Mothers, Daughters, and “Young Girl’s Ambition”: the Reconfiguration of Women’s Slave Narratives

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Risking punishment and death, Linda Brent flees to the North. Sick of her master’s sexual advances and worried for her children’s futures—as well as her own—escape is her only option. Harriet Jacobs’ experiences, as portrayed through the character Linda Brent, in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) have become the prototype for the female equivalent to the male slave narrative.¹ The male narrator’s quest for freedom and knowledge is substituted by a female narrator, who seeks freedom for both herself and her children: the shift is one from individual to community and from the public, male sphere of education to the private, female realm of motherhood and domesticity. With Jacobs’ narrative positioned at the center of the genre, scholars have come to define the woman’s slave narrative as a place where the sexual conflict unique to the bondswoman’s experience plays out through the advances of white masters, the birth of illegitimate children, and the presence of jealous mistresses. The quest for freedom functions as a means of breaking the cycle of sexual assault. Furthermore, escape provides assurance of a better life for one’s children, a life where they need not experience the oppression and assault their mothers endured.

But what about the narratives of Louisa Picquet (1861), Old Elizabeth (1863), Mattie Jackson (1866), Bethany Veney (1889), Lucy Delaney (1891), Kate Drumgoold (1898), and Annie Burton (1909)? For the most part, these narrators are not motivated by their children; in fact, most of these narrators portray themselves as children throughout a significant portion of their narratives. Additionally, these narratives often embed, rather than display, the issues of sexual conflict that distinguished Harriet Jacobs’ experiences. In relying too much on *Incidents* to define the women’s slave narrative genre and bridge the gap between male and female slave narratives, scholars have forgotten—or worse, ignored—the more prevalent experiences in the

woman’s slave narrative. The plots of these lesser-known stories center on a young woman who, upon freedom, explores opportunities other than, or in addition to, motherhood.

The choices these narrators make in portraying themselves, their mothers, and even their white mistresses profoundly affect the composition of the genre; these characters move the action of the narratives into a distinct, female space. The use of a female sphere shifts the focus of these stories away from the sexual encounters between masters and slaves and towards the dynamics between mistresses and slaves. The female sphere also complicates the readers’ understanding of the narratives’ heroic figure. The narrators position their mothers as the story’s hero in the initial part of their stories; the daughter-narrators’ interpretation of their mothers provides readers with a different perspective on the African-American heroic mother from what *Incidents* provides. In the second stage of their stories, the narrators themselves function as a second, equally significant type of African-American female hero, one who captures the post-slavery experiences of African-American women. Through both the mother and daughter heroic figures, the genre helped to shape African-American race and culture in the nebulous years surrounding the Civil War.

To see how women’s slave narratives serve as forms of resistance and collectively produce two female heroes, we must leave behind the familiar territory of Linda Brent and venture into the scholarly unknown of women’s slave narratives. This argument only looks at slave narratives written by or about antebellum African American women and will attempt to turn the discussion away from the more studied female slave narratives and towards lesser known, but equally informative, texts. Both slave narratives physically written or dictated by African
American women are included in this argument. Neither method is absolutely authentic; rather, the texts will be considered as artifacts in themselves.

The argument examines narratives published in the United States after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act (1850) and before the beginning of the WPA narratives (collected 1936-1938). Accordingly, this span of time allows for a diverse range of experiences while also providing certain continuities among the narratives. The argument also will not include narratives focused on events outside of the continental United States simply to provide continuity in experience among the lives considered.

This argument also turns the focus away from more frequently discussed narratives. Though it is impossible to ignore *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) in a discussion of women’s slave narratives, the text is used only as it enables a better understanding of the genre as a whole. No analysis comes from this text nor are other texts considered against *Incidents*. In its place, this argument will analyze *Louisa Picquet, The Octoroon: A Tale of Southern Slave Life* (1861), *Memoirs of Old Elizabeth, a Coloured Woman* (1863), *The Story of Mattie J. Jackson* (1866), *The Narrative of Bethany Veney, A Slave Woman* (1889), *From Darkness*

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2 Since the focus of the argument is on the voices of African American women, Ellen and William Craft’s *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860) is not included. Since the text discusses the experiences of a man and woman, it differs too much in composition and themes from the texts solely about women.

3 As Frances Foster articulates, the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act (1850) had a profound impact on the slave narrative genre, creating a more defined genre rooted in descriptions of the horrors of slavery. Texts published after the passage of this Act share important similarities in style, plot, and theme that earlier narratives did not always have. Foster, Francis *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Antebellum Slave Narratives*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979), 52-53. Furthermore, in order to make a comprehensive argument about women’s slave narratives, it was essential to analyze narratives drawn from a broad time frame. By focusing on narratives from this time period, I could look at texts written during or about the Antebellum south, narratives united by certain similarities, while still providing enough room for difference to determine how other examples from this genre related to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

4 *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave* (1831) and *A Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Mary Prince* (1850) are not included because they were both published outside the considered dates and detail events outside the continental United States.

5 Similarly, Hannah Craft’s *The Bondswoman* is not considered since it has received a great deal of scholarly attention in the last decade.
Cometh the Light or Struggles for Freedom (1891), A Slave Girl's Story (1898), and Memories of Childhood’s Slavery Days (1909). Each text provides fresh insight on slave women’s experiences in the years surrounding the Civil War.

Though scholars have long recognized the fundamental differences between the experiences of enslaved men and women, they have been slower to distinguish the female slave narrative from male slave narratives. Scholarship on the female slave experience has focused on resistance and the distinct networks formed by enslaved women. Bondswomen’s acts of resistance were often less pronounced than those of bondsmen. Stephanie Camp, in Closer to Freedom, notes that enslaved women often engaged in acts of resistance through everyday objects and actions. Bondswomen were more likely to become truants than fugitives, as they were emotionally unable to permanently part from their children and often could not fathom successfully escaping with them. Through leaving their plantations, even for short periods of time, they “with[eld]” their labor, resisting the slave system. Jennifer Morgan’s discussion in Laboring Women supports the notion that bondswomen resisted slavery in different ways than bondsmen; however, she views resistance as a more complicated issue than Camp does. For her, no act serves as pure resistance to slavery. Imbedded in every act is compliance to the slave system, creating a “spectrum,” as opposed to a dichotomy, between resistance and obedience. The act of writing a slave narrative should be understood through Morgan’s spectrum: it both resists and complies with the system of slavery.

In addition to contemplating forms of resistance within the slave community, scholars have also examined the distinctly female sphere that bondswomen formed through connections

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7 Camp, Closer to Freedom, 58.
to both other slaves and the white mistress. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, in *Within the Plantation Household*, was the first to articulate this sphere, a “discrete social system and political economy,” believing that women, regardless of race, were united through their subordinate relationship to the white master. As the household was more central to southern than northern women’s lives, the connections that women formed through their collective experiences as women should be viewed as an important category of analysis. Deborah Gray White’s analysis of the slave system in *Ar’n’t I A Woman?* follows Fox-Genovese’s logic insomuch as she believes that enslaved women had a distinct life experience from men. She articulates that slave women created their “own female culture.”

Unlike the female world Fox-Genovese describes, White believes that this culture exists only among enslaved women and results from their autonomy from African-American men, on whom they maintained no financial dependence. Taking these two worlds collectively—the female experiences shared by both mistresses and their slaves and the network that bondswomen formed among themselves—the female world that existed on plantations, or in slaveholders’ homes, explains why female slave narratives should be understood independent of men’s and as unfolding in a distinct female world: female slave narratives document the very sphere from which the narrators came.

