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Motherhood as a Site of Agency in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl *and* Dessa Rose

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Introduction

In recent years a considerable amount of critical studies and literary works has been published on the question of the oppression of black women in history. Many of these studies have particularly underlined the peculiar condition of black women within contexts of domination in which their subjugation was enforced on the basis of both their race and gender. Black feminist scholars, in particular, have focused on investigating this issue and developing theories that could explain the black woman's experience in this type of historical, as well as contemporary, context.[1] With regard to this, in her pioneering essay "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics", the scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw has contended that the experience of the black woman in contexts of oppression cannot be reduced to only being black or to only being a woman, but should rather be considered in terms of intersectionality.[2] This is due to the fact that the black woman's experience is shaped by the interaction between the categories of race and gender, which reinforce one another, and which, consequently, cannot be investigated separately if one wants to have a full understanding of her struggles.

This study is specifically focused on the analysis of black women's condition of oppression within the context of American chattel slavery. If one looks at American slavery, one will acknowledge that Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality can also be applied to the condition of oppression that black women were victims of in this context: black people's enslavement was justified on the basis of their alleged racial inferiority, but the exploitation of black women went beyond their employment as field hands and included also forms of sexual exploitation that were enforced on them because of their gender. Similarly to Crenshaw, in *Women, Race, and Class*, a work focused on women's struggles for equality in America and the role of black women in the shaping of the women's rights movement, Angela Davis also examines the ways in which the categories of race, gender and class interact with one another to produce inequality and to reinforce patterns of domination. Starting her analysis from the impact of slavery on black women,

[1] Ula Taylor, "The Historical Evolution of Black Feminist Theory and Praxis", *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 29, no. 2 (1998): p.250.
[2] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics", in Sharpley-Whiting and James, eds., *The Black Feminist Reader*, 2000, p.209.

Davis significantly argues that enslaved black women "were beaten and raped, but never subdued."[3] The acknowledgement of black women's resistance to slavery gives rise to a series of questions concerning their actual role in the fight against slavery, which can be boiled down to: how did slave women resist their condition of oppression? This question becomes even more relevant if one considers that slave women were not only exploited for their labor but also for their capacity to bear children and, consequently, reproduce human capital for their masters.

In her work Davis also points out that despite the fact that many slave narratives represent women as victims of sexual violence, this question has frequently been ignored in traditional literature on slavery.[4] This study, therefore, stems from the desire to investigate this issue in depth by considering if and how black women rebelled against racial and sexual exploitation, and by paying attention to their representation in narratives about slavery. More specifically, the aim of this study is to try and investigate the issue of female agency within the context of American slavery, focusing on the analysis of motherhood as a possible site of empowerment for black women. The choice to concentrate on motherhood in particular is dictated by various reasons, the first one being that motherhood clearly is a unique female dimension and, as such, it allows to analyze problems that are strictly related to womanhood. Moreover, given the fact that the sexual violence perpetrated on slave women was mostly used by slaveholders as an instrument for breeding human chattel, motherhood can also be examined in relation to patterns of racial and sexual domination as well as in relation to strategies of dehumanization.

This study, then, specifically examines two works by black female writers, namely *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) by the former slave Harriet Jacobs and *Dessa Rose* (1986) by Sherley Anne Williams. The main reason why these two works were chosen for this analysis is that they can relate on different levels. First of all, they both provide an insight into slavery from a black female perspective, since both the protagonists and the authors of these works are black women. This allows the reader to engage directly with issues, such as sexual exploitation, that are strictly related to race and gender. Moreover, both *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Dessa Rose* put at

[3] Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class*, London: The Women's Press, 1982, p.29.
[4] Davis, *Women, Race and Class*, p.25.

the center of the narration the experience of two slave mothers, denouncing the troublesome position of these women who not only had to suffer the effects of slavery on their own lives, but also had to think about the safety of their offspring. It should not be surprising that *Dessa Rose* shares these themes with *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* despite being written more than a century later. As noted by Angelyn Mitchell, Jacobs's slave narrative has started a "dialogue about the nature of black womanhood in America to which the contemporary novelists respond."[5] This means that, according to Mitchell, Jacobs has laid the foundations for the discussion of the role of black women and of their representation in historical and literary works, which seems to characterize the works of many contemporary black female writers, including Williams's.

This study has been divided into four main chapters. The first one is an introductory chapter that aims at providing basic information on the topic of American chattel slavery, which can be useful to better understand the condition of black female slaves in such context. It examines in particular the importance of the slaveholding system for Southern agricultural economy, which was largely based on the exploitation of free slave labor to survive. This chapter also analyzes the implications that the transmission of the status of slave from mother to child had on black women's lives, as their reproductive potential began to be exploited as a means to increase the human capital of their masters. The issue of sexual violence and rape, strictly related to the exploitation of slave women as breeders, is also extensively addressed in chapter one, especially with regard to its use as an instrument of domination.

After outlining the historical background taken into consideration for this study in chapter one, chapter two moves on to present the ideological context surrounding the institution of slavery, focusing in particular on the issue of representation of black womanhood, which is first considered in its oppositional relation to white womanhood and then in relation to stereotypes framed by dominant groups. The chapter thus opens with a discussion of the Cult of True Womanhood, which is a system of values that promoted an ideal of white femininity that was based on the glorification of submission and domesticity as the attributes of "true women", and then considers the different

[5] Angelyn Mitchell, *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction*, New Brunswick, London: Rutgers University Press, 2002, p.18.

stereotypical images of black womanhood, such as that of the mammy and of the jezebel, which were circulated by the dominant group as a means to foster the objectification of black women. Finally, chapter two also analyzes the different ways in which black women are represented in literature by former slave men and women, especially with respect to their condition as victims of violence, also pointing out the problematic position of slave mothers in contexts of oppression.

The two final chapters respectively deal with Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Williams's *Dessa Rose*. In particular, chapter three provides a thorough analysis of Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, which starts with an explanation of the form and the genre of Jacobs's work. After a discussion concerning the reasons behind the publication of this narrative, which was motivated by Jacobs's desire to convince her readers of the necessity to support the abolition of slavery, the chapter moves on to examine Jacobs's critique of the ideology of True Womanhood, which she considers inapplicable to slave women due to the condition of sexual exploitation they had to endure. Given that the main aim of this chapter is to identify possible connections between female agency and motherhood, particular attention is given to the analysis of the different strategies of resistance carried out by Linda throughout the text in order to secure her children's safety.

Finally, chapter four focuses on Williams's *Dessa Rose*, providing first of all background information regarding the genre, the form and the context within which it was published. This chapter also provides a detailed analysis of the process of dehumanization of the enslaved black woman that Williams meticulously describes throughout the text. Similarly to the previous chapter, this one too is aimed at understanding the way in which motherhood and agency interact in the narrative, thus part of the discussion is centered upon Dessa's fight for freedom and her rebellion against her oppressors. An issue that is also examined in this chapter is the fear of separation and loss, which Dessa experiences as a consequence of her enslavement, and that is strictly related to her maternal identity.

1. The Business of Slavery

1.1. American Chattel Slavery

One of the first records of the arrival of enslaved Africans in North America dates back to 1619. They were brought to Jamestown, Virginia, and sold to work alongside English indentured servants in tobacco plantations. However, at that time, the number of white servants in Virginia exceeded that of black slaves by four to one.[1] It was only in the late 1670s that the landowners' interest in the purchase of African slaves began to increase. This was probably a consequence of the shortage of English manpower that followed the Civil War in the 1640s. Additionally, another possible reason why work force began to run low is that English migrants began to seek their fortune in newly founded colonies. Therefore, in the seventeenth century the demand for African slaves to exploit as plantation workers started to grow steadily until, by the mid-nineteenth century, the United States had become the nation with the highest number of slaves in the Western Hemisphere.[2] This event is particularly revealing of the fact that slaveholding had developed into a fundamental part of the American economic system. More specifically, the needs of the recent industrializing world had led landowners to exploit slave work at a higher rate in order to meet the demands of the international market.[3] This section will examine the relationship between slavery and the American marketplace; in particular, it will investigate slaveholders' economic interests in the slave trade in order to provide background information that will be useful for the understanding of the condition of enslaved black women, a topic that will be discussed in the following section.

A large part of the agricultural economy of the Southern States was based on the production of commodity crops, such as cotton, rice, tobacco, and sugar. All of these goods were produced by slaves in Southern plantations and later exported to different countries. Therefore, slaves proved to be extremely useful for landholders as a means to produce wealth. Furthermore, the nature of slavery in the United States allowed slaveholders to consider their slaves as pieces of property that could be sold and inherited

[1] David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and the Fall of Slavery in the New World*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, p.132.
[2] Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, p.175.
[3] Claire Robertson, "Africa into the Americas? Slavery and Women, the Family, and the Gender Division of Labor", in Gaspar and Hine, eds., *More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*, 1996, p.6.

like any other possession. The result of this is that slaves were not valuable to planters only because of the work they would do for them, but also because of the possible profit that could derive from their sale. This is the reason why the type of slavery that developed in the New World is often referred to as chattel slavery. A crucial feature of chattel slavery is the dehumanization of the enslaved man or woman which is strictly related to their monetary value as property.[4] From an economic point of view, this means that slaves were assigned a price that corresponded to their skills or to their capabilities to perform a particular task and, in so doing, slaveholders further denied the possibility of regarding them as more than livestock. The fact that slaves were considered in these terms also enabled the possibility of using them as collateral for loans to plantation owners.[5] Given the fact that slave property was so valuable, it was quite common for slaveholders to mortgage their own slaves when they needed to borrow some money. By so doing, if they failed to repay their debt, the slaves that had been mortgaged could be seized as payment. It is important to notice that this loan system allowed slaveowners to put their slaves in a condition of double exploitation. This depends on the fact that mortgaged slaves would become a source of financial income while, at the same time, they would also continue to work for their master.[6]

It seems, therefore, clear that slaveholders were interested in maximizing the profit they could make out of their human capital. This is especially visible in the fact that the financial worth that was assigned to enslaved people did not expire after their death; on the contrary, every slave had a post-mortem value that their masters could try to collect.[7] For instance, when a slave was murdered, the slaveowner could apply to the court in an attempt to be refunded for the damage that the loss of the slave might have caused. In order to protect their own investment in enslaved capital, slaveholders could also stipulate life insurance policies on the slaves they possessed.[8] The famous Zong case in 1781 is an example of this practice: the captain of the slave ship Zong ordered to throw

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[4] Eva Boesenberg, "The Color of Money: Economic Structures of Race and Gender under Slavery", in Gates, Pedersen and Diedrich, eds., *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage*, 1999, p.117.
[5] Bonnie Martin, "Neighbor-to-Neighbor Capitalism: Local Credit Networks and the Mortgaging of Slaves", in Beckert and Rockman, eds., *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development*, 2016, p.108.
[6] Martin, "Neighbor-to-Neighbor Capitalism", p.110.
[7] Diana Ramey Berry, "Broad is de Road dat Leads ter Death: Human Capital and Enslaved Mortality", in Beckert and Rockman, eds., *Slavery's Capitalism*, 2016, p.146.
[8] Berry, "Broad is de Road dat Leads ter Death", p.154.

overboard more than a hundred living slaves after the outbreak of an epidemic on board. When the ship arrived in Jamaica, the slaveowner tried to collect the insurance on their lives; at first, the court ruled in his favor, but then the insurers appealed and won the case. Thus, the slaveowner was not refunded for his property loss.[9] Therefore, it seems that, in the perspective of slaveowners, enslaved men and women were not only producers of wealth but also pieces of property of which they could dispose as they pleased.

The desire of maximizing the profits deriving from enslaved property also reflected on the slaveholders' attempts to incentivize slaves' productivity. Slaveholders tried to look for consent and gratitude on the part of their slaves by granting them benefits that could improve their living conditions and boost their morale, so as to encourage slaves to work harder, and thus, produce more. According to David Brion Davis, this tendency to seek slaves' gratefulness was especially common within those Southern plantation realities where paternalism was deeply rooted.[10] This ideology pictured the dimension of the plantation as a patriarchal household where the master is a father-like figure that takes care of his slave-children. Following this line of thought, it was not uncommon for the master to resort to a language that belonged to the sphere of the family and to refer to enslaved people as his "children".[11] In order to promote productivity, some plantation owners even granted a few rewards to their slaves, such as clothes or other commodities. These types of incentive were used by masters as a means to favor a high productivity and also as a means of exerting social control over their slaves. For example, it has been pointed out that it was quite common for masters to encourage stability in slave families, especially considering the fact that their economic investments were grounded in the work of their slaves.[12] By so doing, plantation owners hoped to reduce the risk of escape attempts and slave rebellions, as well as to promote growth in the slave population. Therefore, these allowances granted by slave masters were often an instrument to safeguard their own economic interests, as the loss of their slaves might have a negative impact on their incomes.

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[9] Berry, "Broad is de Road dat Leads ter Death", p.155.
[10] Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, p.194.
[11] Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *Fatal Self-Deception: Slaveholding Paternalism in the Old South*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, p.25.
[12] Robertson, "Africa into the Americas?", p.14.

It is important, however, to be mindful of the fact that it would be inaccurate to believe that, in those plantations where the ideology of paternalism was deeply rooted, the relationship between master and slaves was shaped by kindness. On the contrary, paternalism was based on the constant use of violence and threats.[13] Masters were fully aware of the fact that instilling fear was often a necessary tool for reinforcing the position of power they had over their slaves. Furthermore, the association of masters and slaves with the household roles of father and children was also related to the idea that black people were inherently inferior to white people. Profoundly convinced of this, slave masters used arguments of racial inferiority as a justification for their enslavement.[14] These arguments were based on the assumption that black people were unable to support themselves and live in freedom without the risk of returning to a savage state. Consequently, slaveowners contended that black people were happy to be put in bondage because, in this way, they could be kept safe and protected by their master. Therefore, the identification of the slave with a child-like figure was used to reinforce this type of ideology.[15] This resulted in the diffusion of the Sambo stereotype, that is the representation of the slave as a childish and lazy black man who is completely dependent on his master and who is happy to live in this condition.

As previously discussed, considering the fact that the loss of a slave could represent a significant economic cost for a slaveholder, the law sanctioned a compensation for the damage suffered. In order to prevent the possibility of escaping bondage, the law also enforced certain measures that limited the liberty of enslaved people and that made running away extremely difficult.[16] For instance, slaves could not leave a plantation without a pass signed by their master and people who gave shelter to runaways were subjected to heavy sanctions. As an incentive, those who managed to return runaways to their master were often granted rewards for their help. Therefore, the safeguard of the economic interests of slaveholders also depended on the legal recognition of slaves as property. Moreover, the fear of possible slave insurrections led to the necessity of increasingly restricting the freedom of enslaved black people. This resulted

[13] Fox-Genovese and Genovese, *Fatal Self-Deception*, p.86.
[14] Fox-Genovese and Genovese, *Fatal Self-Deception*, p.121.
[15] Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, p.51.
[16] William M. Wiecek, "The Statutory Law of Slavery and Race in the Thirteen Mainland Colonies of British America", *The William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. 34, no. 2 (1977): p.271.

in the passing of laws that prohibited masters from teaching their slaves to read and write, as well as of laws that prevented slaves from carrying weapons, walking away from their plantation without a written pass, and even gathering together in plantations or towns.[17] Despite the numerous limitations enforced by the state with regard to enslaved people, it should be noticed that the power of masters was also somewhat restrained by the law. For example, slaveholders could not murder or maim a slave without a legally acceptable reason; nevertheless, these laws were often difficult to enforce and, in most cases, the punishment for this type of offence consisted in a fine or a brief period of detention.[18]

Black slaves were an extremely profitable source of income for their masters. In particular, their familiarity with agricultural labor and their constitution, which enabled them to work in harsh environmental conditions, made them excellent workers in the eyes of plantation owners.[19] However, the value of slaves was not related only to the amount of work they could do in the fields to increase the production of tradable goods. Given the fact that chattel slavery defined enslaved people as pieces of property, each slave was himself or herself a commodity that could be sold to make profit. As explained previously, this also meant that slaves could be mortgaged if their owner needed a loan and insurance policies even allowed masters to ask for compensation if a slave was killed. The economic value of slaves was also enhanced by state laws that safeguarded slaveholders against the possible loss of their human capital. Consequently, the dehumanization of enslaved people seems to be the result of an economic system that was based on the exploitation of free labor as a means to increase financial income. With the aim to achieve this end, this system also relied upon the promotion of racial ideologies that were used as a justification for the perpetration of slavery.

Thus far, it has been shown that masters viewed slaves as pieces of property and, therefore, exploited their labor in life and tried to receive compensation for their death when possible. The following section moves on to consider the conditions of black female

[17] Wiecek, "The Statutory Law of Slavery and Race in the Thirteen Mainland Colonies of British America", pp.272-3.
[18] Wiecek, "The Statutory Law of Slavery and Race in the Thirteen Mainland Colonies of British America", p.266.
[19] Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, p.99.

slaves in an attempt to explain how masters could further exploit enslaved women for their reproductive ability and how this affected their lives.

1.2. The Reproductive Role of Slave Women

As previously discussed, enslaved people proved to be an extremely convenient source of manpower for plantation owners. Not only were they exploited to do heavy field work, but they could also be sold and bought as any other tradable wares. Given the economic value that enslaved people had for their master, they were regarded as a capital investment in all respects. Nevertheless, after Congress ruled in favor of the abolition of the international trade in 1808, purchasing and importing slaves from Africa became illegal. One of the most significant consequences of this event was that the exploitation of the reproductive capacity of slave women, which was already a common practice, evolved into an even more profitable business for slaveholders.[20] This is due to the fact that state law established the principle of *partus sequitur ventrem*, which meant that the child followed the condition of the mother. As a result, any child born to a slave mother was himself or herself a slave. After 1808, the interregional slave trade was still going and, since the only way to acquire new slaves was procreation, enslaved women in childbearing years became a valuable source of income for slave owners.

It has been estimated that by 1860, despite the abolition of the international trade, the southern slave population amounted to almost four million people and was mostly composed of native-born slaves.[21] This piece of information seems to be evidence of the fact that slaveholders' exploitation of the reproductive lives of enslaved women was an advantageous means to increase the number of slaves they owned. Fertility played, therefore, a significant role in the eyes of slaveholders and they would resort to several different measures to ensure that a slave woman in her childbearing years could give them as many children as possible. For instance, they could decide to grant pregnant slaves rewards and benefits, such as dispensation from certain types of hard labor, in order to encourage them to have more children. However, this did not mean that they were

[20] Emily West and Erin Shearer, "Fertility Control, Shared Nurturing, and Dual Exploitation: The Lives of Enslaved Mothers in the Antebellum United States", *Women's History Review*, vol. 27, no. 6, 2018, p.1007.
[21] Sally G. McMillen, *Southern Women: Black and White in the Old South*, John Wiley & Sons, 2017, p.70.

protected from violence or punishments.[22] Moreover, even if it is true that some slave masters allowed a few benefits to pregnant women, it would be misleading to assume that they did not have to work as much as anyone else. Slaveholding was primarily a business for masters, who wanted to make sure to maximize the productivity rate of each slave, independently of their conditions. This is especially evident in the case of large southern plantations where pregnant women worked alongside old slaves and children in the so-called “trash gangs”.[23]

If on the one hand some slave women could be rewarded for their pregnancy, on the other hand those women who could not bear children were often subjected to punishments, namely being separated from their families and, eventually, being sold to another master. Nevertheless, during the antebellum period, slaveholders began to rely increasingly on medical experimentation in an attempt to find a cure for female infertility.[24] Considering that for slaveholders slaves were a significant economic investment, it seemed reasonable to try and find a solution to this problem, rather than get rid of an infertile woman immediately. In many cases, however, the risk of buying an infertile slave was prevented directly at the moment of the purchase. Generally, as mentioned in the previous section, buyers would stipulate life insurance policies on the slaves they wanted to acquire in order to safeguard their own financial interests; therefore, buyers could ask physicians to verify the health conditions of slaves before buying them. In the case of enslaved women this practice also included a check of their reproductive capability, which most of the times consisted in determining whether she had already given birth to a child.[25]

The reproductive function of slave women was, therefore, essential to slaveholders who wanted to increase the number of slaves they owned. In addition to being exploited sexually, enslaved women also had to perform hard labor for their masters. As mentioned above, the fact of being pregnant did not influence the type of treatment that slave women received, nor did their femininity. As a result, in the eyes of

[22] Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in Antebellum South*, Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 2006, p.18.
[23] Wilma King, "'Suffer with them till Death': Slave Women and their Children in Nineteenth-Century America", in Gaspar and Hine, eds., *More than Chattel*, 1996. p.154.
[24] Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave*, p.68.
[25] Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave*, p.73.

a slaveholder, slaves were differentiated only because of their sex, rather than because of their gender.[26] This means that the major difference between enslaved men and women resided in the reproductive potential of the latter. As discussed in the previous section, enslaved people were considered to be the same as chattel; consequently, their gender was not relevant to slaveholders, who exploited men and women equally for their labor. An example of this indifference to gender can be found in the way in which the cargo of slave ships was perceived to be. More specifically, when slaves were loaded into the ships that had to take them to the New World, they were simply thought of as quantities.[27] In this case, gender was not considered important, however sex was because, presumably, women occupied less space than men on board, and thus the arrangement of cargo could be done accordingly. Therefore, the sexual differentiation of enslaved people was considered only to the extent to which it favored the economic interests of slaveholders.

Considering black women for their reproductive potential was advantageous, and so was having them work alongside men in plantations. Even though it is true that both men and women in bondage were subjected to the same harsh labor conditions, it has been pointed out that there was a certain degree of division of work, especially in Southern plantations and farms.[28] This was mainly due to the fact that some chores required a greater physical strength to be performed. Thus, for instance, usually men plowed while women hoed. Moreover, not only did slave women work as much as slave men, but they often had to perform additional domestic chores after sundown. Enslaved black women were also subjected to a specific kind of exploitation that was related to their reproductive ability, namely wet-nursing. Therefore, slave women who had recently given birth to a child were often forced to breastfeed the children of their master as well. Another type of work that enslaved women frequently performed was midwifery. Midwives were indeed essential to help slave women deliver their babies as safely as possible and many of them were also skilled healers who knew how to cure different illnesses, thus proving to be extremely valuable to slaveholders.[29] Both midwifery and

[26] Venetria K. Patton, *Women in Chains: The Legacy of Slavery in Black Women's Fiction*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000, p.8.
[27] Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: an American Grammar Book", in Sharpley-Whiting and James, eds., *The Black Feminist Reader*, 2000, p.70.
[28] Deborah G. White, "Female Slaves: Sex Roles and Status in the Antebellum Plantation South", in Dublin and Sklar, eds., *Women and Power in American History: A Reader. VOL 1 TO 1880*, 1991, p.161.
[29] Schwartz, p.146.

wet-nursing are types of works related to the female sex and, as such, they enabled slaveholders to exploit black women in a way that was unique to their sex. Consequently, it seems evident that all enslaved people, men and women, were required to perform heavy labor; however, women were also compelled to perform additional tasks as a result of their being female. This is, thus, evidence of the dualistic nature of the work of slave women who were seen as both producer and reproducers of goods for their masters.[30] Furthermore, it was not uncommon for slave women in smaller plantations to be assigned to the same type of physical demanding field work that was usually done by men. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that, in most cases, this was more likely to happen when a woman was no longer in her childbearing years.[31]

It seems, therefore, clear that enslaved women were extremely valuable to their masters because of the possibility of exploiting both their work and their reproductive lives. As Angela Davis noted, "They were 'breeders'-animals, whose monetary value could be precisely calculated in terms of their ability to multiply their numbers."[32] In light of the fact that slaves were economically and legally considered to be the same as chattel, the sexual exploitation of enslaved black women was seen as nothing more than the exercise of the property right of the master over them. As a result, slave women were frequently victims of sexual assault and rape, especially considering that, unlike white women, they did not enjoy the benefits of patriarchal protection. With regard to sexual violence, it should be pointed out that rape was legally regarded as the violation of a man's property.[33] This means that violence against women was punished by the law because of the damage that the sexual assault caused to men, namely the father or the husband of the victim. This is due to the fact that the social value of a woman was related to her perceived purity, thus raped women could not expect to meet the standards of respectability that was required of them by society. If this was the case for white women, enslaved black women were even less protected by the law. Not only were they often raped by their white masters, but they were not even safeguarded against sexual violence

[30] Jacqueline Jones, "'My Mother was much of a Woman': Black Women, Work, and the Family under Slavery", *Feminist Studies*, vol. 8, no. 2 (1982): p. 236.
[31] White, "Female Slaves", p.161.
[32] Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class*, London: The Women's Press, 1982, p.7.
[33] Patricia L. N. Donat and John D'Emilio, "A Feminist Redefinition of Rape and Sexual Assault: Historical Foundation and Change", *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 48, no. 1 (1992): p.18.

perpetrated by enslaved black men.[34] Once again, the main reason behind this lack of protection was related to the economic interests of slaveholders because any child born of rape would help increase the number of slaves they owned, and thus their capital.

