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Adriana Merly Farias

Female slave narratives: consistency and permanence – a study of two texts from the XIXth and XXth centuries

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Dissertação apresentada, como requisito parcial para obtenção do título de Mestre, ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras da Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. Área de concentração: Literaturas de Língua Inglesa.

Orientadora: Prof[a]. Dra. Maria Aparecida F. de Andrade Salgueiro

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Banca Examinadora:

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Profª. Dra. Maria Aparecida F. de Andrade Salgueiro (Orientadora)
Instituto de Letras da UERJ

_____

Profª. Dra. Lucia De La Roque Rodriguez
Instituto de Letras da UERJ

_____

Prof. Dr. Luiz Carlos Moreira Rocha
Universidade Federal de Viçosa

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Redemption Song

Old pirates, yes, they rob I;
Sold I to the merchant ships,
Minutes after they took I
From the bottomless pit.
But my hand was made strong
By the 'and of the Almighty.
We forward in this generation
Triumphantly.
(...)

Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery;
None but ourselves can free our minds.
Have no fear for atomic energy,
'Cause none of them can stop the time.
How long shall they kill our prophets,
While we stand aside and look? Ooh!
Some say it's just a part of it:
We've got to fulfil de book.

Bob Marley

RESUMO

FARIAS, Adriana Merly. *Female slave narratives:* consistency and permanence: a study of two texts from the XIXth and XXth centuries. 2012. 87 f. Dissertação (Mestrado em Literaturas de Língua Inglesa) – Instituto de Letras, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, 2012.

Esta dissertação tem por objetivo investigar o papel das "slave narratives" como poderoso gênero literário na denúncia da escravidão africana e na representação do homem negro e da mulher negra nos séculos dezoito e dezenove. Este trabalho também se propõe a investigar o papel das "neo-slave narratives" no estudo do passado e a representação da identidade negra no século vinte. Ambos os gêneros desafiam seus tempos presentes ao discutirem questões de etnia e subjugação humana, em uma abordagem crítica. Em *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861)*, Harriet Jacobs narra sua experiência na escravidão, deixando um importante legado não somente para a História mas também para a Literatura Afro-Americana. Em *Dessa Rose (1986)*, Sherley Anne Williams, revisa o passado para resgatar a memória da escravidão e reescrever a história para examinar seu tempo presente. Além disso, as duas autoras apresentam questões de gênero, levantando questões feministas em suas obras.

Palavras-chave: Literatura Afro-Americana. Gênero. Identidade negra.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation aims to investigate the role of slave narratives as a powerful literary genre in the denouncement of African slavery and in the representation of the black man/woman in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It also aims to analyze the role of neo-slave narratives in the revision of the past and the representation of black identity in the twentieth-century. Both genres challenge their present times by discussing issues of ethnicity and human bondage through a critical approach. In *Incidents in the Life of s Slave Girl (1861),* Harriet Jacobs narrates her experience in slavery, leaving an important legacy not only to History but also to African-American Literature. In *Dessa Rose (1986),* Sherley Anne Williams revises the past in order to recover slavery memory and rewrite history to examine her present time. Besides, these two authors present matters of gender, bringing feminist issues in their works.

Keywords: African-American literature. Gender. Black identity.

SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

I would like to share with the reader my motivations to write this work. Firstly, as a student of Letters, I had the privilege to be in contact with brilliant authors of the Literary tradition, like Chaucer, Hawthorne, Dickens, among others. In fact, the literary references I had during my Undergraduation Course came essentially from the Western canon. However, when I began my Graduation studies at Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro-UERJ, I was introduced to a different realm: the world of the "ex-centric", of the "others", of the non-canonical. Needless to say, the canonical texts were vital not only to my academic formation but also, and mainly, to my personal growth. I am not exaggerating when I say that many canonical authors have contributed to shape the person I am today. Nonetheless, I felt I needed to enhance my horizons and the contact with the "protest" literature caused a great impact on me. I learned that there were other genius men and women who, despite their "marginalized" condition for the most different reasons, had the arduous task to build new concepts and mentalities.

The second reason is that I believe that Art, especially Literature, must be libertarian. The "protest" writings I have read showed me that Literature can be a great project of indictment and resistance. Obviously, not only the topic is important but also and principally the talent of the writer is crucial for a successful result. So, when I first heard of the existence of American *slave narratives*, I wondered how it had been possible for African-American slaves to produce literary works. It caused me not only surprise but also a certain sense of shame that, despite my degree in Letters, I had never imagined that such literary genre existed.

The course of "Especializacao" in English Language Literatures from UERJ gave me the opportunity to know unique autobiographers such as Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass, Mary Prince, Olaudah Equiano (also known as Gustavus Vassa), and Harriet Jacobs. I saw myself eager to investigate what slave narratives meant and how they contributed to American Literature.

As my line of research focuses on the voice and perspective of the "other" (exploring matters of gender, race and ethnicity), I thought it relevant to analyze the African slavery issue in my Dissertation, from the perspective of both a nineteenth and a twentieth-century slave narratives. The works I have selected to explore are Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, an autobiographical work published in 1861, and Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose*,

a historical novel about slavery published in 1986, written in the style of a slave narrative, incorporating elements from slave autobiographies written in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. My intention is to highlight the relevance of slave narratives as vehicle of self-portrayal and resistance literature, and how the matter remains alive in contemporaneity, through the neo-slave narratives.

In the first chapter, I will analyze the matter of representation of African slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. To start with, I will briefly comment on representation of black men and women through the European perspective, especially the justification of slavery based on stereotypes and the mistaken idea of "inferior" races. I will also discuss the representation of slavery carried out by white thinkers, that is, the dominant society. I will make brief considerations on *African-American Slavery as It Is* (1839), published and edited by Theodore Weld, and the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), written by Harriet Beecher Stowe, among others. The former is a collection of testimonies written by white abolitionists and slaveholders who described the routine of slaves. The latter is a fictional work based on the "reality" of American slaves, according to the author's perspective. In the second part of chapter I, I will exemplify some anti-slavery works produced by African-American autobiographers. I intend to contrast the two categories in order to analyze the question of representation of slavery, a regretful institution that became a remarkable theme in American Literature.

The male slave autobiographies I have selected for the analysis are *The Interesting Narrative of The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789) and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845). The former is a canonical autobiography fulfilled by this African intellectual of the eighteenth century, who certainly became source of inspiration for subsequent slave narrators. The latter is a classical autobiography written by an important African-American abolitionist and orator of the nineteenth century. In both works, I remark the authors' strategies of self-portrayal and the portrayal of slavery in order to denounce the system and question their so-called inferiority. I will show, for instance, Equiano's assertion of his African identity and the description of Eboe's (today, Nigeria's) tradition, as a way of praising his culture and exercise his memory. Similarly, Frederick Douglass challenges the boundaries of cultural imposition and shows not only literacy but also a great sense of individuality in his narrative. Female slave narratives could not be exempt from this analysis. Significant names such as Mary Prince and Elizabeth Keckley also illustrate the question of representation of slavery and

slaves as individuals. Although they produced fewer narratives than male autobiographers, their importance lies in the fact that, besides attacking the system as a whole, they exposed questions of gender in their narratives.

The question of authority is an important issue in the analysis of slave narratives. Firstly, I discuss the authority exerted by the dominant culture to represent the other. The representation (or misrepresentation) of African culture was an efficient strategy to justify the slavery system, since European explorers had the authority to define what was inferior and what was superior, establishing universal and unquestioned truths in the West. The misconception of biological, cultural and spiritual inferiority of Africans was, in fact, a powerful argument to strengthen the system. Nonetheless, the authority to represent the other was also practiced by anti-slavery intellectuals, who used their oral and written abilities to support the abolitionist movement. Nonetheless, white intellectuals attempted to portray “realities” based on what they saw rather than what they experienced. In this sense, I present the production of slave narratives as a project which allowed Africans and African-Americans to speak for themselves and represent their own cultures. What is more, this interesting literary genre gave slave narrators the authority to represent the beholders of dominant culture, demystifying the idea of civilization and superiority attributed to the white race.

In chapter I, it is also mentioned how slave narrators proclaimed themselves as humans by proving their capabilities to read and write, besides the fact that reading and writing was also a signal of resistance and disobedience to the law, which prohibited slaves to be alphabetized.

What I intend to show in the first chapter, is not only the significance of slave narratives as authority of self-portrayal and resistance literature, but also to stress their feature as individual narratives. Despite the fact these narratives end up including some common topics, it does not mean slave autobiographers underwent the same trajectory or had the same development as individuals.

In the second chapter, I will examine Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents* as an instance of nineteenth-century slave narrative that succeeded in the act of self-representation, authority and resistance literature. What is more, Harriet Jacobs presented female issues such as motherhood and sexual abuse, bringing a differential in female slave autobiographies. Along the narrative, Jacobs establishes dialogs with the readers, attempting to sensitize them to the issue of human

bondage, and inducing them to visualize several images of the system. Assuming that a great deal of her readers was constituted of white women, Jacobs was careful in selecting the words and images to touch the audience. Needless to say, the autobiographer used her individual experience as a female slave to emphasize matters of motherhood and sexual harassment to involve the readers. In every chapter, Jacobs not only talks about herself, but also mentions the incidents of other women slave, who were, according to Jacobs, the greatest victims of the system: “Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women.” (JACOBS, 1987, p.405).

Analyzing *Incidents* as a rich autobiography (thus, a significant literary work), I will show the strategies Harriet Jacobs used to fulfill her project. The creation (or recreation) of characters is one of the most relevant aspects in the narrative. Departing from the principle that in an autobiography the author is not only the narrator, but also the protagonist, I will discuss the elements that make Jacobs (or Linda Brent) the protagonist of *Incidents*.

Besides the reconstruction of her own image, Jacobs succeeds in reconstructing the image of Dr. Norcom (named Dr. Flint in the narrative), her master and greatest persecutor, portraying him as the antagonist of the narrative. Similarly, Jacobs depicts Mrs. Norcom (or Mrs.Flint) as a villain; however, she does it in two different perspectives: the first as a slave, and the second, as a woman. As a woman, Jacobs expresses sympathy for white mistresses who are aware of their husbands’ unfaithfulness. However, as a slave, she attacks Mrs. Norcom’s and other white ladies for their cruelties towards slaves (especially slave women) as well as for their false religiousness.

The slave community is also well depicted by Jacobs. By portraying her father, for instance, Jacobs not only shows where her ideals of freedom come from, but also demystifies the concept of black’s intellectual inferiority, a concept that was highly spread at that time. Jacobs’ depicts her father’s uniqueness as an individual, his gift as a carpenter, his authority as a father, and his convictions of slaves’ humanity. In this sense, the reader learns that Elijah (Jacobs’ father) is an important influence for the author’s development as an activist. Other characters are extremely relevant in *Incidents*, as will be shown in this chapter. Jacobs describes, for example, the beauty and boldness of Benjamin, her young uncle and sweetheart. Through Benjamin, and a black carpenter whom she falls in love afterwards, Jacobs elevates the black man’s image. At the same time, she diminishes the image of white slaveholders by rejecting Dr. Flint and exposing his weak points.

I will also discuss Jacobs' authority to expose questions of sexuality and motherhood. In this sense, the author breaks taboos by bringing to the white audience issues that were supposed to be hidden from the Christian white society. I will point out how Jacobs shows control over her body. If on one hand Jacobs fights against the sexual harassment inflicted by her master, on the other, she plots to become pregnant of Mr. Sands, a white lawyer. With Sands, Jacobs establishes a relation of mutual interest.

The pursuit of freedom is, needless to say, an essential part in Jacobs' narrative. The details of her escape, the concealment for seven years in her grandmother's house and the eventual liberty are told in the form of a novel. Nonetheless, Jacobs ends her narrative painting a realistic picture of her condition. Although free, the autobiographer regrets the fact that she is unmarried and does not have a house of her own. Contrary to what critic John Blessingame affirms, the end of *Incidents* is not fantastic or melodramatic.

In the third chapter, I will analyze the genre neo-slave narrative, a term coined by the critic Bernard W. Bell, in *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (1987). If on one hand, slave narratives were autobiographical works that intended to depict and denounce the system, on the other, neo-slave narratives are fictional works which assume the form of slave narratives to rescue the memory of slavery and bring issues related to contemporary societies.