Scholarship on the slave narrative, however, has been slow to treat the female slave narrative separate from male narratives and detail the significance of the genre on its own terms. The earliest scholarship struggled to see female slave narratives as anything other than lesser

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12 White, *Ar’n’t I A Woman?*, 121.
versions of male slave narratives. Marion Starling’s work, *The Slave Narrative*, introduces female slave narratives in her text by means of male slave narratives feeling that one must understand how male slave narratives portrayed women as mothers or sisters in their narratives to appreciate them as authors of their own stories.\(^{13}\) The male slave narrative often provided, in great detail, the sexual abuse women encountered from their masters, using these scenes as effective antislavery propaganda.\(^{14}\) Though Starling seemed baffled by the apparent discontinuities between male and female slave narratives, Valerie Smith argues that the genre does not allow for male and female differences. She sees the genre as defined by a “triumph of the individual human will,” which makes it inappropriate for women’s stories since they only articulate the “triumphant self-in-relation.”\(^{15}\) The failure to see women’s slave narratives as an independent, valuable genre did the narratives a disservice, preventing them from being properly studied and understood.

Even though more recent scholarship has acknowledged and articulated a distinct female slave narrative genre, they have situated their understanding of the genre around *Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl*. Joanne Braxton was the first scholar to ask, “how did slave women shape their experience into a different kind of literary language?”\(^{16}\) In providing an answer to this much-needed question, Braxton replaces Frederick Douglass with Harriet Jacobs and the “articulate hero who discovers the links among freedom, literacy, and struggle” with the “outraged mother” who “travels alone…to impart a sense of identity and belongingness to her


\(^{14}\) Starling, Marion, *The Slave Narrative*, 117-129.


child.\textsuperscript{17} Though her insight is certainly central to moving discussion of the female slave narrative toward acknowledgment of a distinct literary genre, she stops short of articulating a full understanding of the genre. Instead, Braxton has raised the mother to the position of hero within the narrative, neglecting the non-maternal role of most of the female narrators themselves and the presence of multiple heroic types within the genre and even within individual narratives.

That is not to say that the mother does not play an important role within the slave narrative, though. In fact, scholars have long agreed on the central role of the mother in the construction of slave narratives. Starling’s early impression of the mother in male slave narratives as a tool to encourage abolitionism has since been displaced by a heroic interpretation of her role. DoVeanna Fulton’s more recent analysis of the mother in Speaking Power has drawn on the essential role that women played in holding families together and maintaining family identity throughout slavery, seeing these efforts echoed in the narrators’ portrayals of their mothers.\textsuperscript{18} The mother must be understood as central to the narrative but not as the only figure deserving attention.

Scholarship has also placed a great deal of emphasis on the role that the woman’s slave narrative has had in defining the community, as opposed to simply exploring the individual writer. Francis Foster, in Witnessing Slavery, first articulates the relationship between the individual narrator and the larger African American community as a “tension” that left the narrator torn between exploring the self as an individual and serving as a “symbol” of the race.\textsuperscript{19} The negative “tension” that Foster describes has largely given way to a more positive interpretation. Lecater Bland, in Voices of the Fugitives, believes that the “slave narrative used

\textsuperscript{17} Braxton, Black Women Writing Autobiography, 19-21.


\textsuperscript{19} Foster, Witnessing Slavery, 5.
individual lives to look outward,” creating a sense of African American identity through the stories and experiences of the characters portrayed in women’s slave narratives.\(^{20}\) He argues that “black identity [should be seen] as a cultural fabrication,” and its changes can be tracked through the development of the slave narrative genre.\(^{21}\) Taking Bland’s argument a step further, the African American women, then, can be understood through the way the female slave narrative portrays female characters.

Women’s slave narratives provide two distinct types of African-American women: the mammy-like mothers and independent, post-slavery daughters. The meaning of the “mammy” figure has been highly contested in recent scholarship. Deborah Gray White asserts that the figure developed out of the Victorian era’s definition of white womanhood as a means of defending the institution of slavery.\(^{22}\) The mammy represented the blending of the “idealized slave” and “idealized woman” as she was both “black and female.”\(^{23}\) The mammy allowed antebellum whites to reconcile gender and slavery, defining African-American women on terms imbedded in their culture. The stereotype of the mammy, rooted in the prevalence of female servants in the homes of southern whites, describes a woman who was the best domestic servant, cared for children, both black and white, seemed completely unisexual, and was generally loved by the white family.\(^{24}\) White sees the mammy figure as both negative and supportive of the patriarchal context of slavery.

Whereas White believes that the mammy stereotype serves only as a means of denigrating African-Americans, Eugene Genovese believes that the figure holds a number of


\(^{21}\) Bland, *Voices of the Fugitives*, 3.

\(^{22}\) White, *Ar’n’t I A Woman?*, 56.

\(^{23}\) White, *Ar’n’t I A Woman?*, 61.

\(^{24}\) White, *Ar’n’t I A Woman?*, 49-54.
positive traits that should be respected, if not celebrated. He views the mammy as a complex character that maintains an unrivaled level of “courage, compassion, dignity and self-respect.”

Furthermore, she often defended her race to the white master and mistress and used her position as a respected servant to secure better conditions for her family than they might otherwise have had. Female slave narrators tend to craft their mothers into the image of the mammy, repossessing and transforming an often-negative stereotype and projecting in their mothers many of the positive traits Genovese describes. The narrators see their mammy-like mothers as both positive and liberating, not victims of their situations.

In addition to articulating a mammy-like representation of African-American mothers, the narratives also cultivate a collective image of the post-slavery women through the narrators themselves. Historian Jaqueline Jones, in *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, comments that by 1860, a quarter million African Americans were free, the majority of whom resided in cities.

She notes that some free black women became entrepreneurs, working as “bakers, seamstresses, and caterers, and as peddlers of produce, brooms, and prepared foods.” Other free women joined or led religious and missionary groups or worked at schools for black children. The majority of free African-American women remained limited to domestic jobs. Jones notes, however, that African-American women, despite their limited opportunities for employment,

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fai red better than men, who were largely replaced in their jobs by Irish and German immigrants.\textsuperscript{31}

A distinct paradox developed among free African-American women: while these women might be confined to specific kinds of work, usually at the lowest rungs of the labor market, they frequently also served as the main, or sole, breadwinners for their families. Statistically speaking, in 1870 about $\frac{2}{3}$ of single African-American women worked for a wage while only $\frac{1}{4}$ of single white women did. Likewise, 31% of married African American women were employed while only 4% of married white women were.\textsuperscript{32} The post-slavery picture for African-American women was one of both opportunity and obligation: though they had more autonomy to pursue the tasks of their choosing and a wage of their standard, they also worked not for personal satisfaction but to support their families.

While the post-slavery lives and experiences of African-American women might seem quite limited and controlled despite their newfound freedom, their need, or desire, to engage in the public realm afforded them opportunities that their white female counterparts often lacked. Jones notes that the responsibility of “defin[ing] the priorities of a freepeople” fell just as much to African-American women as it did to men.\textsuperscript{33} Especially within cities, organizations like churches, schools, and service groups that were run by African-Americans provided women, as much as men, the opportunity to become involved and shape the community.\textsuperscript{34} As whites in both the north and south continued to try to control the labor and actions of blacks, even during Reconstruction, the involvement of these women in shaping the economy—through their labor—and black community—through their involvement in different organizations—was integral to the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{31} Jones, \textit{Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow}, 71.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Jones, \textit{Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow}, 116.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Jones, \textit{Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow}, 73.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Jones, \textit{Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow}, 117-120.
\end{itemize}
development of a distinct African American character and identity as the race made the transition from slavery to freedom. The women’s slave narratives published before and after the Civil War document the ways that free African American women contributed to the culture-building Jones describes.

The Mother, The Mistress, and The Articulation of a Female World

As the two main heroes that emerge in the female slave narrative are women, it is not surprising that the majority of narratives present the action of their stories in a female world. Themes of motherhood and domesticity dominate, especially in the early part of these texts. More significantly, though, women, both black and white, control the narratives’ action, enabling the development of their plots. The main characters within the narratives also tend to be women, meaning that the primary conflict within the narratives unfolds between women, not women and men. The most significant effect of the female space these narrators create is that white mistresses, not masters or patriarchy more generally, pose the biggest threat; in fact, the men within these narratives often serve solely to project the mistress as the narrative’s cruelest character. By positioning the white mistress as the biggest threat within the female world, the narrators simultaneously elevate their mothers to the position of hero in the early part of the story because they alone challenges the cruel mistresses. Through the creation of a female world in which the white mistress is the villain and the narrators’ mothers are the heroes, women’s slave narratives offer a stern critique of slavery while also building a unique, female, African-American cultural identity.