Unprotected by the law and seen as breeders by their masters, enslaved black women had to endure both physical and sexual violence throughout their whole lives. In order to legitimize the systematic rape of slave women, slaveholders would cling to racial ideologies that were meant to explain the nature of black people. More specifically, Davis pointed out the conceptualization of the myth of the black man as rapist, which stemmed from the widespread association between blackness and bestiality, also influenced the way in which black women's sexuality was seen.[35] Given the fact that, according to this myth, black men are inclined to consider white women as sexual preys, the assumption that follows is that black women must necessarily be eager to receive the attentions of white men. As a result, the rape of enslaved black women seemed to be justified not only by the property rights of slave masters, but also by the development of racial stereotypes that facilitated the perpetration of this type of behavior. Being the legal owners of slave women, masters were the only ones that could potentially appeal to court for accuses of rape if they believed that their rights on what they considered to be their property had been overstepped. Nevertheless, not only did this happen rarely but, in most cases, it was the master himself that offered the sexual services of his slaves to other white men as a sign of hospitality.[36]

The rape of slave women, then, was legitimized by the law as well as by racial ideologies. Increasing the size of human capital owned by slaveholders was indeed one the main reasons why sexual violence was allowed. However, there was another equally significant reason for this, which was also related to the economic interests of slave owners: social control. Rape was in all respects a weapon of domination that aimed at submitting enslaved women by eradicating their desire to rebel against their masters, as well as at demoralizing black men.[37] This means that the brutal violence that slave women had to undergo affected not only them, but also their men. More specifically, sexual

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[34] Karen A. Getman, "Sexual Control in the Slaveholding South: The Implementation and Maintenance of a Racial Caste System", *Harvard Women's Law Journal*, vol. 7 (1984): p.144.
[35] A. Davis, *Women, Race and Class*, p.182.
[36] Getman, "Sexual Control in the Slaveholding South", p.146.
[37] A. Davis, *Women, Race and Class*, p.24.

violence was finalized to the enhancement of the master's authority and used as a means to tone down possible rebellious behavior. With regard to this, Kimberlé Crenshaw suggested that, historically, rape can be considered as a "weapon of racial terror", rather than only as the expression of male domination over female sexuality.[38] The reasoning behind this statement is that being both black and female meant that black women were not raped simply because they were women, nor were they oppressed simply because of their blackness; rather, they were oppressed in a way that is specific to the condition of being a black woman, which is, as such, a category situated at the intersection of race and sex.[39] This means that, with respect to slavery, enslaved black women's gender is what made them subjects of sexual violence, which is also what enabled slave masters to reinforce racial oppression over them.

Enslaved black women were perfectly aware of what it meant for a woman to be held in bondage. Therefore, despite the legal claims that masters had over their bodies, slave women did not subdue easily. Rather, they tried to resist oppression and often resorted to several means to defy their master's authority. This is especially visible in the fact that enslaved women were knowledgeable about the usage of herbs and plants, specifically cotton roots and indigo, as measures of birth control.[40] Conscious of the fact that giving birth to a child meant increasing the human capital of their masters, some black women would ingest these plants as contraception or as a way to cause abortion, thus defying the authority of those masters who wanted to exploit them as breeders. Among the greatest fears of slaveholders was the possibility that slave mothers could commit infanticide, especially because that would mean being deprived of what they considered to be their rightful property. A famous example of this is the case of Margaret Garner, a slave woman who in 1856 tried to escape from bondage together with her husband and her children. However, after being tracked down by her master she decided to kill her children rather than tolerating to see them brought back into slavery, but only managed to kill her daughter. Similar cases of infanticide have been interpreted as forms of resistance to slavery; however, it should be noted that the killing of babies at the hands

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[38] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics", in Sharpley-Whiting and James, eds., *The Black Feminist Reader*, 2000, pp. 223.
[39] Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex", p.209.
[40] Liese M. Perrin, "Resisting Reproduction: Reconsidering Slave Contraception in the Old South", *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 35, no. 2 (2001): p.259.

of their mothers was not as common an event as it is sometimes thought.[41] Finally, slave women also tried to defend themselves against sexual assaults and, in some cases, they even resorted to physical violence to fight off their assaulters. However, resisting violence was often quite dangerous as it could result in the injuring or killing of the assaulter, or the slave herself. According to the law, striking a white person was an offence that was usually punished with a whipping but, in some cases, it could also be considered such a serious transgression that it could even be punished with death.[42] Despite the sexual violence that they had to endure, enslaved black women often attempted to carry out strategies of resistance, such as repelling sexual attacks or trying to prevent pregnancy, which were tools to defend themselves and to defy the authority of their masters.

Any attempt to hinder pregnancy on behalf of slave women was considered as a threat to the economic interests of slaveholders. As a consequence, slave masters resorted to every means possible to favor the birth of new slaves. As mentioned in the previous section, many slave masters focused on the support of a climate of stability among their slaves. More specifically, they encouraged enslaved people to live in family units and to have children. In some cases, masters even allowed the informal recognition of slave marriages. These unions, however, were never actually legalized, due to the fact that the legal legitimation of slave marriage would prevent slaveholders from selling and separating married slaves, thus interfering with the property rights of the master.[43] However, enslaved people did not always have the possibility to choose their own partners. This is especially visible in the practice of slave breeding, which was not so widespread, but a reality nonetheless.[44] This method consisted in the selection of what the slaveholder considered to be the best breeders among his slaves as a means to ensure that their children would be strong and valuable resources to exploit. Therefore, slave owners could also exercise forms of eugenics, deciding who could have children and who could not. This power that slaveholders had over the reproductive conditions of their slaves could get to such an extent that, in some cases, they could even resort to the

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[41] Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave*, p.210.
[42] Wiecek, “The Statutory Law of Slavery and Race in the Thirteen Mainland Colonies of British America”, p.273.
[43] McMillen, *Southern Women*, p.41.
[44] Robertson, “Africa into the Americas?”, p.25.

exploitation of stud men.[45] These enslaved black men were used to impregnate as many slave women as possible, so as to increase the overall chances of pregnancies.

Slaveholders expected most slave women to give birth to children that would increase the quantity of slaves they could exploit for hard labor. As already explained, the way in which slave children were conceived was not relevant to masters, as long as it ensured that women got pregnant. Therefore, motherhood covered a significant part of the lives of black women, independently of the fact that a child could be the outcome of forced intercourse. More specifically, it has been estimated that a slave woman, on average, began childbearing when she was about twenty years old and had children every two and a half years.[46] A slave mother lived with the constant fear of being separated from her own children since she was well aware of the fact that, once the children had reached a certain age, they could be sold to another master. Despite all of the above-mentioned issues related to slave unions and motherhood, family ties became in all respects a source of strength for slaves and an important point of reference in slave communities. If, on the one hand, families could be used by slaveholders to threaten slaves and to discourage rebellious activity, on the other hand they could still provide a shelter against oppression and violence.

With regard to the slave family, it is worth to mention the fact that the African heritage of enslaved people, together with the limitations imposed on them by slavery, gave shape to a type of family that was substantially different from the one conceptualized by traditional western thought, especially for what concerns the role assigned to motherhood. More specifically, the division of family life into two different spheres on the basis of gender was not a feature that could be found in black families.[47] This is due to the fact that, traditionally, for African women taking care of both the emotional and physical sustenance of children was all part of the dimension of motherhood, as opposed to white middle class families in which the man provided to the economic support of the family, whereas the woman took care of the nurturing functions. In addition to African tradition, the conditions under which black women were forced to live under slavery also

[45] McMillen, *Southern Women*, p.43.
[46] White, “Female Slaves”, p.161.
[47] Patricia Hill Collins, “The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother/Daughter Relationships”, *Sage*, vol. 4, no. 2 (1987): p.4.

enhanced the importance of their role within the family unit. In particular, the fact that many children were the result of sexual violence, and thus had no actual father, compelled enslaved women to be the main source of support for them. This is the reason why the slave family has often been defined as "matrifocal", a term that is used to highlight precisely the importance of the mother as a major provider for her family.[48]

Given the fact that enslaved women had to perform hard labor all day long, taking care of children was not always an easy task to do for slave mothers. For example, it was not uncommon for slave women to carry their babies on their back or to leave them under the shade of a nearby tree while working in the fields. Therefore, it was quite frequent for other women of the slave community, the so-called "othermothers", to assist mothers who could not take care of their own children.[49] Furthermore, children were often sold to other masters, and thus separated from their families and left without parental care. Hence, the role of othermothers within the slave community was extremely important. As a result, this practice gave way to the formation of extended family relations, in which women looked after each other's children. As Patricia Hill Collins has argued, this community-based experience of motherhood can be regarded as a form of adaptation to the restrictions that slavery imposed over black people.[50] This becomes especially evident if it is considered that slave women, as already discussed, were not given any dispensation from work if they were pregnant and, once they had delivered their baby, they were expected to resume their former chores. Therefore, in order to be able to combine the experience of motherhood with their enslaved conditions, black women had to rely upon the support of the slave community.

Slave mothers had the great responsibility to prepare their children for their lives in bondage. It was essential that children learned how to behave if they wanted to avoid being punished for their actions or to prevent repercussions on their family members. Women's desire to protect their children reflected on the way in which they raised them, as a result many slave mothers resorted to harsh discipline to educate them.[51] For instance, children had to be taught that what they said could affect the lives of their relatives.

[48] Robertson, "Africa into the Americas?", p.12.
[49] Collins, "The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother/Daughter Relationships", p.5.
[50] Collins, "The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother/Daughter Relationships", p.5.
[51] King, "'Suffer with them till Death'", p.153.

Therefore, being strict could sometimes be necessary in order to ensure the survival of a whole family. Furthermore, children had to be taught how to perform different chores efficiently. With regard to slave children labor, it has been pointed out that, in many cases, girls began working years before boys: they started with housework when they were about seven years old and subsequently moved to field labor when they were old enough, whereas boys started to work directly in the fields.[52] It seems, therefore, that the exploitation of slaves began when they were still quite young, especially for women; as a consequence, children needed to be guided by their parents until they learned how to work satisfactorily.

Protecting their own children was often difficult for slave mothers. The main reason why is that, as slaves, they were completely subjected to the authority of their master. Children, like adults, could be physically punished for whatever reason the master considered appropriate. Therefore, despite the attempts of slave mothers to spare their children punishments like whipping, they had no guarantee they would succeed in their efforts. Moreover, sometimes safeguarding the health of their children was simply beyond the control of enslaved mothers. This is especially evident in the survival rates of newborns, which were directly related to the physical health of the mother.[53] As a result, the harsh lives of enslaved pregnant women, who were most likely malnourished and physically fatigued by work, also affected the health of their unborn babies.

As mentioned above, the fear of separation was a tangible reality for enslaved mothers. This is due to the fact that slave parents had no legal rights over their own children, who were considered to be property of slaveholders in all respects. Nevertheless, slave mothers tried to protect their children as much as they could. Some of them tried to convince their masters not to sell their children, some others attempted to persuade buyers to purchase the entire family or arrange for them to be sold to nearby plantations. Finally, escaping was another option. However, it has been noted that, especially in the antebellum period, it was more likely for enslaved mothers to encourage their children to run away, rather than escape together.[54] The main reason behind this is that it was easier for slaves

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[52] Richard H. Steckel, "Women, Work, and Health under Plantation Slavery in the United States", in Gaspar and Hine, eds., *More than Chattel*, 1996, p.44.
[53] Steckel, "Women, Work, and Health under Plantation Slavery in the United States", p.53.
[54] King, "'Suffer with them till Death'", p.161.

to escape alone since it was harder to track down one slave than an entire group. Moreover, escaping with a child meant facing great difficulties on the road to freedom, such as hunger and weariness. Therefore, even though family ties proved to be a source of stability and strength for enslaved people, it is also true that they could often prevent slaves from running away because many of them worried about the safety of their relatives.

As explained in this section, after the abolition of the international slave trade in 1808, the sexual exploitation of slave women became extremely valuable for slaveholders because it was the only legal way left to acquire new slaves. Therefore, masters resorted to different means to encourage slaves to have children, such as granting some benefits to pregnant slaves and punishing infertility. In many cases, however, enslaved women were victims of sexual violence. Rape, in particular, proved to be a terrible but efficient weapon of domination: on the one hand it daunted its victims, while on the other hand it could result in the conception of a child that would increase the human capital of slaveholders. Moreover, racial ideologies that strengthened white views about the lasciviousness of black people, together with the legal recognition of slaves as pieces of property, facilitated the perpetration of sexual violence at the expense of black women. As a result, it seems evident that enslaved women were subjected to a form of double exploitation that derived from their specific condition under slavery. Not only were they forced to endure the same harsh treatment as men, but they also had to suffer sexual violence. In the eyes of slaveholders, slave women were not mothers, but breeders. Nevertheless, women did all they could to carry out strategies of resistance that aimed at defying their authority. Furthermore, with the help of the slave community, slave mothers attempted to balance between hard labor and motherhood, hoping to be able to protect their children from the brutal reality of slavery.

This section has examined the condition of enslaved black women under slavery. In particular, it has focused on the explanation of the reasons behind the sexual exploitation of slave women, as well as on the effects of such exploitation on their lives. The following chapter will first examine the ideologies related to the concept of true womanhood; then, it will move on to discuss the issue of enslaved women's agency in an attempt to provide the theoretical bases that will be used for the analyses of Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*.

2. The Ideologies of Womanhood

The first chapter has examined the conditions of enslaved black people within the context of American chattel slavery. In particular, it has been pointed out that slaves were legally and economically regarded as tradable wares. This means that they were assigned a monetary value related to their capabilities to perform certain types of work and that they could, consequently, be sold and bought by slave owners like any other goods. Considering that this system was based on the exploitation of free labor, slavery proved to be an extremely profitable source of income for slaveholders. Therefore, racial ideologies that promoted the presumed inferiority of black people were used to support and legitimize the enforcement of slavery as a system of oppression. These ideologies led to the development of several stereotypes about black people that were meant to provide a justification for their subjugation. The aim of this chapter is to outline the ideologies of womanhood that framed the context within which black women writers tried to claim a space for enslaved women as active agents in resisting the oppression of slavery. Unlike men, slave women were not subjected only to physical exploitation but also to sexual violence. The practice of using black women as breeders became particularly common after the abolition of the international slave trade, especially considering that state laws did not safeguard them against rape. However, if on the one hand they were powerless in the eyes of the law, on the other hand they did not passively accept their condition and often found ways to defy their master's authority.

This chapter is organized as follows: the first section begins with the analysis of the Cult of True Womanhood, which laid the foundations of the nineteenth-century ideal of white womanhood and which also had several implications for the definition of black womanhood; the following section will examine the set of controlling images related to the representation of black women that were developed under slavery; finally, the last section will discuss the question of the agency of black female slaves with a particular emphasis on the different representation of women in slave narratives written by men in comparison to those written by women.

2.1. The Cult of True Womanhood

Racial ideologies promoted during slavery led to the development of several stereotypes about black people that were meant to provide a justification for their

subjugation. With particular regard to the stereotypical representation of black women, the scholar Hazel V. Carby has pointed out that the ideologies of white Southern womanhood influenced those of black womanhood to such an extent that white and black womanhood began to be defined as opposing concepts.[1] Therefore, in order to give a complete overview of the ideologies related to this topic, it seems worth to begin with an analysis of the ideals of white womanhood. The expression Cult of True Womanhood refers to a set of values that influenced nineteenth-century ideas of femininity, both North and South. As the scholar Barbara Welter pointed out, women were morally judged by society on the basis of four "cardinal virtues," namely piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.[2] First of all, in order to be regarded as virtuous, a woman had to be devout and pious. More importantly, she had to preserve her chastity until marriage because "without it she was, in fact, no woman at all, but a member of some lower order."[3] She also had to be submissive and thus passively accept her husband's authority. Finally, she was expected to dedicate her life to the care of the household. Consequently, a woman, to be socially recognized as such, had to possess all of these qualities as they were deemed to be fundamental characteristics for a true woman.

Despite being both shaped by the values promoted by the Cult of True Womanhood, Southern and Northern ideals of white femininity were slightly different from one another. While in New England the ideal woman was represented by the urban middle-class housewife, in the South true womanhood was embodied by the figure of the plantation lady.[4] These images of white womanhood reflected the economic and social environment in which they developed: New England was an industrial region, whereas the South was mostly based on an agricultural system led by plantation owners. The image of the Southern lady was especially characterized by her elevated status in society, which derived from her belonging to the landowning aristocracy. With regard to this, Marie S. Molloy has argued that Southern women had an interest in supporting slavery because

[1] Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afroamerican Woman Novelist*, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, p.20.
[2] Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood", *American Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 2 (1966): p.152.
[3] Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood", p.154.
[4] Amy Thompson McCandless, "Concepts of Patriarchy in the Popular Novels of Antebellum Southern Women", *Studies in Popular Culture*, vol. 10, no. 2, (1987): p.4.

their high social status depended on its survival.[5] More specifically, their wealth as well as their social and racial superiority were the result of an economic system that needed the exploitation of free slave labor to survive and to ensure a well-off living condition to Southern families. Within Southern patriarchal society, women were encouraged to accept their subordinate role if they wanted to maintain the elevated status that made them socially and racially superior to lower-class and black women. Therefore, the promotion of the ideal of true womanhood in the South was strictly related to the ideas of race and class, which marked the difference between those women who could and those who could not attain this standard of perfection.[6] Given their high position in society, Southern mistresses were expected to be the exemplification of ideal womanhood. With this expectation came the encouragement to meet the requirements set by the Cult of True Womanhood, which contributed to shaping an image of the Southern lady as a delicate and weak woman who needed to be protected from the outside world and whose place was in the house taking care of her family while her husband looked after business and political matters.

It seems quite clear that encouraging women to look at the above-mentioned virtues as the exemplification of true womanhood also helped to enhance the traditional division of family life into two separate spheres, feminine and masculine. In particular, the function of women as wives and mothers within the household was greatly emphasized by this ideology. This is especially evident in the fact that motherhood was regarded as a patriotic way for women to fulfill their civil duty because they were held responsible for the education of the future members of society.[7] Given the fact that, traditionally, the highest aspiration for a woman was to get married and to take care of her family, it seemed logical that a woman could only be truly considered virtuous if she possessed qualities that made her fit for this role in society. In this respect, therefore, Carby has argued that the power of the Cult of True Womanhood had a double cultural effect: not only was it the prevailing ideology defining the boundaries of acceptable female behavior, but at the same time it was also assimilated as a dominating image on

[5] Marie S. Molloy, *Single, White, Slaveholding Women in the Nineteenth-Century American South*, Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2018, p.12.
[6] Molloy, *Single, White, Slaveholding Women in the Nineteenth-Century American South*, p.13.
[7] Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood", p.172.

the basis of which the value of a woman was assessed in order to decide whether she could be considered a woman at all.[8]

The main implication of the assimilation of the Cult of True Womanhood as a dominating image was that those women who did not fit into the boundaries established by this ideology were regarded as social failures: women had to cling to the four virtues that defined them as true women because "without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth, all was ashes."[9] The failure to comply with the requirements of true womanhood meant being excluded from its domain altogether. Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to assume that most Southern women were the actual personification of the true woman; rather, this ideology can be seen as the result of a patriarchal society that aimed at maintaining specific power relations through the promotion of controlling images that were meant to enforce the oppression of women. More specifically, encouraging women to accept their role as mothers and wives was essential to Southern economy because marriage was used as an instrument to forge economic alliances between plantation families, thus ensuring the consolidation of properties within the family itself.[10]

However, the ideology related to the Cult of True Womanhood did not influence the life of white women only. As already mentioned, the discourse of white and black womanhood was articulated in such a way that one became the opposite of the other. Before analyzing the reasons behind this, it might be useful to provide some background information on the mental process of objectification. According to the scholar Patricia Hill Collins, the human mind works by means of a binary system of thought, which lies at the foundation of the way in which human beings conceptualize differences.[11] In particular, binary thought is responsible for the categorization of things on the basis of their relation to their counterpart. Within this relation, things gain meaning through opposition, which means that their difference is explained in terms of opposing concepts. Thus, for instance, the category male/female allows the mental visualization of each

[8] Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, p.23.
[9] Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood", p.152.
[10] Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, p.24.
[11] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, New York, London: Routledge, 2000, p.70.

element not just as different from the other, but as diametrically opposed. The result of this process is objectification, which derives from the association of what is different with "the other" and, therefore, as an object that needs to be manipulated. In contexts of domination, the most relevant consequence of this process of objectification is that the reality of the person that is subordinated is usually defined by those who are in power, rather than by himself or herself.[12]

Hence, the oppression of white women within Southern society can be seen as an example of this very process: the promotion of the Cult of True Womanhood as an ideology manipulated white womanhood as a means to control women's behavior. Nevertheless, if on the one hand white women were defined by their opposing relation to white men, on the other hand black women found themselves in opposition to white women, as well as to white men. As mentioned in the previous chapter, black women were subjected to a type of oppression that was specific to their condition of being both black and female. They were at the intersection of these categories, which made them experience slavery differently from black men but also made them subjected to a type of sexual oppression that was different from the one that white women had to endure.[13] Therefore, black womanhood could not be defined within the boundaries of white womanhood. On the contrary, it seemed that the qualities that characterized a true woman could not be attained by black women, especially considering the presumed status of inferiority that derived from their blackness.

