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"Oh! The pity of it! In the land of the free and the home of the brave": Tricksterism and True Womanhood in the Slave Narratives of Harriet Jacobs and Lucy Delaney

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Abstract

This essay discusses the use of trickster behavior in Harriet Jacobs and Lucy Delaney's slave narratives. Their enslavement necessitated that they engage in, what I describe as literal and rhetorical tricksterism. Trickster behavior, an African cultural practice adapted by enslaved Africans and their descendants, encouraged multiple forms of deception demonstrated in slave narratives through behavior and rhetorical presentation. Because Jacobs's narrative is frequently taught and evaluated, my discussion of Delaney's narrative adds another dimension to the female slave experience.

Introduction

Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* published in 1861, and Lucy Delaney's *From the Darkness Cometh the Light or Struggles for Freedom,* published in 1892, show black women using tricksterism to resist racial and sexual subordination. Their works strengthen Evelyn Brooks Higgonbotham's call for feminist scholars to "bring race more prominently into their analyses of power" (8). This call is significant to an evaluation of how black female slave narrators negotiated the power relations within slavery which excluded them from being recognized as women, while degrading and co-opting their womanhood for financial benefit. The fact that "slave women fell victim to rape precisely because of their gender" while race reinforced their exclusion from womanhood, makes Jacobs and Delaney's narratives significant because they seized the opportunity to demonstrate their desire to be recognized as women, instead of property (Higgonbotham 8). In "Whiteness as Property," Cheryl Harris explains that "slaves were bred through Black women's bodies" (1719). This situation placed black women at the center of race and class delineations because their sexuality became representative of socioeconomic status. Thus, black women's sexual victimization and status excluded them from the respect inherent to true womanhood: the recognition of feminine virtue and the role of motherhood in society. Barbara Welter identifies the characteristics of true womanhood as "purity, piety, submissiveness, and domesticity" (qtd. in Carby 23). These characteristics are described by Hazel Carby as "the parameters within which women were measured and declared to be, or not to be, women" (32). So, enslaved women were excluded from these parameters based on their position within the plantation system and burdened with demonstrating their worthiness. As Carby observes, black women writers "had to define a discourse of black womanhood which would not only address their exclusion from the ideology of true womanhood, but as a consequence of this exclusion, would also rescue their bodies from a persistent association with illicit sexuality" (32). This situation explains why Jacobs resorted to literal tricksterism in order to claim sexual choice and to protect her children and Delaney used rhetorical tricksterism to construct a morally upright self-identity that challenged the stereotypical image of black female deviancy. Jacobs's and Delaney's narratives portray their use of literal and rhetorical tricksterism to resist sexual compromise and maintain family stability, values that embodied true womanhood. By invoking pathos through direct appeal to readers and supporters, demonstrating religious and moral values, justifying acts of resistance, and organizing statements and events in a deliberate sequence that minimizes readers' discomfort, Jacobs and Delaney demonstrate literal and rhetorical trickster behavior (Pack 19).

Jacobs and Delaney engage in literal and rhetorical tricksterism by deliberate acts of deception and the manipulation of language to justify those acts in written form. While the trickster figure has been frequently discussed in folklore and fiction, its metamorphosis has been rarely identified in slave narratives and autobiographies. This absence is a significant observation because trickster behavior was disseminated through oral literature. Yet, slave narratives do not include folktales or accounts of listening to folktales, so it remains unclear exactly how the narrators used models of trickster behavior without deliberate analysis. So, the lack of recognition of tricksterism in African American autobiography proves its successful adaptation to literature because evidence of its use must be uncovered. Enslaved women's strategies of deceit, dissimulation, and evasion are revealed by their profoundly *realistic* responsibilities within families and communities. Tricksterism in enslaved women's narratives goes beyond mainly rhetorical figurations to stress the complexity of their dual responsibilities to their families and as laborers in white households; this is what primarily differentiates female and male slave narrators. Black women's tricksterism was a necessary means for them to negotiate the complex performance and representation of nineteenth century women's identities from which they were excluded.

Although trickster behavior was clearly seen in animal and human figures in African, African American, and Caribbean folktales, Ivan Van Sertima differentiates between the roles of the trickster in Africa as opposed to its revision in the New World to explain its adaptation. In Africa, Van Sertima states that the trickster "is not only involved in tricking the lords of the jungle" but "he also plays tricks on the rulers of Heaven itself;" while in the New World the trickster is an "underdog," a "representative of an oppressed group or class or race,. . .almost the only role or function transplanted." Van Sertima identifies the rabbit trickster's (Brer Rabbit) situation as "a disadvantageous position in the animal world," while the tortoise trickster embodies "brooding silence and secrecy. . .with a suggestion of craft and cunning and mystery" (104-105). So, the trickster animals' responses to their situation served as a guide for teaching worldview to the enslaved. The incorporation of this worldview by slave narrators is realized by their actions and thoughts which correspond to the trickster persona. Lawrence Levine describes the condition that influenced this worldview in the following manner:

> The universe held promise and hope, but it was also dominated by malevolence, injustice, arbitrary judgment and paradox which had to be dealt with here and now. Slave tales taught tactics for short-run survival and maintenance but held few illusions concerning the costs of survival or the ways in which the world as it was constituted distorted the victim as well as the oppressor. (134)