Neo-slave narratives do not have a fixed style. We will see that some works contain elements of fantasy, social criticism and issues of racism. Another important aspect is the fact that female authors have dominated the genre. In this sense, black women writers between 1960s and 1980s such as Margaret Walker, Toni Morrison, Octavia Butler and Sherley Anne Williams played an important role both in the black and the feminist movements. Consequently, these writers are careful in the creation of slave women. As Elizabeth Beaulieu observes, their focus should be laid on "reclaiming, repositioning, and revaluing the black woman's role in America, both in history and in contemporary society." (BEAULIEU, 1999, p.02).

The connection between past and present is certainly another important characteristic in the neo-slave narratives. As we will see, for the neo-slave narrative writer history and truth are not necessarily related. The past is supposed to be reconstructed to gain significance in the present time.

Another important characteristic that will be analyzed is the use of black vernacular. By

recovering the slave's language, neo-slave narrative authors reinforce the role of English to the construction of black identity in their present times.

In the fourth chapter, I will examine Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose*. As I took Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents* to illustrate the genre slave narrative, I will explore Williams' novel in order to illustrate the genre neo-slave narrative. Published in 1986, the novel portrays the absurdities of slavery, through the perspective of a contemporary female writer. *Dessa Rose* is a historical fiction set in the 1840s. We will see how Williams explores elements of slave narratives, such as first-person narration, exposure of the system, issues of racism and sexism.

Dessa Rose is based on two historical events. The first is about a young pregnant slave who helped to lead a rebellion, causing the death of five white men; the second incident is about a white woman who lived isolated in a farm and was reported to give refuge to runaway slaves. In real life, these two women never met, but Williams decided to reconstruct history by creating an encounter between Dessa (or the "devil woman") and Rufel.

The novel is divided in three sections ("The Darky", "The Wench" and "The Negress"). We will see Dessa's development as the novel unfolds, that is, as she goes through each section. Nonetheless, it does not mean the novel is strictly chronological. It is chronological in the sense that the three sections follow a sequence; however, past and present are interplayed, the same way voices are blended.

Each section will be analyzed. In "The Darky" Dessa is interviewed in prison by Adam Nehemiah. Nehemiah's motive is to write a book about slaves' revolts and advise slaveholders how to prevent them. We will observe how Williams revises history through the character Nehemiah. The white intellectual represents the view of the "self" (the superior) on the "other" (the marginalized). For him, Dessa is nothing but a "darky". Besides, Nehemiah distorts Dessa's narrative according to his perspective. Using the colonialist method of appropriation, Nehemiah intends to take Dessa's story, misrepresent it and use it for self-benefit.

In "The Wench", Dessa meets Rufel after escaping from prison. We will observe William's strategy to represent black and white feminism, and the division between these two groups. At first, the relationship between the two women is conflicting due to social and racial barriers. Before forming a "sisterhood" with Rufel, Dessa expresses resistance against white women, due to previous experiences with white mistresses. Similarly, Rufel is influenced by her

cultural values and scorns the figure of the black woman. However, Rufel and Dessa end up establishing an alliance, not only for mutual interest, but also for starting to see the “other” through a more sympathetic perspective.

In “The Negress”, Dessa and Rufel form a “sisterhood”, despite the racial and social obstacles. It is also a moment of liberation for Dessa: not only she gains freedom, but also voice. This section is fully narrated by the title character, in a free and loquacious language.

I will also discuss Williams’ strategy to question the concept of emancipation and the effects of slavery in her time. The author attacks the false idea of equality between free black and white individuals in a democratic society. The novel also brings issues of prejudice and stereotype, in the construction of the black race image.

Among other important topics, we will see the portrayal of black art in in the novel. Through the character Kaine, Dessa’s lover, Williams portrays the African musical influence in America to the creation of contemporary genres, like blues and jazz. In addition, she brings the black gospel as an important cultural expression to black identity.

Both slave narrative and neo-slave narrative authors bring the issue of slavery as a response to the abuses of their contemporary systems, as we will see in the following pages. Although produced in different times, both genres are not only an important contribution to African-American Literature, but also perfect examples of Protest Art.

1 WHEN THE “SELF” READS THE “SELF”: QUESTIONS OF REPRESENTATION OF SLAVERY

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the issue of slavery was object of interest among white Western intellectuals, followers of both anti and pro-slavery ideals. The debate on human bondage had its defenders and attackers, at a time when most of black man and women could not speak for themselves. The representation of slavery made under the dominant culture's perspective intended either to denounce or to justify the institution. Both abolitionist and pro-slavery works had divergent views; they had, however, a mutual characteristic: they had given “authority” to represent “the other”.

The production of pro-slavery texts was a powerful method of domination. In these writings, African slavery was easily accepted and justified due to the misrepresentation of Africans. The “truth” about black individuals and the African continent was provided by white Western explorers and intellectuals. Not only seen as mentally, morally and even spiritually inferior, African men and women were also depicted as exotic and uncivilized. Far from their home and culture, they lived under the condition of “ex-centric”, that is, those “marginalized by a dominant ideology” (HUTCHEON, 1999, p.42). Their physical attributes, and some customs brought from their native lands were some of the factors that caused them to be defined as inferior. Indeed, this was a stable and unquestioned notion. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said explains the distorted concepts disseminated by dominant forces, used as an invisible weapon in order to subjugate the other:

> Neither imperialism nor colonialism is a simple act of accumulation and acquisition. Both are supported and perhaps even impelled by impressive ideological formations that include notions that certain territories and people *require* and beseech domination, as well as forms of knowledge affiliated with domination: the vocabulary of classic nineteenth-century imperial culture is plentiful with words and concepts like ‘inferior’, or ‘subject races’, ‘subordinate peoples’, dependency’, ‘expansion’ and ‘authority’. (SAID, 2006, p.09).

The subjugation of the so-called “inferior” races was partly justified through the accepted idea that some categories of men were made to be tamed. For instance, in his famous essay *Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question* (1849) the Scottish writer Thomas Carlyle created a prejudiced picture of Africa, and a heroic image of white explorers:

> For countless ages... those islands had produced mere jungle, savagery, poison-reptiles, and swamp-malaria till the white European first saw them… they were as if not yet created their noble elements of cinnamon, sugar, coffee, pepper, black and grey, lying all asleep, waiting the white enchanter who should say to them, awake! (CARLYLE, 1849)

Defending the continuity of slavery in the United States, the Victorian writer attacks what he considered chaotic in the West Indies, where several blacks were freed. Making use of his satirical style, Carlyle ridicules the African man's image, reinforcing the idea of blacks as bestial: "our beautiful black darlings are at last happy; with little labor except to the teeth, *which*, surely, in those excellent horse-jaws of theirs, will not fail!" (CARLYLE, 1849). Carlyle's mockery of the black race clearly reflects the stereotype about Africans and the African continent that prevailed at that time. Again, they were unquestioned "truths" created to justify what was unjustifiable. As Said points out, they were "widely accepted notions, and they helped fuel the imperial acquisition of territories in Africa throughout the nineteenth century". (SAID, 2006, p. xiv).

However, if on one hand writers like Carlyle produced pro-slavery texts, on the other, a great deal of white intellectuals produced anti-slavery (or abolitionist) works. The "truth" and "absurdities" about slavery were mostly supplied by non-Africans. Indeed, several white thinkers made use of both written and oral communication to attack the system. Considering they were the "self" in the dominant society, these men and women contributed to weaken the slavery system by speaking for the "other". They created a new cultural and political force in favor of those who did not have a voice. Notwithstanding, their perspectives were limited in the sense that they portrayed something they did not experience, but something they witnessed and/or heard through slaves and former slaves' testimonies. In this case, the main characters of the subject, that is, the slaves themselves, ended up by "lending" their voices to be expressed by beholders of the dominant culture. Their testimonies, as Gayatri Spivak would put it, was a way of "giving witness to oppression to a less oppressed other". (SPIVAK, 1998, p.7).

Before examining the representation of slavery by African and African-American writers, I would like to briefly comment on some abolitionist works fulfilled by non-black intellectuals. The abolitionist movement was expressed through fictional and non-fictional writings, in an effort to expose and discuss the absurd of the system. A very important vehicle of denouncement against slavery was the newspaper. During the slavery regime in the United States, part of the press worked on behalf of black man and women. Needless to say, the press served both pro-

slavery and abolitionist movements, providing these groups space to express their ideas. On one hand, it was a vehicle of oppression, through which slavery defenders supported the continuity of the system. Moreover, it made profit by advertising the trade of black man and women, as well as announcement of “fugitive Negroes”. On the other hand, the press brought into light anti-slavery issues, being used as a means of criticism and reformist discourses.

One of the most influential antislavery newspapers was *The Liberator* (1831-1865), published and edited by William Lloyd Garrison, one of the founders of the American Antislavery Society and contributor to the women suffrage movement. In his autobiographical narrative, the African-American abolitionist Frederick Douglass recalls the impact *The Liberator* had upon him, when he had been recently emancipated:

> The paper became my meat and my drink (....) Its sympathy for my brethren in bonds (….); its faithful exposures of slavery--and its powerful attacks upon the upholders of the institution--sent a thrill of joy through my soul, such as I had never felt before! (DOUGLASS, 1992, p.67)

As a freedman, Douglass became an important collaborator to the newspaper, which means that *The Liberator* was also an agency through which former slaves could proclaim their voices. Nevertheless, it was still an enterprise controlled by non-African-Americans. Understanding that black thinkers should have their own intellectual projects, Douglass started publishing the newspaper *North Star*, defending the idea that an abolitionist newspaper should be under the control of “colored” men.

In 1839, the white abolitionist Theodore Weld published *American Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses*. Weld was a lecturer and co-founder of the American Anti-Slavery Society in Ohio. His abolitionist convictions were publicly known and caused outrage among slavery supporters. Weld’s subversive discourse caused him to leave the Lane Theological Seminary, since its members did not allow the discussion of slavery to be brought into light. His work *American Slavery as It Is* intended to denounce the cruelty of human bondage system through a collection of testimonials and personal narratives from both white abolitionists and slaveholders. In the introduction, Weld provokes the reader by making him/her picture themselves as the “other”: “Suppose I should seize you, rob you of your liberty, drive you into the field, and make you work without pay… would that be justice and kindness, or monstrous injustice and cruelty?” (WELD, 2009, p.7). Needless to say, Weld himself would never be able to say what slavery was, since he belonged to a distinct realm. Weld was in fact a witness, an

observer of a series of events that affected other individuals. As mentioned before, the book contains personal narratives written by white abolitionists who had observed many scenes during the period they resided in slave states. One of these narratives subtly raises the question of the representation of slavery. The author, named Nehemiah Caulkins, declares himself as a mere spectator and implies that only those who underwent human bondage would be able to describe the system accurately:

> The scenes that I have witnessed are enough to harrow up the soul; but could the slave be permitted to tell the story of his sufferings, which no white man, not linked with slavery, *is allowed to know*, the land would vomit out the horrible system...(WELD, 2009, p.11)

Theodore *Weld's American Slavery as It Is* attempted to expose a “concrete” portray of the slavery system. But, it should be noted, without the narration of the real protagonists of the events. Weld, as well as other abolitionists, played the role of historians of their present time; indeed, they contributed to the documentation of slavery but still, they were the voice of the so-called “majority”.