As already pointed out, purity was one of the most important virtues that a woman should have: the social respectability of women was based on their chastity, which was in all respects regarded as a commodity.[14] This is mainly due to the fact that being chaste was necessary in order to ensure the arrangement of a proper marriage. However, the case of black women was completely different. It was not their chastity that was considered valuable, but rather their reproductive potential, which was often exploited to increase the number of slaves possessed by slaveholders. This meant that many enslaved black women were victims of rape and sexual violence, thus making it impossible for them to achieve

[12] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p.71.
[13] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics", in Sharpley-Whiting and James, eds., *The Black Feminist Reader*, 2000, p.217.
[14] Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, p.25.

an ideal of purity as conceived by white society. The issue of the preservation of chastity for slave women is exemplified in Harriet Jacobs's narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. In this narrative, Jacobs gives an account of her experience under slavery in an attempt to denounce the sexual abuse that slave women suffered at the hands of their masters. Jacobs's narrative displays a constant tension between her wish to fulfill the expectations of purity as defined by the Cult of True Womanhood and her master's attempts to deny her this accomplishment.[15] At the basis of this tension is the awareness that, for a slave woman, exercising control over her own body is beyond her power. Jacobs, as will be further explained in chapter three, does not only acknowledge the impossibility for her to fit within the boundaries of true womanhood, but also shows how she managed to use her own sexuality as a means to resist her master's oppression. More specifically, she describes how she deliberately started a relationship with Mr. Sands, a white neighbor, with the aim of having children with him and, thus, denying her master his power over her body.

The ideal of purity was therefore unattainable for slave women because of the conditions they suffered under slavery. Moreover, even if they could somehow remain chaste, they most definitely could not legally marry. In particular, as seen in the previous chapter, slave unions were often encouraged by slave masters as a means to promote stability within plantations; however, these unions did not have any actual legal value, therefore black women could not even fit within the conventional role of women as wives that was promoted by the Cult of True Womanhood. Black women also seemed to be excluded from the domain of true womanhood because of their physicality. Barbara Welter has underlined that a true woman had to defend the values of true womanhood "with her frail white hand."[16] The choice of the adjectives "frail" and "white" is particularly relevant as it points out the fact that this ideology was directed towards a specific idea of woman, which did not exclude only black women but also white women belonging to the lower class. This is due to the fact that a fair complexion was a sign of wealthy status in Southern society.[17] Therefore, both black and lower-class women did

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[15] Kimberly Drake, "Rewriting the American Self: Race, Gender, and Identity in the Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs", *MELUS*, vol. 22, no. 4 (1997): p.104.

[16] Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood", p.152

[17] Venetria K. Patton, *Women in Chains: The Legacy of Slavery in Black Women's Fiction*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000, p.30.

not embody the idea of whiteness that was intrinsic to the ideology of true womanhood. Moreover, slave women did not fall under the category of "frail" women: enslaved black women had to perform physical demanding chores and to work as much as slave men did, especially in plantations. As a result, the hard labor conditions they had to endure forged their constitution and their strength, thus broadening the physical gap between them and their "frail" and "white" mistresses. This physical difference is also stressed in the famous speech "Ain't I a Woman?" that was delivered by Sojourner Truth at the Akron, Ohio, Women's Rights Convention in 1851. In her speech, Sojourner Truth, a former slave woman, gave an account of her life experience under slavery, claiming that she could match the physical strength of slave men in her daily chores, thus pointing out that the assumption that women were the weaker sex could not apply to slave women. Sojourner Truth also forced her audience to reflect upon true womanhood as an ideal that restricted its boundaries only to white upper and middle-class women: through the repetition of the question "Ain't I a Woman?", she stressed the fact that her body had been shaped by the condition of enslavement that was enforced upon her and that had prevented her from embodying those qualities that instead defined white womanhood.[18]

Finally, the glorification of submissiveness and domesticity only seemed to be possible within the limits of white womanhood. The separation of family life into two different spheres on the basis of gender was a defining characteristic of white middle-class households but not of black families, which were instead shaped by their African heritage and the need to adjust to enslavement. As mentioned in the previous chapter, slave families were for the most part influenced by the model of matrifocality, according to which the role of women was vital to the functioning of the whole household. However, this did not mean that black women had more authority than men within their families, but rather that their relationships were more equal than those of their white counterparts.[19] Therefore, the image of the docile and subservient wife did not seem to represent black women who, once again, apparently transgressed the boundaries of true womanhood.

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[18] Angelita Dianne Reyes, *Mothering Across Cultures*, Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002, p.10.
[19] Patton, *Women in Chains*, p.32.

In the context of true womanhood, motherhood was celebrated as the most natural and important dimension of women's lives because becoming a mother meant complying with the highest expectations that society had for women. With regard to the mothering role of women, the scholar Venetria K. Patton has argued that the ideals of motherhood and womanhood were so strictly bound together that they resulted in the impossibility of formulating one concept without necessarily including the other.[20] Nevertheless, under slavery black women were deprived of their parental rights because newborns were legally considered property of their masters. Fulfilling their mothering role was therefore difficult, especially considering that the time that slave mothers could dedicate to their children was often limited because of the amount of work they had to do daily. In addition to this, the fear of being separated from their children was a palpable reality for black mothers, as masters could dispose of their slaves as they pleased, and thus, sell them to other slaveholders. It seems, then, that the conditions that black women had to endure during slavery denied them the possibility to embody the white ideal of motherhood, thus also excluding them from the boundaries of true womanhood.

The Cult of True Womanhood developed into an ideology that was meant to enhance a traditional role of women through the promotion of social behaviors that were glorified as the maximum expression of femininity. If a woman could not meet the requirements set by this ideology, she was considered to be socially unworthy. Nevertheless, the only women that could aspire to embody such an ideal of womanhood were part of the white Southern middle class, thus black women could not fit into the boundaries of true womanhood as they seemed to be lacking its four core virtues. The lack of these virtues made black womanhood a breeding ground for the development and rooting of stereotypes that had the effect of broadening the gap between white and black femininity even more. As will be explained in the following section, while the true woman was represented as an angel that takes care of her household, the black woman was hostage to a deviant and overt sexuality; thus, white and black womanhood began to be defined as opposing concepts.

[20] Patton, *Women in* Chains, p.31.

2.2. Stereotypes of Black Womanhood

In the nineteenth century, the Cult of True Womanhood was assimilated as the dominant image of white womanhood. White women were encouraged to aspire to become the embodiment of the angel-like virtues that were promoted by this ideology. As a controlling image, the ideal of true womanhood reflected the power of the white patriarchal society within which it was developed. In particular, it is necessary to remember that an ideal is not the representation of actual facts, but rather the mental vision of a more desirable and perfect reality, which is usually regarded as something to strive for. Nevertheless, encouraging white women to achieve true womanhood was a means to enhance their traditional role in society through the regulation of their social behavior. Similarly, the promotion of stereotypes about black women proved to be a powerful instrument of oppression. The main reason behind this lies in the fact that the power of stereotypical images resides in their potential of making social injustice appear to be the result of a natural and inevitable process.[21] Thus, stereotyping becomes functional to the process of objectification that was previously discussed, as it facilitates the acceptance of dominant ideologies as undeniable realities.

One of the most popular stereotypes of black womanhood is that of the mammy. This particular image represents black women as obedient and faithful domestic servants who take care of their white family and children out of their genuine affection for them. The circulation of this stereotypical representation was especially necessary to the support of the economic interests of Southern slaveholders. In particular, after the raise of the abolitionist movement in the 1830s, the image of the mammy was used to strengthen the idea of slavery as a system based on patriarchal benevolence.[22] By conveying the image of a faithful servant who was happy to live under the protection of her master and who fondly cared for his children as if they were her own, this stereotype served as an example of the fact that slavery was not enforced by means of violence, but rather by a process of willing submission. Therefore, the mammy can be seen as the embodiment of the

[21] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p.69.
[22] Micki McElya, *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007, p.4.

expectations that white masters had about the submissive role of black women in relation to their patriarchal authority.

The image of the mammy also carried important implications for the definition of the sexuality of black women. More specifically, mammies were characterized only by their maternal, and not sexual, relationship with their white masters. This is probably due to the attempt of slavery supporters to defend themselves from the abolitionists' claims that slave women were often victims of rape and sexual violence.[23] As a result, the mammy was portrayed as an unfeminine servant who lacked any type of sexual characterization. Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to identify the image of the mammy with the ideal of feminine purity that was promoted by the Cult of True Womanhood. It is true that both these representations of womanhood were based on the repression of female sexuality; however, while white mistresses were supposed to deny their sexuality in order to gain respectability, the mammy was defined as an asexual being and, as such, deprived of her sexuality altogether.[24]

The mammy was, then, the representation of the white ideal of the black mother figure within the white household. More specifically, it was an image that was meant to display the existence of benevolent and affectionate relations between masters and slaves, thus discrediting the claims that sexual abuse of black women was a common practice. Nevertheless, once the black woman was put into the context of her own black household, she was immediately deprived of her motherly characteristics and she became, in the eyes of white people, a terrifying matriarch. This particular stereotype portrays black women as unfeminine and overly aggressive figures that undermined the authority of black men and that proved unable to take care of their own children. Consequently, the matriarch was seen as the representation of a "failed mammy", who had rejected her submissive and mothering role and who was, therefore, labeled as a deviant woman by white society.[25]

This white conception of the matriarch was used to promote the necessity of putting black women in chains. In particular, the representation of a deviant black woman who defied patriarchal authority was, in a white perspective, evidence of the fact that

[23] McElya, *Clinging to Mammy*, p.8.
[24] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p.74.
[25] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p.75.

bondage was required in order to ensure social stability. This idea was also strengthened by the fact that slave families did not rely upon the division of family life into two separate spheres on the basis of gender. Gender relationships established within the slave family challenged the traditional white conception of family, which assigned to men the predominant role within the household. Therefore, within a white patriarchal society the different balance of power relations between woman and man in the black family was regarded as an additional proof of black inferiority.[26] Moreover, even if in the white conception the images of the mammy and the matriarch represented opposed ideals of black womanhood, they both portrayed black women as unfeminine figures. The matriarch in particular, given her defining aggressiveness and her incapability to submit, could not fit within the models of traditional feminine behavior, thus reinforcing once again the idea that the qualities of true womanhood could not be embodied by black women.

Another stereotypical image of black womanhood that was promoted in a specific attempt to legitimize the oppression of slave women was that of the jezebel. This was an image that focused on the representation of the alleged deviant sexuality of black women, which were portrayed as driven by lascivious appetites and promiscuity. The main reason behind the circulation of this stereotype is related to the sexual exploitation of enslaved black women under slavery. More specifically, promoting the idea that the black woman was hostage of a deviant and lustful sexuality was instrumental to the justification of the rape of slave women by their white masters. The assumption of such promiscuity as the main attribute of black female sexuality was perceived as an argument in favor of the idea that black women actually enjoyed being sexually abused by white men.[27] This meant that black women could not be victims of rape because their very sexuality proved that white men were only satisfying black women's natural desires and, thus, they could not be accused of abusing them. The construction of a promiscuous sexuality also led to the consequent assumption of black women's enhanced fertility, which made them even more subjected to their exploitation as breeders.[28] Therefore, the promotion of the jezebel image helped to strengthen the oppression of black women because it provided a

[26] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p.77.
[27] Rupe Simms, "Controlling Images and the Gender Construction of Enslaved African Women", *Gender and Society*, vol. 15, no. 6 (2001): p.883.
[28] Simms, "Controlling Images and the Gender Construction of Enslaved African Women", p.883.

justification to their treatment under slavery through the portrayal of sexual exploitation as the inevitable consequence of their nature.

The sexual representation of the jezebel stereotype is completely different from the one of the mammy. With the image of the mammy, black womanhood is deprived of its sexual dimension, thus promoting the portrayal of mammies as asexual figures that are driven only by their maternal affection for their white family. In contrast, the jezebel is a woman whose overt sexuality classifies her as the willing receiver of white men's attentions. Finally, the matriarch is also considered a deviant figure like the jezebel, but her sexuality is expressed through the aggressiveness that characterizes her behavior, which leads her to rob her partner of his patriarchal authority within the household. Therefore, these three images represent different levels of manipulation of black women's sexuality by the dominant white elite. Despite the marked defining function of their sexuality, these images do not portray black women as feminine figures with respect to the social standards of true womanhood, as none of these images could fit into its boundaries. Rather, as noted by Carby, black female sexuality was used to establish what these boundaries were.[29] This means that black womanhood seemed to be characterized by the absence of those feminine qualities that instead defined white womanhood, thus eventually leading to the establishment of one as the polar opposite of the other.

All of the stereotypes of black womanhood here analyzed are based on the regulation of black women's sexuality. Each one of them is functional to the enforcement of ideologies that were meant to legitimize the oppression of black women under slavery. In particular, the manipulation of sexuality that lies at the core of these images can be seen as the reflection of white men's interests. This is due to the fact that, within a broader context, the legitimization of black women's oppression was also essential to ensure the survival of slavery, especially after the ban of the international slave trade (1808) and the development of the abolitionist movement (1830s). If slavery had to survive, then it was necessary to exploit slave women's reproductive potential and, in order to do so, the support of ideologies that could manipulate the conception of their sexuality was a prerequisite for collecting a widespread consent to this exploitation.

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[29] Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, p.30.

This process resulted in the development of ideologies that excluded slave women from the domain of true womanhood, which was instead regarded as a model that only white women could hope to embody. Therefore, enslaved black women underwent a process of objectification that was aimed at depriving them of the possibility to define their own identity and to control their own bodies. The following section moves on to discuss the issues concerning the articulation of black female agency in an attempt to show how black women writers were able to challenge the stereotypical representation of black womanhood and redefine its boundaries.

2.3. The Issue of Agency

The need to regulate black women's fertility resulted in the production of sexual stereotypes that restricted the conceptualization of black womanhood to a specific set of controlling images. As previously mentioned, this can be regarded as part of the process of objectification that black women underwent during slavery, which led to the manipulation of their sexuality by the dominant group. Nevertheless, it would be misleading to assume that slave women did not try to resist these ideologies. With regard to this, the scholar Brenda E. Stevenson has pointed out the fact that black women were often able to produce their own positive images of black womanhood, which functioned as a "counterimage" to the stereotypical representation of black female degradation and passivity.[30] This means that slave women often developed images of black womanhood that reflected their own ideals of positive feminine behavior, as opposed to the negative image of the deviant black woman that was promoted in white society. Through the analysis of several autobiographical accounts of slave women from nineteenth-century Virginia, Stevenson has been able to show not only that slave women often produced positive models of black womanhood to look up to, but also that the role of mothers in transmitting these positive images to their daughters was fundamental. For example, in an interview reported by Stevenson, Minnie Folkes, a former slave woman, described her mother as a heroic figure that had taught her a powerful lesson on the importance of resistance: Folkes had witnessed her mother being brutally whipped for refusing to surrender to her master's will and, even after her harsh punishment, she still reminded her

[30] Brenda E. Stevenson, "Gender Convention, Ideals, and Identity among Antebellum Virginia Slave Women", in Gaspar and Hine, eds., *More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*, 1996, p.169.

daughter to always defend herself against sexual abuse and to be faithful to her moral principles.[31] Thus, Minnie Folkes's memory of her mother is that of a strong woman that in her attempts to resist her condition of oppression also shows her daughter a model of behavior that she should follow. This example highlights that slave women were often able to reclaim their role of active subjects within a context of domination that only viewed them as passive victims of slaveholders' authority, which aimed at depriving them of this possibility. The relationship between master and slaves was based on an unequal balance of power which granted the master full authority over them; therefore, the production of images of black womanhood by slave women can be seen as an attempt to challenge this status quo through the re-appropriation of the right of defining one's own subjectivity. Slave women began to transmit, from one generation to the other, role models of black female behavior that were usually embedded within stories about slave women fighting back and resisting their conditions of enslavement.[32] Through the narration of these stories, black women were able to create their own ideals of womanhood, which were shaped by their unique perception and personal experience of reality under slavery.

Before discussing the ways in which slave women could conceptualize their active role in the fight against slavery, it might be worth to consider how black women were represented in the narratives of male former slaves. The main reason behind this is that these narratives have the tendency to portray slave women as helpless victims of the physical and sexual violence of slaveholders.[33] As already explained in the first chapter, slave women were indeed subjected to this type of abuses by their masters, who were especially interested in the exploitation of their reproductive potential. Nevertheless, this representation of black women's defenselessness did not consider the fact that women, like men, could also be active agents in the struggle against slavery. For example, in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs shows how she found a way of resisting her master's claims over her body by deliberately choosing to start a relationship and have children with Mr. Sands. In her text, Jacobs also gives an account of the seven years she spent hidden in a garret to simulate her escape North, enduring a physically

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[31] Stevenson, "Gender Convention, Ideals, and Identity among Antebellum Virginia Slave Women", p.171.
[32] Stevenson, "Gender Convention, Ideals, and Identity among Antebellum Virginia Slave Women", p.171.
[33] Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, p.35.

debilitating condition, in order to avoid her master's abuses without leaving her children behind. A similar display of active resistance can be found in Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*, a neo-slave narrative that also relates the experience of slavery from a female perspective. Imprisoned after taking part in a slave rebellion and killing a white man, Dessa is interviewed by a white man, Adam Nehemiah, who wants her to reveal him the details about the uprising. However, Dessa does not subdue to Nehemiah's authority and refuses to answer his questions, taking control over the interview and rather focusing on her relationship with Kaine, her deceased partner. Dessa, therefore, does not only appear to be an active agent because she took part in the uprising, but also because of the degree of control she manages to exercise over the narration of her own story.

On the contrary, in slave narratives written by men, the abuses suffered by slave women are often related to the slave man's lack of power. This idea is exemplified in slave narratives such as *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*. In this narrative, Henry Bibb shows the effects that slavery had on black manhood, especially within the context of familial relations. In his analysis of Bibb's *Narrative*, Keith Michael Green defines Henry Bibb as a "courageous, though ultimately unsuccessful, antebellum patriarch."[34] Bibb's failure to embody the figure of the patriarch is due to the exclusion of the slave man from the sources of power that were instead available to white men. In particular, within the patriarchal system of the slaveholding South, men were regarded as the legitimate leaders of family and society; thus, the submission of black men, as noted by Lawson V. Bush, was the logical consequence of a system that needed to eradicate any form of patriarchal authority that could undermine white men's prerogatives.[35] In his *Narrative*, Bibb is denied the possibility to fulfill his functions of husband and father, which were instead the traditional roles that white men were expected to assume within the family: as a slave Bibb knows that he has no rights over his own daughter and that his union with Malinda has no actual legal value. Thus, unable to assume the role of husband and father, Bibb cannot exercise patriarchal authority, as shown by the fact that, despite his numerous attempts, he will never be able to rescue his family from bondage.

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[34] Keith Michael Green, "Am I Not a Husband and a Father? Re-membering Black Masculinity, Slave Incarceration, and Cherokee Slavery in 'The Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave'", *MELUS*, vol. 39, no. 4 (2014): p.26.

[35] Lawson V. Bush, "Am I a Man? A Literature Review Engaging the Sociohistorical Dynamics of Black Manhood in the United States", *Western Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 23, no. 1 (1999): p.50.

Seen as breeders by slaveholders, slave women were confined to the role of reproducers of human capital, and thus, they were often victims of sexual abuse and rape. As previously explained, sexual exploitation was legitimized through the promotion of ideologies of racial inferiority as well as the circulation of sexual stereotypes related to black womanhood. The form of sexual violence they had to endure had a traumatic effect on abused women; as noted by Catherine Clinton, rape always leaves a "mark" on the victim, that is "the memory of a violation- force without consent."[36] Within the context of slavery, rape was effectively used as a means to ensure the submission of both slave women and men. Sexual abuse had the effect of demoralizing and extinguishing any possible form of rebellious behavior in its victims. This violence also instilled a sense of powerlessness and fear, not just in women, but also in men. The impossibility to defend slave women from violence, together with the awareness that they could also be subjected to brutal punishments for trying to defend them, deprived black men of the patriarchal power that was instead a defining feature of white manhood. Therefore, Clinton has argued that the use of "sexual terrorism" as a means to ensure the subjugation of black women and men resulted, under slavery, in the establishment of a particular system of power that she defines as "penarchy".[37] Within this system, the power of masculinity is absolute. This means that both white and black women were oppressed, even though the ideological manipulation of their sexuality had different aims. As part of the subordinate group, slave men were also subjected to masculine authority, since the power of their master over them was unrestricted, and deprived of their own masculine power.

The scholar Kimberly Drake has, therefore, argued that male slaves were in all respects "feminized" subjects because, considering their state of submission, they were deprived of the patriarchal authority that instead characterized white manhood.[38] An example of this feminization of the enslaved male subject can be traced in the famous scene of the whipping of Aunt Hester at the hands of Captain Anthony as described in Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*: Douglass, still a boy, has to witness the brutal punishment of Aunt Hester without being able to do anything to end this violence. As noted by Stephanie A. Smith in her analysis of this scene, authority seems to be exercised

[36] Catherine Clinton, "'With a Whip in his Hand': Rape, Memory, and African-American Women", in Fabre and O'Meally, eds., *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, 1994, p.205.
[37] Clinton, "'With a Whip in his Hand'", p.208.
[38] Drake, "Rewriting the American Self", p.99.

by means of a "punitive agency", which is aimed at controlling the body, as is visible in the master's use of the whip.[39] Aunt Hester is thus portrayed as the helpless victim of her master's brutality. The impossibility of protecting his own aunt contributes to fueling that feeling of powerlessness that characterized black manhood under slavery. In particular, Smith points out that the effect of this whipping on Douglass was the assimilation of a "passivity culturally associated with the feminine."[40] Therefore, the representation of slave women as victims in male narratives was essential to emphasize the emasculation of slave men, who not only were unable to shield black women from violence but were also forced to witness their punishments while being aware that they could undergo the same type of treatment. This is the reason why the quest for freedom in these narratives is often regarded a means to construct the self as a masculine subject: escaping could give black men a chance to define themselves outside a context in which they could only be recognized as feminized subjects.

Given that rape was used both to ensure the reproduction of slaves and to submit the slave population on behalf of slaveholders, it seems clear that the issue of sexual exploitation is related to the experience of motherhood as well as to the concept of agency, as the confinement of slave women to the role of victims favored the association between victimization and passivity. As mentioned above, the passive representation of women in narratives by male slaves was, however, challenged in the slave narratives written by black women. In their narratives, the active roles of slave women in resisting slavery is at the core of the narration. This means that black women did not simply focus on giving details about their own experience under slavery; rather, they displayed their sufferings as well as the brutal treatment they had to endure while simultaneously representing themselves as subjects capable of resisting these harsh conditions. Black women were, therefore, able to define themselves as active agents despite the submissive role they had to play within the context of their enslavement. They managed to claim for themselves a type of agency that could be expressed even in their condition of forced subjugation. In contrast to the idea of black women as passive victims of violence as portrayed in slave narratives by men, slave women introduced in their narrations "the possibility of action

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[39] Stephanie A. Smith, *Conceived by Liberty: Maternal Figures and Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994, pp.113-4.
[40] Smith, *Conceived by Liberty*, p.119.

without negating the unequal relations of power that restrict the ability to act."[41] They, then, tried to defy the conventional conception of black women as mere victims of the process of objectification that characterized slaveholding patterns of domination without, however, denying the limitations imposed by their condition.

