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The Extraordinary Black Slave Woman in Nineteenth-Century Slave Narratives

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Afro-American Studies

by

Kimber Thomas

2014

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Extraordinary Black Slave Woman in Nineteenth-Century Slave Narratives

by

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Master of Arts in Afro-American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2014

Professor Richard Yarborough, Chair

This thesis identifies a new type of black female character present in African American literature. By extending Trudier Harris' research on representations of the "strong" black woman backwards into the nineteenth century, this thesis argues that the earliest literary depiction of such figures is the "extraordinary black slave woman," an image present in many nineteenth-century slave narratives. In particular, I argue that in the narratives of Harriet Jacobs, Mary Prince, Frederick Douglass, Sylvia Dubois, Zilpha Elaw and Jarena Lee, the extraordinary slave women are depicted as domestic workers, manual laborers, physical resisters, mothers, and spiritual sisters.

The thesis of Kimber Thomas is approved.

Michael Cohen

Harryette Mullen

Richard Yarborough, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2014

DEDICATION

To “Mom,” Mama, Kelsey, Keisha, Fooney, Teddybear, Cat, Ann, and Niece:
the most extraordinary black women I’ve ever known.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	Introduction	1
	Performing in Bondage: Who is the Extraordinary Black Slave Woman?	
II.	Literature Review	4
III.	The Extraordinary Black Domestic: Talent, Privilege, and Class Mobility	13
IV.	The Extraordinary Physical Laborers: Erotics, Power, and the Politics of Production	17
V.	The Extraordinary Physical Resisters: Resistance, Radicalism, and Female Physical Power	26
VI.	The Extraordinary Slave Mothers: Defying the Limits of Time, Space, and Geography	31
VII.	The Extraordinary Spiritual Sisters: Slave Women Who Save Souls	34
VIII.	Conclusion	38
IX.	Bibliography	41

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Introduction

Performing in Bondage: Who is the Extraordinary Black Slave Woman?

Trudier Harris has written extensively on representations of the strong black woman character in twentieth-century black fiction. In *Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature*, Harris concludes that these characters often fit within the categories of saint, sinner, or savior. In *From Mammies to Militants: Domesticity in Black American Literature*, Harris identifies a new type of strong black woman in black literature: the black domestic. While both of these works have served as critical models for thinking about female characterization, they highlight only twentieth-century representations. By extending Harris' analysis backward into the mid-nineteenth century, I argue that the earliest literary depictions of the "strong black woman" are those of the "extraordinary black slave woman," an image present in many nineteenth-century slave narratives. In particular, I argue that in the narratives of Harriet Jacobs, Mary Prince, Frederick Douglass, Sylvia Dubois, Zilpha Elaw and Jarena Lee, the extraordinary slave women are depicted as domestic workers, manual laborers, physical resisters, mothers, and spiritual sisters. The nineteenth-century slave narratives studied here are each a unique reflection of the narrator's experience in bondage. Any of the women presented in this study could fit into multiple categories mentioned above. Therefore, I am not suggesting that the categories presented are fixed. What I argue is that the extraordinary women presented in the slave narratives that I have chosen to analyze fit into one or more of above categories.

The primary works treated in this paper were chosen based on the presence of an extraordinary slave woman either as the main character or as a secondary character in each

narrative. I define the extraordinary slave woman as one having a remarkable skill or ability that sets her apart from either the ex-slave narrator or her fellow slaves. These skills range from cooking, to cleaning, to laboring in the fields, to fighting, to possessing spiritual powers, and even to being unusually strong. However, unlike Harris' analysis in *Saints, Sinners, Saviors*, strength is not my sole focus. I argue that strength is an effect of extraordinariness. In other words, some of these women are extraordinary because they display remarkable physical strength. I specifically argue this for Sylvia Dubois.

The system of slavery is the marker from which I measure extraordinariness. That is, the extraordinary slave women presented here often produce and perform at a greater degree than normal despite bondage, beatings, and brutality. Therefore, I define "extraordinary" as including anything other than what was considered normal or ordinary for black women during slavery. The extraordinary domestic workers are black slave women who, by Trudier Harris' definition, are responsible for the cooking, cleaning, and other practical operations of the white household, but whose great skill at one of the aforesaid operations gains them certain rights, privileges, and a degree of autonomy not allowed to other slaves. I place Harriet Jacobs' grandmother from *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) in this category. In the first section, "The Extraordinary Black Domestic: Talent, Privilege, and Class Mobility," I argue that Jacobs' grandmother's skill at baking crackers allows her to make her own money, own her own property, and control her own life. The extraordinary physical laborers are the slave women who complete hard, fatigue-producing, and usually "masculine" work – work that Western culture deems more masculine than feminine – with ease. In "The Extraordinary Physical Laborers: Erotics, Power, and the Politics of Production," I argue that Patsey from Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* (1854) and Hetty from Mary Prince's *The History of Mary Prince* (1831)

are physical laborers who work tirelessly at producing value for their masters or mistresses and who are caught in a complex web of power and control due to their masters' erotic desires. The physical resisters are slave women with reputations of fighting back. Harriet Jacobs' grandmother and Sylvia Dubois from *Sylvia Dubois (Now 116 Years Old), A Biography of the Slave Who Whipped Her Mistress and Gained Her Freedom* (1883) are known for their abilities to challenge – and in Dubois' case – to “whip” anyone who opposes them. In “The Extraordinary Physical Resisters: Resistance, Radicalism, and Female Power,” I demonstrate how they use their physicality to wrest authority from whites.

The extraordinary slave mothers are women who travel many miles on foot, and for extended periods of time, either with their children in tow or for the purpose of seeing their children. In “The Extraordinary Slave Mothers: Defying the Limits of Time, Space, and Geography,” I argue that Sylvia Dubois and Frederick Douglass' mother, Harriet Bailey, from *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written By Himself* (1845) defeat distance and suffer on behalf of their children. And finally, the extraordinary spiritual sisters are slave women who possess a God-given ability to preach and prophesy. In “The Extraordinary Spiritual Sisters: Slave Women Who Save Souls,” I describe how Zilpha Elaw in *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labors of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw* (1846) and Jarena Lee in *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee* (1836) travel into slave quarters – and elsewhere – to heal sick slaves and to convert the unconverted to Christianity.

Literature Review

Below are six sources, organized thematically, that have informed my research. The first three are works in which critic Trudier Harris discusses literary representations of the “strong black woman” figure. The last three provide historical and theoretical frameworks that I use to guide my analyses.

In *From Mammies to Militants: Domesticity in Black American Literature* (1982), Trudier Harris examines the role of the domestic worker in black literature through the lens of “power relationships” (xii) – the idea that blacks are always inferior to whites and whites superior to blacks – and argues that while there are many “types” of black women in literature, the domestic is often not treated as such. First, Harris defines the domestic as black women “who leave their homes and families to go work for white women and their families, and who have responsibility for the practical operation of the white household, including cooking, washing, ironing, cleaning, and child-rearing duties”; she later expands this definition to include live-in servants or day-workers (xi). Harris asks several critical questions; among the most significant are these: “How does the black woman operate in the white woman’s house?”; “Does the white world make any concessions at all to who she is?”; “Does she take her work, and all its implications, back home with her? Can she fully ‘go home?’”; and “Are the domestics presented as individuals or as types? Are the authors treating them realistically?” (xii). Before she turns to the literature, Harris makes an ironic claim regarding space, place, and power as they relate to black domesticity and white femininity: though white women could give up their ownership of the kitchen-space without compromising themselves, their power, or their identity, black women – according to Harris – often had to compromise their personal, physical, and psychological security when

entering the openly hostile environment of the “big house” kitchen. Conversely, while power was always in the hands of the whites due to the “big house” being theirs, Harris argues that the kitchen often became the “black town,” the “nigger room” (15) of the “white” house.