So, the environment in which the animal trickster lived justified deviant behavior which naturally affected his/her values. The folktale "Who Ate up the Butter?" in Richard Dorson's *American Negro Folktales* exemplifies how the rabbit trickster ruthlessly deceives his friends. Although all the animals "chipped in equally" to purchase the butter, the rabbit steals the butter by claiming that he has to frequently return home because his wife is giving birth. After three supposed births in which he is called home the third time, when he has fictitious twins, the rabbit has consumed all of the butter. In this version, the rabbit's proposal that each animal jump over a burning log until the guilty one falls in helps him to successfully avoid exposure (68). The rabbit's use of his friends' respect for family plays on traditional values, yet it is overshadowed by his participation in Brer Bear's murder when Bear accidentally falls into the fire. So, both family and friends are expendable to the rabbit's hunger. This story exemplifies how slavery could inspire cruelty amongst bondmen and women if the outcome was deemed a sufficient reward. Thus, slaves were often trapped in a cycle of deviant behavior in which they had to act in an inherently lawless manner, which threatened their moral stature and relationships within the community. Yet their behavior was solely predicated on their condition and forced adherence to rules and laws that denied their humanity. This situation becomes the basis of Jacobs and Delaney's resistance when they use the multiple strategies that involve trickster behavior in order to survive slavery.

Delaney's Narrative Background

Published in 1891, Delaney's narrative relates the singular 1842 trial that gained her her freedom; yet little has been written about her narrative since its reprint in the Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers collection, *Six Women's Narratives*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. In the collection, Gates notes Phyllis Wheatley's dual authorship of the Black American and the Black woman's literary tradition. About the tradition of Black women's writing, Gates says: "Despite this pioneering role…many of their contributions before this century have been all but lost or unrecognized" ("In Her Own Write" xi). Delaney's narrative is not specifically mentioned, underscoring how little has been written about the work or its author. Delaney's narrative appeared simultaneously with Anna Julia Cooper's *A Voice From the South* whose work was groundbreaking because she "first analyzed the fallacy of referring to 'the Black man,' a misstatement that contributed to the exclusion of black women's voices (qtd. in Gates "In Her Own Write" xiii). Cooper accurately justified black women's race representation in her oft-quoted statement: "Only the BLACK WOMAN can say 'when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole *Negro race enters with me*,'" reinforcing the value of black women's activism, sociopolitical involvement, and literature as necessary to black progress (644).

Delaney's narrative tells the story of how her mother, a previously free child who was enslaved, successfully won a lawsuit which gained her daughter's freedom. Delaney's mother first filed a suit that proved that she was entitled to her freedom and later used her successful win to prove that her daughter should be freed because she was her child. Ironically, she triumphed using the law in which the children followed the condition of the mother. Delaney's account of this trial is the climactic end to a narrative that describes a close relationship between a slave mother and her daughters. Polly Crockett Berry's (Delaney's mother) triumph over a law which placed the burden of slavery on black female reproduction was a significant strike against slavery.

Using sentimentalism Delaney adopts rhetorical tricksterism to evoke sympathy from her readers by characterizing herself as an innocent girl threatened by slavery. Delaney's account of a stable family disrupted by slavery begins with her mother, Polly Crockett, whose childhood was lost when she was stolen from Illinois, then taken to live with Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Posey who resided with Mr. and Mrs. John Wood (Delaney 1). Delaney states that her mother lived "in peace and happiness for five years." After being kidnapped as a child, Polly was "sold into slavery" to a

farmer named Thomas Botts who sold her a year later due to his indebtedness. Major Taylor Berry bought her and "started for home to present his wife with this flesh and blood commodity, which money could so easily procure in our vaunted land of freedom" (Delaney 10).

Delaney's family history marks the beginning of her enslavement. Polly marries "a mulatto servant, who was as handsome as an Apollo," a mythological reference to the Greek sun god that is ironic because as a slave he is powerless. They have two daughters, Nancy and Lucy. Delaney describes her parents' marriage as a "natural result" of proximity, yet it was also an attempt to achieve normality. When her master, Major Berry has a fatal duel, Delaney's father was "much disturbed as to what disposition would be made of him" (Delaney 12). Later, Mrs. Berry dies after she marries Robert Wash, who became Judge of the Supreme Court. "In direct opposition to the will of Major Berry," Delaney's father is sold to the dreaded south by Judge Wash (Delaney 14). This betrayal was typical of what Bertram Wyatt-Brown explains was the prerogative of Southern men in regard to their wives' property because "slaves in a wife's possession immediately became her husband's throughout her coverture" (257). This blow to Delaney's family represented the continuing injustice which began with her mother's re-enslavement, a main theme of Delaney's narrative.

