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Aberrant Time:

The Peculiar Temporalities of Black Women's Labors in Nineteenth-Century African American  
Autobiographies

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

by

Erica Leeanne Onugha

2018

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

*Aberrant Time:*

The Peculiar Temporalities of Black Women's Labors in Nineteenth-Century African American  
Autobiographies

by

Erica Leanne Onugha

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Los Angeles, 2018

Professor Richard Yarborough, Chair

*Aberrant Time* argues that the additional burdens of involuntary sexual and reproductive labor during slavery led both male and female slave narrators to articulate black women's uniquely gendered experiences of time. It also asks how newly emancipated women writers portrayed their work time to express agency during Reconstruction. Black women's work was unorthodox because they were forced to perform manual and domestic labor in addition to sexual and reproductive labor for the personal gratification and financial benefit of their owners. Even after emancipation, the labor and time of black women remained peculiar as many continued to work outside of the home and were subjected to discrimination in a profoundly racist labor

market. Drawing from slave narratives by Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Solomon Northup and Elizabeth Keckley, *Aberrant Time* identifies and analyzes the slave laboring temporalities unique to black women. It also examines how the depictions of black women's time and labor changes as they progress from puberty to motherhood and transition from slavery to freedom. In analyzing gender and time in African American autobiographies, this dissertation endeavors to correct the implicit scholarly assumption that nineteenth-century African American women and men—slaves in particular—experienced time in the same way.

The dissertation of Erica Leeanne Onugha is approved.

Yogita Goyal

Uri McMillan

Brenda Stevenson

Richard Yarborough, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2018

For Isioma and Osinachi

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<sup>1</sup> Jacobs 116.



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*Aberrant Time: The Peculiar Temporalities of Black Women's Labors in Nineteenth-Century  
African American Autobiographies*

In chapter five of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*—"The Trials of Girlhood"—Harriet Jacobs describes her entry into her "fifteenth year—a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl."<sup>2</sup> By collapsing any distinction between her life story and those of all slave girls, Jacobs indicates that what she experiences is both universal and inevitable. This quotation addresses what Jacobs suggests throughout her slave narrative: that enslaved black women experienced time differently than enslaved men. Jacobs identifies puberty as the precise period in a slave girl's life when her experience of time will begin to diverge from that of enslaved boys. Jacobs maintains that the experience of puberty is fundamentally different for enslaved girls because of the sexual harassment and forced sexual labor that slave girls will almost certainly face.<sup>3</sup> By exposing how enslaved black women perform constant manual and domestic labor while vulnerable to coerced sexual and reproductive labor, Jacobs reveals that it is the demand for black women to perform *multiple* forms of work that produces their uniquely gendered depictions of time. Jacobs's narrative reveals not just the racial experience of labor and time, but also the gendered experience of both.

My dissertation seeks to widen this window into the experiences of enslaved women by exploring how the burdens of sexual and reproductive labor affect how slave narrators depict

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<sup>2</sup> Jacobs 27. All citations are taken from the Harvard edition of the text.

<sup>3</sup> Although Jacobs discusses the sexual harassment and rape of enslaved men briefly in her narrative (See Valerie Rohy, *Anachronism and Its Others: Sexuality, Race, Temporality*), she suggests that these instances are rare. In contrast, she describes the sexual harassment and threat of rape as an experience that all slave girls endure.

black women's experiences of time during slavery and immediately after emancipation. My dissertation—*Aberrant Time: The Peculiar Temporalities of Black Women's Labors in Nineteenth-Century African American Autobiographies*—offers a feminist reading of the multiple temporalities of black women's labors as narrated in nineteenth-century African-American autobiographies to consider how black women's labor was “peculiar” in both senses of the word.<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, black women's labor was unorthodox. As Jennifer L. Morgan explains, slave owners “inverted the gender ideology that they applied to white women and work [...] African women and girls found themselves in the field.”<sup>5</sup> Black women were forced to perform manual and domestic labor—often working side by side with black men in the fields. In addition, they were also treated like sexual property and forced to perform sexual and reproductive labor for the personal gratification and financial benefit of their owners. Even after emancipation, the labor and time of black women remained peculiar as many black women continued to work outside of the home as wage earners subjected to discrimination in a profoundly racist labor market.

I conduct an intersectional feminist reading of time and labor in five nineteenth-century African American autobiographies. I utilize the methods of literary studies, feminist theory, cultural studies, intersectional theory, and social history to perform a comparative analysis of

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<sup>4</sup> Black female slaves' subjectivities were formed in relation to their circumscribed legal and social experiences. In “The Strangest Freaks of Despotism”: Queer Sexuality in Antebellum African American Slave Narratives,” Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman explains the status of female slaves by examining the etymology of “peculiar”:

The Oxford English Dictionary defines *peculiar* as both adjective and noun. As an adjective, *peculiar* denotes specificity and unorthodoxy. As a noun, it denotes property or possession. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, mistresses and concubines were commonly referred to as “peculiar,” connoting their status as sexual property that existed in uneasy relation to dominant sexual norms. Extending this logic, we may understand slaves as their masters' “peculiar.” (235)

<sup>5</sup> Morgan 145.

*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845) and *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1892), Solomon Northup's *12 Years a Slave* (1853), Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), and Elizabeth Keckley's *Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House* (1868). Using textual close readings to identify and track the different temporal modes in each text I examine the formal techniques each writer uses to depict time including time-related motifs, repetition, and explicit references to time. My analysis demonstrates how the additional burdens of coerced sexual and reproductive labor led black autobiographers to represent the temporal and laboring experiences of black women in notably different ways than those of black men. In addition, I explore the representations of black women's time and labor to reveal how depictions of time expose the complex and changing relationship of black women to their labor as they progress from puberty to motherhood and transition from slavery to freedom. I analyze nineteenth-century autobiographies by black men *and* women because they offer an opportunity to compare how black men and women portray black women's time and labor.

My research on enslaved black women's portrayals of their laboring times draws upon two scholarly genealogies: historical analysis and literary criticism. In this introduction I provide an outline of my dissertation argument and key terms before briefly discussing historical research on slave labor with a focus on the differences between the work performed by enslaved men and women. Next I give an overview of the literary scholarship on time in American literature with an emphasis on African American autobiographies. After reviewing these two scholarly traditions, I provide a fuller discussion of my argument and explain why the neologisms I develop are necessary to better reflect the depictions of black women's laboring temporalities analyzed in my subsequent chapters.

I address the portrayals of enslaved and newly emancipated black women's time in the autobiographies under consideration by revising three theories of slave time: Lloyd Pratt's theory of *slave laboring time* and Daylanne K. English's theories of *fugitive time* and *hardworking temporality*. I modify Pratt's *slave laboring time* by dividing it into several temporalities that correspond to the different forms of work that enslaved women were forced to do. My primary focus is on two additional temporalities that I identify based on the uniquely gendered labor of slave women: *slave sexual laboring time* and *slave reproductive laboring time*. *Slave sexual laboring time* encompasses the time when enslaved women were sexually abused. *Slave reproductive laboring time* covers the time of pregnancy and childrearing, which are forms of slave labor since caring for enslaved children financially benefitted slave owners. I also expand English's discussion of *fugitive time*, a transitional temporality spanning the runaway slave's escape from slavery to freedom, and *hardworking temporality*, an account of how slaves work incessantly, to consider the unique experiences of enslaved black women.

I derive my argument that black women depict their diverse laboring times differently in nineteenth-century African American autobiographies from historical scholarship that shows how integral New World slavery was to Western capitalism. In his seminal *Capitalism & Slavery*, Eric Williams offers an explanation "of the contribution of slavery to the development of British capitalism."<sup>6</sup> His economic analysis reveals that New World slavery arose because it was the most economical and viable labor option available. The racist ideology about Africans evolved as a rationalization to justify the exploitation of slaves. He explains:

Here, then, is the origin of Negro slavery. The reason was economic, not racial; it had to do not with the color of the laborer, but the cheapness of the labor. [...] The features of

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<sup>6</sup> Williams ix.

the [black] man, his hair, color and dentifrice, his “subhuman” characteristics so widely pleaded, were only the later rationalizations to justify a simple economic fact: that the colonies needed labor and resorted to Negro labor because it was cheapest and best.<sup>7</sup>

Williams’s analysis clarifies that slavery’s profit motive was the driving force behind the dehumanizing labor, physical and sexual abuse, and familial separations that I analyze. Williams also offers a reminder that slave labor, and by extension the time it produced, was not naturally occurring, but instead developed in a slave system that prioritized wealth over the humanity of the slaves it exploited.

In fact, inhumane slave labor generated so much revenue that it altered the development of the West and played a central role in the global ascendancy of the United States. In *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, Cedric J. Robinson explains that slavery was central to the development of nineteenth-century capitalism and the markets upon which it depended:

African workers had been transmuted by the perverted canons of mercantile capitalism into property. Then, African labor power as slave labor was integrated into the organic composition of nineteenth-century manufacturing and industrial capitalism, thus sustaining the emergence of an extra-European world market within which the accumulation of capital was garnered for the further development of industrial production.<sup>8</sup>

Robinson argues that the foundation of nineteenth-century economic development rested upon the perverse transformation of Africans into property. The atrocities documented in slave narratives describe the devastating human costs of transforming people into capital. My

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<sup>7</sup> Williams 19-20.

<sup>8</sup> Robinson 113.



particular focus is on how slaves describe the different types of labor forcibly extracted from them and the effects it had on their portrayals of time.

While all slave labor was essential to western economic development in the nineteenth-century, black women's slave labors played an especially vital role in the maintenance of slavery and economic development. According to Jennifer L. Morgan in *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*, slave owners "depended upon and exploited African women. They required women's physical labors in order to reap the profits of the colonies [...] Women were enslaved in large numbers, they performed critical hard labor."<sup>9</sup> The centrality of black women's intense physical manual labor cannot be overstated. As a significant percentage of the slave population, black women often worked in the fields with black men.

The prevalence of black women's manual labor is sometimes rendered invisible by the pervasive image of women performing domestic labor. Morgan ascribes this to the "overdetermined connection between women and the domestic [that] has dominated the ways we think about women's work"<sup>10</sup> and the "[i]mages of enslaved female house servants tend [that] to populate the collective imaginary."<sup>11</sup> Morgan explains how the assumption that women performed domestic labor overshadows the backbreaking physical labor extracted from black women:

To be exempted from the field in favor of the house was a fate open to very few enslaved women [...] It was far more likely that women [...] would end up in the fields. Indeed, the entire system of hereditary racial slavery depended on slaveowners' willingness to ignore

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<sup>9</sup> Morgan 1.

<sup>10</sup> Morgan 145.

<sup>11</sup> Morgan 145.

cultural meanings of work that had been established in England and to make Africans work in ways the English could not conceive of working themselves.<sup>12</sup>

By describing how slave owners deployed black women's slave labor, she illustrates how slavery overturned longstanding notions of what was considered appropriate labor for women. This underscores how slave labor was deliberately defined to adhere to capitalistic imperatives of profit over socially accepted gender norms dictating the types and intensity of women's labors.

What often garners less attention than the brutality of slaves' hard physical labor is that multiple forms of labor were extracted from black women. Morgan explains that their reproductive labor was as equally important to the maintenance of slavery as their manual labor: "Women's labor was at the heart of monoculture export economics in both the Caribbean and the American South, and their reproductive lives were at the heart of the entire venture of racial slavery."<sup>13</sup> She elaborates on how slavery depended upon the manual and reproductive labor of black women: "The obscene logic of racial slavery defined reproduction as work."<sup>14</sup> However, "reproductive work did not alone define daily life. *The effort of reproducing the labor force occurred alongside that of cultivating crops.*"<sup>15</sup> What Morgan reveals, then, is that for slave women labor was not limited to agricultural work but also included biological reproduction—both of which enriched their owners by increasing their property and wealth.

The institution of slavery allowed owners to take advantage of black women's natural periods of development—specifically puberty and motherhood—to exploit slave women's bodies and reproductive abilities for profit. It is this insidious linkage of biology and labor that leads Jacobs to describe her development around the time of puberty as a "sad epoch" in her life.

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<sup>12</sup> Morgan 145.

<sup>13</sup> Morgan 4.

<sup>14</sup> Morgan 144.

<sup>15</sup> Morgan 145, emphasis added.

For enslaved women, puberty and motherhood entailed the addition of new forms of forced labor that they had to perform. In *Arn't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, Deborah Gray White explains:

For women, the beginning and cessation of the menses help define life's transitions, as does the beginning of motherhood. For the antebellum slave woman, biology combined with the demands made on her for plantation labor to delineate the series of passages that marked her life.<sup>16</sup>

What I wish to emphasize here is the extreme degree to which slavery transformed so much of slave women's lives and bodies into profitable labor. However, what inaugurates Jacobs's entry into her "sad epoch" is not exactly puberty, but the commencement of her treatment as a sexual object when she becomes fifteen, which is around the time of puberty.

It is precisely in the demand for sexual and reproductive labor where black women's experiences of labor and time differed significantly from those of black men. White explains that slave owners treated female slaves differently than male slaves, which created a dramatically gendered experience of slavery: "[W]ithin the institution of racial slavery there were two systems, one for women, the other for men. This was due, in part, to the different expectations that slave owners had of male and female slaves."<sup>17</sup> These gender distinctions extended to the types of labor male and female slaves were required to perform. As White explains, "Female slave bondage was not better or worse, or more or less severe, than male bondage, but it was different"<sup>18</sup> because women were subjected to "sexual abuse, abuse made legitimate by the conventional wisdom that black women were promiscuous Jezebels [... and] the slave woman's

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<sup>16</sup> White 91.

<sup>17</sup> White 62.

<sup>18</sup> White 90.

childbearing and child care responsibilities.”<sup>19</sup> While all slaves were forced to work as much as humanly possible, black women were forced to perform diverse types of labor that created vastly different experiences, including the temporal differences I explore. Enslaved women worked in a different laboring environment than enslaved men—one rife with sexual exploitation that extended beyond the manual labor and physical abuse that is well documented in slave narratives. Implicit in White’s explanation is a delineation of the manual,<sup>20</sup> sexual and reproductive labor that enslaved women were commonly required to perform in contrast to the mostly manual labor that enslaved men did.

Perhaps the most under-discussed form of work extracted from enslaved women was sexual labor. In *What is Slavery?*, Brenda Stevenson explains how sexual violence became a constitutive part of slave women’s laboring experience:

Another important difference between the experiences of slave female and male laborers, perhaps the most significant difference of all, was the sexualized component of women’s work. Most male slaves did not face the constant sexual harassment or battery that many slave women confronted and most feared. Indeed, one aspect of female labor that scholars are just beginning to fully recognize as *labor* was the demand that slave girls and women act as sexual outlets for male owners, overseers, drivers, and male slaves as well.

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<sup>19</sup> White 90.

<sup>20</sup> Although there are significant differences between manual (physical) labor and domestic labor (broadly defined as housework), when discussing slave labor in this study I will use manual labor as an inclusive term to refer to both manual and domestic labor. While I do not wish to negate the differences in these types of labor, I do not see these differences creating different experiences of time during slavery. In contrast, sexual labor and reproductive labor create vastly different experiences of time for enslaved women since sexual labor often interrupts the workday and reproductive labor requires extensive and ongoing time to care for children. This project is only concerned with the *differences* in the experiences of time that stem from the uniquely gendered and embodied labor performed by black women. After emancipation, the laboring time of black women changes as they shift from being forced to work incessantly as slaves to having more control, however limited, over their work time.

[...] Masters and other males who came in contact with slave women expected, and often demanded, their compliance with requests for sexual favors. It literally became part of their jobs and a source of enormous pain for the enslaved. Indeed, the sexual abuse of female slaves was one of the most disruptive traumas that slave girls, women, and their families experienced.<sup>21</sup>

The trauma of forced sexual labor also led to coerced reproductive labor. While enslaved women were often required to perform reproductive labor, they were often denied the time to provide maternal care. Part of what I examine is the gendered ways in which slavery brutalized black women: through forced sexual and reproductive labor as well as the denial of basic maternal rights.

In addition to the complex and various forms of black women's slave labor, it also important to consider black women's paid labor during the nineteenth-century. Some black women—both enslaved and free—were able to perform paid labor, which facilitated a different understanding of black women's value outside of the system of slavery and especially after emancipation their relationship to the country. As Xiomara Santamarina explains in her analysis of black women's antebellum autobiographies in *Belabored Professions*, "Written by former slaves and freeborn black women, these autobiographies recast their authors' often-disparaged [self-supporting] labor as socially and culturally valuable to the nation."<sup>22</sup> Examining depictions of black women's paid labor during slavery and their free labor during Reconstruction offers the opportunity to examine how black women reimagined the value of their labor, time, and by extension their place within the nation.

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<sup>21</sup> Stevenson 137-138.

<sup>22</sup> Santamarina X.

The life stories of the black women I analyze reflect the complex and evolving relationship between labor and time in nineteenth-century America. I open with two iconic portrayals of enslaved women in autobiographies by men, starting with Frederick Douglass's brief depiction of his mother Harriet Bailey. Although he only saw her a few times before her death while he was a child, Douglass retains as much of her memory as he can throughout his three autobiographies. Douglass's recollections of his mother only occupy a few paragraphs in each autobiography, but what emerges from his brief remembrances is his depiction of a woman forced to perform as much manual labor as possible, who foregoes sleep and personal care to see and nurture her son when she can. In Douglass's brief lines about his mother, readers see her struggle to manage the competing labor and time demands of manual and reproductive labor as well as the brutal personal cost that she and Douglass bear since she is forced to work at the expense of time of with him. By virtue of being included in arguably the most famous slave autobiography, Harriet Bailey becomes a model of slave motherhood.

To consider male depictions of black women's sexual abuse, I turn to Solomon Northup's depiction of Patsey, his fellow slave who worked with him in the fields. Northup's meticulous detail in documenting the labor requirements of slaves provides an invaluable comparison of his manual labor to the manual and sexual labor forcibly extracted from Patsey. By contrasting his experience to Patsey, Northup's portrayal reveals the fear and anxiety that accompanied Patsey's sexual abuse. He also exposes how the flagrant sexual abuse of Patsey led to retaliatory violence by their jealous mistress. Northup portrays the tremendous physical and psychological toll that Patsey's competing labor and time demands had on her.

Despite the usefulness of Douglass and Northup's depictions, nothing can replace the depth and insight offered when women tell their own stories. Consequently, I focus on Harriet

Jacobs's depiction of sexual and reproductive labor and time during slavery in *Incidents* and Elizabeth Keckley's depiction of post-slavery labor and time in *Behind the Scenes*. I analyze Jacobs because her slave narrative occupies a prominent position in scholarship on nineteenth-century black women's autobiography even though her experiences were not representative of all enslaved women. As a slave who was spared from working in the fields and who is later able to reunite with her children as a freeperson in the North, Harriet Jacobs's road to freedom was unusual. However, she insists that the physical and sexual violence she both experienced and witnessed is common to all slave women. As France Smith Foster explains in *Written by Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746-1892*, "Harriet Jacobs represents the incidents in her life as being at the same time unique and typical, unusual and commonplace."<sup>23</sup> According to William L. Andrews in "The Changing Moral Discourse of Nineteenth-Century African American Women's Autobiography: Harriet Jacobs and Elizabeth Keckley," *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is "the most famous of the female slave narratives [...] [and it] inaugurated the tradition of black women's autobiography in a profound interrogation of the relationship of power, sex, and morality within the slave system."<sup>24</sup> By paying significant attention to the sexual and reproductive labor slave women were forced to perform, Jacobs made the themes of sexual violence and childrearing, as well as their accompanying temporalities, central to the narrated experience of enslaved women.

In contrast to Jacobs's emphasis on sexual labor, Elizabeth Keckley barely discusses her coerced sexual labor and instead focuses on her successful work as seamstress. Andrews argues this reticence to discuss sexual labor is reflective a notable change in the themes covered in postbellum narratives: "[A] reading of female-authored slave narratives of the postbellum era

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<sup>23</sup> Foster *Written By Herself* 96.

<sup>24</sup> Andrews "Changing Moral Discourse" 227.

reveals a studied refusal to explore the kinds of moral problems attendant to the slave woman's sexuality that surface often in the discourse of the antebellum antislavery movement."<sup>25</sup> For Elizabeth Keckley, who was born a slave and after emancipation became a successful seamstress to Washington's elite, her autobiography offers a rare opportunity to examine the changing nature of black women's labor and working time during and immediately after slavery. According to Santamarina, Keckley shared many similarities with Jacobs during slavery, yet chose to emphasize the potential of her labor in the narrative:

Although it is clear that Keckley shared many of Harriet Jacobs's experiences as a slave woman—sexual violation, fears for her slave child, and so forth—in her narrative she subordinates these overtly gendered concerns to the details of her work history. As a transitional, postbellum text that combines slave narrative and political memoir, *Behind the Scenes* moves away from the concerns of the slave narrative and focuses mainly on demonstrating how a slave woman might recast the coercions of slave labor so as to produce herself as an empowered agent, rather than solely as a victim of bondage.<sup>26</sup>

Santamarina identifies Keckley's labor as a central way in which she demonstrates her independence and reframes her formative experience of slavery.

It is unsurprising that as soon as the shackles of slavery were removed, Keckley sought to reimagine her labor as a freeperson and in relation to the nation. This is because in the immediate aftermath of Emancipation, the question of where and how African Americans fit into the country was far from settled. No longer enslaved but certainly not a citizen with the benefits of full participation in the nation, Keckley uses her autobiography to imagine what the possibilities for integration and inclusion could look like by focusing on the future of post-slavery black

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<sup>25</sup> Andrews "Changing Moral Discourse" 227.

<sup>26</sup> Santamarina *Belabored Professions* 143.



labor. What is even less surprising is Keckley's decision to center black women's laboring time in her vision of the nation's future. Given how much slavery dictated the labor and time of slaves, it makes perfect sense for Keckley to focus her narration of freedom on how her experience of labor and time changes after emancipation.

Keckley's decision to use her experience of post-slavery time to argue for the equal citizenship of African-Americans falls in line remarkably well with the established literary scholarship on time in American literature. Indeed, much of the scholarship on time and literature can be traced back to Benedict Anderson's central claim that time is central to the constitution of the nation in his seminal *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Building on Walter Benjamin's idea of "homogeneous, empty time,"<sup>27</sup> Anderson maintains "simultaneity [...] measured by clock and calendar"<sup>28</sup> is what allowed "for the birth of the imagined community of the nation."<sup>29</sup> This imagined simultaneous experience of time allows citizens who will never meet to still believe in their shared concurrent pursuits.<sup>30</sup> Anderson's insight about the relationship between time and the nation ushered in a new era of scholarship that complicated scholarly notions of time and its depiction in literature. However, his lack of attention to race and gender was often reproduced in subsequent analyses.

One of the most significant developments of Anderson's work was the recognition that time is not singular, but rather constituted by various experiences of time, or temporalities. In *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time*, Wai Chee Dimock explains

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<sup>27</sup> Benjamin *Illuminations* 261.

<sup>28</sup> Anderson 24.

<sup>29</sup> Anderson 24.

<sup>30</sup> Anderson explains, the "idea of the nation [...] is conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history. An American will never meet, or even know the names of more than a handful of his 240,000-odd fellow-Americans. He has no idea of what they are up to at any one time. But he has complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity" (26).

that the seeming universality of time merely reflects an unexamined adoption of Newtonian time, which she describes as “numerical time” in which “[t]ime is imagined here as if it were a kind of measuring tape.”<sup>31</sup> Central to Newton’s theory is the “simultaneity”<sup>32</sup> of events, which assumes that we can locate any point in time and identify all of the events that occurred at that precise moment. The notion of simultaneity has significant ramifications for thinking about connections through time because it suggests that time is *the* incontrovertible way of linking disparate events. Drawing upon Einstein’s theory of relativity, which challenged Newton’s version of time, Dimock reveals that however ubiquitous Newtonian or universal time is, it is not the only form of time. In her reading of Einstein:

Simultaneity turns out not to be generalizable. Two events might be simultaneous in one frame of reference, but in a different frame they would not be. The "now" experienced in one location, then, cannot be the same as the "now" experienced in a differently moving location. These two nows cannot be unified: for the simultaneity that defines one turns out to be nonexistent in the other. Einstein, in this way, turns Newton's absolute truth into a contingent truth, specific to one set of coordinates, not generalizable beyond them. This is what he calls relativity.<sup>33</sup>

What Dimock’s reading of Einstein indicates is that time is not neatly simultaneous and numerically precise. Einstein’s insight reveals that relative location and perspective are essential to determining any temporal relation between events. In other words, time is relative depending on where you are and what you experience.

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<sup>31</sup> Dimock 123.

<sup>32</sup> Dimock 128.

<sup>33</sup> Dimock 131.

Scholars like Dimock have extended this understanding of time's relativity to the humanities and to literary studies in particular. The practical effect of time's relativity is that rather than talking about one singular time, we are, inevitably, talking about different times or temporalities—the splitting of time into multiple experiences of time. The ability to explore the racialized and gendered temporalities in nineteenth-century African American literature is predicated upon the understanding that modern time is not singular or universal, but rather comprised of multiple and heterogeneous temporalities that are nevertheless simultaneous and overlapping. However, Dimock's theory of "deep time," which seeks to "thread America[n] texts into the topical events of other cultures, while also threading the long durations of those cultures into the short chronology of the United States,"<sup>34</sup> focuses primarily on connecting American literature to other historical periods and geographical places. Dimock's "deep time" challenges the temporal and spatial boundaries of American literature, but it does not delve into the multiple experiences of time that occur simultaneously but differ due to racial and gender differences.

In "Race, Time and the Revision of Modernity," Homi K. Bhabha critiques the absence of race in Anderson's account of nationalism and offers a postcolonial theory of the "temporal split—or time lag"<sup>35</sup> as a conduit for the emergence of "postcolonial agency."<sup>36</sup> Bhabha insists on the need to recognize the temporalities of marginalized peoples in any account of the nation:

This encounter through the time-lag of representation insists that any representation of 'historical beginning' must encounter the *contingent place* from where its narrative *begins*

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<sup>34</sup> Dimock 3.

<sup>35</sup> Bhabha 200.

<sup>36</sup> Bhabha 200.

in relation to the temporalities of other marginal 'minority' histories that are seeking their 'individuation', their vivid realization.<sup>37</sup>

Bhabha explicitly critiques any explanation of nation-formation that posits a singular account of time and that does not recognize the ways in which marginalized people experience time differently as well as how those temporalities are also constitutive of the nation.

Like Bhabha, social historian Thomas M. Allen rejects the homogeneous time of Benjamin and Anderson and insists that the multiplicity of temporalities help constitute national identity. In *A Republic in Time*, Thomas M. Allen argues that analyzing nineteenth-century culture through texts and objects reveals the multiple forms of time, or temporalities, that have existed throughout modernity:

The complex cultural history of temporal experience in America—in which time could be, at once, both natural and artificial, both millennial and secular—allows us to see that time has been, and remains, a medium for addressing the apparent contradictions of modern national identity not by eliminating them but rather by making it possible to imagine nationality as an ongoing negotiation, in narrative, of the heterogeneous temporal modes.<sup>38</sup>

However, Allen challenges how Bhabha imagines these temporalities as forms of resistance and thus on the periphery of the nation. Instead, he argues that these different forms of time are equally constitutive of the nation:

Temporal heterogeneity thus becomes central to the experience of modern collective belonging. The crucial point that must be made in regard to recent theorizing about

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<sup>37</sup> Bhabha 213.

<sup>38</sup> Allen 4.

nationalism in American studies is that these heterogeneous temporalities are not marginal or resistant to the nation, nor do they represent forms of collective affiliation that will emerge after the demise of the nation. Rather, they are themselves the threads out of which the fabric of national belonging has long been woven.<sup>39</sup>

That is, the multiple, overlapping temporalities that exist simultaneously within the nation are the building blocks out of which national identity is constructed; they are not peripheral or ancillary. Allen's argument relocates temporal heterogeneity from the margins of national identity to the center, which indicates the need to analyze the temporalities of marginalized populations in the study of national literature.

In *Anachronism and Its Others: Sexuality, Race, Temporality*, Valerie Rohy makes a similar point about the temporality of slaves existing outside of normal calendar time. Based on her analysis in Douglass's *Narrative* and Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Rohy argues that the depiction of the slaves' time or "their double-time is the time of the nation."<sup>40</sup> Rohy reiterates the same point that Allen makes, but focuses on the experiences of African Americans: chronological time—whether called "time," national time, calendar time, linear time, historical time, clock time or any other singular designation—is simply one of many temporalities that exist simultaneously. She too argues that the temporalities of African Americans are equally constitutive of these national times, not separate, outside of, marginal to an imagined singular national time.

Part of the challenge of disaggregating the temporal experiences of enslaved men and women is due to the complex and changing nature of laboring time on nineteenth-century

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<sup>39</sup> Allen 11.

<sup>40</sup> Rohy 34.

plantations, which relied upon both agricultural and industrial modes of operation and time. In *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, Eugene D. Genovese describes the historical context in which such divergent experiences of time occurred. He explains, “slaveholders presided over a plantation system that constituted a halfway house between peasant and factory cultures.”<sup>41</sup> The hybrid laboring cultures in the plantation system shaped the management of plantation life, which affected how slaves experienced time:

The slaves could not reckon time either according to preindustrial peasant models or according to industrial factory models. [...] However much their [the plantations'] economic organization required and tried to compel quasi-industrial discipline, they also threw up countervailing pressures and embodied inescapable internal contradictions.

The setting remained rural, and the rhythm of work followed seasonal fluctuations. Nature remained the temporal reference point for the slaves. However much the slaveholders might have wished to transform their slaves into clock-punchers, they could not, for in a variety of senses both literal and metaphoric, there were no clocks to punch.<sup>42</sup>

Genovese’s detailed description reveals the plantation as a site in transition where the rural and industrial experiences of labor and time overlapped in messy, contradictory ways. While cataloguing this temporal complexity, it is easy to overlook the additional ways in which black women’s and black men’s experiences of time differed.

These gendered differences in slave labor had a profound effect on how enslaved women describe their experiences of time. By converting the natural acts of sex and motherhood into profitable labor, slavery altered slave women’s work time. Elizabeth Freeman explains the

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<sup>41</sup> Genovese 286.

<sup>42</sup> Genovese 291-92.

process through which labor changes the experience of time in *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*:

*[C]hrononormativity* [is] the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity [...] Chrononormativity is a mode of implantation, a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts. [...] Manipulations of time convert historically specific regimes of asymmetrical power into seemingly ordinary bodily tempos and routines, which in turn organize the value and meaning of time. The advent of wage work, for example, entailed a violent retemporalization of bodies once tuned to the season rhythms of agricultural labor.<sup>43</sup>

Freeman's theory of "retemporalization" helps to explain slavery's power to use physical violence and legal sanctioning to normalize new experiences of time: slave laboring times. Slave laboring times are new because they are not innate, but rather are forcibly taught through constant punishment. In the case of enslaved women, converting sex into sexual labor is a chrononormative process that removes sex from the privacy of the home, located outside of the work place and the timing of the work day, and relocates sexual labor to the plantation where the slave remains sexually available to the owner and other men given access to her. It also converts sex from a private act to one that can be publicly known since it takes place during work time. Freeman's analysis emphasizes that the process of reorganizing labor and time in ways that make them more productive and profitable are not natural, but rather are disruptive with violence frequently used as the catalyst for change. For slave mothers, slavery retemporalizes the natural timing of motherhood by prematurely separating mothers and babies in an attempt to destroy their instinctive bond. Further, slavery strips slave mothers of the right and available time to

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<sup>43</sup> Freeman 3.

provide maternal care, and grants slave owners the ability to decide how much time slave mothers can spend with their children. The primary focus on productivity and profitability leads to the violent upending of natural relationships and results in the violent insertion of new forms of time. What Freeman's analysis reveals is that the slave laboring times under consideration are unnatural temporalities created to more efficiently extract labor and profits from slaves. Following Saidiya Hartman's example of how "to illuminate the terror of the mundane and quotidian rather than exploit the shocking spectacle,"<sup>44</sup> this project exposes the horror of ordinary moments embedded in slave laboring times in addition to dramatic moments of physical, sexual, and reproductive violence.

When considering the depictions of time in African American literature, it is necessary to consider the relationship between time and labor for slaves. In *Chaotic Justice*, John Ernest explains how whites and blacks experienced time differently precisely because of laboring differences even while ostensibly living in the same space and historical period:

[W]hite and black Americans of a great many regions, slave and nominally free, lived in a cultural landscape divided by labor and time, and they necessarily negotiated their way through that landscape differently. Although they lived in the same historical period, they lived in different complexes of community, space, and time—and therefore, to a large extent, in different historical continuums.<sup>45</sup>

In language that echoes Einstein's theory of relativity, Ernest rejects the assumption of simultaneity that posits that whites and blacks experienced the same time simply because they existed in the same period. Instead, he insists that despite their simultaneous existence, blacks

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<sup>44</sup> Hartman 4.

<sup>45</sup> Ernest 151-152.



and whites in America were divided in a number of ways including labor and time. My project pushes Ernest's point further by considering how nineteenth-century America was divided by race, labor, and gender, and suggests that enslaved men and women describe significantly different temporal experiences. The notion of a singular racial time remains in the literature, and my project directly challenges this idea.

These temporalities profoundly shaped the subjectivity of slaves, which in turn affected how slave writers narrated their experiences of time. In thinking about the relationship between African American literature and time, Ernest explains, "[T]ime enter[s] African American literature not merely as a subject but as a fundamental condition, the terms by which a possible community might be narrated into consciousness."<sup>46</sup> Time is a way for African American writers to construct their stories and, of course, their places within them. Put another way, nineteenth-century African American writers do not merely tell *when* events happen; rather, their use of time tells *how* events happened and in what contexts. They construct their subjectivities and specific historical experiences through their uses of time. In the case of enslaved black women, their experiences of slavery are inseparable from their uniquely gendered slave laboring times.

The historical scholarship demonstrating how significantly enslaved women's labor differed from the labor of enslaved men has yet to fully permeate scholarship on time and African American literature. The few book-length considerations of time in African American literature do not focus on gender as a key analytic category, but do prioritize race. Rohy's book is one of a handful that examines time in African American literature. Completing this cluster of texts that focus on time and African American literature are two significant contributions. Lloyd Pratt's *Archives of American Time* investigates the multiple temporalities embedded within

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<sup>46</sup> Ernest 159.

American literature. Finally, Daylanne K. English's *Each Hour Redeem* examines time and citizenship in African American literature spanning the eighteenth to twenty-first centuries.

Pratt and English argue convincingly for the necessity of examining time in African American literature and firmly situate their research in larger conversations about time in American literature. I use the theoretical foundation they create to explain the stakes of my research. Pratt builds on Allen's analysis of nineteenth-century temporalities and applies it to American literary studies by explaining that heterogeneous temporalities pervade nineteenth-century American literature, including African American life writing.

To locate the multiple times circulating in African American life writing,<sup>47</sup> Pratt first rejects the notion of temporal absence advanced by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in *Figures in Black*. Pratt analyzes Gates's suggestion that the "deprivation of time"<sup>48</sup> that writers like Douglass highlight in their narratives shows that they were outside of time. Pratt asserts that Gates projects absence into these scenes and ignores the other forms of time that exist in these precise moments. Pratt calls this "disavowed time [...] laboring time,"<sup>49</sup> explaining,

Douglass's life narratives work hard to frame his experience as a chronicle of progress, but [...] the repetitive, unbroken, and unremitting labor the Douglass endures at Covey's produces a particular, and particularly brutal, nonprogressive experience of time. [...] Rather than having been deprived of time, though, it is more the case that Douglass has been forced to live the kind of time slave labor produces, or laboring time. [...] [T]he

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<sup>47</sup> I use "life writing" and "autobiography" as synonymous and interchangeable terms.

<sup>48</sup> Pratt 162.

<sup>49</sup> Pratt 163.

world Douglass inhabits is not a temporal desert. Rather, slave-holders try to deprive Douglass of linear progressive time and replace it with laboring time.<sup>50</sup>

Using Douglass, Pratt defines “slave laboring time” as the unrelenting labor that slaves were forced to perform, which is “nonprogressive” because it prevents slaves from experiencing personal growth as human subjects. While challenging his insistence on the nonprogressive nature of time being key to the slave experience, I will also expand Pratt’s definition of “slave laboring time” to include the laboring times of enslaved women.

Pratt develops his account of *slave laboring time*—the time slaves spent performing forced labor—solely on the depictions of time in Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and Solomon Northup’s *Twelve Years a Slave*. As a result, his account of slave labor and the time it produces focuses on both writers’ depictions of manual labor, which excludes other forms of labor and the experiences of enslaved women. My project splits Pratt’s theory of slave laboring time into additional temporalities that consider the uniquely gendered depictions of slave women’s laboring temporalities. The first new temporality is what I call *slave manual laboring time*, which describes the time enslaved men and women spent performing manual labor. Since Pratt’s analysis focuses on Douglass’s depiction of manual labor, what Pratt calls Douglass’s experience of slave labor falls under *slave manual laboring time*. Although a number of other slave temporalities existed concurrently with *slave manual laboring time*, I examine only the gendered temporalities that slave narrators depict: *slave sexual laboring time* and *slave reproductive laboring time*. Subdividing slave laboring time into different temporalities enables scholars to see how gendered divisions of labor affect how former slaves depict their experiences of time.

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<sup>50</sup> Pratt 164-65.

Unlike enslaved men who mostly performed manual labor and accordingly portray a relatively uniform experience of unrelenting work, most slave women were forced to perform sexual and reproductive labor in addition to manual labor. Consequently, formerly enslaved women's depictions of their own labor differ dramatically in detail and complexity from how formerly enslaved men portray women's experiences. More specifically, formerly enslaved women depict being forced to perform multiple types of labor throughout the day, with coerced sexual labor often interrupting their manual labor. The constant fear of sexual assault and the need to find time to provide prohibited maternal care to slave children all while performing manual labor led some enslaved women to depict their work time as full of anxiety and dread.

Like Pratt, English also explains the importance of examining time; however, her exclusive focus is on African American literature. She insists that with the exception of Pratt's chapter on multiple temporalities in African American life writing, "Literary scholars have yet to account fully for the ways African American writers have complicated received historical narratives of the nation's steady move toward standardized time."<sup>51</sup> English states that there are only two book-length analyses of time and African American literature: Bonnie Barthold's *Black Time: Fiction of Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States* (1981)<sup>52</sup> and her own *Each Hour Redeem*.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> English 30.