Two chapters from Harris’ work are particularly relevant: chapter six, “Beyond the Uniform,” and chapter eight, “The Militants,” which analyze a new type of black domestic in literature. In chapter six, Harris discusses how Mildred from Alice Childress’ 1956 *Like One of the Family... Conversations from a Domestic’s Life* is not a typical domestic: she talks back, is intellectual, and has a strong sense of racial and cultural identity; also, she does not let her work drain her mentally or physically. Harris describes a scene in the volume where a Southern white man came to visit and proceeded to call Mildred “sister” and the “right sort of Nigra” (117). Harris explains that Mildred demonstrates her nontraditional, confrontational attitude first by seating herself in front of the white gentleman without being asked and then by demanding that the white man refer to her by her first name. In chapter eight, Harris analyzes Rosa Lee from Barbara Woods’ 1970 “The Final Supper.” Rosa Lee is a black domestic in the Van Evrie big house who cuts her white master’s throat after he tries to enter her bed and who is consequently killed at the end of the story. Harris argues that Rosa has abandoned the mask that typical domestics wear, and that her resistance “brings her revolutionary potential to fulfillment – and to an end” (160).

This work by Harris is a pertinent example of how one character type can be examined in terms of her relationships to race, identity, and other characters and throughout multiple works of literature. In other words, Harris outlines the parameters in which this character can fit and then formulates her analysis based on how each character performs in her respective text. Since my research will focus on multiple categories of slave women, this technique will serve as a model

for my work. Harris' definition of "domestic" also will be referenced in defining my own categories. The questions that Harris asks have proven most useful when thinking about ways to frame my own research and to challenge and extend Harris'. Building off of her model, my research seeks to address the following, specifically in regards to Harriet Jacobs' grandmother: How does the extraordinary black slave woman operate in the white woman's house? If the white world makes any concessions at all to who she is, what do they look like, and how do they affect the character and her work? And finally, if the extraordinary black slave woman *can* go home, what does this movement across space say about black women, white families, and power relationships during slavery?

In the introductory chapter of *Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature* (2001), Trudier Harris argues that in an effort to avoid creating stereotypical images that would malign black women (i.e., the Jezebel or the physically oversized "mammy"), twentieth-century black writers inadvertently created another one: that of the strong black woman. Harris asserts that this character often fits within the categories of saint, sinner, or savior – with the saints "basking in their saintly roles"; the sinners sinning against their families for their own personal gain; and the saviors using their strength "for saving purposes" (19). These characters often possess Christian virtue, are perceived as emotionally distant and dominating, and occasionally display "pervasive taciturnity." Most significant to this research is Harris' preliminary analysis, which first focuses on the historical "strength" of black women during American slavery and then touches briefly on literary representations of the strong black woman during the 1980s. She notes that for black slave women who worked as field hands on the plantation, their labor – and therefore their strength – was often emphasized over their other qualities. Consequently, these women were often assigned tasks comparable to men's and were

subjected to whippings comparable to those that men would receive. Harris explains that black women were expected to perform physically at a level “seldom – if ever – required of the planter class of white women, specifically, or of white women generally” (3). Harris notes that by the 1980s, the literary representations of the strong black woman became more mythical and imaginary, often depicting how she transcended human limitations (12). The author ends by suggesting that although our culture has praised black women “for exhibiting traits that Western culture deem more masculine than feminine” (13), literary critics must take a closer look at the ways in which strength affects these characters both positively and negatively, in terms of gender, space, place, and the self. Harris asserts that by continuing to recycle this “type,” black writers are casting “aspersion upon other possible models” (17) and are foregoing their abilities to create more complex, multidimensional characters.

Harris’ study informs my research on the topic by establishing that the pattern of the strong black woman has been replicated in – and has thus dominated – black literature over the past 150 years. Although I agree with Harris’ claim, my research aims to challenge and extend hers by arguing that this character’s presence can be traced back to the slave narratives of the nineteenth century. Harris’ approach of creating and defining literary categories to guide her study is useful, and my research will mimic this strategy by creating categories such as domestics, mothers, physical laborers, physical resisters, and so on to define the slave women whom I intend to examine. One issue with Harris’ approach is that she analyzes works of twentieth-century fiction, but often uses historical facts to support her analyses. How useful are historical facts when analyzing fictional representations? How will my analyses of nonfiction characters differ from Harris’ analyses of fictional ones? And further, how do these characters’ representations compare across literary genres? Though Harris’ work is essential, a

comprehensive study that traces the representations of these characters from slavery to the present and across literary categories is not only necessary, but would greatly inform African American literary criticism.

The essay on which Harris builds in *Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature* (2001), “This Disease Called Strength: Some Observations on the Compensating Construction of Black Female Character” (1995), discusses strength as a disease for black women in African American literature. Harris argues that the contemporary matriarch or strong black women character often “perpetuates dysfunction in literary families”; in other words, their actions become “malignant growths” upon the lives of their children, husbands, and other relatives (110). Harris’ use of the term “strength” includes moral and physical; and as she does in *Saints, Sinners, Saviors*, she lists the traits of characters affected by the “disease of strength” as “pervasive taciturnity, suprahumanity, introspection, Christian virtue, silence, and emotional/physical domination” (111). She then notes that these women were derived both from the author’s own biographies and from romanticized perceptions of Africa, and she suggests that these black women often provided a stark contrast to their white, female counterparts – that is, the perceived weakness of white women versus the ascribed strength of the black “was presumed to be a positive development, a way of showing competence in everyday affairs” (124). Finally, the author lists early portraits of black women from literature of the 1950s: two examples are Elizabeth Grimes from James Baldwin’s *Go Tell it on the Mountain* and Mary Rambo from Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*.

The strength of Harris’ research approach in this work – similar to her work on black domestics – is that the terms she uses are clearly delineated and remain consistent throughout her analysis. That is, “strength” has its own definition, and each category associated with “strength”

– saint, sinner, savior – has its own definition. Although this technique works well for Harris, it brings up potential problems for my research. For the slave women whom I analyze, both strength and extraordinariness play pivotal roles. Consequently, critical questions must be addressed. First, what is the difference between being strong and being extraordinary? Is strength an effect of extraordinariness or is extraordinariness an effect of strength? And further, how do both of these terms alter, inform, or influence the representations of slave women? These questions are particularly significant because for my work, strength is complex and multi-dimensional. My use of the term, like Harris', will include physicality, morality, and spirituality; however, strength affects my characters ironically. For example, laborers like Patsey and Hetty are physically strong, but are mentally and emotionally frail; therefore, they are depicted as pitiful throughout the text. Their strength is used to facilitate labor and to produce value for the plantation, not to fight back against their cruel owners. On the contrary, because they contribute greatly to the plantation and are still brutally beaten, Patsey and Hetty are often miserable, disheartened, and suicidal. For spiritual sisters like Zilpha Elaw and Jarena Lee whose bodies are frequently physically weak and afflicted with illness, their strength is given by God and for the sole purpose of spreading His word; for them, only “spiritual strength” informs their extraordinariness. For resisters like Sylvia Dubois, physical strength is always a positive attribute, never a detriment or a “disease.”