While the Delaney family's dissolution is understandably tragic, Frances Smith Foster reveals that the "broken-family motif appears even when the protagonist is the legitimate offspring of a slave couple" (133). Foster argues that this motif deliberately invokes pathos:

> Such pathos is also encouraged in the romanticized reports of the rare and brief instances of nuclear family relationship in slave narratives. The narrators' depiction of such families is simplistic and highly idealistic. The narrators imply that loving, harmonious familial relations are the natural impulse of blacks by emphasizing the strong love and devotion among kith and kin. (135)

Foster's concern is that this portrayal promoted the idea that "slavery seriously weakened or virtually destroyed the [black] family and social structure [. . .] and that it in turn contributed to the dehumanization of the slave," which led, after slavery, to the idea of "the black matriarchal family and the broken family which former Senator Daniel Moynihan and others have asserted to this day" (138).[1] bell hooks (sic) observes that while the matriarchy myth represents black women as "economically oppressed and victimized by sexism and racism," nevertheless they were (and remain) able to "exercise some social and political control over their lives" (Ain't I A Woman 81). Indeed, the loss of her husband leads directly to the mother's literal tricksterism. Delaney's mother teaches her daughters to secretly resist slavery, her only recourse: "My mother never spared an opportunity to impress it upon us, that we must get our freedom whenever the chance offered" (Delaney 16). hooks' comment that "the myth of the black matriarchy (sic) helped to further perpetuate the image of black women as masculinized, domineering, amazonic creatures" reveals the injustice of this stereotype as readers witness Delaney's mother's subversiveness only because she had to parent her daughters alone due to slavery (Ain't I A Woman 81). Delaney's mother's tricksterism provides a direct parallel to how the trickster within folktales was an apt model. Specifically, folktales provided patterns of resistance and the psychic expression of discontent which slaves could not manifest publicly. Because of the folktale's ability to transcend the status of entertainment, it was important to the survival of African Americans. John Blassingame describes the folktale as:

> A projection of the slave's personal experiences, dreams, and hopes the folk tales allowed him to express hostility to his master, to poke fun at himself, and to delineate the workings of the plantation system. At the same time, by viewing himself as an object, verbalizing his dreams and hostilities, the slave was able to preserve one more area which whites could not control. (103)

In relation to the role of the folktale, Van Sertima's description of the trickster as "revolutionary," identifies the figure's socioeconomic discontent. "The revolutionary role of the trickster figure in the folk imagination is related in the first place to the longing of a powerless group, class, or race for social or political change, for transcendence over an oppressive order of relationships" (Van Sertima 103). For enslaved black women the dual burden of race and gender made tricksterism an especially necessary method of asserting humanity and justifying their attempts to subscribe to gender roles privileged by white women. So, even more importantly, Delaney's mother becomes a model for her daughters to emulate for their own survival, making the dissemination of the trickster figure apparently successful. Delaney's focus on her family's plight, according to Foster's perspective of the motif, was also a strategy fundamentally similar to the storyline that Jacobs crafts.

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[1] Moynihan's report was done to determine the increase in black single family parentage, crime statistics, and poverty. Unfortunately, it stereotyped black womanhood as deviant. During slavery black women were stigmatized as the source of sexual deviancy which justified their reproduction of slaves. Similarly, black women were blamed for crime and poverty because they were often burdened with raising children by themselves under tenuous socioeconomic conditions. Many have attempted to link enslaved black mothers to the socioeconomic difficulties of contemporary single black mothers.

Jacobs's Narrative Background

Published in 1861, Jacobs's narrative tells the story of how she escaped from slavery by hiding for nearly seven years within a makeshift attic of her freed grandmother's house nearby her master before she finally escaped to the North. In the telling of her story, Jacobs adopts an alternative persona named Linda Brent that allows her to reveal her acquiescence to sexuality and justify her attempts to resist sexual compromise and permanent enslavement. Aunt Marthy, Jacobs's grandmother, like Delaney's mother, was kidnapped during childhood, leading to the subsequent enslavement of her children and grandchildren. Jacobs says that her grandmother "was the daughter of a planter in South Carolina, who, at his death, left her mother and his three children free, with money to go to St. Augustine. . ..It was during the Revolutionary War; and they were captured on their passage, carried back, and sold to different purchasers" (Jacobs 342). Jacobs does not state that her grandmother was the offspring of miscegenation, but instead emphasizes how her re-enslavement represents black women's constant uncertainty under the law. More striking, however, is how Aunt Marthy's industriousness is a strategy to gain certain advantages within her position as a Mammy. Van Sertima's observation that "there are so many collections of Afro-American folktales and so few analyses of the significance of the animals in these tales," can be compared to the lack of recognition of women as tricksters in slave narratives (106). So, the Mammy represents a notable position from which enslaved women could strategize and negotiate their level of powerlessness by manipulating their relationship with their owners.

The Mammy's position demonstrates a literal and figurative space from which resistance could be developed that is modeled in the setting of the "Tar Baby" story from the Dorson collection. When Brer Fox realizes Brer Rabbit is stealing his milk, Brer Fox plants a tar baby as a trap. Because the rabbit refuses to be disrespected by the tar baby's failure to speak to him, he ends up stuck in tar. Implicit to the rabbit's capture is his sensitivity (and that of enslaved blacks) about the lack of respect he receives from the tar baby because it does not speak, therefore it does not acknowledge him. The story's conclusion explains the value of the folktale as a teaching mechanism to the enslaved black community. To escape, the rabbit begs the fox not to throw him into the briar patch. The briar patch appears to be dangerous; it is full of thorns and brambles. The rabbit fears that he will be "all scratched up and all tore up with them briars," which leads the fox to promptly throw him in. Afterwards, the rabbit's haughty statement: "Ohh, ho, here's where I want to be, here's where I was bred and bo'n anyhow," designates the briar patch as a familiar place from which the rabbit (or the slave) has learned to develop survival tactics (qtd. in Dorson, "The Tar Baby" 76). Similarly, the role of the Mammy, a fixture within the plantation household and the Southern mind, was a literal space from which the enslaved woman could learn the values of the family with whom she was forced to serve and use her knowledge for the benefit of herself and family.