The different conception of the role of slave women in narratives by black women, with respect to those written by men, also reflected on the importance attributed to literacy in these texts. More specifically, the scholar DoVeanna S. Fulton has noted that black women relied on oral culture as a means of empowerment, rather than on reading and writing, which were instead considered fundamental steps in the achievement of freedom in narratives by male former slaves.[42] Orality was a powerful tool in the eyes of slave women. The reason behind this is that, while they could be deprived of the chance of learning how to read and write, slave women could still orally pass on stories and traditions from one generation to the other. Oral culture could, therefore, be used as a means to resist the oppression of slavery. In particular, slave women created positive images of black womanhood that were meant to challenge the controlling images pushed forward by the white ruling class. Through the narration of the stories of heroic female slaves, black women could transmit positive models of womanhood to their daughters, thus evading the dehumanizing effects of slavery and refusing to passively conform to the standards of black womanhood promoted by white ideologies.[43]

The affirmation of slave women's agency can be seen as part of the process of self-definition that was meant to oppose their objectification. By forging and passing on positive images of black femininity, slave women actively challenged the white ideologies that enforced their submission. With regard to the conceptualization of their own subjectivity, Collins has argued that black women did not define themselves in separation from others, but rather in connection to others.[44] This means that slave women framed their own identity within the context of the community they were part of and, thus, valued the importance of family ties above their individual well-being. As already

[41] Jenny Sharpe, *Ghosts of Slavery: A Literary Archaeology of Black Women's Lives*, Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, p.xiv.
[42] DoVeanna S. Fulton, *Speaking Power: Black Feminist Orality in Women's Narratives of Slavery*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006, p.21.
[43] Stevenson, "Gender Convention, Ideals, and Identity among Antebellum Virginia Slave Women", p.183.
[44] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p.113.

discussed in the first chapter, the role of women as othermothers within slave communities was essential to the formation of ideas of kinship that reached beyond blood ties. These ties were extremely important as they provided a means to support each other and to offer shelter against the brutality of slavery. The protective function of these ties allowed slave women to develop a sense of community that shaped, and often fueled, their process of self-development and resistance.[45]

This distinctive mode of constructing the self in relation to others also had an impact on the way in which their fight against oppression was articulated, thus highlighting once again the substantial difference between slave men's and women's understanding of agency. With regard to this, the study of slave narratives by men and by women can provide clear evidence of such difference. More specifically, Joanne M. Braxton has noted that the path to freedom in narratives by male ex-slaves is focused on the individual, and often physical, fight of the male slave against the oppression of slavery; on the contrary, in narratives by women the emphasis is not on the individual efforts to escape slavery, but rather on the role of the whole slave community in the achievement of freedom.[46] Thus, in their narratives, black women displayed the importance of family ties as a means to resist their condition of enslavement. By so doing, they did not deny their individuality, rather, they constructed it in such a way that it could include their connectedness with other people as a defining characteristic.

Within the context of family relationships, enslaved black women especially valued the bond of motherhood as central to the experience of womanhood. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that motherhood cannot be considered as a universal experience because the way in which motherhood is perceived can be different for different women and within different contexts. This means that while mothering can be regarded as an empowering role in certain situations, in others it could be considered as a limitation to women's possibility to act freely. This latter point of view is examined by the scholar Carole Boyce Davies who, in her analysis of the theme of movement in slave narratives, notes the fact that both movement and agency are traditionally associated with manhood,

[45] Drake, "Rewriting the American Self", p.98.
[46] Joanne M. Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition within a Tradition*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989, p.20.

whereas womanhood is typically defined by containment.[47] More specifically, the chance to travel, and thus physically escape bondage, seemed to be hard to conciliate with a mothering role. Slave mothers had to face numerous difficulties in order to protect their children, not simply because of the violent environment they lived in, but also because they could be separated from their children at any time. If on the one hand escaping could be seen as the only way to achieve freedom for themselves and for their children, on the other hand running away was also extremely dangerous. Therefore, children could be both a source of strength and of weakness for a slave mother, because the desire to protect her own offspring could be used as a powerful weapon to ensure her submission.

Motherhood can, then, be regarded as the maximum expression of the conceptualization of the self in relation to others: the instinctive need to ensure the safety of their own children despite the difficulties faced by slave mothers could give black women a significant reason to resist their oppression and fight against the dehumanizing effects of slavery. Collins, however, has noted that black motherhood seems to be a rather contradictory institution.[48] The reason behind this is that, in contexts where oppression is enforced on the basis of the intersection of categories of race and gender, the strength that derives from the mother-child bond, despite indeed providing a shield against dehumanization, does not counter all injustice. If it is true that enslaved black mothers could find in their children a reason to fight against oppression, it is equally true that they still had to suffer physical and sexual exploitation, as well as the fear of being separated from their offspring. Therefore, motherhood can potentially be an empowering experience, but it can also require great personal sacrifice. However, these difficulties do not deny the strength that can come with motherhood, especially for slave women; rather, the desire to protect their offspring existed regardless of the brutality of slavery, thus establishing the domain of motherhood as a unique site of agency for enslaved black women.

The mothering role was, therefore, problematic for slave women. The numerous difficulties they had to face, together with the limitations imposed by their enslavement, put them in a particular condition. In her study on the representation of motherhood in

[47] Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migration of the Subject*, London: Routledge, 1994, pp.130-1.
[48] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p.195.

American culture, Nora Doyle has pointed out that "the most significant commodification of maternal bodies occurred in the context of American chattel slavery."[49] Slave women were exploited for physical labor and for their reproductive potential, but also for their production of breast milk, which allowed slaveholders to use them as wet-nurses for their own children. The result of sexual exploitation was the appropriation of the black woman's reproductive capability and, consequently, of her mothering role: not only were slave mothers deprived of their parental rights, but they were also expected to deprive their own babies of their nourishment in order to give their breast milk to the master's offspring. Carole Boyce Davies points out that Toni Morrison's *Beloved* perfectly represents this condition of appropriated motherhood through the use of the images of milk and breast-feeding as signifiers, respectively, for motherhood and containment.[50] In *Beloved* the commodification of the maternal body, as Doyle defines it, is especially evident in the experience of Sethe, whose breast milk is forcefully stolen by her master's nephews. After the violence, Sethe is also whipped and scarred as a punishment for telling her mistress what happened to her and her body is left with an indelible mark to remind her of the trauma she suffered. Sethe's body thus becomes a text that displays the appropriation of her maternal products, her milk, as well as of her labor, the ink she produces in the plantation.[51] As will be discussed in chapter four, the motif of the body as a text is also at the core of Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*, in which the scars on Dessa's thighs function as a constant reminder of the appropriation of her sexuality and of her maternal body.

In a context of domination such as the one of slavery, in which the attempts of the ruling class to maintain control over the subordinate group is enforced through the use of violence and the promotion of racial ideologies of inferiority, the definition of slaves' own subjectivity depends upon the capability to define themselves as active agents in the fight against their oppression. The sexual exploitation of slave women was especially troublesome because of the numerous implications it had. The use of rape as a means both

[49] Nora Doyle, *Maternal Bodies: Redefining Motherhood in Early America*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018, p.131.
[50] Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, p.144.
[51] Anne E. Goldman, "'I Made the Ink': (Literary) Production and Reproduction in *Dessa Rose* and *Beloved*", *Feminist Studies*, vol. 16, no. 2 (1990): pp. 323-4.

to ensure slave reproduction and to eradicate rebellious behavior also had the effect of crystallizing the image of the slave woman as a passive victim of violence, especially with regard to narratives by male slaves. This crystallization of the portrayal of slave women was also strengthened by the traditional view of motherhood as a constraint to women's movement and, by extension, to their possibility to act freely. Additionally, sexual violence contributed to the formation of a sense of powerlessness and fear, not only in its victims, but also in male slaves, whose manhood was violated by the awareness of the impossibility to protect their mothers and sisters, and thus, by the consciousness that they had been robbed of the masculine power that instead defined white patriarchy.

The conceptualization of the black woman as a victim, together with the circulation of ideological stereotypes that were meant to legitimize her sexual exploitation, resulted in the association of her image with an idea of passivity and helplessness. The appropriation of slave women's labor, their body, and their mothering role under slavery also contributed to the reinforcement of this portrayal. Nevertheless, as discussed in this section, slave women did not passively accept their subordinate condition; rather, they found ways to resist and challenge their masters' authority as well as to actively fight the dehumanizing effects of enslavement. By passing on from one generation to the other stories of heroic slaves, they tried to transmit positive images of behavior to their daughters while also trying, at the same time, to re-appropriate the right of defining black womanhood as a site of agency. To this end, narratives by black women focus on the representation of the active resistance of slave women to the brutality of slavery. By so doing, they are able to challenge that stereotypical representation of black womanhood that lay at the basis of the process of objectification enforced by the patterns of domination of the white patriarchal elite.

This chapter has attempted to provide an overview on the implications that the manipulation of sexual ideologies of black womanhood within Southern patriarchal society had on the representation of slave women. This latter section, in particular, was aimed at showing how the crystallization of the image of black women as passive victims of physical and sexual violence was nevertheless challenged in literature written by black women. Issues of female agency and its relation to motherhood will be further investigated in chapter three and four, which will respectively focus on the analysis of

Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*.

3. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

The previous chapter has discussed the ways in which the representation of black womanhood was manipulated by the slaveholding class through the circulation of sexual stereotypes that were meant to provide a justification for the physical and sexual exploitation of slave women. The promotion of these images supported the legal and economic identification of slaves as chattel through the development of an ideological basis upon which the interests of slaveholders could be grounded. The harsh conditions endured by slave women, whose labor and reproductive potential was appropriated by slaveholders, led to the crystallization of their image as defenseless victims of physical and sexual violence, especially with regard to slave narratives written by black men. However, this representation of slave women as mere victims of violence was challenged in narratives by black women who offered a different picture of black womanhood, one that was shaped by the active resistance to their enslavement. Despite not denying the limitations imposed over them by their condition of bondage, black women emphasized the ways in which they managed to fight back and to defy their masters' authority.

One of the most famous examples of narratives by black women that focuses on the sexual exploitation of slave women is Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. As will be discussed later, this work focuses on the commodification of the enslaved female body and the consequent strategies of resistance carried out by the protagonist as a means to survive the dehumanizing effects of slavery. This chapter attempts to investigate the main themes and features of Jacobs's text, analyzing in particular the relationship between the issue of sexual exploitation and the ideologies of white and black womanhood discussed in the previous chapter. After a first introductory section that is aimed at giving contextual information about Jacobs's work, the chapter moves on to discuss issues of black female representation. The final section will focus on the theme of motherhood and will especially try to reconstruct its role within the narrative.

3.1. A Slave Narrative

First published in 1861, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs is one of the most famous narratives written by a former slave woman to give an account of slavery from a female perspective. Under the pseudonym of Linda Brent, Jacobs narrates the most significant events of her life in bondage and how she managed to escape North

and eventually be free. Jacobs's *Incidents* can, therefore, be included in Bernard W. Bell's definition of slave narratives as "the personal accounts of physical and psychological bondage and freedom."[1] In particular, Jacobs focuses on showing her readers what slavery was really like, especially for a woman who was vulnerable to both physical and sexual exploitation. The text presents many of the defining characteristics of slave narratives, thus, a brief overview of the structure of these texts might be useful to have a better insight into Jacobs's work. The scholar James Onley has given an outline of the main features that allow a slave narrative to be identified as such. According to Onley, these narratives are usually accompanied by a signed portrait of the author, prefaces and introductions written by a white abolitionist aimed at guaranteeing the truthfulness of the narrative, a poetic epigraph, and an appendix collecting different historical documents.[2] Another common feature is that the title usually includes the phrase "Written by Himself", which can be subjected to slight variations, as in the case of *Incidents* where this phrase is changed into "Written by Herself."

Onley also highlights how the actual narrative is usually structured: the text generally begins with the words "I was born", but no indication of the exact date of birth is provided. Then, the narrative moves on to give an account of the slave's family members as well as a description of the slaveholder and his family. Throughout the text, the narrator shows his or her experience of life in bondage, including details regarding slave labor, punishments, references to slave trading and families being separated, attempts to escape from bondage, and also reflections on slavery. In his analysis of the structure of slave narratives, Onley points out that many of the features that are usually included in these texts, such as the author's portrait and the formula "Written by Himself", together with the use of a first-person narrator, are meant to validate the actual existence of the narrator as a person.[3] This is due to the necessity of presenting the events portrayed in the narratives as truthful on the basis of the fact that the author is a former slave giving an autobiographical account of his or her experience in bondage.

[1] Bernard W. Bell, *Bearing Witness to African American Literature: Validating and Valorizing its Authority, Authenticity, and Agency*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012, p.77.
[2] James Onley, "'I Was Born': Slave Narratives, their Status as Autobiography and as Literature", in Davis and Gates, eds., *The Slave's Narrative*, 1990, pp.151-2.
[3] Onley, "'I Was Born'", p.155.

Jacobs's *Incidents* follows most of the above-mentioned conventions related to slave narratives, but it also includes some features that make the text unique in its form. The main aim of slave narratives is to expose their readers to the brutal reality of slavery and to convince them of the necessity to take action against this institution and thus support the abolitionist cause. The aim of *Incidents*, however, is not only to denounce the horrors of slavery as an institution but also to uncover the truth behind the sexual violence that slave women had to endure. Jacobs's intent to focus on the condition of enslaved women is explicitly stated in her preface to *Incidents*, in which she writes:

> But I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women in the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse. I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is.[4]

Jacobs seems to suggest that her own experience as a former enslaved woman will allow the reader to have a deeper understanding of slavery and to be aware of the fact that the abuses she suffered are not to be seen as an isolated case of violence; rather, she points out that her experience is shared by many slave women, who might be living in even harder conditions than those she endured. By so doing, Jacobs emphasizes the need to acknowledge that the exploitation of slave women plays a significant part in the reality of slavery.

As noted by Jean Fagan Yellin, another striking feature of *Incidents* is that Jacobs identifies her audience as female.[5] In the passage quoted above, Jacobs states her desire to raise awareness in "the women of the North" about the condition of enslavement of "two millions of women in the South." The identification of the reader as female is fundamental to the discussion of the sexual harassment that Linda experiences in the text at the hands of her master, Dr. Flint. It is likely that women would be more likely to show sympathy for Linda's condition of oppression than men because, considering that white women were also subordinated to patriarchal authority, they could probably relate to the meaning of being oppressed as well as to the fear of being sexually assaulted. According to Thomas Doherty, Jacobs's decision to address white women as target readers could

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[4] Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, in Foster and Yarborough, eds., Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019, p.5.

[5] Jean Fagan Yellin, "Text and Contexts of Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*", in Davis and Gates, eds., *The Slave's Narrative*, 1990, p.263.

also be part of a very precise strategy that took into account the fact that the most dedicated supporters of the abolitionist movement were Northern women belonging to the middle class.[6] Therefore, appealing to Northern women's conscience and morality could be instrumental to the growth of the number of supporters of the abolitionist cause.

In order for *Incidents* to reach the widest audience possible, Jacobs decided to base her work on the conventions of the sentimental novel, which was a popular genre among Northern middle-class women in the nineteenth century; however, the choice of writing in such a form also influenced the way in which Jacobs could discuss some troublesome questions, such as sexual abuse.[7] The editor Lydia Maria Child, in the introduction to *Incidents*, recognizes that sexual violence could be regarded as too delicate a subject to be presented before a female audience. Nevertheless, Child justifies the decision to deal with this topic adding that:

> I do this for the sake of my sisters in bondage, who are suffering wrongs so foul, that our ears are too delicate to listen to them. I do it with the hope of arousing conscientious and reflecting women at the North to a sense of their duty in the exertion of moral influence on the question of Slavery, on all possible occasions.[8]

Child, thus, claims that the necessity of discussing this topic stems from the desire to raise awareness about the wrongs suffered by slave women, in the hope that the readers would be persuaded to support the abolition of slavery. Therefore, the importance of acknowledging the actual condition of slave women seems to overcome the conventions of modesty that prohibited the discussion of such troublesome topics.

This did not mean, however, that sexuality could be explicitly discussed, especially considering that Jacobs was following the tradition of sentimental literature. In the narrative, Jacobs, rather than making direct reference to sexual abuse, decides to let the reader extrapolate this piece of information from her words. For example, in the text Dr. Flint often reminds Linda that she "was made for his use, made to obey his command in *every* thing."[9] Despite not overtly referring to sexual exploitation, it seems clear that Dr. Flint wants Linda to know that he can dispose of her body as he pleases. Jacobs's

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[6] Thomas Doherty, "Harriet Jacobs' Narrative Strategies: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*", *Southern Literary Journal*, vol. 19, no. 1 (1986): p. 81.
[7] Mary Helen Washington, *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women, 1860-1960*, New York: Doubleday, 1987, p.5.
[8] Lydia Maria Child, "Introduction by the Editor", in Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, p.6.
[9] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, p.19.

strategy to remain silent on the actual abuse in order to force the readers to think about the details she is purposely leaving out has been analyzed by Patton, who suggests that Jacobs uses language as a metonym for sexual abuse.[10] This means that the fact that there is no actual reference to a forced intercourse in the text would actually be part of a narrative strategy that allows Jacobs to discuss sexual violence without the need to resort to a type of language that would be deemed inappropriate for the standards of nineteenth-century ideas of decorum. Following this strategy, silence itself becomes a marker for sexual abuse that makes what is not explicitly narrated in the text relevant to the understanding of Linda's condition.

Jacobs's choice of avoiding explicit accounts of sexual violence is also useful to facilitate the identification of the audience with the narrator.[11] Linda's sufferings are used as a means to arouse sympathy in the reader, who is compelled to witness her impossibility of overcoming the trauma of sexual violence. Throughout the narrative, the pain of the abuses endured by Jacobs and the anguish of reliving this trauma often emerge: Jacobs clearly expresses her feelings when she says "I cannot tell how much I suffered in the presence of these wrongs, nor how I am still pained by the retrospect."[12] If Jacobs's pain is still so vivid in her mind, then giving detailed accounts of her abuse seems impossible. Therefore, glossing over the actual physical abuse seems to be more than a choice dictated by the conventions of nineteenth-century decorum, as it also appears to be a powerful means to convince the reading public of the cruelty of slavery through the display of the pain that the memory of such traumas can evoke in those who suffered them.

Jacobs's decision to write *Incidents* in the form of a sentimental novel has raised some doubts about the authenticity of her narrative, which could seem to be more similar to a work of fiction than to an autobiographical account.[13] The authenticity of her work has nonetheless been proven by Yellin, thanks to the discovery of some letters written by Jacobs in which she reveals the details about the publication of her autobiography. As

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[10] Venetria K. Patton, *Women in Chains: The Legacy of Slavery in Black Women's Fiction*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000, p.85.

[11] Franny Nudelman, "Harriet Jacobs and the Sentimental Politics of Female Suffering", *EHL*, vol. 59, no. 4 (1992): p.952.

[12] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, p.28.

[13] Yellin, "Text and Contexts of Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*", p.262.

already mentioned, Jacobs's choice to write her narrative in the form of a sentimental novel, influenced the way in which she could use language to portray the sexual abuse she was subjected to. This elusive use of language is not, however, the only detail that contributed to the raising of doubts about the authenticity of Jacobs's work: the description of Linda's relationship with her master is also quite troublesome. Mary Helen Washington has noted that Dr. Flint is represented as a jealous lover who tries to prey upon a vulnerable woman, rather than as a slaveholder exercising his legal rights on his chattel property.[14] The image of Dr. Flint pictured by Jacobs might, thus, seem to be masking the reality of what their relationship actually was under the conventions of sentimental literature. Nevertheless, this representation does not deny the fact that Jacobs had been abused by her master, nor does it overlook the fact that slaves were in all respects regarded as chattel. According to Patton, sentimental novels and slave narratives are similar in their capability to stir emotions in their readers.[15] This means that emotional reaction is fundamental in both these types of work. As already explained, slave narratives had to convince the readers of the necessity of abolishing slavery, thus provoking sympathetic reactions in her audience could help Jacobs to achieve this end. Through the representation of her master as a jealous lover who denies Linda the right to marry the man she truly loves, as described in the chapter titled "The Lover", Jacobs encourages the reader to empathize with Linda's condition. By so doing, Jacobs facilitates the establishment of a connection between Linda and the readers on the basis of her painful experience, which functions as a means to persuade them of the need to act against slavery.

As explained in this section, Jacobs wrote *Incidents* with the aim of raising awareness on the issue of sexual exploitation in the hope to convince Northerners to support the abolition of slavery. Jacobs's text, however, achieves more than that. In exposing the reality of slavery for women, Jacobs highlights the impossibility for enslaved black women to preserve their chastity and the consequent inapplicability of the ideology of "True Womanhood" to black women. As will be discussed in the following section, the acknowledgement of such impossibility allows Jacobs to redefine the

[14] Washington, *Invented Lives*, p.5.
[15] Patton, *Women in Chains*, p.41.

boundaries of black womanhood within a context of domination that denied slave women control over their own sexuality.

3.2. Challenging the Cult of True Womanhood

The scholar Hazel V. Carby has defined *Incidents* as "the most sophisticated, sustained narrative dissection of the conventions of true womanhood by a black author before emancipation."[16] This is due to the fact that, through the account of her personal experience under slavery, Jacobs questions the standards of femininity promoted by the Cult of True Womanhood. In so doing, she highlights the different social context within which white and black womanhood were conceived, as well as the impossibility for black women to embody the qualities of true womanhood. As already seen, in *Incidents* Jacobs provides an account of her life in bondage as an example of the condition of sexual exploitation to which many slave women were subjected. More specifically, throughout the text Jacobs focuses on the several attempts made by Dr. Flint to force Linda to start a sexual relationship with him. When Dr. Flint first starts to "whisper foul words" to Linda, she perceives her master's attention as a threat to her sense of decorum, stating that Dr. Flint "tried his utmost to corrupt the pure principles my grandmother had instilled."[17] The connection between the threat to Linda's sexuality and her wish to preserve her chastity is presented to the reader early in the narrative and reveals Linda's experience of an inner conflict that stems from the awareness of living a contradictory situation: on the one hand she wants to defend herself from sexual abuse and follow the "pure principles" that her grandmother had taught her, while on the other hand she often remarks that, as a slave, her body belongs to her master. Linda is thus conscious of the inescapability of her condition, which seems impossible to change.

Aunt Martha, Linda's grandmother, plays a significant role in the framing of Linda's conception of womanhood. Given that Jacobs's mother died when she was six years old, Aunt Martha became the closest model of femininity for her to look up to. Linda's grandmother, a former slave woman, is described by Jacobs as the embodiment of those qualities that were at the basis of true womanhood: she is an extremely religious

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[16] Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afroamerican Woman Novelist*, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, p.47.
[17] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, p.27.

woman, who stepped in and took care of Linda after the death of her parents. She did not simply provide for Linda's needs but also instilled in her a sense of virtue that aligned more with a white woman's idea of social respectability than with a slave girl's actual experience of slavery, especially considering that many slave women were exploited as breeders. As noted by the scholar Gloria T. Randle, the figure of Aunt Martha can be seen both as "Brent's ideal and her nemesis."[18] This is due to the fact that, while Linda truly wishes to emulate her grandmother and follow her teachings, she also realizes that the model Aunt Martha embodies seems to be impossible for her to achieve. In particular, the moral principles that Linda assimilates thanks to her grandmother give rise to Linda's struggle with her own sense of decorum, as she reveals to her readers: "I was very young, and felt shamefaced about telling her such impure things, especially as I knew her to be very strict on such subjects."[19] She admits the sense of shame caused by Dr. Flint's harassment but also the fear of telling this to her grandmother because of her strict moral code. The limits of the moral principles that Linda tries so hard to follow are thus evident, as they do not prevent her master from harassing her, nor do they make her feel comfortable about speaking the truth to her grandmother.