Wilma King's chapter “‘Suffer with them till Death’: Slave Women and their Children in Nineteenth Century America” in *More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (1996) provides a historical background of slave mothers and their relationships with their children. King notes that generally slave mothers were left to parent their kids without their spouses; as a result, they were tasked with ensuring that their often neglected, sick, and

irregularly fed children adjusted to work and understood the ways of the plantation. King notes that while some slave mothers killed their children as an act of resistance, many slave mothers worked at finding ways to spend time with their children and shaping the quality of the time. As relevant examples, King briefly discusses the role of the slave mother in the narratives of Booker T. Washington and Frederick Douglass. She writes, “both mothers exerted extra effort for the well-being of their children, who remembered them and their sacrifices” (152). King ends her chapter by discussing runaways, and she contends that slave mothers were less likely to run away because they refused to leave their children behind. She continues, “slave mothers who became fugitives faced extraordinary difficulties when accompanied by children. It was virtually impossible to carry enough food to sustain oneself, let alone additional food for youngsters.” King continues, “Moreover, travelling overland on foot meant that children walked or were physically carried. Besides, children crying from hunger or weariness drew attention and increased chances of detection” (161).

King’s chapter is essentially a work of collective memory and historicity, and her claims validate my argument that slave women, in walking long distances to see their children, were performing extraordinary acts. The author’s detailed descriptions of the slave mothers’ journeys not only inform my research but bring up additional issues that need to be explored. As an example, my research argues that Frederick Douglass’ mother walking several miles back and forth each day to see him is an extraordinary act. However, Douglass writes that his mother dies, ending her hardships and suffering. Can it be argued that walking long distances took a toll on Harriet Bailey’s body? Where does strength fit into this discussion? And further, can the black female slave body challenge – or even defy – the limits of time, space, distance, or geography? These questions will be discussed in my section on extraordinary slave mothers.

Two additional works are critical in providing historical and theoretical context: chapter two, “The Nature of Female Slavery” in Deborah Gray White’s *Ar’n’t I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (1999); and the introduction to John W. Roberts’ *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom* (1989). White’s chapter argues that there were two systems of slavery – one for women and one for men – and she explains how these two systems resulted in different expectations, responsibilities, and life chances for slaves. White discusses the division of labor and notes that although black slave women were field laborers like black slave men, their labor was cheaper than male labor and they could rarely, if ever, vary their work experience. Roberts provides a theoretical framework for thinking about heroes and heroism; in particular, he relates heroic creation to the process of “culture-building” and to the concept of Afrocentrism. He argues that characters whom we consider folk heroes/heroines are “figures who, from our vantage point, appear to possess personal traits and/or perform actions that exemplify our conception of our ideal self, the self that our personal or group history...has prepared us to become” (1).

Slave labor is a consistent theme in my discussions of slave women, physical labor, and physical strength, and will be discussed specifically in my section on extraordinary physical laborers; folk heroism will be discussed in my section on physical resisters. White’s description of the gendered division of labor confirms that slave women could labor as efficiently as slave men. For instance, Patsey, a young slave woman, could pick almost three times the amount of cotton that a healthy, adult male like Northup could. What made Patsey such a competent field hand? Sylvia Dubois could operate the ferry better than any man on the Susquehanna. What are her abilities attributed to? Though folklore will not play a major part in this study, it is difficult to ignore the ways in which certain characters’ depictions mimic those of folk heroines. For this

reason, Sylvia Dubois and Jacobs' grandmother will be briefly discussed in terms of their heroic qualities. It is also important to mention that a comprehensive study of black slave women analyzed as folk heroines would fill a void in African American literary criticism and American folklore studies.

The Extraordinary Black Domestic: Talent, Privilege, and Class Mobility

Harriet Jacobs begins *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* with her genealogy. She describes her father – a carpenter who was “considered so intelligent and skillful in his trade, that, when buildings out of the common line were to be erected, he was sent for from long distances, to be head workman” (Jacobs 9) – and her brother, William, “a bright, affectionate child” (Jacobs 9) – but treats her mother quite differently. In fact, Jacobs never explicitly introduces her mother to the reader. She mentions that her parents were slaves, were a light shade of brownish yellow, and lived together, but then she shifts to a lengthy description of her maternal grandmother, whom Jacobs recalls as being a “remarkable woman in many aspects” (Jacobs 9). Perhaps Jacobs provides a more detailed description of her maternal grandmother than of her mother because her grandmother served as more of a mother-figure to her. Regardless, what is significant about Jacobs’ introductory genealogy is the placement of her family members in the text and the descriptions of them that follow. Jacobs’ lengthy discussion of her grandmother – instead of her mother – after describing her father and brother demonstrates her attempt to highlight a woman who does not fit within the bounds of hegemonic femininity during slavery. That is, Jacobs’ grandmother does not resemble a typical black slave woman; instead, she represents a common trope found in most nineteenth-century slave narratives of the extraordinary slave woman and, more specifically, she represents the trope of the extraordinary Black domestic slave worker. These women are responsible for the practical operations of the white household, including cooking, cleaning, and nursing, and they often possess a great skill at one of the aforesaid operations that allows them more privileges and mobility than other slaves.

Before Jacobs reveals to the reader her grandmother's extraordinary skill, she provides the woman's history. Jacobs explains that her grandmother was the daughter of a planter in South Carolina, "who, at his death, left her mother and his three children free, with money to go to St. Augustine, where they had relatives." (Jacobs 9). "It was during the Revolutionary War," Jacobs explains, "and they were captured on their passage, carried back, and sold to different purchasers" (Jacobs 9). Next, Jacobs writes that as her grandmother grew older, she evinced so much intelligence and was so faithful that her master and mistress saw that it was for their interest to take care of such a "valuable piece of property." Jacobs' brief insertion of her grandmother's history – followed by a description of her grandmother's skills – serves as a testament to the grandmother's extraordinariness; in other words, Jacobs' grandmother's extraordinary abilities outlived her turbulent history.

Though Jacobs' grandmother can work efficiently in many domestic capacities – "from cook and wet nurse to seamstress" – her extraordinariness is marked by her ability to cook. According to Jacobs, her grandmother "was much praised for her cooking, and her nice crackers became so famous in the neighborhood that many people were desirous of obtaining them" (Jacobs 9). Jacobs' grandmother's ability to cook also sets her apart from her slave counterparts: the grandmother is able to control her own life in ways that other slaves cannot; she is granted privileges that other slaves are not; and she does not live as the average slave does. The best illustration of this is when Jacobs' grandmother "asked permission of her mistress to bake crackers at night, after all the housework was done" and the mistress grants her request, "provided she would clothe herself and her children from the profits" (Jacobs 10). Although the kitchen-space was historically considered the "black" space of the "white" house only when blacks were producing for whites, Jacobs' grandmother is able to use the kitchen after-hours and

while unsupervised for her own purposes. Jacobs' grandmother uses the money she makes from baking crackers to purchase what she needs for herself and her children. This serves as an example of how a slave woman's extraordinary talent affords her opportunities for upward class mobility. Jacobs also adds that "after working hard all day for her mistress, [her grandmother] began her midnight bakings, assisted by her two oldest children" (Jacobs 10). Again, Jacobs' grandmother's ability to inhabit the kitchen-space after-hours, and in the company of her two children, suggests that there was a certain level of trust between Jacobs' grandmother and her master and mistress, and a certain level of privilege granted to Jacobs because of her ability to cook well.

