Subjugation, Dehumanization, and Resistance: Slaves in Select Antebellum American Slave Autobiographies

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Abstract

In Antebellum America, both male and female slaves were oppressed and subjugated. However, the forms of these oppressions varied based on the gender of the slave, as did the ways in which different genders resisted their oppressors. Using the autobiographies of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs as primary sources, this paper studies the differences and similarities between male and female slaves in terms of subjugation and resistance in Antebellum America. Douglass in his autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, describes how slave-owners used violence to "break" male slaves' spirits and maintain their subservience, leading him to employ physical resistance against his masters and eventually flee to the North. On the other hand, Jacobs in her autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* illustrates how female slaves faced additional obstacles, such as fighting for their children's safety and living under the constant threat of sexual violence. These gendered differences reveal the complex ways in which power and oppression function in society, especially when analyzing them from an intersectional perspective. Through this analysis, the paper gains a deeper understanding of the nature of power dynamics connected to slavery.

Keywords: resistance, exploitation, dehumanization, slavery, race, racism

Introduction

The 19th century in America was a time of great turmoil and upheaval, especially for African Americans who were still enslaved and treated as property. The institution of slavery is rooted in the Atlantic slave trade which brought over "10 million" slaves from Africa to the Americas between the 15th to the 18th centuries (Lovejoy 95). With the discovery of the Americas by European settlers and the cultivation of new crops such as sugarcane, tobacco, and cotton, intensive labor was required, which American natives were unable to perform. This prompted

the European settlers to turn their attention to Africa where they captured and enslaved millions of people to work in their fields.

Douglass and Jacobs were two such former slaves who wrote autobiographies that detailed their experiences of being enslaved in America. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, published in 1845, is a powerful condemnation of the institution of slavery in the United States and played a significant role in the abolitionist movement. Through his narrative Douglass sheds light on the brutal conditions of slavery he faced as a child and young adult. His experiences included various forms of abuse such as physical violence, starvation, and being forced to work in abhorrent conditions. On the other hand, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), an autobiography written by Jacobs offers a unique perspective on the experiences of enslaved women in the American Antebellum South. Jacobs recounts her struggles as a slave woman and the challenges she faced in keeping her children safe during a time when "[s]exual exploitation and abuse simply characterized the daily reality of many females in bondage" (Miller 35). Both Douglass and Jacobs further portray the differing ways in which male and female slaves experienced and resisted slavery and pursued freedom. Therefore, in this paper, we examine select slave narratives with the aim of seeking answers to how male and female slaves were exploited and subjugated in Antebellum America, and how they resisted their oppressors.

In connection to these questions, we also explore the distinctions between race and racism, as well as how the concept of race, as it is understood today, is mostly a "European" invention mainly constructed to justify the discriminatory treatment inflicted on Africans (Fortney 35). The paper is an exegesis of the aforementioned autobiographical texts. However, the only limitation would be that very often the genre has been claimed to be unreliable (on which the authors of this paper elaborate in the theoretical framework). Overall, the authors of this paper unearth the gendered dynamics of slavery in the select texts in an attempt to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding the lives of enslaved individuals in Antebellum America.

Race, Racism, and Intersectionality

The concept of race is a complex and socially constructed notion that is difficult to scientifically define. It serves as a way of categorizing and distinguishing the diverse human population based on perceived physical traits, such as skin color, facial features, and hair texture. American sociologist and race theorist Wintat posits that "race can be defined as a concept that signifies and symbolizes sociopolitical conflicts and interests in reference to different types of human bodies" (172). Generally speaking, though race is a way of categorizing people based on their physical characteristics, such as their outward appearance or their

physical traits, it is important to understand that race is not something that is determined by biology or science. Instead, it is created and defined by society and history. Certain physical features may be used to determine someone's race, but there is no clear-cut "biological" basis for these categories. Close examination of the ways in which people are categorized into different races shows that these categories are not accurate or consistent (Wintat 172). So, the question is if there is no biological validation of race, why was it constructed? The answer is quite simple. Throughout history, race is created as a tool for "othering," as a means of "distinguishing and highlighting differences" among the various communities of humans which led to the creation of "social hierarchies" and gave rise to different "power dynamics."