<sup>52</sup> Recognized as the first book-length analysis of time and literature from the African Diaspora, Barthold's *Black Time: Fiction of Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States* (1981) examines the ways in which writers of African descent have used time in their novels. Barthold's book, which predates English's by thirty years, was pioneering and identified key issues that scholars continue to grapple with today.

<sup>53</sup> To this short list I would also add Valerie Rohy's *Anachronism and Its Others: Sexuality, Race, Temporality* and John Ernest's *Chaotic Justice: Rethinking African American Literary History*. However, I still agree with English's claim that time in African American literature is still vastly understudied.

Since English develops her theories of *fugitive time* and *hardworking temporality* through her analysis of Frederick Douglass's autobiographies, she too advances theories of time that exclude the experiences of black women. In addition to revising Pratt's theory of "slave laboring time," I expand English's discussion of a key transitional temporality: *fugitive time*, which she defines as a brief period of transit between slavery and freedom that is full of anxiety and fear of capture. She develops her theory from Douglass's account of running away in *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*:

In his third autobiography, he describes his escape from slavery, remarking: "Though I was not a murderer fleeing from justice, I felt, perhaps, quite miserable as such a criminal. The train was moving at a very high rate of speed for that time of railroad travel, but to my anxious mind, it was moving far too slowly. Minutes were hours, and hours were days during this part of my flight" (*LT* 645). Here he articulates both his alienation from U.S. legal citizenship in terms of time, including the standardized time established by the railways. Literally in transit, Douglass is also positioned figuratively between slave time and free time. On a train, not coincidentally the "engine" of the establishment of uniform U.S. time, Douglass occupies fugitive time, a temporal state of disorientation and dislocation preceding full citizenship.<sup>54</sup>

English focuses on how fugitive time is a temporary stage between slavery and freedom that ultimately, in her reading, leads to Douglass's imagined transformation into a full-fledged citizen, not just a freed slave. However, Douglass's plan for escape is predicated upon his identity as a single man.

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<sup>54</sup> English 41.

I wish to complicate English's reading by analyzing Harriet Jacobs's depiction of fugitive time as she attempts to secure freedom for herself and her children. English's definition privileges the desired brevity and speed of fugitive time in Douglass's text and does not consider the extended and slow fugitive time that Jacobs experiences. I develop my understanding of fugitive time from Jacobs's relationship to her body and her children as stolen property while she is a fugitive slave. In *The Fugitive's Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession*, Stephen M. Best explains the complicated legal construction of the fugitive slave as "pilfered property and indebted person, object of property and subject of contract [...] The fugitive is, in short, two persons in one."<sup>55</sup> Using Best's insights, I explore how the theft of time enacted by the fugitive slave running away and the later reclamation of one's ownership of time is exceedingly complex for the slave mother who seeks freedom for her entire family and not just herself. This contrast reveals that rather than being the definitive model of fugitive time, Douglass's portrayal of fugitive time is just one of many.

Through her analysis of Douglass, English also identifies what she considers his "own theory of time,"<sup>56</sup> in which he refutes the racist notions of black inferiority with his counternarrative of slave labor and time. She explains, "According to Douglass, slaves, men and women alike, are *more* than Franklin-esque; they are exemplars who exceed, even if involuntarily, American hardworking temporality: they are both late to bed *and* early to rise."<sup>57</sup> Taking this notion of "hardworking temporality" as my starting point, I consider how Elizabeth Keckley depicts her "hardworking temporality" as both a slave and emancipated free black woman to support her implicit argument for the inclusion of African Americans, including black

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<sup>55</sup> Best 9.

<sup>56</sup> English 39.

<sup>57</sup> English 39.

women, as productive citizens in post-Civil War America. I agree with the theoretical frameworks that Pratt and English advance in their books, but insist that their analyses are incomplete because of their inattention to gender as a significant factor in representations of time in African American literature. Using gender as an analytic lens illuminates how black women's complex labor demands led to dramatically different depictions of time.

#### CHAPTER BREAKDOWNS

Chapter one examines how male narrators depict women's laboring times. It begins with Douglass's brief depiction of his mother Harriet Bailey and how she uses her time to perform incessant manual labor while also finding hidden moments to nurture young Douglass. I analyze Douglass's portrayal of his mother's *slave manual laboring time* and how she resists the demand to work constantly as a field slave by foregoing sleep and the free time she has to provide maternal care to young Douglass. Douglass has little information about his mother, but what he does share suggests that even when performing identical manual labor, enslaved women experience time differently than enslaved men because of their additional labor as caretakers.

The chapter then moves to Northup's meticulous portrayal of how being forced to perform manual and sexual labor affects the laboring time of his fellow slave Patsey. Even though Northup and Patsey perform identical manual labor side by side in the field, Patsey is also sexually abused by their master and forced to perform sexual labor. I argue that the additional burden of forced sexual labor complicates depictions of enslaved women's experiences of slave laboring times. Northup also reveals the necessity of first-person accounts by black women to capture a fuller sense of their complex and varied experiences of slave laboring times. By identifying the limits of what male slave narrators capture about black

women's experiences, I demonstrate the insufficiency of deriving theories about slave laboring time based solely on the narrated experiences of men.

Chapter two shifts to focus on how female slave narrators depict their own laboring times. My analysis begins with Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and her revelation of how the additional burdens of sexual and reproductive labor lead to dramatically different depictions of slave laboring time for women. This temporality sometimes occurs *simultaneously* with slave manual laboring time, but can also interrupt slave women's working day. I argue that Jacobs's narrative illustrates that post-pubescent slave sexual laboring time is dreadful because all slave girls will eventually enter what Jacobs calls the "sad epoch" of their lives: puberty, when they will become subject to sexual harassment and possibly rape as well as forced reproduction and physical violence. In contrast to Douglass and Northup who describe the tedium they face as they perform the same labor incessantly, for the slave women under consideration there is no typical day once they reach puberty. As a result, the slave sexual laboring time of these women is not monotonous; rather, it is characterized by a constant dread of the looming threat of sexual harassment, rape, and retaliatory violence.

I next examine Jacobs's experience of *slave reproductive laboring time*, which consists of the time slave mothers spend giving birth to and caring for children. Since nurturing slave children maintains or increases the value of the owner's investment in the children as property, I contend that it is nearly impossible for slave mothers to care for enslaved children without also performing work that benefits slave owners. Jacobs is only allowed to offer the maternal care that her owner approves, thus when she finds secretive ways to provide maternal care, she is also performing acts of resistance. By examining how the additional burdens of sexual and reproductive labor alter the temporal experiences of slave women, I reveal the complexity of



slave laboring times as well as the unique ways slave mothers sought to resist slavery's denial of their parental rights.

Chapter three explores the intermediary temporality of *fugitive time* that exists between slavery and freedom. Comparing the fugitive time of Douglass and Jacobs reveals how Jacobs's desire for her and her children to be free led to a communal experience of fugitive time that is significantly different than Douglass's experience as a single man. Unlike Douglass who can measure his experience of fugitive time in hours of transit as he travels to the North, Jacobs spends most of her fugitive time in the "loophole of retreat," her grandmother's attic where she hides for seven years while she waits for an opportunity to flee to the North.

Additionally, Douglass and Jacobs differ in their feelings about fugitive time. Both feel anxiety during fugitive time as they transition from slavery to freedom. However, because of Jacobs's unusual circumstance of being a mother and living as a fugitive near her family, her fugitive time is characterized by both anxiety *and* maternal pleasure. Jacobs develops and strengthens her connections to her children during fugitive time by providing maternal care previously prohibited during slavery. This chapter explores how Jacobs's resistance during fugitive time provides her with time to be a mother—time that is independent of the manual and reproductive laboring demands of slavery. The primary purpose of this chapter is to challenge Douglass as the representative fugitive slave and to show how considering other forms of resistance, with a particular focus on Jacobs as a fugitive slave mother, reveals more diverse experiences of fugitive time.

Chapter four analyzes Elizabeth Keckley's postbellum depiction of her free labor and control over her working time as she transitions from an enslaved seamstress to a successful entrepreneur in Washington, D.C. This chapter focuses on how Keckley narrates her post-slavery

laboring time to envision what autonomy and economic independence could look like for a free black woman during Reconstruction. For Elizabeth Keckley's spectacular rise from slave to White House modiste and employer to occur, she had to experience a number of social, political, economic and, as I will argue in this chapter, temporal transitions. Extending current scholarly arguments that Keckley uses her personal story of self-reliance and social and economic mobility to make a case for the inclusion of hardworking African Americans as citizens in the newly unified post-Civil War nation, I analyze how Keckley's diverse narrative strategies for representing her experiences of time are equally important to her national argument. More specifically, I maintain that Keckley's primary evidence that African Americans embody the idealized postwar American worker is her consistent demonstration of what English calls "*hardworking temporality*" during and after slavery. However, I expand English's use of the phrase to consider how Keckley's depiction of work time during and after slavery bolsters her claim that blacks who have survived slavery are the true heirs of two defining American national characteristics: self-reliance and hard work.

Significant to my argument is how Keckley chooses to bestow her time; I therefore carefully analyze the sole moment in the text when she gives free time (that is, non-laboring time) to her employees. Drawing upon the research of Eugene Genovese in *Roll, Jordan, Roll* and Albert Raboteau in *Slave Religion*, I examine Frederick Douglass's and Solomon Northup's descriptions of slave holidays and then analyze how Keckley reimagines a postwar employee holiday as an expression of national belonging and shared sentiment. In her narration of a scene in which she gives her employees time off from work, Keckley ultimately demonstrates the equality, if not superiority, of her and her presumably black employees as exemplars of postwar

national character. My analysis reveals the centrality of time and black working women to Keckley's national argument.

By probing black women's temporalities throughout the nineteenth-century, this dissertation will demonstrate that black women portray their experiences of time in fundamentally different ways than black men. Revealing the centrality of time in analyzing nineteenth-century African American literature, I expose the inadequacy of studying time without an acute focus on gender and labor differences. My research shows that gender and motherhood are essential analytical lenses that reveal previously under-considered aspects of the enslaved experience. I hope that my research will prove that even with the scholarly attention slave narratives have received, there is still much to be learned about the experiences of black women, their labors, and their time.

## 1. THE LIMITS OF THE MALE SLAVE NARRATOR'S GAZE:

### Black Men's Portrayal of Black Women's Laboring Times

[M]y only recollections of my own mother are of a few hasty visits made in the night on foot, after the daily tasks were over, and when she was under the necessity of returning in time to respond to the driver's call to the field in the early morning. These little glimpses of my mother, obtained under such circumstances and against such odds, meager as they were, are ineffaceably stamped upon my memory. She was tall and finely proportioned, of dark, glossy complexion, with regular features, and amongst the slaves was remarkably sedate and dignified. There is, in Prichard's *Natural History of Man*, the head of a figure, on page 157, the features of which so resemble my mother that I often recur to it with something of the feelings which I suppose others experience when looking upon the likenesses of their own dear departed ones.<sup>58</sup>

Barely one page into his third and longest autobiography, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1892), Frederick Douglass seems to share every feature he can remember about his mother Harriet Bailey, despite seeing her only a handful of times at night. Douglass can recall even this detailed mental image of her that he can recall her physical appearance near the end of his life.<sup>59</sup> Although separation defines the majority of their relationship, Douglass's

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<sup>58</sup> *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* 12. Subsequent citations refer to *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* as *LT*.

<sup>59</sup> Douglass surmises that he was born in February 1817 (*LT* 11) and would have been approximately 75 years old when *LT* was published.

portrayal of his mother demonstrates that her memory has a special place in his heart. In the above passage Douglass seems proud of his mother's dignified deportment and his recollection focuses on the nostalgic yearning he has for both her memory and the familial relationship they were never allowed to have. What is easy to overlook in Douglass's succinct remembrance is the very reason why he has any memory of his mother at all: her decision to perform additional labor beyond the requirements of a field slave to nurture young Douglass. Douglass narrates the earliest scenes of his life from the perspective of a young boy's irreparable loss of his mother and consequently shows the devastating impact that treating human beings and their families as property has on slaves. In "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Hortense J. Spillers uses Douglass's description of his separation from his mother, which she calls his "careful elaborations of the arrangements of captivity,"<sup>60</sup> to elucidate the relationship between family and property during slavery. Douglass's story of maternal loss is so powerful and informative that scholars return to it as an example. Although Douglass's focus on his loss is understandable as part of his strategy for exposing the horrors of slavery while telling his life story, it can overshadow the additional labor Harriet Bailey had to perform to provide maternal care to young Douglass.

Even with Douglass's intent to share all that he knows about his mother, the window he opens into her life is still quite small. Still, Douglass's memories hint at the complex life of a slave mother who loves her son and defies slavery's restrictions to provide parental care. Harriet Bailey's inclusion in Douglass's slave narratives reminds readers, however briefly, about the labor of enslaved women that goes largely unexplored in Douglass's autobiographies. As Douglass's infrequent interactions limit his portrayals of his mother, his depiction is a reminder

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<sup>60</sup> Spillers 75.

of the challenges that male writers faced when portraying the experiences of slave women. This chapter analyzes two seminal depictions of slave women by male slave narrators to explore both the possibilities and the limitations of men's depictions of enslaved women's experiences of labor and time. This chapter begins with Douglass's depiction of his mother in his autobiographies. Since Douglass is arguably the most famous slave narrator, his depiction of her serves as a foundational example of black slave motherhood.

Turning next to one of the most detailed accounts of slave labor and black women's sexual abuse, this chapter also discusses Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853). Writing from the perspective of what Robert Stepto calls the "participant-observer,"<sup>61</sup> Northup describes in minute detail the incessant manual labor that he performs and that he witnesses other slave men and women doing. However, I have limited the focus of my analysis to his depiction of his fellow slave Patsey and the sexual abuse Northup recalls her enduring. In "I Got No Comfort in This Life: The Increasing Importance of Patsey in *12 Years a Slave*," Salamishah Tillet argues that Northup primarily uses Patsey's experiences to demonstrate the brutality of slavery:

A formidable figure in Northup's original narrative, Patsey is one of the many black women, free and enslaved, featured. Her beating, nevertheless, has ultimate significance because Northup uses it to make his biggest case against slavery: even those whose entire lives are spent under its lash still yearn for and deserve to be free [...] Ironically, after this scene, Patsey is effectively silenced for the rest of the story—an absence that reveals

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<sup>61</sup> Stepto 233.

that her primary function was to substantiate Northup's abolitionist agenda and appeal to the sympathy of white northerners who had yet to convert to his cause.<sup>62</sup>

However, Patsey is far more significant to Northup's text than just her final brutal beating. My focus is on Northup's depiction of different forms of labor and what it reveals about slaves' experiences of time. Analyzing the forced sexual labor of female slaves like Patsey reveals their depiction of a uniquely gendered slave laboring temporality that I call *slave sexual laboring time*—the time spent performing forced sexual labor. While Northup's portrayal of Patsey is incredibly detailed, it also reveals the limits of third-person narration when Northup resorts to speculating about Patsey's thoughts. Northup emphasizes Patsey's victimization, but is unable to address whether Patsey developed strategies for resisting slavery like Harriet Bailey did when sneaking away to visit Douglass at night. Examining these two portrayals of sexually exploited slave women<sup>63</sup> reveals the limits of slave men's depictions of slave women's experiences and demonstrates the need to analyze first-person accounts by enslaved women to see a fuller portrayal of their lives.

My focus on gendered depictions of slave laboring times challenges the notion that slavery eliminated meaningful gender distinctions among slaves. In the influential "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Hortense J. Spillers describes slavery as a traumatic event in which gender distinctions among slaves were violently eliminated: "Under these conditions [New World slavery] we lose at least *gender difference in the outcome*, and the

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<sup>62</sup> Tillet 356.

<sup>63</sup> In *Narrative*, Douglass explains that there is speculation that his father is his white master, but he is understandably unable to give voice to the sexual coercion that likely led to his birth. As I discuss later, Northup also spends a great deal of time chronicling Patsey's sexual abuse by Master Epps.

female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific.”<sup>64</sup> Although Spillers later explains that female slaves were vulnerable to rape as well as other forms of violence typically meted out to men, her framework revolves around the removal of gender as a key site of difference for female slaves who become “female flesh ‘ungendered.’”<sup>65</sup> A generation later, Spillers’s idea of the “ungendered” slave still has currency.

In “‘The Strangest Freaks of Despotism’: Queer Sexuality in Antebellum African American Slave Narratives,” Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman uses Spillers to argue “the conditions of enslavement and its obliteration of families disallowed enslaved men and women from fulfilling normative gender requirements.”<sup>66</sup> She also maintains that “[t]he vulnerability of all enslaved black persons to nearly every conceivable violation produced a collective ‘raped’” subjectivity.”<sup>67</sup> While I appreciate Spillers’s argument that female slaves were treated like male slaves when subjected to brutal physical violence, I challenge the notion that female slaves were ungendered because that label erases the specifically gendered sexual and reproductive labor they were forced to perform. I do not see how it is possible to discuss the violence to which slave women were subjected to without considering the sexual violence and additional childrearing work added to slave women’s burdens. This erasure of slave women’s gendered labor leaves me troubled by the metaphorical use of rape and Abdur-Rahman’s discussion of a “raped subjectivity” that encompasses all enslaved black people without addressing the *actual* effects of rape and reproduction on enslaved black women.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Spillers 67.

<sup>65</sup> Spillers 68.

<sup>66</sup> Abdur-Rahman 230.

<sup>67</sup> Abdur-Rahman 231.

<sup>68</sup> Stevenson 137-138.



Moreover, I argue that gender is a central analytic category, an argument Saidiya Hartman advances in *Scenes of Subjection*:

[T]oo often it has been argued that the enslaved female existed outside the gendered universe because she was not privy to the entitlements of bourgeois women within the white patriarchal family. As a consequence, gender becomes descriptive for the social and sexual arrangements of the dominant order rather than an analytic category.<sup>69</sup>

Rejecting the notion that slaves were ungendered, and specifically the assertion that gender distinctions between male and slaves were minor enough to ignore, this chapter considers how forced sexual and reproductive labor during slavery generated unique temporal experiences among slave women. I foreground gender as a key analytic category for examining depictions of slave labor and time instead of setting slave women and their experiences outside of normative gender experiences.

Before turning a critical eye to Harriet Jacobs's first-person account of her own slave labor and time in the following chapter, my analysis begins with Douglass and Northup, who provide invaluable accounts of antebellum black womanhood in their texts. Still, both writers leave significant questions about black women's labor and time unanswered. Given how significantly sexual and reproductive labor affects the laboring time of slave women, this chapter explores slave men's inability to fully capture these experiences, which demonstrates the need for black women to narrate their own experiences.

Despite the limitations of his portrayal, Douglass still protects his mother's image with his crucial explanation that his separation from her is not due to her personal failure as a mother, but is instead the result of the widespread practice of severing the natural bonds between slave

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<sup>69</sup> Hartman 99.

mothers and their babies. In light of this defining feature of slavery, it is significant that Douglass still assigns such importance to his mother. He explains in his first and most famous autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845):

My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant—before I knew her as my mother. It is a common custom, in the part of Maryland from which I ran away, to part children from their mothers at a very early age. [...] For what this separation is done, I do not know, unless it be to hinder the development of the child's affection toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child. This is the inevitable result.<sup>70</sup>

Although Douglass implies that this separation inhibits the innate love that mother and child feel for each other, his depiction of his mother in his autobiographies contradicts that generalization. It is clear that he longs to remember every detail he can about his mother and acutely feels her loss—not just through death but also through their cruel parting while enslaved.

In each of his autobiographies, there are subtle differences in descriptions of his mother, but the most consistent detail is the tremendous effort she makes to see him. He explains in *Narrative*:

I never saw my mother, to know her as such, more than four or five times in my life; and each of these times was very short in duration, and at night. She was hired by a Mr. Stewart, who lived about twelve miles from my home. She made her journeys to see me in the night, traveling the whole distance on foot, after the performance of her day's work. She was a field hand, and a whipping is the penalty of not being in the field at

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<sup>70</sup> Douglass *Narrative* 12-13.

sunrise, unless a slave has special permission from his or her master to the contrary. [...] I do not recollect of ever seeing my mother by the light of day. She was with me in the night. She would lie down with me, and get me to sleep, but long before I waked she was gone. Very little communication ever took place between us.<sup>71</sup>

Beyond the paucity of details, what is remarkable about this passage is that it is only because of his mother's perseverance that Douglass even has *any* memories of her at all. She has to make extreme sacrifices—including going without a night of sleep after working a full day in the field and before having to do so again the next day—just to see him. Douglass's memories reveal the enormous amount of additional labor and time his mother expends to take care of him.

While working like all slaves from dawn to dusk, his mother, when able to do so, continues to labor by performing prohibited maternal care at night, presumably when most other slaves are sleeping. Douglass explains:

They [the slaves] find less difficulty from the want of beds, than from the want of time to sleep; for when their day's work in the field is done, the most of them having their washing, mending, and cooking to do, and having few or none of the ordinary facilities for doing either of these, very many of their sleeping hours are consumed in preparing for the field the coming day; and when this is done, old and young, male and female, married and single, drop down side by side, one common bed—the cold, damp floor,—each covering himself or herself with their miserable blankets; and here they sleep till they are summoned to the field by the driver's horn.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Douglass *Narrative* 12-13.

<sup>72</sup> Douglass *Narrative* 17.

By abstaining from the various labors Douglass describes slaves performing after working in the field, his mother sacrifices food, preparation and the little sleep she could have had for the sole purpose of being with him for only a few moments.

Although Douglass seems to share every detail he can recall about his mother, his primary focus seems to be on conveying his keen sense of loss and portraying the absence of the relationship he should have had with her. In Douglass's portrayal she is more of an outline imbued with his desire for kinship than a fully realized person. In "Sentimental Douglass," Arthur Riss calls Douglass's mother an "imaginary sentimental mother"<sup>73</sup> who is "a citation, a representational effect, an image of an image"<sup>74</sup> because "a fundamentally sentimental and abstract notion of the way 'a mother acts' [...] grounds Douglass's particular knowledge of how his mother acted."<sup>75</sup> Riss explains Douglass's belated depiction and appreciation of his mother, which "tallies with sentimentality's cult of motherhood [as]—'soothing... tender... watchful,' deeply protective and self-sacrificing,"<sup>76</sup> as the product of Douglass's freedom. Riss argues, "Douglass establishes a sentimental relationship to his mother only retroactively"<sup>77</sup> because "[h]is mother intrinsically demands a particular kind of attention only after the fact, only after freedom has installed a sentimental relation."<sup>78</sup> I agree that what Douglass shares is more of his projection of what his mother must have been like than a faithful depiction of who she was. This is not to say that Douglass's portrayal is false, but it is a reminder that Douglass's own self-

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<sup>73</sup> Riss 112.

<sup>74</sup> Riss 112.

<sup>75</sup> Riss 112.

<sup>76</sup> Riss 112.

<sup>77</sup> Riss 113.

<sup>78</sup> Riss 113.

fashioning in his autobiographies extends to the literary construction of the mother he barely knew.

Ultimately, Douglass's mother emerges from his narration as a symbol of how slavery deprived him of his natural rights, beginning with his right to a mother's love. Consistent with his emphasis on loss, Douglass frames his discussion of his mother's death by listing all he was denied because of their separation:

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, near Lee's Mill. I was not allowed to be present during her illness, at her death, or burial. She was gone long before I knew any thing about it. Never having enjoyed, to any considerable extent, her soothing presence, her tender and watchful care, I received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger.<sup>79</sup>

Douglass's brief memories of his mother reveal one crucial trait: she *resists* slavery's attempts to obliterate her feelings for young Douglass by choosing to provide the maternal care that slavery tries to deny him. Although the phrase "[n]ever having enjoyed" suggests that Douglass lacked this nurturing, the subsequent phrase "to any considerable extent" critically indicates that he does indeed get to briefly enjoy the care his mother works so hard and walks so far to provide. The asymmetry of Douglass's mother walking twenty-four miles roundtrip at night and sacrificing a night of rest just to see him for a few minutes reveals just how hard she has to work to leave any

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<sup>79</sup> Douglass *Narrative* 12-13.

lasting impression on her son. Although Douglass suggests that he feels almost no emotional connection to his mother, it is clear that slavery never blunts *her* feelings for him.

Douglass's depiction of Harriet Bailey opens a window into the experiences of slave mothers who worked tirelessly to provide the maternal care prohibited by slavery. In lieu of time spent together, Douglass shares his mother's persistent efforts to nurture him as evidence of her love for him. There are many questions about Harriet Bailey's life that Douglass cannot answer, including whether she found other means to resist slavery or whether she was forced to perform sexual and reproductive labor. Nevertheless, this glimpse into his mother's life shows that despite slavery's best efforts to destroy the bond between slave mother and child, some slave mothers were able to resist through the decisions they made about how to use their extremely limited free time.

In *Twelve Years a Slave*, Solomon Northup offers far more details than Douglass about the labor and time of the slave women he encounters during his period of enslavement. Soon after his capture, Northup recalls why the slave catcher Theophilus Freeman refuses to sell Emily, a young girl, to the man who had purchased her mother Eliza. Freeman bases his rationale for not selling her upon the value he predicts Emily will be worth as a young woman. Northup writes,

He would not sell her then on any account whatever. There were heaps and piles of money to be made of her, he said, when she was a few years older. There were men enough in New- Orleans who would give five thousand dollars for such an extra, handsome, fancy piece as Emily would be, rather than not get her. No, no, he would not

sell her then. She was a beauty—a picture—a doll—one of the regular bloods—none of your thick-lipped, bullet-headed, cotton-picking niggers.<sup>80</sup>

Freeman explains how appearance factors into his calculation of the current and future value of female slaves. Northup describes Emily as “seven or eight years old, of light complexion, and with a face of admirable beauty. Her hair fell in curls around her neck.”<sup>81</sup> Since she is pretty, Freeman considers Emily an investment whose value will increase dramatically with time—far more than ordinary slave women. Freeman’s own words reveal Emily’s status as a commodity through his objectifying description of her as a “picture” and “doll.” The projected image of an adolescent Emily priced for her value as a beautiful object for the men who purchase her reveals what Freeman’s statement implies: Emily will be worth more financially because of the coerced sexual labor Freeman expects her to perform when she is older. Based on Freeman’s logic, in just a few years Emily’s value as a “beauty” and “fancy piece” will be high.

The ease with which Freeman’s can imagine a very young child as being sexually available reveals how common the sexual exploitation of slave women was. In *What is Slavery?* Brenda E. Stevenson confirms the historical precedent for charging more for “fancy pieces”:

Throughout the South and over the antebellum decades, male slaves generally cost more than females, skilled laborers more than field hands, and the young more than the elderly. The only real exception to these rules of the market was the fancy girl trade and ‘good breeding’ women.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Northup 52-53. All citations are taken from the Penguin edition of the text.

<sup>81</sup> Northup 27.

<sup>82</sup> Stevenson 140.

That slave owners were willing to deviate from the typical pricing system and pay more slave girls' sexual and reproductive labor reveals the demand for and profitability of "fancy" slave girls like Emily. By featuring Emily's story prominently as part of his own kidnapping and introduction to slavery early in the narrative, Northup establishes both the separation of parent and child as well as the sexual exploitation of black women as central features of slavery. Emily's fate presages Northup's record of Patsey's sexual abuse, which suggests that sexual abuse is ubiquitous and unavoidable for enslaved women.

Despite Freeman's suggestion that Emily will be forced to perform sexual labor instead of manual labor, the reality is that most slave women were required to perform both manual and sexual labor, with the frequent result of them also performing reproductive labor<sup>83</sup> as they bore children who became the property of their owners. Stevenson explains:

Another important difference between the experiences of slave female and male laborers, perhaps the most significant difference of all, was the sexualized component of women's work. Most male slaves did not face the constant sexual harassment or battery that many slave women confronted and most feared. Indeed, one aspect of female labor that scholars are just beginning to fully recognize as *labor* was the demand that slave girls and women act as sexual outlets for male owners, overseers, drivers, and male slaves as well.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> According to Stevenson, "Motherhood added another dimension to the labor of female slaves. Clearly, slave women were the principal rearers of their children, whether in matrifocal, nuclear, or extended families. As such, they were responsible for their day-to-day care, even when owners provided nurses" (135).

<sup>84</sup> Stevenson 137-138.



Stevenson's insistence that sexual abuse was a form of labor reveals one of the key ways in which slave women's experiences of slavery differed from those of slave men. This difference is one that Northup explores in some depth as he contrasts his experience of constant manual labor to the manual *and* sexual labor demanded of Patsey.

While enslaved men and women were forced to work incessantly, it is clear from historical records as well as first-person slave narratives that the types of labor slaves performed varied by gender. According to Stevenson, "Southern female slaves, especially those who were 'field' workers, routinely worked longer hours and were responsible for more work--a combination actually of skilled, manual, domestic, and sexual labor."<sup>85</sup> Regardless of whether they performed manual or domestic labor, female slaves were also subjected to frequent sexual harassment and rape. Stevenson reveals that enslaved black women were required to perform multiple forms of labor—including manual, domestic,<sup>86</sup> sexual, and reproductive work—all of which affected their experiences of time dramatically. I argue that slave women depict uniquely gendered experiences of time, unlike slave men who mostly performed manual labor, because their experience of slave laboring time involves managing and fulfilling competing and overlapping demands for their manual, sexual and reproductive labors. Northup's portrayal of Patsey's forced sexual labor reveals critical insights about her slave sexual laboring time.

Labor and time are the primary lenses through which Northup describes slavery even when he depicts the beatings and whippings that are often exposed in slave narratives. For

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<sup>85</sup> Stevenson 133.

<sup>86</sup> I use manual labor to refer to manual and domestic labor as well as any other form of physical labor; in my argument, manual labor comprises the unrelenting physical labor that Douglass and Northup describe in their narratives. In contrast to the manual labor that both enslaved men and women performed, my interest lies in the examining how the uniquely gendered forms of sexual and reproductive labor led slave women to depict different experiences of time.

instance, when describing the frequency of whippings on Epps's plantation, Northup explains that the threat of physical violence permeates the slave's workday: "In fact, the lash is flying from morning until night, the whole day long."<sup>87</sup> He also emphasizes that the violence is not an aberration, but occurs with regularity: "It is the literal, unvarnished truth, that the crack of the lash and the shrieking of the slaves, can be heard from dark till bed time, on Epps's plantation, any day almost during the entire period of the cotton-picking season."<sup>88</sup> By integrating scenes of violence with discussions of slave work, Northup reveals that the threat of violence is a consistent and integral part of slaves' laboring time.

Beyond the horrific images of extreme violence, Northup offers a sophisticated rendering of how labor shapes slaves' daily lives. As Sam Worley explains in "Solomon Northup and the Sly Philosophy of the Slave Pen":

Northup does not simply describe the experience of picking cotton; he does not present cotton production as a process tangential to slave life. The cycle of cotton production is, instead, shown to shape the very contours of slave life on cotton plantations. [...] each stage of cotton's development appears as human, specifically slave, labor.<sup>89</sup>

To expose the centrality of slave labor to the daily operations of plantation life, Northup expands his focus beyond the physical abuse of slaves and spends far more time depicting the nature and timing of slave labor—mostly manual labor—in multiple forms and across seasons. I define manual labor broadly to include physical labor in the fields, domestic work and other menial tasks. I consider much of the work described in many slave narratives—including the labor

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<sup>87</sup> Northup 108.

<sup>88</sup> Northup 117.

<sup>89</sup> Worley 309.

Douglass, Harriet Bailey, Northup and Patsey perform as field hands—to be slave manual labor and I use the phrase *slave manual laboring time* to capture the time spent performing it. Northup spends much of his narrative depicting various slaves' experiences of slave manual laboring time.

In addition to describing the seasonal nature of slave work, Northup explains how the incessant demand for labor structures the slave's entire day. For instance, Northup describes the precise timing of the slave manual laboring day during cotton-picking time:

The hands are required to be in the cotton field as soon as it is light in the morning, and, with the exception of ten or fifteen minutes, which is given them at noon to swallow their allowance of cold bacon, they are not permitted to be a moment idle until it is too dark to see, and when the moon is full, they often times labor till the middle of the night. They do not dare to stop even at dinner time, nor return to the quarters, however late it be, until the order to halt is given by the driver.<sup>90</sup>

Northup depicts how the maximum amount of labor is forcibly extracted from slaves every single day. They are required to work as soon as there is sunlight to illuminate their tasks and continue to do so until they are ordered to stop. Continuous work is only interrupted for a quick bite of food; the length of this meal break is closely monitored and policed to ensure that slaves do not exceed the allotted time. With that exception, slaves are not permitted to be idle. This description is critical in explaining the nature of slave manual labor. Not only are the slaves to work ceaselessly, they must be in constant movement. Through his portrayal, Northup reveals that slave manual laboring time is truly unrelenting because of the inconsistent enforcement of

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<sup>90</sup> Northup 109-11.

work time. The slaves' work day has no set start or end time, so that they can work as long as possible during daylight hours. In contrast, the only break is strictly defined and given precisely at noon to ensure that it is as short as possible. This arbitrary approach to slaves' work time—with undefined work hours that enable the extraction of more labor and miserly periods of rest—exposes a deliberate attempt to eliminate leisure time and reduce all slave time to slave manual laboring time.

As Northup elaborates, work does not abate once the driver orders a stop to the day's work. In addition to work performed for masters, there is other personal labor that must be done:

The day's work over in the field, the baskets are "toted," or in other words, carried to the gin-house, where the cotton is weighed [...]

This done, the labor of the day is not yet ended, by any means. Each one must then attend to his respective chores. One feeds the mules, another the swine—another cuts the wood, and so forth; besides, the packing is all done by candle light. Finally, at a late hour, they reach the quarters, sleepy and overcome with the long day's toil [...]

[T]he tenant of the slave hut is ready to sit down upon the ground to supper. By this time it is usually midnight. The same fear of punishment with which they approach the gin-house, possesses them again on lying down to get a snatch of rest. It is the fear of oversleeping in the morning.<sup>91</sup>

Merely stating that they work from dawn to dusk is woefully insufficient for describing the nature of the slave's manual laboring day. Northup makes clear that between the manual labor

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<sup>91</sup> Northup 109-11.

they are forced to perform for masters and the domestic work they must do at home, slaves have little free time to rest.

Although manual labor forms the foundation of male and female slaves' work and time, slave women are required to shoulder the additional burden of sexual labor, which is profoundly disruptive to their daily labor and time. Northup's depiction of Patsey's life reveals how sexual abuse frequently interrupts the working day and also can lead to vicious harassment and brutal violence by both master and mistress. While Northup can describe how his typical days of brutish, incessant manual labor blend into each other, his portrayal of Patsey reveals that there was no typical day for her once sexual labor was demanded. The frequent interruptions of violence, harassment and rape that disrupt her working days create an experience of slave sexual laboring time that causes uncertainty, anxiety, stress, and fear that Northup does not depict himself or other male slaves as experiencing. Patsey's slave laboring time includes both manual laboring time *and* sexual laboring time; her work time is characterized by a dread of the looming threat of the sexual harassment, rape, and retaliatory violence.

Northup's narration of Patsey's experiences reveals the stark difference between the depictions of laboring time of enslaved men and that of women performing identical manual labor. Patsey is the undisputed "queen of the field"<sup>92</sup> as the best cotton picker, male or female, on the plantation. Despite her status, superior labor, and her "genial and pleasant temper,"<sup>93</sup> Patsey "wept oftener, and suffered more, than any of her companions"<sup>94</sup> because of the sexual labor she

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<sup>92</sup> Northup 123.

<sup>93</sup> Northup 123.

<sup>94</sup> Northup 123.

is forced to perform. Northup elaborates on how this additional labor also results in Patsey suffering frequent yet erratic violence:

She [Patsey] had been literally excoriated. Her back bore the scars of a thousand stripes; not because she was backward in her work [...] but because it had fallen to her lot to be the slave of a licentious master and a jealous mistress. She shrank before the lustful eye of the one, and was in danger even of her life at the hands of the other, and between the two, she was indeed accursed [...] Patsey walked under a cloud. If she uttered a word in opposition to the master's will, 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 smite her unexpectedly in the face. The enslaved victim of lust and hate, Patsey had no comfort of her life.<sup>95</sup>

The repeated violence, confirmed by the numerous scars on her back, has two different origins. First, Patsey's suffering stems from her master, who rapes her repeatedly through coerced sexual labor. He also uses physical violence to subdue her if she attempts to oppose his sexual abuse. According to Northup, Patsey endures this inevitable yet erratic sexual and physical abuse while still performing manual labor.

Rather than imagine that female slaves' sexual abuse was separate from their labor, Stevenson explains how sexual coercion became another type of labor demanded of them:

Masters and other males who came in contact with slave women expected, and often demanded, their compliance with requests for sexual favors. It literally became part of

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<sup>95</sup> Northup 123-24.

their jobs and a source of enormous pain for the enslaved. Indeed, the sexual abuse of female slaves was one of the most disruptive traumas that slave girls, women, and their families experienced.<sup>96</sup>

While acknowledging the extreme suffering slave women endured, it is also critical to recognize that the constant sexual abuse to which Patsey and other slave women were subjected constituted a traumatic form of labor that added to the work they had to do.

Just as slaves were unable to avoid manual labor and were punished for attempting to do so, Patsey is unable to refuse her body and sexual labor to her master, who subjects her to the “lash” if she opposes him. As Hartman explains in *Scenes of Subjection*:

The rape of black women existed as an unspoken but normative condition fully within the purview of everyday sexual practices, whether within the implied arrangements of the slave enclave or within the plantation household. [...] the virtual absence of prohibitions or limitations in the determination of socially tolerable and necessary violence sets the stage for the indiscriminate use of the body for pleasure, profit, and punishment.<sup>97</sup>

What Hartman makes clear is that Epps had the legal authority to use Patsey for any purpose he wanted, including sexual abuse or physical violence as punishment. However, Northup reveals that Epps’s willingness to exert his legal, albeit immoral, claim to Patsey’s body had other disastrous consequences for her.

Epps’s demand that Patsey submit to sexual abuse in full view of his wife and other slaves exemplifies the “indiscriminate use of the body” that Hartman describes. Rather than view

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<sup>96</sup> Stevenson 137-138.

<sup>97</sup> Hartman 85.