The actual rupture with her grandmother's principles eventually happens in the chapter "A Perilous Passage in the Slave Girl's Life", when Linda learns about Dr. Flint's plan to transfer her to a house in a secluded place where she could be kept at his service. Realizing the impossibility for her to escape Dr. Flint's claims over her body once completely isolated, Linda decides to take control over her sexuality and to start a relationship with Mr. Sands, a white slaveholding neighbor, hoping that her pregnancy will enrage her master and persuade him to sell her. Given the audience she was addressing and the standards of female modesty that they supported, Jacobs was aware that she had to be cautious about the display of such type of behavior. Simultaneously, she had to present her choice to exploit her sexuality at her own advantage as a weapon she could use to resist her condition of oppression, without the risk of being associated with stereotypical representations of black women as jezebels that use their sexuality to

[18] Gloria T. Randle, "Between the Rock and the Hard Place: Mediating Spaces in Harriet Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl", *African American Review*, vol. 33, no. 1 (1999): p.46.
[19] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, p.28.

prey upon unaware men. In order to do so, Jacobs tries to persuade her audience that her actions were the result of the effect that slavery had on her:

> I wanted to keep myself pure; and, under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve my self-respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery; and the monster proved too strong for me.[20]

Jacobs seeks to establish a connection between herself and her female readers on the basis of a commonly shared sense of purity, reaffirming again her desire to preserve her virtue and thus comply with the standards of true womanhood. Then, she defines her condition of enslavement as a battle against a "monster" that she tried her best to defeat, but that eventually proved to be "too strong" for her. Through the use of this metaphor, Jacobs emphasizes both the harshness of her situation and the impossibility for her to win this battle on her own. At this point, Jacobs introduces in the narration Mr. Sands, who is described as an unmarried white man who expresses "a great deal of sympathy" towards a fifteen-year-old slave girl.[21] Rather than focusing on the fact that Mr. Sands was an essential instrument for the realization of Linda's plan, which could have reinforced the stereotypical idea that white men could be victims of black women's deviant sexuality, Jacobs represents him as an ally who offers to help her in her struggle against Dr. Flint. Additionally, Jacobs's choice to stress his unmarried status underlines that their relationship did not result in adultery, thus establishing an opposing relation between Mr. Sands and Dr. Flint, who instead arises his wife's jealousy with his attentions for Linda.

As noted by the scholar Saidiya V. Hartman, in this chapter Jacobs resorts to the use of a confessional tone which, together with a language that expresses the shame she feels for her actions, functions as a means to persuade the audience of the impossibility to apply nineteenth-century standards of virtue to slave women.[22] Convincing her readers of this fact was necessary to show that Jacobs's choice to use her sexuality was not due to her lack of moral principles, but rather to the inescapability of her situation. Thus, Jacobs says to her audience: "Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave."[23] By so doing, she places her readers in a condition of moral superiority, giving them the power to judge her and asking them to forgive her actions;

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[20] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, p.49.
[21] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, p.49.
[22] Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Selfmaking in Nineteenth-Century America*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, p.105.
[23] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, p.50.

however, she reminds them that they have never experienced slavery, thus pointing out that, in fact, they can only judge her on the basis of their personal experience, which does not take into account the effects that slavery can have on people. Jacobs does not stop here; she goes on stating that "the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards as others."[24] This statement is particularly important as it stresses the need to find a different standard by which to judge the morality of slave women. Having already suggested that her readers would not be able to fully understand the impact of bondage on a slave woman, Jacobs goes one step further and insinuates that the standards of white womanhood they uphold cannot apply to her, not because she did not try to live by them, but because of her condition of enslavement that prevented her from achieving these standards. Thus, what Jacobs seems to demand in this passage is a new conceptualization of black womanhood that should take into account the weight of one's own experience.[25]

What lies behind the acknowledgment of the fact that Linda's enslavement is the main reason why she could not be a true woman is a critique of the idea that true womanhood could only be attained by white women. With regard to this, Kimberly Drake notes that the emphasis that Jacobs puts on the strict moral code of Aunt Martha, especially with regard to her ideas of purity, is meant to highlight the fact that race had nothing to do with the possibility of embodying true womanhood.[26] At the beginning of *Incidents* the reader learns that Linda's grandmother, after years of enslavement, is bought and freed by the sister of her grandmother's deceased mistress. Thus, no longer a slave, Aunt Martha is allowed to cling to her moral principles. When Linda tells her grandmother about her pregnancy, she condemns her granddaughter for her actions: "I had rather see you dead than to see you as you now are."[27] Aunt Martha is judging Linda on the basis of a moral code that can only effectively apply outside slavery, as indicated by the fact that it is not until Linda explains her the sexual abuse she was subjected to that Aunt Martha decides to forgive her, understanding that renouncing her purity was a choice dictated by necessity. Moreover, it should be noted that Linda states many times that she wishes to remain faithful to the principles of purity taught her by her

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[24] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, p.51.
[25] Yellin, "Text and Contexts of Harriet Jacobs' Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself", p.274.
[26] Kimberly Drake, "Rewriting the American Self: Race, Gender, and Identity in the Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs", *MELUS*, vol. 22, no. 4 (1997): p.104.
[27] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, p.51.

grandmother. The only reason why she is not able to do so is Dr. Flint's decision to sexually harass her, which eventually leads to Linda's choice to start a relationship with Mr. Sands. The outcome of Linda's choice in terms of purity is the same as surrendering to Dr. Flint's claims over her body, but through the decision to choose her own partner she is at least able to re-appropriate her own sexuality.

The assumption that true womanhood was only applicable to white women is also criticized in *Incidents* through Jacobs's characterization of white women, especially Mrs. Flint. At the beginning of the text, Jacobs gives a detailed description of her second mistress:

> She had no strength to superintend her household affairs; but her nerves were so strong, that she could sit in her easy chair and see a woman whipped, till the blood trickled from every stroke of the lash. She was a member of the church; but partaking of the Lord's supper did not seem to put her in a Christian frame of mind.[28]

As a traditional Southern mistress, Mrs. Flint should be the embodiment of delicacy and piety. Nevertheless, her physical weakness seems to be compensated by the strength of her "nerves" that enable her to witness extremely brutal punishments while being comfortably seated on her easy chair. Mrs. Flint, then, does not appear to be such a delicate woman, nor does she seem to display any piety towards the victims of those punishments, as Jacobs stresses with the reference to her lack of a Christian "frame of mind." The contradictory image that is conveyed by the portrayal of Mrs. Flint thus, as noted by Carby, undermines the conventional figure of the Southern plantation lady.[29] In particular, in this description of Mrs. Flint, Jacobs underlines that her physical fragility, which should be a defining characteristic of Southern mistresses, actually prevents her from taking care of her household, thus ironically showing her lack of domesticity, which is one of the main virtues a true woman should have. The final contradiction lies in the fact that Mrs. Flint lacks any sense of piety despite being a religious woman, highlighting once again her failure to meet the requirements of true womanhood.

Nevertheless, Jacobs does not imply that true womanhood could not be applied to white women altogether, especially considering that she had to be mindful of the audience she was addressing. She rather seems to be stressing the fact that being white does not

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[28] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, p.15.
[29] Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, p.53.

guarantee the achievement of true womanhood, as in the case of Mrs. Flint, just like being black does not necessarily mean that a woman cannot follow "pure principles", as shown by her grandmother. By showing this, Jacobs tries to prove that the Cult of True Womanhood, despite being regarded as the ideal to which women should aspire, is actually an ideology that can only apply to few women. It is also worth noticing that most of the white women that Jacobs defines as virtuous do not support slavery. For example, the second Mrs. Bruce, who is the woman Linda works for in New York City, is described as a person "of excellent principles and a noble heart" who "had a most hearty dislike" for the institution of slavery.[30] This detail is particularly relevant as it seems to suggest that being against slavery is what contributes to the image of Mrs. Bruce as a person of strong moral principles. The same logic is applied towards the Northern women readers of *Incidents* who, as seen above, in the chapter "A Perilous Passage in the Slave Girl's Life" are addressed as "virtuous" when Jacobs asks them to forgive her behavior. Jacobs calls them "virtuous" not only to stress how their condition is different from hers, but also to underline that, thanks to their strong moral principles, they can sympathize with the condition of degradation endured by black women who cannot morally uplift themselves like Northern women because of their forced enslavement.

Therefore, in *Incidents* there seems to be no chance to achieve true womanhood within the context of slavery, whether because a woman is in bondage and thus prevented from achieving this ideal, or because partaking in the horror of slavery deprives women of their angel-like status. The figure of Linda's first mistress seems to be the only exception to this but even this white woman is not exempt from judgement. The way in which her behavior towards Linda is described shows that her mistress did not treat Linda as a slave: "My mistress was so kind to me that I was always glad to do her bidding […]. When she thought I was tired, she would send me out to run and jump."[31] Jacobs, thus, has a positive memory of her mistress and also claims that that happy period of her life ended once her mistress died. Nevertheless, Jacobs perceives the fact that she did not free her, and instead bequeathed her to her niece, as a betrayal that still haunts the memory of her "kind" mistress, as Jacobs tells her audience: "I would give much to blot out from my

[30] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, p.157.
[31] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, p.11.

memory that one great wrong."[32] The positive image of her mistress appears, therefore, to be corrupted by this unhappy event that cannot be erased from Jacobs's memory. Even though there is no actual comment on the moral implications of her mistress's betrayal in the text, her failure to grant Jacobs her freedom produces a palpable sense of bitterness in Jacobs's words, thus underlining that the high esteem she had for her mistress when she was a child has been damaged.

In *Incidents*, then, enslavement is identified as the main reason why black women could not achieve true womanhood. The Cult of True Womanhood is seen as too restrictive to effectively describe the experience of black womanhood under slavery. Linda, in particular, is aware of the inescapability of her situation, and understands that, if she wants to take control over her own body and defeat Dr. Flint's authority, she needs to renounce the "pure principles" she was taught to follow and try to change her condition. The first step she takes in this direction is choosing Mr. Sands over Dr. Flint as her partner. By so doing, she directly challenges not only the principles of modesty and purity promoted by the Cult of True Womanhood, but also the power that Dr. Flint has over her. Nevertheless, Linda's first plan to induce Dr. Flint to sell her after learning of her pregnancy does not work and Linda finds herself in a precarious situation, in which her children are used a means to threaten her. As will be seen in the following section, motherhood becomes a cause of pain for Linda, but also and especially the site of a newly discovered agency, which stems from her desire to protect her offspring from the brutality of slavery.

3.3. Motherhood as a Site of Resistance

As previously mentioned, in order to try and resist Dr. Flint's claims over her body, Linda decides to start a relationship with Mr. Sands, which results in Linda's pregnancy. When she informs her master about her condition, she feels a sense of "satisfaction and triumph."[33] The feelings that Linda experiences derive from the acknowledgement that she managed to deprive her master of his rights over her body, considering that slave women's reproductive potential was in all respects regarded as a piece of property that the slaveholder could exploit as he pleased. At the basis of these

[32] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, pp.11-12.
[33] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, p.51.

feelings also lies the awareness that denying Dr. Flint his rights meant exercising a degree of agency that Linda had never experienced before.[34] The sense of powerlessness she feels knowing that her body does not belong to her is won by this intentional act of defiance, which allows Linda to re-appropriate her own sexuality. Nevertheless, these triumphant feelings are soon replaced with a sense of wretchedness at the idea of letting her grandmother know about what she did. Unable to confess the truth to Aunt Martha, she sits under a tree and starts sewing, but her grandmother understands that something is wrong just by looking at her granddaughter. Aunt Martha's display of her maternal instinct gives rise to a reflection on the experience of motherhood under slavery, which perfectly summarizes the condition of slave mothers:

> The mother of slaves is very watchful. She knows there is no security for her children. After they have entered their teens, she lives in daily expectation of trouble.[35]

What unites slave mothers is the common awareness that their children are never safe and that they could easily be separated from their family members. With regard to Linda, after her first baby is born, Dr. Flint often reminds her that Benjamin's birth has contributed to the increase of the size of his human capital, thus pointing out the fact that she has no parental rights over her son. Motherhood for Linda thus appears to come together with the consciousness that her act of defiance might have endangered her baby.

Therefore, as noted by the scholar Mary McCartin Wearn, after the birth of her child, Linda starts living her motherhood with ambivalent feelings.[36] This ambivalence is not only due to the fact that the birth of her child did not have the outcome she was hoping for in terms of personal freedom, but also to the fact that she feels guilty for having transmitted her condition of enslavement to him. This sense of ambivalence towards her role as mother is taken to the extreme in one particular passage of *Incidents*, in which Linda admits wishing for her baby to die rather than see him living as a slave; however, once Benjamin actually falls ill, she starts praying for him to survive:

[34] Miranda A. Green-Barteet, "'The Loophole of Retreat': Interstitial Spaces in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*", *South Central Review*, vol. 30, no. 2 (2013): p.60.

[35] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, p.51.

[36] Mary McCartin Wearn, *Negotiating Motherhood in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, New York, London: Routledge, 2012, p.92.

> 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.[37]

Despite her admission that "death is better than slavery", Linda's love for her child leads her to do all that is in her power, in this case praying, to ensure his survival. Linda's maternal instinct manifests itself as a strength that enables her to act for the sake of her offspring. Despite the awareness that for Benjamin surviving means living in bondage, Linda simply cannot let him go, as she feels the need to try and protect him. A similar feeling of ambivalence raises again in Linda's heart when she gives birth to her second child, Ellen. As Jacobs explains: "Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women."[38] This time her sense of anguish is caused by the consciousness that Ellen, being both female and a slave, is most likely going to be subjected to sexual exploitation and violence once old enough. Once again, Linda is reminded of the danger of slavery for her children.

Although in the text Linda's torment for the awareness that her children are bound to suffer the cruelty of slavery is often stressed, it is also quite significant that the chapters in which Jacobs describes the birth of Benjamin and Ellen are titled, respectively, "The New Tie to Life" and "Another Link to Life". These titles seem to point both at the fact that becoming a mother has given Linda a renewed reason to cling to life and resist her condition of oppression, as well as at the fact that the mother-child bond is essentially a relation of dependence in which children are protected and taken care of by their mother. Thus, as noted by Stephanie Li, what Linda realizes after the birth of her children is that her own survival is necessary to ensure their well-being.[39] In this sense, referring to Linda's children as a "tie" and a "link" underlines the system of interdependence that lies at the core of maternal relationships. In *Incidents* the mother-child bond is exploited by Dr. Flint as a means to threaten Linda; more specifically, he uses Linda's love for her children against her, turning her offspring into a weapon to try and submit her: Dr. Flint offers Linda to give her and her children their freedom if she accepts to become his mistress, warning her that refusing his offering would mean being sent, together with her children, to his son's plantation to endure hard labor conditions. The fear for the safety of

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[37] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, p.56.
[38] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, p.68.
[39] Stephanie Li, "Motherhood as Resistance in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*", *Legacy*, vol. 23, no. 1 (2006): p.23.

her children is what compels Linda to take immediate action against Dr. Flint, thus revealing the empowering role that can come with motherhood:

> I had a woman's pride, and a mother's love for my children; and I resolved that out of the darkness of this hour a brighter dawn should rise for them. My master had power and law on his side; I had a determined will. There is might in each.[40]

In this specific passage, Linda recognizes the "might" that derives from her desire to protect her own children. It is particularly interesting to notice that, as previously seen, this is not the first time that Linda exploits her maternal body as a means to resist Dr. Flint's claims over her sexuality, as she had intentionally become pregnant in the hope that her master would sell her. The major difference between that scene and the passage quoted above lies, however, in the fact that now Linda is focusing on the well-being of her children before hers, which is evident in her specific reference to her wish that a "brighter dawn should rise for them." Her newly found strength is fueled by her "woman's pride" and her "mother's love", asserting again her right to exercise control over her own body, and thus refusing to comply with Dr. Flint's degrading offering, and especially her right to perform her mothering role by protecting her children.

According to Patricia Hill Collins, then, *Incidents* can be seen as an example of a mother's denial of her own self-actualization in the name of a sense of responsibility that stems from the acknowledgement of the importance of the mother-child bond.[41] Linda's wish to put her children's safety before hers is perfectly visible in the way in which she develops her new plan: she resolves to escape from her master's house in an attempt to prevent her children from being taken to the plantation and thus ensure their safety. Aware that Dr. Flint was using them as a weapon against her and that he would never sell them as long as they could be used to submit her, Linda understands that leaving could actually favor her children: if Dr. Flint could be convinced of Linda's escape, then her children would no longer be useful for him and he would probably sell them, so that they could finally be bought by their father, Mr. Sands. By developing and enacting a plot to escape from bondage Linda is able to affirm her agency once again, as she directly challenges her master's authority. However, Linda is unable to leave her children altogether, preferring to remain as close to them as possible, while concealing her presence even to

[40] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, p.75.
[41] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, New York, London: Routledge, 2000, p.197.

them in order to avoid endangering them. Her act of defiance is thus not only motivated by her desire to protect her offspring, but also aimed at achieving freedom for them, rather than for herself, since she states: "it was more for my helpless children than for myself that I longed for freedom."[42]

After hiding in various places, Linda eventually moves to a small garret above her grandmother's house, where she will spend seven years of her life. Despite the limited space she is forced to live in, Linda is able to transform the garret in a place of empowerment. More specifically, Green-Barteet has pointed out that Linda's peculiar status of invisibility, which is only possible while she is in her hiding place, contributes to the enhancement of her sense of agency.[43] The limited possibility to move is replaced, in this garret, by Linda's ability to watch and keep under surveillance Dr. Flint and the rest of the community through a peep-hole craved in the wood. This situation leads to a reversal of the traditional balance of power between master and slave: Dr. Flint does not know where Linda is hiding, not does he imagine that she can spy upon him without being noticed; thus, thanks to her use of the peep-hole, Linda is able to shift her position from being controlled by her master to be the one in control of her master. In particular, the information that Linda gathers from the garret about Dr. Flint's insistent attempts to convince Aunt Martha to reveal where she is hiding allows her to manipulate her master into thinking that she has already escaped North.

Nevertheless, this feeling of empowerment does not come without difficulties for Linda, as she has to endure both physical and emotional pain due to the condition of constraint in which she is forced to live. While in the garret she cannot properly move, she is tormented by insects and rats, and she also experiences the painful effects of frostbite on her body. Additionally, she has to resist the urge to run to her child, Benjamin, when he is attacked by a dog. The agony she undergoes when she sees her child covered in blood is palpable in her words of despair: "O, what a torture to a mother's heart, to listen to this and be unable to go to him!"[44] Despite all the pain she has to endure, Linda does not surrender and manages to remain hidden for years without being caught by her master. The main reason why Linda is able to hide for so long is that her family members

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[42] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, p.78.
[43] Green-Barteet, "'The Loophole of Retreat'", p.63.
[44] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, p.104.

and friends help her during this difficult time, providing for her needs, taking care of her children, and eventually helping her escape North. *Incidents*, therefore, as noted by Joanne Braxton can be seen as an example of how slave narratives written by former slave women tend to celebrate the cooperation of the entire community in the achievement of freedom by the protagonist of the narrative.[45] Moreover, as already discussed, while Linda's incapability to sever her ties with her children leads her to prefer a condition of physical containment in the garret to escaping North, it also allows her to gain power over her master, thus underlining that family ties should be valued for their empowering potential rather than being regarded as a mere constraint to individual freedom. In this sense, *Incidents* rejects the importance attributed to personal freedom over family ties in many slave narratives written by men. While in her hiding place, Linda's freedom is indeed limited, but her condition is seen as a compromise that she willingly accepts in order to secure their children's safety, and their eventual freedom, which she values above anything else.

The greatest source of strength for Linda during her seven years of concealment, then, is knowing that her children are safe from Dr. Flint's threats. Despite the discomfort she feels in the garret, Linda acknowledges that the pain she is enduring can be eased if she reminds herself that she is suffering for the sake of her children: "I had my consolation. Through my peeping-hole I could watch the children, and when they were near enough, I could hear their talk."[46] Pain, thus, seems to become a symbol of Linda's resistance, which underlines on the one hand the sacrifice that can come with motherhood while, on the other hand, the strength that the mother-child bond can give to a woman even in the hardest circumstances. According to the scholar Mary Vermillion, Linda's physical sufferings can also be interpreted as a fundamental step in the re-appropriation of her body.[47] The reasoning behind this statement is that the condition of concealment to which Linda is subjected while in the garret is the result of Linda's own choice: while it is true that she is forced to stay hidden to avoid being returned to her master, it is also true that her own decision to enact a plan to escape and her wish to protect her children

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[45] Joanne M. Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition within a Tradition*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989, p.19.
[46] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, p.99.
[47] Mary Vermillion, "Reembodying the Self: Representations of Rape in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *I Know why the Caged Bird Sings*", *Biography*, vol. 15, no. 3 (1992): p.248.

is what really encourages her to challenge Dr. Flint's authority and endure years of pain. By intentionally putting herself in this condition, she exercises a degree of agency that allows her to assert control over her own body, reclaiming even the right to feel a type of physical pain that is not the result of the punishments inflicted on her by her master, but rather of her will to sacrifice herself for her children. Therefore, the process of bodily re-appropriation that had started with Linda's first act of defiance, namely choosing Mr. Sands over her master and becoming pregnant, seems to culminate in her acceptance of physical suffering, while in the garret, in the name of the well-being of her children. Pain, thus, is presented as an integral part of Linda's resistance, by means of which she can reassume control over her body and definitively defy Dr. Flint's authority.

Overall, motherhood in *Incidents* appears to be conceived as a powerful site of resistance, as the development of Linda's agency is strictly related to her desire to fulfill her mothering role. As explained in this section, the need to protect Benjamin and Ellen from the brutality of slavery compels Linda to act against Dr. Flint and endure severe forms of physical and psychological pain. Nevertheless, motherhood is not presented only as a form of resistance to physical bondage, but also to ideological oppression. With regard to this, Patton notes that Jacobs in her narrative shows that motherhood can become an instrument to fight against the dehumanizing effects of slavery and racism as well.[48] In the eyes of slaveholders, slave women were valued for their reproductive potential as breeders and, thus, their role as mothers was completely denied. This denial, as seen in the previous chapter, often resulted in the conception of black mothers as unaffectionate matriarchs that could not properly look after their offspring. Therefore, by presenting her readers the figure of a loving mother who goes through terrible sufferings for the sake of her children, Jacobs rejects this stereotypical conception of black motherhood and offers, instead, a positive image of slave mothers who, like Linda, manage to take care of their children despite their condition of enslavement. Moreover, the way in which Jacobs represents the role of motherhood in fueling Linda's fight against her oppression also challenges the conventional conception of slave women as passive victims of violence. While focusing on denouncing the brutal reality of the sexual exploitation to which slave women were subjected, Jacobs at the same time depicts Linda as a slave woman

[48] Patton, *Women in Chains*, p.92.

threatening her master's authority with her multiple acts of defiance, rather than as a helpless victim of abuse. The fact that one of the main reasons behind her fight against Dr. Flint is the well-being of children also contributes to reinforce the idea that motherhood can provide the strength necessary to resist oppression.