According to Wintat, the concept of race started to develop alongside the emergence of a "world political economy," as the world became more interconnected through trade and exploration. With the colonization of the Americas and the establishment of the Atlantic slave trade particularly, the concept of race began to take shape (172). It was not just a theoretical concept, but rather a practical one that evolved over time. Although different societies across the world had their own ways of categorizing people based on physical characteristics, the specific idea of race as it is understood today was primarily an invention of "Europeans" (Fortney 35). It was connected with the processes that led to the creation of European "nation-states" and colonial empires (Wintat 172). Wintat claims that the creation of the dark, oppressive, and exploitative sugar plantations in regions like the Brazilian Reconcavo and the Caribbean were all part of the same "world-historical process" that shaped the concept of race (172). Similar sentiments would be echoed by Zanden in his article "The Ideology of White Supremacy," in which he would go on to point out how "notions of innate Negro inferiority" would rise "rather early in the Colonies" (391). Therefore, the "biological basis," as the prevailing belief, was constructed and practiced for a "colonial purpose" which propagated some races (e.g., white-skinned Europeans) to be superior to others (e.g., black-skinned Africans).

As one can imagine, this perspective of a biological reality influenced not only scientific discourses but also social and political systems. This understanding of race played a significant role in debates, both in "defense of slavery and its critique" (Wintat 174). Proponents of slavery used the concept of race to justify the enslavement of certain groups, arguing that their "innate" characteristics made them suitable for servitude (Wilson 411). While discussing segregation and the unlawful treatment of black people, people in the South often used terms like "instinctive," "a natural order," or "a universal law of nature" to describe it (Zanden 386). By relying on these pseudoscientific notions, historical justifications for

racial hierarchies were constructed, enabling further discrimination of black people. Zanden also attributes slavery to pre-Enlightenment thinking, including influences from Greek philosophers like Aristotle, who claimed that slavery was a natural part of the social order and part of God's plan for the world (387).

However, the idea that certain races are inherently inferior or superior to others only became a widely accepted practice through the early 16th-century colonial endeavors. Three hundred years later, in 19th century America, Jacobs confronted these notions of racial inferiority, and justifiably attributing the blame to the institution of slavery, she declared, "I admit that the black man is inferior. But what is it that makes him so? It is the ignorance in which white men compel him to live; it is the torturing whip that lashes manhood out of him; it is the fierce bloodhounds of the South" (49). It is a historical fact that different forms of slavery have existed throughout the ages, even before the establishment of the Atlantic slave trade. However, these systems of slavery were typically justified not because of the alleged biological inferiority of a person, but rather due to religious and cultural differences (Zanden 390). When a significant number of enslaved Africans began to adopt Christianity as their religion, there arose a need for a change in rhetoric. As Zanden would point out, "As time progressed and the Negro was converted to Christianity, the heathen or infidel buttress no longer constituted a satisfactory defense of slavery. Gradually, then, the biological argument came into prominence" (391). This "biological argument" reinforces the belief among the 19th century white Europeans that the "mental capacity" of black people had a "biological limit or ceiling." Conversely, abolitionists such as Jacobs expressed their disdain for such laws and beliefs: "I regarded such laws as the regulations of robbers, who had no rights that I was bound to respect" (208). Similarly, Douglass also challenged these notions of "natural inferiority" of black people and hoped that, given enough "time and opportunity," they may reach "the highest point of human excellence" which ensures that the notion of freedom would soon thrash the chains of slavery (38).

Intersectionality

With the emancipation of slaves and the abolition of slavery, American society gradually aimed to distance itself from its racist past. However, despite the passage of time, racist ideologies and discrimination continue to persist even in the 21st century. Thus, the vision of a post-racial society remains largely elusive. In order to address the ongoing racism and prejudice against certain racial groups, various racial theoretical frameworks have emerged. Among these frameworks is the intersectionality theory, which asserts that a person's various identities, such as gender, race, and social status, intersect "to shape" different forms of discrimination or, in some cases, preferential treatment (Crenshaw,

qtd. in Gopaldas 90). Intersectionality can help explain the various forms of abuse that Douglass and Jacobs encountered, and elaborate on why some of their struggles were similar while others were unique to them.

To understand intersectionality, one must look at the period after the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, when it became increasingly clear that progress with regards to racial equality had stagnated, and even some of the victories of the past "were being rolled back" (Delgado and Stefancic 461). In response to these challenges, a group of scholars and activists identified the need for a fresh perspective that could provide deeper insights into the interconnectedness of race and other social identities, and how they intersected with systems of oppression. The term "intersectionality" was coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, but "the concept of intersectionality was developed over the course of the twentieth century by various advocates of black feminism" (Gopaldas 90). The term emphasizes how different intersecting identities of a person shape unique experiences of marginalization and resistance. Slave autobiographies and narratives written in the Antebellum period nullify the connection of intersectionality with slavery for which a little elaboration on the aspects of slave narratives is necessary.