Epps as responsible for Patsey's sexual abuse, the lack of legal protection for slave women perversely implied that they were complicit with their own sexual abuse by transforming rape into sexual intercourse. As Hartman explains:

The legal transposition of rape as sexual intercourse shrouds this condition of violent domination with the suggestion of complicity. Sexual intercourse, regardless of whether it is coerced or consensual, comes to describe the arrangements, however violent, between men and enslaved women.<sup>98</sup>

This legal understanding of slave rape helps explain Mrs. Epps's cruel response to finding evidence of her husband raping his slave, which is the second source of Patsey's scars. Rather than come to Patsey's defense or show compassion in any way, the "jealous mistress" tortures her with violence that increases Patsey's suffering; she even secretly tries to get Northup to kill Patsey.<sup>99</sup>

Of course, the problem is not Patsey. Mr. Epps creates this violence by refusing to make any sacrifices to appease his wife, whether it is resisting his desire to rape Patsey or taking a financial loss by selling his best field slave. As Northup explains:

He [Epps] respected and loved his wife as much as a coarse nature like his is capable of loving, but supreme selfishness always overmastered conjugal affection [...] He was ready to gratify any whim—to grant any request she made, provided it did not cost too much. Patsey was equal to any two of his slaves in the cotton field. He could not replace

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<sup>98</sup> Hartman 85.

<sup>99</sup> Northup 124.



her with the same money she would bring. The idea of disposing of her, therefore, could not be entertained.<sup>100</sup>

In Epps's estimation, Patsey is too valuable to sell even though that would have been the only way to appease his wife. As Janet Neary suggests in *Fugitive Testimony: On the Visual Logic of Slave Narratives*, "Patsey is literally marked by her location between the opposing gazes of her master and mistress."<sup>101</sup> This unresolved tension between the master's lust and the mistress's hatred results not in monotonous stasis, but the increasing deterioration of Patsey's life, including her labor and time, as Mr. and Mrs. Epps both violate Patsey's body. Rather than deal with this central tension with her husband, Mrs. Epps privileges her hurt feelings and blames Patsey for her imagined complicity.

Significantly, this focus on Patsey allows Mrs. Epps to avoid directly confronting both her husband's sexual violence and her own complicity in her slaves' abuse. Hartman provides a useful historical context for understanding the blame Mrs. Epps assigns to Patsey:

The sexual exploitation of the enslaved female, incredulously, served as evidence of her collusion with the master class and as evidence of her power, the power both to render the master weak and, implicitly, to be the mistress of her own subjection. The slave woman not only suffered the responsibility for sexual (ab)use but also was blameworthy because of her purported ability to render the powerful weak.<sup>102</sup>

Enslaved women were imagined to be powerful aggressors instead of powerless victims with no legal recourse. Rather than having any basis in the actual lived experiences of slave women, the

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<sup>100</sup> Northup 130.

<sup>101</sup> Northup 123.

<sup>102</sup> Hartman 87.

decision to blame slave women for their own sexual abuse serves as the pretext for absolving owners of responsibility for their actions and perversely justifies the violence to which many slaves were subjected. In this dynamic, Patsey is powerless to stop Epps's sexual abuse, and yet she is still vulnerable to the violent outbursts of both master and mistress. What Northup exposes so well is that Patsey's coerced sexual labor results in both expected violence—through a predictable lashing from Epps if she refuses his sexual advances—as well as unexpected violence from the mistress, who seeks any opportune moment to increase Patsey's torment. Patsey's suffering shows how slave sexual laboring time is marked by the erratic tempo of coerced sexual labor and potential violence that can occur at any moment. Obviously, these interruptions must disrupt Patsey's slave manual laboring time. The looming threat of either forced sexual labor or physical violence makes it nearly impossible to predict which types of slave labor she will be required to perform at any particular time. Unlike Northup's description of homogeneous days filled with consistent manual labor, the additional sexual labor demanded of Patsey leads to a vastly different experience of slave laboring time.

Another significant departure from the constancy of the manual labor Northup describes is that the violence to which Epps and his wife subject Patsey becomes increasingly brutal. According to Northup, Patsey's experience of slave sexual laboring time is not static, but instead gets progressively worse:

I learned from Aunt Phebe and Patsey, that the latter girl had been getting deeper and deeper into trouble. The poor girl was truly an object of pity [...] [Epps] had beaten her more severely and frequently than ever. As surely as he came from Holmesville, elated with liquor—and it was often in those days—he would whip her, merely to gratify the mistress; would punish her to an extent almost beyond endurance, for an offense of which

he himself was the sole and irresistible cause. In his sober moments he could not always be prevailed upon to indulge his wife's insatiable thirst for vengeance.<sup>103</sup>

Northup reveals that even while she is continually subjected to rape and harassment from her master, Patsy's experience of slave sexual laboring time changes and worsens over time as both her mistress and master become increasingly violent toward her. This is yet another example of the excessive nature of the violence that was a punishment "almost beyond endurance."

Perhaps what is even crueler is that Patsy is described as having been "a favorite when a child"<sup>104</sup>:

She had been petted and admired for her uncommon sprightliness and pleasant disposition. She had been fed many a time, so Uncle Abram said, even on biscuit and milk, when the madam, in her younger days, was wont to call her to the piazza, and fondle her as she would a playful kitten. But a sad change had come over the spirit of the woman. Now, only black and angry fiends ministered in the temple of her heart, until she could look on Patsy but with concentrated venom.<sup>105</sup>

Here Northup presents Patsy's agonizing transition from favorite pet to despised woman. This progression changes her slave sexual laboring time as she is increasingly subjected to beatings that interrupt her working time and increase her fear of unanticipated and erratic violence.

Given the extreme violence Patsy endures, one would expect that any moments of calm would be a welcome reprieve. Instead, Northup describes how they cause Patsy much anguish:

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<sup>103</sup> Northup 129.

<sup>104</sup> Northup 130.

<sup>105</sup> Northup 130.

But the storm of angry words would pass over at length, and there would be a season of calm again. At such times, Patsey trembled with fear, and cried as if her heart would break, for she knew from painful experience, that if mistress should work herself to the red-hot pitch of rage, Epps would quiet her at least with a promise that Patsey should be flogged—a promise he was sure to keep. Thus did pride, and jealousy, and vengeance war with avarice and brute-passion in the mansion of my master, filling it with daily tumult and contention. Thus, upon the head of Patsey—the simpleminded slave, in whose heart God had implanted the seeds of virtue—the force of all these domestic tempests spent itself at last.<sup>106</sup>

Based on Northup's observations, what causes Patsey the most anguish is the anticipation of impending violence. Part of her sexual abuse is the certainty that she will, yet again, be viciously beaten, but without the certainty of knowing when it will happen. Moments of calm are filled with anxiety and a looming sense of doom; all of these moments—the fearful anticipation, the actual assault, and the violent aftermath—comprise Northup's depiction of Patsey's slave sexual laboring time.

One particular example reveals Patsey's dread in the moments preceding either vicious violence or more coerced sexual labor:

While hoeing by the side of Patsey, she exclaimed, in a low voice, suddenly, "Platt, d'ye see old Hog-Jaw beckoning me to come to him?"

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<sup>106</sup> Northup 131.

Glancing sideways, I discovered him in the edge of the field, motioning and grimacing, as was his habit when half-intoxicated. Aware of his lewd intentions, Patsey began to cry.<sup>107</sup>

In this rare scene when Northup shares an emotional response from Patsey, it is because of imminent abuse. Although working side by side with Patsey, Northup does not see Epps or his entreaties to Patsey. Without Patsey's revelation, Northup could have worked close to Patsey and yet remained ignorant of Epps's presence. The invisibility of Patsey's forced sexual labor to Northup reveals how dramatically Patsey's slave manual laboring time differs from his own, even as they perform identical manual labor side by side. While working next to Northup, Patsey also looks for Epps and experiences slave sexual laboring time while anticipating the next time she will be forced to perform sexual labor that interrupts her manual labor. This hyper-awareness of her surroundings as well as the competing demands for multiple forms of labor permeate Patsey's gendered experience of slave laboring time. More specifically, Patsey's slave manual laboring time is interrupted by competing experiences of slave sexual labor. Unlike Northup, Patsey's slave manual laboring time is not monotonous or constant; it is highly variable and dreadful as expressed by her tears *before* her coerced sexual labor has begun. She must simultaneously perform as much manual labor as she can while also preparing for unexpected sexual labor. These are concerns that Northup does not experience; accordingly, these thoughts, fears, and mental preparations do not affect or interrupt his narrated slave manual laboring time.

Epps's demand for Patsey's sexual labor forcibly interrupts her ability to perform manual labor side by side with Northup. Without recourse and in anticipation of another rape, Patsey

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<sup>107</sup> Northup 150.

begins to cry. Northup's laboring time is only interrupted when he attempts to intervene on Patsey's behalf. Even then, he is able to avoid incurring Epps' wrath or violence, ironically, by running to the mistress. None of these options—avoiding Epps, evading his violence, or finding sanctuary with the mistress—are available to Patsey precisely because of the sexual labor she is required to perform.

This tension between Epps's lust for Patsey and his wife's hatred of her continues until Patsey is given a harrowing beating that breaks her spirit. Patsey's severe flogging is the culmination of a cruel progressive slave sexual laboring time in which her owners' conflicting feelings about her coerced sexual labor literally breaks her body. Northup describes a gradual change in Epps toward Patsey as his jealousy grows:

At length “the green-eyed monster” crept into the soul of Epps also, and then it was that he joined with his wrathful wife in an infernal jubilee over the girl's miseries [...] the suspicion gradually entered the brain of Epps, that another and a baser passion led her thither—that it was not Harriet she desired to meet, but rather the unblushing libertine, his neighbor.<sup>108</sup>

As Epps's jealousy grows, he not only subjects Patsey to sexual abuse, but also resorts increasingly to physical violence.

This cycle culminates with Northup's depiction of Patsey's final punishment. For her imagined transgressions, Epps orders Northup to tie Patsey to four stakes in the ground and whip her. After Northup refuses to continue whipping after thirty lashes, Epps takes over:

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<sup>108</sup> Northup 169.

She was terribly lacerated—I may say, without exaggeration, literally flayed. The lash was wet with blood, which flowed down her sides and dropped upon the ground. At length she ceased struggling. Her head sank listlessly on the ground. Her screams and supplications gradually decreased and died away into a low moan. She no longer writhed and shrank beneath the lash when it bit out small pieces of her flesh. I thought she was dying.<sup>109</sup>

The effect of this brutal beating, according to Northup, is that Patsey is never the same and her spirit is broken forever:

Indeed, from that time forward she was not what she had been. The burden of a deep melancholy weighed heavily on her spirits. She was no longer moved with that buoyant and elastic step—there was not that mirthful sparkle in her eyes that formerly distinguished her. The bounding vigor—the sprightly, laughter-loving spirit of her youth, were gone [...] She became more silent than she was, toiling all day in our midst, not uttering a word. A care-worn pitiful expression settled on her face, and it was her humor now to weep, rather than rejoice. If ever there was a broken heart—one crushed and blighted by the rude grasp of suffering and misfortune—it was Patsey's.<sup>110</sup>

Northup's depiction of Patsey's slave sexual laboring time reveals that the brutal end awaiting slave women like her is the violent breaking of body and spirit. To ignore the progressive nature of Patsey's slave sexual laboring time or to conflate it with Northup's experience of brutal slave manual laboring time is to ignore the increasing suffering, violence and dread to which she was subjected by her master and mistress.

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<sup>109</sup> Northup 171.

<sup>110</sup> Northup 171-73.

Despite the usefulness of Northup's detailed recollections of the labor and violence he witnesses Patsey experiencing, there are unresolved questions about his depiction of Patsey. According to Neary, Northup encounters difficulty in narrating the experiences of other slaves precisely because of his tenuous position as a "participant-observer":

Northup speaks from an impossible subject position in the narrative: the enslaved-free black man. The tension between maintaining his position as an outsider, a free man, while speaking from the position of an insider, a slave, creates some inconsistencies in the passages in which Northup describes slave life and slave consciousness.<sup>111</sup>

By attempting to simultaneously narrate his personal experience as a slave while also providing general observations about the institution of slavery, Northup creates irregularities within his narrative that affect his portrayal of other slaves. Neary suggests, "Northup's account of his interiority is the primary way he distinguishes himself from other slaves during the period of his enslavement,"<sup>112</sup> which becomes most obvious in his portrayal of Patsey. In contrast to his first-person account of his own experiences of slavery—including his internal thoughts and feelings—Northup can only offer his impression of Patsey based on her actions and uttered words. Northup reveals the limitations of his perspective when he begins to speculate about Patsey's feelings about her own life and the future. It is imperative to acknowledge that Northup shares his observations about Patsey through what he witnesses and hears; his account does not provide first-person accounts directly written or narrated by Patsey. I contend that as a result, Northup's speculations about Patsey's feelings actually divulge some of *his* ideas and wishes.

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<sup>111</sup> Neary 110.

<sup>112</sup> Neary 111.



After the vicious beating by Epps that nearly kills her, Northup speculates about Patsey's hope for the future:

Patsey's life, especially after her whipping, was one long dream of liberty. [...] To dwell where the black man may work for himself—live in his own cabin—till his own soil, was a blissful dream of Patsey's—a dream, alas! The fulfillment of which she can never realize.<sup>113</sup>

From Northup's perspective, Epps's beating breaks Patsey's spirit. However, without any direct testimony from Patsey, it is fair to question whether the dream he recounts really belongs to Patsey or to Northup. Tellingly, in Northup's articulation of Patsey's dream, she has been replaced with a black man who dreams of free labor and a home he owns. It seems coincidental that the dream Northup describes seems to recreate the life of free work with his wife and children that *he* had prior to becoming a slave. Given the absence of any respite from physical and sexual violence in Northup's imagined dream for Patsey, it is likely that her feelings about her own future diverged from Northup's. Without any conversations with Patsey to bolster his musings, Northup appears to project his own wishes into the interior life he imagines for Patsey.

Without his imaginings, Patsey's actions at times seem inexplicable to Northup. Despite his own determination to live despite his constant suffering, Northup cannot understand why Patsey does not choose to die as she suffers through an interminable recovery from Epps's brutal whipping. Although succumbing to death is never an option for Northup, as he repeatedly fights for his life and uses his cunning to stay alive, he still thinks it would have been preferable for Patsey to die rather than suffer: "A blessed thing it would have been for her—days and weeks

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<sup>113</sup> Northup 174.

and months of misery it would have saved her—had she never lifted up her head in life again. Indeed, from that time forward she was not what she had been.”<sup>114</sup> Northup’s suggestion that death is preferable for Patsey makes no sense given his own indomitable will. Further, it reveals that he does not know what motivates Patsey to persevere. Despite portraying Patsey as if he understands her deeply, Northup’s depiction reveals the limits of his perspective, especially when it comes to comprehending how the brutal combination of physical and sexual abuse affects her.

Northup further seems to imagine Patsey as a one-dimensional victim. In contrast to the complex thoughts he ascribes to himself throughout the narrative, Northup describes Patsey’s feelings after Epps’s whipping in far simpler terms:

She [Patsey] entertained but confused notions of a future life—not comprehending the distinction between the corporeal and spiritual existence. Happiness, in her mind, was exemption from stripes—from labor—from the cruelty of masters and overseers. Her idea of the joy of heaven was simply *rest*.<sup>115</sup>

Northup determines that Patsey’s mind is too simple for complex thoughts about the nature of the afterlife and asserts that she defines contentment as rest or the absence of work. Northup also focuses on rest, but that seems like his own desire based on his experience of incessant manual labor. Given the frequent assaults and the demands of slave sexual laboring time, it seems likely that Patsey’s own dreams would at least involve the cessation of sexual abuse and violence, even if complete rest were not an option. Moreover, it is odd for Northup to discuss Patsey’s thoughts and beliefs so confidently and without any supporting evidence. This passage raises a significant

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<sup>114</sup> Northup 171.

<sup>115</sup> Northup 173.

question about Northup's depiction of Patsey: How can he possibly know what Patsey comprehends or thinks? The very suggestion that Northup can confidently know what a fellow slave is thinking is undermined by the secrets he successfully hides until the day he is freed. Northup's own ability to hide his true name and his origin as a free married man and father wrongfully sold into slavery demonstrates just how little slaves and owners could know about each other. Since *Twelve Years* is Northup's narrative, readers only see Patsey through his eyes. However, recognizing that Northup only offers his portrayal of Patsey makes it easier to identify the gaps in her story that she would have almost certainly filled as the author of her own tale.

It is likely that Patsey's own telling of her story would have been far more complex than Northup's rendering, which is why Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is such an important text. Jacobs offers the first-person accounts of complex agency that are lacking in Northup's depiction of Patsey. As Hazel Carby explains in *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergency of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*, "The narrative that Jacobs wrote was assertively gender-specific and resonated against the dominant forms of the male slave narrative."<sup>116</sup> Part of what makes *Incidents* such a uniquely feminist text is the nature of Jacobs's agency and resistance: "The spirit of defiance characterized Jacobs's representations of all Linda Brent's encounters with her master. Conventional feminine qualities of submission and passivity were replaced by an active resistance."<sup>117</sup> In *Written by Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746–1892*, Frances Smith Foster elaborates on what distinguishes Jacobs's text from slave narratives written by men:

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<sup>116</sup> Carby 59-60.

<sup>117</sup> Carby 87.

Like most slave narrators, Jacobs relates examples from her own experience to represent the kinds of physical abuse and sufferings inherent in slave life. But male slave narrators tended to tell this story as humanity lost, then regained. They depict themselves as conditioned into accepting themselves as chattel then as awakening to their humanity and the possibilities of living self-defined lives. They claim their humanity by separating themselves from other slaves and fleeing to the free northern states. Jacobs, on the other hand, depicts herself as the young and feisty Linda Brent, a slave girl who knows herself to be an individual of value and who is decidedly aggressive in defending her right to self-determination against those who claimed otherwise. Harriet Jacobs's treatment of conflict, dominion, and power is more complex and varied than that of male narrators.<sup>118</sup>

Unlike many male slave narrators, Jacobs does not suggest that slavery succeeded in subduing her. It is not a coincidence that her primary foe is Dr. Flint, who fights with her for years to acquiesce to his forced sexual labor. Instead of centering her narrative around her victimization, Jacobs focuses *Incidents* on the continuous battles of will between herself and her master as she finds numerous ways of resisting and evading his sexual harassment, foregrounding her decisions to resist slavery.

As P. Gabrielle Foreman suggests in *Activist Sentiments*, the multiple interpretations of Jacobs's narrative offers stand in stark contrast to the ostensibly more transparent male slave narrators:

Jacobs's symbolic relation to her narrator's trajectory of multivalent address stands in opposition to the seemingly transparent regained candor of most male narrators [...]

Whereas the men transform from trickster to true-name-trusted author, the narrator of

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<sup>118</sup> Foster *Written by Herself* 95.

*Incidents* rejects the implied transformation and textual transparency promised in the narrative resolution by the slave narrative paradigm: she becomes the fictive character, Linda Brent.<sup>119</sup>

Foreman identifies the different narrative approach Jacobs takes to construct her story of female enslavement, which extends to her depiction of her sexual abuse. Foreman's reading raises important questions about the different ways in which male and female narrators represent the sexual abuse of female slaves. Sexual abuse is not just another horror of slavery; it becomes a central theme in *Incidents*.

In fact, Foreman argues that Jacobs establishes her agency as a writer through her confession of sexual abuse:

Jacobs must be a sexual *actor* to appropriate speech rights; she does so by expressing agency where male authors most often depict female victimization. This agency exhibits itself in the realm of the illicit: it must produce something to confess.

Confession, then, is the currency with which the text purchases the sanitized (and thus legitimate) attention of its readers.<sup>120</sup>

Foreman emphasizes that the shift from third-person depictions to first-person narration has a profound impact on the writer's relationship to the portrayal of sexual abuse. Unlike male narrators who focus on female victimization, Jacobs establishes her agency while simultaneously depicting her sexual abuse and her resistance to it. As Frances Smith Foster notes in *Written by Herself*, Jacobs "counters the prevalent literary construct of slave women as completely helpless victims. In her narrative, a young woman successfully deflects a master's sexual advances and a

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<sup>119</sup> Foreman 32-33.

<sup>120</sup> Foreman 26.

slave mother does not allow her children to be sold away.”<sup>121</sup> *Incidents* is a complex counternarrative that challenges the helplessness of slave women and establishes itself as representative due to Jacobs’s insistence that her experiences reflect those of slave girls more generally.

By viewing Patsey almost exclusively through the lens of victimization, Northup presents a limited portrayal of her slave labor and time, especially her slave sexual laboring time. Comparing Jacobs’s numerous attempts to resist abuse to Northup’s limited account of Patsey suggests that if Patsey were to have told her own story she would have revealed far more complexity, nuance, and agency than Northup depicts. This access to interiority and agency that we find in Jacobs’s firsthand account, with her particular focus on sexual abuse, is why her narrative is the ideal text for elucidating how the uniquely gendered burdens of forced sexual and reproductive labor affect slave women’s depiction of their slave laboring times.

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<sup>121</sup> Foster *Written by Herself* 95.

## 2. VOLATILE INTERRUPTIONS:

### The Temporalities of Black Slave Women's Sexual and Reproductive Labors

“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.”<sup>122</sup>

“Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, *they* have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own.”<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Jacobs 29.

<sup>123</sup> Jacobs 77.

Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* offers one of the most detailed and expansive portrayals of slave motherhood found in antebellum slave narratives. In her depiction of her own story and the women who surrounded her, Jacobs exposes the inescapable sexual abuse to which slave girls were subjected as they developed into women and mothers. Jacobs's story is one of childhood cut short because slave girls are exposed to sexual knowledge at a young age. However, it is also a story of her resistance, motivated by her love for her children as well as her intellect.

Jacobs's willingness to openly discuss the sexual abuse she endured as well as the sexual relationship that led to the birth of her children. Carby *argues* that Jacobs's loss of virtue "placed her outside the parameters of the conventional heroine. [...] According to the doctrine of true womanhood, death itself was preferable to a loss of innocence."<sup>124</sup> Jacobs does not let the cult of true womanhood define her and "developed an alternative set of definitions of womanhood and motherhood"<sup>125</sup> that more accurately reflect the "spirit of defiance"<sup>126</sup> that characterizes her resistance to slavery. Indeed, Jacobs emphasizes resistance as a key component of her identity as a woman and mother, explicitly challenging the notion of true womanhood:

Conventional feminine qualities of submission and passivity were replaced by an active resistance. [...] Her strength and resourcefulness to resist were not adopted from a reservoir of masculine attributes but were shown to have their source in her "woman's pride, and a mother's love for [her] children" (87).<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Carby 59.

<sup>125</sup> Carby 56.

<sup>126</sup> Carby 56.

<sup>127</sup> Carby 56.



Jacobs's new vision of womanhood and motherhood allowed her to put herself at the center of her story as a new literary subject: "a heroic slave mother."<sup>128</sup> In the introduction to *Incidents*

Jean Fagan Yellin elaborates:

In and 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.<sup>129</sup>

Jacobs's new definition of womanhood allows her to circumvent the expected silence about the sexual abuse that she attests forms a large part of the slave girl's experience. Although the "wrongs and sufferings" that slave girls experience have received much scholarly attention, it is often discussed in the context of abuse and violence. This chapter focuses on the sexual abuse Jacobs discusses so openly, but situated within the context of slave labor to consider how Jacobs's portrayal of the sexual and reproductive labor extracted from enslaved women produced a different experience of time.

One of Harriet Jacobs's boldest pronouncements is her insistence that slave girls, unlike white girls, are exposed to sexual knowledge in childhood. This early introduction precipitates the untimely end of black girls' innocence and prepares them for the approaching time when they too will be compelled to perform sexual labor. This is because all slave girls will eventually enter puberty, when they will become subject to sexual coercion, rape and forced reproduction. Long before she narrates her own experiences of sexual persecution, Jacobs recalls the scenes of other slave women's harassment she witnesses while still a child. In one example, Jacobs remembers

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<sup>128</sup> Yellin *Incidents* xvi.

<sup>129</sup> Yellin *Incidents* xvi.

the slave woman Dr. Flint sells after she and her “husband,” who were not legally married since slaves could not marry, quarrel over the paternity of the fair-skinned child to whom she had recently given birth:

When the mother was delivered into the trader’s hands, she said, “You *promised* to treat me well.” To which he [Dr. Flint] replied, “You have let your tongue run too far; damn you!” She had forgotten that it was a crime for a slave to tell who was the father of her child.<sup>130</sup>

The cruel irony of Dr. Flint’s admonishment lies in the fact the child’s skin color is what reveals his paternity, something clearly beyond the mother’s control. P. Gabrielle Foreman describes the impossibility of the mother’s compliance this situation in *Activist Sentiments*, explaining:

When, for women, bodily expression (that is, pregnancies and pale children) is constructed as punishable speech, the promise of safety that owners offer in exchange for silence is impossible for enslaved women to carry out, much less collect upon.<sup>131</sup>

Dr. Flint’s demand for silence is one that the slave mother is incapable of meeting since her child’s body reveals Dr. Flint’s sexual abuse. From the beginning of the narrative, Jacobs exposes Dr. Flint’s pattern of forcing slaves to have sex and then selling them away after they bear his children. However, Jacobs also explains that masters are not the only source of persecution; she recounts how her mistress tormented a slave who later died while giving birth to one of Dr. Flint’s children. Jacobs implicates both master and mistress by revealing that much of the suffering that she witnesses in other slave women and personally experiences originates with sexually abusive masters as well as their complicit wives.

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<sup>130</sup> Jacobs 13.

<sup>131</sup> Foreman 21.

Before delving into her own painful experience of sexual harassment, Jacobs emphasizes that her story reflects the common experience of slave girls. By directly addressing her imagined white women readers, she instructs them to channel any sympathy they may have for her to the women who are still enslaved: “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.”<sup>132</sup> Even while reflecting back on her experiences from the vantage point of freedom, Jacobs insists that her misery and implicitly her complex experiences of labor and time reflect the experiences of most, if not all, enslaved women.

One of the universal experiences that Jacobs describes is the transition from childhood to puberty, which she exposes as a destructive process for slave girls. She explains:

Every where the years bring to all enough of sin and sorrow; but in slavery the very dawn of life is darkened by these shadows. Even the little child, who is accustomed to wait on her mistress and her children, will learn, before she is twelve years old, why it is that her mistress hates such and such a one among the slaves. Perhaps the child’s own mother is among those hated ones. She listens to violent outbreaks of jealous passion, and cannot help understanding what is the cause. *She will become prematurely knowing in evil things.* Soon she will learn to tremble when she hears her master’s footfall. She will be compelled to realize that she is no longer a child. If God has bestowed beauty upon her, it will prove her greatest curse.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Jacobs 29.

<sup>133</sup> Jacobs 28, emphasis added.

The end of childhood comes artificially determined not by the natural approach of adulthood, but by the lascivious desire of the master. Jacobs reveals that before her own persecution begins, the young slave girl learns too early about sex, jealousy and other immoral things. This untimely knowledge teaches the slave girl one thing: fear of both master and mistress. Even before sexual abuse occurs, the fear of it can pervade the slave girl's thoughts and thereby steal precious time both from her already curtailed childhood and practically from her daily work.

In the chapter "The Trials of Girlhood," Jacobs describes her entry into her "fifteenth year—a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl"<sup>134</sup> as she begins to narrate her own personal experiences of sexual harassment. Jacobs's invocation of the term "epoch" exposes one critical way in which enslaved women depict gendered experiences of time. For slave women, puberty marks the beginning of a new period of vulnerability with the likely addition of sexual and reproductive labor to existing demands for manual and domestic labor. To capture the breadth of the danger Jacobs describes, I define "sexual labor" to include sexual harassment, abuse and assault. Rather than focus exclusively on rape, I include the myriad of ways in which Jacobs depicts slave women being forced to gratify the wanton demands of masters, placing additional burdens on their labor and time. Although she does not submit to Dr. Flint's lewd suggestions, Jacobs still performs sexual labor. This is because Dr. Flint requires her to listen and respond to his indecent advances despite her insistent and forceful indication that she would prefer nothing more than to be free of the vulgar ideas to which he constantly subjects her. To emphasize that the coerced sexual labor Dr. Flint demands from Jacobs is yet another onerous form of work with its own temporality, I call this time *slave sexual laboring time*.

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<sup>134</sup> Jacobs 27.

Later in the narrative when Jacobs describes her experience as a slave mother, she reveals how slavery commodifies the ordinary labor and time of maternal care to increase the wealth of slave owners. More specifically, since her children are slaves, the labor she performs while caring for them maintains or even increases their value as commodities owned by the Flints. To capture this transformation of ordinary maternal labor into an economically profitable form of slave labor, I contend that Jacobs's maternal labor is actually what I call *reproductive labor* and the time she spends performing this work is *slave reproductive laboring time*. Jacobs's narrative elucidates how slavery perverts the sacred bond between mother and child, including maternal labor and time, to benefit the slave owners financially.

By exposing Dr. Flint's sexual coercion early in her narrative, Jacobs creates space to delve more deeply into her resistance to the sexual abuse that she portrays with depth and candor not commonly seen in male depictions of female sexual abuse such as Solomon Northup's portrayal of Patsey. As Frances Smith Foster argues in *Written By Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746–1892*, Jacobs "counters the prevalent literary construct of slave women as completely helpless victims. In her narrative, a young woman successfully deflects a master's sexual advances and a slave mother does not allow her children to be sold away."<sup>135</sup> Part of what distinguishes *Incidents* from other slave narratives written by men is the way in which Jacobs portrays her abuse alongside with her agency and active resistance. This agency goes beyond Jacobs's depiction of her active resistance, and includes the myriad of ways in which she portrays herself and other enslaved women resisting slavery. According to Foster, Jacobs "does not excuse the evil inherent in that institution [slavery] but does reveal [...] some are able to develop strong family ties, develop bonds of affection and loyalty among women, and

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<sup>135</sup> Foster *Written By Herself* 95.

unite themselves into a viable and resourceful community of resisters”.<sup>136</sup> Further, the community of women that Jacobs depicts also provides examples of resistance from which she draws:

Through the grandmother and others who remained in the South, and who sometimes remained enslaved, but who nonetheless successfully defended themselves against slavery’s unrelenting assault upon self-esteem and intellectual independence, Jacobs suggest a variety of loopholes through which slaves might retreat.<sup>137</sup>

Although victimized, Jacobs does not depict herself as a powerless victim. In fact, Jacobs’s meticulous record of the abuses to which she was subjected provides her with ample opportunity to document her consistent resistance.

In addition to her detailed descriptions of abuse, Jacobs also shares the psychological effects it has on her. Once she begins to narrate her life after puberty, Jacobs depicts her slave laboring time as filled with dread and unpredictable sexual harassment that frequently interrupts her day and other slave labor. Jacobs explains Dr. Flint’s tactics for subduing her resistance to his sexual advances:

My master began to whisper foul words in my ear. Young as I was, I could not remain ignorant of their import. [...] He was a crafty man, and resorted to many means to accomplish his purposes. Sometimes he had stormy, terrific ways, that made his victims

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<sup>136</sup> Foster *Written By Herself* 95.

<sup>137</sup> Foster *Written By Herself* 95-96.

tremble; sometimes he assumed a gentleness that he thought must surely subdue. Of the two, I preferred his stormy moods, although they left me trembling.<sup>138</sup>

Jacobs reveals the unpredictability of Dr. Flint's actions, which leaves her with a growing sense of dread of him and—echoing Patsey's constant fear of Epps' sexual assaults—fearful anticipation of his inevitable next attempt to seduce her.

What must be emphasized is the fact that Dr. Flint's harassment takes place while Jacobs is still performing her other required work. In discussing her experience of slave sexual laboring time in more detail, Jacobs reveals how much Dr. Flint's sexual abuse interrupts her day and instills in her a constant fear of his presence. Her portrayal also divulges how often she deploys strategies for resisting Dr. Flint, albeit with varying levels of success. Jacobs often structures her depictions of Dr. Flint's abuse with corresponding scenes of resistance, which allow readers to see her attempts to thwart and stall his efforts to assault her. As Frances Smith Foster explains, Jacobs emphasizes this defiance in dramatically different ways than male slave narrators:

Like most slave narrators, Jacobs relates examples from her own experience to represent the kinds of physical abuse and sufferings inherent in slave life. But male slave narrators tended to tell this story as humanity lost, then regained. They depict themselves as conditioned into accepting themselves as chattel then as awakening to their humanity and the possibilities of living self-defined lives. They claim their humanity by separating themselves from other slaves and fleeing to the free northern states. Jacobs, on the other hand, depicts herself as the young and feisty Linda Brent, a slave girl who knows herself to be an individual of value and who is decidedly aggressive in defending her right to

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<sup>138</sup> Jacobs 27.

self-determination against those who claimed otherwise. Harriet Jacobs's treatment of conflict, dominion, and power is more complex and varied than that of male narrators.<sup>139</sup> In addition to forcefully defending herself as Foster suggests, Jacobs boldly chooses to highlight her defiant self-protection throughout her narrative. Jacobs manages to rebel against Dr. Flint primarily using time to do so. More specifically, Jacobs subverts the temporal constraints placed on her as a slave—such as the imperative for her to use all of her time to work as much as possible—by using them as pretexts for avoiding Dr. Flint and his sexual coercion.

Jacobs depicts the increasing frequency of Dr. Flint's sexual entreaties along with her strategy of avoidance. In one example, Jacobs describes:

My master met me at every turn, reminding me that I belonged to him, and swearing by heaven and earth that he would compel me to submit to him. If I went out for a breath of fresh air, after a day of unwearièd toil, his footsteps dogged me. If I knelt by my mother's grave, his dark shadow fell on me even there. The light heart which nature had given me became heavy with sad forebodings.<sup>140</sup>

She effectively conveys the seeming omnipresence of Dr. Flint, who is seemingly inescapable to the desperate Jacobs. Like a predator waiting to pounce on unsuspecting prey, Dr. Flint pollutes Jacobs's environment. He encroaches constantly on Jacobs's laboring time by harassing her while she continues to perform domestic work in his home. However, his pursuit of Jacobs does not end once her daily domestic labor is over. Jacobs also depicts Dr. Flint's attempts to get her alone even when her workday is done, which creates an atmosphere of abiding fear and dread. Through these scenes of relentless harassment, Jacobs expresses the feeling that her slave

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<sup>139</sup> Foster *Written By Herself* 95.

<sup>140</sup> Jacobs 28.



laboring time never seems to end. Nevertheless, Jacobs attempts to evade Dr. Flint by moving to different locations on the plantation. Despite her effort, Jacobs finds no place safe as even the sacred ground of her mother's grave cannot protect her from Dr. Flint's lustful eye. Thus, when Jacobs exclaims, "O, what days and nights of fear and sorrow that man caused me!"<sup>141</sup> her readers understand that Dr. Flint's abuse permeates her time. Dr. Flint's harassment becomes so ubiquitous in Jacobs's portrayal that it seems as though she is constantly performing sexual labor while simultaneously balancing her domestic and sexual labors during the day. What is critical in Jacobs's depiction is that Dr. Flint's demands for sexual labor affect her laboring time, making it feel interminable because of her anxiety and dread of when he will suddenly appear to harass her anew.

As Jacobs progresses through her fifteenth year, Dr. Flint increasingly subjects her to sexual harassment that disturbs all of her time, including her nighttime rest. To evade his watchful wife, Dr. Flint resorts to various schemes in his attempts to seduce Jacobs:

What he could not find opportunity to say in words he manifested in signs. He invented more than were ever thought of in a deaf and dumb asylum. I let them pass, as if I did not understand what he meant; and many were the curses and threats bestowed on me for my stupidity. One day he caught me teaching myself to write [...] Before long, notes were often slipped into my hand. I would return them, saying, "I can't read them, sir." "Can't you?" he replied; "then I must read them to you." He always finished the reading by asking, "Do you understand?"<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Jacobs 29.

<sup>142</sup> Jacobs 31.

Jacobs couples examples of Dr. Flint's harassment with her own resistance. Jacobs describes managing to avoid conveying her understanding of his lewd messages and signs; this feigned ignorance stalls Dr. Flint for a while. Although this tactic ultimately proves to be unsuccessful, Jacobs catalogs her attempts to thwart Dr. Flint so readers can see that she is trying to do everything in her limited power to avoid forced sexual labor.

In fact, Jacobs concludes her examples of Dr. Flint's abuse and her defiant responses with a summary of her attempts to avoid him:

By managing to keep within sight of people, as much as possible, during the day time, I had hitherto succeeded in eluding my master, though a razor was often held to my throat to force me to change this line of policy. At night I slept by the side of my great aunt, where I felt safe.<sup>143</sup>

However, despite Jacobs's best efforts, she is unable to stop Dr. Flint's advances as he finds new ways to threaten and abuse her. Dr. Flint is inescapable because no one can protect her from him. She explains:

When I succeeded in avoiding opportunities for him to talk to me at home, I was ordered to come to his office, to do some errand. When there, I was obliged to stand and listen to such language as he saw fit to address to me. Sometimes I so openly expressed my contempt for him that he would become violently enraged, and I wondered why he did not strike me. Circumstanced as he was, he probably thought it was better policy to be forbearing. But the state of things grew worse and worse daily. In desperation I told him

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<sup>143</sup> Jacobs 32.

that I must and would apply to my grandmother for protection. He threatened me with death, and worse than death, if I made any complaint to her.<sup>144</sup>

Far from any sense of stasis, Jacobs's account reveals the deteriorating situation she faces because she cannot protect herself. Despite all of her attempts, Jacobs demonstrates that while enslaved she is unable to control her labor and time.

Besides Dr. Flint's attempts to sexually assault her, Jacobs endures the verbal assaults of the "jealous mistress."<sup>145</sup> Mrs. Flint is eager to foil Dr. Flint's seduction of Jacobs, but only to assuage her feelings as a wronged wife. Jacobs takes care to note that while Mrs. Flint "pitied herself as a martyr" she "had no compassion for the poor victim of her husband's perfidy."<sup>146</sup> Jacobs documents the degeneration of her experience at the Flint home, stating,

I had entered my sixteenth year, and every day it became more apparent that my presence was intolerable to Mrs. Flint. Angry words frequently passed between her and her husband. He had never punished me himself, and he would not allow any body else to punish me. In that respect, she was never satisfied; but, in her angry moods, no terms were too vile for her to bestow upon me.<sup>147</sup>

Unable to satisfy her jealous desire for physical punishment, Mrs. Flint resorts to extreme verbal harassment of Jacobs and becomes another menacing presence in Jacobs's young life. Between Dr. Flint's sexual harassment and Mrs. Flint's own verbal harassment, Jacobs's slave manual laboring time is frequently interrupted by slave sexual laboring time.