As previously discussed, in *Incidents* Jacobs criticizes the standards of purity associated with the concept of true womanhood, as they seem to be inapplicable to her experience. By displaying Linda's active role in her fight against slavery, Jacobs also challenges the idea that a true woman should be submissive. In her experience, accepting paternal authority, which for a slave woman was represented by her master, would have meant surrendering to Dr. Flint's claims over her body and, consequently, to her condition of enslavement. Therefore, given that the impulse to resist so fiercely to her master is given to Linda by the desire to protect her offspring, her mothering role becomes essential to her development of a new conception of womanhood that can overcome ideas of female passivity and be free from the limitations imposed by the Cult of True Womanhood, as well as from the stereotypical images of black womanhood that were promoted by the slaveholding class. With regard to this, the conclusion to *Incidents* becomes extremely meaningful as it appears to be more than a simple reference to her newly acquired freedom from bondage:

> 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.[49]

In this conclusive passage, Jacobs apparently wants to emphasize the fact that she eventually managed to achieve freedom from her condition of enslavement. Although this fact is definitely true, she also remarks that marriage would be a more "usual" ending to her story. As noted by Angelyn Mitchell, by so doing, she establishes an oppositional relationship between freedom and marriage that stresses the fact that nineteenth-century marriages were, in all respects, property relationships that limited women's liberties.[50] Thus, Jacobs seems to suggest that she is not simply free from bondage, but also from the constraint of marriage that would want her submitted to another form of patriarchal

[49] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, p.167.
[50] Angelyn Mitchell, *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction*, New Brunswick, London: Rutgers University Press, 2002, p.40.

authority. By stressing that freedom is "a vast improvement in *my* condition", Jacobs seems to acknowledge that her own experience as a former slave woman has led her to this conclusion. This idea becomes even more evident in the fact that Jacobs claims that her "dream" would be to have a home of her own in which she could live with her children, but she does not mention the eventuality of having a husband. This passage seems, therefore, to be alluding to a new conception of womanhood that she wants to claim for herself and that does not follow traditional patterns of domesticity. For Jacobs, thus, freedom means to be free from the bondage of slavery as well as from the boundaries of limitative ideologies of womanhood that cannot be effectively applied to her own experience.

This chapter has analyzed issues of female agency and representation, focusing in particular on the role of motherhood in Harriet Jacobs's slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. The following chapter will focus on the analysis of Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*, a neo-slave narrative that also relates the story of an enslaved black woman and that, similarly to *Incidents*, examines the role of motherhood in resisting slavery.

4. *Dessa Rose*

Chapter three has focused on the analysis of Harriet Jacobs's slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. The aim of this narrative was to persuade the reader of the need to abolish slavery as well as to denounce the condition of sexual exploitation to which many slave women were subjected; the chapter has, therefore, examined the way in which Jacobs discusses this issue within her narrative, also showing how the commodification of the slave woman's body prevented slave women from identifying with standards of femininity promoted in the nineteenth century as the requirements for True Womanhood. Similarly to *Incidents*, Williams's *Dessa Rose* also focuses on the experience of an enslaved black woman, Dessa, who tries to escape from bondage to ensure a better life for her unborn baby. In the text, Dessa is not represented as a passive victim of violence, but rather, like Linda Brent, as a slave woman who fights for her freedom and for the re-appropriation of her rights to self-definition. Moreover, in both Jacobs's and Williams's works, the role attributed to motherhood by the authors is fundamental to Linda's and Dessa's discovery of their own strength and to the achievement of freedom.

The aim of this chapter is to analyze the main themes of *Dessa Rose*, examining in detail the process of appropriation of the slave woman's body. The first section of this chapter is meant to provide introductory information on *Dessa Rose*, focusing especially on the ways in which Williams's novel responds to contemporary historical and cultural debates. The second section moves on to investigate the problem of the dehumanization of enslaved subjects within the narrative, which is carried out by means of strategies that result in the appropriation of Dessa's own body and voice. The final section will especially focus on the theme of motherhood and its role within the text as a site of empowerment and re-appropriation.

4.1. A Neo-Slave Narrative

Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* was first published in 1986. The text follows the story of Dessa, a slave woman, who is imprisoned after taking part into a rebellion on a slave coffle, which resulted in the killing of five white men and the maiming of another. Being pregnant, Dessa's death sentence is postponed until the birth of her baby. While in jail, Dessa is interviewed by Adam Nehemiah, a white man who is collecting details about

the slave uprising Dessa was involved in, in order to write them down in his book, which should help slaveholders understand how to suppress slave rebellions. Dessa, however, manages to escape thanks to the help of three runaway slaves and finds shelter in the plantation of a Southern woman, Ruth Elizabeth, where she gives birth to her baby. Eventually, with the help of Ruth, Dessa and the other slaves devise a plan to accumulate the money necessary for them to escape West and be definitively free from bondage.

As seems evident from this brief summary, one of the central themes of *Dessa Rose* is slavery. *Dessa Rose* is an example of "neo-slave narrative", a type of literary text which Ashraf Rushdy defines as "contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative."[1] With regard to this definition, it should be pointed out that the term "neo-slave narrative", which Rushdy borrows from Bernard W. Bell, is not the only accepted way to designate contemporary works that deal with the topic of slavery. For example, Arlene Keizer prefers the term "contemporary narrative of slavery" over "neo-slave narrative", which she considers as a too limitative definition; more specifically, Keizer notes that, despite the fact that many contemporary works on slavery draw upon the slave narrative, they also often move beyond this tradition, using the context of slavery to theorize on "the nature and formation of black subjects, under the slave system and in the present."[2] Overall, the neo-slave narrative as a literary genre includes all those texts that approach the issue of slavery, even if they are not directly set in the period of slavery or adopt forms that differ from the slave narrative. According to Valerie Smith, what unifies all these different texts is the relevance given to both the history and the memory of slavery in the framing of individual and national identity, as well as the fact that neo-slave narratives usually offer insight into questions that relate to contemporary cultural and historical issues.[3]

In *Dessa Rose* Williams is particularly interested in the issue of slavery exactly because she believes that its effects are still evident in the contemporary world. When

[1] Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, *Neo Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, p.3.
[2] Arlene Keizer, *Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018, p.1.
[3] Valerie Smith, "Neo-Slave Narratives", in A. A. Fisch, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp.168-9.

asked about the reasons why she decided to start writing a novel about slavery, Williams replied:

> Even some black people, a few, have asked why I would want to probe that old scar. Slavery, however, is more scab than scar on the nation's body. It's a wound that has not healed and, until the scab is removed, the festered flesh cut away, it cannot heal cleanly and completely.[4]

By identifying slavery with "scab", Williams underlines that the healing process that is associated with it is not yet concluded. Writing *Dessa Rose* can thus be seen as her attempt to heal this "wound" by portraying the story of an enslaved black woman that, despite the difficulties she has to face, is able to survive the dehumanizing effects of slavery and pass on her story to the future generations. Moreover, Williams's choice of relating the experience of a black woman can be better understood within the context of what critics have defined as the Black Women's Literary Renaissance of the 1970s. According to the scholar DoVeanna S. Fulton, this literary movement emerged as a response to the patriarchal values promoted by black nationalist groups, which in addition to privileging black male, over female, experience also often emphasized the submitted role of black women with respect to men.[5] Black women writers of this period, then, focus on the experiences of black women as a means to challenge these patriarchal views. In presenting the story of an enslaved black woman that fights for her freedom, Williams therefore seems to place herself within a literary tradition that uses slavery as the starting point for investigating gender and racial issues that are not yet resolved within contemporary society.

In the "Author's Note" included in *Dessa Rose*, Williams affirms that her text was inspired by two historical incidents. The first one is the capture and conviction of a pregnant black woman that led a slave uprising on a coffle in 1829 and whose hanging was postponed until the birth of her baby, while the second incident is related to the story of a white woman that was said to have given shelter to runaway slaves in her isolated farm in North Carolina in 1830. Commenting on these events, Williams writes: "How sad, I thought then, that these two women never met."[6] Together with the disappointment

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[4] Sherley Anne Williams and Geraldine Smith-Wright, "The Lion's History: The Ghetto Writes B[l]ack [with Response]", *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 76, no. 2/3 (1993): p.248.
[5] DoVeanna S. Fulton, *Speaking Power: Black Feminist Orality in Women's Narratives of Slavery*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006, p.102.
[6] Sherley Anne Williams, *Dessa Rose*, New York: Harper Perennial, 1986, p.5.

Williams felt when she first learnt that these two women did not have a chance to meet came the acknowledgement of the possibility of rewriting their stories in a way that could allow not only their encounter, but also the chance for them to help each other. These two women are represented in *Dessa Rose* by Dessa and Ruth who, although not without difficulties, manage to establish a relationship of interracial sisterhood on the basis of their shared womanhood.

Despite basing her novel on historical events, Williams clearly states that *Dessa Rose* is a work of fiction. The necessity to inform her readers of the fictionality of her novel derives from her editors' request to explicitly clarify this point; however, Williams commented on this request affirming that "white boys won prizes to do just that and I didn't understand this sudden concern for 'historical accuracy.'"[7] This comment is a clear allusion to William Styron, author of the novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, which was published in 1967 and that won the Pulitzer Prize the subsequent year, and hints to Williams's desire to enter the contemporary debate surrounding the publication of this novel. This is also evident in the fact that Williams also refers to Styron's novel in the "Author's Note" to *Dessa Rose*, writing that she is "outraged by a certain, critically acclaimed novel of the early seventies that travestied the as-told-to memoir of slave revolt leader Nat Turner."[8] The publication of this novel caused the reaction of many black intellectuals because of the way in which Nat Turner, the leader of one of the most famous slave rebellions in America, is described in the text: Nat Turner is represented as a weak and lust-driven man that obsessively fantasizes about white women. According to Williams, then, Styron's novel is an example of how "African Americans […] remain at the mercy of literature and writing."[9] Her statement is motivated by the fact that Styron's depiction of Nat Turner is not historically accurate and seems, rather, the consequence of the manipulation of history at the hands of Styron. Williams's critique to Styron's *Confessions* in her "Author's Notes" is thus quite relevant as it seems to point at the fact that she conceives her novel in relation to Styron's work. The first section of *Dessa Rose*, in particular, seems to be the result of Williams's act of signifying on Styron's

[7] Williams and Smith-Wright, "The Lion's History", p.257.
[8] Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.5.
[9] Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.5.

Confessions, which leads Williams to include a series of references to his novel, to repeat its structure and also to subvert its features.[10]

This first section of *Dessa Rose* is titled "The Darky" and it is a rewriting of Williams's former short story *Meditations on History*, which already engaged with Styron's text in its display of an interview between Dessa and Nehemiah, which is represented similarly to the encounter between Nat Turner and Thomas Gray as described in Styron's *Confessions*. Like Gray, Nehemiah is writing a book about slave uprisings and he interviews Dessa who, like Nat Turner, had led a slave rebellion that resulted in the killing of many white men. However, as the interview proceeds, the reader understands that Nehemiah is biased against Dessa, often questioning the truthfulness of what she says and trying to find better explanations to the incidents she narrates. For example, when Dessa reveals that her lover, Kaine, had been killed after attacking the master who had smashed his banjo, Nehemiah refuses to believe what Dessa is telling him and convinces himself that there must be another reason why Kaine reacted like that. The fact that Nehemiah does not believe Dessa's words points at a problem of trustworthiness, which Williams seems to be especially interested in investigating in *Dessa Rose*. According to Andrée-Anne Kekeh, Williams's aim in the text is to highlight the fact that historical writing can be subjected to ideological manipulation.[11] This is particularly evident in a passage in which Williams points out that Nehemiah is not really faithfully transcribing Dessa's words in his notebook, but rather reconstructing what he remembers of the events she recounts:

> He hadn't caught every word; often he had puzzled overlong at some unfamiliar idiom or phrase, now and then losing the tale in the welter of names the darky called. Or he had sat, fascinated, forgetting to write. Yet the scene was so vivid in his mind as he deciphered the darky's account from his hastily scratched notes and he reconstructed it in his journal as though he had remembered it word for word.[12]

Nehemiah is not always able to make sense of what Dessa is telling him because of some expressions she uses that he is not familiar with and also because of the "welter of names" she includes in her story. He even admits forgetting to write down what Dessa says

[10] Stefanie Sievers, *Liberating Narratives: The Authorization of Black Female Voices in African American Women Writer's Novels of Slavery*, Hamburg: LIT, 1999, p.113.
[11] Andrée-Anne Kekeh, "Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*: History and the Disruptive Power of Memory", in Fabre and O'Meally, eds., *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, 1994, p.221.
[12] Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.18.

because he is captivated by her words. The reader thus understands that Nehemiah is unable to reproduce a faithful account of Dessa's story because he lacks partial information, yet Nehemiah does not refrain from annotating the bits he "deciphered" and decides to reconstruct Dessa's words "as though he had remembered it word by word." The act of deciphering and reconstructing Dessa's story implies that Nehemiah is rewriting, and thus manipulating, her words by putting together what he can understand and creating his own version of the story that Dessa has told him. This manipulative acts, together with the fact that this first section of *Dessa Rose* is actually narrated from Nehemiah's perspective, make the reader realize that what Nehemiah is writing is not an objective account of Dessa's story, but rather a filtered version of it.

On the basis of the above-mentioned association of Nehemiah with Thomas Gray and Dessa with Nat Turner, it is therefore arguable that behind Nehemiah's behavior lies a critique of Styron's representation of the historical figure of Nat Turner. More specifically, Williams seems to be suggesting that the inaccurate depiction of Nat Turner provided by Styron is the result of his appropriation of Nat Turner's voice, which does not only fail to follow historical accuracy, but also appropriates his figure and risks to perpetrate stereotypical representations of black people. For this reason, as noted by Angelyn Mitchell, Styron's work can be seen as an example of how history is a culturally constructed narrative which, in this case, shows how white ideologies have often misinterpreted black voices, even in their attempt to speak for them.[13] *Dessa Rose* can thus be understood as Williams's desire to free black voices from white appropriations and return them to black subjects. In this respect, the structure of *Dessa Rose* is quite telling. The text is divided into three main sections, each of which is told by different perspectives. These sections are also preceded by a prologue, which contains fragments of Dessa's dreams and memories of Kaine, and followed by an epilogue. As already mentioned, the first section is titled "The Darky" and it is narrated from Nehemiah's point of view; the second section, "The Wench", takes on Ruth's perspective; while the final section, "The Negress", is related in Dessa's first person. The terms "darky" and "wench" designate Dessa, respectively, on the basis of her race and gender, thus underlining those characteristics, namely race and sexuality, that in the eyes of slaveholders make of Dessa

[13] Angelyn Mitchell, *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction*, New Brunswick, London: Rutgers University Press, 2002, p.68.

an object worth exploiting. On the contrary, the term "negress" carries no racial or sexual connotation, thus pointing out, together with the fact that the third section is the only one written in Dessa's first-person, that this section is simply the narrative of a black woman, whose voice is finally free from ideological constraints.[14] Additionally, the prologue and the epilogue of the novel are also related in Dessa's first person, therefore encapsulating the whole narrative and pointing out Williams's intention to give voice to a black woman's perspective, as Dessa's voice is both the first and the last one heard by the reader.

In her giving voice to a black woman's subjectivity in *Dessa Rose*, Williams is able to enter contemporary debates on race and gender issues, as well as to revise the past through the creation of a fictional world based on historical incidents as a means to challenge misinterpretations of black voices such as Nat Turner's in Styron's novel. As will be shown in the following section, Williams includes the misreading of Dessa's story by Nehemiah within a broader context of appropriation that reflects on Dessa's body and that shows the effects of slavery on those who experienced it.

4.2. The Appropriation of Dessa's Body

The section "The Darky" mostly focuses on Nehemiah's interview of Dessa while she is imprisoned. As already explained, not only does Nehemiah refuse to believe some of the incidents that Dessa tells him, but he also reconstructs and writes down in his journal his own version of Dessa's story. Nehemiah's behavior can be seen as an example of the acts of appropriation that contribute to the process of dehumanization that is aimed at objectifying people in contexts of enslavement. The enactment of this process over Dessa at the hands of Nehemiah is already suggested in Williams's choice to use a racially connotated term as a title for this section, which reflects Nehemiah's perspective on Dessa and which is reinforced, as noted by Carol E. Henderson, by the addition of a reference to Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* before the beginning of the section, namely "You have seen how a man was made a slave[…]."[15] By quoting Douglass's famous narrative, Williams seems to underline her wish to investigate the power dynamics that lie at the

[14] Fulton, *Speaking Power*, p.112.
[15] Carol E. Henderson, *Scarring the Black Body: Race and Representation in African American Literature*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002, p.64.

basis of slavery, making the reader aware of her intention to shed light on the process of objectification of enslaved black people.

In *Dessa Rose* Williams highlights the fact that, as a slave woman, Dessa is legally considered to be a piece of property whose body is meant, in the eyes of slaveholders, to produce labor and reproduce human chattel for her master. When Nehemiah first visits Dessa in her jail, he comments on her pregnancy defining her condition a "stroke of luck."[16] From his perspective, this luck did not consist in the fact that, because of her pregnancy, Dessa's hanging had been postponed and had thus contributed to the preservation of a human life, but rather in the fact that this delay is what made possible for him to interview a rebellious slave for his book, *The Roots of Rebellion in the Slave Population and Some Means of Eradicating Them*. Moreover, the fact of delaying Dessa's death sentence is not motivated by the wish to spare the baby's life either, but rather by the recognition that the death of the baby would mean the loss of human capital for Wilson, the slaveholder who had been maimed in the uprising and who was "obsessed with seeing, and selling, the kid she carried."[17] Therefore, already physically restrained by her chains, Dessa is further entrapped in a situation that will inevitably end with the seizure of her own baby.

Since the beginning of the novel, then, the reader is made aware of the status of Dessa as a commodity, which leads both Nehemiah and Wilson to appropriate her body and her voice as a result of the power that derives from their dominant position. According to Anne E. Goldman, Dessa's body can consequently be read, literally and figuratively, as a text upon which the mark of slavery is inscribed.[18] Dessa's body is indeed scarred: as a punishment for attacking her mistress out of rage, Dessa was whipped on her genitalia and her thighs. In Nehemiah's perspective, Dessa's scars "bespoke a history of misconduct."[19] This shows that Nehemiah is analyzing Dessa on the basis of his own perspective, which carries strong racial connotations. In particular, when Nehemiah thinks about Dessa's scarred body, he only takes into consideration the fact that she assaulted her mistress, ignoring the reasons behind Dessa's reaction because in his mind

[16] Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.29.
[17] Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.22.
[18] Anne E. Goldman, "'I Made the Ink': (Literary) Production and Reproduction in *Dessa Rose* and *Beloved*", *Feminist Studies*, vol. 16, no. 2 (1990): p.323.
[19] Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.21.

they are not relevant as the law prohibited black people from striking white people. However, if on the one hand the scars on her body are seen by Nehemiah as a mark of Dessa's rebellion against her mistress, on the other hand they also clearly appear to the reader as an example of the brutality of slavery on those who suffered it. This is due to the fact that the reader is aware that Dessa's rage was triggered by her mistress's assumption about the paternity of Dessa's baby: Dessa's mistress was convinced that the father of her baby was, in fact, her husband Terrell and that, after learning this, Kaine had attacked Terrell out of jealousy and had consequently been killed. Hence, Dessa is not only physically but also psychologically scarred by her traumatic experience of enslavement.

According to the scholar Jennifer Griffiths, in the text there is a clear link between Dessa's trauma and her bodily response, which becomes especially evident in Dessa's emotional detachment from the events she narrates to Nehemiah.[20] For example, when Dessa tells him about Kaine's killing at the hands of their master, he comments on her involvement in the events saying that she narrated this episode "with about as much expression as one gave to a 'Howdy' with any passing stranger."[21] Unable to elaborate the pain for the loss of her beloved, Dessa seems to dissociate herself from the memory of this traumatic event as a mechanism of self-defense, which leads her to the incapability of expressing her feelings about what happened to Kaine. Therefore, completely ignoring Dessa's emotional scarring and the story behind it, Nehemiah is unable to see beyond Dessa's detachment and only manages to partially read the marks inscribed on Dessa's body, which he only sees an indicator of her bestiality. Nehemiah does not only fail to read Dessa but, as previously discussed, also distorts her words to fit his own narrative rather than accurately writing them down. Nehemiah's misreading, together with the faulty reconstruction he does, works as a process of appropriation that shows that behind his attempts to subjugate Dessa lies the necessity to assert his own dominance, that is the necessity to affirm his position of power through the objectification of "the other".

This process of objectification enforced by Nehemiah on Dessa is further demonstrated by Nehemiah's perseverance in calling her Odessa. As noted in the text,

[20] Jennifer L. Griffiths, *Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women's Writing and Performance*, Charlottesville, London: University of Virginia Press, 2009, p.19.
[21] Williams, *Dessa Rose*, pp.20-1.

"no one called her Odessa, but the white folk."[22] This comment reflects white people's tendency, in the text, to assume that Dessa is just a corruption of the form Odessa and not her actual intended name. By renaming her Odessa, Nehemiah performs another act of appropriation, the result of which is the assignation of a new and different identity upon her.[23] The fact of renaming Dessa thus appears to be an instrument of which Nehemiah can dispose to deprive Dessa of her right to self-definition. More specifically, Nehemiah is writing a story about a rebellious woman named Odessa, and he is doing so on the basis of his own reconstruction of her words, which only partially match Dessa's actual narration and show that he is misinterpreting her actions. In so doing, Nehemiah is creating a totally different person to fit in his book. The same type of process is enacted by Nehemiah when he first hears the name Kaine, which he immediately assumes to be a name given to him by his master, unaware of the fact that "Kaine was the color of the cane syrup taffy they pulled and stretched to a glistening golden brown in winter."[24] Once again, Nehemiah does not question the origin of Kaine's name and rather takes for granted that the explanation he thinks of must be correct. As pointed out by Mary Kamp Davis, it is particularly interesting to notice that Nehemiah's first name is a specific reference to the Biblical figure of Adam, the "archetypal namer" that first denominates God's creations.[25] Williams is thus drawing a comparison between the Biblical Adam and Adam Nehemiah on the basis of their act of naming other creatures; however, it seems clear that Williams also wants to stress that the nature of this process is substantially different in these two contexts: one act is the performance of a divine task, while the other is the enforcement of a system of oppression that considers renaming as a means to dehumanize black people by stripping them of their identity.