Exploring the Historical and Critical Aspects of Slave Narratives

Slave narratives hold importance as they provide firsthand accounts and personal testimonies of individuals who experienced slavery. But there are an abundance of these narratives. James Onley mentions that "one estimate puts the number of extant narratives at over six thousand" (46). Onley notes even after reading through two or three dozen narratives, one would only scratch the surface. Nevertheless, while slave narratives have been a valuable source of information and insight into the lives of enslaved individuals, a gap in the research lies in the comparative analysis of these narratives through an intersectional lens. In fact, very few attempts have been made to examine the experiences of male and female slaves in Antebellum America. By delving into the narratives of both male and female slaves, a more nuanced understanding of how gender played a crucial role in defining the experiences of slaves can be attained.

Furthermore, the authorship of slave narratives has been historically subjected to much scrutiny. One of the primary reasons for doubting the authorship of slave narratives is the limited access to education that enslaved individuals had, especially during the Antebellum period. Many enslaved individuals were denied the opportunity for formal education, and there was a prevailing belief among some that they lacked the necessary skills to write their narratives. This assumption has led to skepticism about whether the ex-slaves themselves were the actual authors or if their narratives were authored by others. Zanden points

out the lack of appreciation for the intellectual abilities of black people, stating that it "was essentially a paternal point of view, one which held that the Negro race could be elevated only under the guidance and supervision of an advanced civilized race" (395).

For this reason, accounts such as the one provided by Jacobs were questioned for their authenticity. Many believed that her editor, Lydia Maria Child, was the true author of the book, and Jacobs was just the convenient token black woman used to appeal to people's emotions and sentimentality to promote abolitionist ideologies. Yellin, however, disputes these claims, stating that the "discovery of a cache of" Jacobs' "letters" has "transformed" the "questionable slave narrative into a well-documented pseudonymous autobiography" (479). Here, Yellin is speaking out against the deeply ingrained belief that black individuals are incapable of intellectual or creative achievements on their own and need the guidance or assistance of white people to accomplish anything significant. This is probably why Foreman claims that "slave narratives are the most neglected body of early American writing" (313). However, when these narratives are examined alongside current events in America, it becomes evident that racial divisions and oppression still persist. People of color continue to face inequality and social opportunities are far from equal. Hence, the study of slave narratives, whether they are autobiographical or biographical, is crucial in this effort. The discussion becomes more nuanced when race and gender are considered together, enabling one to recognize the interconnected systems of oppression that male and female slaves (e.g. Douglass and Jacobs) confronted and how they navigated their unique paths of resistance.

Resistance through Violence in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, published in 1845, details Douglass' life as a slave in Antebellum America. It is a powerful condemnation of the institution of slavery in the United States, as it played a significant role in the abolitionist movement. One of the most crucial elements of Douglass' narrative is his description of the psychological impact of slavery on enslaved people, with one of his earliest childhood memories being the witnessing of his aunt being lashed. He writes, "I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but I well remember it. I never shall forget it whilst I remember anything. It was the first of a long series of such outrages" (49). This traumatic experience had a profound psychological impact on Douglass. He later reflected, "It was a most terrible spectacle. I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it" (Douglass 49). It was a trauma that was all too common among enslaved people, yet often went unrecognized and untreated, as it "was a generally held belief that Africans

lacked humanity and were therefore incapable of experiencing mental illnesses" (Hickling and Sorel, qtd. in Longman-Mills et al. 79).

Douglass often spoke of the "dehumanization" that slavery caused, noting that it robbed people of their humanity and made them feel like nothing more than objects. Furthermore, he recognized that the institution of slavery dehumanized both the enslaved individuals and the slave owners themselves, creating a cycle of violence and oppression:

> We were all ranked together at the valuation. Men and women, old and young, … There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being, and were all subjected to the same narrow examination … At this moment, I saw more clearly than ever the brutalizing effects of slavery upon both slave and slaveholder. (Douglass 76)

The belief that Africans were an "inferior race" was not unique among the Southern American slaveholders. Longman-Mills et al. exposed similar sentiments among Caribbean slave owners who thought that the imprisoned "Africans were considered to be sub-human, treated as property, enslaved, raped, beaten and killed" (79). This shows that the dehumanization and brutal treatment of enslaved Africans was not limited to one particular region or group of slaveholders, and was quite common across different regions and cultures. The prevalence of this type of thinking during the era of slavery can be attributed to several factors. One of the main reasons was the economic incentive to use enslaved people as cheap labor, enabling the maximization of profits. Robert S. Starobini claims that most slaves in the South "lived in rural, small-town or plantation settings, where most southern industry was located" (132).