Understanding the dynamics of food, class, and privilege is essential to understanding Jacobs' grandmother as an extraordinary cook and domestic worker. In a section of Jacobs' narrative where she describes slave life during the holidays, she explains that slaves who had been lucky enough to save a few shillings over the year would spend their money on either a turkey or a pig during Christmastime, and those who could not obtain a turkey or a pig often cooked a 'possum or raccoon. Jacobs then states, "my grandmother raised poultry and pigs for sale; and it was her established custom to have both a turkey and a pig roasted for Christmas dinner" (Jacobs 95). Here, Jacobs presents a food hierarchy: for those less fortunate, a 'possum or raccoon would suffice; for those moderately fortunate, or for those who had saved up enough shillings over the year, a turkey or a pig would suffice; but Jacobs' grandmother was fortunate enough to have both.

Jacobs' grandmother is also depicted as a savior throughout Jacobs' narrative. Jacobs explains that little attention was paid to the slaves' meals in Dr. Flint's house – "if they could catch a bit of food while it was going, well and good" – but notes that when she passed her

grandmother's house during various errands, the older woman "often stood at the gate with something for [her] breakfast or dinner" (Jacobs 13). The gate here functions in two ways. First, it serves as a physical barrier between Jacobs and her grandmother: Jacobs' grandmother is a slave, but she lives in her own home; Jacobs is a slave girl who lives with her owners. Although they are relatives, Jacobs is not allowed on the other side of her grandmother's gate as her master "frequently threatened [her] with punishment" (Jacobs 13) if she stopped there. Therefore, Jacobs' grandmother's extraordinary ability to cook literally sets her apart from other slaves. Second, the gate represents a figurative barrier between safety, or the refuge of Jacobs' grandmother's house, and hell – Dr. Flint's plantation. Jacobs' grandmother standing at the gate with food then is the savior while Jacobs is the one requesting salvation. Only the extraordinary black domestic could own her own property, transcend class lines, and control her own life.

The Extraordinary Physical Laborers: Erotics, Power, and the Politics of Production

The slave woman as extraordinary physical laborer is a common trope in many nineteenth-century slave narratives. These slave women are often either gifted with the ability to produce work faster or more efficiently than other slaves or forced to do so by their master or mistress. These women are usually painted as pathetic figures – that is, if they do not die at the hands of their cruel masters or mistresses, they are usually severely beaten by them. These women’s skills are often in contrast to those of their masculine counterparts, and their relationship to production often works in this way: they only produce value for the master or mistress. Patsey from Solomon Northup’s *Twelve Years a Slave*, Hetty from Mary Prince’s *The History of Mary Prince*, and Sylvia Dubois are examples of the extraordinary physical laborer.

Solomon Northup explains that when a new hand is sent for the first time into the cotton field, “he is whipped up smartly, and made for that day to pick as fast as he can possibly” (Northup 165). Northup adds that at night the cotton is weighed, so that the newcomer’s capability in picking is known; from that night forward, the slave is required to bring in the same weight. Anything less, Northup explains, “is considered evidence that [the slave] has been laggard, and a greater or less number of lashes is the penalty” (Northup 165). This description by Northup serves two purposes: First, it serves to demonstrate to the reader the mechanics of cotton picking. Second, it foreshadows what is to come for Northup at Bayou Boeuf, including his encounters with Patsey.

Northup later explains the cotton picking standard at Bayou Boeuf and attributes the ability of certain slaves to pick cotton faster and more efficiently than others to “the gift.” Northup writes that an ordinary day’s work in the cotton field should yield two hundred pounds;

for slaves who were accustomed to picking cotton, Northup states, punishment in the form of lashes is the consequence for bringing in less than the standard. He also states that for some slaves, “a natural knack, or quickness...enables them to pick with great celerity, and with both hands, while others, with whatever practice or industry, are utterly unable to come up to the ordinary standard” (Northup 165). Patsey, Northup explains, was “the most remarkable cotton picker on Bayou Boeuf” (Northup 165), picking with both hands and with such rapidity that five hundred pounds a day was not unusual for her. Throughout Northup’s narrative, he places himself in contrast to Patsey, specifically at times when he describes labor produced for the master. He states that in picking cotton, he was “unskillful always in that business” (Northup 166), “not designed for that kind of labor” (Northup 178-179), and “not fit to associate with a cotton-picking ‘nigger’” (Northup 179); he “had not the gift – the dexterous fingers and quick motion of Patsey, who could fly along one side of a row of cotton, stripping it of its undefiled and fleecy whiteness miraculously fast” (Northup 179). The “gift” to which Northup refers signifies that Patsey possesses some innate ability which allows her to labor more efficiently than both Northup and the other slaves. Patsey’s “gift” also renders her extraordinary.

Northup describes Patsey, “a ‘Guinea nigger,’” (Northup 186) as

slim and straight. She stood erect as the human form is capable of standing.

There was an air of loftiness in her movement, that neither labor, nor weariness nor punishment could destroy. Truly, Patsey was a splendid animal, and were it not that bondage had enshrouded her intellect in utter and everlasting darkness, would have been chief among ten thousand of her people. She could leap the highest fences, and a fleet hound it was indeed, that could outstrip her in a race. No horse could fling her from his back. She was a

skillful teamster. She turned as true a furrow as the best, and at splitting rails there were not who could excel her. When the order to halt was heard at night, she would have her mules at the crib, unharnessed, fed and curried, before uncle Abram had found his hat. Not, however, for any of these, was she chiefly famous. Such lightning-like motion was in her fingers as no other fingers ever possessed, and therefore it was, that in cotton-picking time, Patsey was queen of the field. (188-189)

First, Patsey's "glory" in the fact that she is the offspring of a Guinea nigger (Northup 186) denotes a separation between her pure, African ancestry and American influences; that is, any skill possessed by Patsey is a testament to her African heritage. The "air of loftiness" that neither labor nor punishment could destroy suggests that even after picking hundreds of pounds of cotton and being tormented by her mistress, Patsey is still, according to Northup, exalted in rank and in character. This exaltation is evident in Northup's comparison of Patsey to a "splendid animal." This reverse anthropomorphism is significant because, like Harriet Jacobs' grandmother, Patsey does not fit within the bounds of hegemonic femininity during slavery. Her abilities are both extraordinary and unusual for a woman of her condition and circumstance.