While women dominate the action, men are by no means absent from these narratives; the narrators often contrast their master and mistress to demonstrate that their mistress presents
the largest threat to their wellbeing. In the opening pages of her narrative, *The Story of Mattie Jackson* (1866), Mattie compares her mother’s master and mistress, creating a female-dominated world in which the white mistress is the greatest villain. As Mattie describes her mother’s first mistress, she comments that her mother, Ellen Turner, was sold from that household after her master becomes bankrupt due to “the extravagance and mismanagement of his wife, who was a great spendthrift.” Her removal to a new master means that she lives twenty miles away from her husband and spends but a day a week with him. As Mattie describes the events leading to her mother’s sale, she distances her master from the event: he is only responsible for making the transaction for Ellen’s sale, a moment Mattie does not even describe. By minimizing her master’s involvement in the affair, Mattie shifts the content of her narrative into a female-centered world where women carry out most of the significant action. Mattie casts the action of her narrative such that Ellen is sold to a new family and must leave her husband because of the actions of her mistress, not her master. Moreover, by depicting the content of her novel through a female world, the mistress, and not the master, poses the biggest threat. In fact, Mattie portrays her mother’s master as a victim of his wife’s affairs: he loses everything through her poor management of the home. As Mattie opens her narrative, she also establishes early on, though quite implicitly, that the action of her story will take place within a female world where women control the action and serve as the narrative’s main characters.

In *From Darkness Cometh the Light or Struggles for Freedom* (1891), Lucy Delaney makes use of a similarly constructed moment in her narrative in which her master also follows his wife’s lead when it comes to the management of their slaves. Where as Mattie Jackson’s mother is sold because her master lacks funds Lucy Delaney’s mother is sold merely because her

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36 *Mattie Jackson*, 6-7.
mistress desires to sell her. As with the scene in Mattie’s narrative, as Lucy describes the sale of her mother, it is evident that her master provides a means of emphasizing the cruelty of her mistress and articulating the existence of a distinct, female world within the narrative. Lucy comments that her mistress, Mrs. Cox, “was always very severe and exacting with [her] mother.”\(^{37}\) Through wording like “always,” Lucy demonstrates that Mrs. Cox’s treatment of her mother did not fluctuate or appear better at times; the unrelenting nature of her cruelty serves to emphasize just how evil she is. Lucy articulates that Mrs. Cox arranged for Polly to be “s[old]…down the river at once” because she appeared to be “put[ting] on…‘white airs’” and “something [Polly did while managing the house] did not suit her.”\(^{38}\) Lucy describes Mrs. Cox as having nearly complete control over the household’s affairs, only needing her husband to compete the transaction to sell Polly. The power Lucy displays Mrs. Cox as having both minimizes the role of her master in the story and creates within the narrative a distinct, female space. As Lucy crafts this space, she simultaneously depicts her mistress, not her master, as the greatest threat.

In *Memories of Childhood’s Slavery Days* (1909), Annie Burton also contrasts her master and mistress, establishing both the centrality of women and the cruelty of her mistress early in her story. Upon hearing that Lincoln had signed the Emancipation Proclamation, Annie’s mistress “suggested that the slaves should not be told of their freedom,” an idea her husband disapproves of, understanding that the slaves would find out even if he didn’t tell them.\(^{39}\) Annie’s inclusion of this moment in her narrative is quite interesting because it represents a private conversation between her master and mistress that she undoubtedly never heard; her

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choice to incorporate the private feelings and emotions of her mistress, though, is essential to the comparison she forms between her master and mistress and reader’s understanding of her mistress as the biggest threat to her well-being.

Annie does not just stop at portraying a difference in opinion between her master and mistress, though; she attributes to them a difference in action. Annie explains that though her mistress allows the other slaves to leave the plantation, she remains determined to keep her and her siblings enslaved. She excuses her decision to keep the children by arguing it is in their best interest since their mother has been away for a long time. Her mistress continues to treat the children like slaves, requiring them to “help all [they] could” and even whipped Annie when she does not meet her expectations. As Annie describes her early years as a slave, she minimizes the presence of her master while depicting him as more logical and fair than his wife. Through the comparison between her master and mistress, Annie portrays her mistress as crueler than her master because of her seemingly greater attachment to and pleasure in the institution of slavery. This comparison serves to move the action of her narrative into a distinctly female world where women, not men, drive the plot of her story and influence her experiences. Men, though not absent from women’s slave narratives, often function to emphasize the role and behaviors of white women. The narrators minimize men and present them in contrast to their wives both to articulate a female world and to position the white mistress as the villain.

In addition to using the contrast between masters and mistresses to project the mistresses as the cruelest characters in the narratives, the narrators also depict the cruelty of their mistresses through their behavior toward their slaves. By presenting their mistresses as exceedingly cruel, the narrators mask certain aspects of slavery while simultaneously presenting a strong critique of

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40 Burton, Memoires, 10.
41 Burton, Memoires, 10-11.
the institution; additionally, the cruelty of their mistresses enables the narrators to emphasize the
goodness and heroic qualities of their mothers. Mattie Jackson describes her mistress, Mrs.
Lewis, as more tyrannical than her husband, as she was “constantly pulling [her slaves’] ears,
snapping [them] with her thimble, [and] rapping [them] on the head and sides of it.” Mattie’s
choice to distinguish her mistress as worse than her master is essential, showing who Mattie sees
as the greater villain throughout her experiences. Mattie also explains that her mistress’ behavior
is both “constan[t]” and physical: Mattie does not characterize Mrs. Lewis’ treatment of her
slaves as ever being more relaxed nor does she describe the abuses as mental or emotional. As
Mattie describes her mistress’ behavior towards her slaves, she also uses language that ascribes
the action of the narrative to a female world. Her mistress inflicts pain not through a switch but
with a thimble, an object closely associated with women’s domestic work. Through her portrayal
of her mistress, Mattie creates a distinct, female villain for her story, one who she later contrasts
with her own mother. Mattie also provides a strong critique of slavery in her portrayal of her
mistress, demonstrating the institution’s ability to transform the domestic, maternal, and pure
Victorian woman into a dangerous monster. Thus the choice to craft her mistress into a cruel
character both defines the source of evil within the female world of her narrative and shows the
dangers of slavery to white womanhood.

Like Mattie Jackson, Annie Burton also depicts her mistress as the greatest source of evil
throughout her experiences in slavery. By depicting her mistress as the greatest perpetrator of
cruelty, Annie masks the sexual dangers of white men to female slaves. During Annie’s youth,
her mistress had a habit of taking Annie out on the porch and pointing out to her a white man
from a neighboring plantation, Annie’s father, and then calling for the man to “see and speak to

42 Ibid.
and caress [his] darling child.”*43 The man never wanted to have anything to do with Annie, a truth her mistress undoubtedly knew, which makes her continued attempts to harass the man and remind Annie of his repulsion for her all the more unnecessary and cruel. The moment certainly demonstrates the power of slavery in transforming her mistress into an unfeeling, unmatri
tal woman. Furthermore, by informing her reader of her mixed parentage Annie also succeeds in making a stern critique of the way that white men sexually exploited slaves without violating any codes of decency. The choice to create a female world in which her mistress is the cruelest character enables Annie to critique slavery while simultaneously creating a figure with which she can later contrast her own mother.

Bethany Veney’s *The Narrative of Bethany Veney, A Slave Woman* (1889) develops quite differently from the others—she lacks a mother-figure throughout much of it. However, in the small part of her narrative in which she does have a mother-figure, she also attributes cruel acts to her mistress. Bethany best emphasizes her mistress’ cruelty by contrasting her with her mammy. The opening scene of the narrative, Bethany’s first clear memory, involves her mistress, Miss Fletcher, taking her and the other slave children to the blackberry pasture to “impress [them] with the importance of always telling the truth.”*44 Though Miss Fletcher’s decision to provide them with a moral lesson might not seem troubling or cruel, what follows in her lesson certainly forms a different impression in the reader. Miss Fletcher informed the children that they must tell the truth because “some time all this world that [they] saw would be burned up, that the moon would be turned into blood… and everything would melt away with a great heat, and… every little child that had told a lie would be cast into a lake of fire and

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brimstone, and would burn there for ever.”