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<sup>144</sup> Jacobs 32.

<sup>145</sup> Jacobs 31.

<sup>146</sup> Jacobs 33.

<sup>147</sup> Jacobs 32.

Dr. Flint's demands for sexual labor incite his wife's jealousy and their harassment of Jacobs progresses during the day and night. In addition to enduring Dr. Flint's sexual abuse during the working day, Jacobs must survive Mrs. Flint's physical threats at night. Jacobs explains how she comes to fear physical violence from Mrs. Flint:

[Mrs. Flint] spent many a sleepless night to watch over me. Sometimes I woke up, and found her bending over me. At other times she whispered in my ear, as though it was her husband who was speaking to me, and listened to hear what I would answer [...] At last, I began to be fearful for my life.<sup>148</sup>

Unable to directly thwart Dr. Flint, Mrs. Flint resorts to harassing, hounding, and threatening Jacobs. The fear and anxiety that Mrs. Flint's stalking produces as well as Dr. Flint's sexual abuse interrupt Jacobs's slumber. Although Jacobs does not say it directly, it is hard to imagine how she can sleep peacefully while simultaneously fearing for her life.

It becomes clear that Jacobs's attempts to avoid Dr. Flint's sexual coercion are only temporary and that the impasse between them will be resolved at some point. Jacobs shows that she tries to find a number of escapes from Dr. Flint's abuse, all to no avail. She explains in painstaking detail that her utmost desire is to marry and maintain her virtue, but Dr. Flint uses his legal control over Jacobs's life decisions to satisfy his jealousy. After a free black man proposes to Jacobs, her grandmother attempts to persuade Dr. Flint to sell her so that she can be free and marry. While awaiting Dr. Flint's response to her entreaty, the passing time and anxiety are unbearable. Jacobs recalls, "How I dreaded my master now! Every minute I expected to be

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<sup>148</sup> Jacobs 34.

summoned to his presence; but the day passed, and I heard nothing from him.”<sup>149</sup> This dread consumes her time as she waits for an answer that will in large part determine the trajectory of her future. Dr. Flint, of course, refuses her request and soon subjects Jacobs to his wrath while questioning her about the proposal. Jacobs describes Dr. Flint’s violence when she tells him that she loves her suitor: “He sprang upon me like a tiger, and gave me a stunning blow. It was the first time he had ever struck me; and fear did not enable me to control my anger.”<sup>150</sup> Eventually Dr. Flint resumes his seduction and Jacobs confronts the inevitable truth that she will never be allowed to marry her suitor. She explains the lesson Dr. Flint teaches her: “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.”<sup>151</sup> When Jacobs eventually persuades her suitor to leave her for the Free States, she reflects: “[The] lamp of hope had gone out. The dream of my girlhood was over. I felt lonely and desolate.”<sup>152</sup> Although Jacobs’s language seems to echo Northup’s depiction of Patsey’s broken spirit and unfulfilled dream of liberty, Jacobs does not passively accept her situation. While Jacobs may seem resigned to her situation, she closely guards her plans for freedom. Jacobs’s reticence to confide in some of her closest family members reveals the limitations of Northup’s assessment of Patsey. Without access to Patsey’s thoughts, Northup may have missed any rebellious plans similar to Jacobs’s forming in Patsey’s mind. Ultimately, Jacobs’s radical decision to take a secret lover creates a new avenue for her to resist Dr. Flint’s harassment.

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<sup>149</sup> Jacobs 38.

<sup>150</sup> Jacobs 39.

<sup>151</sup> Jacobs 42.

<sup>152</sup> Jacobs 42.

In the chapter “A Perilous Passage in the Slave Girl’s Life,” Jacobs explains her decision to become the lover of Mr. Sands, a white unmarried man who learned of Dr. Flint’s persecution and then began to lavish her with attention,<sup>153</sup> as the only choice she can make in light of Dr. Flint’s relentless determination to assault her. Jacobs explains that the constant attention from Mr. Sands was “flattering”<sup>154</sup> and over time “a more tender feeling crept into [her] heart.”<sup>155</sup> However, it is the impending threat of Dr. Flint’s coercion that also propels Jacobs to take the “headlong plunge”<sup>156</sup> of becoming Mr. Sands’s lover. She explains:

When I found that my master has actually begun to build the lonely cottage, other feelings mixed with those I have described. Revenge, and calculations of interest, were added to flattered vanity and sincere gratitude for kindness [...] The crisis of my fate now came so near that I was desperate. I shuddered to think of being the mother of children that should be owned by my old tyrant. I knew that as soon as a new fancy took him, his victims were sold far off to get rid of them; especially if they had children. I had seen several women sold, with his babies at the breast. He never allowed his offspring by slaves to remain long in sight of himself and his wife.<sup>157</sup>

Jacobs identifies two temporal constraints in this passage. First, she describes feeling rushed while being compelled to make a decision that will allow her to circumvent the immediate threat of Dr. Flint moving her to the isolated home he is building so that he can subdue her away from the watchful eyes of his wife and community. Second, Jacobs acknowledges that even if she

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<sup>153</sup> Jacobs 54.

<sup>154</sup> Jacobs 54.

<sup>155</sup> Jacobs 54.

<sup>156</sup> Jacobs 55.

<sup>157</sup> Jacobs 55.

submits to Dr. Flint's sexual demands, her sexual labor will only grant her a limited amount of additional time with her children because Dr. Flint will eventually sell her like the other slaves he abused. Jacobs realizes that because of Dr. Flint's insistence, she will be required to perform sexual labor. Therefore, her turn to Mr. Sands is the product of her acceptance of her inability to escape sexual labor coupled with her resistance to Dr. Flint. By choosing Mr. Sands Jacobs tries to ensure that the sexual and reproductive labor she performs will, at the very least, not be for Dr. Flint.

Jacobs frames her decision to take Mr. Sands as a lover as an act of agency as well as a desire to outsmart and thwart Dr. Flint. In choosing Mr. Sands and experiencing "something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over [her], except that which he gains by kindness and attachment,"<sup>158</sup> Jacobs avoids performing sexual labor that Dr. Flint demands, which grants her additional time to remain in the Flint home near her family. When Dr. Flint orders Jacobs to go to the newly finished house, she tells him, "I will never go there. In a few months I shall be a mother."<sup>159</sup> Jacobs attempts to use her pregnancy to halt Dr. Flint's abuse and by extension her experience of slave sexual laboring time. Although Jacobs's declaration does cause Dr. Flint to abort his plan to bring her to his cottage, it does not stop his constant harassment. Despite her difficult childbirth and weeks of being bedbound, Dr. Flint continues to badger Jacobs; he even uses her brother to send her "frequent notes and messages."<sup>160</sup>

After Dr. Flint discovers that Jacobs will become a mother for the second time, he becomes physically violent and subjects her to continued verbal harassment. Dr. Flint responds

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<sup>158</sup> Jacobs 55.

<sup>159</sup> Jacobs 56.

<sup>160</sup> Jacobs 61.

to Jacobs's declaration by cutting her "fine head of hair."<sup>161</sup> When she replies to some abusive remark, Dr. Flint hits her despite his earlier promise to never strike her again. His harassment only increases: "After he discovered my situation, he was like a restless spirit from the pit. He came [to her grandmother's house] every day; and I was subjected to such insults as no pen can describe. I would not describe them if I could; they were too low, too revolting."<sup>162</sup> In one instance, just four days after Jacobs delivers her daughter Ellen, Dr. Flint subjects her to a particularly intense verbal scolding that causes Jacobs to faint. She recalls, "while I stood before him, trembling with weakness, he heaped upon me and my little one every vile epithet he could think of [...]. In this midst of his vituperations I fainted at his feet."<sup>163</sup> Unsurprisingly, Dr. Flint's harassment of Jacobs continues until she runs away. In addition to her concern for her children, Jacobs also becomes a fugitive slave to continue her hitherto successful avoidance of Dr. Flint attempts to sexually assault her. Ultimately, Jacobs's decisions to become a mother and a fugitive slave are the result of her refusal to succumb to Dr. Flint's sexual demands. Although Jacobs's decision to take Mr. Sands as a lover is her most daring act of resistance prior to running away, it certainly is not the only one. In fact, it is her most desperate effort to avoid Dr. Flint's sexual coercion. By showing readers how Dr. Flint's sexual abuse impedes her labor and time, Jacobs demonstrates the inevitability of her sexual labor outside of wedlock.

The most obvious result of becoming Mr. Sand's lover is that Jacobs bears two children. Becoming a mother leads to profound changes in how Jacobs views life and understands slavery. Immediately, motherhood provides Jacobs with motivation to stay alive and endure slavery. As Jacobs explains after she gives birth to her son Benny, "I had often prayed for death; but now I

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<sup>161</sup> Jacobs 77.

<sup>162</sup> Jacobs 77.

<sup>163</sup> Jacobs 77.



did not want to die, unless my child could die too.”<sup>164</sup> Despite a renewed will to live, Jacobs experiences a number of contradictory feelings about motherhood:

As the months passed on, my boy improved in health. When he was a year old, they called him beautiful. The little vine was taking deep root in my existence, though its clinging fondness excited a mixture of love and pain. [...] I could never forget that he was a slave. Sometimes I wished that he might die in infancy. God tried me. My darling became very ill. [...] I had prayed for his death, but never so earnestly as I now prayed for his life; and my prayer was heard. Alas, what mockery it is for a slave mother to try to pray back her dying child to life! Death is better than slavery.<sup>165</sup>

Although this passage seems to suggest that Jacobs has conflicting feelings for her son, a careful reading reveals her grappling with how to love her child who is a slave. More specifically, it is the horror of slavery that makes her demonstrate her maternal love by wishing for her son’s death in order to spare him a life of slavery. Although Jacobs’s prayers for her son expose the depth of her love, they are also more examples of reproductive labor that maintain the Flints’ wealth through their investment in her son.

Despite her misgivings about raising a slave child, Jacobs cares for her son without fail. However, the addition of reproductive labor further taxes Jacobs’s limited time since she must still complete her existing work requirements and shoulder the burden of sexual labor Dr. Flint forces her to perform with each act of abuse. Since slave mothers are neither afforded extra time to care for children nor granted a reduction in work, Jacobs must find time to care for her children while still meeting all of her laboring demands. While the work and time Jacobs spends

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<sup>164</sup> Jacobs 61.

<sup>165</sup> Jacobs 62.

nursing her infant son back to life in the preceding example may seem like ordinary maternal labor and mothering time, it is reproductive labor and she experiences slave reproductive laboring time when performing it.

Jacobs's experience of motherhood is circumscribed by the law's denial of legal rights to slave parents with the most profound ramifications for slave mothers. According to Hartman in *Scenes of Subjection*, "Motherhood was critical to the reproduction of property and black subjection, but parental rights were unknown to the law. [...] Motherhood, specifically, and parenting, in general, were social relations without legal recognition."<sup>166</sup> Hartman exposes the legal basis for Jacobs's parental apprehensions, which is complete legal nullification of her rights and recourse as a mother. The very notion of a slave mother with agency and ownership of her children is absent in a judicial system that reduces slaves to vessels for producing the next generation of children, who themselves are legally property. Most significantly, Hartman identifies the artificial separation of the social connection between parents and children from the legal acknowledgment of parental rights. The law overturns parents' natural rights to their children and transforms the multifaceted relationship between parents and children in general, and the relationship between mothers and children specifically, into merely one of economic reproduction. I argue that Jacobs's narrated experiences of motherhood depict her performance of slave reproductive laboring time. Her inability to exercise her natural rights as a mother affects her experience of maternal labor and time.

The unnatural yet legal supremacy of owners over slave parents is not a hidden source of shame for Dr. Flint, but is instead a tool he uses to taunt Jacobs. Soon after Jacobs gives birth to

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<sup>166</sup> Hartman 98.

her son, Dr. Flint continues to visit her while she stays at her grandmother's house and consistently tells her "that [her] child was an addition to his stock of slaves."<sup>167</sup> By repeatedly reminding Jacobs that he owns her newborn son, Dr. Flint threatens her with the power he wields over the baby. However, he is even more explicit when reminding Jacobs of her children's financial value to him when he "would often say to [her], with an exulting smile, 'These brats will bring me a handsome sum of money one of these days.'"<sup>168</sup> Despite Jacobs's motherly love, all of the labor and time she spends to care for her son benefits Dr. Flint. I do not wish to negate the labor and time Jacobs spends caring for her children. Instead, I contend that she experiences slave reproductive laboring time, which serves the *dual* purposes of demonstrating her maternal love while also benefiting her owners. The few moments where Jacobs experiences mothering time outside of the confines of slavery are moments of resistance where she defies the orders of Dr. Flint.

Since she has no legal right to parent, care for or protect her children, Jacobs narrates few interactions with her children; instead she offers multiple scenes where she is denied the ability to perform the full amount of maternal labor that she desires beyond what her master allows. In multiple instances, Jacobs describes how Dr. Flint directly, or her role as a slave mother more generally, prevents her from providing the motherly love and tenderness she wishes to give to her children. In one example, Dr. Flint verbally abuses Jacobs in the presence of her young son:

He clinched my arm with a volley of oaths. Ben began to scream, and I told him to go to his grandmother.

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<sup>167</sup> Jacobs 61.

<sup>168</sup> Jacobs 80.

“Don’t you stir a step, you little wretch!” said he. The child drew nearer to me, and put his arms round me, as if he wanted to protect me. This was too much for my enraged master. He caught him up and hurled him across the room. I thought he was dead, and rushed towards him to take him up.

“Not yet!” exclaimed the doctor. “Let him lie there till he comes to.”

“Let me go! Let me go!” I screamed, “or I will raise the whole house.” I struggled and got away; but he clinched me again. Somebody opened the door, and he released me. I picked up my insensible child, and when I turned my tormentor was gone. Anxiously I bent over the little form, so pale and still; and when the brown eyes at last opened, I don’t know whether I was very happy.<sup>169</sup>

In this horrific scene, Dr. Flint physically abuses Jacobs’s son and then prevents her from tending to her unconscious child. This suspenseful period of waiting is another way in which Dr. Flint dominates Jacobs. When Jacobs is unsure of whether her son is dead or alive, Dr. Flint cruelly restrains her and keeps her physically separated from the child. Dr. Flint denies Jacobs the few, fleeting seconds of tenderly holding and caring for her unconscious child that she desperately wishes to have. By depriving her and her son of this intimate moment of familial love and bonding, Dr. Flint torments Jacobs who must watch her son’s limp body as an impotent spectator. Dr. Flint prevents Jacobs from displaying her tender affection as he recovers from a physical assault. Dr. Flint’s disruption of this act of motherly love abates only because of the timely and unanticipated interruption by someone who opens the door. In this scene, Dr. Flint’s refusal to allow Jacobs to provide medically unnecessary but emotionally beneficial care such as

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<sup>169</sup> Jacobs 81.

caressing and soothing Benny illustrates how mothering labor is reduced to reproductive labor during slavery because Jacobs cannot expect to nurture her children beyond what her master desires.

In addition to such dramatic disregard of parental rights, Jacobs is also denied the ability to care for her children when they are ill. Jacobs recalls an instance when she cannot nurse her sick son: “My boy was ill, and I left him behind.”<sup>170</sup> Later Jacobs remembers sending her daughter to her grandmother and explaining her decision to Mr. Flint, Dr. Flint’s son and her new master:

The next morning the old cart was loaded with shingles for town. I put Ellen into it, and sent her to her grandmother. Mr. Flint said I ought to have asked his permission. I told him the child was sick, and required attention which I had no time to give. He let it pass; for he was aware that I had accomplished much work in a little time.<sup>171</sup>

Here Jacobs states clearly that she does not have time to take care of her children and also perform the work demanded of her, which is why she sends her sick children to her grandmother. However, Jacobs’s inability to care for her children is not the result of a personal failing; the problem is that she must conform to the demand for incessant slave labor or face grave consequences. As Jacobs indicates earlier in this same chapter, her security, which she defines as staying in the same place as her children, rests on her ability to work as much as possible and without giving any cause for complaint to Mr. Flint.

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<sup>170</sup> Jacobs 86.

<sup>171</sup> Jacobs 87.

An even crueller common practice than the denial of maternal labor, Jacobs describes how slave mothers are “broke in”<sup>172</sup> by witnessing the abuse of their children for so long that it destroys their spirits and their ability to resist. After being sent to Mr. Flint’s plantation and hearing of his intention to break her in, Jacobs muses that it would be easier to see her daughter die than watch her being beaten. For Jacobs, the death of her child would be preferable to impotently observing her daughter’s physical abuse. Moreover, Jacobs fears what will happen when she is too defeated to protect her children:

When I lay down besides my child, I felt how much easier it would be to see her die than to see her master beat her about, as I daily saw him beat other little ones. The spirit of the mothers was so crushed by the lash, that they stood by, without courage to remonstrate. How much more must I suffer, before I should be “broke in” to that degree?<sup>173</sup>

Jacobs describes this destructive process without assigning blame to slave mothers. Rather, it is the inevitable result of repeated abuse and conditioning. When Jacobs hears that she is next in line, she explains that it is only a matter of time before her spirit will be crushed too. In Jacobs’s retelling, she resolves to run away before she crosses that threshold. Nevertheless, she describes how the breaking in process already begins before she can run away.

During the period where Jacobs plans her escape, she must endure the heartache of watching her daughter suffer without the ability to soothe her:

Ellen broke down under the trials of her new life. Separated from me, with no one to look after her, she wandered about, and in a few days cried herself sick. One day, she sat under

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<sup>172</sup> Jacobs 87.

<sup>173</sup> Jacobs 86-87.

the window where I was at work, crying that weary cry which makes a mother's heart bleed. I was obliged to steel myself to bear it.<sup>174</sup>

Despite being so near to her daughter who is crying, Jacobs is unable to comfort her. To avoid suspicion and punishment, Jacobs “resolved to give [Dr. Flint’s son] no cause to accuse [her] of being too much of a lady, so far as work was concerned. [She] worked day and night.”<sup>175</sup> Unable to stop this incessant labor, Jacobs can only listen to her crying child with a bleeding heart. In the face of her daughter’s suffering, Jacobs’s only option is to harden her emotions and endure listening to Ellen. This is one of the most heart-rending scenes in the book; notably, it involves the suffering of her child, which Jacobs is forced to witness without a safe way to assuage it.

It is only when she ceases to hear her daughter’s crying and finds her missing that Jacobs stops working to venture out to check on Ellen, a dangerous moment of resistance:

After a while it [the crying] ceased. I looked out, and she was gone. As it was near noon, I ventured to go down in search of her. The great house was raised two feet above the ground. I looked under it, and saw her about midway, fast asleep. I crept under and drew her out. As I held her in my arms, I thought how well it would be for her if she never waked up; and I uttered my thought aloud. I was startled to hear some one say, “Did you speak to me?” I looked up, and saw Mr. Flint standing beside me. He said nothing further, but turned, frowning, away.<sup>176</sup>

Even though she is ostensibly surprised to see her daughter “gone” and concerned enough to want to look for her, Jacobs still tries to find a hidden moment to check on her child. Jacobs’s

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<sup>174</sup> Jacobs 87.

<sup>175</sup> Jacobs 86.

<sup>176</sup> Jacobs 87.

fear of punishment for searching for Ellen instead of working is palpable when Mr. Flint startles her and catches her holding her child during her work time.

Jacobs's suspension of work to go find Ellen is not her only moment of resistance to slave reproductive laboring time. In fact, there are many small moments of resistance when Jacobs finds time to provide uncommodified—that is, economically unbeneficial—mothering labor. One such moment is when Jacobs christens her children. This occurs when Dr. Flint goes out of town, giving Jacobs free time she otherwise would not have. Jacobs describes her and her grandmother's desire to christen her children, an act of mothering that does not directly correspond to maintaining their economic value and consequently is an uncommodified act of labor. However, Jacobs knows that Dr. Flint would oppose this ostensibly unprofitable and thus unnecessary act:

My grandmother belonged to the church; and she was very desirous of having the children christened. I knew Dr. Flint would forbid it, and I did not venture to attempt it. But chance favored me. He was called to visit a patient out of town, and was obliged to be absent during Sunday. "Now is the time," said my grandmother; "we will take the children to church, and have them christened."<sup>177</sup>

By performing the role of a religious mother in the moments before the christening of her children, Jacobs finds hidden time to perform an act of motherhood that is significant to her, but of no value to Dr. Flint. Christening her children is a defiant assertion of their humanity that undermines slavery's legal defining of slaves as property, likely another reason for Dr. Flint's objection. Although Jacobs succeeds in christening her children and finding a way around Dr.

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<sup>177</sup> Jacobs 78.



Flint's opposition, scenes like these are rare and only possible when Jacobs's laboring time is suspended or at least more flexible.

From this perspective, Jacobs's hidden moments of maternal care are even more telling because they reveal how calculated she has to be even to attempt to provide any care deemed excessive or unusual beyond the expectations of her master. Any maternal care outside of what Dr. Flint allows is an act of resistance and theft—of both labor and time. As Hartman explains:

As in the case of "stealing away," the slave's property in the self is defined not by possession or legal title, customarily understood as inalienable rights, but by appropriation and theft. The relation of the enslaved to the self is possible only by way of wrongful possession of possession without right or permission.<sup>178</sup>

To take unauthorized time was an act of resistance and, ironically, a serious crime against the master because slaves were unable to possess themselves, a function of being legal property. By secretly visiting her children at night and performing unauthorized maternal work, Jacobs steals more than just the labor and time she could have spent working for the Flint family. She also steals the mothering labor and time of which she is legally divested as a slave. The law prevents her from performing maternal labor without the explicit consent of her owners. Each act of uncommodified maternal labor that she performs as a slave is an additional act of resistance and theft.

The gap between what she is able to do and what she says she would like to do reveals just how much slavery and specifically its demands for labor prevent Jacobs from being the mother she desperately wishes to be. It is important to recall that through her individual story,

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<sup>178</sup> Hartman 110.

Jacobs claims to give voice to other slave girls whose stories of sexual abuse have not been told. As Foster explains, "Harriet Jacobs represents the incidents in her life as being at the same time unique and typical, unusual and commonplace."<sup>179</sup> Since Jacobs argues that her experiences are representative of slave girls, readers have no reason to doubt that this thwarted maternal desire and longing is one that is shared by nearly all slave mothers.

Jacobs describes her covert nocturnal trip to visit her children at her grandmother's house. Her maternal labor and time begins well before Jacobs actually sees her children:

I had been three weeks on the plantation, when I planned a visit home. It must be at night, after every body was in bed. I was six miles from town, and the road was very dreary. I was to go with a young man, who, I knew, often stole to town to see his mother. One night, when all was quiet, we started. Fear gave speed to our steps, and we were not long in performing the journey. I arrived at my grandmother's. Her bed room was on the first floor, and the window was open, the weather being warm. I spoke to her and she awoke. She let me in and closed the window, lest some late passerby should see me.<sup>180</sup>

This passage catalogs just how much labor and time are required for Jacobs to plan to see her children. It also emphasizes the danger she courts in undertaking such a perilous journey, as evidenced by the numerous precautions she takes to conceal her presence. In this heart-rending scene, Jacobs reveals the true extent of her maternal care and the lengths to which she would go—including walking six miles at night, risking punishment for leaving the plantation without permission, and foregoing food and sleep<sup>181</sup>—all to see her children.

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<sup>179</sup> Foster *Written By Herself* 96.

<sup>180</sup> Jacobs 87-88.

<sup>181</sup> Jacobs 88.

Sadly, Jacobs spends far more time preparing to see her children than actually enjoying time in their presence:

I went to look at my children, and thanked God for their happy sleep. The tears fell as I leaned over them. As I moved to leave, Benny stirred. I turned back, and whispered, “Mother is here.” After digging at his eyes with his little fist, they opened, and he sat up in bed, looking at me curiously. Having satisfied himself that it was I, he exclaimed, “O mother! you ain’t dead, are you? They didn’t cut off your head at the plantation, did they?”

My time was up too soon, and my guide was waiting for me. I laid Benny back in his bed, and dried his tears by a promise to come again soon.<sup>182</sup>

It is these moments of intense maternal tenderness and forced brevity that reveal that some of Jacobs’s worst experiences of slavery come from her inability to care for her children. That she literally spends all night traveling to and from her grandmother’s house, foregoing sleep and food, reveals the importance of nurturing her children. The nature of the maternal care that she works so hard to provide is commonplace; she simply sees her children’s sleeping faces, wipes away their tears, and puts them back to bed. These ordinary moments of maternal care are so rare for Jacobs that she has to sacrifice an entire night for them, even after performing a full day of labor and before being forced to labor again the following day. Furthermore, despite all of the violence to which she is subjected—including Dr. Flint’s sexual, physical and verbal abuse—this is one of the rare scenes in *Incidents* in which Jacobs cries freely. The tears that fall unreservedly

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<sup>182</sup> Jacobs 88.

as Jacobs watches her children sleep reveal the bitter feelings of love and anguish she feels as a mother.

The small acts of defiance analyzed in this chapter foreshadow the more extreme and enduring act of resistance and mothering Jacobs experiences as a fugitive slave, which is the subject of the following chapter. Soon after this scene with Benny, Jacobs begins to narrate her preparations for running away. As a slave mother intent on securing the freedom of her children along with her own, Jacobs endures an unusual experience of fugitive time that, while torturous and lengthy beyond expectation, also provides her with previously denied opportunities to perform the maternal labor and to experience mothering time she so desperately wishes to during slavery.

Jacobs's willingness to endure seven years of physical pain while a fugitive slave is inconceivable without understanding the precise nature of the horror from which she runs away. This chapter reveals that Jacobs becomes a fugitive slave not just to secure freedom for herself and her children; she is clearly motivated by her desire to escape forced sexual labor and to have time to be a nurturing mother. These inspirations emerge in this chapter's exploration of Jacobs's detailed depictions of the uniquely gendered experiences of slave women. In addition to the well-documented terrors of incessant work and ghastly physical violence, Jacobs exposes the sexual and reproductive labor that is forcibly extracted from enslaved women. Jacobs's narrative also reveals that slave sexual laboring time and slave reproductive laboring time interrupt slave women's working day, which places additional demands on their limited time. Through her painful and detailed recollections, Jacobs explains how inescapable the demands for sexual and reproductive labor are for post-pubescent slave girls.

Despite enduring inevitable sexual labor and being forced to experience slave sexual laboring time, Jacobs still documents her multiple attempts to resist these demands on her work and time. More specifically, I argue that in each instance where attempts to evade, stall, or thwart Dr. Flint's various schemes for sexually abusing her, Jacobs reveals her defiant will and displays her intelligence as she outwits her more powerful foe. Additionally, once Jacobs becomes a mother, she finds ways to work around the denial of her natural parental rights and the practical effect of having little to no time to care for her children outside of what the Flint family allows.

In these moments of resistance, Jacobs attempts to reclaim her time by taking what is legally not hers: the right to her labor and working time. By attempting to avoid Dr. Flint's sexual abuse, Jacobs deprives him of her sexual labor, to which he is legally, but not morally, entitled. Additionally, evading sexual labor would prevent her from experiencing slave sexual laboring time. By finding hidden moments to nurture her children beyond what her masters allow, Jacobs solidifies her maternal bond with her children and lays the foundation for their reunification as an intact and free family in the North. Jacobs's narrative reveals how the multiple forms of labor stolen from slave women—manual, domestic, sexual and reproductive—combine to form an increasingly horrific experience of constant abuse that ultimately can subdue or “break” the spirits of slave mothers. After demonstrating the impossibility of avoiding such a fate by remaining a slave, Jacobs turns her narrative to her most daring and hazardous act of resistance yet: her decision to run away and become a fugitive slave mother.

### 3. “IT WAS A STILL GREATER SATISFACTION”<sup>183</sup>:

#### **Excavating Harriet Jacobs’s pleasure as a fugitive slave mother**

After running from the daily torture of slavery, but before being burdened with trying to survive economically in a racist northern labor market, Jacobs depicts an extended fugitive time, a space of imaginative possibility where she offers a glimpse of the mother she would like to be and perhaps would have been if not a slave. As Jean Fagan Yellin argues in her introduction to *Incidents*, “in [Jacobs’s] hand, the slave narrative is changed from the story of a hero who single-handedly seeks freedom and literacy to the story of a hero tightly bound to family and community who seeks freedom and a home for her children.”<sup>184</sup> The result of this shift is that Jacobs’s narrative diverges significantly from the traditional trajectory of other slave narratives primarily focused on an individual’s journey toward freedom. As Grace McEntee explains in “The Ethos of Motherhood and Harriet Jacobs’ Vision of Racial Equality in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,” “Jacobs had a different story to tell her northern mothers--a story of how much a slave woman was willing to endure, to what lengths she was willing to go, in her quest for the kind of mother-centered home considered the norm by her women readers.”<sup>185</sup> Jacobs’s focus on motherhood as both a core component of her identity and a central motivation for her desire to run away permeates the narrative, but is especially emphasized when Jacobs depicts her experience as a fugitive slave.

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<sup>183</sup> Jacobs 116.

<sup>184</sup> Yellin, *Incidents* introduction xl-xli.

<sup>185</sup> McEntee “Ethos of Motherhood” 200.

In this liminal and temporary time between slavery and freedom, Jacobs describes the unsurprising suffering she endures as a fugitive slave as well as many unexpectedly pleasurable moments. Although much scholarly attention has been paid to Jacobs's depiction of space in *Incidents*, especially in her depiction of confinement as a fugitive slave in the garret, less attention has been paid to the temporal nature of her fugitive slave experience despite some obvious parallels. For instance, in "Between the Rock and the Hard Place: Mediating Spaces in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*" Gloria T. Randle discusses Jacobs's creativity in finding safe spaces when none exist:

[W]hat I find especially remarkable about Harriet Jacobs's story is the unfolding of her ability creatively to construct sites of temporary refuge where none exist; to discover space where there is no space; to identify, over and again, the narrowest wedge between the rock and the hard place.<sup>186</sup>

I find Randle's insight useful for thinking about Jacobs's portrayal of time as I see Jacobs enacting a similar process with respect to fugitive time. Daylanne K. English imagines fugitive time as a time that only exists as a bridge that leads the slave to freedom. In and of itself, fugitive time is a temporal void filled with the anxiety that Douglass describes so well. However, Jacobs imbues fugitive time with other experiences and emotional associations. Jacobs transforms fugitive time by making time to mother her children, which becomes a source of contentment that helps sustain her throughout her confinement.

Grace McEntee argues that Jacobs experiences emotional suffering because of her inability to be an active part of her children's life while enslaved:

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<sup>186</sup> Randle 43.

Jacobs' narrative has little to say of how she endured such imprisonment or the physical distress she bore, despite abolitionist rhetoric's tradition of describing the slave's physical pains. Rather, her focus is on the psychological pain of being separated from her children. Her memories are largely about being able to look *at* her children but not to look out *for* them; her mother's role is reduced to surreptitiously sewing clothes for her son and daughter.<sup>187</sup>

However, I see Jacobs's deriving immense joy from simply being able to see and hear her children. Although I agree that Jacobs is unable to do much for her children while a fugitive, Jacobs depicts a profoundly enjoyable experience of motherhood during fugitive time because she is freed of the limitations placed on her by the burden of reproductive labor. No longer forced to seek permission from her master to provide maternal care, during fugitive time Jacobs has ample time to be near her children, enjoy previously denied pleasures such as listening to their voices, and has time to express her deep feelings for them. Given how often Jacobs contrasts her suffering during confinement to the joy she derives from being able to perform these maternal roles, I argue that Jacobs structures her narrative to show that it is the pleasure she derives from being a mother that sustains her during her years of confinement. I would counter McEntee by arguing that what is most significant for Jacobs is not how much she is able to do for her children, but how much freedom she has to experience motherhood without the restrictions imposed by slavery.

The joy Jacobs narrates as a fugitive slave mother who finally has access to her children at times seems to exceed her relief at finally attaining her legal freedom by the narrative's conclusion. In addition to the climactic achievement of freedom, Jacobs "demonstrates that a

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<sup>187</sup> McEntee "Ethos of Motherhood" 211.



black mother's love is as deep as the love of any white mother—a thread running through the entire narrative."<sup>188</sup> Jacobs's maternal love and the joy she derives from having time to develop her relationship with her children is a central yet under-discussed part of her fugitive slave experience. This chapter centers on the fleeting moments of limited freedom and contentment that Jacobs portrays during the limited temporality of fugitive time.

Analyzing Jacobs's narrated experience of fugitive time necessitates a reexamination of how that term has been defined. In *Each Hour Redeem*, Daylanne K. English defines fugitive time based on her analysis of Frederick Douglass's account of running away in *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*:

Literally in transit, Douglass is also positioned figuratively between slave time and free time. On a train, not coincidentally the “engine” of the establishment of uniform U.S. time, Douglass occupies fugitive time, a temporal state of disorientation and dislocation preceding full citizenship.<sup>189</sup>

While English's definition of “fugitive time” as a “temporal state of disorientation and dislocation preceding full citizenship”<sup>190</sup> accurately captures Douglass's solitary experience as a fugitive slave aboard a train, it does not capture other experiences of fugitive time including Jacobs's experience as a fugitive slave for seven years. In those years, Jacobs occupies a fugitive time that is far from a “state of disorientation and dislocation” as English asserts, but rather a state during which she can finally go home—literally to her grandmother's house—and for the first time have the ability to nurture her children without limitations imposed by her slave

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<sup>188</sup> McEntee “Ethos of Motherhood” 211.

<sup>189</sup> English 41.

<sup>190</sup> English 41.

owners. Rather than being a time of “disorientation,” Jacobs reveals the limited agency and free time she discovers while a fugitive. As John E. Dean suggests in “Space and Time in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*”:

Linda’s experience of time is a direct result of her movement in space. In slavery, her space and time are controlled by her master. Once she moves to spaces in which she has agency, however small, Linda experiences both free space and free time.<sup>191</sup>

Jacobs’s uses her depiction of her free time as a fugitive to express the full extent of her maternal love to her readers. Finally unrestrained by constant slave labor and the Flints’ harassment, Jacobs uses fugitive time to present the type of mother she yearns to be. I do not wish to suggest that Jacobs’s experience is better or more valuable than Douglass’s; Jacobs’s depiction of her fugitive slave experience clearly shows that there is more than one way to be a fugitive slave and to experience fugitive time.

I use English’s simpler description to define fugitive time as the “time between slavery and freedom,”<sup>192</sup> which begins with slaves initiating a process that will culminate in their freedom, most often simply running away, and that ends with slaves experiencing freedom—regardless of whether they are legally freed or they arrive in free land. Implicit in my definition is a demonstration of resistance because slaves seeking freedom is a form of rebelling against their status as property. I use broad language to define fugitive time because Jacobs’s extended experience as a fugitive slave mother defies easy categorization. Rather than overlook a divergent experience, this more inclusive definition encourages an exploration of the different

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<sup>191</sup> Dean 140-41.

<sup>192</sup> English 41.

ways that slaves narrate fugitive time and opens up more possibilities to consider unusual experiences like Jacobs's.

The familiar story of the fugitive slave for anyone who studies or has read a slave narrative is most likely derived from Douglass's depiction of his experience as a fugitive slave in his autobiographies and most extensively in this third autobiography *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. Since Douglass's figure looms over the field of African American literary studies and the study of slave narratives in particular, it is easy to conjure the image of the fugitive slave traveling under the cover of night and anxiously awaiting quick and safe passage to the North. While Harriet Jacobs tells that familiar tale in *Incidents*, it only occupies three pages in the narrative. However, the gap between Jacobs running away and actually arriving in the North spans over sixty pages.<sup>193</sup> This chapter will examine Jacobs's extended experience of fugitive time, which spans that gap of fourteen chapters and seven years of confinement. Although Jacobs's experiences as a slave are not representative of most slave women, her text provides a useful counterpoint to Frederick Douglass, as an overreliance on his narrative as *the* model of specific experiences of slavery can render invisible the uniquely gendered narrated experiences of African American female slaves. The previous chapter identifies how gender and motherhood affect Harriet Jacobs's experience of slave time in *Incidents*. This chapter continues this examination of gendered experiences of time by focusing on the time of the fugitive slave. It is here where Douglass's figure looms largest as the representative fugitive slave despite his specific experience as a solitary childless bachelor. By exploring how motherhood shapes

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<sup>193</sup> Jacobs narrates the commencement of her fugitive slave experience in chapter XVII: "The Flight" and she describe arriving in the North sixty-three pages later in chapter XXXI: "Incidents in Philadelphia." However, the passage of the fugitive slave law enables Dr. Flint to continue his pursuit of Jacobs while she is in the North until Mrs. Bruce purchases Jacobs's freedom in chapter XLI: "Free at Last."

Jacobs's collective experience of fugitive time, centering maternal sacrifice and the desire for her children to be free, this chapter hopes to shift the example of Douglass as *the* exemplar of the fugitive slave to simply one example of a fugitive slave experience.

Although motherhood is the primary lens through which Jacobs narrates her experience of fugitive time, it is not the only one. I also consider other forms of resistance that Jacobs performs as fugitive slave, including her use of the postal service to outwit Dr. Flint's attempts to capture her. As Jean Fagan Yellin explains in the introduction to *Incidents*, Jacobs's experience as a fugitive slave is unusual for a number of reasons including the clever methods she devises to resist Dr. Flint:

Linda Brent's [Jacobs's penname] story is also different from most slave narratives in that its protagonist does not escape and quickly run north; almost a quarter of the book chronicles her years in hiding in the South. During that time she is not solely occupied with reading and sewing. She uses her garret cell as a war room from which to spy on her enemy and to wage psychological warfare against him. From her cramped hiding place, she manipulates the sale of her children to their father, arranges for her daughter to be taken north, tricks her master into believing that she has left the South, and quite literally directs a performance in which Dr. Flint plays the fool while she watches, unseen.<sup>194</sup>

While physically constrained to the tiny garret and immobilized in that she can neither leave nor really move around, nevertheless Jacobs is active in the garret and finds numerous ways to resist and challenge Dr. Flint. While these other moments of opposition may seem marginal when compared to the centrality of motherhood in Jacobs's narrative, analyzing Jacobs solely as a

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<sup>194</sup> Yellin *Incidents* xxx.

fugitive slave mother can inaccurately suggest that it is only the strength of her emotional bonds with her children that drives her resistance. A more complicated reading of Jacobs's text also exposes her strategies for resistance and the enjoyment she experiences when outsmarting Dr. Flint. In this more expansive reading, Jacobs's complexity as a person, mother and intellectual emerges. Jacobs's text reveals that fugitive time offers sundry methods for resisting slavery as well as new way opportunities to experience motherhood.

