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"The Strangest Freaks of Despotism": Queer Sexuality in Antebellum African American Slave Narratives

In a well-known passage from Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* the elderly ex-slab Nanny explains to Janie, her adolescent and newly sexually awakened granddaughter, the plight of African American women and families under slavery. She emphasizes the necessary, corrective force of sexual repression within nascent free-black communities. Nanny wants Janie to understand why the benefits of Janie’s financially stable, virtually asexual marriage to a man three times her age outweigh the prospects of a romantic union and sexual gratification with a man Janie likes. Nanny tells Janie that “us colored folks is bran-ches without roots and that makes things come around in queer ways” (16). What Nanny’s pronouncement reveals is that slavery had the effect of corrupting and contorting the most basic familial relationships. Not only did the institution deny slaves basic claims to familial, spousal, and hereditary bonds, insidiously it also assaulted their sexuality, robbing them of the basic rights of bodily autonomy and sexual choice. Through Nanny, Hurston describes this violating, soul-shattering feature of slavery and its cumulative generational effects on black identity formation even after slavery’s formal abolition is “queer.”

This essay reads literary renderings of black enslavement as founding articulations of a plausible connection between the institutionalization of sexual violence and racial subordination in slavery and modern theories of sexual difference. Tracing certain modern epistemologies of sexuality to the era before the late nineteenth century—their acknowledged moment of formal entrance into the ideological order—I suggest that representations of sexual perversity under conditions of enslavement have contributed to notions of sexual alterity and to the ideologies by which aberrant sexual practices were named, domesticated, and policed in the first decades of the twentieth century. Many scholars, including Lisa Duggan, Siobhan Somerville, and Sander Gilman, note that the development of discrete sexual categories in the late nineteenth century coincided with the discursive and legislative deployment of racial theories to support coercive regimes of race-based social stratification between black and white citizens at the turn of the twentieth century. Discourses of racial and sexual pathology contributed significantly to juridical measures (like legal segregation) and acts of racial terrorism (like lynching) that prevented Black Americans from accessing the full entitlements of citizenship after slavery’s formal end. Here I show that the era, institution, and literary representation of slavery helped to shape emergent models of sexual difference. The entwinement of violent racial separatism, sexual regulation, and the discursive production of bodily difference that characterizes the late nineteenth

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century may be usefully traced back to the institutional patterns of slavery and to the theories of black inferiority promoted by its proponents and practitioners.

This paper reads Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* to analyze the interrelation of sexuality, race, identity, and social order in the middle of the nineteenth century. As canonical exemplars of the slave narrative form, Douglass’s *Narrative* and Jacobs’s *Incidents* not only evidence the material history of slavery but also manifest the power of literature to shape the cultural construction of identity, fantasy, and ideology. That the written testimonies of Douglass and Jacobs grapple at all with the relation of nonheteronormative sexual practices to (sexual and racial) identity formation suggests that we may productively extend modern theorizations of sexual identity to an earlier historical moment and locate them, at least partially, in the sexual deviance and sexual violence of the slave plantation. This paper contends, then, that the brutal enslavement of black people, their legal definition as three-fifths human, and the social, economic, and legislative practices of slavery helped to institute not only whiteness but the very notions of the person, the citizen, the normal, and the heterosexual as well. Despite the importance of late 19th-century medical and legal discourses, which founded theories of sexual perversion and its punitive consequences, racial slavery provided the background—and the testing ground—for the emergence and articulation of those theories.

The specific linkage of homosexuality and blackness in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries can be traced to the obfuscation, or obliteration, of gender roles in slavery with regard to enslaved persons; it can also be traced to the widely held belief by Europeans that black sexuality in Africa was so libidinous, so unregulated, so wanton that not only did African men keep as many wives as they wanted but there existed as well “men in women’s apparel, whom they [kept] among their wives.” As historians Winthrop Jordan and George Frederickson have noted, European beliefs about black sexuality developed out of their first contact with Africans in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Upon arriving on African shores and encountering Africans who wore clothing befitting the hot climate and who practiced polygamy, Europeans concluded that Africans were sexual savages who had not undergone the disciplining regulation that civilization entails. These ideas were further promulgated by scientific investigations in the nineteenth century that alleged that black people had abnormally large genitals and that the size and shape of their genitalia predetermined illicit sexual propensities. While it would oversimplify the case to suggest that homosexuality encompasses all forms of sexual deviance, the specific resonance of homosexuality within blackness can be traced, in part, to the belief in slavery that, as descendents of Ham, black people were doomed to generational enslavement precisely for the historic crimes of incest and homosexuality. The “unrestrained” sexuality of black people was thought to extend beyond promiscuous heterosexuality, by which I mean a rapacious sexual appetite for the appropriate objects of sexual desire (members of the opposite sex but the same racial group), to include sexual violence, interracial wanting, bestiality, and homosexuality. In other words, racial blackness was believed (throughout the slave era and since) to evince, and to engender in others, an entire range of sexual perversities.