The novel also played a remarkable role in the abolitionist project. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) is a significant example of literary work that intended to illustrate the “reality” of American plantations. Stowe was an American abolitionist who, among other actions, supported the Underground Railroad. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was written two years after the Fugitive Slave Law took effect; thus, it was massively read at a time when the intolerance against blacks was in its peak. The main topics of the novel are the evil of slavery, the values of Christianity and the role of women in slave states. The novel advocates the emancipation of African-Americans, however, it can also be seen as an idealistic novel that supports Africans’ submission to white Christian values. The African-American novelist James Baldwin, for instance, in his essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel” (1949), criticized Stowe’s method of depicting the black man: “since we have only the author’s word that they are Negro and they are, in all other respects, as white as she can make them.” (BALDWIN, 1998, p.112). For Baldwin, the three main black characters – Eliza, George and Tom – were made through a stereotypical perspective, and the value of the black slave was in his/her compliance with the whites’ principles. About Uncle Tom, Baldwin draws attention to the colonized mind of the old slave, as well as the colonizing method of Stowe in her portrayal of the title character:

> The figure from whom the novel takes its name, Uncle Tom, who is a figure of controversy yet, is jet-black, wooly-haired, illiterate; and he is phenomenally forbearing. He has to be; he is black; only through this forbearance can he survive or triumph… Tom, therefore, her only black man, has been robbed of his humanity and divested of his sex. It is the price for that darkness with which he has been branded. (BALDWIN, 1998, p.112)

In contrast, Henry Louis Gates Jr. sees the novel through a less pessimistic perspective. For him, Stowe's attempt to portray the institution of slavery was worth praising, in the sense it caused a reaction in the white American society and its anti-libertarian ideals. Gates describes *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as "culturally capacious" and "sexually charged", despite the fact the novelist did not experience slavery. Regarding Baldwin's criticism, he remarks:

> Half a century after Baldwin denounced it as 'a very bad novel' in its 'self-righteous, virtuous sentimentality' and promotion of feminine tears and anguish as a form of political protest, both the novel and Baldwin's now canonical critique are ripe for reassessment. (GATES, 2006).

As a simple spectator of her black counterparts and contemporaries' lives, Stowe made symbolic characters like, for instance, George Harris. His strong personality can be seen as a symbol of resistance of many African-Americans who denied to be mentally domesticated: "Mas'r will find out that I'm one that whipping won't tame" (STOWE, 2002, p.23). It is interesting to note that the author attempts to reproduce the language of the slaves, by making use of colloquial words like "mas'r" for "master". At the same time, the author reproduced the image of the "other" according to her cultural codes, as she did in the characterization of Eliza. According to the narrator, the slave had "that peculiar air of refinement, that softness of voice and manner, which seems in many cases to be a particular gift to the quadroon and mulatto women..." (STOWE, 2002, p.27). Certainly, the author's years of observation and contact with the "other" gave her important source of information and motivation to write the novel. Nonetheless, it is important to question to what extent Beecher Stowe knew about slavery since she had a distinct cultural and social position from her black protagonists.

Aware of the complexity of depicting the reality of the "other", Henry David Thoreau expressed the following words: "much has been said about American Slavery, but I think that we do not even yet realize what slavery is" (THOREAU, 2004, p.1946). This well-known passage from *Slavery in Massachusetts* (1854) reflects Thoreau's consciousness of white men and women's incapability to have a full dimension on the slaves' experience. In fact, abolitionist works produced by white intellectuals strongly contributed to battle against the institution of slavery. However, these intellectuals were beholders of the dominant culture, and being so, they

were influenced by their cultural references. In *Power, Politics and Culture*, Edward Said argues that the act of representing implies a sort of control and confinement, in the sense that the one who represents is the one who has authority to do so. For Said, there is a hint of "violence" in the act of representing: "The act or process of representing implies control, it implies accumulation, it implies confinement, it implies a certain kind of estrangement or disorientation on the part of the one representing." (SAID, 2001, p.40)

The African-American self-portrayal was marked by the slave narratives, autobiographical works written by freed or fugitive African-American slaves published before 1865. They are considered one of the first efforts to represent the voice of the black American man and woman. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. observes, in history of human bondage, "it was only the black slaves in the United States who (…) created a genre of literature that testified against their captors and bore witness to the urge of every black slave to be free and literature". (GATES, 1987, p.ix). At a time when race defined the destiny of individuals, the slave narratives came as a rupture with several pre-established concepts, causing a change in the course of slavery. These important writings became source of study not only in the literary area, but also in other fields like history, sociology and anthropology. Again, the portrayal of the African-American slavery was a great deal fulfilled by non-African-Americans, those who belonged to an opposite sphere. However, the representation of slavery fulfilled by African-American autobiographers gave black men and women the authority to question the "truths" imposed by dominant forces.

Going back to the issue of representation of slavery fulfilled by white abolitionists, I would like to reinforce the question of experience. For instance, in *Slavery As It Is*, one of the narrators relates the case of a planter who proposed a "criminal intercourse" with his young female slave. The girl, after several refusals and consequent punishments, gives up the fight, as Nehemiah Caulkins (the narrator) accounts: "seeing that her case was hopeless, her back smarting with the scourging she had received, and dreading a repetition, (she) gave herself up to be victim of his brutal lusts." (WELD, 2009, p.15). Let us now analyze this passage, considering three important points: the first, the witness and narrator of the case belonged to distinct social position, race and gender from those of the young slave. Thus, the most he could do was to provide *his* impression on the planter's barbarity, but never the girl's view on the matter. Secondly, Caulkins describes the girl, in previous lines, as follows: "for a slave, she was intelligent and conscientious." (WELD, 2009, p.15). Although the narrator had clear

emancipatory purposes, we can observe that his perspective of the “other” was, in some respects, influenced by his own cultural references. The third and most important point is that the slave girl, whose name we ignore, having been represented, could not supply the reader with a more complete and even accurate version of the episode.

The first thing to consider about a slave narrative is that it was a project carried out by black and white thinkers. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. states, in the introduction of *The Slave Narratives*, “the slave's writings were often direct extensions of their speeches, and many ex-slave narrators confess that their printed texts are structured formal revisions of their spoken words organized and promoted by anti-slavery organizations.” (GATES, 1985, p.xvi). Notwithstanding, it was the view of the narrators that built the autobiographies.

As a project, the narratives intended to picture a realistic and striking view of slavery. Thus, most of former (or fugitive) slaves had a lot in common to tell and to indict. Several topics such as family segregation, mental and physical subjugation, motherhood, sexual abuse, memory of their pasts, characterization of their “masters/mistresses”, for example, can be found in most slave narratives. The critic James Olney, in his essay “’I was born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature”, questions the “structural” approach of the narratives, claiming they have “a sense not of uniqueness but of overwhelming *sameness*” (OLNEY, 1985, p.148). Olney argues that the focus of the narrative is the institution of slavery, and not the narrator him/herself. According to Olney, “the narrative lives of the ex-slaves were so much possessed and used by abolitionists as their actual lives had been by slaveholders.” (OLNEY, 1985, p.154). Nevertheless, it is important to question whether the “structural” approach of the narratives jeopardizes their significance as the voice of the “self”. Furthermore, it is essential to question if the alleged “sameness” means that all its authors wrote in the same style and under the same perspective. As a matter of fact, slave narrators used individual strategies to fulfill a unique project. They represented not only slavery but also their race and culture according to their individual experiences and development.

Olaudah Equiano is a significant example of an autobiographer who challenged not only the view of slavery but also the view of the African culture. Going back to the matter of representation of Africa in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we have seen that it was the view of the European which prevailed. This view was the unquestioned “universal truth”

established by Eurocentric principles. The imagination of white men, women and children was filled with the “mysteries” of the so-called “exotic” and “wild” lands. In his narrative, Equiano also nurtures the European imagination with stories of his land. However, what he brings to the reader is not the wildness but the *beauty* and *richness* of Nigeria, formerly named Eboe:

> As our manners are simple, our luxuries are few. The dress of both sexes is nearly the same. It generally consists of a long piece of callico, or muslin, wrapped loosely round the body, somewhat in the form of a highland plaid. This is usually dyed blue, which is our favourite colour. It is extracted from a berry, and is brighter and richer than any I have seen in Europe. (EQUIANO, 1987, p.14)

Equiano shows a great deal of knowledge about his culture, establishing a bridge between his past and his present. By depicting a beautiful image of Nigerian tradition (beautiful, but not exotic), the autobiographer shows not only an exercise of memory but also the assertion of his identity, making it clear that his view was not influenced by European patterns. What is more, Equiano gives emphasis to the intellectual gift of his country-fellows, demystifying the barbarian and puppet-like image so often attributed to his race: “We are almost a nation of dancers, musicians, and poets.” (EQUIANO, 1987, p.17). Nevertheless, at the same time the author exalts the African culture, he also shows a less positive feature of Eboe: he exposes, for instance, how slavery was an old practice in his country. Equiano does not defend the practice, but does not attack or diminish Eboe's tradition either.

Equiano’s autobiography is entitled *The Interesting Narrative of The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*. It was first published in 1789 and became highly popular in England. Interestingly, he subverts the order of importance and begins the title of the narrative with his Nigerian name, Olaudah Equiano, leaving his European identity, Gustavus Vassa, in a less outstanding place. The autobiographer remembers his resistance to accept the name Gustavus Vassa, as a moment of objection to the cultural imposition:

> While I was on board this ship, my captain and master named me *Gustavus Vassa*. (...) and when I refused to answer to my new name, which at first I did, it gained me many a cuff; so at length I submitted, and was obliged to bear the present name, by which I have been known ever since. (EQUIANO, 1987, p.37)

Again, even being “obliged to bear” the European name, it is the African one which gains the highest importance. Moreover, Equiano adds to the title a great sense of identity: he was *the African*. By asserting his “Africanism”, the author proved that, even after years living under European domain, his identity awareness had not vanished. On the contrary, Equiano questions the distorted thought of black biological and spiritual inferiority: “Are there not causes enough to

which the apparent inferiority of an African may be ascribed, without limiting the goodness of God, and supposing he forbore to stamp understanding on certainly his own image, because 'carved in ebony'." (EQUIANO, 1987, p.17). As a black Christian, Equiano absorbed the European culture in his favor, making use of Biblical doctrine to argue against African slavery. As a skillful autobiographer, he opened the door to subsequent slave narrators, as Henry Louis Gates observes, “Equiano's strategies of self-presentation most certainly influenced the shape of black narrative before 1865.” (GATES, 1987, p.xiv).

Olaudah Equiano is among the most important African autobiographers of the eighteenth century. At this time, the anti-slavery literary project was growing and new concepts being planted. Nevertheless, it was in the nineteenth-century that this genre gained its strength, especially in the United States, as William Andrews remarks in his essay “The Representation of Slavery and Afro-American Realism”:

> The slave narrative took its classic form and tone between 1840 and 1860, when the romantic movement in American literature was in its most influential phase. Transcendentalists like Theodore Parker welcomed antebellum slave narratives (and Douglass in particular) into the highest echelon of American literature, insisting that 'all the original romance of Americans is in them, not in the white man's novel.” (ANDREWS, 2010, p.78)

Among the classical American slave narrators of the nineteenth century is Frederick Douglass. One of the most important intellectuals of his time, Douglass succeeded in representing slavery “as it was”, besides asserting himself as a unique writer. He also became an important orator and statesman, and an important leader of the abolitionist movement. As a free man, he could relate his life as a slave, as well as the pathway to liberty, in three autobiographical works: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), and *Life and Time of Frederick Douglass* (1881). In *Narrative,* the reader is able to observe the critical tone of Douglass at the very beginning of the book, especially for the analogies he makes to criticize the absurdities of slavery: “By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant.” (DOUGLASS, 1992, p.9). The main focuses of his narrative are the complex relationships between slaves and masters, his individual perspectives in contrast with some of other slaves, and the essential role of education in the achievement of physical and mental freedom. Along his narrative, Douglass shows how observant he was during his life in bondage, proving to be an effective autobiographer. For each character, Douglass attributes

suitable characteristics, making use of extensive vocabulary. Douglass' first overseer, for instance, is depicted as "a miserable drunkard, a profane swearer and a savage monster." (DOUGLASS, 1992, p.10). Here, he subverts the idea of righteousness and civilization often associated to the dominant society.

Douglass proves his literacy in several moments in his narrative. For example, the episode in which slaves and other properties are sent for valuation, Douglass draws the following image: "There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being…" (DOUGLASS, 1992, p.23). Instead of separating the groups of beings, saying, for instance, "there were men, women and children mingled with horses and pigs", the author brilliantly puts together a human and a non-human in each division, causing a more shocking effect. Moreover, the inversion of values is clear if we consider that the non-human image comes first: pigs and children, not children and pigs. This method of representation reflects the author's efficiency in transmitting the message. Douglass had not only the essential skill but also the necessary experience as "property" to create such an impacting image.