By informing the young children about the existence of hell, and telling them how easy it would be for them to end up there, Miss Fletcher removes some of the blissful youth they had once enjoyed. Bethany also rhetorically aligns her mistress with hell, or evil, as she brings the existence of such a place to Bethany’s attention.

The significance of this choice becomes all the more clear when Bethany runs to her mammy. The woman informs her of something her mistress had “failed” to mention: “those who told the truth and were good would always have everything they should want.” In other words, her mammy tells her about the existence of heaven, providing her with an alternative to her mistress’s image of the future. If her mistress is equated with hell, then her mammy is most certainly aligned with both heaven and goodness. As is the case in many of the other narratives, Bethany presents her mistress as a cruel character and a threat to her wellbeing. Early in their stories, many of the narrators present their experiences in a distinct, female world. They minimize the involvement of their masters and depict their mistresses as the greatest perpetrators of cruelty. Often, the choice to articulate their experiences in such a way enables the narrators to comment on the evils of slavery.

As Bethany Veney’s narrative suggests, within the distinct, female space that the narrators craft, they tend to depict their mothers, or maternal figures, as heroes who contrast with, or even challenge, the cruel white mistresses. With some important exceptions, the narrators tend to present their mothers as heroes by depicting them with the language of the mammy stereotype. In focusing on their mothers’ strengths as caregivers and home managers, the narrators use the traits of the figure that pro-slavery advocates had long used to support the institution and transform her into a character who by no means submits to the institution of

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45 Veney, Narrative, 214.
46 Veney, Narrative, 214.
slavery. As a result, the narrators craft their mothers into heroic figures who show the ability and potential of their race.

Mattie Jackson presents her mother as a skilled and self-sacrificing caregiver, certainly a model of the mammy ideal; however she only portrays her mother caring for her own children, demonstrating her mother’s alliance to her own family and, ultimately, her resistance to slavery. As she transforms the mammy figure into a tool for resisting slavery, Mattie simultaneously raises her mother to the position of hero within her narrative. Mattie describes the care her mother, Ellen, goes through to nurse for one of her children as her mistress, Mrs. Lewis, exacerbates the child’s sickly condition. One of Ellen’s children develops a severe condition from being kept in a box all day at Mrs. Lewis’ demand. Though the boy lingers close to death, Ellen “watched over [her son] three months by night and attended to her domestic affairs by day.” She seems super-human as she shuns sleep for several months to perform her duties as a servant and her responsibilities as a mother. Much as the mammy is the ideal caregiver, Ellen is the ideal mother, sacrificing every moment to tend to her child and mistress’ home. Mattie does not portray her mother negatively by describing her as representative of the mammy, though. She describes her mother solely taking care of her own children, transforming the negative, obsequious aspects of the mammy-figure into an individual full of strength and power.

Mattie further transforms her mother into a heroic mammy figure through her ability to resist her mistress. Historians and pro-slavery advocates have considered the mammy figure the one slave within the household who could speak her mind to the white family. Mattie uses this characteristic when describing her mother; however she turns it on its head because her mother does not just challenge but outwardly resists her mistress. Mattie transforms the mammy ideal

47 Jackson, Narrative, 12.
48 Jackson, Narrative, 10.
from a means of reinforcing slavery to a means of rebelling against it, and, in doing so, she elevates her mother to a heroic status within her narrative. Mattie mentions that her mistress, Mrs. Lewis, relied mainly on a cowhide to inflict punishment on her slaves. One night, fed up with being “stinted...for food,” Mattie’s mother, Ellen, cooked that very cowhide, providing food for her children and an end to Mrs. Lewis’ preferred weapon. Her mother engages in an outward resistance to the institution of slavery: she punishes, corrects, and rebels against the white mistress to preserve her own self-respect and secure improved conditions for her children. Her mother still draws on the mammy’s archetypal traits—she puts her children first and stands up to the mistress—but Mattie transforms this image from someone reinforcing the system of slavery to someone outwardly resisting the institution. In doing so, Mattie depicts her mother as a hero, providing the reader with a sense of how it was possible for African-American women to be powerful and capable under the constraints of slavery.

Annie Burton also presents her mother through the characteristics of the mammy, especially through her ability to care for her family, yet she also transforms the stereotype through her mother’s unwillingness to submit to her white mistress. During her time in slavery, Annie’s mother serves as the cook in her mistress’ house, aligning her experiences with those of the stereotypical mammy figure. In addition to caring for her own children, Annie’s mother takes two other children into her house and raises them as her own, caring for a total of five children. Her concern and maternal affection extends past her own kin, one of the mammy-figure’s greatest attributes, demonstrating her strength of character and her capability as a mother. She also describes how her mother could transform even “pease and ham-bone and

49 Ibid.
50 Burton, Memories, 8.
51 Burton, Memoires, 12.
skins” into a meal suitable for their little family, showing how her mother was also a talented cook who could turn even the most minimal provisions into sustenance for her children.\(^5^2\)

More significantly, though, Annie transforms the negative characterization of the mammy, portraying her mother as endowed with the level of ability, courage, and compassion that only a household’s mammy figure could possess but using these qualities to rescue her children from slavery and even overturn elements of the racial hierarchy. Annie’s mother had grown up with her mistress, and, upon receiving her first beating from her, she runs away from the plantation for three years.\(^5^3\) The act of truancy in itself serves as a form of rebellion as Annie’s mother asserts her disapproval for her mistress’ treatment by stealing her body and her labor. But more significantly, Annie demonstrates a transformation of the mammy stereotype when she explains how her mother fought to get her children back. Annie notes that only a few months after the declaration of the Emancipation Proclamation, “the end of the year 1865,” her mother returned for her and her siblings.\(^5^4\) Annie’s mother “demanded that her children be given up to her,” a request Annie’s mistress refused, even threatening to “set the dogs on [her]” if she didn’t leave.\(^5^5\) Annie’s mistress has no claim to Annie and her siblings by the time Annie’s mother returns; rather, she becomes the force trying to drive their family apart while Annie’s mother does everything to reunite the family.\(^5^6\) After some time, Annie’s mother manages to send news to her children to meet her at “the gap in the fence,” succeeding in her attempt to assure her children’s freedom.\(^5^7\) Annie portrays her mother as quite stubborn and strong-willed,

\(^{5^2}\) Burton, Memoires 40.
\(^{5^3}\) Burton, Memoires, 8.
\(^{5^4}\) Burton, Memoires, 11.
\(^{5^5}\) Burton, Memoires, 11-12.
\(^{5^6}\) Annie’s mistress had justified keeping her and her siblings enslaved by arguing it was in their best interest since their mother was not around and they were too young to look after themselves. Burton, Memories, 10.
\(^{5^7}\) Burton, Memoires, 12.
traits that a mammy figure would likely have, but she channels her perseverance not toward tasks within the household but toward removing her children from the dominance of slavery. Her mother resists the power of the white mistress, challenging the institution of slavery through her desire to protect and care for her children.

Annie’s mother does more than just resist slavery, though; she also rejects elements of racial hierarchy by means of her maternal and domestic qualities. As she recalls the family’s first night of freedom, Annie employs a complete role reversal, portraying her mother as a black mistress of her own home in the presence of a white family. Late in the evening of their first night as a free family, a white woman knocks on their door with her children. Annie’s mother takes them in out of the rain, shares their small meal with them, and lets them sleep in her cabin for the night. Annie retains the positive characteristics of the mammy in her portrayal of her mother: she is a good, nurturing mother, a capable maintainer of her home, and in possession of the courage and strength of self that Eugene Genovese believes characterize the best qualities of the mammy. Simultaneously, Annie divorces her mother from the negative aspects of the mammy stereotype: she is not a slave and does not submit to a white mistress or master. In fact, as Annie describes her mother’s attention to the white family, her mother assumes the position of mistress, taking them into her home, delegating tasks to her children and the white family, and seeing to the care of both families. Elements of the mammy figure become a vehicle through which Annie portrays her mother’s complete rejection of the racial hierarchy.

