This dissertation has explored this phenomenon through a reconsideration of several foundational autobiographical and lyrical texts of this tradition. And it will conclude in a demonstration of how approaching its earliest literature, with the attitude of the most recent work of black studies, transforms the figurative possibilities and implications of these earlier works.

The tensions produced in the shift in scale—between the personal and the political, being the one represented and being the representative one—characterizes not only the writing of the antebellum African Americans, but also African American art making generally. This tension haunts the tradition from the very first poem, Lucy Terry's “Bar's Fight” (1746) to the ontologically bent account of blackness currently being produced by scholars discussed across

¹⁰¹ c.f. Anthony Reed, The Black Situation: Notes on Black Critical Theory Now, *American Literary History*, Volume 34, Issue 1, Spring 2022, Pages 283–300

this dissertation, especially the fields two largest voices: Saidiya Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson III.

Terry's poem reads almost like a limerick, recounting the deaths of several white people at the hands of the sovereign nations they audaciously challenged in the later 18th century. One choice couplet reads: "Simeon Amsden they found dead, / Not many rods distant from his head." This "dead / head" rhyme occurs twice in the poem, in the almost gay accounting of the slaughter of a fleeing woman. The position of ironic indifference the speaker takes on within this poem—where the black poet stands outside and after an event she chooses to render almost as a song—will be replicated to greater intensity in the work of Phillis Wheatley, as seen above. Wheatley's poetry, as has been widely remarked, preforms this distancing even to the pretension of chastisement and rebuke. And whether eulogizing white children or pontificating on the power of "Imagination", Wheatley always works in two directions, both with regard to a felt need to prove her own capacities and with an ironic chagrin at the necessity thereof.

This conclusion, and the larger dissertation, has sought to make two claims which it understands as obverses. The first, as has been explored above, is that one movement of the transition between black thing and black person is made in the figurative writing of the enslaved between Terry, Hegel, and Du Bois, joining their autobiographies to the literary archive that charts the upheavals of Enlightenment critique which characterize the American 19th century. The second is that the present formations of the theory of black being, expressing themselves as they so often do through auto theoretical figuration—the crafting of voices and positions that, in their novelty to the field of discourse, require the crafting of a parallel theoretical claim—find useful predecessors in the writing of the enslaved. Writer's whose attentiveness to the limits and power of language to generate new concepts and standpoints eventuated in the dense theoretical writings of the present. A present scholarship, now in the case of some like Fred Moten, that still borrows for and observes the receptions of these earlier texts.

These two claims have been made toward the argument that considering the writing of the enslaved, in this conclusion specifically Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), as both a historical intercessor between Hegel and Du Bois and a theoretical predecessor to the writing of Hartman and Wilderson, will not only more accurately account for the formal and generic complexity of Jacobs's text itself, and the wider field of enslaved artistic production, but reposition it in the now long historical discourse on blackness which develops out of the 19th century. Casting these works as a more philosophically minded, and certainly descriptively rich, group of compositions, furthering the figurative transformation of the black from mindless thing to thinking being. What the scholar who redeems Jacobs's work from fiction back into the world of fact, Jean Fagan Yellin, describes as: "the transformation of herself [Jacobs] into a literary subject." The overall goal of this dissertation has been to propose that many other writers of this period also worked towards this transformation, and that in achieving it, they were perhaps finally able to escape into a different register of freedom, the freedom of a life not in need of justification.

Harriet Jacobs makes just such a demonstrative critique when, toward the end of her 1861 *LINDA: Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, she finally is informed of her purchase and subsequent freedom. The moment is perhaps one of the most striking of her entire narrative which, famously makes many asides to its readers. These readers, assumed to be more or less bourgeois more or less just and only white women, are apostrophized several times throughout the narrative by Linda Brent, Jacobs's narrator, as has been observed above. In several moments Jacobs's autobiographical protagonist, the "LINDA" whose name is eventually dropped from the

title one can only assume to avoid confusion, makes a comparison between the lived condition of Jacobs's enslavement—which she is figuring through the text and in perpetuity for her reader—and the assumed conditions of this narrator's readers, who are of course Jacobs's historically specific reading public, but also “us” “here” and “now”. This apostrophe, often almost lyrical in intensity, is present from the very opening words of the “Preface”:

Reader be assured this narrative is no fiction. I am aware that some of my adventures may seem incredible; but they are, nevertheless, strictly true. **I have not exaggerated the wrongs inflicted by Slavery; on the contrary, my descriptions fall far short of the facts.** I have concealed the names of places, and given persons fictitious names. I had no motive for secrecy on my own account, but I deemed it kind and considerate towards others to pursue this course.