Jacobs not only centers her narration on motherhood in the sixty-three pages where she depicts her fugitive time *before* she makes her successful escape to the North, but also in her portrayal of her final, successful fugitive slave journey in the three pages comprising chapter XXX: "Northward Bound." Prior to boarding a ship headed to the North, Jacobs reunites with her son briefly, recalling: "I felt something pull me gently, and turning round I saw Benny, looking pale and anxious. He whispered in my ear, 'I've been peeping into the doctor's window, and he's at home. Good by, mother. Don't cry; I'll come'."<sup>195</sup> In this brief exchange, Jacobs reveals the extent of Benny's love for her. He protects Jacobs by ensuring she can travel undetected, confirming to her that the master who is frantically searching for her is at home and unable to capture her. Benny also demonstrates the tenderness of his affection with his gentle tug and his concern for his mother's safety, signaled in his pale face and anxiety. More than just a child's love for a parent, Jacobs's brief description of her exchange with Benny exposes a deeper truth about her experience as a fugitive slave: it is a collective experience shared by her family. According to Douglass's example, this chapter should be exclusively about chronicling Jacobs's escape to the North. Nevertheless, Jacobs chooses to include this brief goodbye with her son in such a short chapter. Benny's visit at this point in Jacobs's tale clearly shows that the "something

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<sup>195</sup> Jacobs 156.

pull[ing]” Jacobs is motherhood. As Deborah Gray White explains in *Arn't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, “the responsibilities of childbearing and child care seriously circumscribed the female slave's life.”<sup>196</sup> Jacobs’s narrative continuously proves the veracity of White’s claim since fugitive time brings Jacobs’s family closer and provides them with rare opportunities to divulge and demonstrate their love for each other. Even in an abbreviated chapter, Jacobs chooses to center her portrayal of her fugitive experience on her children.

While the complex legal existence of the fugitive slave as both person and stolen possession is often discussed, the fugitive slave is less often imagined as a mother connected to the bodies of her children. According to Stephen Best in *The Fugitive's Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession*, the law figures “the fugitive as pilfered property and indebted person, object of property and subject of contract [...] The fugitive is, in short, two persons in one.”<sup>197</sup> Becoming a fugitive slave was simultaneously an act of resistance and theft because slaves were legally unable to possess themselves. To take the self was an act of theft and a serious crime, ironically, against the master. As Saidiya Hartman explains in *Scenes of Subjection*,

[I]n the case of "stealing away," the slave's property in the self is defined not by possession or legal title, customarily understood as inalienable rights, but by appropriation and theft. The relation of the enslaved to the self is possible only by way of wrongful possession or possession without right or permission.<sup>198</sup>

I agree with both Best and Hartman’s insights that a slave’s legal relation to the self is based on theft and that a slave can only possess him or herself illegally. However, I find their gender-

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<sup>196</sup> White 70.

<sup>197</sup> Best 9.

<sup>198</sup> Hartman 110.

neutral discussion of a slave self and implicit reference to a slave body to be limiting because they fail to account for the slave mother's legal relationship to her pregnant body and the children she bears. Considering the plight of the female fugitive slave reveals even more theft than Best and Hartman identify: the theft of new slaves—babies—through reproduction and the theft of the reproductive labor needed to carry, birth and then care for slave children.

Jacobs's story addresses directly the legal premise that she has no right to her children by centering her depiction of slavery on her role as a mother desperate to protect and reclaim her children. Of course, the centrality of motherhood does not abate when Jacobs decides to become a fugitive slave; rather, motherhood is her motivation *for* running away. Jacobs resolves to run away immediately when she learns that the Flints are going to send her children to the plantation of Mr. Flint, Dr. Flint's son, as leverage to prevent Jacobs from fleeing. Instead, their decision has the opposite effect. Jacobs confirms her true motivations for running away when she takes an unnecessary risk by stopping to see her children one last time: "I feared the sight of my children would be too much for my full heart; but I could not go out into the uncertain future without one last look. I bent over the bed where lay my little Benny and baby Ellen. Poor little ones! fatherless and motherless!"<sup>199</sup> What is clear in her narration is that Jacobs's children motivate her to run away as well as influence the strategies of resistance she uses to do so.

Jacobs's prioritization of her children is salient because her decision to run away is unusual for a young mother. According to White:

Some of the reasons why women were underrepresented in the fugitive population had to do with childbearing. Most runaways were between sixteen and thirty-five years old. A

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<sup>199</sup> Jacobs 96.

woman of this age was either pregnant, nursing an infant, or had at least one small child to care for.<sup>200</sup>

This statement implies that pregnancy and children were a hindrance to running away. It also suggests that the ideal circumstance for a fugitive slave was to run away alone, unimpeded.

No one embodies this solitary fugitive slave ideal more than Frederick Douglass. In *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, his third and final autobiography, Douglass finally describes how he escapes slavery. From the beginning, Douglass envisions the preparation for and experience of running away as an individual, solitary experience that rends families and communities. While describing his final preparations for his second, successful attempt to run away, Douglass reveals that the primary task of the would-be fugitive is to overcome a fear of separation:

I had the painful sensation of being about to separate from a circle of honest and warm-hearted friends. The thought of such a separation, where the hope of ever meeting again was excluded, and where there could be no correspondence, was very painful. *It is my opinion that thousands more would have escaped from slavery but for the strong affection which bound them to their families, relatives, and friends.* The daughter was hindered by the love she bore her mother and the father by the love he bore his wife and children, and so on to the end of the chapter. I had no relations in Baltimore, and I saw no probability of ever living in the neighborhood of sisters and brothers, but *the thought of leaving my friends was the strongest obstacle to my running away.*<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> White 70.

<sup>201</sup> Douglass LT 135, emphasis added.



Even as a single man without a family, Douglass has trouble leaving his friends and community. He rightly identifies the bonds of affection as a reason many other slaves did not run away. These feelings must be overcome before the slave even begins to run away. Douglass considers them “obstacle[s]” that however meaningful during slavery only hamper the progress of the slave preparing to run away.

In stark contrast, Jacobs’s children are her reasons for running away. Rather than obstacles to be overcome, her children serve as inspiration and motivation that compels her *toward* freedom during the darkest hours, especially in her grandmother’s garret. As Jean Fagan Yellin explains in her introduction to *Incidents*, “in her [Jacobs’s] hand, the slave narrative is changed from the story of a hero who single-handedly seeks freedom and literacy to the story of a hero tightly bound to family and community who seeks freedom and a home for her children.”<sup>202</sup> Similarly, Houston A. Baker Jr. in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* suggests:

[Linda] Brent’s work gives a sense of *collective*, rather than individualistic black identity. Nurtured and supported by a sisterhood yoked by common oppression, Brent does not seek the relationship of marriage that signals a repossession of self and the possibility of black reunification in male narratives [...] A new bonding of Afro-American humanity consists, for Brent, in the reunion of mother and child in freedom.<sup>203</sup>

Jacobs’s family-oriented fugitive time offers a radically different experience but also reveals how this liminal temporality can offer moments akin to freedom. Jacobs’s collective experience

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<sup>202</sup> Yellin xl-xli.

<sup>203</sup> Baker 55.

reveals the limitations of using Douglass's solitary experience as a representative model of the fugitive slave experience.

Jacobs's tale of the fugitive slave mother centers on her resistance, but more importantly on the depth of her maternal love. It is unsurprising that Jacobs prioritizes her children in her narrative, as historians have established that female slaves were required to do the brunt of childcare work. As Deborah Gray White explains, "The most important reason for the difference between male and female bondage, however, was the slave woman's childbearing and child care responsibilities."<sup>204</sup> However, Jacobs's tale of slave motherhood exceeds providing the basic requirements for children to survive like food and shelter; Jacobs takes pains to show the depth of her maternal love. According to Grace McEntee, "Jacobs had a different story to tell her northern mothers—a story of how much a slave woman was willing to endure, to what lengths she was willing to go, in her quest for the kind of mother-centered home considered the norm by her women readers."<sup>205</sup> It is this story of determination and sacrifice on behalf of her children that occupies much of Jacobs's fugitive time section; undergirding all these actions is her profound love for her children. Further, "[Jacobs] demonstrates that a black mother's love is as deep as the love of any white mother--a thread running through the entire narrative."<sup>206</sup> Jacobs weds her resistance to slavery to her motivation to see her children freed by choosing to become a fugitive slave, thus embodying White's analysis that "childbearing and child care responsibilities" [...] affected the female slave's pattern of resistance."<sup>207</sup> Jacobs's narrative demonstrates how dramatically her children influence her strategies for resistance. It is because

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<sup>204</sup> White 90.

<sup>205</sup> McEntee "Ethos of Motherhood" 200.

<sup>206</sup> McEntee "Ethos of Motherhood" 211.

<sup>207</sup> White 90.

of them that she endures years in her grandmother's attic rather than speedily seek freedom for herself. Jacobs's collective experience of fugitive time is just as much about her relationship to her children as it is about her own quest for freedom. Choosing to foreground motherhood as her primary identity and motivation is already an act of resistance to the ways in which slavery sought to destroy the bonds between mother and child.

Jacobs centers the content and structure of her narrative on her role as a mother, but she is an unusual slave mother. When she boards the ship and sees her friend Fanny, they embrace and share the stories that led them to both flee to freedom that fateful night. Far from alone, Jacobs shares her fugitive experience with a friend whose experience seems to mirror her own. When Jacobs mistakenly equates their experiences, Fanny promptly corrects her: "'We have the same sorrows,' said I. 'No,' replies she, 'you are going to see your children soon, and there is no hope that I shall ever even hear from mine.'"<sup>208</sup> This exchange is critical because it reveals the uniqueness of Jacobs's position: although she is not the only fugitive slave mother, she has the rare hope of being reunited with her children in freedom. Jacobs's wish for reunification is a dream far beyond the reach of most slaves like Fanny because historically children were a primary deterrent that prevented women from running away. White explains, "females ran away less frequently than men [...] [because] women tended to be more concerned with the welfare of their children, and this limited their mobility."<sup>209</sup> Jacobs's hope does not negate the real risk she faces of never seeing her children again. In her narration, Jacobs only runs that risk to secure her freedom *for* her children. Her example demonstrates that there were multiple motivations for slaves to become fugitives beyond the individual desire for freedom and self-determination.

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<sup>208</sup> Jacobs 157.

<sup>209</sup> White 70-71.

In the rest of the chapter “Northward Bound,” Jacobs more closely echoes the anxiety and desire for speed that Douglass describes while narrating his experience as a fugitive slave in *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. In fact, Douglass’s experience of fugitive time is defined by his desire for a fast journey. He explains how his plan for avoiding scrutiny on the train carrying him to the North is predicated on delaying the commencement of his escape until the last second:

In order to avoid this fatal scrutiny on the part of the railroad official, I had arranged with Isaac Rolls, a hackman, to bring my baggage to the train just on the moment of starting, and jumped upon the car myself when the train was already in motion. [...] In choosing this plan upon which to act, I considered the jostle of the train, and the natural haste of the conductor in a train crowded with passengers.<sup>210</sup>

Douglass’s escape plan relies upon the chaos of a train already in motion, which is more likely to rush the official checking papers. By minimizing the amount of time he spends on the train and boarding during a bustling period, Douglass hopes to escape detection.

Douglass’s desire for speed is only surpassed by his relentless feelings of anxiety, which affect his perception of his body and even time. Douglass describes his feelings as being akin to those of an animal being chased in a deadly pursuit: the “heart of no fox or deer, with hungry hounds on his trail, in full chase, could have beaten more anxiously or noisily than did mine from the time I left Baltimore till I reached Philadelphia.”<sup>211</sup> Douglass is anxious because his life is in peril since he risks his safety to run away. However, even once Douglass survives “[t]his

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<sup>210</sup> Douglass LT 138-39.

<sup>211</sup> Douglass LT 140.

moment of time [which] was one of the most anxious [he] ever experienced”<sup>212</sup> and successfully boards his train, he still has to wait for it to reach Philadelphia. During this dangerous voyage, the train cannot move fast enough for Douglass:

Though I was not a murderer fleeing from justice, I felt, perhaps, quite as miserable as such a criminal. The train was moving at a very high rate of speed for that time of railroad travel, but to my anxious mind, it was moving far too slowly. Minutes were hours, and hours were days during this past of my flight.<sup>213</sup>

During his brief experience of fugitive time, Douglass is so worried about being captured that time seems to move too slowly for him. The effect of this anxiety is that time seems to slow down and expand where minutes and hours *feel* like hours and days. For Douglass, each second spent as a fugitive provided an opportunity for him to be discovered and his plans thwarted. Douglass’s journey as a fugitive slave is brief even though he feels as though time is slowing down: “I completed the journey in less than twenty-four hours. Such is briefly the manner of my escape from slavery—and the end of my experience as a slave.”<sup>214</sup>

Jacobs too feels a similar anxiety while aboard the ship ferrying her to the North. Unlike Douglass who, luckily, is able to use the fastest form of transportation at the time, Jacobs has to rely on nature in a ship slowed by the wind:

The vessel was soon under way, but we made slow progress. The wind was against us. I should not have cared for this, if we had been out of sight of the town; but until there

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<sup>212</sup> Douglass LT139.

<sup>213</sup> Douglass LT 140.

<sup>214</sup> Douglass LT 140.

were miles of water between us and our enemies, we were filled with constant apprehensions that the constables would come on board.<sup>215</sup>

The “slow” journey of the ship makes Jacobs feel anxious and her only comfort is the great distance between her and her would-be captors. Yet even in describing her nervousness and desire for space—not surprising given her confinement in the garret—Jacobs’s reference to her own anxiety cannot but recall her brief exchange with Benny at the beginning of the chapter. By mirroring Benny’s “pale and anxious” face<sup>216</sup> Jacobs reveals that her experience of fugitive time is collective because her son and presumably the rest of her family share her anxiety as they all await her safe arrival into the North. Even in the passage most closely resembling Douglass’s solitary experience of fugitive time, Jacobs takes pains to demonstrate that her identity as a mother is inextricably linked to her experience of fugitive time.

Jacobs’s decision to minimize the actual experience of fleeing on the ship makes sense because it provides her with more space to focus on her liminal time in the garret and in the process articulate a new, if fleeting, experience of motherhood previously denied her. From the very beginning, Jacobs’s concern for her children and their freedom is paramount and dictates the choices she makes about running away. In contrast to Douglass who quickly runs away to the North, Jacobs begins a slow journey as a fugitive slave. Rather than finding the fastest route to the North, Jacobs selects an option that she thinks will maximize the likelihood of her children being freed. She makes circuitous local trips around her town—discovering hidden nooks and her community’s makeshift Underground Railroad created out of necessity for her use. Jacobs’s fugitive journey is also characterized by endless delays and last-minute changes. Jacobs’s first

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<sup>215</sup> Jacobs 157.

<sup>216</sup> Jacobs 156.

stop is a hiding place in the home of a friend. Jacobs expects her accommodations to be temporary since she hopes that her escape will expedite her sale, but the hunt for her persists much longer than she anticipates. It is under this duress and fear that Jacobs's family finds another local place of safe harbor for her. Despite the danger she faces as a fugitive, Jacobs's constant focus remains on her children: "I was daily hoping to hear that my master had sold my children [...] But Dr. Flint cared even more for revenge than he did for money."<sup>217</sup> Ironically, the expenses Dr. Flint incurs in pursuit of Jacobs lead him to eventually sell her children with the understanding that they will be sold away; he is unaware that he is actually selling them to a trader for their father.

Although Jacobs is still in a precarious fugitive position when she learns that Mr. Sands buys her children, she experiences an emotion that would have been inconceivable in Douglass's fugitive journey: happiness. Upon learning that her children are free from the grasp of the Flints, Jacobs seems just as relieved as she would have if she had learned of her own emancipation:

I had my season of joy and thanksgiving. It was the first time since my childhood that I had experienced any real happiness. I heard of the old doctor's threats, but they no longer had the same power to trouble me. The darkest cloud that hung over my life had rolled away. Whatever slavery might do to me, it could not shackle my children. If I fell a sacrifice, my little ones were saved.<sup>218</sup>

This passage is notable for the emotion Jacobs reveals: despite being a fugitive slave, she feels happiness for the first time in her adult life. This is a marked departure from Douglass's constant anxiety as a fugitive. It is not a coincidence that Jacobs feels happiness because of her children's

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<sup>217</sup> Jacobs 101.

<sup>218</sup> Jacobs 109.

safety now that they are no longer owned by the Flints. This passage reveals that Jacobs's pursuit of freedom becomes a secondary concern in the text once she perceives that her children have been purchased from the Flints and she believes she has finally secured their freedom. From the very beginning of her fugitive journey, Jacobs's pursuit of freedom is collective with her desire for her children to be free superseding any concern for her own wellbeing, demonstrated by her willingness to sacrifice herself so that Ellen and Benny may be free. Crucially, fugitive time provides the opportunity for Jacobs to oversee the safety of her children.

The most familiar and agonizing part of Jacobs's fugitive slave experience begins when she moves to her final place of concealment, "the loophole of retreat."<sup>219</sup> Her transition to the garret above her grandmother's house is harsh and dramatic:

A small shed had been added to my grandmother's house year ago. Some boards were laid across the joists at the top, and between these boards and the roof was a very small garret, never occupied by any thing but rats and mice. It was a pent roof, covered with nothing but shingles, according to the southern custom for such buildings. The garret was only nine feet long and seven wide. The highest part was three feet high, and sloped down abruptly to the loose board floor. There was no admission for either light or air.<sup>220</sup>

The shed is the perfect hiding spot, but it causes Jacobs's great misery because "rats and mice ran over [her] bed."<sup>221</sup> Even worse, Jacobs suffers from a lack of space to move around in and fresh air: "Morning came. I knew it only by the noises I heard; for in my small den day and night

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<sup>219</sup> Jacobs 114.

<sup>220</sup> Jacobs 114.

<sup>221</sup> Jacobs 114.



were all the same. I suffered for air even more than for light.”<sup>222</sup> Gone are the commanding view of Dr. Flint and the comfort of the feather beds.

Nevertheless, the contrast between Jacobs’s suffering and her happiness only grows as her condition worsens in the garret because Jacobs experiences something more precious than thwarting Dr. Flint’s relentless attempts to capture her:

I was not comfortless. I heard the voices of my children. There was joy and there was sadness in the sound. It made my tears flow. How I longed to speak to them! I was eager to look on their faces; but there was no hole, no crack, through which I could peep. [...] Yet I would have chosen this, rather than my lot as a slave.<sup>223</sup>

What Jacobs’s discovers in the garret is the pleasure of hearing and later seeing her children. Unlike Douglass whose primary emotion is anxiety on his solitary fugitive train ride to freedom, Jacobs experiences multiple conflicting emotions, suffering and joy, during her collective fugitive time experience. Her children’s voices comfort her and mitigate some of the suffering she endures in the garret. Jacobs’s connection to her children as a fugitive slave offers a complex experience of fugitive time that yet again calls into question the representativeness of Douglass as exemplar fugitive slave.

In another significant departure from Douglass’s model and many slave narratives, Jacobs does not focus extensively on the physical suffering she endures during her seven years of imprisonment in the garret. Even though she does discuss the discomfort she experiences, Jacobs insists that the visual and auditory presence of her children mitigates the bodily pain she endures:

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<sup>222</sup> Jacobs 114.

<sup>223</sup> Jacobs 114.

But for weeks I was tormented by hundreds of little red insects, fine as a needle's point, that pierced through my skin, and produced an intolerable burning. The good grandmother gave me herb teas and cooling medicines, and finally I got rid of them. The heat of my den was intense, for nothing but thin shingles protected me from the scorching summer's sun. But I had my consolations. Through my peeping-hole I could watch the children, and when they were near enough, I could hear their talk.<sup>224</sup>

In her narration, watching and hearing her children provides direct relief from pain. This is a narrative substitution in which her children's presence mitigates her bodily discomfort. Jacobs seems to link her body to her children's, which allows her to argue that simply being near, seeing, or hearing their bodies minimizes what she feels in her own body. By inextricably linking her fugitive body to her children, Jacobs asserts that only her children can provide comfort during fugitive time.

However, Jacobs's primary focus is not on her physical discomfort, but her children.

McEntee explains how unusual Jacobs's strategy is in a slave narrative:

Jacobs' narrative has little to say of how she endured such imprisonment or the physical distress she bore, despite abolitionist rhetoric's tradition of describing the slave's physical pains. Rather, her focus is on the psychological pain of being separated from her children. Her memories are largely about being able to look *at* her children but not to look out *for* them; her mother's role is reduced to surreptitiously sewing clothes for her son and daughter.<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> Jacobs 115-16.

<sup>225</sup> McEntee "Ethos of Motherhood" 211.

I contend that Jacobs's decision to subjugate much of her own physical suffering in her narrative is strategic because it shifts the focus from her as an individual, creating space where she can discuss her experience as a mother. By foregrounding her ability to hear and later on see her children, Jacobs reveals that her physical discomfort as a fugitive slave is offset by her ability to experience some of the basic pleasures of being a mother. Additionally, as a fugitive slave she is ironically afforded time to love and nurture her children apart from the demands for reproductive labor exacted by slavery; this time to simply provide a mother's love and care is forbidden by slavery. Providing prohibited maternal care is a vital part of Jacobs's resistance as a fugitive slave. Jacobs's focus on mothering is even more remarkable since she is unable to actually nurture her children because of her position in the garret. Although this separation is clearly a tremendous obstacle for Jacobs to overcome, she minimizes the importance of physical distance from her children and instead performs the role of a caring mother. With each sigh, tear, and heartache, she *acts* like a dutiful mother would if in the actual presence of her children. As much as Jacobs desires to be with her children, she indicates that possessing fragments of them as a confined fugitive—by seeing and hearing them—is still a significant improvement over her experience as a restricted slave mother.

Jacobs explains why even limited connections to her children—a stolen glimpse here and an overheard song there—improve her experience by first describing how all of her interactions are done under the cover of darkness when she first relocates to the garret. When Jacobs finds a gimlet that she uses to bore a small hole that provides her with fresh air, light, and the ability to see and hear her children, she says that her situation is improved despite her continued imprisonment:

In the morning I watched for my children. [...] At last I heard the merry laugh of children, and presently two sweet little faces were looking up at me, as though they knew I was there, and were conscious of the joy they imparted. How I longed to *tell* them I was there! My condition was now a little improved.<sup>226</sup>

What improves Jacobs's condition is the presence of her children. This close proximity gives her the opportunity to resist slavery's restrictions on slave mothers by allowing her to enjoy simple maternal pleasures like the sight of her children and the sound of their laughter. Fugitive time provides Jacobs with the leisure time to simply be a mother and enjoy her children, despite the physical restrictions her concealment requires.

As Jacobs's narration progresses, her narrative time speeds up as the seasons quickly change even while the dreariness and monotony of her hiding place remain. Despite her continued torment, Jacobs describes trying to remain thankful for her hiding place: "Dark thoughts passed through my mind as I lay there day after day. I tried to be thankful for my little cell, dismal as it was, and even to love it, as part of the price I had paid for the redemption of my children."<sup>227</sup> Yet again, Jacobs's children and the promise of their freedom motivate her to endure her incessant misery.

Nevertheless, Jacobs still suffers from her inability to physically be with and care for her children. When her son is injured severely by a dog bite, Jacobs describes feeling tormented by hearing Benny's moans while being unable to soothe him:

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<sup>226</sup> Jacobs 115.

<sup>227</sup> Jacobs 123.

One day the screams of a child nerved me with strength to crawl to my peeping-hole, and I saw my son covered with blood. A fierce dog, usually kept chained, had seized and bitten him. A doctor was sent for, and I heard the groans and screams of my child while the wounds were being sewed up. O, what torture to a mother's heart, to listen to this and be unable to go to him!<sup>228</sup>

What Jacobs implies earlier in the text she now makes explicit: it is torturous for slave mothers to hear and see their children suffer while they are unable to soothe and care for them. While such an assertion may seem obvious, Jacobs here directly challenges the racist stereotype that slave mothers did not have maternal feelings for their children, which was used to justify slavery and the separation of slave families. By referring to herself as a typical mother with a “mother’s heart,” Jacobs argues explicitly to her white female readers that slave mothers share the same feelings and love for their children as white mothers do. Despite her spatial restrictions in the garret, fugitive time allows Jacobs to express her maternal concern freed from the restrictions of her masters.

Despite the anxiety she feels when Benny is bitten, being a fugitive allows Jacobs to follow her son’s recovery without interruption—something that would not have happened when she was a slave forced to work constantly. As an eavesdropping fugitive, Jacobs reports:

Before night Benny was bright and lively, threatening the destruction of the dog; and great was his delight when the doctor told him the next day that the dog had bitten

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<sup>228</sup> Jacobs 123.

another boy and been shot. Benny recovered from his wounds; but it was long before he could walk.<sup>229</sup>

Given how much work Jacobs had been required to perform and how infrequently she saw her children at her grandmother's house, it would have been unlikely that she would have been able to hear Benny recovering if she were not a fugitive slave in her conveniently located hiding place. Despite her miserable condition, her experience of fugitive time still includes more time to resist the limitations of slavery by witnessing the lives of her children uninterrupted by labor. She is there to witness their lives and feel "motherly" feelings like anguish and anxiety on their behalf.

Jacobs's constancy as a mother throughout her years of concealment shows the power of her maternal love, something she demonstrates during the relative freedom she portrays during fugitive time. She quietly endures much for the benefit of her children, risking her safety to procure their legal freedom. When the children's father, Mr. Sands, is elected to Congress, Jacobs comes out of concealment to speak with him about legally freeing them: "He had not emancipated my children, and if he should die they would be at the mercy of his heirs. Two little voices, that frequently met my ear, seemed to plead with me not to let their father depart without striving to make their freedom secure."<sup>230</sup> Given her limited mobility and physical deterioration, Jacobs must summon her strength to come out of the garret:

I found myself so stiff and clumsy that it was with great difficulty I could hitch from one resting place to another. When I reached the storeroom my ankles gave way under me, and I sank exhausted on the floor. It seemed as if I could never use my limbs again. But

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<sup>229</sup> Jacobs 123.

<sup>230</sup> Jacobs 125.

the purpose I had in view roused all the strength I had. I crawled on my hands and knees to the window, and, screened behind a barrel, I waited for his coming.<sup>231</sup>

Securing Mr. Sands's promise to free the children exhausts what little energy Jacobs has. While she could crawl on her hands and knees for her children, she cannot muster the energy to get back to her place of hiding.

Once back in the garret with some assistance, Jacobs is weary and longs for death; only the thought of her children keeps her going. As she describes, "I was so weary of my long imprisonment that, had it not been for the hope of serving my children, I should have been thankful to die; but, for their sakes, I was willing to bear on".<sup>232</sup> This willingness to "bear on" epitomizes the depth of Jacobs's love for her children, enduring years of pain, disability, and discomfort—all for the benefit of her children. From this perspective, Jacobs's experience of fugitive time is the antithesis of Douglass's experience of temporary accelerated time on the train that speeds him toward freedom. Jacobs's fugitive time is slow, drawn out, and painful. The monotonous years bring constant suffering and the increased likelihood of permanent disability; according to Jacobs, "My friends feared I should become a cripple for life."<sup>233</sup> Yet what also emerges throughout these years of suffering is the constant display of the depth of Jacobs's maternal love—the love she always had for her children but was prevented from displaying openly while a slave. Unlike Douglass's desire for personal freedom, Jacobs's narration portrays a different form of fugitive time that is selfless, where the endurance of time is not a personal boon but a cost that she chooses to pay for her children.

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<sup>231</sup> Jacobs 125-126.

<sup>232</sup> Jacobs 127.

<sup>233</sup> Jacobs 127.

Jacobs continues to risk her safety to protect her children and their tenuous freedom. After learning that instead of emancipating their children Mr. Sands wants to take Benny away and let his sister adopt Ellen, Jacobs risks her safety by speaking indirectly with Mr. Sands and revealing that she is still in the area, not in the North as many assume:

I was too proud to ask Mr. Sands to do any thing for my own benefit; but I could bring myself to become a supplicant for my children. I resolved to remind him of the promise he had made me, and to throw myself upon his honor for the performance of it. I persuaded my grandmother to go to him, and tell him I was not dead, and that I earnestly entreated him to keep the promise he had made me; that I had heard of the recent proposals concerning my children, and did not feel easy to accept them; that he had promised to emancipate them, and it was time for him to redeem his pledge. I know there was some risk in thus betraying that I was in the vicinity; but what will not a mother do for her children?<sup>234</sup>

Thus emboldened to protect her children, Jacobs negotiates the best arrangements she can imagine with Mr. Sands with her grandmother serving as proxy. Jacobs argues that Mr. Sands has a moral responsibility to fulfill his promise. The primary objective of the fugitive slave is to avoid capture and maintain one's safety at all costs. However, Jacobs consistently defies that logic and imperils herself to protect her children from danger.

Once it is settled that Ellen would go with Mr. and Mrs. Sands until they could send her to Brooklyn, Jacobs reveals the full extent of her anguish at being separated from her daughter. She also expresses her concern that her daughter will not have a mother to watch over her. Even

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<sup>234</sup> Jacobs 138.



when depicting a moment of deep distress, Jacobs considers the feelings and needs of her children:

Ellen was made ready for the journey. O, how it tried my heart to send her away, so young, alone, among strangers! Without a mother's love to shelter her from the storms of life; almost without memory of a mother! I doubted whether she and Benny would have for me the natural affection that children feel for a parent.<sup>235</sup>

Although Jacobs mentions the pain she feels at the thought of being separated from her daughter and her fear that her children will not love her as most children love their mothers, she reserves her strongest emotion—indicated by her rare use of an exclamation point—when fretting over Ellen's future without a mother. The thought of Ellen being alone with strangers and without a mother's protection is what causes Jacobs the most anxiety; Jacobs's subordinates her own pain to focus on Ellen's wellbeing. As usual, Jacobs's focus remains on the well being of her children.

Throughout the narrative Jacobs tries to protect her children from physical harm and provide what motherly love she can, but in this scene with Ellen Jacobs considers Ellen's psychological and emotional needs as well. In this climactic scene, Jacobs offers the fullest vision of the type of mother she could have been without the restrictions of slavery: a mother devoted to all of the needs—physical, psychological, and emotional—of her children. In short, Jacobs narrates her experience during fugitive time as an unrestricted and nurturing mother. To soothe her own anxiety as well as to provide Ellen with a memory of her mother, Jacobs resolves to see Ellen before she leaves:

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<sup>235</sup> Jacobs 139.

I thought to myself that I might perhaps never see my daughter again, and I had a great desire that she should look upon me, before she went, that she might take my image with her in her memory. It seemed to me cruel to have her brought to my dungeon. It was sorrow enough for her young heart to know that her mother was a victim of slavery, without seeing the wretched hiding-place to which it had driven her.<sup>236</sup>

Jacobs describes her conflicting thoughts even as she determines to see Ellen. On the one hand, Jacobs wants to give Ellen an indelible image of her mother—something denied to many slaves as Douglass attests to in his autobiographies. However, Jacobs also considers the psychological damage that learning of Jacobs's suffering and confinement may have on Ellen. Jacobs weighs the rare opportunity she has to reveal her identity to Ellen and to spend precious time with her against the risk of traumatizing Ellen with a fuller knowledge of just how much torture her mother has endured. Ultimately, Jacobs opts to see Ellen outside of her garret, which is riskier for Jacobs since it increases the chance of detection, but it allows her to spare Ellen any additional trauma beyond what she has already experienced as a slave. Seeing Ellen in Jacobs's former room allows Jacobs to experience a fleeting night of unencumbered maternal love that was so often denied to her. Part of the horror of the scene is that it such a rare opportunity for Jacobs to consider and act on such ordinary parental concerns—such as the well-being of a child as not just a physical laborer and commodity but a full human with complex psychological and emotional needs. Moreover, it is only during fugitive time and the absence of slavery's laboring demands and parental restrictions that even this fleeting moment can exist.

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<sup>236</sup> Jacobs 139.

Of course, the riskiest aspect of Jacobs's meeting with Ellen is her decision to entrust such a young child with the desperately sought after secret location of Jacobs's hiding place:

I begged permission to pass the last night in one of the open chambers, with my little girl. They thought I was crazy to think of trusting such a young child with my perilous secret. I told them I had watched her character, and I felt sure she would not betray me; that I was determined to have an interview, and if they would not facilitate it, I would take my own way to obtain it. They remonstrated against the rashness of such a proceeding; but finding they could not change my purpose, they yielded.<sup>237</sup>

It is only possible to understand the magnitude of the risk Jacobs takes in seeing Ellen when viewing her actions through the eyes of her supportive family and community. The same people who risk life and limb to shelter, feed, and protect Jacobs for years initially refuse to help her see her daughter outside of the hiding place. Further, they view her desire as "crazy" because entrusting a young child with the secret could ruin and endanger everyone if revealed. For her family, madness is the only explanation for Jacobs's willingness to entertain such significant risks. Even Jacobs's closest family members do not understand that Jacobs's primary reason for running away is not to secure her own freedom, but that of her children. In her retelling, Jacobs risks and endures all on behalf of her children, which makes her an anomalous fugitive. Jacobs is not merely biding her time and waiting for an opportunity to flee to the North; she is strategically using her fugitive time to secure her children's freedom.

Moreover, Jacobs's time with Ellen is far more precious than Jacobs's family realizes. It is one of the rare moments of uncommodified, unencumbered maternal care that Jacobs provides

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<sup>237</sup> Jacobs 139.

in the narrative and as such it is also a moment of extreme resistance of slave reproductive laboring time. In this conversation with Ellen, Jacobs is able to be the mother she wants to be and spend a private moment with her child. This is Jacobs's chance to be a mother without restriction, at least for the night, a luxury denied to her by slavery. Understanding the rarity of this opportunity to be a loving mother to Ellen makes it easier to see that Jacobs makes a reasonable decision to have an unusual experience as a slave mother—leisure time to talk to and cry with her daughter.

From the moment Jacobs sees Ellen, she describes her attempts to finally perform the role of a loving mother:

I put my arms round her, and said, "Ellen, my dear child, I am your mother." She drew back a little, and looked at me; then, with sweet confidence, she laid her cheek against mine, and I folded her to the heart that had been so long desolated. She was the first to speak. Raising her head, she said, inquiringly, "You really are my mother?" I told her I really was; that during all the long time she had not seen me, I had loved her most tenderly; and that now she was going away, I wanted to see her and talk with her, that she might remember me.<sup>238</sup>

Jacobs seeks to establish her bond with Ellen as well as impress upon her how much she has loved her during her extended absence. Most significantly, Jacobs embraces Ellen in a loving hug. Jacobs is firmly in control as the mother; her uncle serves merely as a silent witness. This moment is the zenith of Jacobs's resistance during fugitive time; her resistance is rewarded with the maternal rights and privileges she is denied during slavery. On this most rare night she can

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<sup>238</sup> Jacobs 139-140.

speak and act freely—without fear of immediate interference. In this moment, Jacobs finally narrates a scene possible only during fugitive time: the night she gets to be a slave mother unencumbered and free to love.

Even more significant than the words Jacobs exchanges with Ellen is the physical proximity and intimacy she shares with her. After answering some of Ellen’s questions about what will happen to their family, Jacobs asks Ellen if she would like to sleep with her all night. Ellen eagerly agrees and after Jacobs’s uncle reminds her to never speak of seeing her mother that night, he leaves Jacobs and Ellen together. While Jacobs dispenses advice to Ellen, their physical contact dominates Jacobs’s portrayal of that night:

I took her in my arms and told her I was a slave, and that was the reason she must never say she had seen me. I exhorted her to be a good child, to try to please the people where she was going, and that God would raise her up friends. I told her to say her prayers, and remember always to pray for her poor mother, and that God would permit us to meet again. She wept, and I did not check her tears. Perhaps she would never again have a chance to pour her tears into a mother’s bosom. All night she nestled in my arms, and I had no inclination to slumber. The moments were too precious to lose any of them. Once, when I thought she was asleep, I kissed her forehead softly, and she said, “I am not asleep, dear mother.”<sup>239</sup>

The unreserved intimacy Jacobs depicts as she describes holding Ellen throughout the night is a rare moment in the text. When Jacobs attempts to provide maternal care prior to running away, she does so quickly and hides it from her owners lest she be discovered and punished. In

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<sup>239</sup> Jacobs 140.

contrast, fugitive time ironically offers Jacobs the extraordinary opportunity to savor each moment and finally be a mother without worrying about managing her laboring time. This scene with Ellen is the most daring moment of fugitive time that Jacobs narrates because she depicts an extraordinary opportunity to savor each moment and perform the role of a free mother, disregarding the limitations of slave laboring temporalities. As a fugitive, she steals her most precious time as a loving, nurturing mother who gives Ellen essential advice for her trip and new life.

This moment also functions as a climax because the bonding that takes place as Jacobs and Ellen share tears fulfills one of Jacobs's deepest wishes. Throughout the narrative Jacobs longs for the ability to soothe her children during times of duress, but is limited in her ability to do so because of the demands of slavery. Jacobs's unrestricted time with Ellen is "too precious to lose" by sleeping, so she seeks to make the most of this rare time with Ellen. When Jacobs finally has time to enjoy an uninterrupted night with her daughter, the ultimate luxury of time and act of resistance, she lets Ellen weep freely. Jacobs gives Ellen the experience of crying into her mother's bosom, an occurrence at this point she fears Ellen may never have again. The act of sharing tears is transgressive because it subverts the family-destroying practices that sustain slavery. Jacobs desires to do more than just comfort her child; she wants to give Ellen indelible memories of her mother so that she will be unlike Douglass who barely remembers his mother. Given Jacobs's own inability to properly say good-bye to her parents, most notably when she is denied the opportunity to attend her father's funeral when she is twelve, this gift of memory is indeed precious and will be one that Ellen can carry with her for the rest of her life and share with future generations—even if she never sees her mother again. By reconnecting with her daughter, Jacobs thwarts slavery's design to destroy familial bonds and maintains an

intergenerational bond between mothers that slavery still cannot extinguish. This moment fulfills Jacobs's desire and is the pinnacle of her experience as a fugitive slave.