Another significant aspect in *Narrative* is Douglass' place as an individual. As William L. Andrews remarks, slave narrators like Douglass "trace their salvation back to an intuition of individual uniqueness and a sense of special destiny which they claim has inspired them since their early youth." (ANDREWS, 2010, p.79). Deconstructing the idea of sameness often associated to slave narratives, Douglass' autobiography is dominated by the author's emotional and psychological aspects, proving Douglass' main role in his own narrative. In fact, Douglass' pursuit of knowledge is one of his greatest achievements; in this sense, the author reveals the striking effect of education in his personal development: "In moments of agony, I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity. I have often wished myself a beast. I preferred the condition of the meanest reptile to my own. Any thing, no matter what, to get rid of thinking!" (DOUGLASS, 1992, p.23).

Likewise male slave narrators, female black autobiographers are indispensable protagonists in the scenery of abolitionist literature. These women also succeeded in portraying the reality of American slavery, discussing not only matters of race but also, and especially, matters of gender. However, male slave autobiographies dominated the slave narrative tradition, as William Andrews stresses in *Six Women Slave Narratives*

> As we reconstruct the history of black autobiography in its formative century, from 1760 to 1865, we find that only rarely did escaped female slaves ask for or receive the kind of attention that encouraged them to dictate or write their life stories. (ANDREWS, 1995, p.xxxii).

At the same time, issues such as male oppression and women's right were mainly discussed by white female writers, like Emily Dickson and Kate Chopin, who introduced interesting female characters who lived in conflict with the patriarchal system. Considering the place in-between the feminist and the anti-slavery movements, it is important to highlight the significance of black female writers in both History and Literature.

Besides Harriet Jacobs, many of these black autobiographers did not content themselves in being simply freed colored women and dared to go beyond social boundaries. Old Elizabeth, whose real name is unknown, is a good example. Although her narrative is quite short and essentially evangelistic, she tells us how she challenged traditional values by becoming a Christian pastor, an occupation exclusively performed by white men: "The people there [Virginia] would not believe that a colored woman could preach. And moreover, as she had no learning, they strove to imprison me because I spoke against slavery." (THOMAS, 1995, p.42). Likewise, the pursuit of a place in the dominant culture is part of Elizabeth Keckley's trajectory, as she accounts in her autobiography *Behind The Scenes or Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House (*1868). After thirty years as a slave, Keckley purchases her freedom and achieves an occupation in the White House, where she worked as the First Lady's personal seamstress. Keckley describes her life as a slave at the beginning of her narrative, and, like many other black female autobiographers, she clearly exposes issues of rape and motherhood. However, she dedicates more pages narrating her life as a freed woman as well as her supposedly friendship with Mary Lincoln (President Lincoln's wife) and the barriers she had to face due to her race and gender. A very interesting moment of her narrative is when she witnesses young Tad Lincoln's (the President's son) difficulty to read and write, taking this moment to criticize the stereotype of black race inferiority:

> ...had Tad been a negro boy, not the son of a President, and so difficult to instruct, he would have been called thick-skulled, and would have been held up as an example of the inferiority of race. I know many full negro boys, able to read and write, who are not older than Tad Lincoln was when he persisted that A-p-e spelt monkey (…) If a colored boy appears dull, so does a white boy sometimes; and if a whole race is judged by a single example of apparent dullness, another race should be judged by a similar example. (KECKLEY, 1989, p.81)

Mary Prince is another significant black writer of the nineteenth century. In fact, she is considered the first woman to write a slave narrative in Britain. In her autobiography, *The History*

of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave (1831), she stresses the mistreatment of slaves, and the matter of sexual abuse as well. Being born in the British colony of Bermuda, Prince indicts the brutality of the colonial system and its consequences over black men and women. One of the strongest topics in her narrative is the sexual harassment she suffers from one of her masters – whom she calls Mr. D. Actually, she does not dedicate many pages to mention the abuse, and the issue is subtly presented. Mainly, Prince attacks the trade and abuse of the human body - especially the female one: "I was soon surrounded by strange men, who examined and handled me in the same manner that a butcher would a calf or a lamb he was about to purchase..." (PRINCE, 1987, p. 146). Prince, as well as other female and male slave narrators like Jacobs and Douglass, brings the image of the body as a significant symbol, an entity through which subjugation and violence were applied. For Post-Colonial studies, the body has a significant meaning, since it is seen a "space in which conflicting discourses can be written and read" (ASHCROFT, 2007, p.166). In the case of women autobiographers, the female body is especially exposed as an arena, in which white male power is exerted. Taking the words of William Andrews, "Women, especially those of Prince's caste and class, were not expected to speak out so bluntly in public, especially about their supposed betters" (ANDREWS, 1995, p.xxxii).

As a final consideration, slave narratives were instances of resistance literature. They permitted marginalized men and women to proclaim themselves as intellectuals, transgressing the so-called "inferiority" often imputed to the black race, as the Enlightenment thinker David Hume once declared: "I am apt to suspect that negroes, and in general other species of men...are naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white" (HUME: 1984, p.202). About the natural talent of black, indigenous and other non-white races, Hume concluded that there were "no ingenious manufacturers amongst them, *no arts, no science*...." (HUME, 1984, p.202). Contrary to this sort of representation, Nat Turner, the leader of the insurrection in Southampton in 1831, depicted himself in a divergent perspective. In a short narrative he wrote to Thomas R. Gray while in prison (*The Confessions of Nat Turner*), the black leader remarks how his "restless, inquisitive and observant" mind made him a unique individual:

> My grand mother... noticing the singularity of my manners, I suppose, and my uncommon intelligence for a child, remarked I had too much sense to be raised, and if I was, I would never be of any service to any one as a slave....All my time, not devoted to my master's service, was spent either in prayer, or in making experiments in casting different things in moulds made of earth, in attempting to make paper, gunpowder, and many other experiments, that although I could not perfect, yet convinced me of its practicability if I had the means. (TURNER, 1831)

Moreover, the very act of writing and reading was itself a great signal of resistance, once it was a crime to alphabetize slaves. As Frederick Douglass' master warns his wife, teaching slaves to read and spell was “unlawful and unsafe” (DOUGLASS, 1992, p.24). In *Narrative*, Douglass tells the reader his strategies to disobey the law and become literate by negotiating with poor white boys stolen bread in exchange of spelling lessons. Also, the act of reading and writing was highly significant for slaves to assert their conditions of human, as William Andrews puts: “language is assumed to signify the subject and hence to ratify the slave narrator's humanity as well as his authority.” (ANDREWS, 2010, p. 80).

As autobiographers, eighteenth and nineteenth-century slave narrators had an essential role: to construct meaningful texts which had social significances. Taking Lejeune's theory that an autobiographer is the producer of a discourse, it is important to consider that the attitude of self-representation and representation of a system made slave narrators to produce a message, a message which attempts to construct a new thought in their current societies.

What is more, slave narratives presented a kind of literature in which the ex-centric establishes a view on the beholder of the dominant culture. If on one hand European thinkers had authority the read the African slave and culture, on the other, slave autobiographers show authority not only to represent themselves but also to picture the opposite realm. In a slave autobiography, Africans are the “self” and white men and women are the “others”. As we have seen before, Elizabeth Keckley exposed how “unintelligent” a white boy could be, despite his high social rank and alleged biological superiority. Frederick Douglass subverted the image of “distinct” slaveholders, by revealing their inabilities and addictions. As we will see in the next chapter, Jacobs exposed an ambiguous portray of “good” masters and mistresses. Jacobs and many other slave narrators showed the reader the complexities of such concept, and how the “kindness” of a master/mistress could not justify the system, let alone replace the dream of liberty. The Christian doctrine also gains a different representation through the voice of slave narrators. Although a great deal of African autobiographers were Christians, like Jacobs and Equiano, many of them took Christianity as an instance of pro-slavery power. However, the object of attack is the Institution and its distortion of Biblical texts, not the doctrine itself, as Douglass explains in his *Narrative*:

> ...between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference--so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. To be the friend of the one, is of necessity to be the enemy of the other.

(DOUGLASS, 1992, p.49).

The representation of African slavery had several voices: the voice of the beholders of the dominant society and the voice of the outsiders. These outsiders asserted themselves as autobiographers, or metaphorically speaking, they were painters of their own lives. Again, slave narrators wrote according to their individual experiences, however in the name of a specific motive. The critic James Olney in his essay *The Value of Autobiography for Comparative Studies*, proposes the name *autoautography* for the Western autobiography, for being "individualistic, inturned and self-centered", and the name *autophylography* for African autobiography for focusing on the idea of community. The twentieth-century African-American novelist Ralph Ellison expressed the relation between the individual narrative to the general as the following: "We tell ourselves our individual stories so that as to become aware of our general story." (ELLISON, 1990, p.4). Similarly, slave narrators resorted to their personal experiences to paint a general picture of the system they intended to denounce and destroy. As remarked before, slave autobiographers had a great deal in common to relate, but it is important to stress they had individual trajectories, perspectives, and used their own strategies as writers to depict an accurate picture of themselves and the system.

2 HARRIET JACOBS' *INCIDENTS:* A NINETEENTH-CENTURY FEMALE SLAVE NARRATIVE.

In the previous chapter, we saw the role of slave narratives in the construction of black identity through self-representation, and the manifestation of a protest literature. Among the classical slave narrators, Harriet Jacobs is undoubtedly one of these courageous figures who represented not only African-American slaves, but mainly African-American women slaves. Her *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) is not simply an account on slavery and its harmfulness; it is, in the first place, a creation of an individual who was able to produce (and re-produce) the narrative of her own life. Jacobs' attitude in writing an autobiography indicates not only the necessity of exposing the cruelty of the system, but also Jacob's view that the incidents of her life could be object of interest to the dominant society. As James Olney puts it "The very act of writing a life down constitutes an attempt on the writer's part to justify his life, and implicit in every act of autobiography is the judgment that his life is worth being written down." (OLNEY, 2010, p.212). As a significant autobiographical work, *Incidents* brings the author's personal experiences, historical events linked to the author's life, and the autobiographer's time and culture.

Harriet Jacobs was born a slave in North Carolina in 1813. After her mother's death, when she was six years old, Jacobs started living with her mother's mistress, Margareth Horniblow, who taught Jacobs to read and write. After Mrs. Horniblow's death, Jacobs became "property" of Mrs. Horniblow's 5-year-old niece. The girl's father, Dr. James Norcom (named Dr. Flint in *Incidents*), became Jacobs' greatest malefactor. The years Jacobs lived in the Norcom's house are a crucial period in her narrative, especially for Dr. Norcom's attempts to make Jacobs his concubine. As a strategy to obtain her liberty, Jacobs intentionally got involved with a white lawyer, Samuel Sawyer (fictionally Mr. Sands), having two children with him. However, Sawyer failed to keep his promise to free Jacobs and their children, forcing Jacobs to pursuit her liberty all by herself. In 1835, Jacobs escaped from the Norcoms' place, counting on her grandmother as well as some black fellows and white neighbors in this "adventure", managing to reach the North in 1842. There, she met some members of the anti-slavery Philadelphia Vigilant Committee, who helped her to get to New York in 1845. She found a job as a nursemaid in New York in the house of Nathaniel and Mary Stacey Willis. After Mrs. Willis death, she traveled to England to

accompany Mr. Willis and his daughter. Back to the United States, Jacobs was found by the husband of her legal mistress in 1852, but Cornelia Willis (Nathaniel Willis' new wife) purchased Jacobs' freedom. *Incidents* was secretly written while Jacobs still worked for Nathaniel Willis. It was published in 1861 under the pseudonym of *Linda Brent*.

Jacob's autobiography is an account of her individual experience, and the general story of African-Americans in the nineteenth century, especially slave women. Indeed, Jacobs had the duty to be a representative of her time and, mainly, of her social group. As we know, the slave narratives had a peculiar function (indictment of slavery), which means that Jacobs had a great challenge in her literary project: to be her own voice and the voice of her fellow slaves. In this context, Jacobs' attitude reflects what Henry Louis Gates Jr. remarked on African-American art, in the sense that their focus is “less on individual as isolated icons and more on individuals as part of a grand tradition” (GATES, 2000, p. xiv). In fact, *Incidents* transmits the autobiographer's individual voice, at the same time it constitutes part of a general voice. Harriet Jacobs, as Jean Fagan Yeling observes “would shape her book with both a public agenda – to forge her story as a weapon against the slave system; and with an autobiographer's private agenda - to convince her readers to understand and sympathize with her.” (YELLIN, 2004, p.56).