Historical studies confirm that the mammy was often a young woman who grew into servitude while trying to maintain her own family's stability. Jessie W. Parkhurst's description of the Mammy's relationship to her owners clearly explains: "She was usually the child of a favorite servant, perhaps of a 'Black Mammy' herself, who had entered the house at an early age as playmate for the children, later became the maid and then the 'Black Mammy'; or a playmate for one generation, maid for the next and 'Black Mammy' for the third" (1024). Parkhurst reveals how entrenched was this role, and explains how it was predicated on an unequal reciprocity, where enslaved young women acceded to the demanding Mammy role because of potential benefits, although the results of their attempts were unpredictable. Indeed, following in her mother's steps, who was a favored servant of her mistress, young Jacobs gained literacy when her mistress teaches her to read. Yet her mistress's decision to bequeath her to Dr. Flint's daughter illustrates what Parkhurst describes as the "Black Mammy' tradition," an idea that Mammy-hood was a prize, passed down through generations of grateful slave women that "took hold of the imagination of the people of the South" as they defended the peculiar institution (1019). So, the entrenchment of Mammyhood within slavery also forced black women to resort to strategies for survival as a means of gaining some advantages.

Jacobs writes against the Mammy tradition. Realizing what hooks would later stress, that the mammy was created to deny "white male lust for the bodies of black females"—Jacobs carefully dissembles when she discusses her grandmother's sexual vulnerability (Ain't I A Woman 84). At one point, Jacobs says: "I have often heard her tell how hard she fared during childhood," but does not give any details. Similarly, Jacobs's omission of a grandfather leads readers to infer that her grandmother's children were also the offspring of miscegenation. Though Aunt Marthy's industriousness was interpreted among whites as loyalty, Jacobs insinuates that her grandmother's work was a matter of blood ties which, ironically, she wanted to sever by using the same labor to start an evening baking business with the goal of purchasing her children. But when her master died, "her five children were divided among her master's children [. . .] the youngest one was sold in order that each heir might have an equal portion of dollars and cents." Jacobs' uncle's sale was a "blow" to her, in addition to the loss of a $300.00 loan that her grandmother's mistress never repaid (Jacobs 342). Her grandmother's failure to protect her children shows that motherhood doubly burdened black women because they always had to worry about their children's well-being. While this tragedy explodes the mammy myth, a subversive intention of Jacob's narrative that scholarship has inadequately recognized, it also reveals how the Mammy as trickster was subject to the same unpredictable forces of slavery as all tricksters.

Delaney's Tricksterism

Delaney's narration of her mother's use of her knowledge of a free state to encourage Nancy (Delaney's sister) to escape shows the deliberate use of a literal tricksterism. Indeed, so important is this story-within-the-story that Delaney includes it through direct quotation, which demonstrates the intertextuality of tricksterism and highlights the family's common goal: survival. This intertextuality "represents a process of repetition and revision and a direct component of signifying, another aspect of tricksterism, by "achieving […] 'direction through indirection"' (Gates Signifying Monkey 60). By including her sister's story Delaney demonstrates the success of trickster behavior, uses that success as a model for her own hopes, and plays on readers' sympathy for her desperate situation. Through her sister's story, Delaney indicates how the increasingly harsh conditions of enslavement inspired her family solidarity and resistance. Nancy accompanies Mrs. Cox on her wedding trip and successfully escapes to Canada. Then, Delaney's mother employs deception when told of the escape: "Mother was very thankful, and in her heart arose a prayer of thanksgiving but outwardly she pretended to be vexed and angry." Such behavior underscores Delaney's thematic message that dissimulation was necessary to disguise feelings and ulterior motives. Notably, she describes this moment using the third person to avoid readers' scrutiny: "Oh! The impenetrable mask of these poor black creatures! How much of joy, of sorrow, of misery and anguish have they hidden from their tormentors!" (Delaney 18). Her mother's true feelings make a singular impression which offers a triumphal moment in the narrative and is a prime example of the transmission of trickster behavior. "How wildly mother showed her joy at Nancy's escape when we were alone together. She would dance, clap her hands, and waving them above her head, would indulge in one of those weird negro (sic) melodies, which so charm and fascinate the listener" (Delaney 19).

Nancy's escape becomes Delaney's cross, as she is now "compelled to go live with Mrs. Cox to mind the baby" and replace her sister. Once again her mother encourages strategies for secret resistance:

> I was beginning to plan for freedom, and was forever on the alert for a chance to escape and join my sister. I was then twelve years old, and often talked the matter over with mother and canvassed the probabilities of both of us getting away. No schemes were too wild for us to consider! (Delaney 19-20)

At this point in Delaney's narrative, tricksterism becomes deadly serious as she prepares to strategize against slavery.