Unsurprisingly, the speed of Jacobs's narration increases as she turns to reflect on her time as a fugitive slave while hastening toward her successful escape to the North. Rather than structuring her narrative around her escape as an obvious climax like Douglass and other slave narrators, Jacobs centers her fugitive time on her experiences of motherhood, which culminates in a tender night she shares with Ellen. Jacobs's escape to and freedom in the North are secondary to her experiences in the garret—both thematically and structurally. As the moment of narrating her daring escape nears, Jacobs reviews her experience in the garret and attempts to capture the amount of time she spends in confinement:

I hardly expect that the reader will credit me, when I affirm that I lived in that little dismal hole, almost deprived of light and air, and with no space to move my limbs, for nearly seven years. [...] Countless were the nights that I sat late at the little loophole [...] Season after season, year after year, I peeped at my children's faces, and heard their sweet voices, with a heart yearning all the while to say, "Your mother is here." Sometimes it appeared to me as if ages had rolled away since I entered upon that gloomy, monotonous existence. At times, I was stupefied and listless; at other times I became very impatient to know when these dark years would end, and I should again be allowed to feel the sunshine, and breathe the pure air.<sup>240</sup>

Jacobs seems to struggle with how to convey the nature of her temporal experience while a fugitive slave in the garret; simply explaining that she spent nearly seven years in confinement is

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<sup>240</sup> Jacobs 148.

woefully insufficient because those years both expanded into “ages” even as they contracted into moments of “impatien[ce].” What becomes clear when reading the fugitive section of the text is that despite the constancy of her confinement in the garret, Jacobs’s experience of time is complex and varied. Despite the monotony of natural time as seasons pass and blend into each other, Jacobs depicts the garret as a timeless hole in which it is impossible for her to keep an accurate account of time. In the absence of precise time keeping, Jacobs inserts her children as the consistent presence around which she orients her experience in the garret. Once her wish of telling her children that they still have a mother is fulfilled, Jacobs speeds up the pace of the fugitive time section and the narrative races towards Jacobs’s triumphant escape to the North and the text’s ultimate conclusion.

Soon after Ellen leaves, the slow, extended period of Jacobs’s fugitive time comes to an abrupt end when she has reason to believe that her concealment has been revealed to the untrustworthy slave, Jenny. Thus, without warning, Jacobs must immediately prepare to depart for the North to avoid detection. Jacobs’s narrative changes dramatically and abruptly once she shifts to making immediate arrangements for running away. While this narrative pacing conveys the anxiety of running away unexpectedly, it also contrasts sharply with the majority of Jacobs’s fugitive time and experience as a fugitive slave mother because now the seamless blending of years gives way to anxious minutes. The family determines that Jacobs has less than a day to get away: “Uncle Philip was sent for, and he agreed with his mother in thinking that Jenny would inform Dr. Flint in less than twenty-four hours.”<sup>241</sup> Although Jenny’s discovery of Jacobs is the stated motivation for the sudden shift in narrative pacing, this change emphasizes the significance of the time Jacobs has with Ellen through the contrast between those lingering

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<sup>241</sup> Jacobs 153.



moments in the night with Ellen and the rushing of minutes and even seconds as Jacobs prepares to board the boat that will eventually carry her to the North.

While these preparations are under way, Jacobs has a few hours to spend with her family and she resolves to see her son before she leaves:

I made all my arrangements to go on board as soon as it was dusk. The intervening time I resolved to spend with my son. I had not spoken to him for seven years, though I had been under the same roof, and seen him every day, when I was well enough to sit at the loophole. I did not dare to venture beyond the storeroom; so they brought him there, and locked us up together, in a place concealed from the piazza door.<sup>242</sup>

Even in the midst of immediate danger, Jacobs makes time to spend with her son before she leaves. Despite the imminent risk she faces, Jacobs still prioritizes seeing and caring for her children. As expected, the reunion is quite emotional for both Jacobs and her son: “It was an agitating interview for both of us [...] we had talked and wept together for a little while.”<sup>243</sup> She continues to resist slavery by solidifying her connection to her children and establishing the bonds upon which they can build in the future as free persons. Although Jacobs does not explicitly state this in the text, it can be assumed that seeing Benny before she runs away brings her some pleasure too. As Jacobs’s fugitive time comes to a close, it is clear that being a fugitive slave mother leads Jacobs to take more risk to protect her children. However, her children also bring Jacobs joy that mitigates some of the suffering she endures. Thus when finally embarking on the journey that would either ferry her to freedom or certain doom, Jacobs structures the narrative to temper some of the anxiety in this scene with the soothing and joyful presence of her

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<sup>242</sup> Jacobs 154.

<sup>243</sup> Jacobs 154.

son. Jacobs's split focus both on seeing her son and running away yet again emphasizes what is most unusual about her text: that her physical safety and freedom are a distant second to demonstrating and preserving her love for her children.

I began this chapter with my analysis of the short chapter in which Jacobs escapes, yet I focused most of the chapter on fugitive time as a complex and ephemeral temporality that provides Jacobs with unparalleled experiences as a slave mother. This organizational decision reflects my understanding that the most significant aspects of Jacobs's fugitive slave story lie not in her quest for freedom, but rather in her desire to be a mother free of slavery's restraints. Jacobs's narrated experience of a collective, familial, slow and extended fugitive time challenges the experiences readers have come to expect based on the canonical experience that Douglass describes in *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. Analyzing Jacobs's narrated experiences reveals that far from being universal, Douglass narrates only one type of fugitive time that cannot begin to capture the experience Jacobs describes in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Given the centrality of motherhood to Jacobs's reason for running away and determination to survive such a lengthy fugitive slave period, I argue that the real end of her fugitive slave journey does not occur when she sails for freedom without her children or family, but rather in her final good-byes as she prepares to leave them. Above all else, Jacobs's narrative reveals repeatedly that motherhood is inextricable from her experience as a slave. Thus, any analysis of her text must grapple with her role as a mother in order to fully engage the experience she narrates because unlike most fugitive slaves, individual freedom was beside the point for Jacobs. What matters most to her is the freedom and security of her children. Readers must understand this simple fact before they can fully understand the complex depictions of slavery and time that Jacobs offers in *Incidents*.

Jacobs's children give her joy that helps sustain her through the years of suffering she endures in the garret, but they are not her only source of pleasure. Jacobs depicts a collective experience of fugitive time that centers on her children and there are numerous scenes where Jacobs subordinates her safety while making the freedom of her children her primary concern. However, despite this overwhelming focus on her children, Jacobs also reveals one other source of contentment during her fugitive time: outsmarting Dr. Flint.

Jacobs repeatedly describes her "satisfaction" at outwitting Dr. Flint and evading his numerous attempts to capture her. Jacobs is not merely content that she remains safe as a fugitive; instead, she sees her resistance to Dr. Flint as a battle of intellect that she thoroughly enjoys winning. Jacobs's feelings about Dr. Flint's active yet fruitless search for her are instructive:

Aunt Nancy brought me all the news she could hear at Dr. Flint's. From her I learned that the doctor had written to New York to a colored woman, who had been born and raised in our neighborhood, and had breathed his contaminating atmosphere. He offered her a reward if she could find out any thing about me. I know not what was the nature of her reply; but he soon after started for New York in haste, saying to his family that had business of importance to transact. I peeped at him as he passed on his way to the steamboat. It was a satisfaction to have miles of land and water between us, even for a little while; and it was a still greater satisfaction to know that he believed me to be in the Free States. My little den seemed less dreary than it had done.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> Jacobs 116.

Although Jacobs is glad that Dr. Flint is far from her while he is pointlessly searching in New York, she derives even more satisfaction from his belief that she is free in the North. Jacobs does not go so far to say that seeing Dr. Flint so clueless about her location bring her the same joy she feels when she sees her children, but it brings her more contentment than simply feeling relatively safe. Just as the presence of her children mitigates her suffering in the garret, Dr. Flint's folly also makes Jacobs's attic "less dreary." It is as if seeing Dr. Flint's folly minimizes Jacobs's own misery.

Jacobs does not merely witness Dr. Flint's misinformed attempts to capture her, but rather takes an active role by using the postal service—including mastering its timing—to elude and confound Dr. Flint. As John McKay describes this contrast between Jacobs's confinement and resistance in "And Hold the Bondman Still": Biogeography and Utopia in Slave and Serf Narratives:"

The most harrowing image we have of radical spatial limitation is still surely the garret where Harriet Jacobs spent seven numbing years, but from where she also found ways—mostly through friends and through the mail—to compete with her pursuer 'in cunning.'<sup>245</sup>

When Jacobs is most vulnerable in the garret is when she manipulates Dr. Flint into believing that she has already arrived in the North, which ensures her relative safety as he travels away from her actual hiding place. Her continued manipulation of Dr. Flint prolongs their intellectual battle, which began years before when Jacobs devised strategies to thwart his sexual advances. Jacobs's framing of her fugitive slave experience as a battle reveals how she sees her decision to run away as a form of resistance. Moreover, Jacobs's frequent references to her strategy for

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<sup>245</sup> MacKay 114.

outsmarting Dr. Flint exposes the personal fulfillment she derives from winning these intellectual fights.

One silver lining of her fugitive time experience is that by enduring years of stasis, she also has time to think of additional ways to “match [her] cunning against [Dr. Flint’s] cunning.”<sup>246</sup> Although Jacobs is cramped in one of the smallest spaces imaginable, she uses her one extensive resource—unrestricted time—to outsmart Dr. Flint. Given her physical confinement, Jacobs’s narrated experience in the garret becomes, in some ways, timeless; time becomes irrelevant as days, seasons, and years bleed seamlessly into each other. It is during this nearly unlimited time that Jacobs develops her plan to deceive Dr. Flint into thinking that she is in the North to lessen the anxiety her relatives and friends feel by having her so close in her grandmother’s garret.

Given that Jacobs’s stated goal is to convince Dr. Flint that she is indeed in the North, her strategy for completing this task is fundamentally spatial and temporal. She has to successfully persuade him that she is in a place she is not at in that precise moment. She masters the geography of New York and the timing of the postal service to feign the authenticity necessary to accomplish her subterfuge: “In order to make him believe that I was in New York, I resolved to write him a letter dated from that place.”<sup>247</sup> As she explains to her friend Peter, “I expressed a wish for a New York paper, to ascertain the names of some of the streets.”<sup>248</sup> It is only after she learns some New York geography from the newspaper fragment that Peter provides that Jacobs commences writing the letter:

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<sup>246</sup> Jacobs 128.

<sup>247</sup> Jacobs 128.

<sup>248</sup> Jacobs 128.

Early the next morning, I seated myself near the little aperture to examine the newspaper. It was a piece of the New York Herald; and, for once, the paper that systematically abuses the colored people, was made to render them a service. Having obtained what information I wanted concerning streets and numbers, I wrote two letters, one to my grandmother, the other to Dr. Flint.<sup>249</sup>

In a display of intellectual prowess, Jacobs performs research to write a convincing letter. Surprisingly, she seems quite confident in the success of her endeavor. Gone is the meekness that characterizes Jacobs's earlier writing, especially in reference to her abilities.<sup>250</sup> In this scene, Jacobs is a woman in control. She requests and receives the information she desires, which she then uses effectively to deceive Dr. Flint. In addition to mastering enough spatial details about New York to sound convincing, Jacobs selects the appropriate dates to account for mailing time: "I dated these letters ahead, to allow for the time it would take to carry them, and sent a memorandum of the date to the messenger [...] I had directed that my letters should be put into the New York post office on the 20th of the month."<sup>251</sup> The precision of Jacobs's request reveals her sophisticated understanding of how to use the postal service to her advantage. Jacobs puts

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<sup>249</sup> Jacobs 128.

<sup>250</sup> Like many slave narrators opening their texts with demonstrations of humility, Jacobs's narrative begins with a preface in which she outlines her writing deficiencies as a slave denied formative educational opportunities:

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. Since I have been at the North, it has been necessary for me to work diligently for my own support, and the education of my children. This has not left me much leisure to make up for the loss of early opportunities to improve myself; and it has compelled me to write these pages at irregular intervals, whenever I could snatch an hour from household duties. (1)

<sup>251</sup> Jacobs 129.

effort into successfully convincing Dr. Flint and ultimately makes a fool of him to her family and friends who know her true whereabouts.

Although Jacobs does not say this explicitly, her cunning extends beyond the battle of wits with Dr. Flint. Whether it is subverting the aims of the *New York Herald*, which Jacobs claims is hostile to African Americans, or using the United States Postal Service, a presumably neutral government institution that is still implicated in the transmission of letters and documents that support slavery, Jacobs uses her knowledge of these institutions and repurposes them for her own needs. Jacobs realizes the benefit of these manipulations, explaining her intention to maintain her geographic deception:

The fact that Dr. Flint had written to the mayor of Boston [about her whereabouts] convinced me that he believed my letter to be genuine, and of course that he had no suspicion of my being any where in the vicinity. It was a great object to keep up this delusion, for it made me and my friends feel less anxious, and it would be very convenient whenever there was a chance to escape. I resolved, therefore, to continue to write letters from the north from time to time.<sup>252</sup>

These acts of cunning show the power Jacobs wields as a fugitive slave once she masters control of time and space. Jacobs's ability to manipulate her master while a fugitive demonstrates the power of the free time fugitive time provides Jacobs, enabling her to develop sophisticated and effective tools for resistance.

Jacobs uses most of her unrestricted time as a fugitive slave to resist the denial of her maternal rights and the continued enslavement of her and her children. Jacobs spends most of the

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<sup>252</sup> Jacobs 131-132.

fugitive slave section of the narrative describing how she uses fugitive time to develop and enrich her relationship with her children and expand her own experience of motherhood previously limited by slavery's restrictions. However, she also reveals her own personal satisfaction in displaying her intellectual ability and her success in thwarting Dr. Flint's attempts to recapture her. The relative freedom afforded to Jacobs during fugitive time allows her to contradict two key stereotypes that undergirded the institution of slavery. First, Jacobs's depiction of fugitive time overwhelmingly discredits the stereotype of neglectful slave mothers by proving that her maternal love is equal to that of any white mother. Second, Jacobs exposes the assumed intellectual inferiority of slaves to be false, emerging triumphant in her battle of wits with Dr. Flint despite being outmatched by his financial resources, education, legal rights, and community standing. A deeper inquiry into Jacobs's fugitive time reveals the complexity of her experience of a slave mother, but also exposes the intellectual ability and pride of a savvy runaway slave. Unlike Douglass's brief and anxious train ride from slavery to freedom, fugitive time offers Jacobs years of pleasure and pain along with emotional wounds and intellectual victories. These narrated experiences of motherhood and intellectual strategy allow Jacobs to articulate the complex range of feelings and actions that demonstrate unquestionably her humanity—the ultimate resistance of and rebuke to slavery's lies about slaves and black mothers in particular.



4. “SELF-EMPLOYED BLACK WOMEN ARE AMERICA’S FUTURE:

**Elizabeth Keckley’s Radical Vision for Rebuilding Reconstruction-Era America in *Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House***

In the penultimate paragraph of Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs describes being free in the North with surprisingly muted joy. She reveals that despite finally being “free at last” as the final chapter’s title indicates, she still has unfulfilled aspirations:

Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free! We are as free from the power of slaveholders as are the white people of the north; and though that, according to my ideas, is not saying a great deal, it is a vast improvement in *my* condition. The dream of my life is not yet realized. I do not sit with my children in a home of my own. I still long for a hearthstone of my own, however humble.<sup>253</sup>

Jacobs seems far less enthused than one would have expected—especially at the end of a slave narrative chronicling her quest for freedom. Although she acknowledges that her situation has improved tremendously, she also states plainly that merely being free will not make her content. Unlike Douglass who indicates at the end of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* that his work is not done because slavery had not yet been abolished,<sup>254</sup> Jacobs’s dream is much more personal: she wants a home of her own. As she later indicates in the paragraph, her economic

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<sup>253</sup> Jacobs 201.

<sup>254</sup> Douglass ends *Narrative* with his entrance into the anti-slavery lecture circuit and the abolitionist cause, remarking, “From that time [his first anti-slavery speech] until now, I have been engaged in pleading the cause of my brethren” (*Narrative* 75).

situation forces her to still live with Mrs. Bruce, the woman who purchased her freedom.<sup>255</sup> The conclusion of Jacobs's narrative raises the question of how one can live freely without the means to be financially self-sufficient. This very question is one that Elizabeth Keckley also grapples with throughout her postbellum autobiography, *Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*.

Although it is not a prominent theme in a slave narrative dominated by Jacobs's resistance to forced sexual labor amid her quest for freedom, Jacobs does examine the relationship between freedom and economic independence throughout *Incidents*—just not through her own personal experience. Instead, Jacobs's depiction of her grandmother, Aunt Martha, reveals how economic independence can facilitate limited experiences of freedom and autonomy, even for slaves. The towering figure of Harriet Jacobs's grandmother Aunt Martha looms over *Incidents*. Jacobs exclaims early in the narrative, "I had also a great treasure in my maternal grandmother, who was a remarkable woman in many respects,"<sup>256</sup> and it soon becomes clear from her chronicles of Aunt Martha's success as a laborer and an entrepreneur that Jacobs offers no idle praise.

Jacobs chooses to emphasize Aunt Martha's ability to nourish her family and community through her diverse labors: Aunt Martha gives her family strength and provides her community with literal nourishment through delicious food that she uses to maintain her financial independence. Jacobs describes her grandmother's resolve and determination as a slave as a narrative of progress:

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<sup>255</sup> "But God so orders circumstances as to keep me with my friend Mrs. Bruce. Love, duty, and gratitude, also bind me to her side" (Jacobs 201).

<sup>256</sup> Jacobs 5.

She [Aunt Martha] became an indispensable personage in the household, officiating in all capacities, from cook and wet nurse to seamstress. She was much praised for her cooking; and her nice crackers became so famous in the neighborhood that many people were desirous of obtaining them. In consequence of numerous requests of this kind, she asked permission of her mistress to bake crackers at night, after all the household work was done; and she obtained leave to do it, provided she would clothe herself and her children from the profits. Upon these terms, after working hard all day for her mistress, she began her midnight bakings, assisted by her two oldest children. The business proved profitable; and each year she laid by a little, which was saved for a fund to purchase her children.<sup>257</sup>

Jacobs chronicles all of the different types of domestic labor her grandmother performs, but what distinguishes Aunt Martha most is her cooking, which becomes the basis for her successful business. Given the demands of her forced labor as a slave, her business becomes an additional job that she works at night. Like Frederick Douglass, Aunt Martha seems to work incessantly, both day and night. However, unlike Douglass who saved his earnings from caulking to help him run away,<sup>258</sup> Aunt Martha's business serves an important communal purpose: it provides money that she eventually uses to purchase some of her family. As Frances Smith Foster explains,

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<sup>257</sup> Jacobs 6.

<sup>258</sup> In *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass describes how being hired out would help him run away: "My discontent grew upon me, and I was on a constant look-out for means to get away. With money I could easily have managed the matter, and from this consideration I hit upon the plan of soliciting the privilege of hiring my time" (131). When Master Thomas flatly refuses Douglass's request to hire his time, he later makes an ultimately successful appeal to Master Hugh, again explaining how earning additional money would help him escape slavery: "Once master of my own time, I felt sure that I could make, over and above my obligation to him, a dollar or two every week. Some slaves had, in this way, made enough to purchase their freedom. It was a sharp spur to their industry, and some of the most enterprising colored men in Baltimore hired themselves in that way. (132)"

“Aunt Martha was so skilled in the domestic sciences that she baked both her and her son’s way out of slavery and into her own home.”<sup>259</sup> Later Jacobs also notes how her grandmother’s business helps establish Aunt Martha’s formidable and respected position within white society.<sup>260</sup> By focusing on Aunt Martha’s superb cooking as the genesis of her successful business, this story arc ultimately obscures the multiple types of labor Aunt Martha was required to perform while enslaved.

More specifically, focusing on what Aunt Martha *does* as an entrepreneur enables Jacobs to avoid the thornier questions of what was *done to* Aunt Martha who at one time was a slave girl just like Jacobs. In *Activist Sentiments: Reading Black Women in the Nineteenth Century*, P. Gabrielle Foreman ponders the most “obvious questions”<sup>261</sup> about Aunt Martha, specifically asking, “How, after all, were all these children begotten? What indelicate questions might attentive readers ask here?”<sup>262</sup> There are other questions about childbearing that Jacobs avoids, such as whether her grandmother had “suffered through similar sexual threats or, like Jacobs, experienced a complicated sexual history.”<sup>263</sup> Jacobs would have been unable to reconcile her depiction of her grandmother as the text’s primary representative of true womanhood with a complex sexual history that produced nine children.<sup>264</sup> Instead, Jacobs offers her grandmother as

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<sup>259</sup> Foster *Written by Herself* 113.

<sup>260</sup> Jacobs describes her grandmother’s standing among whites: “She had for a long time supplied many families with crackers and preserves; consequently, ‘Aunt Marthy,’ as she was called, was generally known, and every body who knew her respected her intelligence and good character” (11).

<sup>261</sup> Foreman 40.

<sup>262</sup> Foreman 40.

<sup>263</sup> Foreman 40.

<sup>264</sup> According to Foreman, “The narrator suggests that Benjamin [Aunt Martha’s youngest son and Jacobs’s uncle] inherited the complexion of his grandmother’s white father. Yet in *Incidents*, the absence of Benjamin’s own father, whom Linda, so close to her uncle’s age, might have known, raises nagging questions. Property lists name Horniblow’s [Aunt Martha’s actual name was Molly Horniblow] children but not their fathers—a sign that whites may have sired them.

an example of an ideal woman. As Foreman explains, “Pious and domestic, Aunt Martha counsels contentment, submissiveness, and purity; she is, indeed, the only sustained Southern representative of true womanhood in *Incidents*.”<sup>265</sup>

Foreman argues that Jacobs adopts a narrative strategy that enables her to shield her grandmother from her scrutiny:

Just as Linda, “remains unseen,” so Jacobs shields her grandmother Molly Horniblow, protecting her, in turn, from sexual unveilings. [...] By casting her gaze outside, Jacobs refuses to compromise the integrity of her grandmother’s home; consequently, the older woman’s privacy—and private life as well—remains intact.<sup>266</sup>

By directing the reader’s gaze away from the interiority of her grandmother’s home and personal life, Jacobs avoids some of the most obvious questions about her grandmother’s personal life and the parentage of her children. In a chapter section entitled “Aunt Martha’s Mask,” Foreman argues, “Protecting Aunt Martha’s own sexual and private life limits the reach of readers’ prurient interests and also acts to counterbalance Linda’s own sexualized representation.”<sup>267</sup>

While I do not dispute Foreman’s argument, I want to suggest that one reason that Jacobs was able to successfully shield her grandmother’s personal life was precisely because her

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Indeed, Jean Fagan Yellin’s research unearthed the men who might have fathered the two beloved uncles featured prominently in *Incidents*. Uncle Mark Ramsey, known by a different last name than his mother, siblings, and owners, was probably the son of Alan Ramsay, a white widower and merchant. Yellin suggests that a free Black Edenton native might have claimed Joseph as his child. Yet, if Molly Horniblow had a free Black partner, why weren’t they married? If her mistress prevented the union, why not present this in some form in *Incidents*? And, if Joseph’s father was a free Black man, whose own *father*, not mother, had been emancipated, then how do we account for the diminished possibility that he inherited his “white face”—one he used to pass both in his escape and, as far as the family knew, permanently into the white race—from his two (mixed-race) Black parents?” (40-41).

<sup>265</sup> Foreman 36.

<sup>266</sup> Foreman 36.

<sup>267</sup> Foreman 36.

grandmother had a public life as a well-known entrepreneur among blacks and whites. To be more specific, the “mask” that Jacobs gives Aunt Martha is entrepreneurship cloaked in true womanhood. Jacobs substitutes the likely, deeply personal sexual and reproductive labor that Aunt Martha was forced to perform as a slave and replaces it with the external entrepreneurial labor that was already publicly known and visible to their community. Entrepreneurial labor is by no means equivalent to sexual and reproductive labor, so this substitution of publicly known economic information is unequal to the personal and private information that readers may have expected or desired to read.

Instead of divulging personal information about her grandmother, Jacobs peppers her narrative with minor references to Aunt Martha’s business endeavors that seem to serve no purpose other than to remind readers of her grandmother’s business success and high standing within the community.<sup>268</sup> However, I contend that these references are the narrative strategies through which Jacobs enacts her substitution of entrepreneurial information for private details. These references *seem* personal since Jacobs shares her memories of her grandmother; however, Jacobs maintains her external focus by discussing how other people view her grandmother. What seems like intimate access is actually a synopsis of public sentiment about Aunt Martha.

Jacobs’s references to Aunt Martha’s entrepreneurship also remind readers of why Aunt Martha has her own home and such high standing that she can even dare to challenge Dr. Flint. In one memorable scene, Jacobs explains that even though she did not confide in her grandmother about Dr. Flint’s sexual harassment, her grandmother’s presence and reputation still protected her:

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<sup>268</sup> The following are examples of Jacobs’s references to her grandmother’s cooking business: “My grandmother was in the habit of preserving fruit for many ladies in the town, and of preparing suppers for parties” (66). Later Jacobs recalls, “My grandmother raised poultry and pigs for sale” (119).

[H]er presence in the neighborhood was some protection to me. 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.<sup>269</sup>

This passage reveals the power that Aunt Martha had as an entrepreneur who had access to the white community. She could easily sully Dr. Flint's character by gossiping with her patrons. That leverage and respect among whites emboldened Aunt Martha to criticize Dr. Flint in ways that Jacobs dared not. Additionally, it is precisely the power and leverage her grandmother gets from her businesses that provides Jacobs with some level of protection.

Of course, the most tangible benefit of Aunt Martha's business is the economic independence it provided. She was able to maintain a home and display an independence that, ironically, newly emancipated Jacobs can only yearn for at the end of her narrative. To compare Aunt Martha's economic and subsequent social independence while enslaved to Jacobs's limited liberty as a financially dependent free person reveals the limits of a legal freedom that is not accompanied by economic autonomy. The relationship between legal and economic freedom is one that Elizabeth Keckley explores in her postbellum autobiography that chronicles her rise from slave seamstress to Mary Todd Lincoln's modiste in the White House.

Just as Jacobs replaces any disclosure of Aunt Martha's slave sexual and reproductive labor with recollections of her entrepreneurship, Keckley also avoids discussing the sexual and reproductive labor that she was forced to perform while enslaved. As a result, even though Keckley spends some time narrating her life as a slave, discussions of slave laboring time,

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<sup>269</sup> Jacobs 29.

specifically slave sexual laboring time and slave reproductive laboring time, are notably absent in her text. William L. Andrews also notes this omission:

Keckley's comments on her sexual liaison with an unnamed white man during her time in slavery are confined to a mere five sentences [...] There is no reason to think that the memory of this experience was any less "fraught with pain" for Keckley than for Jacobs, yet while Jacobs struggles to declare herself, Keckley refuses to articulate her pain and "deep mortification" to her reader.<sup>270</sup>

Although Andrews refuses to provide a definitive explanation for the omission of sexual labor during slavery in most postbellum slave narratives, he judges what he sees as Keckley's focus on her career rather unfavorably, stating: [S]he links her sense of pride and respectability to an external standard—that of the marketplace—rather than an internal principle—what Jacobs would have called her 'virtue.'<sup>271</sup> In conclusion, Andrews argues, "Keckley can also be seen to have invited her readers, particularly those who were black and female, to buy into an economy of selfhood consistent with the interests of the newly emerging capitalist order in the postwar North."<sup>272</sup> Andrews seems critical of the "unabashed and often plainly self-congratulatory success story"<sup>273</sup> that he sees Keckley telling in her autobiography.

However, one key element missing from Andrews's analysis of Keckley's views on her labor and career is time. I contend that Keckley's skilled labor as a seamstress and her self-employment as an entrepreneur in particular provide her with an extraordinary opportunity to articulate what it means to her to be a free black woman working in postwar America. Just as entrepreneurship provided Aunt Martha with economic self-sufficiency and even some autonomy

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<sup>270</sup> Andrews "Changing Moral Discourse" 232.

<sup>271</sup> Andrews "Changing Moral Discourse" 233.

<sup>272</sup> Andrews "Changing Moral Discourse" 237.

<sup>273</sup> Andrews "Changing Moral Discourse" 234.



denied to most slaves, it is precisely through Keckley's depictions of her post-slavery laboring time where I see her asserting her autonomy as a free black woman laborer within the capitalist marketplace. Whereas Andrews sees Keckley defining herself in the marketplace, I see her *using* the marketplace, through her depiction of her laboring time after slavery, which I call her *autonomous work time*, to assert her independence and productivity in the new postwar economy.

Keckley was a black postbellum writer tasked with not only narrating her experiences of slavery and freedom, but also with demonstrating the significance of emancipation by conveying how significantly the lives of freed persons differed from slaves. As a result, Keckley had to invent new narrative strategies for representing a freedom that was at once complete—because slavery was finally over—and yet limited and conditional, given the tremendous oppression African Americans still faced. From this perspective, it is unsurprising that Keckley's autobiography articulates a vision of a postwar, reunited nation that centers on the free labor of black working women; her autobiography is not just her personal story, but also a model for African Americans looking forward to the future. In his introduction to *Behind the Scenes*, William L. Andrews explains the role that Keckley

[S]uggests in her autobiography [...] history has assigned her and other middle-class African Americans. That role [...] was to exemplify the practical value of self-reliance and hard work in the economic sphere while at the same time assisting in the realization of the nation's great postwar destiny, the reconciling of North and South through sectional reunification.<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> Andrews *Behind the Scenes* xx.

Keckley uses her autobiography to show that she is ready to fulfill her role in reuniting post-Civil War America. She demonstrates that two quintessential American characteristics, self-reliance and hard work, are her inheritance from slavery through her depiction of how she chooses to use her autonomous work time throughout the narrative. She and by extension other black women similarly trained can utilize these traits to participate in postwar national rebuilding efforts. Keckley uses her autobiography to narrate a place for her and other black women in the newly reunited nation.

Keckley portrays black working women as exemplars of these essential national characteristics and culminates this radical vision of national reconstruction in a holiday that *she* gives her employees during the Civil War. By looking back to the immediate past, Keckley demonstrates that emancipated black women have already proven their ability and readiness to be productive citizens in postwar America. Keckley does not reveal the race of her employees. Regardless of whether they were black, white or an interracial group of women, Keckley highlights the importance of black working women either as leaders of other black women or, more radically, as leaders of black and white women who are ready to do the labor of rebuilding the nation. Keckley gives her employees the gift of free time so that they can celebrate a Union victory simultaneously with the rest of the nation. In doing so, she also reimagines the national holiday, previously a time of anxiety and rupture as her own father was sold away during a Christmas celebration, as one of interracial national unity with black working women at its center.

Although scholars have examined Keckley's implicit political argument that emancipated African Americans had earned a rightful place in postwar America, few have considered the degree to which she develops her national claim through her depictions of how she *chooses* to

use her time. In this chapter I will demonstrate how Keckley constructs the case for the social and political inclusion of African Americans in postwar America. She insists that the way in which African Americans workers have *chosen* to use their time demonstrates their embodiment of the preeminent American characteristics self-reliance and hard work. Keckley's own example of entrepreneurial success reveals that her autonomy as a self-employed laborer allows her to choose how to perform her skilled labor and use her autonomous work time. By highlighting the behavior of black workers, Keckley implies that African Americans are superior models of American character and values. I will also show how Keckley develops her national argument on the choices African Americans, particularly African American working women, make about how to use their time both during and after slavery. This chapter will reveal the centrality of time in Keckley's vision of a postwar America that includes African Americans as equals and her understanding that the basis of national belonging is economic and temporal. Despite Keckley's highly selective depiction of her post-slavery autonomous work time, she includes a scene in which she sacrifices her economic profits by closing her sewing room early to celebrate a Union victory with her employees. This moment of national simultaneity most demonstrably asserts her readiness to contribute in rebuilding America in the Reconstruction era, and ultimately the importance of time to civic participation.

It is not surprising that Keckley's autobiography, published in the midst of Reconstruction, is preoccupied with nationalism and includes a subtle yet forceful argument for the full inclusion of African Americans in the newly unified postwar nation. In his introduction to the Schomburg edition of *Behind the Scenes*, James Olney argues, "The reader must not forget that the struggle going on beyond the White House and Washington--the history that unfolds itself as romance in the pages of *Behind the Scenes*--was to determine the character and identity

of the nation at the time of its second birth."<sup>275</sup> Olney's description of the Reconstruction period as the nation's "second birth" is particularly useful for imagining the stakes of Keckley's argument in *Behind the Scenes* that portrays black working women as necessary economic, social and political actors in the postwar nation. Olney's reminder that the nation was being reborn during Reconstruction also highlights the degree to which American society had to reconstitute itself to accommodate the ending of slavery and the legal incorporation of African Americans, however limited in actual practice, into the national body.

Given the extensive post-slavery discrimination facing African Americans, emancipation was not a clearly defined boundary between enslavement to full citizenship. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman insists on replacing

[T]he place of the grand narrative of freedom, with its decisive events and incontrovertible advances [...] [with] an account that focuses on the ambivalent legacy of emancipation and the undeniably truncated opportunities available to the freed. Lacking the certitude of a definitive partition between slavery and freedom, and in the absence of a consummate breach through which freedom might unambivalently announce itself, there is at best a transient and fleeting expression of possibility that cannot ensconce itself as a durable temporal marker. If periodization is a barrier imposed from above that obscures the involuntary servitude and legal subjection that followed in the wake of slavery, then attempts to assert absolutist distinctions between slavery and freedom are untenable.<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> Olney xxxv.

<sup>276</sup> Hartman 12-13.

Hartman troubles the clear boundary between slavery and freedom by analyzing the actual daily lived experiences of African Americans, asserting that any insistence upon emancipation as a definitive rupture without adequately examining the continued oppression of African Americans after slavery is “untenable.” Hartman’s analysis forces us to question the sweeping historical declaration that freedom began once slavery ended and insists that we scrutinize what freedom actually looked like for postwar African Americans. Reconstruction was a transitional period during which political rights had been formally granted but the essential civic institutions required for the implementation and protection of those rights in the face of hostile white supremacy were still being formed or missing altogether. In light of these political realities, the question of how African Americans can live freely as participants in postwar America was an open and unresolved one; I argue that this question motivates much of Keckley’s autobiography. According to Janaka Lewis, “Keckley’s freedom means more than having the opportunity to work for a prominent family after she purchases herself and her son; it also means having the freedom to contract and control her labor, to command authority as a woman on her own terms instead of those of a spouse, and to help improve the lives of other freedmen and freedwomen.”<sup>277</sup> More important than how Keckley defines freedom is how she depicts it in her narrative. Lewis argues, Keckley “illustrates what it means to live as a person who is both legally and inherently free.”<sup>278</sup>

Critics have long recognized the argument for the inclusion of African Americans in the postwar nation in Keckley’s text. In “I Was Re-Elected President: Elizabeth Keckley as Quintessential Patriot in *Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White*

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<sup>277</sup> Lewis 5.

<sup>278</sup> Lewis 15.

*House*,” Lynn Domina argues that Keckley fashions herself into the “quintessential patriot”<sup>279</sup> who “demonstrates the character of the nation in the character of herself.”<sup>280</sup> I disagree with Domina’s larger argument that Keckley identifies exclusively as an American and not as a black woman because Keckley centers her political argument on the behavior and labor of black women; I see Keckley’s identification as a black woman as essential to her national argument. However, I agree with Domina’s insistence that Keckley represents herself as the premiere embodiment of American national character.

In “Behind the Scenes of Black Labor,” Xiomara Santamarina explains, “Keckley’s *Behind the Scenes* testified to the productive possibilities of black workers [...] Keckley’s life-story dramatized the possibilities of racial reconciliation and national progress attainable through the successful social and economic integration of freed blacks.”<sup>281</sup> I go one step further to assert that Keckley does not just argue for the inclusion of African Americans, but actually insists that African Americans, particularly successful black laborers, are *essential* to the success of the postwar nation precisely because they are the inheritors and embodiment of the best of American characters and values.

This focus on the inheritance from slavery has led to some critical accusations that Keckley and other post-bellum writers are too generous in their recollections of slavery. In *Written by Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746-1892*, Frances Smith Foster argues, “Like other postbellum narrators [...] [Keckley] chronicled the atrocities and deprivations engendered by [slavery], but reinterpreted this suffering and degradation as a historical moment necessitated by the brief reign of evil in a land that was intended for better

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<sup>279</sup> Domina 150.

<sup>280</sup> Domina 150.

<sup>281</sup> Santamarina “Behind the Scenes of Black Labor” 516.

purposes.”<sup>282</sup> However, Keckley and other postbellum writers were not, in Foster’s view, overly accommodating in their remembrances of slavery; instead their writings were “subversively ennobling. [...] The postbellum protagonist could be characterized as the epitome of the American Dream, surpassing Benjamin Franklin’s rise from poverty to power by moving from being property to becoming proprietors.”<sup>283</sup>

Foster also explores Keckley’s engagement with the nation and the American Dream in her essay “Autobiography After Emancipation.” While describing Keckley’s narrative approach to white readers, Foster asserts, “She is portraying herself as a fellow participant in the American Myth.”<sup>284</sup> In her analysis of a scene in which Keckley describes her response to hearing that President Lincoln had been assassinated, Foster describes how “The reader recalls the nation ‘paralyzed with horror’ and can see Keckley, at this point, as part of ‘the nation.’ Her blood, like that of her fellow citizens, froze.”<sup>285</sup> Foster also explains the implicit message that Keckley conveys by describing how blacks were eager to help the widowed Mary Todd Lincoln, in contrast to the white politicians who leave Mrs. Lincoln’s appeals for financial assistance unanswered: “By noting such ironies as the blacks’ readiness to assume what was both a civic and moral obligation while the whites bickered among themselves, Keckley echoes the Puritan idea of moral superiority achieved through adversity, a morality, in fact, that some whites had yet to achieve.”<sup>286</sup> It is precisely in this vein that I wish to invoke Keckley’s insistence upon the “moral superiority” of African Americans in demonstrating and embodying the essential values that defined nineteenth-century national character. In this chapter I draw upon Foster’s insights

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<sup>282</sup> Foster *Written by Herself* 118.