Despite the mediated production of slave narratives and their conformity to generic conventions and audience expectations, slave narratives remain useful sources of data on the internal operations of slavery and its harrowing personal and communal effects. Noting that slave narratives document the inner workings of slavery in ways that
the official records do not, I utilize slave narratives for their dual function as both historical document and literary genre. To engage theories, as well as the history, of the production of sexuality, this essay emphasizes the ways in which two slave narratives that have amassed significant cultural capital authorize a particular set of historical race relations and embody/influence sexual ideology. My aim is to demonstrate that complex figurations of eroticism and domination narrativized in canonical slave testimonies mark an emerging representational structure that may be traced in modern epistemologies of racial and sexual identity. I read pivotal scenes in Douglass’s Narrative and Jacobs’s Incidents to illustrate the ways in which literary constructions of sexuality function as tropes, both politically and imaginatively, to reveal heinous institutional practices within slavery and to decry its personal abuses. As the experiences of human bodies are so intimately connected to individual psyches and to the life of communities, the accounts that slaves provided about the myriad ways in which their bodies were hideously and repeatedly violated became apt metaphors for revealing the gruesome and violent nature of American slavery itself.

I begin by exploring the historical and representational processes by which slaves came to embody various forms of sexual deviance. I read Douglass’s Narrative to illustrate the overall linkage between enslavement and sexual criminality. Exposing domination and same-sex eroticism as the undeclared basis for heterosexuality and sexual normalization in both enslavement and in developing theories of sexual inversion, my paper moves into the analysis of a much overlooked scene in Jacobs’s Incidents—one in which a male slave, Luke, undergoes an extended period of sexual abuse by his male master. In reading selections from Douglass’s Narrative and Jacobs’s Incidents, my aim is ultimately to point to the ways in which authors of slave narratives acknowledged the notion that sexual criminality was a racial characteristic but subverted this notion by exposing the sexual perversity not of enslaved black people but of white slave-owners.

Much recent scholarship in sexuality studies has tended to treat the late nineteenth century as the critical juncture at which sexual definitions emerged, coalescing in the oppositional figures of the homosexual and the heterosexual. Michel Foucault, arguably the most influential theorist on the cultural production of sexualities, suggests that though there had existed in the West religious, economic, judicial, and medical methods for tracking, categorizing, and punishing non-(re)productive sexualities since the eighteenth century, it was in the late nineteenth century that “peripheral sexualities entailed an incorporation of perversions and a new specification of individuals” (42-43). Medical, pedagogical, psychoanalytic, and judicial discourses around sexuality proliferated in this era, bringing with them new modes of naming and classifying individuals according to their illicit sexual tastes and behaviors. People whose sexual inclinations fell outside of the heteronormative model were now identified as, for example, auto-mono-sexualists, pedophiles, and homosexuals. These identities were named, and thereby invented, in the late nineteenth century. No longer were sexual perversities things one engaged in; they became the criteria for determining what one was.

Reflecting on the ways in which legal segregation and spectacle lynching helped to solidify sexual distinctions at the turn into the twentieth century, Siobhan Somerville asserts in Queering the Color Line that “questions of race—in particular the formation of notions of ‘whiteness’ and ‘blackness’—must be understood as a crucial
part of the history and representation of sexual formations, including lesbian and gay identity and compulsory heterosexuality in the United States” (5). Alluding to the importance of scientific racism to grounding models of sexual difference, David Halperin describes: “All scientific inquiries into the aetiology of sexual orientation . . . spring from a more or less implicit theory of sexual races, from the notion that there exist broad general divisions between types of human beings corresponding, respectively, to those who make a homosexual and those who make a heterosexual sexual object choice” (50). Halperin proposes that the rac(i)alist roots of sexual definitions must be uncovered: “When the sexual racism underlying such inquiries is more plainly exposed, their rationale will suffer proportionately” (50). Halperin proposes that sexual ideologies function, like racial theories, to classify individuals for the purpose of organizing the social sphere. He also reveals that sexuality determines many beliefs about different races. At the turn into the twentieth century, beliefs about the deviant and excessive sexuality of black people led to myths of the black male rapist, to Jim Crow legislation, and to lynching as the punishment for black men who supposedly raped white women. Prohibitions against interracial marriage and on homosexuality supported the ascendency of whiteness (and the propagation of white generations) at the precise moment of the nation’s reunification after the Civil War, westward expansion, increased immigration of non-white peoples into the US, and the disfranchisement of African Americans. Compulsory heterosexuality in the late nineteenth century helped to shore up whiteness assaulted by the increased presence of non-white peoples in the national polis at the level of putative parity.

Of course, sexual practices on the slave plantation and, specifically, sexual violence—understood not only as a form of sexual deviance but central to the very definition of it—established whiteness as the requisite racial category for heteronormative qualification even before slavery’s formal end. The distinction between black and white women on the plantation grounded heteronormativity and secured its association with whiteness and with capitalist accumulation. Ideologies of white womanhood were articulable and meaningful only in relation to slave women’s experience: forced physical labor, “natal alienation,” reproductive exploitation, necessary dependence on extra-familial networks, enforced prostitution, and enslavement. The differential positions held by black and white women were essential to plantation structure and economy because they determined the heritage and inheritance of all children born on the plantation. As a sexual imperative based on proper sexual object choice, heteronormativity outlawed interracial sexuality between white women and black men, and it assigned white women the responsibility of reproducing in monogamous marriages white heirs or more white masters. Hazel Carby posits that the legislation that a slave followed the condition of his or her mother “necessitated the raising of protective barriers, ideological and institutional, around the form of the white mother whose progeny were heirs to the economic, social, and political interests in the maintenance of the slave system” (31). Under the regime of slavery, the racial category of the mother determined the status of the child: children of white women were born to the master race, children born to slave women became the enslaved. The routine rape of black women increased the wealth of slave owners.
and solidified an enduring association of forbidden sexuality, sexual violence, and blackness.

