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The Representation of Fatherhood as a Declaration of Humanity in Nineteenth -Century Slave Narratives

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in English Literature, Hunter College  
The City University of New York

2017

Thesis Sponsor: Janet Neary

May 9, 2017

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## The Representation of Fatherhood as a Declaration of Humanity in Nineteenth -Century Slave Narratives

‘You are my child,’ replied our father, and when I call you, you should come immediately, I you have to pass through fire and water.’(Jacobs 17)

In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs presents the challenges of fatherhood for enslaved black men by illustrating the difficulty of assuming paternal authority while unable to fully practice personal autonomy. While motherhood in slave narratives is widely discussed, black fatherhood is often overlooked. As is the case for enslaved mothers, fatherhood for enslaved men entailed its own unique challenges and needs. Enslaved men are both hyper-masculinized and put into positions of traditionally “feminine” subservience, where their ability to carry out their roles of provider and protector are hampered. We see this in narratives like Solomon Northup’s *Twelve Years a Slave* and Frederick Douglass’s *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, where black men are controlled, abused, and threatened. This in turn leads to enslaved men carrying out their roles of husband and father in ways that are seen as both untraditional and extraordinary because their ability to perform traditional paternal duties is obstructed and racist perceptions of black men render any example of a good black father an exception to the rule. Not only do these men regard fatherhood as an aspect of their masculinity, in many cases fatherhood is equal to masculinity and vice versa. In slave narrative representations, slavery hinders a man’s ability to fulfill the role of father and then points to enslaved men’s diminished ability as a sign of insufficient masculinity, in this context, a man’s ability to be a father and husband measures the degree to which he is a man. Successful fatherhood for black men in slave narratives is more complex than simply mimicking the social norms of white fatherhood. For black fathers in slave narratives, fatherhood is a choice that is independent of social obligation or legal bonds, whereas white fathers within these texts shirk

their emotional and social responsibilities to their families and are fathers in name and not much else. This distinction is important to the way we read and discuss slave narratives because it exemplifies one important way in which people whose humanity was denied, and who were placed outside of the umbrella of society, embodied the paternal role without the traditional power, recognition, support, and other benefits that come with fatherhood within this umbrella. To the men in these texts, fatherhood is a cornerstone of humanity. To embody the role of father is to combat the attempted erasure of the humanity of themselves and their families.

One important aspect of fatherhood that these men focus on is affection towards their children. Solomon Northup's attitude toward fatherhood is one that frames his paternal role as a privilege and a source of pride. His description of the children and of their time together makes evident that he enjoys this privilege, perhaps all the more because it is a privilege other black men are not able to enjoy. We are given a sense of Northup's enjoyment of his paternal role and especially his time with his children in this description:

At this time we were the parents of three children - Elizabeth, Margaret, and Alonso. Elizabeth, the eldest, was in her tenth year; Margaret was two years younger, and little Alonso had just passed his fifth birth-day. They filled our house with gladness. Their young voices were music in our ears. Many an airy castle did their mother and myself build for the little innocents. When not at labor I was always walking with them, clad in their best attire, through the streets and groves of Saratoga. Their presence was my delight; and I clasped them to my bosom with as warm and tender love as if their clouded skins had been white as snow. (Northup 11)

That Northup chooses to spend time with his children in his leisure hours emphasizes that he has chosen fatherhood, and that he enjoys the company of his children. The "airy castles" formed by the couple prove that they are invested in their children's future and in their characters. We see a vastly different picture of paternal relations in the description of Dr. Flint's relationship with his son in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Linda, Jacobs's pseudonym in the narrative,

describes the relationship between the white master Dr. Flint and his son as follows: “That I had not been taken to the plantation before this time, was owing to the fact that his son was there. He was jealous of his son...[I]s it strange that I was not proud of these protectors?”(64-65). Not only does this information reveal that Dr. Flint has not invested himself in the good character of his son, but rather than the protector of his son, he stands to him in the relation of a rival. We can also contrast the relationship between Northup and his children with that of George Sands in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, who demonstrates parental affection to his “legitimate” white daughter, while treating his half black daughter with the enslaved Linda as property he is authorized to transfer to someone else. For Sands, fatherhood and paternal affection are conditional: he can bestow love and real protection to his white heir but not to his enslaved black offspring. While Linda and George Sand’s daughter Ellen laments the notion that “if he was my own father, he ought to love me”(Jacobs 283), Northup insists that he exhibits the same “warm and tender love” to his children possessing “clouded skins” that he would if they had been “white as snow”. (Northup 39) Northup presents fatherhood as a responsibility he assumes willingly, with pride, and without conditions.

The paternal drive exhibited by men like Northup existed and grew in spite of systematic suppression of the notion of positive, affectionate fatherhood for enslaved black people. The fact that black fatherhood was not valued by white masters is unsurprising. Black fatherhood was so belittled by the slave system, that the identity of one’s father might be inconsequential in the mind of a slave. According to Frederick Douglass in his narrative *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*,

The whisper that my father was my master, may or may not be true; and, true or false, it is of but little consequence to my purpose whilst the fact remains, in all its glaring odiousness, that slaveholders have ordained, and by law established, that the children of slave women shall in all cases follow the condition of their

mothers; and this is done too obviously to administer to their own lusts, and make a gratification of their wicked desires profitable as well as pleasurable; or by this cunning arrangement, the slaveholder, in cases not a few, sustains to his slaves the double relation of master and father. (Douglass 14)

The raping of black slave women to produce children kept as chattel meant that the master was literally master and father to these offspring, the resulting psychological relationship of enslaved to slave master, wherein the slave may feel obligated to obey and please the master as a father, and fear him as a violent figure of power, is implied in this statement. The master becomes a doubly authoritative figure to the slave. Not only do white master fathers authoritatively dethrone black slave fathers, but in the cases wherein they are the actual fathers of their slaves, the master also ensures more complete authoritative and pseudo moral control over the enslaved. The white master father is controlling, abusive, cold hearted towards their black children. The black fathers in these texts are presented with an opportunity to be warm, loving and caring to their children in contrast.