Lucy Delaney’s portrayal of her mother, Polly, unites positive aspects of the mammy stereotype—specifically, the mammy’s focus on family and her ability to stand up for her race—with the quest for freedom; she creates her mother as a figure who projects a positive, empowered portrayal of the mammy tied not to the white family but to her children. Through

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58 Burton, *Memoires*, 41-44.
portraying Polly as a strong, good mother, Lucy relates her story of achieving freedom through
the court system without threatening the white power structure: Polly is merely a mother looking
to protect her children. Lucy forms the narrative’s plot around her mother’s quest to preserve her
family by freeing her children from slavery.\textsuperscript{59} Polly engages in the legal system to achieve
Lucy’s freedom, hoping to transform them into a proper, free family.\textsuperscript{60} Polly’s determination to
free her child and willingness to stand up for what she knows is right demonstrates what a
concerned mother she is. It also enables Lucy to mold her mother into a qualified version of the
Mammy figure. Though she shares core characteristics with the mammy, Polly also
demonstrates a transformation of these traits, as she is a free woman.

The mammy figure endures all hardships and overcomes many obstacles in order to
perform her responsibilities; Polly certainly fits this description, but her hardships and obstacles
unfold in a courtroom rather than a slave-owning household. One of the first obstacles Polly
encounters is her poverty and inability to pay for a lawyer. She finds Judge Edward Bates, who
“consented to undertake the case and make his charges only sufficient to cover his expenses.”\textsuperscript{61}
After overcoming this slight setback, Polly and Lucy encounter the larger obstacle of the trial
itself, which centers on the ability to prove that Lucy is Polly’s daughter, a truth that Polly must
rely on others to confirm. Polly finds three men willing to testify that Lucy is her daughter and
three individuals willing to write affidavits assuring Lucy is Polly’s child.\textsuperscript{62} It is quite telling
that the court case rests on the ability to prove that Polly is Lucy’s biological mother; the bond of
mother and child had the power to overturn the system of slavery. Thus Lucy, though in an

\textsuperscript{59} Quite significantly, Polly was actually born free, but illegally captured and sold into slavery as a young
woman. The fact that Polly, Lucy, and Lucy’s sister Nancy are legally free but unable to secure their
freedom drives the plot, and creates the drama, of the narrative.

\textsuperscript{60} Delaney, \textit{Struggles}, 33.

\textsuperscript{61} Delaney, \textit{Struggles}, 36.

\textsuperscript{62} Delaney, \textit{Struggles}, 36, 42.
unconventional fashion, portrays her mother as an example of a mammy figure: she unrelentingly works to secure her daughters’ freedom and provide for them the best possible life.

Lucy elevates her mother to the position of hero within her narrative. Though Polly’s role in Lucy’s trial might seem limited—she, after all, was not even present during the court proceedings—Lucy credits her mother with securing her freedom. Praising her mother’s efforts, Polly exclaims,

Blessed mother! how she clung and fought for me. No work was too hard for her to undertake. Others would have flinched before the obstacles which confronted her, but undauntedly she pursued her way, until my freedom was established by every right and without a questioning doubt.

Lucy praises her mother as the hero of her saga, suggesting that not anyone could have accomplished what she did. Polly is extraordinary. She provides the only means for Lucy’s freedom, through her birth as a free woman as well as the strength and support to reunite them as a family. The notion of womanhood that Lucy finds in her mother is not only tied to her ability as a mother but also to her ability to consult and benefit from the legal system. Much as other narrators have crafted their mothers, Lucy describes Polly as someone who puts her role as a mother above all else and fights for her child. Lucy portrays her mother as having the outspokenness and devotion of the mammy but without the constraints and limitations of slavery.

The narrators tend to craft their mothers through the characterization of the mammy stereotype; however, they transform it from a negative tool to support slavery into a positive device that undermines and resists the institution. The narrators generally employ the mammy’s skills at caring for children, maintaining a home, and her general courage and strength to describe their mothers. Their mothers, however, tend to channel these traits not towards supporting the white household, but to protecting their own children, rescuing them from slavery,

63 Delaney, Struggles, 45.
and even denouncing the institution itself. They craft a new archetype, the heroic mother, or heroic mammy, to categorize their mothers’ goodness and capability and desire to denounce the evils of slavery. Simultaneously, within the narrative’s female world, each narrator contrasts her mother and white mistress, using both characters to create a sense of good and evil.

Though the heroic mammy figure characterizes the mother figure in a number of the narratives, it does not properly convey the role of the mother in Old Elizabeth’s story. She conveys her experiences in a format that resembles a conversion narrative as much as a slave narrative. The difference in plot development of her narrative from the other narratives makes it only logical that Elizabeth would portray her mother quite differently. She assumes the role of the hero in the first pages of Elizabeth’s story, yet she is a hero who is ultimately rejected, a measure that none of the other narrators take. Elizabeth introduces her mother as the most influential figure in her life before quickly replacing her mother’s centrality with religion. After being sent to a plantation “several miles from [her] parents, brothers, and sisters,” Elizabeth confesses: “I thought I should die, if I did not see my mother.” The strength of her words demonstrates how important Elizabeth’s mother is to her as well as the influence she has on her life as a girl. Elizabeth, though separated from every other member of her family, desires only to see her mother. Elizabeth’s need to see her mother is so strong that she decides to visit her after “being positively denied” permission to go by her overseer. When she cannot find her mother, she walks another twenty miles to find her. After spending several days together, they part ways, but before Elizabeth goes, her mother tells her that she had “‘nobody in the wide world to

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66 Ibid.
These parting words become a mantra for Elizabeth, consuming her thoughts and outlook on life until she “betook [herself] to prayer, and in every lonely place…found an altar.” From this point forward in the story, Old Elizabeth’s quest for religion, and then efforts to instruct others in religion, becomes the main topic, eclipsing the early centrality of her mother.

Both gender and religion impact Old Elizabeth’s portrayal of her mother. Old Elizabeth’s mother prompts her daughter to violate society’s constructs of gender while simultaneously adhering to them herself. Old Elizabeth establishes her mother as the most important and trusted person in her life—she would take to heart anything her mother says. When her mother tells her she has “‘nobody in the wide world to look to but God,’” she gives her daughter the key to a meaningful life. A successful life is something she cannot find from anyone but God. Her mother, then, implies that Old Elizabeth does not need to hold herself accountable to the two main systems that would otherwise dictate her life: slavery and patriarchy. Though Old Elizabeth skims over the details of her life as a slave and her eventual freedom, her story emphasizes her eventual ability to overcome the gendered, male-dominated hierarchy within the church community. Ultimately, the image of the mother itself becomes something for Old Elizabeth to reject: she never marries or has children. Instead, she spends her life “journeying through the different states of the Union” and even to Canada. Old Elizabeth’s mother, the figure Old Elizabeth trusted most as a girl, gives her the advice and motivation to free herself from the gender and race restraints she experiences and hold herself to a higher power.

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67 Ibid.  
68 Ibid.  
69 Ibid.  
70 Old Elizabeth, Memoir, 18.
As Old Elizabeth’s mother inspires her daughter to not let her gender prevent her from success, she holds herself to the very bounds she wants her daughter to reject. Though Old Elizabeth does not provide much information about her mother, what the reader does know hardly suggests her mother managed to live the life she inspired her daughter to follow. Old Elizabeth tells us that her mother was a slave and that she, along with her father, was “religious.”\footnote{Old Elizabeth, \textit{Memoir}, 3.} But Old Elizabeth’s mother was not “religious” in the same way she wants her daughter to be: “it was “[her] father’s practice to read in the Bible aloud to his children.”\footnote{Ibid.} Old Elizabeth describes her mother as someone second to her father—he alone possessed the knowledge and desire to read the Bible and instruct the rest of the family. Apart from knowing that Old Elizabeth’s mother lacks the ability to instruct others in the way she leads her daughter to instruct others, Old Elizabeth also implies that her mother remains a slave her entire life. Old Elizabeth never gives any evidence that her mother became free. In fact, Old Elizabeth herself only becomes free because she is sold away from her mother to a master who believed in freeing his slaves.\footnote{Old Elizabeth, \textit{Memoir}, 8.} Instead, the last we hear of Old Elizabeth’s mother is when Old Elizabeth is shortly moved back to the farm her mother remained enslaved on before being sold to her final master.\footnote{Ibid.} Old Elizabeth’s mother remains a victim of slave society, only challenging it through her expectations for her daughter.