The first thing to be observed in an autobiography is that the autobiographer should be not only the author, but also the narrator and the protagonist. By declaring: “The war of my life had begun” (JACOBS, 1987, p. 353), Jacobs establishes herself as the main character, making the “war of her life” one of the main issues of her narrative. It is understood that the war of Jacobs' life was also, in different ways, the personal war of many other slave girls: the sexual harassment inflicted by their masters. Here, the author uses her individual battle to portray a collective circumstance, painting an accurate and concrete picture of slave women's routine: “My master began to whisper foul words in my ear (…) He peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of.” (JACOBS, 1987, p. 353).

Considering her time, gender, race and social rank, what Jacobs brings in her autobiography is, taking Carole E. Boyce Davis words, the “shifting of privatized discourses to the public arena” (DAVIS: 1999, p. 4), exposing issues that were supposed to be hidden from the nineteenth-century American society. As discussed in chapter I, the question of sexual harassment was a key issue in female slave narratives, what provided its authors with not only voice to

denounce the abuses, but also authority to diminish their “superiors” morally. Nonetheless, writers like Harriet Jacobs had to overcome the very fact they belonged to “inferior” categories, not only in terms of race and social position, but also in terms of gender, to present such a controversial topic. For Boyce Davis, their disadvantageous status made the issue unaccredited, as she argues in her article “Hearing Black Women Voices”:

> In all of the black female slave narratives, the history of sexual harassment of black women by both white and black men as well as by white women has been written. The reality is that the history of black women's experience under oppression was constructed as lie, even in the face of evidence like a blue-eyed baby who looked just like master. (DAVIS, 1999, p.5)

According to Davis, when a black woman presents issues like domestic violence, rape and others, “she has to battle all the cultural and historical meanings about her”. (DAVIS, 1999, p.5). In this sense, Jacobs was not simply an autobiographer who intended to expose appalling matters. She was a writer whose stigmas and labels imposed on her could have represented an obstacle to the fulfillment of her ambitious literary project. Undoubtedly, asserting authority to depict female issues was a challenging task for writers like Jacobs, considering they were excluded from the condition of humanity, and, needless to say, excluded from the condition of womanhood.

However, *Incidents* shows the author’s assertiveness in the portrayal of her individual trajectory and of slavery experience. Jacobs declares herself authorized to depict the system, proving to be a secure source: “I had not lived fourteen years in slavery for nothing. I had felt, seen, and heard enough, to read the characters, and question the motives, of those around me.” (JACOBS, 1987, p.353). Here, Jacobs affirms herself as a witness of her time, and shows her individual development after years in slavery. More than a mere observer, Jacobs was a witness with authority, since she testified on facts which affected directly herself and her social group. Differently from white reformers, who attempted to represent slavery as part of their abolitionist project, slave narrators presented the perspective of the “insider”, providing a more authentic documentation of the system. By affirming she had “felt, seen, and heard enough”, Jacobs reproduces a confident tone in her narrative, especially considering that the audience she addressed would be inclined to suspect of her words' authenticity.

Jacobs managed to describe her personal experience through a critical approach, defying the stereotype of African slaves' intellectual incapability: “These God-breathing machines are no more, in the sight of their masters, than the cotton they plant, or the horses they tend.” (JACOBS,

1987, p.344). Interestingly, in the announcement of reward for Jacobs' capture, James Norcom recognized her abilities and warned his white fellows about the slave's cleverness: “She speaks easily and fluently, and has an agreable carriage and address.”[1]. As a matter of fact, Jacobs was a politicized woman. Not only she became a writer but also an orator for the abolitionist cause. According to Jean Fagan Yellin, one of Harriet Jacobs’ main contemporary scholars, Jacobs, during her ten-month stay in Rochester, “learned to enjoy working with others for social change.” (YELLIN, 2004, p.101). Jacobs joined anti-slavery groups, including feminist abolitionist movements, establishing contact with female intellectuals like the Quaker Amy Post. As Yellin puts it, by joining these women, “Harriet Jacobs joined the most radical women in the nation, the initiators of the women’s right movement.” (YELLIN, 2004, p.102). Jacobs herself became a strong reference of Anti-Slavery and feminist issues, opening the door to subsequent African-American writers.

As a critical narrative, *Incidents* brings the author’s judgment and assessment of the slavery American society. In this passage, Jacobs ironically exposes the idea of superiority attributed to the white race, as well as criticism against the law institution: “Everywhere, in those humble homes, there was consternation and anguish. But what cared the legislation of the 'dominant race' for the blood they were crushing out of trampled hearts?” (JACOBS, 1987, p.503).

The creation of characters is an essential strategy that Jacobs uses to represent not only African-Americans, but also the beholders of the dominant culture. Firstly, the pseudonym Linda Brent is itself a creation; however, the “invention” of a protagonist goes beyond the pen name. Harriet Jacobs certainly knew that, the image she would construct of herself would be the image of an entire category. That is to say, although the author brought her individual experience, the character Linda Brent was supposed to speak for other “Lindas” in the United States. Thus, Linda Brent is not simply a pseudonym, but yet a recreation of the author and a highly symbolic character.

At the beginning of *Incidents*, Jacobs describes her family formation, telling how happy she had lived for the first six years of life: “I was so fondly shielded that I never dreamed I was a piece of merchandise.” (JACOBS, 1987, p.341). Jacobs creates an image of harmony, as if

1 Source: http://www.harrietjacobs.org. See Appendix.

painting the picture of a “typical” white family, where all “lived together in a comfortable home” (JACOBS, 1987, p.341). Here, it is important for Jacobs to assert her human condition by showing the existence of a family, as well as knowledge of her origin. The transition of periods is also carefully recreated. Intending to touch the audience, the author creates a contrast between the happy environment in her childhood and the dark scenery in her adolescence: “When we entered our new home, we encountered cold looks, cold words, and cold treatment. We were glad when the night came. On my narrow bed I moaned and wept, I felt so desolated and alone.” (JACOBS, 1987, p.345).

Jacobs’ individuality is clearly present in *Incidents*. During the narrative, the author expresses her personal development: from the beginning of her slave experience at twelve years old, when she considered herself “old enough to begin to think in the future” (JACOBS, 1987, p.343), to old age. At the end of her narrative, the old Jacobs regrets the fact she does not have a home of her own, despite her freedom. It is important to note that Jacobs does not end her autobiography in a romantic way. Although she affirms that her story ends with freedom, she stresses her disfavored conditions for a nineteenth-century old woman (unmarried and poor), which gives the closing pages a realistic tone. Contrary to what the critic John Blessingame argues, in *The Slave Community*, that *Incidents* “is too melodramatic” and in the end “all live happily ever after” (BLESSINGAME, 1979, p.382), Jacobs brings a very individual and unromantic moment, as Hazel V. Carby concludes:

> Jacobs had achieved her freedom from slavery, but she was still bound to labor for the existence of herself and her children….Contrary to Blessingame’s interpretation *Incidents* does not conform to the conventional happy ending of the sentimental novel. Linda Brent, in the closing pages of her narrative, was still bound to a white mistress. (CARBY, 2010, p.66).

It is important to observe that Jacobs constructs the end of *Incidents* in two distinct moments: firstly, she reproduces a collective voice by exalting her freedom, in the sense that it represented a communal aim. It is interesting that she does it in critical discourse, reinforcing the realistic tone of her narrative: “I well know the value of that piece of paper; but much as I love freedom, I do not dare to look at it…I despise the miscreant who demanded payment for what never rightfully belonged to him.” (JACOBS, 1987, p.512). In a second moment, she expresses an individual voice, by talking about her personal condition: “The dream of my life is not yet realized. I do not sit with my children in a home of my own. I still long for a hearthstone, however humble.” (JACOBS, 1987, p.513). In this passage, it is interesting to observe that,

although Jacobs mentions a personal desire, her condition is the same as of many other former slaves, who continued chained by poverty.

Another significant moment in the closing pages of *Incidents* is the moment in which "Linda" remembers "Dr. Flint" in a very realistic approach. In fact, when the narrator admits that she still had bitter memories of Dr. Flint, she opts to reveal a more sincere and coherent feeling towards her old malefactor: "There are wrongs which even the grave does not bury. The man was odious to me while he lived, and his memory is odious now." (JACOBS, 1987, p.508). In this passage, the reader learns what is in the autobiographer's mind the moment the text was written.

Along the narrative, Jacobs depicts the slavery system by focusing on her personal deeds and thoughts: "*Give me liberty or give me death*, was my motto" (JACOBS, 1987, p.424). Again, Jacobs asserts her role as protagonist of *Incidents*, and the characters she includes in her narrative not only illustrate the system but also justify or contribute to her development of the story.

One of the most significant characters in *Incidents* is Jacobs' father, named Elijah in real life, but nameless in the narrative. Jacobs begins her autobiography by describing her childhood and how she felt as a free girl. In fact, Jacob's unawareness about her slave condition as a child was due to her father's influence. In the first chapters, he is depicted as a talented and audacious man, who, according to masters had "spoiled his children by teaching them feel that they were human beings." And this was, as Jacobs concluded, "blasphemous doctrine for a slave to teach; presumptuous in him, and dangerous to the masters". (JACOBS, 1987, p.345). It is important that readers know how the autobiographer became what he/she is the moment he/she is writing the autobiography. Thus, we know that Jacobs' father had great importance to her development as an activist and intellectual: "My father, by his nature (…) had more feelings of a free man than is common among slaves" (JACOBS, 1987, p.344). Also, his characterization as a gifted carpenter is really significant, once it not only reinforces his human condition, but also subverts the misconception of black's biological and intellectual inferiority, which was dominant in Jacob's time and society: "My father was…considered so intelligent and skillful in his trade that when buildings out of the common line were to be erected, he was sent for from long distances, to be head workman." (JACOBS, 1987, p.341)

Having inherited the same spirit of freedom and assertiveness as his father, William, Jacobs' brother, is another important character. He is portrayed as a free thinker, and by

reproducing his brother's thought and speech, Jacobs has the chance to convey her abolitionist ideals: "My brother William, now twelve years old, had the same aversion to the word master that he had when he was an urchin of seven years. (…) He said he did not mind the smart of the whip, but he did not like the *idea* of being whipped." (JACOBS, 1987, p.352-3)

Based on the concept that liberty is a natural right, William refuses to buy his own freedom; instead, he intends to conquer it. Jacobs shows that the relationship between master and slave cannot be simplified, showing that it is a mistaken belief that a black slave should be contented for having a kind master, or that a slave only searches for freedom if they are brutally treated. William does not accept his condition as property, even when he is purchased by Mr. Sands, considered a "good master". Haunted by the thought of having his future in the hands of his master's heirs, William escapes in order to conquer his liberty:

> He needed no information they (abolitionists) could give him about slavery to stimulate his desire for freedom. He looked at his hands, and remembered that they were once in irons. What security had he that they would not so again? (JACOBS, 1987, p.456).

This passage breaks the hypocritical concept that well-treated slaves should be happy with their nice masters. Certainly, it is the sort of concept that only a slave narrator could bring with authority, since the idea of "kindness" is highly subjective. For instance, when Harriet recalls her deceased mistress, she finds herself divided into two feelings: gratitude and resentment. Gratitude, for her mistress had been her benefactor, having taught her to read and spell. Resentment, for the promise of freedom had failed: "My mistress had taught me the precepts of God's Words: 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself'…But I was her slave, and I suppose she did not recognize me as her neighbor." (JACOBS, 1987, p.344).

Similarly to William, Benjamin is an essential figure in *Incidents*. In fact, Jacobs portrays both William and Benjamin as two leaders, giving the two characters a very positive image. Although Benjamin appears in short moments of the narrative, he is a really remarkable character. To him, the author dedicates a chapter entitled "The Slave Who Dared to Feel Like a Man" (chapter IV). Indeed, Benjamin delivers one of the strongest speeches in *Incidents*. In that passage, Benjamin goes to prison as punishment for his attempt to escape. Fearing worse consequences, his mother advises him to "be humble", so that his master would forgive him. As a reply, Benjamin says: "Forgive me for what, mother? For letting him treat me like a dog? No! I will never humble myself to him. (…) Here I will stay and die, or till he sells me." (JACOBS,

1987, p.356).