The construction of the white/black binary in some ways mirrors the male/female binary, where black is to white as female is to male. In this binary, the black male is made out to be the subordinate, weaker, less intelligent counter to the superior, stronger, and more intelligent white male. In order to humanize and legitimize himself in this social framework as a man in masculine roles then, the black man - particularly the enslaved black man - must either become hypermasculine in his approach to assuming authority over his “subordinates” such as his wife and children, or, he must invent his own male role and identity. As Keith Michael Greene explains, the proofs of masculinity were not accessible to enslaved men:

[S]lavery excluded black males from the protection of and participation in the legal codes available to white males. Just as importantly, it alienated them from the constellation of gendered subject positions - the ‘social fictions’ available to free and propertied white males in a heteropatriarchal society. In turn, male slaves could not become legitimate sons, brothers, husbands, and fathers despite

biological evidence and personal relationships suggesting otherwise. Thus, the eternal irony at the heart of enslaved masculinity was to be in plain 'sight' - physically able and present to witness one's and other's condition - yet removed from "*mimetic view*" - unable to participate in and revise the scripts that governed one's condition. (Greene 25)

Black men were not given the personal liberty to be able to honor their parents, defend their wives, or protect their children. Even their own sense of masculine sexuality was denied them by the fact that black enslaved men were used and represented as breeders. As Thomas A. Foster discusses in his article "The Sexual Abuse of Black Men Under American Slavery," some slave owners "took a more active role in selecting for the qualities they wanted in slaves, forcing some to have children or to live as husband and wife ... Testimony from a number of former slaves demonstrates how forced reproduction had the dehumanizing effect of labelling certain enslaved men as 'stock men' or 'bulls.'" He goes on to state that "Forcing some enslaved men to reproduce with many different women denied to them a fatherly role even while it prevented their children from bonding with them" (Foster 456). This is an example of how black enslaved men's masculinity was represented as an animalistic function. To be masculine and human at the same time would grant them power and authority that could make them equal or superior to their white masters, so their masculinity was diminished in order to maintain the fiction of dominance upon which slavery depended. This was done in many ways. As Foster states, "sexual assault of enslaved men took a wide variety of forms, including outright physical penetrative assault, forced reproduction, sexual coercion and manipulation, and psychic abuse" (Foster 447).

Whippings were also an attempt to humiliate and emasculate these men, an example of which we are given in *Twelve Years a Slave*:

Blow after blow was inflicted upon my naked body. When his unrelenting arm grew tired, he stopped and asked if I still insisted I was a free man. I did insist upon it, and then the blows were renewed, faster and more energetically, if possible, than before. When again tired, he would repeat the same question, and

receiving the same answer, continued his cruel labor ...At last I became silent to his repeated questions. I would make no reply. (Northup 25-26)

In this instance, physical abuse of Northup's body is used in an attempt to curb his sense of autonomy, and his belief in his ability to protect himself along with his wife and children, the will to assert himself as protector of his family is dangerous to those desiring to enslave him because it highlights the fact that his importance and his ability lie beyond his own physical form. He asserts before this takes place that he is a "free man - a resident of Saratoga, where I had a wife and children, who were also free, and that my name was Northup" (Northup23). Stating his identity in this way is a demonstration of self-assured masculinity that his captors find dangerous because it shows them that Northup does not feel as if he is in their power. Stating that he has a wife and children who were also free is an assertion of masculine authority which is harmful to their image and purpose as his dominators: in order to successfully dominate Northup they would have to prove to him that they possess masculine power that he does not. In other terms, they must prove that they are real men and that he is not, so that he will bow to their superior authority. His assertion of the existence of a family that he claims to be his own is an assertion that he is a man, and therefore he is at least their equal. By representing them in their narratives as they do, Northup and other ex-slave narrators do to white slaveholders and traders what the latter had previously done to them :give them two- dimensional personas and purposes, as well as emasculating them by revealing that the only real power they have is the ability and sanction to use the whip. At the same time these narrators prove that their own masculinity is performed by carrying out the roles of husband and especially father in honest, loving, and morally upright ways.