Religion also provides an important means of understanding Old Elizabeth’s portrayal of her mother since her story is best understood in three parts: the time before, during, and after her conversion experience. Her mother is the source of religious inspiration, but religion also displaces her in the narrative. In understanding Old Elizabeth’s story in this way, God becomes
the hero of the second and third parts of the story while Old Elizabeth’s mother becomes the hero of the first. Old Elizabeth’s mother parallels God, then, in the first part of the story, even leading and instructing her daughter in the same way that Christianity does later in the story. Yet Old Elizabeth’s mother plays the hero in the first part of the story because she prompts her daughter to become a Christian. Again, the mother becomes a role to reject, this time because she takes on almost pagan value as an idol in a Christian story. Old Elizabeth uses her mother as a form of resistance, not because her mother resists elements of society but because she resists following her mother’s life choices. Through the brief descriptions Old Elizabeth provides of her mother, it is evident that she serves as a means of resisting the slave system through her expectations for her daughter. Old Elizabeth’s narrative portrays the mother figure quite differently than the other narratives do. Though she initially respects and admires her mother, she does not portray her mother through the language of the mammy, employing only general details and describing her mother more through their relationship than her mother’s behavior or actions.

Daughters, Families, and “Young Girl’s Ambition”

While the mother fills the role of hero of the first part of the narrative, driving much of the initial plot, she tends to disappear in the second part of the narrative. The daughter replaces her mother as hero in the post-slavery part of the narrative, assuming responsibility for controlling the narrative’s action. Though both the mothers and daughters embody meaningful heroic images, they are quite distinct from one another. A large reason for the difference in these two heroes is that the narrators spend most of their lives free while their mothers spend the majority of their lives in slavery: separate experiences engender different values and exemplars.

75 The phrase “young girl’s ambition,” which will be discussed in more detail, comes from Bethany Veney’s narrative. Veney, Narrative, 218.
of those values. As a result of their distinct experiences, the daughters tend to supplement many of the qualities, like skill at domestic tasks and maternal caring, that they heroize in their mothers with an emphasis on public activities, like paid employment and community involvement. If mothers serve as the narratives’ heroes through their activities within the home, their daughters function as heroes because of their actions largely outside of it.

The heroic images that the narrators construct of themselves challenge fundamental notions of white womanhood. Many of the narrators combine family and work into a singular identity. Other narrators make somewhat radical choices for women of their time, rejecting motherhood to become teachers, travelers, or religious speakers. Through their self-depictions, the narrators advance a heroic figure best encapsulated as a woman with a degree of autonomy in the public sphere who also retains ties to her family and children. This image articulates the uniqueness of post-slavery African-American womanhood, and, in so doing, establishes it as an acceptable and achievable norm for other freewomen.

Bethany Veney’s narrative provides the sole exception to the theme of choice that unites the other narratives; however, she, more than any other narrator, captures the essence of the opportunities and motivations that awaited other narrators upon freedom. As she shifts from her experiences as a child to her experiences as a woman, Bethany stops to ponder how her life might have turned out had she become free as a girl, remarking:

> I have sometimes tried to picture what my life might have been could I have been set free at that age; and I have imagined myself with a young girl’s ambition, working hard and carefully saving my earnings, then getting a little home with garden, where I could plant the kinds of things I had known in the South, then bringing my sisters and brothers to share with me these blessings of freedom. But I had yet to know far deeper sorrows before I could have any of this glad experience.⁷⁶

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⁷⁶ Veney, *Narrative*, 218.
The “deeper sorrows” she refers to are, in fact, the experiences of having children, being separated from them, and watching as they endure the burdens of slavery, unable to help them. Though Bethany’s narrative differs from the others because she attains freedom as a mother rather than as a girl, the sentiments she expresses in this moment show that the feelings that drive the other narrators were alive in those women who were not fortunate to be freed as girls. Bethany, seeing herself with “a young girl’s ambition,” captures the sentiments that drove the other narrators even though she herself was denied such a life. She also attests to the sense of opportunity, or at least expanded opportunity, open to slave girls who became free at a younger age: she sees herself not turning her ambition into motherhood but rather making her own living and securing her own home, independent of a man. Furthermore, the ideal freedom she envisioned for her younger self is rooted in the ability to share that freedom with her siblings, showing that family remained central to her hopes for herself.

The lost aspirations that Bethany Veney describes become actuality for the girls in other slave narratives, who find that the “young girl’s ambition” they achieve as a result of freedom enables them to contribute to both the economic and cultural wellbeing of the free African-American community in ways unimaginable to their mothers. Annie Burton, Louisa Picquet, and Lucy Delaney’s experiences demonstrate that African-American women’s experiences post-slavery did not come at the expense of children and family. These women assume a maternal role but they are not limited by this role, achieving independence and choice during their post-slavery lives as well.

Annie Burton assumes the role of mother but also attains financial independence and travels extensively upon becoming free. Motherhood for Annie comes not from her having her own children but from caring for the children of her family members. She takes in the three
youngest children in her family upon her mother’s death and her nephew after her sister’s death.\textsuperscript{77} Annie cares for these children willingly, providing no evidence of even thinking of doing otherwise prior to raising these four children. She embraces her role as a surrogate mother to these children. Annie’s experiences group her with the large number of African-American female-headed households in the Reconstruction era, demonstrating that like many other women, her actions derived more from necessity than desire. She also demonstrates that, for African-American women, employment and motherhood were not mutually exclusive, a fact that distinguished them from the vast majority of whites.

Annie does not just portray herself as a mother within her narrative, however. In fact, though she only briefly touches on the circumstances that led her to assume care for her siblings and nephew, Annie focuses in great detail on the different positions she held and how she came to acquire them. Annie certainly engages in paid work largely because it is a necessity, a means of sustaining a stable quality of life for both her and the children in her care. Annie, however, describes her various experiences with exceptional pride, demonstrating that it was not only something she did but also something she enjoyed. Shortly after becoming free, Annie moves to Boston to find work, mainly as a cook or maid within white households. She describes the effort she goes through to negotiate wages and that she leaves certain positions because the wages fail to meet her requirements.\textsuperscript{78} She demonstrates a substantial degree of pride in herself and her ability to control her labor and even its value.

Annie describes not only her experience with wages but also how she acquires various positions, often seeking out connections or taking risks to attain a better situation than what she had before. On one such occasion, Annie goes to an employment office in Boston to seek

\textsuperscript{77} Burton, \textit{Memoires}, 17, 24.  
\textsuperscript{78} Burton, \textit{Memoirs}, 20-22.
information for any available positions. In exchange for fifty cents, a small fortune considering she was being paid $3 a week at the time, the man gives her a card and street address of a family looking to hire a servant. On her way to the house, she happens upon a woman whose friend is also seeking a cook and will provide better wages. Annie takes the position, intentionally fails her interview at the position offered to her through the employment office, and then returns to the office to collect the money she had originally given them. As Annie describes this moment in her narrative, one can detect the sense of accomplishment she feels for finding a decent, well-paying place of employment, a feat she repeats elsewhere in Boston throughout her time there. Though trying to secure a job and money for herself while caring for her young nephew is not easy, Annie suggests that maintaining the ties of family is just as important as maintaining a quality of life for oneself. Despite Annie’s clear pride in achieving a quality of life unattainable under slavery, it is clear that her life is largely dictated by her race. Though most contemporary white women would not have engaged in paid labor, Annie must do so in order to feed and provide for herself and her nephew; furthermore, the early positions she attains are domestic work, an area of employment historically tied to lower, working-class women.