Within the household, Jacobs and Delaney achieve womanhood in an atmosphere of white female racism and white male sexual aggression. Scholars' observations that black women suffered the dual oppression of racism and sexism are exemplified by these narrators' experiences: Jacobs in Dr. Flint's household reveals the threat of miscegenation and Delaney and her mother reveal oppression by white women. Eventually, Delaney would also be subject to sexual compromise because it was characteristic of black women's enslavement. Delaney and Jacobs's experiences significantly bear on their relation to the white household and the black community because their behavior affects both. As slaves, their resistance to slavery could have negative repercussions for their families and increase the tensions that they were likely to experience while working in white households. Hence, Nancy's escape leads to Delaney's punishment. In his study of Delaney's narrative, Lindon Barrett states that the distinction between black women and black men's narratives:

> Concern the relationship that the narrated subjects of the autobiographies bear to community of African Americans with whom they share oppression, or in other words the extent to which the narratives are or are not individualistic, celebrating individual struggles and individual triumphs. [. . .] Douglass more fully fashions a mythic tale of individual perseverance and ingenuity, while Jacobs more fully records her indebtedness to and enduring concerns for the familial community in relation to which she defines herself. (37)

Barrett's description of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs's narratives as a "now-classic pairing" supports his observation (37). Douglass adapts rhetorical trickster behavior in his narrative in order to justify his resistance to Covey the slave breaker, an individual act that helps him to reclaim his manhood without impacting the community because his resistance does not risk the lives of friends or family. By the time Douglass attempts his escape, both his grandmother and mother are dead and he does not have close ties with his remaining siblings. This lack of family connections releases him from guilt or fear, unlike Jacobs. Because she cannot protect herself from victimization, Jacobs's resistance spills over into her recognition of how a slave-mother's acts are bound up with the sexual stereotypes imposed on black women; such considerations give her deception poignancy and depth when she decides to use literal tricksterism by having an affair with a single white man and she must later deal with the uncertainty of her children's fates. Similarly, Delaney's carefully scripted story maybe seen as an invitation to read it as a generic version of the helpless heroine, a literary convention that would absolve black womanhood from claims of deviancy. Rhetorically it may trick readers into granting such an absolution, but like Jacobs's text it then pushes readers to consider why black women's tricksterism involved greater risks. Thus, Jacobs and Delaney's literal and

rhetorical tricksterism does a kind of double-duty not apparent in Douglass's narrative. Delaney's domestic difficulties reveal the distinction between black and white women living within slavery. After a lifetime of slavery, Delaney's mother is forced to sue for her freedom once her mistress, Mrs. Cox, becomes displeased with her work and threatens to sell her. Delaney states that "Mrs. Cox was always very severe and exacting with my mother," an indication that her mother's life was difficult and her work unappreciated. Mrs. Cox's threat to Delaney's mother to "sell you down the river at once" invokes all slaves' dread of Southern brutality. "Although mother turned grey with fear, she presented a bold front and retorted that 'she didn't care, she was tired of that place, and didn't like to live there, no how"' (Delaney 21).

When Mrs. Cox is unable to control Delaney's mother, Mr. Cox intervenes and sells her for being insolent, an event that strongly suggests he would later become involved in Delaney's conflict with his wife. Of the domestic conflict between white and black women, hooks says: "Historically, white female efforts to maintain racial dominance were directly connected to the politics of heterosexism within a white supremacist patriarchy" (Teaching to Transgress 95). Delaney uses dramatic rhetoric by invoking the American flag to describe her mother's sale: "Oh! God! The pity of it! In the home of the brave and the land of the free, in the sight of the stars and stripes-that symbol of freedom-sold away from her child, to satisfy the anger of a peevish mistress!" (22). In this passage, Delaney's rhetorical tricksterism criticizes the flag's symbolic connection to freedom as it waves atop the very courthouse from which her mother is sold. We especially see this linkage when Delaney's mother decides to use the law to gain her freedom. Because she had been kidnapped, Delaney's mother sued on the basis of the fact that she was wrongly enslaved.

Once her mother wins her freedom, Delaney's conflict with her young mistress begins. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's discussion of the power struggle between black and white women explains the inherent tensions. "For all southern women, the relations of gender, class, and race, like the ideology that encoded them, were mediated through southern households that increasingly differed from the households of the North" (sic) (66). Delaney's conflict was thus predicated on her mistress's compliance with values that granted her authority due to race and class, qualities dependent on the subordination of slave women. When Delaney cannot do the wash, her mistress calls her "lazy" and a "good-for-nothing nigger," expressing the unequal power relations in dehumanizing terms. She attempts to beat Delaney with "shovel, tongs and broomstick" (Delaney 25, 27). Delaney strategically describes this attack after the verbal abuse and her mother's sale to emphasize the increasing violence. The abuse of slave women by their mistresses was a common practice as demonstrated by Elizabeth Keckley in her 1868 narrative, *Behind the Scenes: Thirty Years as a Slave and Four Years in the White House*. Keckley, the noted seamstress to President Lincoln's wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, recalled how her mistress precipitated her beating by her husband and also the village schoolmaster named Mr. Bingham; the latter bluntly "had pledged himself (sic) to my mistress to subdue what he called my 'stubborn pride"' (chapter 2 par. 36). Keckley endures beatings from Bingham and her master that she links to her subsequent sexual vulnerability when after four years of persecution by a neighboring white man she painfully admits, "I-I-became a mother" (chapter 2 par. 39). Although Keckley does not explain if the beatings were done in public, she was unclothed, which increased her sexual vulnerability. Her mistress, thus, gets the men in her household and community involved in her public shame, which suggests that the beating led to her sexual compromise. Keckley's cruel experiences were bound to happen to Delaney because her body would be subject to male domination, if not in the Cox household, then in the household of a future owner.