Patsey's extraordinariness also causes her to suffer greatly, and the link between Patsey, her owners, erotics, and power it is a critical one. Northup notes that generally Patsey was obedient, faithful, and pleasant, but she "wept oftener, and suffered more, than any of her companions" (Northup 188). According to Northup, Patsey "had literally been excoriated: her back bore the scars of a thousand stripes; not because she was backward in her work, nor because she was of an unmindful and rebellious spirit, but because it had fallen to her lot to be the slave of a licentious master and a jealous mistress" (Northup 188). It is implied throughout this section

of Northup's narrative that Patsey was the object of her mistress's ire because of her interaction with Master Epps, but this relationship is never explicitly revealed. Northup writes that although Patsey was a favorite when a child, even in the great house, "for her uncommon sprightliness and pleasant disposition" (Northup 198), as a young woman she walks under a cloud. "If she uttered a word in opposition to her master's will," Northup explains, "the lash was resorted to at once, to bring her to subjection; if she was not watchful when about her cabin, or when walking in the yard, a billet of wood, or a broken bottle perhaps, hurled from her mistress' hand, would spite her unexpectedly in the face" (Northup 188-189). Because Patsey produces so much value in picking cotton for Master Epps, she is valuable for the plantation. Epps' complex relationship with Patsey then can be seen as a complex struggle for power: Epps lashes her often, even though she works efficiently and is an obedient slave. Epps' relationship could also be read as an erotic attraction for Epps based on Patsey's ability to produce value for him. This is demonstrated through Northup's description of an interaction between the master and mistress. Northup writes that to be rid of Patsey, "to place her beyond sight or reach, by sale, or death, or in any other manner" (Northup 198) is the ruling thought and passion of the mistress. However, Northup writes that because Patsey is equal to any of Master Epps' two slaves in the cotton field, and since "he could not replace her with the same money she would bring, . . . the idea of disposing of her could not be entertained" (Northup 199). Patsey's astonishing ability as a physical laborer renders her extraordinary but is also the cause of much pain and strife.

Like Patsey, Hetty from Mary Prince's *The History of Mary Prince* is an extraordinary slave woman who produces value for the master and mistress, but who also suffers tremendously at their hands. Upon her arrival at Spanish Point, the first person Mary Prince notices is a "French Black" called Hetty. Prince describes Hetty as

the most active woman I ever saw, and she was tasked to her utmost. A few minutes after my arrival she came in from milking the cows, and put the sweet-potatoes on for supper. She then fetched home the sheep, and penned them in the fold; drove home the cattle, and staked them about the pond side; fed and rubbed down my master's horse, and gave the hog and fed the cow their suppers; prepared the beds, and undressed the children, and laid them to sleep. I liked to look at her and watch all her doings, for hers was the only friendly face I had seen yet, and I felt glad that she was there. She gave me my supper of potatoes and milk, and a blanket to sleep upon, which she spread for me in the passage before the door of Mrs. I_____ 's chamber. (238)

Like Northup, Prince introduces Hetty via her country of origin. Like Patsey, Hetty's ancestry is one other than American, which signifies some exoticism – and later extraordinariness – on Hetty's part. This link between exoticism and performance suggests that slave women who are foreign (non-Western) or African possess innate abilities to perform greater than others, especially African Americans. Hetty's extraordinariness is marked by her ability to complete gendered, or "masculine" and "feminine," tasks with ease. Prince's use of amplification is key here. Rather than simply stating, "She fetched home the sheep, drove home the cattle, fed and rubbed down my master's horse, and prepared the beds," Prince chooses to embellish her description of Hetty – "She fetched home the sheep, *and penned them in the fold*; drove home the cattle, *and staked them about the pond side*; fed and rubbed down my master's horse, *and gave the hog and fed the cow their suppers*; prepared the beds, *and undressed the children and laid them to sleep*" – to depict a slave woman tasked to her utmost. Prince's description of Hetty's "friendly face" implies that Hetty is skilled enough to complete her tasks not only effortlessly,

but also in good nature. Like Patsey, Hetty is an extraordinary laborer; and while there is no mention of Hetty picking cotton, she is depicted as being able to complete “inside” or domestic, feminine work – making supper, preparing beds, and taking care of children – and “outside” or masculine work – fetching sheep, driving cattle, and feeding hogs and horses efficiently.

Similar to Patsey, although Hetty produces value for her master and mistress, she is still subjected to intense floggings. Prince writes of a time when she was going to sleep, then heard her mistress call out to Hetty to see if some work was finished that she had ordered Hetty to do. “No ma’am, not yet,” was Hetty’s reply, and Prince describes how her master “started up from his bed, and just as he was, in his shirt, ran down-stairs with a long cow-skin in his hand.” Prince continues, “I heard...the cracking of the thong, and the house rang to the shrieks of poor Hetty, who kept crying out, ‘Oh, Massa! Massa! Me dead. Massa! Have mercy upon me – don’t kill me outright’” (Prince 238). First, the image of Hetty’s master running downstairs, barely clothed, and with a long cow-skin in his hand alludes to a phallus. This suggests that perhaps Hetty and her master’s relationship was just as charged as that of Patsey and Master Epps. This link between eroticism and power becomes even more complex during Hetty’s pregnancy.

Although Hetty is pregnant by an unspecified man, she is still able to perform physical labor efficiently. However, Prince describes a scene where Hetty had fastened a cow to the stake, but the cow dragged the rope away and got loose. Prince explains, “My master flew into a terrible passion, and ordered the poor creature to be stripped quite naked, notwithstanding her pregnancy, and to be tied up to a tree in the yard.” Prince continues, “He then flogged her as hard as he could lick, both with the whip and the cow-skin, till she was all over streaming with blood” (Prince 240). Prince notes that after severe labor, Hetty delivered a dead child and that after she appeared to have recovered, both her master and mistress continued to flog her until “her body

and limbs swelled to a great size, and she lay on a mat in the kitchen, till the water burst out of her body and she died” (Prince 240). While the amount and severity of abuse that most slave women received from their masters was significant, the abuse of pregnant Hetty seems unusual. Perhaps Hetty’s unborn child was the master’s and perhaps this is the source of her owners’ cruelty. If this is the case, it must be considered whether Hetty’s master had some strong attachment to or erotic desire for Hetty because of her ability to labor for him and his family. If so, their relationship works in this way: Hetty’s master is attracted to her because she produces on his behalf; however, the master must ensure that Hetty never forgets her position as property. Sexual abuse and domination then become the means by which Hetty’s master reinforces her place on the plantation while simultaneously fulfilling his own erotic desires.

While it is important to acknowledge the place of the extraordinary slave woman as physical laborer in nineteenth-century slave narratives, it would be impossible to discuss feminine labor, power, and production without an in-depth discussion of masculinity – specifically the ways in which slave women directly challenged “masculine labor,” power, and production. In *Sylvia Dubois (Now 116 Years Old), A Biography of the Slave Who Whipped Her Mistress and Gained Her Freedom*, Sylvia Dubois is a slave woman who not only can perform male labor, but who directly challenges masculinity in the process. Dubois’ amanuensis, C.W. Larison, describes her as being “of large stature...not less than five feet ten inches high...well proportioned...[and] capable of great endurance” (Larison 148). Larison claims that Dubois was known to be the strongest person in the settlement; and much like Harriet Jacobs’ grandmother, Dubois “was industrious, and was usually in great request during the house-cleaning and soap making season of the year” (Larison 148). Larison adds that Dubois “was so strong she could lift anything that needed to be moved and could carry anything that had to be toted; and she was so

willing to use her strength that her popularity was ineffable” (Larison 148). Lifting signifies a masculine act and, in conjunction with Larison’s introductory statement describing Dubois’ stature, serves as a rhetorical challenge to masculine power. It becomes clear at the start of Dubois’ narrative that her extraordinariness lies not just in her domestic capabilities but also in her unusual strength.