Enslaved fathers were erased from the consciousness of society at large, and also made inconsequential and therefore essentially invisible to their children. In the struggle to establish an



authoritative relationship with their children, both the model and competition of such fathers was the white master. While the master's tyranny was harmful to enslaved men and women, it was also the only example enslaved men had of free, successful masculinity. Ronda C. Henry Anthony addresses this in *Searching for The New Black Man: Black Masculinity and Women's Bodies*. She states "black men's struggle for gendered agency is inextricably bound up with their love/hate relationship to (white) normative masculinity (Anthony 4). To be a participant in white normative masculinity is to be the oppressor who is hampering the enslaved man's ability to have a good human life, but because the position of the white male authority figure is a position which affords comfort, autonomy, and authority as a legally recognized free man and master, it follows that it is also a more desirable position to the enslaved man than his own. However, what we see in slave narratives is that, given any of the freedoms and opportunities usually reserved for white men in power, black men use these powers to elevate family life, and the lives of the community as a whole, rather than simply mimic white normative masculinity. Whereas white heads of the household are depicted in slave narratives as tyrants who abuse their power and have little regard for the feelings of the rest of the family, black fathers work to unite the family as much as possible, and to ensure that each individual member is able to avail themselves of the best advantages he can provide for them. White husbands and fathers in these narratives act as omnipotent rulers whose word overrules everyone else's, even their wives and partners. Contrary to such depictions, slave narratives often feature communication and cooperation between domestic partners concerning courses of action and the family's future. The case of Mattie Jackson's parents illustrates this point. Mattie Jackson states of her own father "he had a deep affection for his family, which the slave ever cherishes for his dear ones. He had no other link to fasten him to the human family but his fervent love for those who were bound to him by love and

sympathy in their wrongs and sufferings. (Jackson 4). This description perfectly illustrates that to a black father, the paternal bond was one of shared suffering, and a desire to protect and shield, rather than a socially constructed code of honor and estate management. By contrast, a few lines later there is a description of the master and his wife:

My father, Westly Jackson, married, at the age of twenty-two, a girl owned by James Harris, named Ellen Turner. Nothing of importance occurred until three years after their marriage, when her master, Harris failed through the extravagance and mismanagement of his wife, who was a great spendthrift and a dreaded terror to the poor slaves and all others with whom she associated in common circumstances, consequently the entire stock was sold by the sheriff to a trader residing in Virginia. (Jackson4)

These lines not only serve as a contrast between the paternal role of the master versus that of Mattie Jackson's father by depicting Westly Jackson as a husband and father whose marriage and paternal role is based on care and unity and the marriage and household management of the Harris family as one wracked by financial mismanagement and discord between husband and wife, they also serve to flip societal roles by representing Jackson's father as a man of ability and Harris as a man who is unable to manage his household. Here, Mattie Jackson's parents are depicted as partners. Harris and his wife are not. The "mismanagement of his wife" could mean her mismanaging of financial matters, but it could also be read as Harris's inability to manage his wife, a dependent and a part of his property who must be "managed" by him the way he manages all of his other property, including his slaves. After this description of debilitating discord between Harris and his wife, we have a description of Mattie Jackson's parents working in union to secure her father's freedom:

[M]y mother was conscious some time previous of the change that was to take place with my father, and if he was sold in the immediate vicinity he would be likely to be sold again at their will, and she concluded to assist him to make his escape from bondage. Though the parting was painful, it afforded her solace in the contemplation of her husband becoming a free man, and cherishing a hope that her little family, through the aid of some angel of mercy, might be enabled to make their escape also, and meet to part no more on earth. My father came to

spend the night with us, according to his usual custom. It was the last time, and sadness brooded upon his brow. It was the only opportunity he had to make his escape without suspicion and detection, as he was immediately to fall into the hands of a new master. He had never been sold from the place of his birth before, and was determined never to be sold again if God would verify his promise. My father was not educated, but was a preacher, and administered the Word of God according to the dictation and revelation of the spirit. His former master had allowed him the privilege of holding meetings in the village within the limits of his pass on the Sundays when he visited my mother. But on this Saturday evening he arrived and gave us all his farewell kiss and hurried away. My mother's people were aware of my father's intention, but rather than spare my mother, and for fear she might be detected, they secreted his escape. His master called a number of times and enquired for him and strongly pressed my mother to give him an account of my father, but she never gave it. We waited patiently, hoping to learn if he succeeded in gaining his freedom. Many anxious weeks and months passed before we could get any tidings from him, until at length my mother heard that he was in Chicago, a free man and preaching the Gospel. He made every effort to get his family, but all in vain. (Jackson5-6)

The figure given the most agency in this passage is Jackson's mother. This further serves as a contrast. Whereas Harris manages a family whose members are all working toward their own ends and desires, Jackson and his family work together to create the best circumstance they can for the welfare of each member of the family. The father's work as a preacher also places emphasis on his concern for his community. Jackson's village meetings are an effort to elevate and encourage other enslaved people while he works to uplift himself and his family.

We see religious instruction of a different kind in *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* by the Reverend Orville Dewey. According to the text, the reverend asserts that

the safety of the union is not to be hazarded for the sake of the African race. He declares that, for his part, he would send his own brother and child into slavery, if needed to preserve the union between the free and the slaveholding states; and counseling the slave to similar magnanimity thus exhorts him: *'Your right to be free is not absolute, unqualified, irrespective of all consequences. If my espousal of your claim is likely to involve your race and mine in disasters infinitely greater than your personal servitude, then you ought not to be free. In such a case personal rights ought to be sacrificed to the general good. You yourself ought to see this - and be willing to suffer for a while - one for many'*(Craft 60).

One of the multiple ironies of this sermon is that “one for many” is exactly the principle that these black men and fathers embody. The procurement of personal freedom is not the only or final goal. In addition to spreading awareness about the institution of slavery, and helping other individuals to freedom, the black fathers in these narratives endeavor to build free and advantageous lives for their families. Each thriving family unit in turn strengthens the collective cause for freedom and recognition of humanity.