I turn now to Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, to examine an initial black literary rendering of the interrelation of race, rape, and identity under the regime of slavery. Douglass’s 1845 narrative has been widely regarded as the archetypal antebellum slave narrative, representing with the eloquent authority of an intelligent and defiant ex-slave the innumerable atrocities that characterized slave life as well as the journey slaves had to undertake in the path to freedom. Analyzing the opening of Douglass’s narrative, Saidiya Hartman states, “The passage through the blood-stained gate is the inaugural moment in the formation of the enslaved. In this regard it is the primal scene” (3, italics added). Hartman’s comments refer specifically to the beating of Aunt Hester, which concludes Douglass’s first chapter. Hartman suggests that Douglass’s representation of the physical torture of slaves not only reveals the brute, coercive force of slavery but demonstrates also the extent to which slave status was secured and made legible through susceptibility to that force. Douglass writes:

I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom [the master] used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose... I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but I well remember it. It struck me with awful force. It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. (397)

According to Hartman, the “blood-stained gate” through which Douglass and other black people passed in order to become slaves was the whipping post (at once phallic and vaginal). As a metaphor for female genitalia ravaged by violence and childbirth, “the blood-stained gate” refers also to the institutional pattern of slave rape. It was not simply the whipping post but the violence, the illegitimacy, and the inchoateness of rape that produced the body, the status, and the (non)identity of the slave.

That Aunt Hester’s beating is not just a violent whipping but also a forced penetration is made evident in the details that Douglass provides about the first beating he witnessed. Douglass underscores Aunt Hester’s beauty when he calls her “a woman of noble form, and of graceful proportions, having very few equals, and fewer superiors, in personal appearance, among the colored or white women of our neighborhood” (398). Douglass informs us that the offense for which Aunt Hester is savagely beaten is her alleged romantic involvement with a male slave named Ned Kelly. After the master discovered her in Ned Kelly’s company, Douglass writes,

he took her into the kitchen, and stripped her from neck to waist, leaving her neck, shoulders, and back, entirely naked. He then told her to cross her hands, calling her at the same time a d—d b—h. After crossing her hands, he tied them with a strong rope, and led her to a stool under a large hook in the joist, put in for the purpose. He made her get upon the stool, and tied her hands to the hook. She now stood fair for his infernal purpose. Her arms were stretched up at their full length, so that she stood upon the ends of her toes. (398)

Key words signal the sexual underpinnings of the gruesome exchange. Aunt Hester stands “fair for [the master’s] infernal purpose.” She is, in other words, vulnerable and defenseless against his sexual assault. Douglass continues, “He then said to her, ‘Now, you d—d b—h, I’ll learn you how to disobey my orders!’ and after rolling up his sleeves, he commenced to lay on the heavy cowskin, and soon the warm, red blood (amid heart-rending shrieks from her, and horrid oaths from him) came dripping to the floor” (398). The beating performs the stan-
standard disciplinary function of breaking the slave's will through humiliation and torture. The repeated blows to Aunt Hester's body (in this beating and in subsequent ones) cause her to become disfigured in a way intended to lessen her desirability to other men and, ultimately, to destroy her confidence as an agent in her own (sexual) life. The master calls Aunt Hester debased names that intimate sexual familiarity and coercion. His rolling up his sleeves demonstrates the need for some disrobing to perform his violent act as well as the brutal force he exerted while engaged in it. The cowskin serves as a phallic replacement, and Aunt Hester's bleeding and shrieking evidence the terrible loss of both sexual purity and her sexual choice in the matter. As Douglass lost his mother to her daily toil as a slave and her consequent early death, Aunt Hester is a main source of maternal nurturance for him and serves in this instance as a metonymic substitute for his biological mother. The primal scene for individuals is their parents' copulation, imagined by the on-looking child as a violent struggle in which the mother is abused by the father. For Douglass, the primal scene is one of actual physical and sexual violence. In the scene depicting Aunt Hester, Douglass witnesses, and conjures for his readers, his own originary moment: the interracial rape of which he was born.

Thus, the relation of interracial rape to the formation of the slave is for Douglass threefold. First, widespread institutional rape necessitated matrilineal genealogies. Second, offending fathers were absent and did not bestow social legitimacy or a proper legacy to their offspring. Third, brute force and sexual violence not only characterized slave life but brought it literally into being. As such, the slave was not simply the product of sexual criminality but its very incarnation.