Additionally, the institution of slavery, as mentioned above, was supported by laws and religious teachings. Douglass reiterates this in his autobiography: "Here we have religion and robbery the allies of each other – devils dressed in angels' robes" (123). Furthermore, cultural beliefs such as the idea of white supremacy and the notion that slavery was justified because it was a "civilizing force" also contributed to the prevalence of this type of thinking. One of the Founding Fathers of America, Thomas Jefferson, had the opinion that black people were a "distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind." For enslaved people like Douglass, these predominant cultural and religious prejudices meant that he faced significant challenges and obstacles as an enslaved person and later as a free man fighting for the abolition of slavery.

Due to these prejudices held by white people, slaves such as Douglass were

denied the opportunity to receive basic human rights. Douglass' enslavement ensured that all his basic "rights of humanity are annihilated" and that protection was only to be granted to the "spoiler" rather than the "victim" (Douglass 40). One of the less talked about abusive aspects of the institution of slavery was the restriction on slaves to receive an education. As Douglass asserts, "it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read" (68). Douglass describes how the slaveholders believed that education would "spoil the best" slaves in their holdings, making them harder to control and subdue (68). In other words, after receiving an education, slaves would no longer be compliant.

Despite the danger and punishment that came with being caught reading or writing as an enslaved person, Douglass continued to educate himself and eventually "succeeded in learning to read and write" (Douglass 71). It had to be done in secret and by using various "stratagems" since he was allowed "no regular teacher" (Douglass 71). Douglass' owners tried to keep him illiterate so that he would be easier to control and more content with his station in life. However, through Douglass's own initiative and natural curiosity, he taught himself his letters. He accomplished this by sometimes seeking instructions from the white boys during rare breaks from work and at other times by studying discarded newspapers and books that he managed to salvage. When thinking back about his time, Douglass would write, "my copy-book was the board fence, brick wall, and pavement; my pen and ink was a lump of chalk. With these, I learned mainly how to write" (75).

Although not being allowed to read and write was a significant obstacle for Douglass, it was just one part of the many challenges he faced as a slave. His experience was characterized by the constant threat of violence and physical abuse from his masters and overseers. He vividly recalls his time spent working for a slaveholder named Mr. Covey, who was a particularly cruel slave-owner. As Douglass recounts, "Scarcely a week passed without his whipping me. I was seldom free from a sore back" (87). So, it can be said that Mr. Covey took particular enjoyment from punishing his slaves, and enjoyed his reputation as a breaker of "young slaves" (84). Unsurprisingly Douglass' short time with Mr. Covey was marked by brutal beatings, whippings, and other forms of punishment, which often left him physically scarred. As Douglass recalls, Mr. Covey "tore off my clothes, and lashed me till he had worn out his switches, cutting me so savagely as to leave the marks visible for a long time after" (87). This treatment was all too common for enslaved people who were subjected to brutal violence and mistreatment at the hands of their owners with little to no recourse or protection under the law. Stripping slaves was a common practice among slave owners who often used various forms of physical and psychological

abuse to subdue and control their slaves. Keri Leigh Merritt points out that to further "emasculate enslaved boys and men," their masters would deprive "them right to wear pants." Other methods of emasculation techniques, as she goes on to write, involved forcing male slaves to wear "skirts" or dress-like garments, with the purpose of feminizing and undermining them to ensure that the masters were "the most masculine men on the plantation" (Merritt). Thus the masters reassert their dominance over the slaves and subdue them through humiliation and emasculation.

It was also economically more practical to outfit slaves with a single garment rather than providing them with separate shirts, pants, and undergarments. However, the winter months posed a significant challenge for slaves as the harsh cold was severe enough to kill them and the clothing provided to them offered little protection against the cold. Not every enslaved male was "lucky enough to receive pants when the weather turned cooler" (Merritt). Douglass echoed similar sentiments, describing how slaves would receive a limited amount of clothing at the start of each year but by the time winter arrived, these clothes would have become worn and tattered. Douglass states, "[T]heir clothing consisted of two coarse linen shirts per year. When these failed them, they went naked until the next allowance-day. Children from seven to ten years old, of both sexes, almost naked" (52).

Despite the inhumane treatment and severe limitations imposed upon them, slaves found ways to resist and assert their agency. Douglass was no exception. At the age of 16, he realized that the only way to prevent Mr. Covey's beatings was to physically resist him, using force to counter force. This realization came to Douglass one day after he failed to carry wheat due to a sudden bout of illness. Mr. Covey, upon finding Douglass in this state, instead of helping him, kicked him to the side and told him to get up. When Douglass failed to do so, Mr. Covey picked up the "hickory slat" which Hughes had been using and gave Douglass a heavy blow upon the head, causing a large wound and making blood flow freely (Douglass 91). This event would lead Douglass to go see Master Thomas, a former master. He hoped to receive some form of protection against Mr. Covey. Instead, he was "ridiculed" and told that Mr. Covey's actions were justified and he was instructed to return to him (Douglass 92).