<sup>283</sup> Foster *Written by Herself* 119.

<sup>284</sup> Foster “Autobiography After Emancipation” 50.

<sup>285</sup> Foster “Autobiography After Emancipation” 53.

<sup>286</sup> Foster “Autobiography After Emancipation” 58.

to consider how Keckley relies upon different experiences of time to bolster this nationalist argument. As Foster surmises, “As a postbellum slave narrative *Behind the Scenes* is more assertive and more critical than those published during slavery. And yet [...] it carries an optimism and faith in the American dream that later works do not.”<sup>287</sup> I contend that Keckley’s “optimism” stems from her understanding that emancipated blacks in the postwar period had earned a rightful place in the nation.

However, Keckley’s optimistic insistence on portraying the “bright side”<sup>288</sup> of slavery has led to some critical difficulty in satisfactorily reconciling her progressive politics and the fond recollections of certain moments and people during her life as a slave. In contrast to earlier critics who identify this seeming contradiction as evidence of a textual flaw, William L. Andrews’s analysis of the postbellum slave narrative genre helps explain the function of scenes of reconciliation between emancipated slaves and their former masters. In “Reunion in the Postbellum Slave Narrative,” Andrews argues,

[I]n the reunion scenes depicted by Keckley and Douglass, it is the former slave who takes the initiative to return to the South and reunite with the former mistress and master. By demonstrating the moral leadership in such reunions, the former slave comes before the reader of the postbellum slave narrative as an active agent in the reconstruction of the South, not as the white man's burden so often portrayed by New South politicians (Williamson 79-85). The ex-slaves' quests for reunion prove them faithful and true to the national ideal, that of a united people in the states of America.<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>287</sup> Foster “Autobiography After Emancipation” 58-59.

<sup>288</sup> Keckley 17. All citations are taken from the University of Illinois Press edition of the text.

<sup>289</sup> Andrews “Reunion in the Postbellum Slave Narrative” 12.



Andrews' insights uncover a subtle way in which postbellum slave narrators like Keckley attempt to demonstrate how African Americans were needed to play a pivotal role in rebuilding the nation.

In "Unmasking the Genteel Performer," Carolyn Sorisio identifies another crucial function of the postwar reconciliation scene in Keckley's text: it shows unequivocally that after the war Keckley is superior to her former white mistresses. Sorisio explains, "Keckley wants to represent slavery as a regrettable national sin, but one which, nonetheless, prepared her to be worth her salt in the postbellum economy. By contrast, the white women whom Keckley represents are pitifully ill-prepared for the post-war era."<sup>290</sup> Sorisio elaborates,

Keckley also altered the perceived roles of white and African American women in the postbellum period through her representation of herself as a successful proprietor. As *Behind the Scenes* demonstrates, slavery forced most African American women into the commodified realm, while at the same time relegating many white women (at least symbolically or ideally) to the home, a sphere envisioned as removed from the marketplace and crowned with sincerity and gentility. This twist of history, Keckley suggests throughout her narrative, left African American women particularly well-suited for an economic role in postbellum culture.<sup>291</sup>

Sorisio's analysis highlights the extent to which Keckley asserts not only that African Americans are asking for their rightful place in the nation, but that the nation actually needs them to help rebuild. I agree with Sorisio that Keckley's examples demonstrate the worth of African American women. Given the destruction that the Civil War caused and the unpreparedness of

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<sup>290</sup> Sorisio 23.

<sup>291</sup> Sorisio 25.

white Southern women, Keckley insists that black working women like her are ideal citizens because they are most prepared to develop the nation economically.

Notably, Keckley's vision for black working women did not originate with her own story. In *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly: The Remarkable Story of the Friendship Between a First Lady and a Former Slave*,<sup>292</sup> Jennifer Fleischner argues that Keckley developed this vision while enslaved in Petersburg where

[O]ut of a population of which about half were black, nearly a third of the black people were free. Even more notable: most of these were unmarried, self-supporting women. Indeed, women headed more than half of the town's free black households and were the majority of the paid black labor force. And many of these unmarried women were property owners.<sup>293</sup>

In Petersburg, Keckley encountered a thriving community in which black women were not merely working productively, but were the *majority* of successful black laborers. These women did more than exist: they were highly visible. From this perspective, black working women were the backbone of Petersburg's laboring force. This model of black working women forming the core of a prosperous free black laboring community mirrors Keckley's later experience as a modiste and employer.

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<sup>292</sup> Fleischner, Jennifer. *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly*. New York: Broadway, 2003. Print.

Fleischner explains her decision to change the spelling of Keckley's name:

I noticed that she [Keckley] spelled her name differently from the way it appears in her published memoir and in the history books. She spelled it "Keckly," not "Keckley," as I had always seen it. [...] So, in writing this book I decided that if I was to restore Elizabeth Keckly's "voice" I must also restore her name, as she knew it: Elizabeth Keckly, Lizzy Keckly. (7)

In keeping with convention, I use the standard spelling of Keckley's name throughout my dissertation.

<sup>293</sup> Fleischner 124.

Just as a significant as the black women's ability to work was the type of labor they performed. Fleischner's analysis foregrounds the variety and scope of labor the free black women of Petersburg performed, which I consider to be the most significant model for Keckley and her ideal of black working women's labor. Fleischner explains:

Lizzy would have noticed these free women [...] She could see their occupational options were limited: most were washers, ironers, seamstresses, house servants, and cooks—traditional female tasks—or employed in the tobacco factories. However, there were women (some of the emancipated slaves) who were professionals and entrepreneurs: cuppers and leechers, midwives, nurses and even doctors, storekeepers, tavern keepers, and proprietors of cook shops. [...] *In these working-and middle-class black women Lizzy could see the possibilities beyond slavery for someone like her.*<sup>294</sup>

These black women provided Keckley with models of black female independence and self-sufficiency while she was still enslaved, and once free, Keckley seemed to use these very templates to pattern her own professional identity. Additionally, Keckley would have likely recognized that the independence self-employment offered to the entrepreneurial class of workers she observed. As Janaka Lewis argues in “Elizabeth Keckley and Freedom's Labor,” “Keckley drew inspiration from her association with these women.”<sup>295</sup> Keckley already knew that she could support a household with her sewing skills. Thus, Fleischner's argument that Keckley would see opportunities for herself as a free professional reflected in the lives of the professional black working women in Petersburg is convincing. Through extrapolation, the significance of these black women to the town of Petersburg may have also influenced Keckley's understanding of how central black working women could be to the entire postwar nation.

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<sup>294</sup> Fleischner 124, emphasis added.

<sup>295</sup> Lewis 10.

For Keckley, the national value of independent black working women is not just economic, but also temporal, as Dana Luciano explains in *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America*. Luciano is one of the few critics to explicitly link Keckley's nationalist aims with her use of varied times. The discerning analysis of "the time of Lincoln"<sup>296</sup> in *Arranging Grief* offers the most concrete exploration of time and nation in Keckley's *Behind the Scenes*. Luciano explains how shared mourning after Lincoln's assassination created a national time of grief that served to reunite the country and indicate its forward progress for whites. Simultaneously, "[m]any white eulogists [...] locat[ed] African American mourners in an affective-temporal national annex, at once irrefutably American and held apart from the progress of the nation."<sup>297</sup> Luciano argues that while white eulogists attempted to identify African Americans with a nonprogressive national time, African Americans rejected such temporal banishment by articulating a grief that was simultaneous with and connected to that of the nation. Luciano explains,

African American eulogies for Lincoln assigned a different temporality to black grief in response to the President's death. Black eulogists maintained the popular emphasis on the distinct intensity of African American mourning for Lincoln, affirming that, as the Reverend Jacob Thomas, an A.M.E. minister from Troy, New York, insisted, "We, as a people, feel more than all others that we are bereaved." Yet this intense bereavement, for Thomas, provided an avenue for African Americans to participate actively in the nation, as he imagined that grief as a kind of affective citizenship, furnishing a new means of

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<sup>296</sup> Luciano 219.

<sup>297</sup> Luciano 237.

present-tense connection to other Americans [...] Thomas's image of mingled tears resisted the tendency to set black grief apart in time and space.<sup>298</sup>

Luciano's analysis reveals the stakes of black temporality in the time of Lincoln. During this fluid time in which the nation tried to figure out how to move past its grief over Lincoln's assassination and into a new, post-Lincoln era, whites attempted to locate African Americans outside of the national time of progress; yet African Americans contested this temporal asynchronicity with their own narratives of temporal and national simultaneity.

Keckley's text participates in this temporal challenge. Luciano explains how "Keckley's movements, both rhetorically and narratively, at once underscore her synchronicity with the rest of the nation and reinfect its habitual arrangement of sentimental time."<sup>299</sup> In analyzing the scenes in which Keckley depicts her own mourning of President Lincoln in the White House, Luciano explains,

Keckley not only refuses to remain with the "martyred President" in the mournful time-loop in which the white commemorative discourse tended to abandon freedmen and women, she reproduces both black eulogists' insistence that African American mourning was a sign of synchronous citizenship and the nationalistic labor that the dead President himself had declared necessary to "bind up the nation's wounds" and move toward the future—that of caring for the widows and orphans that the war had left.<sup>300</sup>

In Luciano's analysis, Keckley situates her grief within the forward-looking national temporality that demonstrates her "synchronous citizenship" and participation in the nation's future. Luciano

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<sup>298</sup> Luciano 240.

<sup>299</sup> Luciano 247.

<sup>300</sup> Luciano 247.

reveals how Keckley, like her black contemporaries, reimagines her grief over Lincoln as a moment of national inclusion that would propel her as a key actor in the active work of rebuilding the newly reunited nation.

I have argued throughout the dissertation that nineteenth-century African American autobiographers suggest through their narrative depictions that they experience time differently because of racial and gender discrimination. My specific focus has been on how black women writers use different narrative strategies to express these differing times. One challenge for African American postbellum autobiographers was that blacks were excluded from postwar America through their relegation to differing experiences of time that existed outside of the contemporaneous moment. To reject this temporal segregation, Keckley uses her own personal experience with President Lincoln to demonstrate that blacks and whites have been and continue to occupy the same temporality. Through this argument, she refutes the racist argument commonly found after Lincoln's death that blacks did not belong in the postwar nation because they were of the wrong time.

Although I agree with Luciano's persuasive reading of grief and mourning in Keckley's autobiography, I contend that Keckley's use of time to demonstrate her national belonging is not confined to the scenes that Luciano analyzes. Further, focusing exclusively on grief ignores the centrality of black women's labor to Keckley's nationalist arguments. This chapter builds on Luciano's insightful analysis and casts a wider net to consider the degree to which Keckley's depictions of labor and time both during and after slavery inform her nationalist argument. As Luciano makes clear, for Keckley to argue for the political inclusion of African Americans in the national body, she had to argue for the temporal equality of African Americans, which would grant them a place in the forward-looking work of rebuilding the nation.

However, Keckley faces the challenge of representing her unusual temporal experiences as a successful and independent black woman. Against a backdrop of racial and gender discrimination, Keckley could not simply appropriate the narrative strategies of white men or white women; she also could not look to earlier slave narratives as a model for writing her vision of free black women working in a postwar future. Antebellum slave narratives written by women often focused on the forced sexual and reproductive labor that women were forced to perform; in contrast, Keckley focuses on depicting her domestic labor as a free woman. Additionally, in many slave narratives written by men, the depictions of labor center on manual labor that was often performed outdoors. In contrast, Keckley performed domestic labor as a seamstress working in the private domestic spaces of white clients. I argue that in response to these representational dilemmas, Keckley develops new narrative strategies for depicting time that resist racial and gender discrimination. In short, she had to develop new strategies to depict her unique laboring experiences and time as both a slave and free person because there were no previous models that could adequately depict her unusual circumstances.

One strategy that Keckley adopts is almost exclusively depicting scenes in which she controls her time, even with the white clients that sustain her business, as a way of modeling and living in freedom. The choice to ignore the demands of white clients, work at her leisure, and determine how to use her laboring time creates for Keckley a daily praxis of living free time. By building and running a successful business and then hiring her own employees, Keckley models how to develop and distribute this freedom through economic self-sufficiency. Keckley's narrative strategies allow her to create space to imagine how black women can be economically independent and successful in America's future.

However, before she can portray the opportunities she sees for free black women, Keckley begins her narrative with a brief discussion of her life as a slave. Keckley provides only a cursory exposition on slavery as evidenced by her subtitle, “Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House.” As an autobiographer in her forties, Keckley spent far more of her life as a slave than she did in the White House. Nevertheless, her subtitle equates the time as a slave with her time in the White House despite the tremendous difference in actual lived years. This is the first indication that her focus will not be on slavery, but rather on her time as a White House modiste. Keckley continues to minimize her life as a slave within the structure of the narrative with only three of the twenty-five chapters focusing on slavery.

Keckley’s compression of time extends beyond the title and structure of the text, evidenced by her decision to narrate select scenes rather than offer a thorough chronicle of her life. Keckley describes her process of remembering in her opening chapter:

Hour after hour I sit while the scenes are being shifted; and as I gaze upon the panorama of the past, I realize how crowded with incidents my life has been. Every day seems like a romance within itself, and the years grow into ponderous volumes. As I cannot condense, I just omit many strange passages.<sup>301</sup>

Keckley would rather share a few detailed and vivid scenes than reduce the depth of her detailed memory. Keckley continues to explain her process: “From such a wilderness of events it is difficult to make a selection, but as I am not writing altogether the history of myself, I will confine my story to the most important incidents which I believe influenced the moulding of my

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<sup>301</sup> Keckley 9.



character.”<sup>302</sup> Keckley does not disclose a full record of her life, but instead limits herself to the scenes that she feels are most important to her personal development.

This compression occurs at the sentence level as years pass in just a few paragraphs. For example, the first memory that Keckley describes in chapter two occurred when she was fourteen years old. However, in the very next paragraph, time flitters away as she matures: “The years passed slowly [...] and at the same time [I] grew into strong, healthy womanhood. I was nearly eighteen when we removed from Virginia to Hillsboro’, North Carolina.”<sup>303</sup> Keckley repeatedly uses phrase “the years passed” to cover vast swaths of time and additional scenes that she chooses not discuss in more detail. For example, she opens chapter three with the temporally ambiguous statement, “The years passed and brought many changes to me, but on these I will not dwell, as I wish to hasten to the most interesting part of my story.”<sup>304</sup> Here Keckley reinforces what her title already implies: she has no interest in discussing slavery any more than she must in order to arrive at her time in the White House.

While Keckley occasionally discusses the passage of years, references to specific days are exceedingly rare. One such reference in chapter two discusses the horrific physical abuse her masters subjected her to when she was a young woman. While briefly recounting just one of the several beatings she describes, Keckley provides a rare reference to the passage of days: “I was so badly bruised that I was unable to leave my bed for five days.”<sup>305</sup> This specific temporal reference is, however, immediately followed by her more typical vagueness: “I will not dwell upon the bitter anguish of these hours, for even the thought of them now makes me shudder.”<sup>306</sup>

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<sup>302</sup> Keckley 10.

<sup>303</sup> Keckley 18.

<sup>304</sup> Keckley 27.

<sup>305</sup> Keckley 23.

<sup>306</sup> Keckley 23.

These specific allusions to time are remarkable because explicit references to time are uncommon in the slavery section of the narrative.

The extreme compression of time that Keckley uses to structure the narrative reveals just the degree to which she breathlessly rushes through her formative years as a slave. In just one of many examples, Keckley opens chapter two, “Girlhood and Its Sorrows” by asserting, “I must pass rapidly over the stirring events of my early life.”<sup>307</sup> While Keckley’s chapter title recalls the title of Jacobs’s fifth chapter “The Trials of Girlhood,” the two chapters differ significantly. Whereas Keckley fulfills her promise to go quickly through the painful memories she recounts in this short chapter, Jacobs, by contrast, expounds on the sexual harassment and abuse to which slave girls were subjected. According to William L. Andrews, Keckley’s omission of detailed descriptions of sexual abuse is one significant way in which the postbellum slave narrative differs from antebellum slave narratives. He argues, “[A] reading of female-authored slave narratives of the postbellum era reveals a studied refusal to explore the kinds of moral problems attendant to the slave woman’s sexuality that surface often in the discourse of the antebellum antislavery movement.”<sup>308</sup>

In addition to condensing her narration of her life as a slave and nearly omitting her forced sexual and reproductive labor and time, Keckley withholds basic information about important dates that readers would have come to expect from antebellum slave narratives. Although Keckley opens her text with the expected background information about her origins by dutifully and precisely provides her specific place of birth,<sup>309</sup> her exactitude yields to playful

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<sup>307</sup> Keckley 18.

<sup>308</sup> Andrews “Changing Moral Discourse” 227.

<sup>309</sup> See Foster, Frances Smith, “Autobiography after Emancipation” for a full analysis of the similarities and differences between Keckley’s autobiography and both antebellum and postbellum slave narratives.

ambiguity when she asserts, “I am now on the shady side of forty.”<sup>310</sup> Keckley replaces the expected birth date or nearest approximation of her age with the decidedly vague description of “shady.” According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “on the shady side” was used in the nineteenth-century and meant “older than.” “Shady” suggests an undefined range—older than forty—that leaves readers with more confusion and curiosity than if Keckley had just given an approximate age like Douglass does in his *Narrative*. Writing her autobiography over twenty years after the publication of Douglass’s *Narrative* and as someone who knew him personally,<sup>311</sup> Keckley would have likely been familiar with his text. Further, Keckley models the structure of her opening sentences on the beginning of Douglass’s *Narrative*; thus, her departure from his explanation of why he does not know his precise age seems intentional. Frederick Douglass directly addresses the “temporal deprivation”<sup>312</sup> that is central to his antislavery argument by starting his 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* with “I was born in Tuckahoe [...] I have no accurate knowledge of my age.”<sup>313</sup> In contrast, Keckley shifts the focus from how much she knows about her own age to readers’ lack of knowledge about her age. She alone knows what number she has in mind when she claims to be “on the shady side of forty” and she has no intention of clarifying the matter for readers. Throughout most of the narrative, Keckley follows linear time by organizing her life events in chronological order; consequently, this

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<sup>310</sup> Keckley 9.

<sup>311</sup> In *We Wear the Mask: African Americans Write American Literature, 1760-1870*, Rafia Zafar confirms that Keckley knew Douglass, writing that Keckley “echoes the language of Douglass, who by the time *Behind the Scenes* appeared was already known for his speech on 'Self-Made Men,' and was numbered among Keckley's circle of acquaintances" (173).

<sup>312</sup> Gates, Henry Louis, Jr., *Figures in Black* (1987). In the chapter “The Literature of the Slave,” Gates analyzes how Douglass’s lack of information about time structures the opening of his 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Gates explains, “The deprivation of the means to tell the time is the very structural center of this initial paragraph [...] Slaves, he [Douglass] seems to conclude, are those who cannot plot their course by and who stand outside of the linear progression of the calendar” (90).

<sup>313</sup> Douglass *Narrative* 12.

departure from linear time through moments of temporal ambiguity—whether extreme compression, omission, or ambiguity—helps identify significant scenes that warrant further attention.

This tension between standard linear narration and moments of temporal ambiguity is not surprising. In *Archives of American Time: Literature and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, Lloyd Pratt explores the splitting of time into multiple temporalities in nineteenth-century American literature.<sup>314</sup> Despite the usefulness of Pratt’s analyses for understanding the complexity of time, his specific theories of “slave laboring time” and “laboring time” are not applicable to the unique circumstances of Keckley’s narrative because he derives his theories from his readings of Frederick Douglass. Pratt argues, “the repetitive, unbroken, and unremitting labor Douglass endures at Covey’s produces a particular, and particularly brutal, nonprogressive experience of time.”<sup>315</sup> He states, “Douglass has been forced to live the kind of time slave labor produces, or laboring time. This laboring time does not function as an obvious medium of progress.”<sup>316</sup> However, Pratt’s descriptions do not capture Keckley’s experience of laboring time as a slave or as a freeperson. As an enslaved skilled seamstress, Keckley’s labor is certainly progressive as she works to complete each project that she independently and creatively designs. While Keckley performs the same type of labor on a constant basis, the effect of this labor is actually progressive because it allows her to refine her skills through practice, which later enables her to buy her freedom and later work in the White House. Even once Keckley is free, her labor remains progressive because it provides economic success and independence as well,

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<sup>314</sup> Pratt 5.

<sup>315</sup> Pratt 164.

<sup>316</sup> Pratt 165.

enhancing her reputation as a seamstress, which leads to an increase in clients and eventually her position as modiste in the White House.

Moreover, the profitability of Keckley's trade as a seamstress affords a certain amount of autonomy, even during slavery, which significantly affects her relationship to and depiction of working time. Most significantly, Keckley translates her autonomy into choice during and after slavery as she volunteers her working time and labor for causes that reflect her character and values. Keckley *decides* to perform excess labor measured by the multiple examples of her opting to work late into the night and well past the working hours she establishes. Keckley constructs her narrative around the cumulative effects of such temporal and laboring choices, expecting that they reveal she is, in fact, the proper embodiment of true American character as exemplified by her voluntary—as opposed to coerced—work ethic.

Given the centrality of her work ethic and voluntary labor, a better articulation of Keckley's laboring time than Pratt's theory is actually found in Douglass's description of hardworking slaves in his *Narrative*. Douglass depicts the incessant labor that slaves perform:

They [slaves] find less difficulty from the want of beds, than from the want of time to sleep; for when their day's work in the field is done, the most of them having their washing, mending, and cooking to do, and having few or none of the ordinary facilities for doing either of these, very many of their sleeping hours are consumed in preparing for the field the coming day.<sup>317</sup>

In this passage, Douglass reveals that the slaves do not squander even a second; every moment is filled with labor that either enriches the slave owners or prepares the slaves for the coming day.

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<sup>317</sup> Douglass *Narrative* 17.

Keckley demonstrates this productivity through her temporal choices and uses them as evidence of the national character inherent in every former slave.

In *Each Hour Redeem: Time and Justice in African American Literature*, Daylanne K. English analyzes this same passage from Douglass and identifies what she considers his “own theory of time”<sup>318</sup> in which he refutes the racist notions of black inferiority with his counternarrative of slave labor and time. She explains, “According to Douglass, slaves, men and women alike, are *more* than Franklin-esque; they are exemplars who exceed, even if involuntarily, American hardworking temporality: they are both late to bed *and* early to rise.”<sup>319</sup> Hardworking temporality is a useful starting point for describing Keckley’s labor, but the term is limited by Douglass’s focus on slaves who were forced to perform manual labor. Consequently, Douglass’s articulation of hardworking temporality does not fully capture Keckley’s atypical experience as a slave choosing to perform skilled labor. Two slaves who embody Douglass’s description of slaves working late and rising early are Aunt Martha and Keckley, who are both described as choosing to work well into the night performing additional labor beyond their required slave duties.

Keckley certainly performs the hardworking temporality Douglass describes, but her laboring time features one additional characteristic: autonomy. As an in-demand seamstress, Keckley experiences some freedom over her labor and laboring time, even as a slave. Keckley then chooses to perform the hardworking temporality Douglass describes by working as hard as possible, often well into the night. Unlike slaves tortured into working as hard as humanly possible, Keckley’s decision to work hard is ultimately what reveals her inner character. Her

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<sup>318</sup> English 39.

<sup>319</sup> English 39.

decision to keep working hard *without* the external force of slavery is the foundational trait upon which she suggests Reconstruction-era America needs to be built.

Although I use English's "hardworking temporality" to describe Keckley's unusual experience as a skilled slave laborer, I revise her definition of the term from working incessantly by compulsion to working incessantly by choice or force. This subtle revision creates space to include the labor of slave entrepreneurs like Aunt Martha and Keckley in discussions of slave laboring times. During slavery, Keckley performs Douglass's hardworking temporality by working as hard as possible well into the night. Although a slave, Keckley chooses to perform this labor in contrast to the field slaves who were forced to work incessantly. Keckley's repeated decisions to perform additional labor as a slave reveal her true character and show that she is hardworking, generous, and compassionate.

Throughout her text, Keckley demonstrates her voluntary performance of this productive hardworking temporality. Moreover, Keckley embodies this hardworking temporality through the choices she makes about her labor and time, which proves her "self-reliance." As critics like William L. Andrews have noted, "self-reliance" is a significant, recurring phrase in *Behind the Scenes*. Andrews draws upon the biographical research of Jennifer Fleischner to argue, "[T]he 'self-reliance' that Keckley learned in slavery was not that celebrated by Ralph Waldo Emerson. What slavery taught Lizzie by the time she became a teenager was that 'there *was* no one for her to rely on but herself'."<sup>320</sup> Keckley explains in the opening chapter, "I had been raised in a hardy school—had been taught to rely upon myself, and to prepare myself to render assistance to others. [...] Notwithstanding all the wrongs that slavery heaped upon me, I can bless it for one

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<sup>320</sup> Andrews *Behind the Scenes* ix.

thing—youth’s important lesson of self-reliance.”<sup>321</sup> In Keckley’s formulation, the coerced slave labor that she performs beginning in childhood has been preparing her to be independent, to take care of herself, and to assist others; self-reliance comes from self-employment. Keckley’s skilled labor as a seamstress provides her with the opportunity to take care of herself financially. There was no one upon which Keckley could rely; even worse, Keckley’s masters relied upon her to keep the household afloat financially.

Significantly, Keckley does not use her training to suggest that slavery was beneficial for slaves like Booker T. Washington in *Up from Slavery*. While condemning the horror of slavery, Washington also asserts:

[T]he ten million Negroes inhabiting this country, who themselves or whose ancestors went through the school of American slavery, are in a stronger and more hopeful condition, materially, intellectually, morally, and religiously, than is true of an equal number of black people in any other portion of the globe.<sup>322</sup>

Washington argues that slavery *improved* the lives of slaves, albeit at a horrible cost.

In contrast to Washington’s ascription of African Americans’ uplift to slavery, Keckley focuses on how the labor she performs and the choices she makes develop her character. Washington favorably compares free African Americans to black people in other countries and thus attributes the relative superiority of African Americans to the nation and slavery. In contrast, Keckley favorably compares free blacks to whites and argues that former slaves are better equipped to rebuild the nation precisely because of the work they performed during slavery. Whereas Washington credits the nation, Keckley unmistakably gives credit to African Americans for their

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<sup>321</sup> Keckley 10.

<sup>322</sup> Washington 37.



labor and self sufficiency learned during slavery. Using herself as a model, Keckley reveals that it is the choices that slaves made that prepared them to participate in postwar America; it is slaves and not slavery that Keckley credits for the lessons learned during slavery.

Keckley's evidence of her "hardworking temporality" and "self-reliance" begins in the slavery chapters with examples of the love she feels as a child for her mother and her willingness to act on her mother's behalf. She writes, "[A]s mother had so much work to do in making clothes, etc., for the family, besides the slaves, I determined to render her all the assistance in my power, and in rendering her such assistance my young energies were taxed to the utmost."<sup>323</sup> Though a child with her own responsibilities that began at the tender age of four, Keckley chooses to help her mother as much as she can by using her autonomous work time to help her mother, which reveals her as a compassionate hard worker. By including an anecdote about volunteering to work at such a young age, Keckley shows she has always been willing to do more work than is demanded by performing her required slave labor in addition to volunteering her remaining time to help her mother. Keckley's generous decision as a child reveals that she is the true embodiment of both "hardworking temporality" and "self-reliance." While her decision to help her mother may be expected or at least unsurprising, Keckley portrays her decision as her response to her master's outrageous plan to send her elderly mother out to work. In Keckley's framing, she rights the wrongs done by her masters by choosing to go in her mother's stead. Regardless of whether other people in her position would have wanted to labor in lieu of the mother, Keckley emphasizes that she is in the unique position of being a slave who possesses the skills to work profitably on her mother's behalf. In addition to her skill as a seamstress, Keckley

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<sup>323</sup> Keckley 11.

has the fortitude to work day and night and does so to spare her mother unnecessary labor. By demonstrating the depth of her love, Keckley also proves the strength of her work ethic.

Significantly, Keckley subtly indicates that whites do not embody these same American characteristics. Keckley first hints at this at the end of chapter one with a seemingly out of place statement about the progression of time. She explains, "Slavery in the Border States forty years ago was different from what it was twenty years ago. Time seemed to soften the hearts of master and mistress, and to insure kinder and more humane treatment to bondsmen and bondswomen."<sup>324</sup> While Keckley's statement may seem like another description of the "brighter side of slavery,"<sup>325</sup> Keckley's strategy of juxtaposition<sup>326</sup> reveals that while slave owners were slowly progressing to become "kinder" and "more humane," Keckley had already surpassed them in both kindness and humanity because she demonstrated her compassion even in childhood when she decided to help her mother. This is one of several key moments when Keckley juxtaposes her own superior behavior with the inferior behavior of whites. This contrast allows Keckley to emphasize that African Americans are prepared to do the work of rebuilding the postwar nation.

Perhaps the most memorable example of Keckley's choice to volunteer her labor and time on behalf of others while enslaved is when she takes on additional employment so that her mother would not be sent to labor outside of the slave owner's home to pay the family's debts. After asking for permission to work in her mother's stead, Keckley reports:

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<sup>324</sup> Keckley 16.

<sup>325</sup> Keckley 17.

<sup>326</sup> In "Unmasking the Genteel Performer: Elizabeth Keckley's *Behind the Scenes* and the Politics of Public Wrath," Carolyn Sorisio argues that Keckley unifies her text around a strategy of juxtaposition. She explains, "In effect, we can read some chapters as a synecdoche for the overall structure of the book, as Keckley often intertwines seemingly disparate but actually relevant topics with one another" (23).

I was fortunate in obtaining work, and in a short time I had acquired something of a reputation as a seamstress and dress-maker. The best ladies in St. Louis were my patrons, and when my reputation was once established I never lacked for orders. With my needle I kept bread in the mouths of seventeen<sup>327</sup> persons for two years and five months. While I was working so hard that others might live in comparative comfort, and move in those circles of society to which their birth gave them entrance, the thought often occurred to me whether I was really worth my salt or not; and then perhaps the lips curled with a bitter sneer.<sup>328</sup>

In this passage, Keckley's description of performing excessive labor echoes the incessant work that Douglass describes in his *Narrative*. She frames it as a *choice* rather than an action performed out of coercion, and emphasizes all the more just how much this hardworking ethic constitutes her very being.

Keckley exposes, however subtly, the wide chasm between the principles and actual behavior of white Americans. Of course, it is Keckley who most embodies the characteristics espoused by Franklin and Emerson. That her white owners living in "comfort" off of Keckley's labor have the gall to question her value is worthy of the scorn that her sneer suggests. Further, it is Keckley who saves the families—both black and white—through her willingness to work. Yet again, Keckley identifies herself as the true heir of American character in contrast to whites who do not labor on their own behalf. Keckley seems to question the true character of whites who do not work for those they love or themselves, but rather rely upon the time and labor of slaves.

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<sup>327</sup> Keckley's reference to seventeen people seems to include the entire Garland family as well as her own family consisting of her mother and herself.

<sup>328</sup> Keckley 27-28.

While enslaved, Keckley works hard to spare her mother additional labor, but once free Keckley blossoms as a successful seamstress to Washington's elite and eventually becomes a thriving entrepreneur. Since Keckley experiences some autonomy over her labor and time during slavery, her text suggests that it is not emancipation but rather self-employment that leads to real experiences of freedom. From this perspective, Keckley's emphasis on freedom, independence, and self-reliance make perfect sense—especially when her depictions are compared to those of Jacobs who laments her lack of economic independence at the end of her narrative although technically free.

Despite ample evidence of Keckley's "hardworking temporality" in the slavery portions of her text, she faces a new challenge once she begins to narrate the post-emancipation sections. Displaying her "hardworking temporality" throughout slavery bolsters Keckley's case for the inclusion of African Americans in the postwar nation, but it is also her response to having limited control over her time and labor as a slave. In transitioning from the "thirty years a slave" section to the "four years in the White House" period, Keckley must find a new way to depict her post-slavery time that adequately conveys the profound difference that freedom had on her experiences. She also narrates a changing relationship to labor, chronicling her experience as an aspiring professional modiste to the elite ladies of Washington and future employer. To effectively portray these dramatic shifts in subjectivity and labor, Keckley must also develop new ways to represent her time as a free black working woman to demonstrate her newfound control over her laboring time. This allows her to establish her equality as a productive, successful, and self-sufficient citizen while still demonstrating the "hardworking temporality" upon which her argument for including African Americans in the postwar nation is based. Keckley's solution to this narrative problem is a two-part strategy. First, Keckley chooses a

select few scenes to depict her post-slavery labor and consequently omits the vast majority of her of laboring time from the narrative. Second, she includes a select few memories that support her national argument and also demonstrate her equality as a citizen, not her subservience as a domestic laborer. Through careful editing and omission, Keckley maintains control over her narrative and its political purpose.

As the narrative shifts from slavery to freedom, her narrative strategy also shifts from emphasizing her hardworking temporality and constant labor to her independence as an entrepreneur. To capture this new narrative strategy in the post-slavery sections of the narrative, I refer to Keckley's free laboring time as her *autonomous work time*. Although she still depicts scenes in which she works incessantly as a free laborer and thus continues to display her hardworking temporality, the phrase autonomous work time incorporates her hardworking temporality and also addresses Keckley's shifting focus on her independence as a self-employed entrepreneur.

By omitting nearly all details surrounding her post-slavery working life as a seamstress, Keckley conceals experiences that would likely reveal her lack of total control over her time as well as her subservience to her clients; it is hard to imagine how a seamstress would not have to regularly abide by her clients' deadlines. However, the practical effect of these exclusions is that Keckley's narrative only includes examples of her temporal autonomy and thus her equality. Through these careful selections, Keckley amplifies her nationalist argument and creates a compelling case for the equal inclusion of African Americans and the necessity of black workers in the postwar nation.

In the few scenes of post-slavery work that Keckley includes in her text, she narrates a benevolent relationship, at least with respect to her time, with her clients. Rather than be at their

beck and call, Keckley maintains her independence and agency over her time, which is the defining feature of her post-slavery autonomous work time. She refers constantly to volunteering her time to complete garments for her clients instead of describing how she abides by their deadlines. One early example is the scene in which Keckley describes her final preparations for a gown that Mrs. Davis, wife of Senator Jefferson Davis, wished to give to her husband on Christmas. Keckley begins her reminiscence with a brief history of her work on the garment:

The holidays were approaching, and Mrs. Davis kept me busy in manufacturing articles of dress for herself and children. She desired to present Mr. Davis on Christmas with a handsome dressing-gown. The material was purchased, and for weeks the work had been under way. Christmas eve came, and the gown had been laid aside so often that it was still unfinished.<sup>329</sup>

Implied in this brief description is Keckley's sole management of her time as evidenced by her ability to set aside the garment despite the firm Christmas deadline. In addition, Keckley subtly focuses on Mrs. Davis's desire for the gown to be a Christmas present instead of plainly stating that Christmas was the firm deadline for the completion of her paid project. Keckley shifts attention away from her own subordinate position as a seamstress working to meet her client's deadline, obscuring the fact that she is not in control of her laboring time. By focusing on Mrs. Davis's "desire" and her feelings, Keckley positions herself as someone with the ability and willingness to fulfill Mrs. Davis's wish. Through this reframing, Keckley yet again remains in control of her autonomous work time and establishes her equality with Mrs. Davis as a generous peer.

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<sup>329</sup> Keckley 44-45.

This link between emotion and time intensifies as Keckley describes her final motivation for completing the project:

I saw that Mrs. D. was *anxious* to have it completed, so I *volunteered* to remain and work on it. Wearily the hours dragged on, but there was no rest for my busy fingers. I persevered in my task, notwithstanding my head was aching. Mrs. Davis was busy in the adjoining room, arranging the Christmas tree for the children. I looked at the clock, and the hands pointed to a quarter of twelve.<sup>330</sup>

By prefacing her description of her last-minute work on the gown with a reference to Mrs. Davis's anxiety, Keckley reframes the scene completely. Instead of being a neglectful or tardy employee who must toil into the night because she has neglected the work she was contracted to do, Keckley describes her late-night work as benevolent because she is choosing to labor to alleviate Mrs. Davis's anxiety. Given Keckley's framing of the scene as a generous use of her time to assist her client, it makes sense for her to list the difficulty she endured on behalf of Mrs. Davis. Despite the weary hours and her "aching" head, Keckley could not "rest" but instead "persevered" in a dramatic display reminiscent of the "hardworking temporality" she performed during slavery. However, this post-slavery example is subtly different because of Keckley's focus on her choice about how to use her autonomous work time. With a focus on her decision making, Keckley becomes the compassionate friend who "volunteered" to help Mrs. Davis, who gets to enjoy her Christmastime preparations and holiday festivities while Keckley works toward midnight.

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<sup>330</sup> Keckley 45, emphasis added.

Keckley even enlists Senator Davis in this display of benevolent autonomous work time to underscore how unusual and generous her choice to work so late on Christmas Eve was. In a brief exchange, Senator Davis questions why Keckley is still at his home:

“That you, Lizzie! why (sic) are you here to so late? Still at work; I hope that Mrs. Davis is not too exacting!”

“No, sir,” I answered. “Mrs. Davis was very anxious to have this gown finished to-night, and I volunteered to remain and complete it.”<sup>331</sup>

Keckley’s inclusion of Senator Davis ensures that readers will witness Keckley’s work and then properly interpret her actions. If Mrs. Davis had compelled Keckley to work late, a natural option to consider given the terms of their arrangement, Keckley’s time spent laboring would not convey her compassion by offering her autonomous work time and instead could demonstrate her negligence and tardiness. By highlighting and repeating that she has “volunteered” her time, Keckley emphasizes her *decision* to work; she intends for this choice to reveal key aspects of her character.

Keckley also explicitly links her willingness to work to her desire to be successful. In this way, Keckley’s autonomous work time reveals both her character and internal drive. Once free, Keckley cannot be forced to work under any circumstances; she must consent to work. Keckley demonstrates this resolve when one of her clients, Mrs. General McClean, visits Keckley unexpectedly and demands to have a dress made. Keckley explains,

One day when I was very busy, Mrs. McC. drove up to my apartments, came in where I was engaged with my needle, and in her emphatic way said:

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<sup>331</sup> Keckley 45.