Annie’s experiences demonstrate, though, that it was possible for African-American women to perform more than just domestic labor, challenging many of the racist beliefs that existed among white Americans at her time. Annie’s most impressive venture occurs when she begins her own business in Florida. She decides to open a small restaurant with her youngest sister and nephew, eventually even renting cots to travelers passing through. She displays her ability as an entrepreneur, making a profit of $175 during the first four months her restaurant was

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in operation.\textsuperscript{81} By operating her own business, even for a short period of time, Annie rejects the domestic labor that her mother had engaged in throughout her life and that she herself had entered into after becoming free. Annie also, for the first time in her life, does not work for a white master or employer, freeing herself completely from the bonds of slavery and racism, at least in her financial experiences. Her success demonstrates the ability and strength of the post-slavery African-American community, making her part of the culture-building and community-building processes that African-Americans engaged in post-slavery.

Annie achieves independence and success within her narrative even though she remains tied to her family. Her experiences echo those of countless other African-American women, who molded their roles as mothers, wives, and workers into a single identity post-slavery. She presents herself as an appropriate archetype of post-slavery women; she is financially independent and in control of her own life yet hardly selfish, caring for her family and working to financially sustain her family and herself.

The combination of autonomy and family that characterizes Annie Burton’s life experiences also applies to the post-slavery life of Louisa Picquet in \textit{Louisa Picquet, The Octoroon: A Tale of Southern Slave Life} (1857). Louisa’s narrative places a higher emphasis on motherhood than even Annie Burton’s story, but her experiences demonstrate that motherhood often cannot come at the exclusion of other activities, like traveling and public speaking, for free African-American women. Louisa was sold away from her mother at a young age, growing up mainly without an older female influence.\textsuperscript{82} Because Louisa and her mother lived in different circumstances as Louisa was growing up, she actually becomes free before her mother and as the

\textsuperscript{81} Burton, \textit{Memoires}, 28.

result of her master’s death. Louisa’s relationship with her mother provides the most visible mother-daughter relationship within the narrative, but it is a relationship dictated more by the daughter than the mother.

Once Louisa attains her freedom, she turns her attention to buying her mother out of slavery, and, in fact, publishes her narrative to raise funds for purchasing her mother’s freedom. She crafts herself as the hero during this part of the narrative as she chronicles her quest to secure her mother’s freedom. After realizing that she would not be able to use her husband’s income to purchase her mother, she decides at the advice of her friends to “go out and solicit money for the purpose.” She was, however, “reluctant” because “she had her family of four young children, fathered by her husband, to care for, as well as her husband; had never traveled, except from New Orleans to Cincinnati, and dreaded to go out for such a purpose.”

Tied to her responsibilities as a wife and a mother, Louisa reveals a hesitation to step outside of the realm of expectations for woman, an emotion that no other narrator portrays. Likely nothing but the condition of her mother could have prompted her to shun her position in the home for a more public role, and she eventually concludes that “her mother was in bondage, and she resolved to make the attempt [to solicit funds] at all hazards.” Louisa proceeds to place ads in various newspapers asking for money and to travel to different parts of the country to ask for donations at various churches. She even speaks publically in church meetings to solicit funds. The activism that Louisa displays on account of freeing her mother attests to the new liberties she found, albeit somewhat reluctantly, as a free woman.

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83 When she becomes free, Louisa has two illegitimate children who were fathered by her master; however, she makes little mention of these children after describing the unfortunate circumstances of their parentage—they neither inform her escape nor drive the plot of her narrative. Picquet, Octoroon, 23-24.
84 Picquet, Octoroon, 36.
85 Picquet Octoroon, 36.
86 Picquet Octoroon, 39-40.
87 Picquet Octoroon, 47.
Louisa’s experiences both contribute to and counter the sense of culture-building that the other narrators engaged in. Louisa, though a slave through her childhood and young adulthood, was also an octoroon—only one eighth African American. Rev. H. Mattison, the man responsible for writing her narrative, describes Louisa as being “of fair complexion and rosy cheeks, with dark eyes, a flowing head of hair with no perceptible inclination to curl, and every appearance…of an accomplished white lady.” His description forms a clear distinction between Louisa and the other narrators, who could not pass for white. The physical difference between Louisa and the rest of the women could account for the reason why she is more reluctant to reject the Victorian ideal of domesticity for the public world of speaking and traveling than the other narrators are. While other narrators try to form a new life for themselves and open up new opportunities for their race, Louisa, a victim of the same slave system, merely attempts to assume the norms of white female life. Though Louisa certainly differs from the other narrators in physical appearance, her experiences do ultimately parallel those of the other narrators. Louisa displays a great deal of independence by the end of her narrative, leaving the physical, and psychological, space of the home for the sake of helping her mother. She, too, demonstrates that motherhood and a more public life could be successfully collapsed into a singular identity.

Lucy Delaney’s experiences also contribute to the portrait of a post-slavery woman who mixes family and community involvement. Unlike Annie Burton and Louisa Picquet, Lucy engages in her community not because she has to but because she wants to. In her narrative, she provides a lengthy list of the different groups and organizations she had been involved with within her community. She informs the reader that by the time she wrote her narrative, she had:

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88 Picquet *Octoroon*, 5.
become a member of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1855; was elected President of the first colored society, called the “Female Union,” which was the first ever organized exclusively for women; was elected President of a society known as the “Daughters of Zion”; was matron of “Siloam Court,” No. 2, three years in succession; was Most Ancient Matron of the “Grand Court of Missouri,” of which only the wives of Masons are allowed to become members” and was still “Past Grand Chief Preceptress of the “Daughters of the Tabernacle and Knights of Tabor,” and also was secretary, and was still a member, of Col. Shaw Woman’s Relief Corps, No. 34, auxiliary to the Col. Shaw Post, 343, Grand Army of the Republic.  

Lucy achieves great success and importance in her own right, serving as a leader in many different organizations and an active member of many other important groups. She comments that she has “made the best use of [her] time” despite “the limited advantages offered [her] because of her race.” Thus Lucy views her own life as rich and successful, even arguing that African Americans can be just as successful and prosperous as whites, if only given the “same chance and equal start.” These words, the last words of her narrative, show that Lucy is aware that her experiences challenge society’s assumptions about her race and gender; she finds success in her own right and is not limited not by obligations to the home or family. She also demonstrates that African-American women could engage in the community not because they had to, but because they wanted to. Lucy does not describe herself engaging in paid employment, which suggests she might not have done so. While she likely does not need to work, she still chooses to become involved in a large number of organizations that contributed to the advancement of the African-American community and enabled her to make her mark on defining what it means to be an African-American woman post-slavery.

Lucy also demonstrates that civic engagement was not something that came separate from being a wife and a mother. Years after becoming free, she informs the reader that she

89 Ibid.  
90 Delaney, Struggles, 63.  
91 Delaney, Struggles, 64.
married Zachariah Delaney and had four children with him. In fact, a number of the organizations she joined were for the wives of men involved in various organizations. Lucy also demonstrates that, though she had four children, she did not devote her life to remaining within the home; rather, she merged her duties as a mother with areas of personal fulfillment outside the home. In addition to raising her own family, Lucy also takes care of her mother until her death. She even helps her father and sister travel to St. Louis for a “joyful reunion.” For Lucy, family serves as a central part of her adult life and identity, but it is not the only part of her life. Her experiences demonstrate that African-American women could successfully merge the public and private realms even by choice rather than necessity.

Where the experiences of Louisa Picquet, Annie Burton, and Lucy Delaney mesh both motherhood and employment or community involvement, Mattie Jackson and Kate Drumgoold define their post-slavery selves outside of experiences of motherhood or, more generally, in the home. Old Elizabeth’s previously detailed post-slavery experiences—as a religious leader and public speaker—also contribute to the image of a post-slavery woman not tied to her own home and children. Mattie Jackson wrote her narrative at a younger age than the other female narrators; she has fewer life experiences to draw from when crafting her narrative. Though she does not spend a large portion of her narrative detailing her post-slavery accomplishments, she does conclude her narrative by informing the reader of her quest for education. Shortly after becoming free, Mattie moves back east to live with her father and stepmother so that she can attain an education. Her first experience with education is through the local Sunday school, where she is pleased she can attend a church with both white and black people. She then

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92 Delaney, Struggles, 58.
93 Delaney, Struggles, 59.
94 Delaney, Struggles, 60-61.
95 Jackson, Narrative, 35.
entered a local public school where she “advanced in [her] studies as fast as could be expected.” Mattie’s story has a similar didactic message to Lucy Delaney’s, demonstrating that, with the opportunity to succeed, African Americans can do as well as whites in society.