After learning that he went seeking Master Thomas' aid, Mr. Covey would target Douglass out for further punishment. Douglass describes the harrowing incident, saying, "Mr. Covey entered the stable with a long rope, and just as I was half out of the loft, he caught hold of my legs and was about tying me" (93-94). This became the first time that Douglass physically resisted his oppressor. He declared, "I resolved to fight," and he followed through with his resolution by grabbing

"Covey hard by the throat" and rising to his feet (Douglass 94). When asked by Covey whether he meant to "persist" with his resistance, Douglass would state that he did, further adding that "come what might … I was determined to be used so no longer," marking the beginning of how Douglass would deal with oppression from then on (94).

From that fateful day, Douglass resolved to resist the beatings through physical means. Douglass explains that the only reason he was not punished more severely for his disobedience was that it would not reflect well on Covey to have it known that a teenage slave had the audacity to oppose him:

> Mr. Covey enjoyed the most unbounded reputation for being a first-rate overseer and negro-breaker. It was of considerable importance to him. That reputation was at stake; and had he sent me – a boy about sixteen years old – to the public whipping-post, his reputation would have been lost; so, to save his reputation, he suffered me to go unpunished. (95)

After suffering at the hands of his masters for so long, this act of resistance would embolden Douglass and give him a newfound sense of strength and courage that he did not have previously growing up in bondage. He no longer accepted the inhumane treatment from his masters without a fight as he wrote that his "long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place" (Douglass 95). Despite the risks, these acts of resistance paid off. Douglass became so confident that he continued getting into "fights, but was never whipped" (Douglass 95).

However, these "fights" that Douglass mentions would be something he would have to contend with into his adulthood. As a slave, Douglass' life was marred by violence and brutality. Even after getting work as an apprentice at a shipyard, Douglass would face discrimination among the other white shipyard workers, almost losing his "left eye" in one altercation (Douglass 108). Ultimately, Douglass came to learn that the only way he could find salvation was by escaping his life of servitude. Coming to this realization, he would eventually escape to the North, but in his autobiography, he would refrain from divulging any details regarding his escape so as not to close off the possibility for other slaves to escape in a similar manner. Thus, showing resilience and strength of the human spirit, his autobiography stands as a testament to the horrors of slavery and the power of hope and resistance in the face of adversity.

The Trials of a Slave Mother in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl is an 1861 autobiography by Harriet Jacobs, a former slave in the United States, written under the pseudonym of Linda Brent. The book tells the story of Jacobs' life as a slave including the sexual harassment

she faced at the hands of her master, her escape to freedom, and her fight to keep her children safe. Throughout the book, Jacobs writes in great detail about the physical and psychological abuse she and other enslaved women suffered as well as the ways in which they resisted slavery and sought freedom. Jacobs wrote about her own experiences of being repeatedly harassed by her master, Dr. Flint: "I was subjected to such insults as no pen can describe. I would not describe them if I could; they were too low, too revolting" (86). However, despite these indignations, she tried to preserve her "self-respect" while struggling against "the powerful grasp of … Slavery" (Jacobs 60). The book also deals with issues such as motherhood, family separation, and the role of enslaved women in Antebellum America.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl holds a unique place among slave narratives as it offers a rare perspective from the lens of a woman, which was highly unusual for that period. This unique aspect makes the autobiography more significant in the history of the abolitionist movement since it is widely recognized that "slave narratives were the most telling weapons in the abolitionist arsenal" (Doherty 82). Slave narratives also offer a unique opportunity for slaves to write themselves "into an existence recognized by dominant American society" (Drake 91). Therefore, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* takes on particular significance as it illuminates the firsthand experiences of a slave girl and highlights the various ways in which they were exploited and oppressed as slaves.

Furthermore, according to Thomas Doherty, Jacobs' book was "both demographically and rhetorically astute" (81). This is because women were some of the most ardent advocates of the abolition of slavery. As Doherty put it, "[n]orthern women, largely from leisured middle-class households, were among the abolitionist movement's most dedicated participants" (81). The active involvement of women in the anti-slavery movement marked a significant departure from societal norms at the time. Their contributions, however, faced strong opposition, even within the abolitionist movement. Though they may not have been subjected to physical violence as frequently as their male counterparts, female abolitionists encountered substantial public "ridicule, and censure" (Doherty 81). Regardless of these obstacles, women abolitionists were able to defy social conventions and the expectations placed on women to remain passive in social and political issues, and make their voices heard against the institution of slavery.