The absence and anonymity of Douglass's father affirms his birth not into human community but into chattel slavery. In tracing his genealogy, Douglass laments that he knows neither his date of birth nor the identity of his father. Noting that white children on the plantation knew their birthdays, Douglass acknowledges that the circumstances surrounding a person's birth announce her membership in a specific social network and in the human family in general. The circumstances of Douglass's birth, specifically what is not known about it, make him and, he believes, all slaves akin to horses and other chattel on the plantation. "The whisper that my master was my father, may or may not be true," Douglass declares. "and . . . 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; for by this cunning arrangement, the slaveholder, in cases not a few, sustains to his slaves the double relation of master and father" (396).

Thus Douglass proclaims slavery a matrilineal system. It was the centrality of black women to establishing kinship and heritage that determined Douglass's status—inhuman, illegitimate, slave. Hortense Spillers describes the enslaved black woman as the "principal point of passage between the human and the non-human world. Her issue became the focus of a cunning difference—visually, psychologically, ontologically—as the route by which the dominant modes decided the distinction between the self and 'other' " (White, Black 155). Early 19th-century US slaveholding culture was racist and patriarchal. Traceable heritage and the inheritance of family name, status, property, wealth, and citizenship were determined by white fathers. Douglass decries his position as a male child born to a white father, and therefore rightful heir to wealth, property, and citizenship, but robbed
of his just inheritance because he was born to a black woman whose status decided his own. Finally, Douglass is outraged that he, as were the overwhelming number of slaves, was conceived through the gruesome ritual of rape. The violence that produced black bodies in slavery not only typified their lives under its regime but also ousted them from the domain of human and intelligible beings, of those capable of regulation and worthy of recognition in an established social schema. Strict heterosexuality in the context of monogamous marriage was reserved for members of the master class. Early 19th-century US sexual mores and plantation sexual practices supported the social order of slavery.

Since the seventeenth century, US chattel slavery has been popularly referred to as “the peculiar institution.” While I will not go so far as to posit that “peculiar” in this designation connotes all that is meant by “queer” as it is used in the current academic/activist lexicon to refer to non-heteronormative sexuality and identity, I do think it is important to recognize the synonymy of these two terms, to grasp fully what the designation “peculiar” reveals about the sexual arrangements, and thereby the larger social infrastructure, of the institution. On the one hand, slavery’s peculiarity was directly related to its continuance in the South in the mid-nineteenth century after it had been abolished in most northern states. It was an odd, distinctive, regional, socio-economic system that was increasingly problematic to the Union as a whole in moral and political terms. It was also a system whose internal operations were increasingly denied or veiled by those who benefited from its propagation. On the other hand, slavery was peculiar in a sense more directly associated with the economies of desire and sexuality in that it provided a cover under which aberrant sexuality flourished. Under slavery, nonconformist sexual attitudes and behaviors found flagrant expression unlike anywhere else in society. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the plantation and the slave quarter became the definitive locales for the practice and proliferation of outlaw sexual behaviors. The institution granted to all whites—slaveholders and non-slaveholders—the full-fledged legal right and unchecked personal authority to exploit, consume, and destroy the slave’s psyche and body in whatever ways they chose. This arrangement inevitably engendered, even as it concealed, all manner of sexual perversion.

Such scholars as Winthrop Jordan, George Frederickson, Angela Davis, and Robyn Wiegman have noted that the promulgation of the myth of the black male rapist is rooted in slavery as a phantasmal projection of the white male/master rapist. Jordan writes that “the image of the sexually aggressive Negro was rooted . . . firmly in deep strata of irrationality. For it is apparent that white men projected their own desires onto Negroes: their own passion for Negro women was not fully acceptable to society or the self and hence not readily admissible. Sexual desires could be effectively denied and the accompanying anxiety and guilt in some measure assuaged, however, by imputing them to others. It is not we, but others, who are guilty. It is not we who lust, but they” (151-52, italics added). Jordan goes on to describe the methods by which black men accused of raping white women were punished: with castration and/or execution. The criminality of sexual violence was conflated with interracial sex, as both were considered debased and inappropriate expressions of sexual desire. The castration of black men for rape and for desiring non-black women was an egregious and extreme result of white men’s projecting their interracial desires and sexual violence onto subjugated slaves. It is important to note that castration was also the punishment for “grave sexual offenses such as
sodomy, bestiality . . . [and] incest” in some states, such as Pennsylvania, and applied to free blacks and white men as well (Jordan 155). The deviance of sexual violence, interracial desire, and homoeroticism were linked in the cultural imagination not only because all were taboo sexual behaviors but also because all warranted the same judicial penalty: castration, itself a punitive act that produces the queer subjectivity it is designed to curb.