Mattie does not end her educational aspirations with the local public school, though. She determines, through the guidance of her step-mother, to enter into a “select school and plac[e] [her]self entirely under its discipline and influence.” Such an education would no doubt cost money, and Mattie reveals at the end of her narrative that she wrote and published it in the hopes of raising the necessary funds for continuing her education. Furthermore, she determines to complete a companion narrative that chronicles her later experiences upon attaining more education and a sounder ability to write. Mattie’s post-slavery life and her decisions center on education, demonstrating a form of success and happiness rooted in self-improvement rather than marriage and family. She describes herself in her narrative as someone who challenges society’s expectations for her and who carves out her own means of success. She also demonstrates through her experiences a sense of culture-building, as she seeks to improve herself through education. Like the other narrators, Mattie replaces her mother as the hero of her narrative, and in doing so, she projects a post-slavery image of women who could be successful outside of the home.

Kate Drumgoold also puts education at the center of her post-slavery life. Upon becoming free, she devotes the majority of her life to serving as a teacher. After receiving an education herself, Kate determines to “be of some use to [her] own people” by teaching as many

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96 Jackson, Narrative, 36.
97 Ibid.
98 Ibid.
children as she can both in religion and in academics.\textsuperscript{99} She describes how her school was always very full and that she was always receiving more children to teach, but that she did everything in her power to teach as many students as she could.\textsuperscript{100} Kate worked in the same school for eleven years, feeling that “to do good work in a school [she] should stay in one place.”\textsuperscript{101} For her, teaching was about making a difference and truly impacting the lives of the students she encountered. The sentiments that Kate describe are quite similar to those put forward by both Lucy Delaney and Mattie Jackson: she expresses the notion that knowledge is the tool through which African Americans can improve their status in society.

In addition to working in this small school, Kate also works in the homes of specific families, helping educate children and often working simultaneously as a servant in the household. By working in the homes of different families, Kate had the opportunity to travel around the country to seek employment. She experienced not only intellectual independence but also geographical independence, moving to different parts of the country throughout her life.\textsuperscript{102} The immense detail with which she describes her experiences also demonstrate the pride she feels in herself for achieving as much as she does upon becoming free. Kate’s narrative provides further evidence of the new type of hero that developed in the post-slavery parts of these narratives. She sees her identity as tied not to her role as a wife or a mother, neither of which she describes having in her narrative, but to her occupation as a teacher. Through her experiences as a teacher, Kate advances the conception that African-American women were successful outside of the home. She also contributes to the notion that African-American women’s employment

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{101} Drumgoold, \textit{A Slave Girl’s Story}, 62.
\textsuperscript{102} Drumgoold, \textit{A Slave Girl’s Story}, 46-47.
and activities in the community contributed to the construction of a post-slavery African-American identity and culture as she helps to educate and mold the next generation of leaders.

Collectively, the women who produced slave narratives seized opportunities to become teachers, speakers, entrepreneurs, and, occasionally, financially independent individuals. Though these women certainly had choices and opportunities unavailable to their mothers, many of them did not reject motherhood or family. Though their mothers resist slavery by manifesting aspects of the mammy stereotype, these women resist racism largely through their activities outside the home. This fundamental difference reflects a new heroic female archetype in the post-slavery period.

Constructing African-American Womanhood

The woman’s slave narrative develops within a tightly controlled female world. The narrators define this space early on in their narratives as they describe the dynamics within their households as slaves. At the start of their stories, the narrators portray their mothers as the narrative’s hero, the person who best embodies the potential for goodness and accomplishment under the system of slavery. Their mothers tend to derive their goodness through their ability to both embody and transform aspects of the mammy stereotype. The mammy image, a tool that reinforced slavery at its core, becomes a vehicle for resisting the institution. The mother hero fades from the narrative once the narrator herself becomes free. The daughters assert themselves as the heroes of the second, post-slavery, parts of their narratives. In doing so, they do not reject ideas of motherhood or domesticity, but these ideas no longer serve as their means of empowerment. Instead, these women often find their voice and their means of resisting slavery and racism through their engagement in community activities or employment. As these narrators
portray themselves, it is evident that the negative, stereotypical image of the mammy that they had begun to transform through their descriptions of their mothers has been overturned completely.

As the narrators fashion themselves as heroes within their narratives, they concurrently create a cultural image of a new hero for a post-slavery society, one who achieves success outside of the home and, occasionally, divorced completely from motherhood and marriage. The narrators display a great deal of pride in their ability to find meaningful jobs, attain financial independence, or engage successfully in a world inaccessible to them under slavery, a world still largely inaccessible to white women. Though the narrators display satisfaction in their accomplishments, historical truth reminds the reader that many of these women also acted in the interest of self-preservation and survival. They might have attained employment and leadership in a public realm largely controlled by men; however, they often lacked alternatives.

The shift from the beginning to the end of the narratives, from a heroic mother to a heroic daughter, mirrors the narrators’ struggle to grapple with the cultural and personal changes that occurred for all freed African-Americans. Though not all of these narrators wrote their stories after the Emancipation Proclamation, the reconfiguring of the hero throughout the narratives reflects the fundamental differences that occurred during the lives of these narrators, and other African American women, during and after slavery. Accordingly, their narratives speak to larger societal truths as others, from Frederick Douglass to W.E.B. Du Bois to Sojourner Truth, grappled with what it meant to be African, American, and African American in a country rooted culturally and economically in race-based slavery. Like Truth, these narrators add another, often overlooked dimension, to those debates: what it means to be an African-American woman.
There is little question that the experiences of African-American women deviated greatly from those of white women. Though both groups shared similar gendered duties as mothers and responsibilities within the home, African-American women, by necessity or, occasionally, by desire, pursued greater levels of employment outside the home. Sojourner Truth, during the 1851 Women’s Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, best articulated the discrepancy between white and African-American womanhood when she expressed that,

\[
\text{Dat man ober dar say dat woman needs to be lifted ober ditches, and to have de best place every whar. Nobody eber helped me into carriages, or ober mud puddles, or gives me any best place and ar’n’t I a woman?}^{103}
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Throughout her speech, she conveys that society by no means treated African-American women the same as white women. She received none of the chivalry or respect afforded to white women. She demonstrates, too, that women function quite successfully without any of that treatment. Historians, and even contemporaries, have noted that it is impossible to divorce abolitionist and feminist causes from one another in the nineteenth century, evidenced by the fact that Truth delivered her remarks in a women’s rights convention. Thus the paradox of African-American womanhood is one of both race and gender: they cannot enjoy the pedestal of white womanhood because of their race yet they attained many of the marks of independence, like employment, that white women sought for themselves because of it.

Women’s slave narratives attempt to make sense of the unique paradox African-American women faced once they became free. As the narratives of Louisa Picquet (1861), Old Elizabeth (1863), Mattie Jackson (1866), Bethany Veney (1889), Lucy Delaney (1891), Kate Drumgoold (1898), and Annie Burton (1909) argue, these issues are not wholly tied to motherhood, as Incidents suggests, but to these women’s understanding of themselves and their role within the community. More so than Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, these narratives

\(^{103}\) Sojourner Truth qtd. White, Ar’n’t I A Woman?, 14.
also attempt to construct an understanding of not only enslaved but also free African American
cwomanhood. By repositioning the genre around the stories of Louisa, Elizabeth, Mattie, Bethany,
Lucy, Kate, and Annie, scholars can better understand how women, both during and after
slavery, could achieve empowerment through their everyday actions and activities. In so doing,
they laid the cornerstone for a culture.
Works Cited


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