Jacobs, through her writing style and sentimentality, brought to the northern women's attention the torment endured by the female slaves who were subjected to sexual exploitation and harassment at the hands of white male slave masters. For instance, by the time Jacobs turned fifteen, she was already the victim of

sexual harassment. As she writes, "On my fifteenth year … (m)y master began to whisper foul words in my ear. Young as I was, I could not remain ignorant of their import. I tried to treat them with indifference or contempt" (30). Her ability to retell these harsh realities drew her fellow slave sisters' empathy, encouraging their involvement in the abolitionist cause. In this regard, Braxton points out that when "viewed from a gynocritical or gynocentric perspective, *Incidents* arrives at the very heart and root of Afra-America autobiographical writing" (383-384). Indeed, throughout the retelling of her story, Jacobs remained true to her identity and was quick to point out that for her to survive in Antebellum America she could not do as the white women did, as she states in this line: "[t]hat which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens the degradation of the female slave" (31). It proves that to understand her struggle all of her identities (e.g., race, gender, body, sexual choice, etc.) would need to be considered to fully comprehend her experience.

Jacobs' narrative demonstrates the value of intersectionality in understanding her experience and the broader struggle against slavery. She highlights the stark contrast between her own experiences as a slave girl and the privileges enjoyed by free, white women. She appeals to the empathy of those women, urging them not to judge her harshly but to understand the immense challenges she faced as a result of slavery. She laments the impossibility of maintaining her purity and self-respect under the oppressive grip of slavery, feeling abandoned by society at large, as the passage below shows:

> But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely! If slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice; I could have had a home shielded by the laws; … I wanted to keep myself pure; and, under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve my self-respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery. (60)

Hence, this book was a way for Jacobs to tell the world of the cruelties perpetuated by the institution of slavery and "was the first to address the sexual exploitation of women under slavery" (Sherman 167). She illustrated the stark contrast between the lack of repercussions faced by her tormentor, Dr. Flint, and the immense sacrifices she had to make to escape from him.

Throughout her life, Jacobs faced harsh consequences for her defiance. Despite being the victim of unjust treatment, the white community falsely accused her of impropriety, while her tormentor, Dr. Flint, presented himself as the victim.

His distorted perception fueled a vow to make her suffer until her "last day" (Jacobs 86). Dr. Flint's wife also vilified Jacobs while pitying herself as a "martyr" (Jacobs 37). The autobiography clearly shows the difficulties of being a black female slave in America. Jacobs expressed that she believed any other life would be more favorable than her own existence, as she wrote: "I would ten thousand times rather that my children should be the half-starved paupers of Ireland than to be the most pampered among the slaves of America" (34). Sherman points out how "not only was slavery's threat more sexual for women, but genteel codes for their behavior were more stringent. The standards of free people differed for men and women" (170). This sentiment is further echoed in Jacobs' writing, where she asserts that living under the control of an "unprincipled master and a jealous mistress" would have a dehumanizing effect on anyone and give rise to feelings of profound despair, anguish, and helplessness (34).

Despite the harsh realities of slave life, Jacobs remained undeterred. She understood that traditional notions of demureness and chastity, often expected of women, would not serve as effective weapons for her as a black woman in the face of her abusive master. She recognized that overt displays of purity and submission would not protect her or lead to improved treatment. On the contrary, they would only invite further abuse and exploitation from her master. As Sherman put it, chastity and purity in women "could be a significant weapon against male aggression, but it also opened new areas of vulnerability" (170). Recognizing the constraints of her situation, she realized that clinging to traditional notions of purity and chastity would only play into her master's desires and further worsen her circumstances.

Therefore, to put a stop to the ongoing harassment and unwarranted sexual advances from Dr. Flint, Jacobs made the decision to engage in a relationship with another man. She reflects, "I knew what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation" (Jacobs 60). Moreover, Jacobs advises her readers not to judge her actions based on conventional expectations of women's behavior, as her circumstances as a slave were vastly different from those of free women. With the hope of deterring Dr. Flint's obsession with her, she sought the companionship of another white man who showed "sympathy" towards her plight (Jacobs 60). Jacobs believed that if it became known that she had a lover, Dr. Flint's infatuation would gradually lessen over time, or this perceived act of betrayal would compel her master to sell her. As she candidly states, "I thought he would revenge himself by selling me, and I was sure my friend, Mr. Sands, would buy me. He was a man of more generosity and feeling than my master, and I thought my freedom could be easily obtained from him. The crisis of my fate now came so near that I was desperate" (Jacobs 61). Even in the unjust circumstances of

being owned by another, Jacobs demonstrated her ability to assert control over her own life and body.