Paternal authority is a matter often presented within these texts, and there is a contrast between that of the free white father and the enslaved black father. Being able to practice authority is both a struggle and a risk for such fathers. In one instance, it is difficult to practice authority when you are not even granted your own autonomy. In another instance, it is dangerous and difficult to challenge the authority of the master. We see an instance in *Incidents of the Life of a Slave Girl* that illustrates the struggle of assuming paternal authority as a slave. Linda’s father attempts to practice authority over his son, but is frustrated because both he and his child have the authority of the master and mistress enforced upon them:

My father, by his nature, as well as by the habit of transacting business as a skillful mechanic, had more of the feelings of a freeman than is common among slaves. My brother was a spirited boy; and being brought up under such influences, he early detested the name of master and mistress. One day, when his father and his mistress both happened to call him at the same time, he hesitated between the two; being perplexed to know which had the strongest claim upon his obedience. He finally concluded to go to his mistress. When my father reproved him for it, he said "You both called me, and I didn't know which I ought to go to first. "You are *my* child," replied our father, "and when I call you, you should come immediately, if you have to pass through fire and water. (Jacobs 17)

This is a perfect example of the struggle to maintain paternal authority in a position of a slave. This father does everything he can to carry out the prescribed duties of a good father; he provides a home for his children through hard work, and thus expects the respect that comes with his role. However, the fact that his child is a slave means that the “claim” he should have earned by

fulfilling the duties of a father is hampered. He does not have the power to control his children's lives or to keep his family together, no matter how much of a "good father" he is. The most he can do is to shield his children from the reality of his lack of control. As fathers who are unable to control their children's fates, practice authority over their children, or even give their children their surnames, much of fatherhood as an enslaved father of enslaved children involves shielding or teaching his children how to cope with the knowledge of his or her position as a slave.

Slavery so hinders the assumption of a healthy paternal relationship that even the attempt to practice parental authority can be harmful. Since both parent and child are operating under the abnormal circumstance of being legally "owned" a father in this position can never really assume the role of a central positive authoritative figure in his children's lives, and attempts to simulate this authority results in a struggle for the child to choose between two wills. Stephanie Li addresses this in her discussion of the passage. According to Li in her article "Motherhood as Resistance in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," slavery "disrupts the relationship between parent and child not only by allowing each to be sold to different masters, but by positing a figure of authority and allegiance that takes precedence over a child's love and responsibility to his or her parent" (Li 15). She goes on to describe how during the scene between Linda's father and brother "Jacobs highlights a disturbing parallel between the roles of master and father while also establishing a point of opposition by which to define the liberatory politics of motherhood. She challenges the patriarchy in all its forms, suggesting that an authoritative black father may significantly jeopardize the well-being of his child by demanding obedience and loyalty" (Li 16). As Li discusses, while assuming a role similar to that of a master in relation to a child is harmful, assuming authority and aligning loyalty and agendas are important accomplishments for black enslaved fathers. In demanding this obedience and loyalty,

fathers such as Harriet Jacobs's attempt to assume paternal agency to combat their lack of power over their children's actual situations in life. The father must align his son's loyalties, from an early age, with him, as opposed to with his free and powerful master and mistress. Having a "kind" master family as Linda's family does in their early lives makes this even more necessary; the father must teach his son that while the master and mistress must and do have physical control over him, his mental powers of obedience and loyalty must be with his father, who holds actual concern for his welfare. The fact that this episode is between father and son makes it an attempt at a teachable moment about black masculinity and paternity. William's father is trying to set him an example of how to assert his masculine and paternal rights in spite of their position of bondage. Learning to place his loyalties with his father also enforces to William his own humanity, by allowing him to form bonds of kinship rather than of slave to master.

Just as Linda's father fights back against the negative and helpless construction of the enslaved black father, enslaved children, such as Mattie Jackson, pushed back against representations of their paternal figures as helpless and inconsequential. Jackson begins her biography by giving an account of her patrilineal line: "By all accounts my great-grandfather was captured and brought from Africa. His original name I never learned...My grandfather was born in the same state, and also remained a slave for some length of time, when he was emancipated...He was true, honest, responsible...My father, Westly Jackson, married at the age of twenty-two." (Jackson 4). Her choice to recount her family history through the male line and not the female line is significant. What she knows of her great-grandfather's history allows her to identify her African heritage, what she knows of her grandfather allows her to identify herself as a descendant of a line associated with freedom and honesty. The fact that she knows that it was her grandfather who first received the name of "Jackson" from his master allows her to associate

it with this honest and admirable grandfather, and thus to claim it not as a signifier of enslavement, but as a legacy of good character and humanity.

In a traditional, heteronormative sense, “fatherhood” epitomizes authority, leadership, and control. Stripped of all of these, a black slave father had to find new ways to embody, and a different meaning with which to imbue the title of “Father.” Unable to perform the role of “head of household,” enslaved fathers instead try to keep their families together as best they can, while providing them with life lessons. In lieu of being able to be with their children or physically provide for them, fathers who were sold, imprisoned, and in any way separated from their families and subject to personal and bodily strife, strove to be resilient for their children’s sake. We see this in the case of Solomon Northup, who strives throughout his capture and enslavement to return to his family with William Craft, who works with Ellen Craft to obtain freedom for the sake of their future family, and with Henry Bibb. Greene discusses the ways in which Henry Bibb endures and remembers his trials through the lens of fatherhood:

Bibb paradoxically re-members slave incarceration as a series of opportunities, though undoubtedly fraught, allowing him to practice respectable masculinity. They permit him to assume the role of a resilient, selfless protectorate by suffering repeated imprisonments on behalf of his family, to fashion a sympathetic vision of himself as an embattled husband and father by drawing on the sympathy reserved for white male prisoners and Native American abductees, to define his manhood favorably in relation to the negative examples of the moral and cultural others... (Greene 26)

To preserve his sense of masculinity, Bibb puts his struggles and experiences into the context of struggling and surviving for his family. Deprived of masculine and paternal agency, enslaved husbands and fathers had to create a sense of agency for themselves, wherein they determine that they can choose to undergo certain struggles for the good of their families.