Dubois’ first direct challenge to masculinity is demonstrated through her encounter with Captain Hatch. At Great Bend, Dubois explains, there was a ferry across the Susquehanna. The boat on one side of the river belonged to her master, while the boat on the other side belonged to Captain Hatch. Dubois reports that she learned to manage the boat as well as anyone else and pretty soon began to steal Captain Hatch’s customers: “When I landed the boat upon his side,” she notes, “if any body was there that wanted to come over to the Bend, before he knew it, I would hurry them into my boat and push off from the shore, and leave him swearing. You see the money I got for fetching back a load was mine; and I stole many a load from old Hatch...every time I could” (Dubois 157). Here we see Dubois’ skill in contrast to that of a masculine counterpart. First, Dubois has the proper knowledge to operate the ferryboat; second, she is quick enough to load passengers into the boat and strong enough to push the boat from the shore; third, like a folk trickster-figure, Dubois steals Hatch’s customers and makes money doing so. In another scene, Dubois describes stealing the ferrymen’s customers when the ferrymen were away at dinner: “They would holler to let us know that someone wanted to cross, then there would be a race. I’d skip out and down to the wharf so soon that I’d have ‘em loaded and pushed off before anyone else could get there – and then I’d get the fee” (Dubois 158). Here again, Dubois’ quickness, strength, and ability are displayed. She also explicitly discusses herself in terms of masculinity in a scene similar to the one above: Dubois states that she was a master at handling

the skiff, was fond of using it, and often took two or more passengers at once (Dubois 157).

Dubois explains, “I had a good name for managing the skiff – they used to say that, in using the skiff I could beat any man on the Susquehanna – and I always did beat all that raced with me”

(Dubois 157). Dubois’ ability to labor not only as effectively as but even better than her male counterparts is a testament to her extraordinariness and to her ability as a female slave woman to outperform men.

The Extraordinary Physical Resisters: Resistance, Radicalism, and Female Physical Power

The extraordinary physical resisters are slave women who actively oppose or challenge power or authority or women who simply fight back. The appearance of these women is not uncommon; for example, their experiences were documented in the 1930s as part of the Federal Writers' Project of the WPA, and they continue to be written about in scholarly books, journals, and dissertations. The women presented here, however, are quite unique. While Harriet Jacobs' grandmother displays physical resistance against a white male slave owner, Sylvia Dubois directly challenges and dominates her white mistress, which signals a complex relationship between resistance, radicalism, and both white and black female power during slavery. In addition, the ways in which the two women's stories are framed place them in conversation with black folklore; in particular, Sylvia Dubois and Jacobs' grandmother resemble folk heroines.

C.W. Larison introduces Sylvia Dubois as a heroine at the beginning of her narrative; he writes, "while getting the biography of the heroine, a vast amount of the customs and manners of the people with whom she lived is also acquired" (Larison 135). He goes on to recount stories about Dubois told by members of her Great Bend community. Dubois' status as historical public figure, or folk heroine, is confirmed through these stories: Larison writes, "in her fights, it is said, she engaged alike man or woman, black or white – beast or bird – anything but God or devil" (Larison 162). Larison's third-person omniscient point-of-view suggests that he has received his information not from Dubois, but from a source who either witnessed or heard stories of Dubois' actions. Second, Dubois' engaging of man, woman, bird, or beast suggests that her ability to fight trumps race, gender, and size. In another instance, Larison describes Dubois' ability to "wade in" on fights, "to seize wherever hand-holt was easiest, and to throw one Negro

in one direction, and another in another direction, until the last fellow was hurled from the arena of the fight” (Larison 163). Larison continues, “oftentimes she threw them with such force, that the dash upon the ground unfitted them for further action.” “Such feats, owing to her great size, and greater strength,” Larison adds, “she accomplished with ease; and it is said, that such were her deliberations, that she would return from such scenes in the utmost composure” (Larison 163). Although the point-of-view is important here, what is most significant about this passage is the concept of female physical power: Dubois is able to use her power to hurl numerous people from a fight and then to leave the fight both unaffected and unharmed.

Larison comments on Dubois’ physical prowess throughout the narrative; at one point, Dubois chimes in herself. Larison writes that according to Dubois, wood and steel could make her wince a little, “but woe to the combatant that dared to resort to those unfair implements of war.” Larison explains, “at best, even with these, they could only wound her, -- just enough to exasperate her to do justice to the occasion. For, when rigid for a fist fight, never enough stood before her...to discomfit her, or to keep her upon the sod” (Larison 162). This passage suggests that Dubois’ physical power was atypical and uncharacteristic of a slave woman. At one point in the narrative, Dubois validates and demonstrates her own physical prowess. During a conversation with Larison regarding her interaction with her “bad” neighbors on the mountain, Dubois explains that they never troubled her much – “they know it wouldn’t do; they know I’d give ‘em that” (Larison 169). Larison writes that as an explanation of “that,” Dubois brought her right fist into her left hand “until the smack could be heard fifty yards” (Larison 169). Dubois is fully aware of how much her size, strength, and skills have afforded her control and power.

DuBois’ multilayered relationship to resistance, control, and power is demonstrated through her encounters with her white mistress. First, essential to understanding this relationship

is recognizing the ways in which resistance works for Dubois: verbal resistance and defiance are almost always precursors for Dubois' physical resistance. First, Dubois prefaces her "tale of resistance" by describing how she resists death. She explains that once her mistress hit her until she was so stiff that the mistress thought she was dead; "once after that," she continues, "because I was a little sassy, she leveled me with a fire-shovel and broke my pate. She thought I was dead then, but I wasn't" (Larison 161). Larison validates Dubois' story by pressing her skull and confirming that a dent is there. Dubois' ability to resist death after a horrendous injury not only demonstrates her extraordinariness and strength, but serves as the first example of how she one-upped her mistress.

The second occurred when Dubois knocked her mistress down "and blamed near killed her" (Larison 163). Dubois explains what led to her "fixing" her mistress, paying her up "for all her spunk" (Larison 163). There were some "grand folks" stopping in the barroom, Dubois states, and the mistress wanted the place to look stylish and tidy. Dubois admits that because she felt grum, she did not clean the barroom well enough to suit her mistress, who then scolded Dubois. Dubois sassed her, and the mistress struck Dubois with her hand. Dubois explains that she "set down her tools, and squared for a fight" (Larison 163). She continues, "I struck her a hell of a blow with my fist. I didn't knock her entirely through the panels of the door; but her landing against the door made a terrible smash...and I didn't know myself but that I'd killed the old devil" (Larison 163). This extraordinary slave woman's physical encounter with her mistress not only reveals another level of resistance, but provides an evocative illustration of white female power and control versus black female power and control. First, Dubois' halfhearted attempt at cleaning the barroom demonstrates one layer of resistance: because she was sick and because she was not up to styling the room for the mistress, Dubois delivers a perfunctory performance.

Second, after the mistress scolded her, Dubois “sassed her,” indicating a form of verbal resistance. Lastly, Dubois’ physical fight with her mistress demonstrates how Dubois, a black slave woman, uses her physicality to wrest authority from her authoritarian mistress. In this sense, Dubois has become what her white mistress represented: a source of female power and control. It is due to Dubois’ extraordinary physical strength and fighting prowess that she is able to claim this role.