Besides representing the black resistance, Benjamin has another peculiar function. In spite of their blood relation (Benjamin is the narrator's young uncle), Jacobs reveals a blend of passion and admiration for Benjamin, whose beauty and braveness are emphasized by the narrator. I would like to draw attention to two aspects in Jacobs' portrayal of Benjamin. First and foremost, Jacobs' love for the young slave reinforces her humanity, if we consider that as "properties", just like cattle, slaves were not supposed to have any emotional attachment to other slaves. Thus, Jacobs' attachment to Benjamin subverts the idea of promiscuity frequently associated to Africans. Needless to say, this idea of promiscuity was a powerful discourse and strategy to justify black family segregation. The second aspect is that, by constructing Benjamin's image, Jacobs tells the reader that *beauty* (physical and internal) can also be linked with *blackness*: "Benjamin was now a tall, handsome lad, strongly and gracefully made, and with a spirit too bold and daring for a slave." (JACOBS, 1987, p.352). After Benjamin's departure, Jacobs presents a free colored man whose name is not mentioned. Jacobs simply names him "my lover". Once again, Jacobs tells the reader about her interest for a black man and the simultaneous rejection for her master. In this dialog, the narrator defies Dr. Flint by affirming her preference for someone of her race:

> '(...) If you must have a husband, you may take up with one of my slaves' (...)
> I replied: 'Don't you suppose, sir, that a slave can have some preference about marrying? Do you suppose that all men are alike to her?'
> 'Do you love this nigger?' said he, abruptly
> 'Yes, sir.'
> '(…) I supposed you thought more of yourself; that you felt above the insults of such puppies.' (JACOBS, 1987, p.371)

For the physician, Jacobs' preference for the free black carpenter was a personal offense. Certainly, for a nineteenth-century white man, especially a slaveholder, it was a threat to his honor. Moreover, it was probably curious for a female white reader to learn that a black woman did not see a white man as her ideal of a lover, that a doubly "inferior" being (black and woman) did not worship a doubly "superior" one (white and man). About Dr. Flint's refusal to accept Jacobs' interest for a "negro", Jacobs' observes: "He thought to mortify me; to make me feel I had disgraced myself by receiving the honorable addresses of a respectable colored man, in preference to the base proposal of a white man." (JACOBS, 1987, p.372).

Interestingly, it is only about Benjamin and the free carpenter that Jacobs writes in a sentimental discourse. Her involvement with a white man, Mr. Sands, is described in a pragmatic

tone. Although Jacobs admits some interest for the white lawyer, she does not romanticize the event. In fact, her relationship with Mr. Sands does not express any emotion to the reader, since it clearly represents a hierarchical relation, with mutual interests. In a way, Mr. Sands' intention with Jacobs is not different from Dr. Flint's: both intended to live an unimportant adventure with a gorgeous black girl. For both, Jacobs was an object for their masculinity and social hierarchy assertions. Needless to say, Mr. Sands and the old physician are divergent in terms of character, according to the author's description. Indeed, Mr. Sands is not depicted as a villain, but as an ambiguous character: if on one hand, he is described as a kind man, on the other he is influenced by his own social condition. About his failure to emancipate his and Jacobs' children, the author observes: “I was too familiar with slavery not to know that promises made to slaves, though with kind intentions, and sincere at the time, depend upon many contingencies for their fulfillment.” (JACOBS, 1987, p.454). Again, Jacobs and Sands' relation is based on mutual interests and the writer's intention was to find a “protector” to fight against her offender and obtain her liberty. In fact, Jacobs reveals some interest and physical attraction for Mr. Sands, who was, in her words, “an educated and eloquent man”. For Jacobs, the attention coming from a “superior person was, of course, flattering, for human nature is the same in all.” (JACOBS, 1987, p.385). Nevertheless, she makes clear her purpose to obtain from Mr. Sands a protection, rather than a romance.

It goes without saying that the characters presented by Jacobs were real; however, it is important to highlight that they were not only presented, but represented by Jacobs. Dr. and Mrs. Flint, the two villains of her narrative, are representatives of the cruel slaveholders. In fact, the cruelty of masters and mistresses is essential information in slave narratives and portrays an outrageous and recurrent fact. If Linda Brent is the protagonist, Dr. Flint is essentially the antagonist, and his failed attempts to make the protagonist his love affair are present in a great deal of the narrative. The old physician symbolizes the tyranny and domination of the white man towards the black girl, a simultaneous relation of racial and sexual oppression. Jacobs is really careful in the description of Dr. Flint’s, a really important character in *Incidents*. Through Dr. Flint, not only Jacobs depicts the evils of slavery, but also she constructs her own image to the white reader. For instance, Jacobs’ resistance to become the old doctor's lover is stressed along the narrative. It is a way for the narrator to show her “righteousness”, as well as a way of telling that a woman should have power over her body. About her decision to have a relationship with Mr. Sands instead of surrendering to Dr. Flint, she concludes: “It seems less degrading to give

one's self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment." (JACOBS, 1987, p.385).

Jacobs shows how the doctor tries to persuade her to cede to his commands through oppressive discourse rather than through physical force. In this context, Jacobs exposes the failure of a "superior" to brainwash his "subaltern". It is interesting to observe that Dr. Flint's image is ridiculed in the narrative. The author expresses much more resentment and hatred to the old physician than fear. Jacobs is careful not to exalt his image, exposing much more his weaknesses rather than his strengths. For example, she tells the reader how the presence of her grandmother was a threat to Dr. Flint, who did not dare cause the old slave's fury due to her popularity in the neighborhood: "Though she had been a slave, Dr. Flint was afraid of her. He dreaded her scorching rebukes." (JACOBS, 1987, p.362). For a late twentieth-century or a twenty-first-century reader, this passage would certainly go unnoticed. But for a nineteenth-century reader, to learn that a member of the "superior" race, gender and culture "was afraid" of a property, a member of "inferior" categories, certainly caused a feeling of strangeness.

Again, female slave narrators established authority to depict black women's experience in slavery, as well as authority to question the concept of civilization among white men. In *Incidents*, Dr. Flint represents the white male power, an image which is reconstructed and then subverted by the author. Indeed, Jacobs uses some relevant strategies to represent and consequently deconstruct her master's figure. As remarked before, it is through the antagonist that the narrator (and the author) constructs her own image. Thus, it is by diminishing the villain morally and even intellectually that Jacobs asserts her own image. Again, Jacobs tells how unable the villain is to convince her to have sexual intercourse with him, showing his lack of firmness. Jacobs even depicts the doctor in pathetic scenes, showing that, despite her condition of slave, she is the one who is in control:

> One morning, as he passed through the hall, to leave the house, he contrived to thrust a note into my hand…He wrote that he had made up his mind to go to Louisiana; that he should take several slaves with him, and intended I should be one of the number…If I merited kindness from him, he assured me that it would be lavishly bestowed. He begged me to think over the matter, and answer the next day…He had a large practice in the town, and I rather thought he had made up the story merely to frighten me. However that might be, I was determined that I would never go to Louisiana with him. (JACOBS,1987, p.373).

Also, she exposes the slaveholder's weaknesses by telling, for instance, his fear of Aunt Martha, Linda's grandmother. Furthermore, Jacobs describes how Linda was able to escape from her master, deceiving the old physician for years. Once again, the nineteenth-century white reader was possibly surprised, perhaps many of them even skeptical, that a slave could be cleverer than her master:

> Opposite my window was a pile of feather beds. On the top of these I could lie perfectly concealed, and commanded a view of the street through which Dr. Flint passed to his office. Anxious as I was, I felt a gleam of satisfaction when I saw him. Thus far I had outwitted him, and I triumphed over it. Who can blame slaves for being cunning? They are constantly compelled to resort to it. It is the only weapon of the weak and oppressed against the strength of their tyrants. (JACOBS, 1987, p.426).

Certainly runaway slaves caused their "owners" not only financial damage, but also public embarrassment for having been cheated by his property, especially if this property was a woman. In the passage above, the autobiographer recalls the moment in which she feels proud for deceiving her "superior", and similarly she justifies the fact that a slave could be astute. It is interesting that the author carefully pictures the scene in a way that the doctor is distant, small, cheated and, somehow, lost. In contrast, Linda is on top, in control, observing her master from above, feeling revenged for a while.

Along with Dr. Flint, Mrs. Flint is another villain in Linda's trajectory. The character represents the abusive mistresses who feel threatened by the presence of female black slaves. To portray the character, Jacobs writes a chapter entitled "The Jealous Mistress" (chapter VI), which not only represents Mrs. Flint but also many other American mistresses. Using the same strategy to assert her own image, Jacobs deconstructs the idea of righteousness and civilization among slaveholder's wives:

> Mrs. Flint, like many southern women, was totally deficient in energy. She had not strength to superintendent her household affair, but her nerves were so strong, that she could sit in her easy chair and see a woman whipped, till the blood trickled from every stroke of the lash. (JACOBS, 1987, p.348).

Mrs. Flint and Linda Brent's relation symbolize the conflict between white and black women, a relation of racial and social oppression. What Jacobs presents is the view of the slave, and, in this sense, the author attacks the villain in a critical language, proving to be an effective observant of her opponent: "She [Mrs. Flint] was a member of the church; but partaking the Lord's supper did not seem to put her in a Christian frame of mind." (JACOBS, 1987, p.348). Notwithstanding, Jacobs also presents the female perspective and, in this case, the autobiographer

shows a sort of sympathy for the mistresses' consciousness of their husbands' unfaithfulness: "I could not expect kindness...from her under the circumstances in which I was placed. I could not blame her. Slaveholder's wives feel as other women would under similar circumstances." (JACOBS, 1987, p.366).

However, it does not mean that Jacobs was sympathetic with her former mistress, but yet, with white ladies in general, who played the social game and silently accepted the male subjugation. Under the female perspective, Jacobs demonstrates a sort of "understanding" to the white women's jealousy, not because she is submissive to them, but because it is the matter of gender which interests Jacobs here. Contrary to what John Blessingame believes (that Jacobs was sympathetic with Mrs. Flint), what we see is the author's ambiguous view. Again, through Mrs. Flint, Jacobs presents the female criticism against the male power; however, as a slave, Jacobs does not spare the slaveholder's wives from attack and criticism: "Southern women often marry a man knowing that he is the father of many slaves. They do not trouble themselves about it. They regard such children as property, as marketable as the pigs on the plantation." (JACOBS, 1987, p.368).

Through *Incidents,* Harriet Jacobs could not only expose the slavery system, but also affirm herself as a writer. Again, the creation of characters is Jacobs' strongest strategies to depict the system and to build her image. In this context, another character responsible for Linda's development is Aunt Martha. The autobiographer portrays her grandmother as a strong Christian woman, almost heroic. Through Aunt Martha, Jacobs could also reveal the power of her people, showing how several slaves fought to purchase their freedom (or their childrens') by exploring their own skills:

> She was much praised for her cooking; and her nice crackers became so famous in the neighborhood that many people were desirous to obtain it…The business proved profitable; and each year she laid by a little, which was saved for a fund to purchase her children.(JACOBS, 1987, p.342)

It is a moment that the autobiographer makes the white reader picture a black individual working for him/herself, at a time when having a group of individuals being unlimited used and exploited by a distinct group was generally seen as normal. More than that, it was justified through misconceptions and stereotypes created by dominant forces, as discussed before. At the same time, Jacobs emphasizes the fact that the slavery system in a way benefited from black slaves' business, since slaves needed official permission from their masters to labor for

themselves. Thus, they were supposed to pay for this license, be it in money or in any sort of means. Furthermore, through Aunt Martha, Jacobs could expose once again the complex relation between slaves and supposedly “good” masters when the issue was money and material property:

> She [Aunt Martha] had laid up three hundred dollars, which her mistress one day begged as a loan, promising to pay her soon. The reader probably knows that no promise or writing given to a slave is legally binding; for, according to Southern laws, a slave, *being* property, can *hold* no property. When my grandmother lent her earnings to her mistress, she trusted solely to her honor. The honor of a slaveholder to a slave! (JACOBS, 1987, p.342).