Nehemiah is not, however, the only white person to confer Dessa an identity that is not her own. In particular, when Aunt Lefonia explains to Kaine the reason why the mistress does not want to move Dessa from her work in the fields to the house, she says that Dessa is "too light for Mist's and not light enough for Masa. Mist's ascared Masa

[22] Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.65.
[23] Mary Kamp Davis, "Everybody Knows Her Name: The Recovery of the Past in Sherley Anne Williams's Dessa Rose", *Callaloo*, no. 40 (1989): p.548.
[24] Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.60.
[25] Davis, "Everybody Knows Her Name", p.547.

gon be likin the high-colored gals same as he did fo they was married […].”[26] The mistress, aware of the fact that before their marriage her husband had sexual relationships with black women, wants to ensure that he stays away from slave women to avoid the chance of him resuming such behavior. Therefore, by claiming that Dessa is “too light”, the mistress expresses her fear for Dessa’s sexuality, thus implying that she associates Dessa to stereotypical representations of black women as jezebels that tempt white men with their lasciviousness. On the other hand, Dessa is “not light enough” for her master, underlining the fact that, ironically, the shade of her skin tone is too dark to be considered attractive to him. In either cases, what emerges from these words is that Dessa is being relegated to the status of sexual object, as she is only spoken of in terms of her sexuality and attractiveness, which become her defining characteristics in the eyes of her owners. Her sexuality, just like her body and her words, is thus appropriated and manipulated by the slaveholding system.[27] This is also evident in the fact that when Nehemiah learns that Dessa managed to escape from jail, he says: “the slut will not escape me. Sly bitch, smile at me, pretend-. She won’t escape me.”[28] Angry about Dessa’s escape, he resorts to sexually connotated terms to define her, as a means to diminish her and reduce her to nothing more than her sex. Once again, Dessa is associated to an idea of promiscuous sexuality that fits within the boundaries of the jezebel stereotype.

All of these acts of appropriation that Dessa undergoes throughout the text have a strong dehumanizing effect on her. In a particularly meaningful passage Dessa remembers that after attacking her mistress and being scarred, she was further punished and condemned to be put in a sweatbox for an extended period of time. With regard to the torture she suffered she says:

> I had cried a long time in that box, from pain, from grief, from filth. That filth, my filth. You know, this do something to you, to have to lay up in filth. […] Laying up there in my own foulment made me know how low I was. And I cried. I was like an animal; whipped like one; in the dirt like one. I hadn’t never known peoples could do peoples like this. And I had the marks of that on my privates.[29]

What emerges from these words is that the pain Dessa endured while in the sweatbox is still vivid in her mind. The degrading condition she was subjected to made her realize that she was, in all respects, considered to be nothing more than chattel. Her pain,

[26] Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.18.
[27] Mitchell, *The Freedom to Remember*, p.73.
[28] Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.71.
[29] Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.191.

therefore, is not only caused by the brutal physical punishment she was victim of, but also by the awareness of being stripped of her human status. It is clear that, through Dessa's words, Williams is underlining the dehumanizing effects of slavery on enslaved people who are reduced to animal-like conditions. However, it might be possible that Williams is also trying to urge her readers to reflect on the fact that slaves are not the only ones to be dehumanized by the institution of slavery. When Dessa comments on what slavery does to people, she says that she "hadn't never known peoples could do peoples like this." In her display of the cruel forms of tortures she was subjected to as a punishment for her behavior, Dessa seems to be thus stressing that slaveholders seem to be the ones who have really lost their humanity, as they are ready to inflict this much pain to other people in order to assert their power and submit those they consider inferior to them. As Dessa observes, the "marks" she bears on her "privates" are therefore evidence of this process of dehumanization, which is forever inscribed on her body.

Despite the different types of appropriation she is subjected to, Dessa is not represented as a passive victim at the mercy of her enslavers. When Nehemiah asks her information about the slave uprising, Dessa avoids answering his questions and rather focuses on the narration of her relationship with Kaine and the events that led to his killing, deliberately taking control over the interview:

> Talking with the white man was a game; it marked time and she dared a little with him, playing on words, lightly capping as though he were no more than some darky bent on bandying words with a likely-looking gal.[30]

The fact that Dessa "dared a little with him" is quite telling, as it points at her exertion of a certain degree of power over Nehemiah: she is moving beyond her condition of physical subjugation, using her words to claim that freedom she cannot achieve while chained. As noted by Kekeh, Dessa seems to oppose the power of oral resistance to Nehemiah's acts of manipulation in his rewriting of Dessa's story.[31] In this passage in particular, Dessa does not just assume control over the interview, but also over her interviewer. This is clarified through the comparison of Nehemiah to a "darky", which is the same term he has used multiple times to refer to Dessa, thus underlining the actuation of a reversal of the roles of master and slave within this context of oral production. By so doing, Dessa is

[30] Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.60.
[31] Kekeh, "Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*", p.221.

able to perform her first act of re-appropriation, which allows her to claim her voice back from the man who tried to steal it. This re-appropriation of her own voice becomes a subversive act that is emphasized by the symbolic use Dessa actually makes of her voice in the text.[32] After hearing someone singing outside her prison, Dessa joins in the singing in front of Nehemiah, who fails, once again, to read Dessa and does not understand the meaning of the chant he hears: Dessa is responding, with her singing, to a hidden message from other runaway slaves who are trying to communicate their intention to help her escape. Dessa, therefore, employs a coded language that literally allows her to break out of jail and be free, thus proving the empowering function of orality in the text.

However, escaping for Dessa is not enough to overcome the traumatic experience she endured during her enslavement. Regaining control over her own voice is but the first step in a process of re-appropriation that needs to target her body and her sexuality as well if she wants to escape, once and for all, a context of domination that denied her the right to self-definition. In this respect, as will be discussed in the following section, Dessa's maternal role becomes fundamental, as it enables her not only to develop a sense of agency that stems from her desire to see her baby free from bondage, but also to recover from her sufferings through the acquisition of a new sense of self.

4.3. Motherhood as a Site of Empowerment

Since the beginning of the novel, Dessa's maternal role is presented to the reading audience as a condition that literally saves her own life. This is due to the fact that, as previously mentioned, the reader almost immediately learns that Dessa's life has been spared because of her pregnancy and her hanging has been delayed until after childbirth in order to safeguard Wilson's economic interests in the baby. According to Goldman, Dessa's life is then defined in inverse relation to that of her unborn baby: the birth of her child will mean, for Dessa, her own death.[33] The nature of the mother-child bond thus appears to be reversed, as it is the mother who depends on her offspring to survive, rather than the opposite. The fact that this relation of dependency can be reversed under slavery points at the troublesome role of slave mothers, who were mostly valuable to their masters as reproducers of human capital and had few means to protect their offspring from

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[32] Kekeh, "Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*", p.223.
[33] Goldman, "'I Made the Ink'", p.315.

enslavement. In Williams's text, the moment in which Dessa first becomes actually aware of the fact that her baby will inevitably be born a slave is when she tells Kaine about her pregnancy. Kaine tries to convince Dessa to seek the help of Aunt Lefonia to have an abortion, which he considers a better option than having their child doomed to a life in bondage. Despite her refusal to accept Kaine's request, Dessa realizes the inescapability of the situation and feels a deep sense of powerlessness: "Fear had eaten at her insides; even if she saved their baby from Lefonia, she would never be able to save it if Master wanted it."[34] Dessa's response to this sense of helplessness is, however, different from Kaine's, as the more he tries to convince her that having a baby would only be a source of profit for their master and of sufferings for them as parents, the more Dessa starts to understand that the only possibility to ensure their baby's safety would be escaping: "everything that Kaine said that was supposed to make her see the foolishness of having a baby only convinced her that they must run."[35] It is evident that Kaine and Dessa do not share the same view of parenthood, given the difficulty of parenting in a context of enslavement. More specifically, Dessa does not surrender to a system that aims at appropriating the fruit of her womb, nor does she accept the alternative suggested by Kaine. Rather, Dessa's bond with her unborn baby is so strong that she would rather risk escaping in the hope that her son will never be enslaved than passively submitting to her condition of enslavement. This thought of freedom stemming from the desire to protect her baby is in itself an empowering act for Dessa.[36] The reason behind this is that considering for the first time the chance of escaping means expressing her will to defy her master's claims over her maternal body and thus resisting its commodification.

After Kaine's killing and the failed uprising on the slave coffle, Dessa is taken to prison, aware that it will only be a matter of time before her child is taken away from her and she is sentenced to death. Refusing to submit to her enslavers, Dessa tries to resist as much as she can, even physically, as noted by Nehemiah: "She had been in a dangerously excitable state when first apprehended - biting, scratching, spitting, a wildcat - apparently unconcerned about the harm her actions might cause to her unborn child."[37] It is interesting to notice that, once again, Nehemiah seems to be misinterpreting Dessa's

[34] Williams, *Dessa Rose*, pp.48-9.
[35] Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.50.
[36] Mitchell, *The Freedom to Remember*, p.79.
[37] Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.23.

actions: he associates her behavior to her animal-like nature, comparing her to a "wildcat", completely ignoring the reasons behind her fierce resistance. More importantly, Nehemiah further comments on her behavior stating that she seems to be "unconcerned" about the fact that her actions might be harmful to her baby. By alluding to Dessa's carelessness towards her child, Nehemiah is not only perpetrating a stereotypical view of black mothers as unaffectionate matriarchs, but also performing an act of misreading, as he applies his own biased views to Dessa, appropriating her image as a mother. According to Carole Boyce Davies, childbearing is a form of visible physical marking for women living in patriarchal societies, like Dessa, as it allows their maternal body to become a readable text.[38] In this case, Nehemiah reads Dessa's behavior in relation to her pregnancy, thus exploiting her maternal body to further his racist beliefs: in his mind Dessa's "biting", "scratching", and "spitting" imply that Dessa is an inconsiderate mother because she might hurt her baby. It is worth noticing that, paradoxically, he does not seem to be as concerned when he learns that Dessa has been scarred and tortured, even if she was already pregnant when that happened. This difference in judgment seems to hint at the fact that what really scares Nehemiah is not the chance of Dessa's baby being hurt by her actions, as he does not condemn her brutal punishment, but rather her display of physical resistance to her condition, which highlights Dessa's strenuous determination and refusal to surrender. What Nehemiah fails to understand is that motherhood for Dessa is a powerful source of strength that leads her to try and ensure the safety of her baby regardless of the hopelessness of her condition. This instinctive need to protect her baby from a life in bondage is also explicitly stated by Dessa when Ruth asks her the reason why she decided to run away and she simply answers: "Cause, cause I didn't want my baby to be slaved."[39]

Motherhood is thus conceived as an empowering dimension that allows Dessa to actively resist slavery. Moreover, by enacting her plan of escape, Dessa is also able to bring the nature of her mother-child bond back to its normal status, freeing herself from a condition that saw her being dependent on her child for survival rather than the opposite. However, escaping is not enough to repossess herself entirely because Dessa, despite

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[38] Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migration of the Subject*, London: Routledge, 1994, p.138.
[39] Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.139.

being physically free from bondage, is still tormented by the trauma of her experience of slavery:

> Many the day I cursed freedom; it took everyone I loved in girlhood from me. […] Yes, freedom had come true, but in ways I'd never thought of and with hurts I didn't know I could bear. That dream had to be something worth living for, if not for me, then for Mony […].[40]

In this passage Dessa is reflecting upon the chance of moving West with the other runaway slaves in order to be definitively free from bondage. The fact that she is still suffering for what she had to endure under slavery is evident in her statement that she "cursed freedom." Aware of all she lost in her path to freedom, she cannot avoid feeling a sense of bitterness while looking back at her past experience. However, despite the pain she had to suffer to escape from her enslavement, Dessa is still willing to try and move West for the sake of her son Mony, as she calls him. The power that derives from the mother-child bond is once again stressed in Dessa's acknowledgement that she has survived "hurts" that she did not know she had the strength to endure. Her motherhood is thus represented as a driving force for Dessa, who is encouraged to continue fighting in the name of the love for her child.[41] In this sense, her maternal role seems to give meaning to her life, as she underlines that her only concern is her son's freedom, not hers.

However, the relation she has with her role as mother seems to be quite ambivalent. If it is true that she indeed finds in her child the strength to rebel against oppression and to fight for freedom, it is equally true that after her imprisonment the fear she feels for the chance of being separated from her baby becomes even more tangible, revealing the effects of her traumatic experience on her maternal identity. This is particularly evident in Dessa's reaction when she first wakes up in Ruth's house after giving birth and sees her newborn in the arms of a white woman: absolutely frightened by the scene, Dessa, still exhausted for her labor, is only able to scream "Naaaaaawwwww!" with all the strength she can gather.[42] Dessa's fear of separation is even more inflamed by the acknowledgement of the fact that she cannot feed her own baby and must, consequently, accept Ruth's help in nursing him:

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[40] Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.171.
[41] Venetria K. Patton, *Women in Chains: The Legacy of Slavery in Black Women's Fiction*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000, p.135.
[42] Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.88.

> It hurt me to my deepest heart not to nurse my baby. Made me shamed, like I was less than a woman. And to have him nursing on her… Oh, I accepted it. Wasn't no choice; but I never did like to see it. And she act like this wasn't no more to her than nursing her own child.[43]

Although her life no longer depends on her child, her own conception of the mother-child bond does not appear to be fully restored: Dessa feels like she cannot properly provide for her baby and experiences a feeling of resentment towards Ruth who, instead, can nurse him as if he was "her own child." Despite acknowledging the necessity of the situation for the sake of her baby, Dessa seems to conceive Ruth's help as an appropriation of her mothering role.[44] Dessa's pain derives from the awareness that when she was in bondage she could not claim her role of mother because she knew that slave mothers have no rights over their own offspring and now, after all she has endured to ensure her baby's freedom, she also has to face the fact that she still cannot reclaim her mothering role because she is physically unable to do so. The feeling of frustration and shame the stems from this situation is further strengthened by Dessa's perception of being "less than a woman." As noted by Venetria K. Patton, this perception Dessa has of herself shows that her idea of womanhood is strictly related to her sense of maternity.[45] More specifically, the incapability to provide for her baby does not only distort Dessa's self-image as a mother, but also as a woman.

This wounded relationship that Dessa has with her own motherhood and womanhood is also symbolically marked by the scars on Dessa's body. As already mentioned, Dessa has been scarred on her genitalia and on her thighs. The fact that Dessa is marked on this private area is especially meaningful as it inscribes, according to Henderson, the brutalizing effects of slavery on an area of Dessa's body that specifically relates to her femininity.[46] The fact that Dessa is pregnant at the moment in which the scarring happens is even more revealing of the deep connection between motherhood, womanhood, and also the trauma of slavery; in marking Dessa's genitalia and thighs, her masters physically inscribe the pain of her experience on a zone of her body that was once a site of pleasure and of reproduction and that Dessa inevitably links to her beloved deceased Kaine, as she remembers in her dreams while imprisoned: "*Talk as beautiful as his touch. Shivering, she pulled at his shirt. This was love, her hand at his back, his mouth.*

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[43] Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.170.
[44] Griffiths, *Traumatic Possessions*, p.24.
[45] Patton, *Women in* Chains, p.137.
[46] Henderson, *Scarring the Black Body*, p.77.

[…] Thighs spreading for him, hips moving for him."[47] After her punishment, Dessa is left with her baby as the only surviving part of Kaine as well as her scarring as a reminder of what she has lost forever. Therefore, the fact that Dessa's baby is related to her memory of Kaine as well as to her sufferings, together with the awareness that she cannot nurse him, only seems to worsen her psychological wounds and to arise in Dessa a feeling of uncertainty about her maternal role.

In order for Dessa to escape the effects of slavery on her self-perception she needs to find a way to heal her wounds and re-appropriate her right to define herself as a woman and a mother outside a context of oppression that deprived her of both these opportunities. In particular, Dessa's own process of self-redefinition becomes possible, in the text, only through the development of her relationship with Ruth, which is characterized, at least initially, by conflict.[48] It is significant that this conflict originates within the boundaries of motherhood. As already mentioned, Dessa's resentment towards Ruth arises from her belief that the white woman, by nursing Mony, is appropriating her mothering role. The fear of appropriation is further exasperated in a passage of the text in which Ruth starts talking about her memories of her mammy, Dorcas, and Dessa misunderstands what she is saying, believing that the mammy Ruth is speaking of is actually Dessa's own mother. Assuming that Ruth is trying to appropriate the image of her mother, just like she had appropriated her mothering functions, Dessa accuses Ruth of lying: "She was crazy, making up this whole thing […]."[49] After this first moment of disbelief, Dessa realizes that the mammy Ruth is mentioning has nothing to do with her own mother:

> She knew even as she said it what the white woman meant. "Mammy" was a servant, a slave (Dorcas?) who had nursed the white woman as Carrie had nursed Young Mistress's baby before it died.[50]

By comparing Dorcas to her sister Carrie, Dessa highlights the fact that the practice of using black women as mammies was extremely common, thus also criticizing the commodification of black women's bodies, whose maternal products were appropriated by slaveholders who exploited them as wet-nurses for their own children. However, Dessa does not stop here and fiercely starts to contend that the term "Mammy" used by white

[47] Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.14.
[48] Griffiths, *Traumatic Possessions*, p.21.
[49] Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.118.
[50] Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.118.

people is, in fact, just a title and does not imply any type of emotional bond, as black mammies were forced to take care of white children: "'Mammy' ain't nobody name, not they real one."[51] Nevertheless, Ruth refuses to believe that her mammy did not truly love her and, when Dessa provokes her asking if she knew her mammy's real name and pointing out that she probably had children of her own, she yells: "She just had me! I was like her child."[52] Despite not accepting the idea that Dorcas might not have loved her, Ruth is indeed aware that she was not her child, but "like her child" thus underlining that there is indeed a difference between mothering a child and being the mother of a child.

As noted by Angelo Rich Robinson, this passage of *Dessa Rose*, then, is characterized by Dessa's determination in proving that the idea of mammy and that of mother are two separate things.[53] This is quite relevant because behind this desire to make Ruth acknowledge the difference between these two roles lies the key to Dessa's own definition of her maternal identity. This desire can be better understood if one considers that the moment in which Ruth begins to breastfeed Dessa's baby marks the reversal of the traditional relationship black mammy/white baby, as Ruth becomes a white mammy nursing a black baby.[54] By pointing out that biological motherhood and mothering are two distinct things and that the love of a mother for her own children cannot be outclassed by the relation between a mammy and the children she is forced to nurse, Dessa is trying to fully restore her mother-child bond; following this reasoning, if Ruth is a mammy and Dessa is a mother, then, Dessa's affective bond to Mony is not comparable to the bond he has with Ruth, which stems from mere necessity since Ruth "was the only nursing woman on the place."[55] Therefore, Dessa's fear of separation, which she has internalized as a slave mother and that has been reinforced by the experience of loss she had to endure, is here voiced in her conflict with Ruth. Through this discussion with Ruth, Dessa is able to restore her self-perception as a mother, as is also symbolically highlighted in the fact that the more the argument develops, the more Dessa seems to align her own maternal identity with that of her own mother. This alignment is especially evident in the fact that

[51] Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.119.
[52] Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.119.
[53] Angelo Rich Robinson, "'Mammy Ain't Nobody Name': The Subject of Mammy in Shirley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*", *Southern Quarterly*, vol. 49, no. 1 (2011): p.54.
[54] Raquel Kennon, "Subtle Resistance: On Sugar and the Mammy Figure in Kara Walker's *A Subtlety* and Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*", *African American Review*, vol. 52, no. 2 (2019): p.156.
[55] Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.102.

the reader learns that Dessa Rose is actually named after her mother, Rose, as the result of an act of self-assertion and continuity.[56] However, the reader is also forced to notice that there is a substantial difference between Dessa and her mother, that is, all of her mother's children have been sold or have died whereas Dessa, despite all the difficulties she had to face, still has her baby. Dessa, too, acknowledges the painful maternal experience of her mother after relating all the names and the tragic stories of her siblings to Ruth in an emotional outburst: "Anger spent now, she wept. 'Oh, I pray God mammy still got Carrie Mae left.'"[57] Sorrow replaces anger the moment Dessa realizes that her mother has lost all of her children, perfectly understanding a mother's feeling of despair at the thought of losing her offspring.

Motherhood thus becomes, for Dessa, a site in which she can articulate her sufferings and come to terms with the fear of loss that slavery has instilled in her after Kaine's death. By asserting her maternal relationship with Mony as the strength that drives her forward and the reason why she fights for freedom, Dessa re-defines herself as a mother outside a context of enslavement that had compelled her to use her pregnancy as a shield, while also defying racist views of black women as unaffectionate matriarchs, as Nehemiah had, without hesitation, classified her. The importance given to motherhood in the text is especially evident in a passage of *Dessa Rose* in which Dessa is looking back at past events, and she identifies the moment she woke up in Ruth's house after giving birth to Mony as the turning point of her life:

> When I come to myself in that bed, I accepted that everyone I loved was gone. That life was dead to me; I'd held the wake for it in that cellar. Yet and still, I was alive. At first I couldn't put no dependence on what I was seeing - a *white* woman nursing a *negro*[...]. So that bed was grave and birthing place to me. I had come into the world, had started on it the minute I said run to Kaine, said north, or maybe when he told me to go see Aunt Lefonia.[58]

She explains that, when she was imprisoned, she had already lost everyone she loved and she was thus living a particular condition in which she was alive but felt as if her life had been destroyed. The bed in which she gives birth to Mony is compared to a grave because it is the place where her previous life, the one marked by loss, ends. Therefore, Dessa acknowledges that that same bed is also a "birthing place" for her: by defining it as a "birthing place" Dessa does not only refer to the birth of Mony, but also and especially

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[56] Davis, "Everybody Knows Her Name", p.554.
[57] Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.120.
[58] Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.197.

to her own rebirth as a new individual outside enslavement, as she goes on specifying, "I had come into the world". In particular, her own process of rebirth starts when she first acts in the name of the love for her child, which Dessa herself consciously recognizes as the moment in which she "said run to Kaine", and when she was asked to "see Aunt Lefonia." Dessa's refusal to have an abortion and her determination in escaping with the aim of sparing her baby a life in bondage are, in retrospection, valued by Dessa for their empowering function as they enabled her to first take action against her condition of enslavement. By indicating her acts of maternal love as the starting point of her process of self-definition, Dessa also definitively restores her self-image as a mother.