To work for the benefit of one’s family is a key element in building masculine identity, one that enslaved men were for the most part denied. Instead, the fruits of these men’s labors

went to the benefit of the slave masters, and the children of these masters. Henry Bibb discusses this in his narrative:

I was taken away from my mother, and hired out to labor for various persons, eight or ten years in succession; and all my wages were expended for the education of Harriet White, my playmate. It was then my sorrows and sufferings commenced. It was then I first commenced seeing and feeling that I was a wretched slave, compelled to work under the lash without wages and often, without clothes enough to hide my nakedness. I have often worked without half enough to eat, both late and, early, by day and by night. I have often laid my wearied limbs down at night to rest upon a dirt floor, or a bench, without any covering at all, be-cause I had nowhere else to rest my wearied body, after having worked hard all the day. (Bibb 14)

This passage illustrates the connection between work and masculinity. Enslaved men are denied the masculine empowerment of their labor because it does not benefit their families. Bibb's lack of clothing and lack of a place to rest mirrors and symbolizes his lack of a family to surround him and a partner to lean on. What is most poignant about freedom for the fathers in these narratives is not standalone freedom for one's self, but the ability to provide for one's family as a free man. Bibb goes on to say: "I could see that the All-wise Creator, had made man a free, moral, intelligent and accountable being; capable of knowing good and evil. And I believed then, as I believe now, that every man has a right to wages for his labor; a right to his own wife and children; a right to liberty and the pursuit of happiness" Bibb expresses how being a husband and father is the right of a free man: by proving that he desires to be an active father and husband for his family, he exposes slavery as unnatural.

Sometimes maintaining an authoritative male role involves maintaining a kind of split personality. We see this in the way William Craft appears to juggle both masculine authority and a manner of subservience. The way Craft handles this double-identity is emblematic of many enslaved fathers and husbands: he separates them into exterior and interior modes of being. While making their escape with Ellen disguised as a white master and William as a slave,



William is Ellen's slave for the public eye, but her authoritative husband in private. His choice to call his wife "master" while recounting the events of the escape to the reader exhibits a willingness to continue the image of subservience to her that he must maintain for the purpose of their disguise, an attitude which appears advanced for his time. On the other hand, the fact that it is his narrative voice steering the text, with no inclusion of Ellen's, means that the narrative is still dominated and controlled by his voice. William Craft also presents the actions of the couple in moments of privacy, and when they have thrown off their disguises, as satisfying the binary of weaker, dependent female, and strong, protective male. While problematic in that this simplifies William and Ellen Craft's relationship and identities to satisfy the binary, this representation serves a purpose in humanizing William and Ellen by making their respective masculinity and femininity valid. Barbara McCaskill addresses the importance of Ellen's femininity in her essay "Yours Very Truly, Ellen Craft" when she discusses a letter Ellen wrote to a newspaper in which she replies to a rumor that she wished to return to slavery after finding free life too difficult:

Enslavement, Ellen Craft's letter indicates, excoriates African women for not possessing the very qualities of womanhood and domesticity that it then discourages them from obtaining. That a woman such as she could emblemize these qualities of femininity not only challenged the stereotypes about all female slaves, but it also demanded a complete reconsideration of the term feminine to account for the many respects in which nineteenth-century African American women operated. (McCaskill 513)

The representation of Ellen's wifely support in the narrative then, lifts the public opinion and view of Ellen and other enslaved women away from being incapable of morally feminine feeling and ambitions, which in turn shows William to be capable and deserving of heading a family with the help of a good and proper woman.

For the most part, William Craft represents the voice of Ellen Craft as the only voice of hesitation, fear, or misgiving within the couple throughout their undertakings. In contrast,

William Craft's voice is one of authority and calm agency. The first notable instance of this representation is on the night they prepare to run. William Craft states "I then whispered to my wife 'Come, my dear, let us make a desperate leap for liberty!' But the poor thing, she shrank back, in a state of trepidation. I turned and asked what was the matter; she made no reply, but burst into violent sobs, and threw her head upon my breast. This appeared to touch my very heart" (Craft 27). Ellen's actions here are decidedly "weaker" and more "effeminate," while William is the strong male against whom she leans. In any instance in the narrative aside from when she assumes the doubly dominant role of the white male, Ellen must represent the triply weak and subservient role of the light-skinned black female. Ellen's "whiteness," rather than giving her any actual authority over her husband, contributes to her dependence on him in that it contributes to her image as one who is "delicate," which has conflicting indications. On one hand, it strengthens his image of paternal authority and that of a strong husband, and shows the audience that this slave woman is just as capable of feminine attributes as free white women. It also by contrast connects black masculinity with strength and capability. On the other hand, it suggests that Ellen's whiteness is what allows her to be feminine by making her a more feasible candidate for the Cult of True Womanhood. William Craft constructs a weak, subservient light-skinned female identity to counteract the perception of the subordinate and effeminate black male which he is trying to cast off. Even though master and slave are roles played by William and Ellen, William must in effect actually become a "servant," or at any rate, subservient to his wife during their travels. William must actually experience the discomfort of riding on the top of a carriage, while Ellen actually experiences the comfort of riding in first class. This creates interesting overt and covert gender performance. On the surface, Ellen's position of comfort is one she inhabits as the dominant and powerful member of the pair, which can be read as