It is interesting to note that Jacobs creates the character Aunt Martha not only to represent her grandmother but also to give the slave woman an image of “superiority” and “heroism”. Simultaneously, she exposes embarrassing scenes for the member of the dominant culture, in which the character Aunt Martha is the one who provides help to her “superiors”. In this passage, Jacobs makes the reader visualize a white gentleman counting on the charity of an old black woman:

> This Mr. Thorne had become poor and reckless long before he left the south and such persons had much rather go to one of the faithful old slaves to borrow a dollar, or get a good dinner, than to go to one whom they consider an equal. It was such acts of kindness as these for which he professes to feel grateful to my grandmother. (JACOBS, 1987, p.492).

Although portrayed as a humble Christian slave, Aunt Martha is also depicted as a powerful character, despite her condition of property. The relevance of Aunt Martha in the narrative is not only in the protagonist's development but also (and especially) in her relation with slaveholders. In fact, Jacobs re-creates moments in which the character who represents her grandmother is often in a superior condition in relation to some members of the dominant race: the money she lends her mistress, the food she offers to poor whites and the “fear” she causes on Dr. Flint.

The creation of characters is not the only strategy used by Jacobs to depict slavery accurately. As an attentive autobiographer, Jacobs played the role both of the writer and the historian. One of the roles of the autobiographer is to be the witness of particular happenings of his/her time, being able to testify precisely not only what he/she saw but also what he/she felt. Family segregation, for instance, is one of the events which most marked the slave narratives. In *Incidents*, it is described under the perspective of someone who felt authorized to do so. In fact, Harriet Jacobs used her experience as a slave, woman and mother to attack one of the cruelest events in slavery. During all her life in bondage, she could see many mothers being separated

from their children and husbands, and the coldness of slaveholders and slave-traders who used this method as a way of avoiding the feeling of community among the captives: “I saw a mother lead seven children to the auction-block (...) I met that mother in the street, and her wild, haggard face lives today in my mind.” (JACOBS, 1987, p.351). Needless to say, Jacobs not only intended to touch the audience but to assert women slaves humanity as well. The autobiographer provides the reader with her view on family segregation in two phases: the first, the impression she gets by witnessing several cases of family segregation; and the second, her own experience as a mother. In both cases, Jacobs makes it clear to the white audience that the slave mother and the slave father are the actual “owners” of the slave child. Interestingly, Jacobs recalls how her father rooted such idea in his children’s mind. In this passage, the narrator tells a moment in which William is divided between his condition of son (thus, of a human) and his condition of property:

> One day, when his father and his mistress both happened to call him at the same time, he hesitated between the two; being perplexed to know which had the strongest claim upon his obedience. He finally concluded to go to his mistress. When my father reproved him for it, he said, ‘You both called me, and I didn’t know which I ought to go to first.’ ‘You are *my* child,’ replied our father, ‘and when I call you, you should come immediately, if you have to pass through fire and water. (JACOBS, 1987, p.345).

What may sound obvious for a twentieth and twenty-first century reader, for the nineteenth-century audience, was, perhaps, not so clear. Again, Jacobs was careful in stressing black slaves’ humanity and the question of maternity and paternity was crucial in this assertion. By reproducing and re-creating her father’s words, the autobiographer intentionally expresses her view on the matter. By affirming that Willie was *his* child, Elijah (as well as Jacobs), subverts the legal claim of the time that a property could not hold another property. What is more, the very idea that the slave child should obey his/her father instead of his/her mistress asserts the authority of the slave father (as well as the slave mother) over the child.

Although Jacobs managed to avoid that her children were sold to distant lands, the autobiographer highlights the fate of slave mothers along the narrative. Since her early experience in slavery, Jacobs learned that female slaves were excluded from the condition of womanhood. Again, the autobiographer attempts to sensitize the white female audience by contrasting the black and white womanhood:

> O, you happy free women, contrast your New Year's day with that of the poor bond-woman. With you, it is a pleasant season, and the light of the day is blessed (....). But to the slave mother New Year's day comes with peculiar sorrows. She sits on her cold cabin floor, watching the children who may all be torn from her the next morning.(...) She may be an ignorant creature, degraded by the system that has brutalized her from childhood; but she has a mother's instinct, and is capable of feeling a mother's agonies. (JACOBS, 1987, p.350)

In fact, Jacobs defended the idea that the fate of a slave woman was worse than the destiny of a male slave. As we have seen so far, the autobiographer was able to testify on the two main events against black women: sexual harassment and family segregation. Jacobs also attacks the American constitution for its lack of protection and its support to the system: “there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death; all these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men.” (JACOBS, 1987, p.361).

As mentioned before, *Incidents* has a great deal of critical approach, which means that the author is often inviting the reader to reflect. This was, without a doubt, an audacious attitude for an ex-slave- a *thing* - to do with the white reader – a *person*. Certainly, there were also black readers who established dialog with Jacobs; nevertheless, the slave narratives were mainly addressed to the white audiences who were supposed to be aware of the evil of the institution of slavery. By writing, for example, “if you have never been a slave, you cannot imagine the acute sensation of suffering at my heart...” (JACOBS, 1987, p.508), the autobiographer certainly knew that the audience she intended to sensitize in fact had never been a slave. It was a way of reminding the member of the dominant culture that only those who had been in the same position of herself were authorized to document the event.

The relation between autobiographer and reader was, in the nineteenth century, based on the idea of truth, and Harriet Jacobs needed their readers' reliance on her words, especially for the fact that her narrative was a means of indictment:

> I hardly expect the reader will credit me, when I affirm that I lived in that dismal hole, almost deprived of light and air, and with no space to move my limbs, for nearly seven years.(...) Members of my family, now living in New York and Boston, can testify to the truth of what I say.” (JACOBS, 1987,p.467)

What Jacobs affirms to be real – her concealment for seven years in a cubicle - is actually a symbol of resistance. Again, for a nineteenth-century autobiographer, it was important to make the audience trust that the scenes happened according to the author’s description. In fact, the period Jacobs spent in her grandmother’s house is the subtitle of the narrative: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl- Seven Years Concealed*. Thus, it is not simply a passage between her life in bondage and the escape to the North. It is a period of personal growth to the author, a moment in which her individuality is stressed:

> Dark thoughts passed through my mind as I lay there day after day… Sometimes I thought God was a

> compassionate Father, who would forgive my sins for the sake of my sufferings. At other times, it seemed to me there was no justice or mercy in the divine government. I asked why the curse of slavery was permitted to exist, and why I had been persecuted and wronged from youth upward. These things took the shape of mystery, which is to this day not so clear to my soul as I trust it will be hereafter (JACOBS, 1987, p.445).

What is more, it represents an attitude in which a slave woman takes the control of her life and deceives those who were alleged to be mentally superior. As discussed in chapter I, slaves' act of escaping meant for the slaveholder not only financial damage, but public embarrassment as well, since it indicated that a slave was able to outwit his/her master. In fact, Jacobs reveals how she had planned to use her cleverness to, as Yelling puts it, “play mindgames with the man who for years had tried to control her consciousness.” (YELLING, 2004, p.57). In order to make the old doctor believe she was distant, Jacobs decides to write him a dated letter from New York. By revealing: “I resolved to match my cunning against his cunning” (JACOBS, 1987, p.448), the author affirms herself as clever as (or more than) the slaveholder, and once again, proves to be the one who is in control. As Yelling observes, not only had Jacobs enmeshed the old physician in her design, “he was even embroidering in it, using her fabrication as the basis for his own forgery.” (YELLING, 2004, p.57). The letter is, thus, a symbol of Jacobs' intellectual triumph over her oppressor, a proof of a white man's incapacity in front of a black woman's smartness.

Challenging the concepts of mental obedience to the white man and state, Jacobs makes use of her individual experience to criticize American society. For instance, she questions the concept of “civilization” at a time when such concept was very well defined in Western societies. For Jacobs, a “civilized” country could not support the human bondage system, once it was contradictory and anti-religious. One of the strongest characteristics of Jacobs as a writer is the way she addressed the audience. In fact, she intended to transmit a particular message in an oral approach, as if delivering a speech. Inducing the reader to think over the concept of “civilization”, Jacobs says:

> I am glad that missionaries go out to the dark corners of the earth; but I ask them not to overlook the dark corners at home. Talk to American slaveholders as you talk to savages in Africa. Tell *them* it was wrong to traffic in men. Tell them it is sinful to sell their own children, and atrocious to violate their own daughters. Tell them that all men are brethren, and that man has no right to shut out the light of knowledge from his brother. Tell them they are answerable to God for sealing up the Foundation of Life from souls that are thirsting for it. (JACOBS, 1987, p.402)

Likewise, Jacobs shows knowledge of the distorted doctrine that white preachers used as tool of manipulation and enslavement. The author denounces the slaveholders' strategy to convince slaves of their “natural inferiority” by distorting the Biblical texts and using Christianity

as an oppressive religion. The author explains, for instance, that after the alarm caused by Nat Turner insurrection, “the slaveholders came to the conclusion that it would be well to give the slaves enough of religious instruction to keep them from murdering their masters.” (JACOBS, 1987, p.397). It is important to highlight that Jacobs' revolt was against the way white men and women used Christianity for their own purposes, not against Christianity itself. As discussed in the first chapter, the slave narrative allowed its authors to depict and question the dominant culture. Although many of the slave narrators embraced the Christian doctrine, they expressed their personal views on the religious institution. Jacobs, for instance, had the support of Quakers for many years; however, the author shows a realistic perspective on the way the Christian doctrine was misused and manipulated: “There is a difference between Christianity and religion in the south. If a man goes to communion table, and pays money into the treasury of the church, no matter if it be the price of blood, he is called religious.” (JACOBS, 1987, p.403).

Incidents is a rich autobiographical narrative which also brings elements of a novel. Let us remember that the autobiographer is, above all, a writer, and the writing process requires a very important element: talent. As Linda Anderson observes, vocation is a vital prerequisite for a successful autobiographical work, and “it is also the way in which serious autobiography, written by the few who are capable of self-reflection, is to be distinguished from its popular counterpart” (ANDERSON, 2001, p.43). Harriet Jacobs indeed not only used her individual experience, but also her capacity of imagination to produce her literary work, which means that Jacobs, as a novelist, had to be strategic to involve the reader. For instance, when the author narrates her refuge in a white lady's home, she creates a tension, leading the reader to imagine that she would be soon caught by the villain, Dr. Flint; nevertheless, the thriller has a happy ending:

> Suddenly I heard a voice that chilled my blood. The sound was too familiar to me, it had been too dreadful, for me not to recognize at once my old master. He was in the house, and I once concluded he had come to seize me. I looked around in terror. There was no way of escape. The voice receded. I suppose the constable was with him and they were searching in the house (…) After a while I heard approaching footsteps; the key was turned in my door. I braced myself against the wall to keep from falling. I ventured to look up and there stood my kind benefactress alone. I was too much overcome to speak, and sunk down upon the floor. (JACOBS, 1987,p.429)

Needless to say, the more the autobiographer involves the reader, the more he or she is able to make the audience sensitive to the object of indictment. In the passage we have just read, the author not only re-created the fact that actually happened, but also she had to do it in a way so that the reader could grasp the narrator's anxiety. It certainly reflects the idea that “not all fiction is autobiographical, but on this deeper level all autobiography is fiction”, as Burton Pike puts it in

“Time in Autobiography” (PIKE, 1976, p.337). In this sense, Jacobs fictionalizes her narrative, not because she distorts or invents the facts, but because she takes the events of her life and reconstructs them with fiction strategies and elements. In the passage mentioned before, Linda, the protagonist, is carefully depicted in a moment of great tension; and the reader is “supposed” to hope the villain, Dr. Flint, does not discover the heroine and triumph over her.