Early theories of homosexuality centered on sexual inversion, or malformed gender. Halperin, Jonathan Ned Katz, and other historians of sexuality trace the invention of the homosexual in the late nineteenth century to the model of the sexual invert, the person who, as Katz describes, “wore the clothes and hairstyle, undertook the work . . . performed the sexual acts and felt the emotions of the ‘other’ sex” (146). Halperin states that homosexuals were initially believed to be sexual inverts, people who pathologically “reversed, or inverted, their proper sex-roles by adapting a masculine or feminine style at variance with what was deemed natural and appropriate to their anatomical sex” (15-16). While racial slavery allowed for the full exploitation of black bodies in slavery in whatever gendered capacity, it simultaneously—and paradoxically—disallowed distinctions in gender among black people. Enslaved black men were feminized by virtue of their subjugation as slaves, the regularity with which many were castrated, and the denial of patriarchal and citizenship rights. Enslaved black women were masculinized by virtue of their back-breaking labor on par with black men and their being denied male protection and provision. Spillers describes the process of “ungendering” in slavery as rendering slaves “neuter-bound” (“Mama’s Baby” 474). The slave body was rendered “neuter” in that in spite of the slave’s anatomical referent, as a non-person, the slave did not register gender legibly, according to established paradigms of masculini-

ty or femininity. The conditions of enslavement and its obliteration of families disallowed enslaved men and women from fulfilling normative gender requirements and helped to create a class of people whose emblematization foreshadows the representational logic underwriting the figure of the sexual invert or the “sexually reversed” person in later decades.

More than simply a condition of black women’s experience under slavery, rape serves as a useful paradigm for assessing and describing the position and experience of black people in total under slavery’s brutal regime. As Katz describes the sexual invert’s participation in the sex acts of the putative other gender, Spillers refers to the “pansexual potential” of the slave that is caused by gender failure resulting from dehumanization in and enslavement (“Mama’s Baby” 474). Spillers’s formulation speaks not to slaves’ roaming and unspecified erotic urges but to their complete vulnerability to any number of invasions by both men and women of the master class; it comments on the comprehensive condition of black people in slavery as socially and sexually abject. In this way, Spillers corroborates Jordan, who summarizes adroitly, “Sexually, as well as in every other way, Negroes were utterly subordinated. White men extended their dominance over their Negroes to the bed, where the sex act itself served as a ritualistic enactment of the daily pattern of social dominance” (141). Spillers’s description of the slave’s “pansexual potential” alludes to rape as a significant event in the formation of the enslaved in that it situates slaves within relations of power along sexual, gendered, and racial lines. Abdul R. JanMohamed also describes this process. He writes: “Rape is simultaneously the metonymy of the process of oppressive racist control . . . and a metaphor for the construction of the racialized subject. Regardless of gender, the racialized subject is always already constructed as a ‘raped’ subject . . . . Rape thus sub-
sumes the totality of force relations on the racial border, which is in fact always a sexual border" (109). The vulnerability of all enslaved black persons to nearly every conceivable violation produced a collective “raped” subjectivity. Again, given that the first western theories of homosexuality centered on sexual inversion, or malformed gender, and given their association of blackness with sexual violence and victimhood, it is reasonable to assert that colonial representations of black men and women under conditions of enslavement have influenced configurations of (homo)sexual abjection in later decades.

Although critical discussions of Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl have tended to focus on Linda Brent’s sexuality and struggle for sexual autonomy, I read it here to illustrate the linkage of sexual abuse, homero- ticism, and racial dominance in the early nineteenth century. Jacobs indicted slavery for its total consumption and commodification of black bodies by representing sexual violence, whether threatened or actualized, as the strongest evidence of the destructive force of slavery on the individual, family, and wider community. She presents a sadomasochistic rendering of same-sex abuse to indicate the most profound, extreme, and damaging expression of the sexual deviance permeating slavery’s various patterns. The relationship between a slave named Luke and his owner qualifies as an instantiation of sadomasochistic, intra-gender abuse and reveals in general the entwinedness of desire and coercion that typifies the master-slave relationship. The master’s sadism is manifestly coextensive with the general practices of slavery. My invocation of masochism here is not meant to suggest that the slave derives pleasure from participating in the master’s sadistic performances but to refer to the textual representation of such performances. The slave, with whom the vulnerable and victimized slave girl narrator identifies, is debased and dominated both to satisfy a despotic master and to effect authorial desires. In other words, the slave’s masochistic relation to his master inheres within its textual representation; the masochistic payoff, belonging to the narrator, is not pleasure but exposure of the master’s sadism. With their focus, if not emphasis, on the underbelly of seemingly normal societal relations, slave narratives expose generally the dark and hidden side of established 19th-century domestic and cultural norms. Sadomasochism, as represented in Incidents, exposes the psychological orientation and erotic underpinnings of the peculiar institution itself.

The story about Luke and his master demonstrates the obfuscation, if not complete undoing, of both sexual and gender normalcy under slavery. The account comes at the end of the narrative after both Luke and Linda have escaped to the North. Linda remembers Luke as a particularly degraded figure and, before she realizes that he, too, has managed an escape from slavery, laments at having left him there. She recalls, “I was somewhat acquainted with a slave named Luke, who belonged to a wealthy man in our vicinity. His master died leaving a son and daughter heirs to his large fortune. In the division of slaves, Luke was included in the son’s portion. The young man became prey to the vices growing out of the ‘patriarchal institution’” (215-16). That Luke is given as property to the son establishes the context for homosexuality and dominance, as dominance is passed on as white male inheritance. The vice to which this passage alludes is the young master’s homosexuality which, it is important to note, is not treated here as sexual orientation or as an identity that is natural to him. Instead, the master’s homosexual inclinations are attributed to the extreme wealth of his family and the unbounded freedom of white masculine privilege. It is the patriarchal...
institution, with its emphasis on the
master’s entitlement and his unfettered
control over the bodies of others that
Jacobs holds responsible for the mas-
ter’s homoerotic desires and behaviors.
For her, the master is prey to an institu-
tion that corrupts both its victims and
its benefactors.