Jacobs's Tricksterism

In ironic contrast, Jacobs's sexuality makes her potential children bound in slavery by the same law which offers Delaney her freedom. Because she cannot avoid the law, Jacobs uses rhetorical tricksterism when she renames herself Linda Brent. With this alternate fictional identity Jacobs represents all victimized black women who are excluded from true womanhood. According to Thomas Doherty, "Jacobs's most striking generic departure is Linda's extraordinary sense of 'self.' Linda as a character maintains a 'single-minded' consciousness that is not above deception" (86-86). Brent decides to choose her own sexual compliance due to miscegenation and uses tricksterism to gain her children a tenuous freedom. Later, through desperate tactics, Brent escapes into a self-imposed confinement when she hides in her grandmother's attic to escape her master's sexual advances and to force him to sell her children so that their white father can free them.

Through her narrative Jacobs confesses in Brent's voice, thereby alleviating the shock of her confession to readers who were mostly Northern white women with delicate sensibilities by displacing the shame onto her alternate identity. So, Linda Brent bears the "sorrow and shame" which "virtuous" readers will discover, instead of Harriet Jacobs (Jacobs 514). Doherty describes Jacobs's intention as a "singleness of identity" that reinforces the "singleness of purpose" and hope for her freedom and that of her children (87). Yet Doherty fails to take into account the psychological conflict Jacobs's decisions create: "I know I did wrong. No one can feel it more sensibly than I do. The painful and humiliating memory will haunt me to my dying day" (Jacobs 386). Jacobs's pathos makes Linda Brent a necessary persona and also reveals how tricksterism has deeply psychological consequences.

According to Jacobs, the circumstances that have made her a victim justify using trickster behavior. Manning Marable's blunt description of the slave woman's situation accurately captures Jacobs's desperation. Marable states, "For the White male American, the Black woman's vagina was his private property. Many black women fought these repeated sexual assaults, and an untold number sacrificed their lives. [. . .] Many more carried the scars of their rapes, both physical and psychological" (3-4). Because the cult of true womanhood excluded black women from the recognized sphere of womanhood, they were forced to bear the stigma of rape and deviant sexuality by being denied the right to maintain their purity and their families. Black women, like Keckley, fought off would-be rapists as long as possible. Others, like Frederick Douglass's mother, refused to discuss their rapes and tried to be mothers to their children despite the circumstances. Forced into immorality, Jacobs employs literal tricksterism by having a consensual relationship with a single white man to avoid sexual victimization by her master. Once she is no longer pure, her master no longer attempts to force himself on her; instead, he uses her children to keep her under control. To influence her readers, "the women of the North," she portrays her *promiscuity* in terms of the racial distinctions between black and white women (Jacobs 335). "If God has bestowed beauty upon her, it will prove her greatest curse. That which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens the degradation of the female slave" (Jacobs 362). In passages like this Jacobs seeks a rhetorical power over readers, here through antithesis, a play on the traditional black/white dichotomy.

Jacobs carefully demonstrates that her oppression in the Flint household counters the Jezebel stereotype that Deborah Gray White describes as "one of the most prevalent images of black women in antebellum America" and "the counter image of the mid-nineteenth-century ideal of the Victorian lady" (28-29).[2] While the image exposed black women to illicit sexuality, abused their reproductive capacity for economic gain, and upheld white women's status, it also blamed black women for their own victimization. White states that this condition conflated black women's public and private lives because "the conditions under which bondwomen lived and worked helped imprint the Jezebel image on the white mind, but traders and owners also consciously and unconsciously created an environment which ensured female slave behavior that would fulfill their expectations" (33-34). By unclothing and beating slave women, forcing them to engage in sexual relationships in order to breed slaves, legally sanctioning their rape through laws that excluded them from protection, or exposing them on the auction block, traders and owners reduced them to sexual objects. Thus black women's lives were circumscribed to the extent that "the choice put before many slave women was between miscegenation and the worst experiences that slavery had to offer" (White 28-29). In the Flint household, Jacobs experiences sexual harassment: "My master began to whisper foul words in my ear. [. . .] He tried his utmost to corrupt the pure principles my grandmother had instilled. He peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of." Simultaneously, Mrs. Flint threatened Jacobs because she could not deter her husband's cheating. Flint's unfaithfulness was commonplace. "My master was to my knowledge the father of eleven slaves" (Jacobs 361). So, Jacobs's premature sexual knowledge and awareness of her fate encouraged literal tricksterism when she makes the decision to have an affair. Likewise, it supports White's assertion that "there was no reason for them [enslaved women] to believe that even freedom could not be bought for the price of their bodies," leading many to risk potential stability and/or freedom for themselves and their children and making tricksterism even more necessary as a tool of survival (34).