masculine, while William's position of discomfort is one he inhabits as the submissive and powerless, which can be read as feminine. Within William's consciousness and representation, his wife's position of comfort is not only one that is expedient to their disguise, but it is one he privileges her with as "his woman," of whom he is the omniscient protector. A good example of this is the scene in which Ellen shares a carriage with an elderly Virginian and his two daughters. William's attentiveness to his wife's well-being is a demonstration of his masculinity and paternal role is emphasized when the gentleman tells William, "I reckon your master's father hasn't any more such faithful and smart boys as you" and requests him to "be attentive to his good master," to which William states, "I promised I would do so, and have ever since endeavored to keep my pledge" (Craft 38). This statement's double meaning is readily apparent to the reader : the Virginian thinks he means to be an attentive slave, when he really means to be an attentive husband. However, we also see that the overt statement is one in which the listener perceives him as an attentive servile figure, while the covert meaning he claims is that he is a dominant protector and provider. He also relates the scene in a manner of someone who has watched over the entire event and has complete authority to retell in the greatest detail. In fact, he claims more authority over telling Ellen's experiences than Ellen herself.

We see William's representation of his own authority over Ellen's experiences when he addresses his wife's fears for any children they might have. William Craft's first act of paternal agency is commencing and leading the journey to freedom that will create a better life for his yet unconceived children. As William Craft narrates:

My wife was torn from her mother's embrace in childhood, and taken to a distant part of the country. She had seen so many other children separated from their parents in this cruel manner, that the mere thought of her ever becoming the mother of a child, to linger out a miserable existence under the wretched system of American slavery, appeared to fill her very soul with horror; and as she had taken what I felt to be an important view of her condition, I did not, at first, press

the marriage, but agreed to assist her in trying to devise some plan by which we might escape from our unhappy condition, and then be married. (Craft 19)

In this excerpt, William Craft as narrator represents all fear and misgiving as coming from his wife, including uncertainty as to their ability to protect their children. William Craft states that Ellen Craft was horrified at the thought of being a slave mother to slave children, indicating in contrast that William Craft did not primarily experience horror or uncertainty at the thought of being a father. In fact, throughout the narrative, William Craft as narrator uses the voice he acquires within this literary work to repair the distorted gender position of the black male and establish himself as a dominant and authoritative figure.

Despite William Craft's dominant voice however, he and Ellen still work in conjunction to secure their freedom. William depicts her as resistant, but her ideas are still integral to the success of their plan. It is her idea to feign illness and injury in order to avoid situations in which they might be detected. Also, she takes the more active role of donning a physical disguise, although it is uncomfortable and difficult for her:

My wife had no ambition whatever to assume this disguise, and would not have done so had it been possible to have obtained our freedom by more simple means; but we knew it was not customary in the South for ladies to travel with male servants; and therefore notwithstanding my wife's fair complexion, it would have been very difficult task for her to come off as a free white lady, with me as her slave. (Craft24)

This passage illustrates Ellen's agency, as well as William Craft's recognition and appreciation of his wife's ability and strength. William Craft as narrator here notes, and by noting appreciates, Ellen Craft's determination to do her necessary part in securing their freedom, rather than just allowing her husband to carry her through the journey. He also makes a subtle contrast between Ellen Craft and her white mistress. He states that it would be very difficult for Ellen to come off as a free white lady with a slave, a white mistress, ostensibly because of the social constriction

against white women travelling alone with black male slaves. However, making this statement after an illustration of Ellen's determination and intelligence serves to make her a contrast to the "free white lady" who comes to mind. He could also be saying that it would be very difficult for Ellen to come off as a white mistress, women who are not usually represented in slave narratives as possessing agency, intelligence, and compassion because she possesses these qualities herself. He emphasizes this point by mentioning Ellen's fair complexion, which is the only trait she shares with white mistresses. By making these subtle suggestions, the narrative is creating a second layer to its description of marriage between this black enslaved couple. While the overt tone of William as narrator is that of the dominant protector to his wife, which legitimizes his masculinity and humanity to the audience, the covert message is that the masculinity of the black enslaved husband and father is neither one that denies intelligence, and autonomy to women, nor rejects women as partners. As Gabrielle Foreman states, "Ellen Craft's reluctance to get married while still enslaved and her simultaneous desire for a legibly black man and legally and phenotypically black and free children are what precipitate the Crafts' attempt to escape"(Foreman 508). Foreman goes on to say "that in all of the literature on the Crafts that there are no extant images of them *together* underscores the ways in which Ellen's body has been appropriated into a white mulatta genealogy, one that does not align her with the familial allegiances and racial critiques which cause them, quite explicitly, to run (Foreman 523). The narrator William Craft, and the written persona of Ellen Craft combat the perceived need to separate their ideals or common goals based on gender or Ellen's mulatta status. This is also why William must adopt and depict himself in a position of authority: and that his darkness does not make him inferior to Ellen's physical whiteness, as well as that his darkness does not make him a less suitable or desirable partner to Ellen herself.