Through this strategic use of her sexuality as a form of resistance, Jacobs empowered herself, protecting herself against the constant threat of sexual violence. However, her act of defiance did not yield the desired outcome. Rather than selling her as she had hoped, her master responded with even greater discrimination and abuse, subjecting her to further hardships, such as, making her work in the plantation rather than in the house. Also, when Jacobs gave birth, her lover did not provide the support she had anticipated and hoped for. Instead, once again, Jacobs found herself completely at the mercy of her master, having to face him on her own without any assistance:

> Dr. Flint had sworn that he would make me suffer, to my last day, for this new crime against *him*, as he called it; and as long as he had me in his power he kept his word. On the fourth day after the birth of my babe, he entered my room suddenly, and commanded me to rise and bring my baby to him. … I rose, took up my babe, and crossed the room to where he sat. "Now stand there," said he, "till I tell you to go back!" My child bore a strong resemblance to her father, and to the deceased Mrs. Sands, her grandmother. He noticed this; and while I stood before him, trembling with weakness, he heaped upon me and my little one every vile epithet he could think of. (86-87)

The birth of Jacobs' child from her relationship with Mr. Sands added another layer of complexity to her pursuit of freedom. Being a mother meant that she could no longer simply escape and leave her child behind. She had to consider the well-being and freedom of her child as well. This compelled her to search for ways in which both she and her child could escape the oppressive bonds of slavery. Jacobs elaborates that her plan was to hide herself "at the house of a friend and remain there a few weeks till the search was over," hoping that Dr. Flint would "get discouraged, and, for fear of losing [her] value, and also of subsequently finding [her] children among the missing, he would consent to sell [them]" (101). This re-expresses the challenges faced by female slaves, who could not prioritize their own safety but also needed to secure the freedom of their children.

Gendered Experiences and Forms of Resistance in the Two Novels

Both male and female slaves in Antebellum America experienced the harsh realities of slavery, but their experiences were often shaped by their gender in different ways. This is well explained by the intersectional theory introduced by Crenshaw, who states that understanding the "various ways in which race and

gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions" provides deeper insights into the experiences of individuals that would otherwise remain unexplored (1224). Douglass and Jacobs, both slaves in 19th-century America, had to experience similar kinds of exploitation. However, there were also distinct differences in the forms of oppression they faced. To fully understand these differences, it is crucial to consider all aspects of their intersecting identities. While both individuals were black and enslaved, their gender became the defining factor in how they were exploited.

Being a woman was enough to experience a bad life in 19th-century America. But Jacobs was not just a woman – she was black and a slave. So, her trials were three-times more difficult than any contemporary white woman. Furthermore, her anxiety was heightened when she discovers that she gave birth to a girl child. She states: "[M]y heart was heavier than it had ever been before. Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women" (86). From an intersectional perspective, Jacobs' statement reflects the compounded oppressions faced by enslaved women. By stating that slavery is far more terrible for women, Jacobs recognizes the additional layers of oppression and suffering experienced by women within the institution of slavery. Not only were they subjected to the brutalities and dehumanization endured by enslaved men, but they also had to contend with the specific forms of oppression that targeted women. This included sexual exploitation, abuse, and the denial of their reproductive autonomy. According to Yellin, Jacobs' book "was the first to address the sexual exploitation of women under slavery," while also acknowledging the "rhetorical strain" faced by Jacobs for openly discussing such topics (qtd. in Sherman 167). While Jacobs' narrative may be seen as less forceful compared to Douglass' classic autobiography, the "ambivalence and troubled voice point toward its strength" (Sherman 167). As Jacobs struggles between the oppressive bonds of slavery and the ideals of true womanhood, she goes through severe tensions and moral conflict. Jacobs vehemently denounces the evil system of slavery while grappling with uncertainty and the complexities created due to her gender identity.

As stated earlier, slavery affected both men and women, but it had a unique and deeply personal impact on enslaved women. Enslaved women were often used for breeding purposes, as concubines, wet nurses, or caregivers. This meant that their ability to bear children was controlled and manipulated by their enslavers. Slavery posed a particularly intimate and brutal threat to women because it denied their sense of self and identity, allowing their masters to behave more selfishly and cruelly, without recognizing their humanity. For example, after giving birth, children would often be forcibly separated from their mothers, a practice designed to undermine familial bonds and exploit enslaved women

further. This act of tearing families apart further served as a means of exerting control and perpetuating the dehumanizing nature of slavery. Both Douglass and Jacobs, in their writings, elaborate on the brutality inflicted upon slave mothers. Jacobs expresses the anguish felt by slave mothers, stating that they never knew when their "children … may all be torn from her the next morning; and often does she wish that she and they might die before the day dawns" (18). Similarly, Douglass recounted his own experience of being forcibly separated from his mother at a young age. He reflected on this painful event: "My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant – before I knew her as my mother. It is a common custom, in the part of Maryland from which I ran away, to part children from their mothers at a very early age" (Douglass 46). These firsthand accounts reveal how slave mothers were unable to keep their own children after giving birth. Ironically, they would be forced to work as "wet nurses" for their masters' children while their own children were cruelly sold off to distant plantations, never truly knowing the love and care of their mothers.