I wish I were more competent to the task I have undertaken. **But I trust my readers will excuse deficiencies in consideration of circumstances.** I was born and reared in Slavery; and I remained in a Slave State twenty-seven years. (*Incidents*, “Preface”, emphasis added.)

Here, Jacobs's text draws attention to the distance between its protagonist and the reader, a distance which is doubled by the fictionality of her autobiographical protagonist, which fictionality is promptly and summarily denied from the outset. And so Jacobs's text from the outset, in seeming to present to her reader a nonfiction, sets a trap for her reader—one that brings them into what they are given to believe is as immediate an experience of her life as possible but is, in fact, a faulty image. She sets her reader the task of recognizing her in a “deficient” figure, both allowing her—the historical Jacobs—to elude the weight of appearing as herself entire in the text while binding the reader into a faith in her ability to appear just so. The question becoming one that has guided this dissertation: Is recognition of blackness in the realm of the figural the genuine recognition that, according to the philosophy of the West, creates a civil society, to say nothing of a legitimate subject? In this way, Jacobs's play across her narrative with the scenes and contexts of recognition is reminiscent of Hegel's famous encounter in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1806).

For Hegel, the positing of another self-consciousness is also its production and occurs as the failure or unwillingness of either Lord-Bondsman (they are, in fact, identical if registered as the opposite to each) to extinguish the other—both within the mind and between persons. In Jacobs's case, between the reader who enters the ambit of the text's conscription into identification with the autobiographical narrator, a figure for blackness, and the narrator who conscripts him into the failure and impossibility of his ability to identify with that narrator. The autobiographical trick begun in the “Preface”, the paratextual frame to this narrative which might well include its pseudonyms, completes itself by withdrawing the presence it pledged to provide in the moment it claims to have definitively presented it. There is after all not self but narration within the text, not Jacobs but Brent, and so—despite Brent's call to future study—there is also her narrative's end, billowing out over a clouded sea.¹⁰² This disintegration into memory figured as clouds over the ocean leaves a spectral Brent, unattached to the text, to linger beyond the

¹⁰² “It has been painful to me, in many ways, to recall the dreary years I passed in bondage. I would gladly forget them if I could. Yet the retrospection is not altogether without solace; for with those gloomy recollections come tender memories of my good old grandmother, like light, fleecy clouds floating over a dark and troubled sea.” (*Incidents*, Ch. XLI. “Free At Last”)

narrative, just out of the frame, unrecognized to the archives of literary study until 1981. Jacobs's disappearance for a time from the archive of enslavement may have been an accident of history, but her escape from the terror in the text she produces to represent her life strikes me as an intentional diversion. One that prefigures the dispersion, disappearance, and absence that has come to characterize the position of the black person in the contemporary scholarship on blackness.

The passage that Jacobs's text provides between Hegel and Du Bois marks a transition between these author's respective idealism and sociology, through the employment of their fusion in the literary genre of autobiography. Her auto theory emerges in the dissonance between her figure for herself and her historical person, between an idea of a person and a person itself. Jacobs's pleas for the recognition of the particularity of her condition, a particularity which—in her view—gropes toward a justification for actions her protagonist characterizes as sinful are, for example, simultaneously betrayals of Brent's double in the text, her grandmother Martha (whose memories the protagonist claims have carried her through this narration, then out over the sea). The result of these recollections, of her return to her shameful past and her publication thereof, are attempts to negotiate new terms for the limits of identification then both among and across races. Limits, it seems clear, Jacobs and her narrator desire to see overcome. This cross racial identification is part and parcel of the Abolitionist discourse of the antebellum period. The fifth chapter in the narrative, titled "The Trials of a Girlhood" makes this attempted (if failed) interracial identification into the figure of two paths, a figure that—in the sense of Erin Auerbach's "Figura" (1944, trans. 1976)—prophetically calls to its living, historical fulfillment in the future. Here is the figure in question, notice how Jacobs skillfully draws her reader in, through an apostrophic aside which begins in an almost lyric expression "O!":

O, what days and nights of fear and sorrow that man caused me! Reader, it is not to awaken sympathy for myself that **I am telling you truthfully what I suffered** in slavery. I do it to kindle a flame of compassion in your hearts for **my sisters** who are still in bondage, **suffering as I once suffered.**

I once saw two beautiful children playing together. One was a fair white child; the other was **her slave, and also her sister.** When I saw them embracing each other, and heard their joyous laughter, **I turned sadly away from the lovely sight.** I foresaw the inevitable blight that would fall on the little slave's heart. I knew how soon her laughter would be changed to sighs. The fair child grew up to be a still fairer woman. From childhood to womanhood her pathway was blooming with flowers, and overarched by a sunny sky. Scarcely one day of her life had been clouded when the sun rose on her happy bridal morning.