Harriet Jacobs’ grandmother in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* also displays physical resistance; but unlike Dubois, Jacobs’ grandmother’s encounter with a white male provides an example of black female power and control in contrast to white masculinity. Jacobs’ grandmother, like Sylvia Dubois, is depicted as a folk heroine, and this is evident through Jacob’s own description of how she managed to avoid Dr. Flint’s sexual advances. Jacobs explains that her grandmother’s “presence in the neighborhood was some protection” (Jacobs 27); she adds, “Though she had been a slave, Dr. Flint was afraid of her. He dreaded her scorching rebukes. Moreover, she was known and patronized by many people; and he did not wish to have his villainy made public” (Jacobs 27). The grandmother’s presence and status in the neighborhood solidify her place as a popular public figure with power and a reputation. Jacobs describes this reputation when she narrates an incident involving her grandmother and a white man. She states, in reference to her grandmother, “She was usually very quiet in her demeanor; but if her indignation was roused, it was not very easily quelled” (Jacobs 27). Jacobs elaborates, “I had been told that she once chased a white gentleman with a loaded pistol, because he insulted one of her daughters” (Jacobs 27). The gun mentioned here is significant in two ways: First, the adjective “loaded” suggests that Jacobs’ grandmother was prepared to inflict harm, if necessary. Second, the “loaded pistol” alludes to a phallus and signifies a transfer a power: the grandmother

is carrying the loaded pistol, and the unnamed, evidently unarmed white gentleman – whose race and gender grants him power and status – is the one being chased. Like Dubois, Jacobs' grandmother successfully uses her fighting prowess to wrest power and control from whites. Jacobs' grandmother's ability to fight adds to her extraordinariness.

The Extraordinary Slave Mothers: Defying the Limits of Time, Space, and Geography

Central to the process of enslavement was the need for masters to control the movement of their slaves. During chattel slavery, movement through space was often either limited or restricted and usually criminalized, so much so that masters used passes, roll calls, and curfews to police slave mobility, and slaves who travelled at night risked being captured or flogged. In his *Narrative*, Frederick Douglass explains that his mother, Harriet Bailey, was a field hand and often visited him in the night; he then mentions that for slaves, a whipping was the penalty of not being in the field at sunrise, “unless a slave has special permission from his or her master to the contrary – a permission which they seldom get, and one that gives it the proud name of being a kind master” (Douglass 13). For slave mothers like Douglass’s who often travelled on foot either with their child or for the purpose of seeing them, movement through time and space was an extraordinary act.

Douglass’ mother’s extraordinariness stems from her ability to challenge the limits of time, space, and authority. Douglass writes that “after the performance of her day’s work,” (Douglass 13) his mother often walked twelve miles at night, “travelling the whole distance on foot” (Douglass 13), to visit him. Douglass explains at the start of his narrative that he was separated from his mother as an infant and subsequently taken care of by a woman who was too old for labor; he never saw his mother more than 4 or 5 times in his life (Douglass 13). Douglass writes that his mother would lie down with him and get him to sleep; before he woke, “she was gone” (Douglass 13). Douglass adds, “very little communication ever took place between us. Death soon ended what little we could have while she lived, and with it her hardships and

suffering. She died when I was about seven years old, on one of my master's farms" (Douglass 13).

Although Douglass's mother's cause of death is unknown, what is significant about the account of his mother's life is Douglass's acknowledgment of his mother's "hardships and suffering." While his mother's challenging of the restriction of slave movement is impressive, it is a small act compared to the amount of physical labor she had to endure. His mother's ability to walk twelve miles back and forth on foot after a hard day's work indicates her strength and endurance. Since distance and movement through space are central to Douglass's mother's history, understanding the significance of time is equally important. Douglass's memories of his mother only include "the night": "I never recollect seeing my mother by the light of day. She was with me in the night" (Douglass 13). This suggests that Douglass' mother was able to move through and navigate space with great skill and from the many visitations she made, it is implied that she also resisted capture.

Like Douglass's mother, Sylvia Dubois also physically challenges the limits of time, space, and authority; but unlike Douglass's mother, Dubois proves her extraordinariness by escaping captivity on foot and with her child in tow. During her interview, C.W. Larison asks how she arrived in Flagtown, New Jersey, from Great Bend. Dubois replies, "On foot...I came right down through the Beech Woods, all alone, excepting my young one in my arms" (Larison 166). She continues, "Sometimes I didn't see a person for half a day, sometimes I didn't get half enough to eat, and never had any bed to sleep in; I just slept anywhere. My baby was about a year and a half old, and I had to carry it all the way" (Larison 166). What is striking about her story is how her physical strength and endurance allowed her to walk an ostensibly long distance while carrying a year-old child. Resistance also works in two ways for Dubois: On the one hand,

the wilderness serves as a form of resistance because, as Dubois explains, it was “full of panthers, bears, wildcats, and wolves” (Larison 166) that could have easily harmed or impeded Dubois. She continues, “I often saw ‘em in the daytime, and always heard ‘em howling in the night” (Larison 166). On the other hand, Dubois was apparently skilled enough to physically resist the animals even though “that old panther...made the hair stand up all over [her] head” (Larison 166) and to flee captivity successfully. Sylvia Dubois and Harriet Bailey represent slave mothers whose abilities to move through space at a time when slave mobility was both policed and restricted demonstrate not only their extraordinariness, but their willingness to suffer on behalf of their children.

The Extraordinary Spiritual Sisters: Slave Woman Who Save Souls

In the introduction to *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth-Century*, William Andrews argues that while fugitive slave narrators were fighting for political and economic freedom for blacks, the black spiritual autobiographer was working to prove that blacks, like whites, were “much chosen by God for eternal salvation” (Andrews 1). For black women autobiographers like Zilpha Elaw and Jarena Lee, in particular, Andrews asks, “From what source did they derive the sense of authority that emboldened them to challenge the tradition of male leadership in churches, or, in the case of Elaw especially, to become independent evangelists apart from the sanction of any established church?” (Andrews 14). Andrews continues, “What caused each of these women to reject the pastoral authority of many male ministers in favor of the primacy of their individual perceptions of God’s will?” (Andrews 14). Although Andrews attributes Elaw’s and Lee’s courage to their confidence, I argue that Elaw, of *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels, and Labours of Mrs. Elaw*, and Lee, of *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee*, are propelled by their God-given extraordinariness. God ordains and sanctifies them as holy, gifts them with the ability to prophesy, and tasks them with converting the souls of non-believers. Elaw and Lee physically labor on behalf of their “master” – God – and as servants, they transform the unholy to holy, the unsaved to saved.

Zilpha Elaw’s sanctification is proven by her physical resistance to death. Throughout her narrative, she describes instances where God heals her when she is sick. Once, she writes, “it pleased God to raise me up and enable me to go and hear him, and render my thanksgivings to God for His great goodness and tender care towards me in my illness” (Elaw 110). In another

instance, Elaw writes, “my ankle was broken, and I was laid by for a time; but after a few months, my hurt was recovered, and I resumed my work in the vineyard of the Lord” (Elaw 129). And finally, she explains, “After an illness of eight month’s duration, my health was re-established, and I was again brought forth to the service of my heavenly master” (Elaw 130). While Jarena Lee is also often physically ill, her sanctification is proven through God’s deliverance of her from self-harm. Lee describes an incident where she told a lie, afterwards felt the weight of her sins, and wanted to seek relief by drowning herself. She explains, but “it was the unseen arm of God which saved me from self-murder” (Lee 28). Though it is God who heals Elaw and saves Lee, neither Elaw nor Lee, unlike Patsey and Sylvia Dubois, is presented as physically strong. In fact, specifically for Elaw, there exists a rigid dichotomy between strength and weakness. Throughout her narrative, she is depicted as weak, frail, and feeble, but it is often in her weakness that she is closest to God. This dichotomy also draws a stark distinction between the extraordinary black slave woman and the utility of the black female body.