In her representations of same-sex
abuse, Jacobs alludes to the protection,
if not advantage, that slavery provided
masters and mistresses who were by
culturally repressive standards sexual
outlaws, or by contemporary defini-
tions non-heterosexuals. She writes:

. . . when [the young master] went
north to complete his education, he
carried his vices with him. He was
brought home deprived of the use of
his limbs, by excessive dissipation.
Luke was appointed to wait upon his
bed-ridden master, whose despotic
habits were greatly increased by exas-
peration at his own helplessness. He
kept a cowhide beside him, and, for
the most trivial occurrence would
order his attendant to bear his back,
and kneel beside the couch, while he
whipped him till his strength was
exhausted. Sometimes he was not
allowed to wear anything but his shirt
in order to be in readiness to be
flogged. (216)

Presumably a venereal disease, or
some other physical manifestation of
the young master’s sexual activity, is
responsible for his severe illness and
bodily weakness, which serve here as
signifiers of his aberrant sexuality.
Because the slave’s body was already
envisioned fundamentally as an instru-
ment for her owner’s profit-making
and pleasure-seeking, the forms of
seeking pleasure and making money
from the bodies of slaves were exempt
from either cultural sanctions or state
control. As the master weakens, he
continues to fulfill his sexual urges and
to express his frustrations through
sadistic beatings and sexual invasions
of Luke. As in Douglass’s depiction of
the beating of Aunt Hester, the
cowhide functions as a phallic replace-
ment, as an instrument for inflicting
punishment and sexual torture. The
sex act underlying the beatings is
revealed in Luke’s having to undress
and kneel to receive his punishment, as
well as his having to spend days
unclothed beneath the waist. Although
his back is the purported site of his
whippings, Luke is allowed to wear a
shirt but is made to go around with his
lower parts exposed to receive his mas-
ter’s additional punishment.

Here, as in general, sadomasochism
characterizes and animates the master-slave relationship. Like
sadomasochism, the slave-master rela-
tionship is performative in two senses:
one, in the theatrical sense because it
requires contrivance: the donning of
particular, unfitted, artificial, and
polarized master-slave roles. Through
technologies of terror and torture,
slaves learned to adopt postures of
passivity, and even complicity, in ritu-
als designed to showcase the master’s
dominance. The slave-master relation-
ship is also performative in the
Austenian sense in that it is initiated,
made intelligible, and upheld through
repeated, ritual enactments of its script
and spectacle.15 If Luke resisted his
treatment at all, “the town constable
was sent for to execute the punish-
ment” (216). The town constable is not
only stronger, and presumably more
virile, but as representative of the state
and of the law, his participation in
Luke’s torture sanctions it. This rein-
forcement holds even though the sexu-
al arrangement between Luke and his
master—and ultimately the constable,
too—falls outside of the domain of
legitimate social interactions. The con-
stable’s participation in Luke’s torture
also dramatizes white male fraternity
in an instance of homosocial bonding
around the shared brutalization and
symbolic castration of the male slave.16
In this way, it anticipates the post-
Reconstruction practice of lynching
black men in large communal specta-
cles to shore up white masculinity after
it had been assailed by black men’s
enfranchisement.

The account of Luke’s abuse at the
hands of his master reveals the cultural
practices and psychic maneuvers by
which domination created and carried on in slavery helped to shape white American identity in the US. As the young master weakens, he depends on sadomasochistic ritual to establish his potency and secure his identity. Jacobs writes:

The fact that [the young master] was entirely dependent on Luke’s care, and was obliged to be tended like an infant, instead of inspiring any gratitude or compassion towards his poor slave, seemed only to increase his irritability and cruelty. As he lay there on his bed, a mere wreck of manhood, he took into his head the strangest freaks of despotism; and if Luke hesitated to submit to his orders, the constable was immediately sent for. Some of these freaks were of a nature too filthy to be repeated. When I fled the house of bondage, I left poor Luke still chained to the bed of this cruel and disgusting wretch. (216)

The additional details of Luke’s sexual bondage, evidenced by a conceivably literal chain to his master’s bed, expose further the extent to which ritual sadomasochistic performance organized the master-slave relationship. This domination includes the sexual dimension, of course, but refers ultimately to the process of identity formation wherein the master comes to exist as a vital, cohesive, legitimated subject by virtue of his repeated negations and violations of the slave’s body and autonomy. As the young master’s condition deteriorates and he becomes completely dependent on Luke for care, he becomes even more brutal. The young master’s dependence on Luke threatens to rob him of his identity as man and master because his literal survival depends on Luke’s caring for him as if he were an infant, presumably feeding, bathing, clothing him, and keeping him otherwise comforted. “A mere wreck of manhood,” the young master asserts himself through his brutality and his sexuality.