Perhaps the most horrifying aspect of slavery for female slaves was the constant threat of sexual violence they endured. As Sarah Way Sherman points out, "slavery denied the female slave's selfhood, it tempted her master to monstrous selfishness, unfettered by recognition of their common humanity" (170). The sexual autonomy of slave girls was brutally violated by white men, resulting in the inevitable loss of their innocence. Unlike free, middle-class women who had the privilege of choosing their husbands and exerting control over their adult lives, enslaved women like Jacobs had no such luxury. Interestingly, male slaves (both men and boys) were also commonly sexually exploited but the incidents might be "mostly unarticulated" (Foster 446). Foster provides a number of forceful "sodomy" cases which involved the male slaves (445-447). However, Douglass does not share any such incident in his autobiography.

Despite these differences in treatment, there are numerous similarities in how enslaved black males and females were treated. Both were subjected to the dehumanizing effects of slavery, enduring physical and emotional abuse. They were both denied basic human rights and treated as property, bought and sold at the whim of their owners. In his account, Douglass vividly recalls the brutal whipping his aunt endured at the hands of his master after being caught in the company of another man. The master whipped his aunt hardest "where the blood ran fastest" (49). Aunt Hester being a woman did not dissuade Douglass' master from subjecting her to brutal whippings, highlighting the disregard for gender when it came to physical harm inflicted by masters. As stated earlier in this paper, Douglass himself endured many similar beatings.

Furthermore, enslaved black males and females were denied education and intellectual development. Both were denied the opportunity to read, write, or pursue education, which further perpetuated their subjugation and limited their ability to resist their oppressors. Fortunately, Douglass' ability to teach himself how to read played a crucial role in his journey towards opposing the institution of slavery. Through his reading, he realized that education and slavery were fundamentally incompatible. The knowledge he gained from books instilled in him a deep desire to challenge the oppressive system and advocate for freedom. Similarly, Jacobs would not have been blessed with the knowledge of words if it had not been for the benevolence of her first mistress, as she honestly states, "While I was with her, she taught me to read and spell" (12). Moreover, despite the prohibition, Jacobs made efforts to pass on her knowledge of reading and writing to Uncle Fred: "There are thousands, who, like good uncle Fred, are thirsting for the water of life; but the law forbids it, and the churches withhold it" (Jacobs 82). Thus, she makes a visionary step towards "collective" freedom.

Another commonality between Douglass and Jacobs is their mixed heritage. Jacobs claimed that her "parents were a light shade of brownish yellow, and were termed mulattoes," a term used pejoratively to refer to people of white and black heritage (7). Similarly, Douglass plainly stated, "[m]y father was a white man. He was admitted to be such by all I ever heard speak of my parentage" (46). The intersectional theory not only shows how different identities intersect to compound oppression, but it also acknowledges how these intersections can give rise to privileges. Although Jacobs and Douglass largely found themselves thrown in with other black slaves when it came to the kind of punishment and dehumanization they faced, it could also be argued that some of the leniency in the treatment they enjoyed, which allowed them to flourish and become exceptional individuals, may be due to their mixed heritage. This suggests that if the other slaves were considered to have the "desired complexion" by their white slave masters, they too might have been given more chances to flourish and face less punishment.

Conclusion

The autobiographies of Douglass and Jacobs provide invaluable insights into the lives of enslaved individuals during the Antebellum period in America. Through a comparison of their narratives, it becomes evident that male and female slaves faced different forms of oppression, largely influenced by their gender. The difference in experiences, along with their unique methods of resistance, expresses the complex nature of slavery. Furthermore, the intersectional lens shows how race and gender compound the experiences of an enslaved individual's life. Understanding the differences in the treatment of male and female slaves and

acknowledging the gendered aspects of their lives is essential in comprehending the complexities of their experiences.

Delgado and Stefancic claim that the advancements in racial relationships between whites and blacks in America are "being rolled back" (461). In the midst of persisting violence and racial discrimination in modern America, exploring autobiographies from even more segregated societies of the past can provide valuable insights into the diverse methods of resistance present to people of color in the present-day United States. From acts of physical rebellion to more subtle and covert forms of resistance, the stories of those who fought against oppression during the era of slavery can inspire and inform the fight for social justice today. Studying these narratives not only provides historical insight into the lives of enslaved individuals but also serves as a stark reminder of the enduring legacy of slavery and the resilience of the human spirit in the face of oppression.

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