For slave women like Patsey, Sylvia Dubois, Hetty, and Harriet Bailey, physical strength and endurance guide their resistance and performance; for Elaw, however, the black female slave spirit is what guides the black female body. Elaw’s conversion experience is the perfect example of this relationship. At a camp meeting, Elaw recalls that “God was pleased to separate [her] soul unto Himself, to sanctify [her] as a vessel designed for honour, made meet for the master’s use” (Elaw 66). Elaw states that she cannot recall whether she was “in the body” or “out of the body on that auspicious day.” However, she notes that after her witnessing a powerful sermon by one of the ministers and a prayer by the congregation, she became so overpowered with the presence of God that she sank upon the ground, “laid there for a considerable time; and while [she] was thus prostrate on earth, [her] spirit seemed to ascend up into the clear circle of the sun’s disc”

(Elaw 66). She concludes by recalling a voice, which said to her: “Now thou art sanctified; and I will show thee what thou must do” (Elaw 66). For Elaw, being “in the body” – or present in the flesh, but not the spirit – serves as a metaphorical form of “spiritual” resistance. That is, it is not until Elaw is in a state of weakness and meekness that she hears the voice of the Holy Spirit and pledges to employ herself “in visiting families, and in speaking personally to the members thereof, of the salvation and eternal interests of their souls, visit[ing] families, and attend[ing] upon the other errands and services of the Lord” (Elaw 67).

Class, place, and mobility also affect Elaw and Lee in different ways. Although Elaw is a servant – “(a female) belonging to the same family stock with [other] poor, debased, uneducated, coloured slaves” (Elaw 92) – she is able to move from plantation to plantation and teach the slaves the knowledge of God. The authority that Elaw possesses over her slave counterparts lies in her ability to preach and to prophesy to them. While Elaw does eventually garner a following, and writes that many people would flock around her and require her to minister to them the “word of life” (Elaw 92-93), her status as a slave remains consistent through the narrative. Lee, in contrast, not only preaches to and converts slaves, but converts whites as well. She mentions at one point in her narrative that an aged slaveholder once walked three miles to see her, and she recounts the experience of a white Methodist lady, who “the Lord first awakened” (Lee 47) under Lee’s preaching.

Central to Lee and Elaw’s extraordinariness is their ability to prophesy and to preach. After visiting Richard Allen, the bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal church, and her subsequent conversion, Lee recalls being able to “exhort sinners, and to tell of the wonders and of the goodness of Him who had clothed [her] with his salvation” (Lee 29). During her visit to the slave states, Elaw writes that when in the spirit and power of Christ, she was able to draw the

portraits of the slaves' characters, "make manifest the secrets of their hearts, and [tell] them all the things that they ever did" (Elaw 92). In another instance, Elaw describes a stout, violent man who approached her as if he would strike her; the man then sat beside his companions and, according to Elaw, began to pull his hair and groan aloud in mockery of the Methodists (Elaw 128). Elaw writes that the groans rested upon her spirit, and she felt the need to "rebuke and exhort him personally, telling him that those groans would soon be repeated in reality...and that he might be suddenly cut off from the land of the living, and required to give a woeful account of himself at the bar of God" (Elaw 128). A few days later, Elaw learned that the man died suddenly from a ruptured blood vessel in the lungs. In regards to Elaw's extraordinary ability to preach, she describes a young man who at first taunted her, but whose "laughter was turned to weeping" (Elaw 100) by the end of her sermon. In an effort to validate herself and her abilities, Elaw explains that the man was a slave driver who had never paid as much attention to a sermon as he had to Elaw's, and who, after Elaw's sermon, kneeled and prayed. Her ability to save an unsaved slave driver is a testament to her extraordinariness.

Conclusion

This thesis has identified the literary ancestors of the women whom Trudier Harris identifies as strong black women in twentieth-century fiction. In the introduction to this thesis, I considered the differences between my analyses of nineteenth-century nonfiction black women and Harris' analyses of twentieth-century fiction black women; after all, my expanding on Harris' argument while treating characters of a different time period and genre could be difficult to reconcile. In my case, the women's roles in the texts could have been very different from their roles in reality. For instance, Jean Fagan Yellin asserts that Jacobs' grandmother's son was the potential son of Allan Ramsay, "a prosperous dry goods merchant and haberdasher" (Yellin 25). Could Jacobs' grandmother's status in the community have stemmed from her relations with white men? Could Patsey have picked five hundred pounds of cotton because she was beaten and forced to do so, not because she was an extraordinary manual laborer? Could these slave women be composites created by the narrators as an autobiographical technique? Regardless, what is important to note is that all of these women – fictional or nonfictional – are analyzed based on their representations in the text, and the women presented in this thesis fit within the designation of extraordinary domestic worker, physical laborer, physical resister, mother, or spiritual sister.

Although the categories presented here are neither fixed nor exhaustive, they suggest that during slavery, there were a set of expectations, behaviors, and qualities that were held in high regard. Most slave women were obliged to cook, to clean, to nurse, and to harvest. To do these things well, however, signaled extraordinariness. For slave women who travelled long distances and who fought and resisted, their extraordinariness stemmed from the notion that they were defying what was normal for women and participating in actions that were admired when performed by men. In other words, these women were performing beyond the constraints of

femininity. What does this suggest, then, about black female potential, specifically potential for achievement, during slavery? What does this suggest about how performance is measured across lines of race and gender under the slave system? And in terms of these slave women as characters, how are they setting up patterns to be judged by, or to live up to, in future literary works?

In the literature review, I briefly considered the relationship between slave narratives and black folklore. The link between the two is critical because as exceptional men and women who endured slavery, escaped, and later went on to tell the stories of their experiences in “the peculiar institution,” Black slave narrators are often viewed by literary critics as inactive participants in slave folk culture. Could slave narrators be incorporating these women into their narratives as figures of signification to validate their own experiences in bondage? I would argue that Northrup signifies upon Patsey throughout his narrative in order to reveal the brutality of both slave labor and the slave system and to prove the extra humanity required of an individual to survive slavery. If Sylvia Dubois can be analyzed as a folk heroine, then how does this practice work alongside the rhetorical aims of the slave narrative, which were to prove that the slave was “a man and a brother” to whites?

It is also difficult to discuss extraordinary slave women without recognizing the contributions of Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth. Truth and Tubman’s fame helped to establish a public image of the extraordinary black slave woman in America. Like Patsey, Hetty, and Sylvia Dubois, Sojourner Truth spent the first quarter of her life performing arduous physical labor. Harriet Tubman, like many of the women examined in this paper, was beaten by an abusive master and, as a result, suffered a severe head injury. This head injury caused Tubman to have “visions” which she believed were given by God, similar to the case of Zilpha

Elaw. And one of Tubman's initial trips in which she led slaves to freedom included bringing her two children to Philadelphia where they were protected from being sold as slaves in Maryland.

The extraordinary black woman has a long history in America, and the extraordinary slave woman specifically serves as a reminder of how black women worked, mothered, and resisted in the face of adversity and despite hardships, suffering, and despair. These slave women sought to justify and reclaim their humanity, and their images should remind us of those who fought tirelessly and emphatically for black freedom.

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