Jacobs reports that Luke is neutered, or symbolically castrated, by virtue of his subjugation as a slave, his feminized/maternal duties to his master, and his master’s sexual abuse. Thus, the young master’s sexual invasions of Luke do not indict the young master of sexual criminality; instead, by instantiating his complete possession and consumption of his (affectively gender-neutral) slave—according to his personal and property rights—they corroborate his status as master. As the young master’s physical abilities wane, he requires more overt sexual performances by Luke so that he can be satiated both physically and psychologically. Through the young master’s rigorous disavowal of his dependence on and desire for his male slave—facilitated by the predominant cultural practice of denying dependence and projecting illicit desires onto black bodies—Luke’s own body becomes the site and sign of his master’s (homo)sexuality.

In her work on sadomasochism, Jessica Benjamin asserts that sadomasochism “replicates quite faithfully the themes of the master-slave relationship. Here subjugation takes the form of transgressing against the other’s body, violating his physical boundaries” (55). This abuse, she argues, is necessary for the master to experience both the separation (or differentiation) and the recognition that are so central to subjective development. The master’s self—defined always against a separate, subjugated other—is formed, legitimated, made autonomous and powerful through direct (physical and sexual) domination of that other. For this process to work and to persist (in one instance and certainly gener-ationally as in slavery) new levels of resistance had to be discovered in the slave for the purpose of surmounting them. Thus, as the escalating brutality of the young master’s abuse indicates, the mechanisms of torture, bodily exposure, excessive toil, and requisite compliance that were standard features of slavery worked to create over centuries not only a population of slaves but the master class as well.

Even though Jacobs locates her most direct and extreme portrayal of sexual abuse in a male, same-sex relationship, she speaks to the general,
identity-enabling character of master-slave relations, regardless of gender. As Joan Dayan states eloquently, “Being a master or mistress became so addictive a pleasure that the slave as ultimate possession became a necessary part of the master’s or mistress’s identity” (192, italics added). The subjection of black bodies in slavery and the imputation of social and sexual deviance onto black persons supported the development of whiteness and solidified heteronormativity as one of its main features. In other words, throughout the nineteenth century both whiteness and heterosexuality were conceived, constituted, and stabilized through their opposition to and haunting by the specter of the black sexual deviant.

Finally, the homosexual nature of Luke’s s/m bondage does not only function in Incidents to lessen the risk of exposure for black women (protecting the frail possibility of virtuousness on their parts), but also calls attention to the illegitimacy of master-slave relations overall. The story of Luke comes after Linda has escaped slavery in a chapter called “The Fugitive Slave Law.” It is offered as a critique of slavery, of racial prejudice throughout the entire country, and of the Fugitive Slave Law that had the effect of nationalizing slavery. Luke becomes representative of all who were still in bondage. And the diseased and decaying body of Luke’s master functions as a metaphor for the institution itself. The depiction of both slave and master underscores Jacobs’s belief that slavery was, in the mid-nineteenth century, an antiquated and perverse social system.

Literary constructions of deviant sexuality function in slave testimonies both to reveal painfully private aspects of slave experience and to provide a fitting metaphor of the experience and impact of institutional slavery. Sexual violence, with its elements of violation, bodily dispossession, psychic torture, and long-lived trauma, offers an apt reflection for what it felt like to be enslaved at all. Further, by exposing the institutional practices and psychic structures that enabled the debasement of the black slave and the development of the white master-subject, slave narratives reveal how concepts of personhood, citizenship, and normality emerged in the US in concert with stringent oppression of a population that was denied access to those very categories. Both Douglass’s Narrative and Jacobs’s Incidents work to expose the grand contradiction of the simultaneity of European Enlightenment and modernization and the base, barbaric social and labor systems that were imported from antiquity to support economic growth and (white) identity formation in the New World.

Notes

1. Patterson describes the disregard that masters had for slave unions and family units as a condition of slavery itself. The inability to determine or claim kinship networks was part and parcel of the condition of enslavement. Patterson writes that in “slaveholding societies slave couples could be and were forcibly separated and the consensual wives of slaves were obliged to submit sexually to their masters; slaves had no custodial claims or powers over their children, and children inherited no claims or obligations to their parents” (6).

2. For a thoughtful, deft explanation of the historical and theoretical intersections of racial and sexual ideologies, see the introductory and first chapters of Somerville. Gilman provides a useful record of medical journals that featured studies of black bodies to develop gendered theories of sexual deviance. Finally, for a cogent reading of the uses of turn-of-the-twentieth racial violence to found sexual categorizations, see Duggan.

3. A common feature of slave narratives is their depiction of the sexual depravity of slave-masters. For example, despite grappling with their inability to fulfill 19th-century ideals of womanhood as a result of their sexual and reproductive exploitation, such well-known slave narrators as Mary Prince and Louisa Piquet allude to the rampant and violent sexual abuse on the plantation in order to decry the widespread moral corruption of slavery. In this essay I read in depth specifically Douglass’s and Jacobs’s narratives to illustrate a mid-19th-century connection between enslavement, sexual criminal-
ity, and the later codification of homosexuality. Arguably, Douglass’s and Jacobs’s narratives, more than others, embody and influence these constructions/connections.  