After re-appropriating her role as a mother, Dessa is also able to re-define her womanhood. Once again, this process of self-definition requires Ruth as a means of awakening for Dessa. In particular, Dessa narrates that, one night, Ruth is almost raped by a white man, Oscar, but thanks to Dessa's help Ruth manages to repel the assaulter. According to Griffiths, this scene represents a significant moment of healing for Dessa because it is the exact moment in which she understands that, as women, they share the same vulnerability to sexual violence, independently from their skin color.[59] The awareness deriving from this incident finally allows the two women to bond and establish a new relationship based on a newly discovered sense of sisterhood:

> I never will forget the fear that come on me when Miz Lady called me on Mr. Oscar, that *knowing* that she was as helpless in this as I was, that our only protection was ourselfs and each other.[60]

This moment of bonding is extremely meaningful as it does not only show the possibility of overcoming racial barriers but also of defying patriarchal authority. This becomes even more evident in the final passage of the third section of *Dessa Rose*, in which Dessa finds herself again face to face with Nehemiah who has Dessa arrested by the sheriff on the charge of being a fugitive slave. To prove everyone that she is, in fact, the slave woman he has been looking for, he wants to strip her naked to expose her scars as a proof of her identity and eventually take her back to her master to have her hanged. However, Dessa is rescued by Ruth, who convinces the sheriff that Dessa belongs to her, as well as by another black woman, Aunt Chloe, who is ordered to check Dessa's body for signs of whipping and who, however, decides to lie to the white men claiming that she cannot see

[59] Griffiths, *Traumatic Possessions*, p.31.
[60] Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.202.

any scar on Dessa's body. Aware of the fact that all the three women are lying, Nehemiah angrily says: "'You-all in this together' - grabbing at us - 'womanhood.' He was down on his knees, scrambling amongst them papers. 'All alike. Sluts.'"[61] By commenting that women are "all alike" and "sluts," Nehemiah puts Dessa and Ruth on the same level, erasing racial differences in his perception of the two women and only evaluating them on the basis of their gender. Significantly, in this final scene, Nehemiah is kneeling on the ground, defeated by the strength of this female coalition, frantically trying to pick up the pages of the journal in which he had once inscribed his own version of Dessa. However, not only has Nehemiah ultimately failed to write Dessa down in his journal, but in a final act of defiance, Dessa becomes the one inscribing Nehemiah in her own narrative: in the epilogue, Dessa is described while she narrates her own story of survival to her grandchildren, thus claiming authority over her own narrative and appropriating the right to self-definition that Nehemiah, and her former masters, had tried to deny her.

As explained in this section, in *Dessa Rose* motherhood is presented to the reader as a site of empowerment for Dessa, which allows her to actively resist her condition of enslavement. Dessa's resistance does not only consist in physically rebelling against bondage in an attempt to give her child a chance to freedom, but also in overcoming the sufferings that the loss of her beloved ones caused her. In particular, re-defining herself as a mother eventually allows Dessa to escape the dehumanizing effects of slavery and to find within her mother-child bond a new reason to live. The novel ends with Dessa's remark that "we have paid for our children's place in the world again, and again…."[62] With this statement she is not merely stressing the sufferings that she, and others like her, had to endure under slavery, but also and especially emphasizing the fact that her sufferings were not in vain. Despite all the pain, her determination to achieve freedom for her child drove her forward and eventually allowed her to claim for him a "place in the world" as a free subject. Dessa, with these words, is thus closing a cycle that had begun with her acts of defiance towards her masters in the name of the love for her child, and that is now ending with the remembrance of the power that such love can give to a mother in her fight against oppression.

[61] Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.232.
[62] Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.236.

Conclusion

This study has focused on the analysis of two works by black female writers, namely the slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs and the neo-slave narrative *Dessa Rose* by Sherley Anne Williams. Despite being written in different historical moments and within different contexts, both these works offer a deep insight into the issue of slavery, focusing especially on denouncing the condition of sexual exploitation and violence to which slave women were subjected. The aim of this study was to analyze the representation of slave women in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Dessa Rose* in an attempt to explore the theme of motherhood as a site of agency in contexts of enslavement. The choice to focus on these two works in particular derived from the fact that both Jacobs and Williams, in their texts, approach the issue of slavery from a female perspective that allows them to explore the problematic position of slave mothers within a context of oppression in which they were regarded as mere pieces of property whose only purpose was, in the eyes of slaveholders, that of increasing the size of their human chattel. Stripped of their parental rights and often victims of rape, slave mothers also had to live in the constant fear of being separated from their children, as shown in both Jacobs's and Williams's works.

Overall, what emerged from this study is that there is indeed a strong correlation between motherhood and agency in both *Incidents* and *Dessa Rose*. In particular, motherhood seems to be conceived by Jacobs and Williams as an empowering dimension for slave women, which becomes a unique site within which female agency can develop. As revealed in the previous chapters, both *Incidents* and *Dessa Rose* extensively deal with the implications of motherhood for black women in contexts of enslavement. The protagonists of these works, Linda and Dessa, are slave mothers who are willing to sacrifice themselves and endure extremely harsh conditions in order to protect their children from violence and to try and ensure their freedom from bondage: Linda decides to feign her escape in order to induce Dr. Flint to sell her children to their white father, whereas Dessa tries to escape physical bondage multiple times and even takes part in a slave uprising in an attempt to achieve freedom for herself and for her unborn baby. As emerged from the analysis of Jacobs's and Williams's works, both Linda and Dessa feel a sense of ambivalence towards their role as mothers, which stems from the awareness

that their condition of bondage will be transmitted to their children. This consciousness does not only lead Linda and Dessa to be concerned about their children's future but also instills in them the fear of being separated from them. While this fear certainly triggers in Linda and Dessa the desire to fight for their offspring, it also causes them a sense of anguish for the precariousness of their condition. This ambivalent feeling towards their maternal role validates the view on black motherhood supported by Patricia Hill Collins who, despite acknowledging the significant impact that the strength deriving from the mother-child bond can have on women's resistance to their condition of oppression, emphasizes the impossibility to overlook the fact that motherhood often requires great personal sacrifice in such contexts.[1]

In *Incidents* and *Dessa Rose* the cost paid by Linda and Dessa for their rebellion against their masters for their children's sake is indeed high: Linda is forced to remain hidden in a narrow garret for seven years without being able to reveal her presence to her children, whereas Dessa is imprisoned and sentenced to death after taking part in a slave uprising in the hope to escape from bondage. Nevertheless, the type of empowerment that they find within their mother-child relationship is presented by Jacobs and Williams as a worth reward for their sacrifice. This is due to the fact that Linda's and Dessa's acts of defiance against their masters allow them to start developing a new sense of self. In this respect, both these works seem to share the same conception of the mother-child bond as a site within which women can redefine themselves as active subjects, since the desire to ensure the safety of their children gives rise to an instinctive need to fight against oppression, whatever the cost, if this means giving their offspring a chance to live a better life as free subjects.

Motherhood is therefore presented as a powerful instrument in both Jacobs's and Williams's works also because, as the site in which Linda and Dessa define themselves as active agents in their fight against slavery, it allows them to challenge traditional representations of slave women as passive victims at the mercy of their masters, as they were usually depicted in narratives by former slave men. Although the reasons behind Linda's and Dessa's acts of defiance are motivated by the same desire to ensure their

[1] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, New York, London: Routledge, 2000, p.195.

children's safety, the strategies they adopt to achieve their ends are slightly different. While it is true that both women escape from bondage, it should be noted that Linda prefers to hide in a garret, where she remains invisible to Dr. Flint's eyes and manages to spy upon her enemy without being seen. Dessa, instead, resorts to more direct means of resistance, physically attacking her enslavers and actually running away from them. These acts clearly show Linda's and Dessa's refusal to accept their condition of submission without trying to change their situation. Moreover, it seems worth noticing that the awakening of their maternal instinct leads Linda and Dessa not only to discover a new sense of agency which fuels their different strategies of resistance to bondage, but also to value family ties above individual freedom. As discussed in chapter three and four, this seems to be particularly evident in the fact that both women explicitly state that all they hope for is their children's freedom, rather than their own. In Jacobs's and Williams's works the instinct of self-preservation is thus transcended within the mother-child bond and is substituted by a spirit of self-sacrifice that finds its ultimate expression in the readiness to risk everything for the survival of another individual.

A common theme in both *Incidents* and *Dessa Rose* is pain, which is directly related to Linda's and Dessa's experiences of slavery, as they are both subjected to physical and psychological suffering. However, while Linda's pain is, to an extent, self-inflicted because she willingly accepts to live in severe physical conditions while in her hiding place, Dessa's suffering is shown as the result of her condition of enslavement, which has been physically inscribed on her body and which has also deprived her of her beloved ones, thus leaving her emotionally scarred as well. In Jacobs's text pain is therefore presented as a symbol of Linda's resistance to oppression, whereas in Williams's text pain becomes a marker of Dessa's traumatic experience which, as explained in chapter four, she needs to confront in order to be able to re-possess herself. In either case, suffering seems to be conceived as an essential component to the process of self-definition that both Linda and Dessa undergo in the texts. This is mainly due to the fact that neither of the two can fully restore her self-perception without first embracing her pain and coming to terms with her own experience of slavery. In particular, physical pain means, for Linda, accepting her role as a mother and being willing to sacrifice her own well-being to ensure her children's freedom. For Dessa, too, pain is related to her maternal identity as overcoming her fears of separation, which fomented her

psychological sufferings after Kaine's death, allows Dessa to re-assert herself as a new subject outside slavery. Therefore, in its relation to motherhood, pain seems to be functional to Linda's and Dessa's complete acceptance of their maternal role.

Finally, both Jacobs and Williams place at the center of their narrations the process of dehumanization of the enslaved subject at the hands of the slaveholding class. In *Dessa Rose* Williams especially dissects this process, showing the reader different levels on which slaveholders try to exercise their authority, appropriating Dessa's body, her sexuality and even her voice. The appropriation of slave women's body and sexuality is also a theme that, in both *Incidents* and *Dessa Rose*, is strictly related to that of motherhood. More specifically, both these works consider how, within the context of slavery, the commodification of the black woman's body had become a routinized practice which did not only result in the sexual exploitation of slave women but also in the appropriation of the fruit of their womb as well as of their mothering functions. With their acts of defiance, Linda and Dessa try to re-appropriate their maternal bodies, claiming for themselves the right to be regarded as actual mothers and not as mere breeders: asserting their rights to perform their maternal role, even in the most basic actions such as nurturing and protecting their offspring, means challenging their masters' view of them as pieces of property of which they could dispose as they pleased. In *Incidents* and *Dessa Rose*, therefore, Jacobs and Williams actively challenge the dominant ideologies that promoted the dehumanization of black female slaves through the perpetration of strategies of objectification. In particular, what emerged from the analysis of these works is that the stereotypical conception of black women as unaffectionate mothers is discarded and substituted, instead, by the image of two loving mothers who are willing to sacrifice everything for the sake of their children. Within the boundaries of motherhood, therefore, both Linda and Dessa seem to find the power necessary to resist dominant ideologies and assert their right to claim for themselves positive images of black womanhood.

In conclusion, through the display of the harsh conditions endured by black mothers under slavery, Jacobs and Williams do not simply aim at emphasizing the status of degradation in which slave women were forced to live. While denouncing the brutal treatment slave women were victims of is certainly part of their purpose as writers, especially for Jacobs who wanted to convince her readers of the necessity to support the

abolition of slavery, they do not only focus on this aspect of slavery. What they seem to be really interested in achieving with their texts is underlining that despite all the difficulties and the abuses slave women had to suffer, they still managed to find a way to resist their condition and fight back. Female agency is thus what really is at the core of the narration in *Incidents* and *Dessa Rose*. The reader follows step by step the whole process of development of Linda's and Dessa's agency, from their condition of oppression to the awakening of their power and, eventually, to their defeat of slavery and of its perpetrators. Motherhood fuels this process, giving Linda and Dessa a reason worth fighting for, which goes beyond the instinct of self-preservation and transforms into the determination to sacrifice one's own well-being for the sake of others. Motherhood thus performs an empowering function in these texts, supporting slave women's self-development as active agents and contributing to their assertion as volitional subjects within a context of domination that aimed at depriving them of this status.

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Riassunto

Lo scopo di questo studio è quello di analizzare la questione dell'agency femminile nel contesto della schiavitù americana, mettendo specialmente in rilievo il ruolo della maternità come luogo all'interno del quale la donna schiava può riscoprire il potere di opporsi e resistere alla propria condizione di oppressione. In particolare, nel corso di questo lavoro vengono prese in esame due opere letterarie, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* di Harriet Jacobs e *Dessa Rose* di Sherley Anne Williams, considerando nello specifico il modo in cui le autrici trattano il tema dell'agency e della maternità.

Già a metà del diciannovesimo secolo, gli Stati Uniti erano il Paese con il maggior numero di schiavi nell'emisfero occidentale. In particolare, il sistema di schiavitù instauratosi negli Stati Uniti era basato sulla concezione degli schiavi come beni commerciabili, che venivano dunque venduti e comprati, come qualsiasi altro bene, sulla base di un preciso valore economico associato ad ogni individuo. La schiavizzazione delle persone di origine africana veniva giustificata con la diffusione di ideologie razziali che ne sostenevano l'inferiorità sulla base della loro presunta natura selvaggia. Quando nel 1808 la tratta degli schiavi venne dichiarata illegale, la schiavitù non venne tuttavia abolita. Al contrario, l'impossibilità di acquistare nuovi schiavi provenienti dall'Africa spinse gli schiavisti a ripiegare sullo sfruttamento delle capacità riproduttive delle donne come mezzo per accrescere la quantità di schiavi posseduta. Ciò era possibile sulla base della legge del *partus sequitur ventrem*, ossia una dottrina legale secondo la quale la condizione di schiavitù della madre veniva trasmessa ai propri figli. Di conseguenza, le donne iniziarono ad essere sfruttate non solo, come gli uomini, per la loro manodopera, ma anche per il loro potenziale riproduttivo, trovandosi di fatto in una condizione di doppio sfruttamento, sia fisico che sessuale.

Lo sfruttamento sessuale cui le donne schiave venivano sottoposte era inoltre legato ad atti di violenza fisica, in quanto lo stupro non era legalmente considerato tale se commesso nei confronti di una schiava. La violenza sessuale veniva, anzi, permessa poiché considerata un valido mezzo per mettere incinta una donna e, di conseguenza, accrescere il numero di schiavi posseduti da uno schiavista. Inoltre, la violenza sessuale veniva anche utilizzata come strumento di sottomissione, sia delle donne che la subivano, sia degli uomini che non potevano impedirla, instillando dunque un sentimento di

impotenza negli schiavi nella speranza di annientare eventuali spiriti rivoltosi. In realtà, nonostante le terribili condizioni in cui le donne si trovavano in schiavitù, alcune di esse si ribellavano contro queste violenze, ad esempio respingendo fisicamente gli aggressori o utilizzando metodi di contraccezione per evitare di far ereditare ai figli la propria condizione di schiavitù. La maternità era una realtà difficile per le donne schiave, poiché consce del fatto che i propri figli, come loro, erano destinati ad una vita di schiavitù e potevano essere separati da loro in ogni momento. Inoltre, poiché accudire i propri figli non era semplice per una schiava, spesso le donne si affidavano all'aiuto delle "othermothers", ossia donne che facevano parte della stessa comunità e che non avevano necessariamente legami di parentela con la madre, le quali si occupavano dei bambini quando nessun'altro poteva, creando dunque una rete di relazioni famigliari che andava oltre il puro legame di sangue.

L'oppressione fisica della donna schiava era accompagnata da quella ideologica attraverso la diffusione di precise immagini stereotipiche mirate a rafforzarne l'assoggettamento. Innanzitutto, occorre sottolineare che l'asservimento femminile nella società americana del diciannovesimo secolo non riguardava esclusivamente le donne nere, ma anche quelle bianche, seppur avvenendo, chiaramente, in modo differente. In particolare, l'ideologia dominante riguardante l'ideale di femminilità cui le donne bianche appartenenti al ceto medio-alto erano spinte ad aspirare era quella del "Cult of True Womanhood", che promuoveva un'immagine di femminilità basata sull'esaltazione della castità e delle virtù domestiche, quali la cura della casa e della famiglia. Questo tipo di ideale escludeva del tutto le donne nere dalla possibilità di rispecchiarvisi, in quanto la loro condizione di schiavitù non permetteva loro di rimanere caste o di rivestire il ruolo tradizionale di madre o moglie, specialmente considerato che legalmente erano private di questi diritti.

Gli stereotipi più diffusi riguardanti le diverse concezioni di femminilità nera erano quelli della mammy, della virago e della jezebel, ognuno dei quali era mirato a sostenere la necessità di schiavizzare e sfruttare le donne afroamericane. L'immagine della mammy serviva a dimostrare che le schiave erano felici nella loro condizione, poiché, da stereotipo, si prendevano amorevolmente cura dei figli dei propri padroni come fossero figli loro. La virago, rappresentata come una donna mascolina e aggressiva che deprivava il proprio uomo della sua autorità, era invece un esempio del perché fosse

necessario mantenere le donne afroamericane in uno stato di sottomissione, affinché non superassero i limiti imposti dalla loro femminilità. Infine, la jezebel era un'immagine utilizzata per promuovere l'idea che le donne nere fossero, di natura, lascive e cercassero di approfittarsi dell'ingenuità degli uomini, corrompendone i principi morali. Questa immagine in particolare serviva a giustificare la violenza sessuale commessa nei confronti delle schiave, poiché secondo questa concezione erano loro le prime a voler ricevere questo tipo di attenzioni.

Anche nella letteratura prodotta da uomini ex-schiavi, come le slave narrative, la rappresentazione delle donne di colore era soggetta a manipolazioni. Nello specifico, in questo tipo di opere, le donne vengono solitamente dipinte come vittime passive e indifese della violenza perpetrata dagli schiavisti nei loro confronti. Il loro ruolo di vittime viene in particolare sfruttato per giustificare lo stato di impotenza dell'uomo schiavo che non solo non è in grado di proteggere la propria moglie o figlia dalla violenza, ma è anche costretto ad affrontare il fatto che nemmeno lui è al sicuro da questo tipo di ferocia. In netto contrasto con questo tipo di rappresentazione, nelle opere letterarie scritte da donne afroamericane la figura femminile non è rappresentata come una vittima indifesa, ma piuttosto come una donna che, seppur segnata dalle violenze subite, riesce a resistere alla sua condizione di oppressione e a ribellarsi contro i suoi padroni. La condizione problematica delle madri in contesti di schiavitù è, inoltre, spesso evidenziata in tali opere poiché, se da un lato l'amore per i propri figli riesce a spingerle a combattere contro l'oppressione, dall'altro lato le rende particolarmente vulnerabili a forme di coercizione basate sullo sfruttamento del legame madre-figlio a vantaggio degli schiavisti.

Un esempio di opera letteraria che pone il ruolo dello sfruttamento sessuale e della maternità al centro della narrazione è sicuramente *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) di Harriet Jacobs, una slave narrative scritta con uno scopo ben preciso, ossia mostrare la brutalità della schiavitù, denunciando in particolare la condizione di sfruttamento sessuale cui erano sottoposte le donne, al fine di convincere i lettori della necessità di supportarne l'abolizione. Il tema dell'abuso sessuale non viene trattato in modo esplicito nel testo, ma piuttosto attraverso velate allusioni alla condizione di sfruttamento cui Jacobs era soggetta durante la schiavitù, specialmente considerando il fatto che l'opera era rivolta ad un pubblico femminile e dunque doveva attenersi a degli standard di decoro che impedivano di trattare esplicitamente di tematiche così delicate.

In quest'opera Jacobs mette in particolare risalto il fatto che per le donne in schiavitù fosse impossibile attenersi ad uno standard di purezza e castità come quello promosso dal "Cult of True Womanhood", a causa della violenza sessuale cui erano sottoposte da parte dei loro padroni. Narrando la propria vicenda sotto lo pseudonimo di Linda Brent, Jacobs cerca dunque di ridefinire uno standard di femminilità che potesse includere la propria esperienza e che fosse libera da costrizioni ideologiche nate in seno a una società bianca e schiavista. Jacobs, inoltre, rifiuta la concezione della donna schiava come vittima indifesa, mostrando come lei sia riuscita ad ottenere la libertà per sé e per i propri figli solo grazie alla sua attiva e continua lotta contro la sua condizione di schiavitù. Ciò che viene maggiormente posto in risalto all'interno della narrazione è la precaria situazione in cui si trovavano le madri in schiavitù, che vivevano sapendo di aver trasmesso ai propri figli questa condizione. Tuttavia, Linda riesce a trarre forza dall'amore per i propri figli, che la rendono in grado di sopportare condizioni di estrema difficoltà e sofferenza. La decisione di fuggire viene infatti dettata dalla necessità di proteggere i propri figli, poiché Linda viene a conoscenza del fatto che Dr. Flint, il suo padrone, ha intenzione di mandarli a lavorare in una piantagione in condizioni disumane. Il ruolo materno viene dunque concepito da Jacobs come il motore che consente a Linda di ribellarsi definitivamente sia contro lo sfruttamento fisico, sia contro concezioni ideologiche che la vorrebbero vittima e sottomessa.

Dessa Rose (1986) di Sherley Anne Williams è un'altra opera scritta da un'autrice afroamericana che tratta del tema della schiavitù e della condizione delle madri in tale contesto. In particolare, questa neo-slave narrative nasce dal desiderio di Williams di prendere posizione all'interno del dibattito contemporaneo circa la pubblicazione di *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) di William Styron, un'opera che, secondo la critica afroamericana, si baserebbe sulla volontaria manipolazione della figura storica di Nat Turner, leader di una famosa rivolta di schiavi della Virginia. Williams, in *Dessa Rose*, fa deliberatamente riferimento a quest'opera, criticandone il contenuto e contestando il modo in cui Styron si era appropriato della voce di Nat Turner e ne avesse storpiato l'immagine. Così come Styron si è appropriato della voce di Nat Turner, allo stesso modo all'interno del testo Dessa viene privata della sua voce da Nehemiah, un uomo bianco che la intervista nella cella in cui essa è detenuta come conseguenza dell'aver guidato una rivolta di schiavi.

Questo processo di appropriazione è parte di un più ampio contesto di disumanizzazione, caratteristico della schiavitù, che Williams cerca di sviscerare in *Dessa Rose*. Nello specifico, nel corso della narrazione, Dessa viene sottoposta a diversi tipi di appropriazione. In primo luogo, in quanto schiava, viene privata della sua libertà e, in quanto prossima al parto, Dessa vive anche nella consapevolezza che suo figlio le sarà tolto e lei verrà impiccata come punizione per aver partecipato alla rivolta. Inoltre, mentre viene intervistata da Nehemiah, l'uomo le nega la possibilità di raccontare la sua storia passata, poiché egli ne altera il contenuto mentre ne prende nota sul suo taccuino. Tuttavia, Williams non raffigura Dessa come una vittima indifesa che accetta la sua condanna a morte, poiché grazie all'aiuto di alcuni schiavi fuggitivi, Dessa riesce a scappare dalla prigione poco prima del parto, motivata soprattutto dal desiderio di salvare il figlio da una vita di schiavitù. Anche in *Dessa Rose*, dunque, la maternità assume un ruolo significativo in quanto rappresentata come forza che spinge Dessa a ribellarsi alla propria condizione e fuggire, motivata dall'amore per il figlio. Williams mostra anche come la sofferenza inflitta a Dessa dalla schiavitù, che l'ha marchiata sia fisicamente che psicologicamente, venga infine accettata solamente abbracciando il proprio ruolo materno, poiché Dessa riesce a lasciare andare la propria sofferenza solo dopo aver realizzato che, nonostante tutto ciò che ha passato, suo figlio non le è stato portato via, come era accaduto invece per il suo amato Kaine e per la sua famiglia.

In entrambe queste opere, dunque, la correlazione tra agency e maternità è evidente. In particolare, la dimensione materna sembra essere concepita sia da Jacobs che da Williams come un sito in cui le donne schiave possono prendere piena consapevolezza del proprio potenziale e riaffermarsi attivamente come soggetti in grado non solo di resistere alla loro condizione di oppressione, ma anche di ridefinirsi al di fuori di quelle ideologie razziste che le volevano sottomesse alla classe dominante.