Through her conflict with the Flints, Jacobs reveals how black women were burdened by white male and female aggression. Instead of gaining her mistress's sympathy, she experiences her jealousy. "Mr. Flint would make sexual overtures to her, and Mrs. Flint would then stalk her to determine the extent of the relationship and assail her whenever the opportunity presented itself." Jacobs, telling her story as Brent, "reasoned that [Mrs.] Flint pitied herself as a martyr but could not feel pity for another's shame and misery" (White 43). hooks explains that the race and sex conflict for black and white women was represented in the servant-served relationship, "a hierarchal, power-based relationship unmediated by sexual desire. Black women were the servants, and white women were the served" (Teaching to Transgress 94). The black woman was forced to serve the master sexually and the mistress domestically, a structure in which the servant-served relationship exposed the fact that true womanhood controlled the sexual compliance of white and black women because both white and black women were subject to white male sexuality. So, Mrs. Flint's aggression toward Brent was an attempt to maintain her social status in spite of her husband's sexual transgressions.

Jacobs's relegation to the status of sexual commodity forces her to negotiate the terms of her inevitable moral degradation. She unburdens this shameful decision using her character Linda Brent:

> The slave girl is reared in an atmosphere of licentiousness and fear. The lash and the foul talk of her master and his sons are her teachers. When she is fourteen or fifteen, her owner, or his sons, or the overseers, or perhaps all for them, begin to bribe her with presents. If these fail to accomplish their purpose, she is whipped or starved into submission to their will [. . .] resistance is hopeless. (Jacobs 382)

[2] The Jezebel was a stereotypic image imposed on enslaved women that made them appear to be willing sexual partners. It denied their powerless situation and vulnerability to rape, abuse, and sale.

To claim sexual choice without censure, Jacobs must trick both her master and her reader while simultaneously emphasizing her powerlessness. Explaining her relationship with Mr. Sands, the white man she chooses, she uses rhetorical tricksterism, “I knew what I did and I did it with deliberate calculation.” This statement is followed by further realistic evaluation: “It seems less degrading to give one’s self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment” (Jacobs 385). By informing her readers of her powerlessness, she also reveals her manipulation of Sands and her text to avoid condemnation when she takes control over her body. White explains that black women who chose miscegenation “expected and often got something in return for their sexual favors” (34). While Jacobs risks her purity and potential children to a system indifferent to black family stability, she represents it as a calculated opportunity. “Of a man who was not my master I could ask to have my children well supported. [. . .] I also felt quite sure that they would be made free” (Jacobs 386). Here, as in Delaney’s narrative, reality takes over because Jacobs’s lost innocence for her potential children is absolutely worth risking. Gloria T. Randle describes Jacobs as a trickster based on her strategic manipulations, noting that “trickster figures during slavery often conducted deadly serious business amidst a precarious, imbalanced power relationship” (par. 27). Although the circumstances of Jacobs’s powerlessness and her desire for her children’s freedom underscore how her deception was extremely risky and its outcome unpredictable, it further reveals the psychological maneuvers tricksterism supports. Jacobs’s unapologetic stance is similar to the attitude of the enslaved man in the tale “How Buck Won His Freedom.” According to the story, Buck’s thievery is well-known, even to his master who “had his chickens and pigs stolen until he was sick.” Buck’s master agrees to grant him his freedom if he can steal his clothes and Buck readily agrees. Buck’s willingness to openly deceive his master for the larger goal of freedom is depicted humorously, although it is serious. When Buck creates a disturbance, he is able to trick his mistress into giving him the clothes by disguising his voice as the master’s. In order to successfully gain his freedom, Buck must admit to the theft, which was part of the agreement between him and his master (qtd. in Barksdale 230). Buck’s lack of remorse over the deception and his master’s complicity through the challenge he offers Buck reinforce the slaves’ acknowledgement of the effect of slavery on their values and ethics as they listen to the tale. By extension, (Jacobs’s) Brent’s deliberate decision to use literal tricksterism to claim her sexual choice is consistent with the emphasis on survival and the embedded hypocrisy of being expected to obey unethical standards.

Jacobs’s Triumphant Deception

Once she obtains her two children’s quasi-freedom, Jacobs’s escape into hiding becomes a mastery of deception using writing to deceive her master:

> In order to make him [Flint] believe that I was in New York, I resolved to write him a letter dated from that place. [. . .] I wrote two letters, one to my grandmother, and the other to Dr. Flint. [. . .] I dated these letters ahead, to allow for the time it would take to carry them and sent a memorandum of the date to the messenger. (Jacobs 448-49)

Although she has successfully escaped through voluntary confinement, Jacobs has not reached the North. In her hiding place, which she describes as a “hole,” “prison,” and a “cell,” she writes letters to prevent being discovered in the crawlspace of her grandmother’s house (Jacobs 443-44).

Jacobs’s scene of writing within the crawlspace has the same purpose as Delaney’s courtroom scene, the reclamation of freedom. Yet Barrett notes that Jacobs’s scene, “privileges the more private interstitial and marginal aspects,” whereas the courtroom represents the public sphere for Delaney:

> It allows her to stage, via the representation of an autobiographical self, the multiple fictions of selfhood that are the only resort of those for whom the “constitutional” issue of their identity already has been settled without their participation or consent. Just as the “fact” of her family is an elusive fiction, so is the ostensible subject of Delaney’s narrative. In the end, what the courtroom scene allows her to represent is the enforced fictionality of any subject defined by the impersonality of the law’s “constitutional” power, even when the power is employed on behalf of the freedom of the subject. (116)

While the courtroom scene is indeed a climactic moment in terms of the ‘fictional’ nature of socially constructed identities, readers must not lose sight of how it functions within the context of Delaney’s narrative as a means of justifying her resistance and solidifying her claim to womanhood.