In contrast to this representation of Ellen Craft is Harriet Jacobs's portrayal of her character Linda, who does not display feminine weakness throughout the narrative. Linda serves as the all-encompassing parent to her children such that there is never a sense of a "missing" father. Despite the fact that they are owned by Flint and fathered by Sands, Linda's children are hers and hers alone. There is no father figure consistently present in the text. More to the point, there is no black father present in the text after the early mention of Linda's father. The black male most present in the narrative is the one mentioned in the chapter entitled "The Lover," about a man that Linda loved but was prevented from being with. He does not have a chance to father children within the text or to serve as a paternal figure to Linda's children. The closest the narrative comes to a depiction of Linda's lover as a father is a rumination from Linda about the children they might have had together, children whose possible existence was the reason she let her lover go: "if we had children, I knew they must 'follow the condition of the mother'. What a terrible blight that would be on the heart of a free, intelligent father!" (Jacobs 65). This nameless lover's freedom makes him an unsuitable father to slave children. His status as "free" would not extend to the power of agency he had when it came to his wife and children. As a free black father of slave children with a slave mother, this lover would be just as silenced in matters concerning his family as he is in this text.

Solomon Northup's description of his father is a notable one as it serves as a comparison between the experiences of an enslaved black father and a "free" black father. Since his father is legally free, he is able to carry out some parental responsibilities that enslaved fathers are not able to. He is able to house and provide for them. His father's work, attitude, and moral lessons to his children are given as indicators of his paternal agency and ability; however, Northup's

description of his father is also indicative of the fact that while he is able to see to his children's upbringing and education, he is not in control of their fates:

Though born a slave, and laboring under the disadvantages of which my unfortunate race is subjected, my father was a man respected for his industry and integrity, as many now living, who well remember him, are ready to testify. His whole life was passed in the peaceful pursuits of agriculture, never seeking employment in those more menial positions, which seem to be especially allotted to the children of Africa. Besides giving us an education surpassing that ordinarily bestowed on children of our condition, he acquired, by his diligence and economy, a sufficient property qualification to entitle him to the right of suffrage. He was accustomed to speak to us of his early life; and although at times cherishing the warmest emotions of kindness, and even of affection towards the family, in whose house he had been a bondsman, he nevertheless comprehended the system of slavery, and dwelt with sorrow on the degradation of his race. He endeavored to imbue our minds with sentiments of morality, and teach us to place our trust and confidence in Him who regards the humblest as well as the highest of his creatures. How often since that time has the recollection of his paternal counsels occurred to me, while lying in a slave hut in the distant and sickly regions of Louisiana, smarting with the undeserved wounds which an inhuman master had inflicted, and longing only for the grave which had covered him, to shield me also from the lash of the oppressor. In the churchyard at Sandy Hill, an humble stone marks the spot where he reposes, after having worthily performed the duties appertaining to the lowly sphere wherein God had appointed him to walk. (Northup 5-6)

Here, to be an effective and present father is depicted as an extraordinary act. The education he provided his children is beyond that which black children usually receive and even his occupation is greater than those "menial tasks" allotted to most black people. It is notable that Northup states that his father is industrious and in possession of integrity although he was born a slave. This indicates that regardless of the conditions of slavery, one could still exhibit masculine virtue if he was a good enough man. At the same time, the passage ends by showing that even a good black father is ultimately incapable of securing his children's freedom during the time of slavery.

Mattie Jackson's relationships and representations of her stepfathers are notable because they present a nurturing and protective paternal instinct and inclination against the traditional

representations (or lack thereof) of black fatherhood. Jackson illustrates this paternal instinct when she is sent for by her stepfather in Lawrence. In this section, Jackson begins by calling him her stepfather, and transitions into calling him “my father.” In their relation to her mother, and in their care for her, all of the men who have been married to her mother are her fathers, and she claims them as such. This is a stark contrast to the white masters who father slave children yet claim none of these as their own flesh and blood. In representing her relationships with her stepfathers in this way, Mattie Jackson is taking an element of slave family conditions that is held as a proof of the sub-humanity of black people, and using it to show just how much human compassion she, black men, and others in her situation possess. Also, Jackson combats the legal invisibility of black fatherhood by claiming and making visible the paternal roles played by her biological father and stepfather. With this she legitimizes black masculinity by asserting that a black man is not only a breeder, but has appropriate masculine leanings toward fatherhood, made evident by the fact that men like her stepfather assume the role of father even when they enter pre-existing families. Not only do these men combat the erasure of their roles as fathers to their biological children, they combat the lack of a paternal link for black children that white slave holders promote through their practices.

We can contrast this to the attitude of the white father of Harriet Jacobs’s children in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Sands never fully embraces the children he fathered with Jacobs as his children, even though he is undoubtedly their biological father. The realization of this status is related by Ellen to her mother when the subject of her father is brought up:

I am nothing to my father, and he is nothing to me. All my love is for you. I was with him five months in Washington, and he never cared for me. He never spoke to me as he did to his little Fanny... I used to wish he would take me in his arms and kiss me, as he did Fanny; or that he would sometimes smile at me, as he did at her. I thought if he was my own father, he ought to love me. (Jacobs 283)



George Sands fails to claim his biological slave children, while the men who enter into Mattie Jackson's mother's life automatically claim the children of another man as their own. As slaves, stable family ties are impossible to maintain, while family units are never closed and final. Men like Mattie Jackson's stepfathers claim the responsibility of slave children's welfare because in their uncertain and unstable circumstances, they assume a paternal role to any and all slave children that come into their scope of care. In some circumstances they even claim the children of white fathers who do not consider them legitimate offspring. In doing so they work to validate the children as children, themselves as men, and enslaved black people as human overall.