How had those years dealt with **her slave sister**, the little playmate of her childhood? She, also, was very beautiful; but the flowers and sunshine of love were not for her. **She drank the cup of sin, and shame, and misery, whereof her persecuted race are compelled to drink.**

Jacobs's manipulation of images here is almost surreal. From exasperation at her own experience she turns, through the employment of a vocative, toward the reader, reengaging her appeal to their consideration not of her particularity—although of course this is a large amount of her

evidence—but a more speculative consideration. Jacobs invites her reader to think on all of them still within the circle of slavery, those her “sisters” still struggling, still stuck in the ecstatic terror of the “O” and the “days and nights of fear and sorrow that man caused.” Here indicating not just the “good” Doctor, Dr. Flint, (who is, after all, a “Christian”) but what he stands in for, through his actions, what Brent elsewhere terms “the demon Slavery,” for which Dr. Flint is but a face—both textually a mask, a pseudonym, just like “Linda Brent.” But also literally, economically, as he is just one slave owner among the many that make up the slave society. The prose here are careful to make neat seams between those “sisters” who are “suffering as I once suffered,” the “Reader,” whose sympathies they are trying to “awaken,” and Brent, who is no longer apparently in bondage. Once again, the writing draws the reader’s attention away from the experiences of the protagonist towards a more speculative condition. With Jacobs’s use of the continuous and non-continuous past, the distinction takes on an activist as well as grammatical form—those suffering and those who’ve suffered are, after all, worlds apart. Worlds this narrative, even as it attempts to separate them, seem inevitably drawn together.

As in the texts discussed above, a position is opened that is both structured by previous suffering, by the tortured sign of blackness, and yet without that suffering. So the Jacobs at the writing desk (like Douglass in the introduction to this dissertation) and the Brent in the narrative exist in a similar relation as that between Brent and the sisters still in bondage. The discontinuity that subsists between Jacobs and Brent, one a person and one a figure for a person, is an essential element of complicating the already fraught relation between Brent and her sisters. The narrative, in continuing to be read into the present, in becoming the foundation for a theory of blackness to the present, in short in becoming evidence of the true to life condition of the enslaved, holds Brent in continuous, replicable suffering which, she thanks God often, becomes slavery “suffered” by the end of the narrative. And thus, the condition of enslavement, the object of the narrative’s polemic, persists as Brent’s condition regardless of the narrative’s progression. While the “true” Jacobs, unmentioned here or anywhere, not present in the narrative, truly escapes. And so, the archive comes to miss her, as her connection to Brent remains unclear for at least 100 years after this articulation. And for those years the true Jacobs remained free of the clutches of the demon slavery, a demon whose transhistorical influence is the topic of so much contemporary scholarship. It has been my argument that by considering the knowing figurations of enslaved or black life that Equiano, Wheatley, and Jacobs make, a reader might become sensitive to the ways these writers actively manipulate the figurative to detach the suffering of slavery from their real lives. But this gesture towards the timeless bind of enslavement—a condition which mysteriously extends beyond its terms of sufferance, as is also indicated by the “bill of sale” passage above, where Jacobs calls for her archival presence to be sought after and studied while marking for the reader that having been sold is a condition, like having been enslaved, that one never fully escapes—is only the beginning.

The quilt-like connections of this parable continue as, not merely satisfied with the evidence from her “own life”, Brent—having breached the barrier between reader and narrator—produces a story within her story, a figurative prophecy that predicts the outcome of the lives of those her sisters still suffering, and in doing so she draws the readers attention towards what exactly lives beyond the condition of slavery, something like structural racism. It begins like a fairy-tale, “I once saw two beautiful children playing together. One was a fair white child; the other was her slave and also her sister.” The metaphorical sisterhood of suffering takes a turn. Is this other child “sister” to the first biologically, by blood relation¹⁰³, or simply by coincidence of

¹⁰³ It is of course likely true that Jacobs herself was a child of her master, sister then to white folks as well as black.

sex, or perhaps something more like logically, to suit the parallelism of the figure that follows? The text provides no definitive proof to either. Part of my argument is to assume that this ambiguity is left intentionally. That Jacobs's deploying of this figure, through Brent, is tactical. The sly repetition which opens the next clause ("I once saw" returns "When I saw") keeps the temporality of this "memory" vague as well. The parallel Jacobs is about to draw, like Brent's persistence beyond Jacobs's natural life within the narrative, is atemporal, suspended, infinitely replicable. And the knowledge of this is too much seemingly for either. The narrator "turned sadly away from the lovely sight."