Delaney’s Legal Triumph

After successfully winning her freedom, Polly Berry follows the law to recover Lucy: “On the morning of the 8th of September, 1842, my mother sued Mr. D. D. Mitchell for the possession of her child, Lucy Ann Berry” (Delaney 33). This decision informs what Barrett describes as a “‘scene of writing’ so peculiar to African American autobiography”

because “the courtroom setting in Delaney’s narrative dramatizes the convergence of the scriptive and the prescriptive, the private and the public, the individual and the social” (105). Thus, Delaney’s account of her enslavement and trial represent a virtual battle for her freedom, her very life, which she was already engaged in by using tricksterism. Most importantly, the potential outcome of the case would weaken the law that made enslaved women’s children slaves at birth. Delaney’s account of how she handles herself during the impending trial represents rhetorical tricksterism because she fully portrays herself as an innocent heroine whose virtue and happiness are threatened by the specter of permanent enslavement. Through Delaney’s lawsuit, readers can clearly see how Delaney might inevitably experience Jacobs’s fate because Jacobs’s grandmother did not challenge the legality of her re-enslavement. Thus, Jacobs and Delaney’s stories are doubly connected wherein Delaney can ostensibly become subject to sexual victimization and the perspective sale of her children, like Jacobs, if she remains enslaved.

Delaney’s self-portrayal as a victimized heroine during the trial projects a sentimental guise to heighten the injustice. Readers recognize her identification with true womanhood regardless of the uncertainty of the law. In spite of her mother’s first success, “she was not instructed to mention her two children, Nancy and Lucy, so the white people took advantage of this flaw, and showed a determination to use every means in their power to prove that I was not her child” (Delaney 35). This omission becomes the central argument for the defense because it seeks to permanently separate Delaney from her mother.

Delaney’s depiction of her relationship with Judge Bates, her lawyer, is a masterful display of rhetorical tricksterism. Even though it is natural for her to praise him, she depicts his chivalric behavior towards her to legitimize her claim to freedom and womanhood. Because he recognizes Delaney and her mother as free women he treats them as such in the following scene:

> On our way there, Judge Bates overtook us. He lived out a short distance in the country, and was riding on horseback. He tipped his hat to me as politely as if I were the finest lady in the land, and cried out, ‘Good morning Miss Lucy, I suppose you had pleasant dreams last night!’ (Delaney 46)

The image of the gallant Judge on horseback addressing her in a manner that he would normally reserve for a white woman is effective. His respectful attention offers her the chance to show readers that white men do recognize black womanhood, even though the moment is predicated on her impending freedom.

Throughout her story, Delaney demonstrates that her mother fulfilled and transcended the cult of true womanhood because “black women [. . .] could not retreat into an abstraction of womanhood dissociated from the oppression of their whole people; their everyday lives were a confrontation of the division between the inviolability of elitist conceptions of womanhood and that which it denied” (Carby 104). So, black women’s conformity to true womanhood, in spite of their circumstances, asserted the humanity of the race by demonstrating that they could adopt moral values. Within this context, Delaney’s mother’s behavior was exemplary once her marriage is disrupted. While Delaney seems to overemphasize her role, it is important to remember that her mother’s respectability removes the stigma of sexual misconduct from her daughters’ lives. At the end of the trial which grants her freedom, Delaney’s invocation of her mother’s spirit demonstrates how she saw her as a guide and protector:

> Dear, dear mother! How solemnly I invoke your spirit as I review these trying scenes of girlhood, so long ago! Your impatient face and neatly-dressed figure stands ever in the foreground of that checkered time; a figure showing naught to an on-looker but the common place virtues of an honest woman! (Delaney 51)

Not only does her mother’s body bear a free child, her wifely and motherly virtue could only produce a virtuous young woman, which secures Delaney’s own rhetorical depiction as a pure young woman who barely escapes the corruption of slavery. Similarly, Nancy’s marriage after her escape also demonstrates the mother’s tutelage.

The Significance of Resistance to the Law

Christina Accomando’s discussion of Jacobs’s “critique of slave law” explains how Jacobs and Delaney’s tricksterism exemplifies the slave narrative’s tradition of identifying the contradictions inherent to the legal oppression of blacks (229). Accomando observes that “various laws existed in the nineteenth century to silence slaves, to attempt to deny them a legal, political, or literary voice.” Yet the fact that slaves resisted their implementation indicated that they recognized them as inherently flawed and inhumane. Therefore, trickster behavior portrayed in narrative form was another means of challenging legal inequity. Accomando states:

> The official line on slavery declared that slaves had no subjectivity to speak of, yet there was tremendous anxiety that there be no public arena where such subjectivity might somehow speak. This central contradiction helps reveal the fictions underlying legal constructions of slavery. (233)

Delaney, like Jacobs, uses literacy to protest this oppression. Her narrative speaks against her oppression; her story is articulated at the primary site of racial oppression, the abstract texts of the law, and the concrete legal process embodied in the courtroom. While Delaney's narrative strikes a telling blow at slave law through legal representation, Jacobs challenges the law through the appropriation of literacy and the reclamation of her sexuality. Thus, their literal and rhetorical tricksterism encourages further discussion of its adaptation based on gender.

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