4. Jordan takes this quote from the travel narrative of an Englishman writing about Africa in the early 17th-century (33). Many European explorers recorded their impressions of Africans and commented on their complexions, their relative bodily exposure, and their marriage customs to suggest that Africans were lewd and licentious. See White over Black for additional textual references.  

5. A number of historians of sexuality have written thorough accounts of how scientific racism and the practice of comparative anatomy, specifically in studies of genitals and women’s buttocks, helped to produce definitions of sexual difference according to a racial axis. Excellent sources for this information, particularly its theoretical origins in polygenesis during slavery, are Wiegman and Stepani.  

6. I am referring to the story of Ham, Genesis 9: 22-9:25, that proponents of slavery cited to justify embodied black slavery. It is important also to note that portrayals of black sexual degeneracy have served the hierarchical ordering of the races, culminating in white supremacy, and have been used to justify enslavement, the rape of black women, and the lynching of black men.  

7. By referencing the propagation of white generations, I refer to anti-miscegenation laws that originated as slave codes meant to regulate the sexual intermingling of black men and white women and to ensure the safe transfer of wealth, citizenship, and property to whites only. Similarly, the ban on homosexuality originated in statutes against sodomy and to prevent the proliferation of non-reproductive sexual practices in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Prohibitions on same-sex and interracial desire support the evolution and multiplication of the white family as both the basic unit of capitalist acquisition and as a microcosm of the US. Both interracial sexuality and homosexuality were believed to be sexual deviations characterized by improper sexual object choice, whether racial or gendered.  

8. In writing that sexual violence is a main feature in the characterization of sexual deviance, I refer to the association of sexual difference as criminality as in, for example, Young-Bruehl’s explanation that, “Homosexuals were, according to sexological consensus, abnormal beings, perverts, deviants whose acts were criminal” (29, italics added). In addition, I refer to the belief that sexual excesses (legible on the body in, for example, the oversized clitoris of the lesbian and the black woman or the large penis of the black male rapist) revealed a propensity for violent activities and social degeneracy. Sexual deviance emerged under the exclusive purview of medicine and psychology and also under the jurisdiction of the courts where laws were made to prevent “sodomy” and “miscegenation,” among other things, and to punish instances of them.  

9. Patterson coins the term natal alienation to describe the process by which slaves were barred from meaningful connections to both forebears and descendents. Slaves were, thereby, deprived of those essential connections and personal histories out of which identities are formed and individuals emerge as recognizable entities in the social body.  

10. For more on this, see Wald and Sundquist. Sundquist writes, “Douglass could not escape the conclusion that he was born of an act . . . that had no legal sanction, gave him no name or inheritance, and stripped him of the genealogical property of manhood” (94). Although he does not go so far as to suggest that Douglass was conceived in an act of rape, Sundquist does agree that the circumstances of Douglass’s birth in slavery sufficiently render him an unintelligible being, a non-person in effect.  

11. The Oxford English Dictionary defines peculiar as both adjective and noun. As an adjective, peculiar denotes specificity and unorthodoxy. As a noun, it denotes property or possession. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, mistresses and concubines were commonly referred to as “peculiars,” connoting their status as sexual property that existed in uneasy relation to dominant sexual norms. Extending this logic, we may understand slaves as their masters’ “peculiars.”  

12. I must reiterate that what I am analyzing here is Jacobs’s strategic use of same-sex sexual abuse to represent institutional slavery as morally bankrupt and perverse. The point of my work in this paper is not to malign sexual difference or to promote homophobia, even as I discuss the same-sex abuse of slaves by white slave-owners and overseers. This study is not guided by a moral commitment to heterosexual hegemony or to a version of African American social and political advancement that requires adherence to established cultural norms or prescriptive modes of being, sexual or otherwise. Quite the opposite: I am committed to unpacking the taken-for-granted assumptions that ground cultural norms and the social hierarchies that they uphold in order to discover routes to fairness—and freedom—that lie beyond these hierarchies. I proceed here with the understanding that racial and sexual ideologies are principal sources of support for asymmetric social structures that have disastrous psychic and social costs for those who live at the bottom. And I maintain that a productive site for beginning to unravel these ideologies is where they converge: in the figure of the black person.
13. Jacobs first references the sexual abuse of male slaves by masters and overseers earlier in the narrative in her discussion of the rampant sexual abuse of young slave girls. Jacobs laments, "No pen can give adequate description to the all-pervading corruption produced by slavery" (55). She decries the absolute authority that masters and overseers claimed over the sexual and reproductive lives of enslaved women and girls, and she asserts that "in some cases they exercise the same authority over the men slaves" (55).

14. The possibility of pleasure in pain is not precluded in the slave context, although to emphasize it is beyond the scope of my purpose in reading Jacobs’s Incidents here. For more on the ways in which contractual sadomasochistic performance can relieve painful associations between the trauma of sexual violence, social practices of domination, and the resultant compromise of felt desire, see Hart.

15. Austinian here refers to J. L. Austin and his theorizations about the performative potential of linguistic structures. See How to Do Things with Words.

16. For a cogent and detailed discussion of white male fraternity and its relation to sexuality and the 19th-century homosocial order obtaining in white male privilege, see Sedgwick. Between Men. For an analysis of the same in the American colonial period, Nelson.

Works Cited


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