The question becomes turning away from this "lovely sight" towards what, exactly? Surely there is the automatic assumption—that this being ostensibly a memory of an event, there must have been a place, a location, some environment surrounding Brent in which this sight was once seen. Yet the narrative has supplied no context for this event, neither does the paragraph turn toward anything like literal description. Instead, the reader is carried into the narrator's speculations, speculations that engage tactics more rhetorical than real to round out this scene of overwhelming embrace. Brent continues: "I foresaw the inevitable blight that would fall on the little slave's heart. I knew..." The foresight and foreknowledge which the narrator turns toward abstracts her account from any literal memory, any single event remembered in connection with the "reality" of the events Brent has just described in her own life (which is, of course, actually Jacobs's), and transforms this image of an interracial embrace (maybe itself the result of another, more scandalous embracing) into a predictive figure for the lives of the two "beautiful children." A figure, as in Auerbach, seeking fulfillment. This is an image of the structure of racialized difference, and a banishment to a world apart. From this point of embracing and play, imagined or remembered, their lives develop into a perfect parallel, which division is foreseen and foreknown.

All the attention the narrative and even the form and genre of Jacobs's text lavishes on the division in experience between her narrator, herself, and her reader thus effects how the text can be read. That effect is the knowledge, on the part of the reader, that Jacobs herself perceives, as an author of a text, something of the sharp distinctions Du Bois articulates when he defines "the veil," another figure apt to representing this divide. It is not simply that Jacobs, along with the other authors in this dissertation, obviously recognizes distinctions in class, race, or role in society between her and her readers, but that she seems to understand through the demonstration of her text this distance as a semi-permeable barrier of understanding that requires the work of representation to be crossed, or to crib from Du Bois again, to be drawn back. This encounter, between white and black, master and slave, reader and narrator, the text and its author, is of course also part and parcel of the task of a black abolitionist autobiographer, a "slave narrator", who must, like it or not, write to prove herself through an activation of the very terrain of figuration that extends between Terry, Hegel, and Du Bois—that of the encounter between master and slave, or for Jacobs's text, as well as those studied throughout this dissertation, the assumed black, (formally) enslaved narrator and assumed white, sentimentally and symbolically primed reader.

To elaborate one complex strain of this interaction, between the reader (who is not enslaved, or not black, or both) and the writer (who is black, and was or is enslaved), this dissertation has worked through successive examples of theory and literature that discuss or have been made to index the visceral connection between the concept or figuration of blackness—a blackness drawn in images and words—and the lived experience of blackness, something unable to be captured by any medium but the idiosyncratic poetry of life. A life that is lived, for the

authors of the texts in this dissertation, many of whom are black, off the page, out of the classroom, in and elsewhere which, at least according to Frank Wilderson III, might be nowhere. And it concludes by observing the infinite suspension of Harriet Jacobs's autobiographical narrator, Linda Brent, to show that since the earliest texts of the African American literary tradition, there have existed methods and theories—by black people and those people—that have worked toward the disintegration of blackness from the life of a black person. As the poet Tongo-Eisen Martin has written in the poem, “Repeating,” these are examples of the long historical injunction for black people to live “A life of escapes.”¹⁰⁴

The other face of the injunction to truth, the requirement of authentic representation of black people by black people to allow them entrance into the history of art (and to History writ large), is this living in escape—having a life that must exist outside of the confines of recorded discourse in part because it has not been or, more recently, has refused to be admitted thereto. Something like what Fred Moten has termed across his dense and transformative trilogy *consent not to be a single being*, “fugitivity.” So the trials of this dissertation have aimed their ends towards the unearthing of a set of seeds for these ideas—seeds planted in the terrible soil of slavery. Wheatley's dissection of the verbal signs of blackness, and the dramaturgy of recognition she records through her poems; Equiano's alleged dissemblance about and subsequent fabrication of his African past, along with his more fluid sense of identity; and Jacobs's crafting of a position from which she can disidentify herself from her own experiences and thus produce and theorize a position for the racially marked but not racially determined subject, lay the groundwork for the metaphysics of blackness as it has come to be considered as a science. A study of black being, black aliveness, black belonging, etc. that works through as it works over these early figures in discourse for blackness and their various textual afterlives.

¹⁰⁴ From his 2015 book *Someone's Dead Already*.

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