“Lizzie, I am invited to dine at Willard’s on next Sunday, and positively I have not a dress fit to wear on the occasion. I have just purchased material, and you must commence work on it right away.”<sup>332</sup>

This scene is remarkable for the subtle ways in which Keckley criticizes the way in which Mrs. McClean’s inquires about the dress. Keckley begins by noting how busy she already was. Mrs. McClean boldly comes to her apartment unannounced and interrupts Keckley who is in the middle of sewing. Without any pretense of cordiality or friendship, Mrs. McClean insists that since she has already “purchased material,” Keckley “must commence work” immediately. By this point in the narrative, it would be clear to Keckley’s readers that she would not respond well to Mrs. McClean’s presumptuous and authoritative demands. In reply to Mrs. McClean’s orders, Keckley answers,

“But Mrs. McClean,” I replied, “I have more work now promised than I can do. It is impossible for me to make a dress for you to wear on Sunday next.”

“Pshaw! Nothing is impossible. I must have the dress made by Sunday”; and she spoke with some impatience.<sup>333</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Keckley refuses, however politely, to acquiesce to Mrs. McClean’s demands. Instead of appealing to Keckley as an equal or friend who could help her, Mrs. McClean instead becomes impatient. Again, this tactic is unsuccessful as Keckley replies, ““I am sorry,’ I began, but she interrupted me.”<sup>334</sup>

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<sup>332</sup> Keckley 53-54.

<sup>333</sup> Keckley 54.

<sup>334</sup> Keckley 54.

It is only upon Keckley's second refusal that Mrs. McClean changes tactics; instead of demanding Keckley's time, Mrs. McClean offers a trade of services for access to the White House:

Now don't say no again. I tell you that you must make the dress. I have often heard you say that you would like to work for the ladies of the White House. Well, I have it in my power to obtain you this privilege. I know Mrs. Lincoln well, and you shall make a dress for her provided you finish mine in time to wear at dinner on Sunday.<sup>335</sup>

This proposition has the desired effect as Keckley changes her mind swiftly and decides to make the dress. Keckley explains, "The inducement was the best that could have been offered. I would undertake the dress if I should have to sit up all night—every night, to make my pledge good."<sup>336</sup> Critical in the resolution of this impasse is that while Mrs. McClean insists that Keckley "must" make the dress, Keckley chooses to make the dress on her terms. Although Mrs. McClean does not feign friendship with Keckley or even a desire to help her, she does recognize that she must still persuade Keckley to give her time. Once Keckley has determined to make the dress, she dedicates all of her effort to completing it by Sunday. Though Keckley determines to work within the constraints of Mrs. McClean's deadline, she clearly chooses to do so for her own purposes.

Keckley could have omitted Mrs. McClean from future scenes and simply jumped ahead to when she initially meets Mrs. Lincoln. In a text constructed through careful selection of scenes, the omission of Mrs. McClean would make perfect sense. Instead, by choosing to include Mrs. McClean in the text, Keckley indicates that there is something significant in their continued

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<sup>335</sup> Keckley 54.

<sup>336</sup> Keckley 54

interactions. Perhaps sensing that the previous scene with Mrs. McClean undermines her consistent control over her portrayal of her working time, Keckley chooses to include another interaction with Mrs. McClean in which Keckley emphatically and unquestionably reasserts control over her autonomous work time.

After describing her agreement to make Mrs. McClean's dress in exchange for being introduced to Mrs. Lincoln, Keckley shares her next exchange with Mrs. McClean: "The next Sunday Mrs. McClean sent me a message to call at her house at four o'clock P.M., that day. As she did not state why I was to call, I determined to wait till Monday morning. Monday morning came, and nine o'clock found me at Mrs. McC.'s house."<sup>337</sup> What is striking about this passage is Keckley's refusal to respond to Mrs. McClean at the appointed moment and her insistence on determining what she felt was the appropriate time. Keckley further emphasizes the time that *she* chooses by giving the precise time down to the minute. By declining to respond to a client on a Sunday afternoon, Keckley reasserts her control over her working time. Further, Keckley waits until Monday morning during normal business hours. Although Keckley states that she did not know the reason for Mrs. McClean's call, given their arrangement it is hard to believe that Keckley was completely clueless. Keckley's implied knowledge about Mrs. McClean's motive for calling is critical because despite Keckley's earlier willingness to exchange her time for favor, Keckley insists on the primacy of her temporal control even if it undermines her long-term goal of working in the White House. One can also imagine the satisfaction Keckley would have had at standing up to the "emphatic" client who kept demanding her time by leaving Mrs. McClean's commands unheeded.

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<sup>337</sup> Keckley 55.

In their final exchange, Mrs. McClean expresses her disappointment with Keckley's failure to appear on time. Keckley relates their conversation beginning with Mrs. McClean:

“Lizzie, why did you not come yesterday, as I requested? Mrs. Lincoln wanted to see you, but I fear that now you are too late.”

“I am sorry, Mrs. McClean. You did not say what you wanted with me yesterday, so I judged that this morning would do as well.”

“You should have come yesterday,” she insisted. “Go up to Mrs. Lincoln's room”—giving me the number—“she may find use for you yet.”<sup>338</sup>

In this scene Keckley restages her initial encounter with Mrs. McClean, but it is Keckley who ends with the upper hand by maintaining control over her time. Whereas previously Mrs. McClean interrupted Keckley's apology with an enticement Keckley could not refuse, in this exchange Keckley finishes her apology and explains that despite Mrs. McClean's desire to see her on Sunday, for Keckley Monday “would do as well.” Ultimately, Keckley alone determines how to use her autonomous work time. In response, Mrs. McClean can only offer the impotent rebuke that Keckley “should have come yesterday.” The change in Mrs. McClean's commanding language, from her repetitive use of “must” to a mildly chiding “should” allows Keckley to demonstrate that she has put Mrs. McClean in her proper place as a client.

Keckley further underscores the impotence of Mrs. McClean's protest by showing that it had no effect on Keckley's ability to gain employment in the White House. Keckley narrates her selection by Mrs. Lincoln rather matter-of-factly. Keckley explains, “Tuesday morning, at eight o'clock, I crossed the threshold of the White House for the first time”<sup>339</sup>; after her meeting with

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<sup>338</sup> Keckley 58.

<sup>339</sup> Keckley 58.

Mrs. Lincoln, “The terms were satisfactorily arranged.”<sup>340</sup> Keckley enters the White House in her own time. To emphasize her autonomy and success, Keckley narrates the exact moment that she achieves her goal of working in the White House.

Keckley maintains this temporal independence even when she begins to work in the White House. When Keckley brings a newly completed dress to Mrs. Lincoln, the First Lady complains that Keckley is too late:

“Mrs. Keckley, you have disappointed me—deceived me. Why do you bring my dress at this late hour?”

“Because I have just finished it, and I thought I should be in time... I am sorry if I have disappointed you, Mrs. Lincoln, for I intended to be in time.”<sup>341</sup>

This conversation between Mrs. Lincoln and Keckley is strange because they discuss Keckley’s deadline abstractly rather than state the precise day and time when Keckley should have delivered the garment. This conversation stands out even more because Keckley places it in a section of the text that abounds with references to the precise moment in which various events happen.

Through the omission of specific references to time, Keckley highlights this particular scene, which raises several questions about Keckley’s working time. What does it mean to “be in time”? What is the difference between being “in time” and “on time”? According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “in time” means “[a]t a suitable time” in contrast to “on time,” which means “[s]oon or early enough, not too late.”<sup>342</sup> In the context of paid labor, the client determines the deadline and thus whether a product is on time. Given Keckley’s insistence on maintaining her

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<sup>340</sup> Keckley 61.

<sup>341</sup> Keckley 62.

<sup>342</sup> (“Time, N., Int., and Conj.”)

temporal autonomy, it is understandable that that Keckley never uses this phrase. Instead, she frequently refers to being “in time” where she alone can determine what is “a suitable time.” By limiting her discussion of her autonomous work time to whether she is “in time,” Keckley maintains control over her narrated laboring time because she alone determines when she plans to complete a garment. In her narration, she does not give clients any access to her thoughts about her working time and deadlines. She alone determines what day and time will be “in time.” My primary distinction here is that Keckley refuses to use a customary phrase that would imply that clients are in control of her laboring time through the ability to set deadlines; instead, Keckley uses the far less common “in time,” which she alone defines. This subtle choice in language reveals a significant shift in Keckley’s text; although she is a domestic laborer beholden to her clients, she asserts sole control over her autonomous work time as a freeperson. Her constant use of the phrase “in time” is one example of how Keckley’s insistence on controlling her time permeates her language down to the sentence level.

Notably, Keckley does not apologize for being late—even with the most desired client in the nation; she only apologizes for disappointing Mrs. Lincoln. Her weak and limited apology to Mrs. Lincoln confirms that Keckley alone determines her work hours and obligations. Keckley’s assertion of being “in time” provides an alternative measure for her time and labor. A similar situation in which a laborer failed provide a contracted product in time would almost certainly be considered a failure on the part of the laborer to fulfill his or her duties. However, Keckley does not choose to recount this scene with Mrs. Lincoln as a failure to meet the client’s expectations. Instead, Keckley narrates this scene as a mere disagreement about time in which she and Mrs. Lincoln had different ideas of the deadline. From Keckley’s perspective, she has committed no wrong and is not accountable to Mrs. Lincoln regardless of Mrs. Lincoln’s standing as the first

lady and Keckley's most valuable client. Keckley consistently maintains the autonomy over time as a free working woman and refuses to concede power over it to anyone, even when challenged by a member of the First Family.

Keckley culminates her display of her temporal control through a description of a holiday she gives her employees to celebrate the Union's victory at Richmond during the Civil War. In her depiction, this holiday demonstrates the equality of Keckley and her employees to other citizens because of their proper behavior and embodiment of critical American values that will be essential to rebuilding the postwar nation. Although Keckley does not reveal the race of her presumably black employees, Keckley's own participation in the holiday in addition to her role as organizer demonstrates the importance of black working women's labor to the nation. Even if Keckley's employees were white or an interracial group of women, her national argument remains equally strong because of her personal embodiment of "self-reliance" and leadership, which still demonstrates that black women like her were ready to perform the work needed to be rebuild the nation. This section is an important transition in Keckley's narrative as she shifts from narrating her quotidian experiences to narrating the participation of African Americans during a crucial national moment. Rather than just allude to the readiness of black workers like her, Keckley uses this holiday to let readers see them in action.

It is no coincidence that Keckley chooses a holiday for her climactic display of African American post-slavery autonomous work time where she not only exempted herself but also her employees from working. In her anecdote, the power Keckley wields as one who controls her own labor and time as well as that of other working women must not be overlooked. Many slave narratives provide detailed accounts of holidays; historians have also documented the rich history

of the holiday period during slavery in the United States. Albert Raboteau explains the significance of the Christmas holiday for slaves:

Sundays and revival meetings were not the only respites from work anticipated by the slaves. Christmas was the most festive holiday of all. Generally, the slaves received three to six days off to celebrate the Christmas season and were permitted to visit family and friends on neighboring plantations [...] Then, as now, Christmas was more a holiday than a holy day [...] slaves, whether religious or not looked forward to Christmas as an all-too-short break from plantation routine. With the arrival of New Year's the celebration ended, and another year of work faced the slaves.<sup>343</sup>

The holidays were an important time of celebration and rest for slaves, but slave owners also used them to manipulate and placate slaves as Solomon Northup, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Jacobs explain.

In *Twelve Years a Slave*, Northup provides a generally positive view of the Christmas holiday period he witnessed. He recalls, "The only respite from constant labor the slave has through the whole year, is during the Christmas holidays... They are the only days when they are allowed a little restricted liberty, and heartily indeed do they enjoy it."<sup>344</sup> He describes how the three to six days of holiday and rest transform, however briefly, the slaves:

They [the slaves] are different beings from what they are in the field; the temporary relaxation, the brief deliverance from fear, and from the lash, producing an entire metamorphosis in their appearance and demeanor [...] Such is "southern life as it is,"

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<sup>343</sup> Raboteau 224.

<sup>344</sup> Northup 140.



*three days in the year*, as I found it—the other three hundred and sixty-two being days of weariness, and fear, and suffering, and unremitting labor.<sup>345</sup>

Northup describes the slaves' experience of the holidays as a reprieve from the incessant work that they are required to perform. Although Northup does not speculate about why the owners provide slaves with these breaks, his description of a brief reprieve from cruel labor suggests that even such a short release enables slaves to endure another year of relentless toil. Further, his narration of the fleeting relief slaves experience during the holiday period does not mitigate the barbarity and self-interestedness of slave owners that Northup documents throughout the text.

In his *Narrative*, Douglass takes pains to explain the form of manipulation that the slave holiday represents:

The days between Christmas and New Year's day are allowed as holidays; and, accordingly, we were not required to perform any labor, more than to feed and take care of the stock. This time we regarded as our own, by the grace of our masters; and we therefore used or abused it nearly as we pleased. Those of us who had families at a distance, were generally allowed to spend the whole six days in their society.<sup>346</sup>

However, Douglass makes it clear that the granting of these holidays is not benevolent:

It was deemed a disgrace not to get drunk at Christmas; and he was regarded as lazy indeed, who had not provided himself with the necessary means, during the year, to get whisky enough to last him through Christmas.

From what I know of the effect of these holidays upon the slave, I believe them to be among the most effective means in the hands of the slaveholder in keeping down the

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<sup>345</sup> Northup 145-46.

<sup>346</sup> Douglass *Narrative* 51.

spirit of insurrection. Were the slaveholders at once to abandon this practice, I have not the slightest doubt it would lead to an immediate insurrection among the slaves. These holidays serve as conducts, or safety-valves, to carry off the rebellious spirit of enslaved humanity.<sup>347</sup>

Douglass explains in no uncertain terms that the holidays are merely another tool of oppression to provide slaves with a brief reprieve that will enable them to perform another year of coerced labor without rebellion.

Finally, Douglass explains how holidays function as part of the dehumanizing and oppressive institution of slavery:

The holidays are part and parcel of the gross fraud, wrong, and inhumanity of slavery. They are professedly a custom established by the benevolence of the slaveholders; but I undertake to say, it is the result of selfishness, and one of the grossest frauds committed upon the down-trodden slave. They do not give the slaves this time because they would not like to have their work during its continuance, but because they know it would be unsafe to deprive them of it... Thus, when the slave asks for virtuous freedom, the cunning slaveholder, knowing his ignorance, cheats him with a dose of vicious dissipation, artfully labelled with the name of liberty. [...] So, when the holidays ended, we staggered up from the filth of our wallowing, took a long breath, and marched to the field—feeling, upon the whole, rather glad to go, from what our master had deceived us into a belief was freedom, back to the arms of slavery.<sup>348</sup>

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<sup>347</sup> Douglass *Narrative* 51.

<sup>348</sup> Douglass *Narrative* 52.

In this remarkable passage, Douglass indicts slaveholders for using holidays as tools for manipulation and subordination. What seems to gall Douglass most is the deceit of slaveholders who answer the call for “virtuous freedom” with a “filth” they call freedom.

In the landmark *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, historian Eugene Genovese confirms Douglass’s critique that the holidays were used to manipulate slaves. He explains, “These holidays, especially the extended Christmas holiday, have lent themselves to different interpretations. The harshest judgment came from Frederick Douglass...Supporting evidence for Douglass’s view comes from a variety of sources.”<sup>349</sup> In addition to an account from a witness, Genovese also describes

“An overseer [who] stressed the whites’ interest in the Christmas holiday as a means of social control when he reported to his employer: ‘I killed twenty-eight head of beef for the people’s Christmas dinner. I can do more with them in this way than if all the hides of the cattle were made into lashes.’”<sup>350</sup>

Finally, Genovese explains the dual appeal of granting holidays:

Christmas in particular and the slaves’ leisure time in general meant much more than social control to the masters, who found in them confirmation of their paternalistic claims to stewardship... Many masters and mistresses took pleasure in giving up much of their own holiday to provide for their people in a manner that heightened their own self-esteem and sense of performing selfless service.<sup>351</sup>

As Genovese demonstrates, the holiday period benefitted the self-image of slave owners rather than the slaves, who were still subjected to control and manipulation.

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<sup>349</sup> Genovese 577-78.

<sup>350</sup> Genovese 579.

<sup>351</sup> Genovese 579.

In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs contrasts the slave mother's holiday season with the experience of white women:

O, you happy free women, contrast *your* New Year's day with that of the poor bond-woman! With you it is a pleasant season, and the light of the day is blessed. [...] Children bring their little offerings, and raise their rosy lips for a caress. They are your own, and no hand but that of death can take them from you.

But to the slave mother New Year's day comes laden with peculiar sorrows. She sits on her cold cabin floor, watching the children who may all be torn from her the next morning; and often does she wish that she and they might die before the day dawns. She may be an ignorant creature, degraded by the system that has brutalized her from childhood; but she has a mother's instincts, and is capable of feeling a mother's agonies.<sup>352</sup>

In Jacobs's gendered analysis, she rejects the idea that black and white women experience the holidays in the same way. She begins by demarcating a strict divide along racial lines where white women have their own New Year's holiday, completely different from the one that slave mothers experience. Whereas New Year's is a day of celebration for white women, it is a day of anxiety and "agonies" for slave mothers. Jacobs focuses on the personal feelings of slave mothers, namely anxiety and dread. Far from a day of celebration, New Year's is when slave mothers wish for death instead of the permanent separation from their children that they face.

In the slavery portion of her text, Keckley's discussion of the slave holiday departs from the descriptions that Northup and Douglass provide with their focus on labor; instead, she closely echoes Jacobs's discussion of separated families. While Northup and Douglass explain how the

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<sup>352</sup> Jacobs 16.

entire slave community experiences the holiday period, Keckley discusses slave holidays as a personal time with the promise of familial reunion. As she reveals earlier in the text, Keckley's mother and family were separated because her father lived on a different plantation. Since Keckley's father was the slave of another man, he was "only allowed to visit [Keckley's] mother twice a year—during the Easter holidays and Christmas."<sup>353</sup> The holidays serve as a reminder of how slavery disrupted slave families through lengthy and often-permanent separations. The marriage of Keckley's parents is subordinated so that they can spend the majority of their time working for and enriching their masters. However, they are allowed to reunite briefly on two major holidays, thus restricting their familial interactions to rare and special occasions.

The Keckleys are given false hope of a permanent reconciliation when they are told that the father was coming to live with them. However, that hope is quickly dashed when Mr. Burwell, Keckley's master, came on the morning of a visit and "informed [her] parents that they must part; for in two hours [her] father must join his master at Dinwiddie, and go with him to the West, where he had determined to make his future home."<sup>354</sup> Despite the promise of reunion on a holiday, Keckley's family is instead given two hours to mourn before its permanent separation. In Keckley's narrative, the holiday for the slave is a temporary reprieve; but in an echo of Jacobs's admonishment, ultimately it serves as an annual reminder of how slavery destroyed her family.<sup>355</sup>

Keckley resurrects the holiday in her post-slavery section when she describes her role as employer and her relationship to her employees. When Keckley gives her employees a holiday, she demonstrates complete control over her time and radically reimagines the holiday. The scene

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<sup>353</sup> Keckley 12.

<sup>354</sup> Keckley 12.

<sup>355</sup> Remarkably, however, Keckley's parents maintained regular correspondence through letters up until their deaths.

in which Keckley gives her employees a holiday barely occupies a page in the narrative, but it is a key moment of national belonging. Given the centrality of time and Keckley's work ethic to the narrative as well as her willingness to volunteer her labor on behalf of loved ones, Keckley's decision to give free time to her employees is significant. In narrating the holiday that Keckley gives her employees as an emancipated entrepreneur, she also rectifies the separation her family suffered on a holiday while still enslaved. Keckley explains the cause for celebration and the motivation for promising a holiday to her employees:

Inquiring the cause of the demonstration, we were told that Richmond had fallen. Mrs. Harlan [a client] took one of my hands in each of her own, and we rejoiced together. I ran across to my work-room, and on entering it, discovered that the girls in my employ also had heard the good news. They were particularly elated, as it was reported that the rebel capital had surrendered to colored troops. I had promised my employées a holiday when Richmond should fall; and now that Richmond had fallen, they reminded me of my promise.<sup>356</sup>

This passage is significant for several reasons. First, this is a rare moment when Keckley refers to her employees and thus obliquely reveals that she is a self-employed businesswoman and also an employer. The consequence of this tacit admission cannot be overstated because it transforms Keckley's autobiography into a record of her rise from slave to employer. Whereas Keckley begins her life by making compassionate, hardworking and self-reliant choices despite the constraints of slavery, Keckley the employer becomes an ideal model of how to manage her own autonomous work time as well as that of her employees.

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<sup>356</sup> Keckley 121.

Although Keckley rarely discusses her own laboring time except to mention repeatedly that she expected each order to be “in time,” she never discusses how she manages the time of her employees. Therefore, this brief glimpse into Keckley’s role as an employer is critical. Given the historical significance of slave holidays and Keckley’s own traumatic experience with a slave holiday, Keckley’s decision to yoke her experience as an employer to a holiday she gives her employees seems deliberate.

Keckley links the holiday, and by extension the labor of her employees, to the fate of the Union by promising a holiday when Richmond falls. Richmond, Virginia, was the capital of the Confederate States of America and its surrender represented a tremendous victory for the North. Just as the nation looked ahead and anticipated a Northern victory, Keckley links the holiday and the laboring time of her employees to the nation through mutual longing and optimism, which is confirmed when the employees remind Keckley of her promise.

Keckley fulfills her promise to her employees and joins in the merriment with her “girls.” Although she is their employer, she participates in the holiday and shares in the Union’s celebrations. She writes, “I joined my girls in the joy of the long-promised holiday. We wandered about the streets of the city with happy faces, and hearts overflowing with joy.”<sup>357</sup> In these brief sentences, Keckley realizes her vision of national inclusion through the equal participation of black Union troops, and black women, through her and her employees, white clerks, and other citizens in Washington in a day of national celebration. Despite having established her desire for success earlier in the text, Keckley subordinates her work and business by giving her employees a holiday so that they can participate in the important day of national celebration. Thus, Keckley reveals that despite her career’s goals, she and black workers like her

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<sup>357</sup> Keckley 121.

will still respect the primacy of the nation over the individual and always put its best interests first.

In this same moment, Keckley's holiday connects black laborers to the national project of wartime victory and shared national sentiments of hope. Despite Keckley's narrative focus on her exceptional skill and profitability, this small moment yokes Keckley's valuable labor to the work performed by black men and women. Keckley reaffirms her implicit claims that African Americans occupy the same national time as white Americans because they share the same desires for the nation's future. Demonstrating their simultaneity with the rest of the nation, Keckley and her employees were clearly following the news of the war on a regular basis, which is implied in Keckley's promise about the holiday. Like the other citizens out celebrating, Keckley and her girls support the North and hope for its success. Keckley and her employees receive news of the North's victory in Richmond at the same time as everyone else, which is why they can participate in the day of celebration that spontaneously occurs that very day. In every way, Keckley's brief anecdote about her employees' holiday demonstrates that she shares the same national desires and exhibits the same behavior as every other citizen in Washington. On such a vital day for the North, Keckley proves that she is already performing the role of a proper citizen.

Notably, Richmond falls to "colored troops" who also demonstrate the utility of black laboring bodies to the very success of the national war effort. Through her own story, the national sentiments of her and her staff, and the efforts of "colored troops" who are literally leading the North to victory, Keckley shows that African Americans are an integral part of the nation and will obviously continue to be so once the war is over.



In fact, in Keckley's text, blacks become the exemplars of national sentiment and behavior.<sup>358</sup> Keckley reveals the superiority of her and her girls' behavior in comparison to that of the other clerks. She explains, "The clerks in the various departments also enjoyed a holiday, and they improved it by getting gloriously fuddled. Towards evening I saw S., and many other usually clear-headed men, in the street, in a confused, uncertain state of mind."<sup>359</sup> Whereas Keckley and her girls walk through the city with "joy," the presumably white clerks decide to get drunk and wander around bewildered. Yet again, Keckley contrasts her and her girls' proper behavior as national celebrants with the inappropriate behavior of the clerks.<sup>360</sup> Combined with the success of the "colored troops," Keckley and her girls reveal that African Americans are the exemplars of national values through their labor and their ability to manage their time. Keckley argues that not only should African Americans be equal participants in the new postwar nation, but also that through work and time management they are, in fact, the best laborers in America. Through the example of the holiday, Keckley again confirms her commitment to revealing not only the "hardworking temporality" of African Americans, but also their ability to manage their autonomous work time in ways that are both profitable individually yet still beneficial to the nation.

Given the importance of the holiday in her post-slavery section, it is fair to wonder why Keckley chooses to include her personal experience of curtailed reunion with her father when

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<sup>358</sup> Critics like Dana Luciano and Jennifer Fleischner have noted how Keckley often juxtaposes her behavior to that of Mary Todd Lincoln. Most notably, Keckley's restrained grief after President Lincoln's assassination embodies the model of proper nineteenth-century mourning in comparison to Mrs. Lincoln's hysterical grief that was considered by her contemporaries to be excessive and unbecoming. Fleischner, Jennifer. *Mastering Slavery: Memory, Family, and Identity in Women's Slave Narratives*. Luciano, Dana. *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America*.

<sup>359</sup> Keckley 121.

<sup>360</sup> The clerks are most likely white because of their positions in the White House and around Washington, D.C.

describing the slave holiday earlier in the text. One could assume that she witnessed scenes similar to the ones that Northup and Douglass recollect. Recalling her explanation in her first chapter that she was highly selective, it is also necessary to ask how these early memories of holidays during slavery shaped her character in such a significant way as to warrant inclusion in a text full of omissions. I argue that Keckley restores the broken promise of a reunited family that she experienced during slavery through her granting of an employee holiday during the postwar period. Although slavery separated her family and caused irreparable destruction, Keckley reconstitutes a new family with her employees. Although it may seem as though Keckley has simply shifted roles to be the benevolent “master” to her “girls,” she establishes her equality with her employees by participating in the holiday with them. Outside of the workroom, Keckley and her employees look and act like peers. Her decision to grant her employees a holiday serves no self-interest or manipulative function, unlike the holidays given to slaves. Instead, Keckley nobly sacrifices her own profit so that she and her employees can perform the shared joy of citizenship even while she presumably is unable to experience it politically as an African American woman. However, Keckley does not discuss the overt racism she inevitably would have faced as a black woman in postwar America; instead, she focuses on the potential that black working women like her represented for the nation.

It is fitting that Keckley grants her girls a holiday where they all, Keckley included, share a holiday united to celebrate a victory for the Union. Keckley helps establish a new holiday to commemorate the promise of reunification that the Union’s victory at Richmond signifies. By giving her employees this holiday that they celebrate through shared yet properly restrained festivities, Keckley links her business, her position as employer, and the bodies of black working women to the nation’s promise of unity.

The significance of the employee holiday echoes the holiday scenes during which the enslaved Keckley family came together. Upon reflection, it becomes even clearer that those fleeting moments of familial reunification were merely empty gestures slave owners used to temporarily appease her family. In his critique of the slave holiday, Douglass reveals how slaveholders cheat slaves by substituting genuine freedom with “a dose of vicious dissipation, artfully labelled with the name of liberty.”<sup>361</sup> By demonstrating a noble use of the holiday and granting genuine freedom from labor to her employees, Keckley reaffirms the insidiousness of the slave holidays she shared with her family. While those slave holidays provided crucial moments of familial unity and bonding for the young Keckley, Keckley the older narrator reveals the violence and oppression the holiday truly represented. Once in a position of power, Keckley the employer finally answers Douglass’s call for “virtuous freedom.”

From this perspective, Keckley and her girls on holiday embody this “virtuous freedom” through their shared national celebrations and restrained behavior. The drunken slave who confuses “filth” with freedom in Douglass’s *Narrative* has been replaced in Keckley’s narrative with the “fuddled” clerks who are “confused.” While the white clerks may be unsure of how to properly act in the new nation, Keckley asserts that African Americans are not only ready for the new nation, but also that they are *already* embodying true American character through hard work, careful time management, and shared national sentiment. Keckley distinguishes herself and her girls as properly trained and thus uniquely equipped to answer the postwar nation’s call for workers. Keckley’s black workers have replaced her separated enslaved family. Instead of the holidays being a time of temporary reunification and continued oppression, Keckley reimagines the postwar holiday as one of national unity embodied by black women workers.

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<sup>361</sup> Douglass *Narrative* 52.

Keckley firmly positions herself and her successful business in the postwar nation and continues to display her autonomous work time in the immediate wake of Lincoln's assassination. However, Keckley's complicated relationship with Mary Todd Lincoln<sup>362</sup> threatens the temporal autonomy Keckley works hard to maintain throughout the narrative. It is clear that Keckley considers Mrs. Lincoln her friend. When describing her time in the White House after Lincoln's death, Keckley explains the close relationship she has with Mrs. Lincoln: "She [Mrs. Lincoln] denied admittance to almost every one, and I was her only companion, except her children, in the days of her great sorrow."<sup>363</sup> As Keckley's former client and friend, Mrs. Lincoln has the rare ability to influence Keckley.

After five weeks of packing and preparations for moving the Lincolns out of the White House, Keckley is ready to resume her business in Washington. However, Mrs. Lincoln "had acquired great power over [Keckley]"<sup>364</sup> and soon convinced her to travel with the Lincolns to Chicago. Keckley includes the conversation in which her failed protest about leaving her business unfolded. She recalls:

"I cannot go West with you, Mrs. Lincoln," I said, when the idea was first advanced.

"You forget my business, Mrs. Lincoln. I cannot leave it. Just now I have the spring trousseau to make for Mrs. Douglas, and I have promised to have it done in less than a week."

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<sup>362</sup> Fleischner, Jennifer. *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly*.

<sup>363</sup> Keckley 142.

<sup>364</sup> Keckley 152.

“Never mind. Mrs. Douglas can get some one else to make her trousseau. You may find it to your interest to go. I am very poor now, but if Congress makes an appropriation for my benefit, you shall be well rewarded.”

“It is not the reward, but –” I commenced, by way of reply, but she stopped me:

“Now don’t say another word about it, if you do not wish to distress me. I have determined that you shall go to Chicago with me, and you *must* go.”<sup>365</sup>

This conversation echoes Keckley’s earlier discussion where Mrs. McClean insists that Keckley make a dress for her in time for a ball, but Keckley refuses because she already had too much work to do. Similarly in this exchange with Mrs. Lincoln, Keckley insists that she cannot go to Chicago because she has to complete work for Mrs. Douglas. Like Mrs. McClean, Mrs. Lincoln tries to entice Keckley to relocate with the promise of a reward, but Mrs. Lincoln misreads Keckley’s desire in this exchange. Keckley begins to protest that she did not desire the reward, but something else. The gap of the dash refers to this unnamed desire. By this time, Keckley has already achieved her life’s goal of working in the White House and her business is financially prosperous, so there is nothing material that Mrs. Lincoln can offer her. Before Keckley can finish her thought, Mrs. Lincoln interrupts her with a demand that she “*must*” go. Unlike the time when Mrs. McClean demands Keckley’s time, Keckley acquiesces.

Clearly Mrs. Lincoln is unlike any of Keckley’s previous clients, but what gave her the power to demand Keckley’s time? The likely answer is found on the next page. After narrating the commencement of their journey to Chicago, Keckley shares Mrs. Lincoln’s declaration of their friendship: “Lizabeth, you are my best and kindest friend, and I love you as my best friend. I wish it were in my power to make you comfortable for the balance of your days. If Congress

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<sup>365</sup> Keckley 152.

provides for me, depend upon it, I will provide for you.”<sup>366</sup> Keckley suggests that it is her friendship, not her business relationship, with Mrs. Lincoln that allows Lincoln to exert this power over her.

While Mrs. Lincoln looks to Congress for financial support, Keckley demonstrates that she is still able to provide for herself and maintain her successful business as long as Mrs. Lincoln’s entreaties do not interfere with her work. Soon after Keckley returns to Washington, she explains to Mrs. Douglas,

“I must do something for myself, Mrs. Douglas, so I have come back to Washington to open my shop.”

The next day I collected my assistants, and my business went on as usual. Orders came in more rapidly than I could fill them.<sup>367</sup>

Later Keckley mentions how “The months passed, and my business prospered.”<sup>368</sup> Keckley depicts herself as firmly entrenched in the present postwar nation as a successful business owner. In her narration, it was quite easy to restart her business and pick up where she left off; it only took a day. What is clear is that Keckley continues to be successful as long as Mrs. Lincoln does not get in her way.

What precipitates Keckley’s fall from “virtuous freedom” into abject poverty is continuing to help Mrs. Lincoln. Mrs. Lincoln desperately needed money to pay her debts after President Lincoln’s assassination. In what would later be called the “old clothing scandal,” Mrs. Lincoln decided to sell her extravagant gowns and clothing. The scheme began with Mrs.

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<sup>366</sup> Keckley 90.

<sup>367</sup> Keckley 161.

<sup>368</sup> Keckley 164.

Lincoln writing to Keckley, asking, “Now, Lizzie, I want to ask a favor of you.”<sup>369</sup> Despite Keckley’s sense that things would not go well, she cannot refuse, explaining, “She was the wife of Abraham Lincoln, the man who had done so much for my race, and I could refuse to do nothing for her, calculated to advance her interests. I *consented* to render Mrs. Lincoln all the assistance in my power.”<sup>370</sup> Yet again, Keckley is willing to volunteer her time for a friend who needs assistance.

As Keckley feared, the clothing scheme is a debacle and destroys her business. She explains,

Mrs. Lincoln’s venture proved so disastrous that she was unable to reward me for my services, and I was compelled to take in sewing to pay for my daily bread.

My New York expedition has made me richer in experience, but poorer in purse. During the entire winter I have worked early and late, and practised the closest economy. Mrs. Lincoln’s business demanded much of my time, and it was a constant source of trouble to me.<sup>371</sup>

Keckley explains how diligently she has worked in all of her waking hours; yet, perversely, she is poorer for it because Mrs. Lincoln’s affairs have consumed too much of her time and have been a “constant source of trouble.” Keckley quite explicitly blames Mrs. Lincoln for her fall from successful business owner to impoverished seamstress. Although it seems Keckley has yet again demonstrated her autonomous work time and “virtuous freedom” by donating her time and ultimately sacrificing her successful sewing business to help Mrs. Lincoln, it is important to

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<sup>369</sup> Keckley 192.

<sup>370</sup> Keckley 193, emphasis added.

<sup>371</sup> Keckley 233.

recall that Keckley sacrifices her temporal independence by yielding to Mrs. Lincoln's demand. More to the point, Keckley sacrifices control over her time with disastrous consequences.

On the final page of the narrative, Keckley explains her realization that she has traded success for friendship:

The labor of a life-time has brought me nothing in a pecuniary way. I have worked hard, but fortune, fickle dame, has not smiled upon me [...] Though poor in worldly goods, I am rich in friendships, and friends are a recompense for all the woes of the darkest pages of life.<sup>372</sup>

Despite Keckley's proclaimed acceptance of her poverty, it is hard not to see Mrs. Lincoln as the "fickle dame" who has destroyed Keckley's career.

In spite of her seeming acceptance of her reduced circumstances, Keckley's poverty reveals the importance of maintaining control over one's working time in achieving postwar success. Keckley's tragic ending demonstrates that the sacrifice of her temporal autonomy was too great a price to pay for Mrs. Lincoln's friendship. Keckley's fall from financial independence to poverty reveals that the only way Keckley could imagine postwar success for black working women like herself was to maintain, *at all costs*, the temporal autonomy upon which she built her "self-reliance" and moral character. Keckley's narrative, ironically, reveals the limits of interracial friendships and relationships. Despite the allure of an interracial friendship with one of the most powerful white women in America, Keckley suffers a betrayal from which she would never recover, financially or socially. In the end, Keckley's fall from grace provides a cautionary lesson: Nothing is worth sacrificing control over one's labor and time—not even a former occupant of the White House.

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<sup>372</sup> Keckley 233.



## CONCLUSION

In this dissertation I examine some of the ways in which enslaved and emancipated women reveal that their numerous labor demands led to uniquely gendered experiences of time. My analysis of black women's depictions of their labor in nineteenth-century African American autobiographies serves as a corrective to theories of temporality in African American literature that do not account for the significant impact of labor on the diverse ways in which black female slaves experienced time.

Beginning with an examination of how gender affects the portrayals of slave laboring times for black women, the examples of Patsey, Solomon Northup's fellow slave, and Harriet Jacobs reveal that the demand for sexual and reproductive labor in addition to the manual labor they were expected to perform led to depictions of what I call their manual laboring time, sexual laboring time, and reproductive laboring time. However, the gendered differences in the portrayals of time did not end in slavery, but also continued into the transition from slavery and freedom. Using Jacobs's example of fugitive time, I challenge whether Frederick Douglass's portrayal of fugitive time is an adequate model for depicting the experiences of fugitive slave women. Jacobs's decision to secure her children's freedom first and consequently wait seven years for her own freedom reveals her collective motivation for running away and her shared strategy for achieving freedom. Further, Jacobs uses fugitive time to perform acts of resistance and, most importantly, to develop her relationship with her daughter and son, which establishes a foundation for their reunification in the North as an intact familial unit, a rare feat for a runaway slave.

In light of the multitudinous ways in which slavery affected the temporal experiences of enslaved women, it is unsurprising that Elizabeth Keckley depicts her hardworking temporality

to emphasize her control over both her labor and time after she is emancipated. Keckley reveals that she maintains her temporal autonomy because of her success as a seamstress and entrepreneur. The freedom that she thereby attains is reminiscent of how Jacobs's grandmother Aunt Martha uses her baking business to establish her financial independence and prominent community standing while still enslaved. In contrast, even after Jacobs finds freedom in the North, she has little control over her time as she must work constantly to support her family. What Keckley, Aunt Martha and Jacobs demonstrate is that financial independence may be just as important in having the freedom to choose how one labors and uses his or her time as being legally free.

The relationships among labor, time, money, and freedom would continue to be explored well into the early-twentieth-century in the discussions about how African Americans could achieve racial uplift, made famous in the debates between Booker T. Washington, who advocated for a strategy of economic development, and W.E.B. Du Bois who emphasized a liberal arts education. However, my dissertation's insistence on the significance of gender as an analytic category raises interesting questions about how black women imagined how their labor could assist in the work of racial progress. Revisiting the writings of prominent "race women" like Anna Julia Cooper, who offered their views on strategies for racial uplift, may elucidate how black women's experiences of labor and time evolved to meet the challenges of racial progress amidst Jim Crow discrimination in *fin de siècle* America.

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