George Sand's attitude towards his enslaved daughter Ellen can also be compared to Henry Bibb's words about his enslaved daughter as a free man:

And unfortunately for me, I am the father of a slave, a word too obnoxious to be spoken by a fugitive slave. It calls fresh to my mind the separation of husband and wife; of stripping tying up and flogging; of tearing children from their parents, an selling them on the auction block. It calls to mind female virtue trampled under foot with impunity. But oh! When I remember that my daughter, my only child, is still there, destined to share the fate of all these calamities, it is too much to bear. If ever there was any one act of my life while a slave, that I have to lament over, it is that of being a father and a husband of slaves. I have the satisfaction of knowing that I am only the father of one slave. She is bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh; poor unfortunate child. She was the first and shall be the last slave that ever I will father, for chains and slavery on this earth. (44)

Whereas George Sands disassociates himself from his enslaved child, Bibb acknowledges the bond he feels to his child, despite being separated from her. The acknowledgement of the existence of this bond across time and status display an ideal of fatherhood that is separate and distinct from the one practiced by the white men in these texts.

Part of what makes up the bond between these black fathers and their children is shared suffering and experience. The black father knows what the refusal of bodily autonomy means to himself and to his child. George Sands is an interesting example of a white father to black children within a slave narrative because he deviates from the figure of the rapist master. His

sexual intercourse with Jacobs is consensual by her own account. He appears to have some amount of interest in his black children's welfare. However, in the end he allows his black daughter to be used and treated as a servant to members of his white family. He ends by indirectly claiming her as his property. As a white biological father, he is represented as irreconcilably removed and distant from his black children, while the non-related black partners of Mattie Jackson's mother are represented as having a close bond with her and her siblings. Similarly, Elizabeth Keckley names her son after her stepfather, who was separated from her family at an early age. Stepfathers in slave narratives are in unique positions because there is either no present biological father to "replace," or if the stepchild has a biological black father, they have no more claim over the child than a stepfather would. For these reasons, Mattie Jackson calls her mother's partners "father" because they effectively become her father in a way stepparents in many other circumstances cannot necessarily become to their stepchildren.

Partnership with wives and co-parents is another way in which ex-slave narrators set themselves apart from their white masters and acknowledged that their sense of masculinity was not defined by the master's model. We encounter a scene in Mattie Jackson's narrative that mimics a domestic scene within a traditional white normative male-headed family.

One evening, after I had attended to my usual duties, and I supposed all was complete, she, in a terrible rage, declared I should be punished that night. I did not know the cause, neither did she. She went immediately and selected a switch. She placed it in the corner of the room to await the return of her husband at night for him to whip me. (Jackson 11)

The events here are similar to a situation in which a mother would entrust punishment for misbehavior to a child's father, telling the child to "wait until your father gets home." The mother and in this case the mistress is depicted as an individual incapable of rational thought or independent action, traits which are nurtured and enabled by her husband. This is a contrast, for

one example, to the relationship between Jackson's mother and one of her former partners.

Mattie Jackson's mother, along with her former partner work together to take the best course of action for the children:

As soon as possible after my mother consented to let my little brother go to his father he sent means to assist us to make preparations for our journey to the North. At first he only sent for his little son. My mother was anxious about sending him alone. He was only eleven years old, and perfectly unused to traveling and had never been away from his mother. Finally my father came to the conclusion that, as my mother had endured such extreme hardships and sufferings during the nine years he was not permitted to participate or render her any assistance that it would afford him much pleasure in sending for us both, bearing our expenses and making us as comfortable as his means would allow. (Jackson 27-28)

This former partner and father hears and understands the concerns of his children's mother, and acts in conjunction with them, thereby exhibiting that he understands the value of communication and respects his co-parent, rather than treating her as an irrational subordinate that needs to be pacified. Jackson shows in this passage that her stepfather is unthreatened by communication with his co-parent and that his senses of masculinity and humanity are strong and broad enough to allow him to protect and provide for children and women that are not his "own."

For both enslaved fathers and fathers of enslaved children, the performance of fatherhood was a means by which a man could stand up against attempts to dehumanize himself and his children. Ex-slave narrators showed how the parenting of black fathers differed from that of the white masters and other white men in authority. Shared suffering is a binding force between fathers and children in these narratives, however suffering for and instead of their children was one of the biggest fatherly responsibilities these men undertook. For the most part, they committed themselves to solidarity with and protection of their families in place of practicing control. The representation of black fatherhood within these narratives is a declaration of self-awareness as well as awareness of the lack of justification inherent within the institution of

slavery: it serves as evidence that these men are capable of being self-sufficient and caring for their families. This representation also proves slavery to be a cruel practice because these strong family bonds exist and are being disturbed. The attempted erasure of black fathers further dehumanized black families and black people as a whole, these narratives make black fatherhood during slavery visible, and exhibit the value of their paternity.

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