Jacobs demonstrated her capacity not only as a writer, but as a reader as well. The reference to literary works and characters (*Robinson Crusoe* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) shows Jacobs’ strategy to prove how cultured an ex-slave could be. The intertextuality with canonical works is also an ironical way to attack the injustice of human bondage: “This honorable gentlemen (Mr. Bruce) would not have voted for the Fugitive Slave Law, as did the senator in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; on the contrary, he was strongly opposed to it.” (JACOBS, 1987, p.507). It is interesting to note that Jacobs makes reference to a literary work produced in the realms of the dominant society to attack this same society. This strategy contrasts with the thought among eighteenth and nineteenth century intellectuals that black writers just echoed the white man's words and ideas, as Hume writes about a Jamaican Cambridge-educated poet, Francis Williams, who was “admired for very slender accomplishments, like a parrot who speaks a few words plainly.” (HUME, 1984, p.206).

The use of language is another relevant aspect in the narrative. Jacobs exposes both the standard and the non-standard English, that is, the former spoken by whites and the latter spoken by black slaves. Interestingly, the author shows her knowledge of the canonical language, affirming her capacity to use the English spoken by the “superior”. It shows not only the blacks' cognitive capability but also a serious disobedience of the law which prohibited slaves to be alphabetized. The representation of the black dialect shows that the author had the domain and awareness of the two types of speech, being able to subvert the tradition.

Harriet Jacobs' personal experience became also a documented historical fact, and like other slave narratives, her autobiography contributed to perpetuate the memory of slavery: “So I was *sold* at last! (…) The bill of sale is on record, and future generations will learn from it that women were articles of traffic in New York, late in the nineteenth century of the Christian religion” (JACOBS, 1987, p.512). Certainly, Jacobs knew that her autobiography was important not only to her present time but also to future years. It was important to her present time in the

sense that it met a more urgent need: to denounce the institution and promote its abolition. It was important for future generations in the sense that it could serve as a historical document, a register of issues that should never be forgotten.

It is important to emphasize that *Incidents* supplies the reader with some pieces of information that are not found in History books. Many of them are indeed unimaginable, and their concreteness could only be provided by a victim of the system. As we have seen, it is interesting to learn, for instance, that many bankrupt whites resorted to old slaves to borrow a dollar or to have a meal. It is also essential that readers learn in details how slaves were physically tortured and morally reduced, and learn that methods of punishment and subjugation went beyond chains and whipping post. As Jacobs remarks “No pen can give an adequate description of the all-pervading corruption produced by slavery.” (JACOBS, 1987, p.382).

Harriet Jacobs' autobiography was adapted into a theater play by the African-American dramatist Lydia Diamond in 2008. The play reflects a contemporary view on Jacobs' narrative, which means that the themes presented in *Incidents* are still recurrent in the twenty-first century. Diamond gives the audience a chance to analyze important issues concerning human bondage in the light of contemporaneity. As Linda Hutcheon puts it in *A Theory of Adaptation*, "Most often adaptations are not backdated but rather are updated to shorten the gap between works created earlier and contemporary audiences.” (HUTCHEON, 2006, p.146). The play is based not only on Jacob's life, but also on the incidents of other slave narrators. According to Eric Rosen, the play's Artistic Director, the adaptation “weaves other slave narratives and spirituals into Harriet’s story, resulting in a powerful testament of personal resilience and an unflinching look at the female slave experience.”[2]

As a matter of fact, very few slave narrators have been portrayed in films or theater plays. Elizabeth Keckley, for instance, was played by Oprah Winfrey in the television production *Lincoln*, in 1992. However, as the title suggests, Keckley is not the central character in the film, but yet the former American president. Mary Prince was depicted in a BBC six-part feature film series *A Skirt Through History* (1994), which tells the story of women who marked British history. Frederick Douglass has been portrayed in a great deal of documentaries, including *Freedom: A History of Us* (2003), in which he was played by Morgan Freeman. They are

2 Source: www.kcrep.org/useruploads/files/education/10-11/HarrietJacobs_LG_2010.pdf

examples of slave autobiographers who became characters in films and documentaries, and *Incidents* is a rare case of a slave narrative which was adapted into a theater play.

The importance of Jacobs' work is not only for the taboos she broke, and the gift she displayed, but also for the fact that the topics she presented are still object of debate in contemporaneity. Although Jacobs was a representative of her social group, she asserted herself as an individual who, during her time in bondage, was able to decide and control the incidents of her life. For over a century, the authorship of *Incidents* was questioned, before a new edition was published in 1987, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson explain in *Reading Autobiography* (2001):

> Soon after the publication the narrative was dismissed as a fraud and a fiction. More than a century later, scholar Jean Fagan Yellin documented its historical veracity, which helped move *Incidents* from the status of forgotten fiction to much-taught slave narrative." (SMITH, WATSON, 2001, p.36)

Currently, the book has become part of university curricula and has been translated into several languages.[3] Undoubtedly, the inclusion of *Incidents* in current academic studies reinforces the idea that the issues Jacobs presented are meaningful in the twentieth-first century. Although slavery was abolished, questions of race and gender are still of great importance in contemporaneity. Even the question of human bondage and concepts of "civilization" are topics of current debates, given the present-time events in the world.

Incidents is thus not an account of a poor slave - Harriet Jacobs would certainly refuse this label. It is an account of a subversive abolitionist who succeeded in portraying the system as well as representing her race and gender. It is a narrative which raises questions concerning the author's time, and questions which are vital for subsequent generations.

3 Source: www.harrietjacobs.org

3 NEO-SLAVE NARRATIVES: A POST-MODERN PERSPECTIVE

The neo-slave narratives came as a contemporary re-reading of eighteenth and nineteenth-century autobiographies that were written by former and fugitive slaves. As Ashraf Rushdy puts it in *Neo-Slave Narratives*, the genre can be defined as "contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative." (RUSHDY, 1999, p.03). Going back to the matter of representation of slavery and the black man/woman, we will observe that important elements such as time, experience, memory, and social position mark the difference between the two genres. On the other hand, it is important to consider that both treat the question of race as a key issue, although not necessarily a central subject. Besides Sherley Anne William's *Dessa Rose* (1986), which will be discussed in the following chapter, the genre neo-slave narrative can be found in novels like Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966), Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), David Bradley's *The Chaneysville Inicident* (1981), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Charles R. Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990), among others.

The term neo-slave narrative was coined by the critic Bernard W. Bell in *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (1987), in which he defines the genre as a blend of "fable, legend, and slave narrative to protest racism and justify the deeds, struggles, migrations and spirit of black people." According to Bell, neo-slave narrative authors "rely more on the artifice of storyteller and humorist than on social realism to stimulate our imagination, win our sympathy and awaken our conscience to moral and social justice." (BELL, 1987, p.285). As discussed in this chapter, twentieth-century "slave narrators" depict slavery based on their contemporary perspectives, making use of their present-time literary strategies to convey issues of racism, human bondage and others in the light of modernity. As Bernard W. Bell puts it, neo-slave narrative authors resort to elements of fantasy to involve the contemporary reader. What is more, the present-time reader is enticed with the story by identifying issues related to the social and cultural movements of his or her time.

Before analyzing the main features of the genre, I would like to explore the following questions: what does slavery have to do with the mid-twentieth century? What does it have to do with contemporary issues? If we consider the black movements which occurred in the United States in this period, especially the Black Power, we will see that African slavery was still object

of debate among intellectuals at that time (or even today). African-American Slavery was legally abolished in 1865, but in practice, its effects persisted for a long time in the country and motivated black artists to go back to history and bring it to present-time scenery, as Rushdy points out:

> In the 1960s a set of intellectual and social conditions associated with the Civil Rights and Black Power movements generated a change in the historiography of slavery. This convergence of an intellectual change in the academic study of the American past and the social movements of the decade, especially Black Power, in turn, affected the fictional representation of slavery from the late sixties to the present.(…) The study of American slavery was invigorated by a renewed respect for the truth and value of slave testimony, the significance of slave cultures, and the importance of slave resistance, all ideas that had briefly informed a flurry of studies by historians and cultural workers on the Old Left in the thirties. (RUSHDY, 1999, p.3-4).

As we have seen in the first chapter, slave autobiographers formed a literature of resistance by exposing issues concerning their racial, social and cultural groups in order to attack the dominant culture of their times. Neo-slave narrative authors also formed resistance literature by exposing matters concerning history; however, they do it in order to analyze their present-time society, as we are going to see along this chapter.

The first feature I would like to examine is the relation between authors and readers in neo-slave narratives. Differently from eighteenth and nineteenth-century slave autobiographers, who needed the white audience to believe in the legitimacy of their accounts, neo-slave narrative writers do not concern in telling verisimilar stories. Nonetheless, they aim at treating issues which are object of debate in their present times. As Charles J. Heglar discusses in *Rethinking the Slave Narrative,* “just as ‘classic’ slave narratives are a form of autobiography, neo-slave narratives are a form of historical fiction.” The meaning of neo-slave narratives, Heglar continues, “clearly involves how slavery should and can be remembered in order for a contemporary audience to come to terms with and move beyond the past.” (HEGLAR, 2001, p.149).

If we take as example Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, we will see how the author combines the “real” with the “unreal” to portray the universe of slavery, as well as the universe of black women. It is interesting to note how a historical fact is rescued and recreated with the tools of magic realism. The novel is based on the true story of Margaret Garner, a fugitive slave who, intending to prevent her children to return to slavery, cuts the throat of her 2-year-old daughter. Amazed by Garner’s story, Morrison gave the 1980’s reader the opportunity to go to the nineteenth century and visualize a realistic picture of the life of former slaves. However, this

cruel “realism” is blended with the fantastic and supernatural. Morrison concluded that making Garner the protagonist would not be as challenging as making the killed baby the central character, as she explains in the forewords of the novel:

> The historical Margaret Garner is fascinating, but, to a novelist, confining. Too little imaginative space there for my purposes. So I would invent her thoughts, plumb them for a subtext that was historically true in essence, but not strictly factual in order to relate her history to contemporary issues about freedom, responsibility, and women's "place."…The figure most central to the story would have to be her, the murdered, not the murderer, the one who lost everything and had no say in any of it. (MORRISON, 1998, p.4).

Making of a ghost the main character of her novel, not only to treat issues of race, but also the relation between mother and daughter, the author re-creates the scenery of post-war racist society in an unconventional narrative. In other words, the author tells a “realistic” story by reproducing events which transcend “normality”. In her words:

> I wanted the reader to be kidnapped, thrown ruthlessly into an alien environment as the first step into a shared experience with the book's population-just as the characters were snatched from one place to another, from any place to any other, without preparation or defense. (MORRISON, 1998, p.4)

Likewise, the science fiction novelist Octavia Butler resorts to fantasy to depict slavery. Her *Kindred* invites the reader to move between the past and present in every chapter, creating a link between the 1800s and the 1970s. The protagonist Dana Frankling is repeatedly transported from her present time to an antebellum plantation in the South. As well as Toni Morrison in *Beloved*, Butler is not interested whether the reader is skeptical about supernatural phenomena or not. What interests the novelist is the portrayal of slavery and the connection between the pre-war system with issues in vogue in the 1970s. In *Remembering Generations*, Ashraf Rushdy observes that *Kindred*, being a time-traveling narrative, is “less a morality tale” and “more an exploration of tensions, contradictions, and anxieties attendant on those who attempt to understand and try to accept the genuine impurities in American politics.” (RUSHDY, 2001, p.101).

Considering that “classic” slave narratives intended not only to indict slavery, but also to assert their humanity and identity, we can say that neo-slave narratives represent slavery in order to attack current dominant cultures. That is, the system is depicted, reinvented and presented to the contemporary reader, who is expected to grasp the convergences between the antebellum and the twentieth-century Western societies. Thus, issues of racism, social oppression and religious manipulation, for instance, are brought in fictional slave narratives, since they are objects of debate both in the eighteenth and in the twentieth centuries. These subjects are brought in neo-

slave narratives and reflect the ideologies of the mid-twentieth century. In *Neo-Slave Narratives*, Ashraf Rushdy observes that violence, property and identity are the main three topics present in most of neo-slave narratives, marking the convergence between the autobiographical and the fictional slave narrative. According to Rushdy, these three topics "assumed a prominent place in this new discourse on slavery because they so effectively demonstrated the connection between the political climate of the sixties and the long-term effects the institution of slavery had on American social life." (RUSHDY, 1999 p.23). Indeed, the sixties as well as the seventies were crucial eras for the assertion of neo-slave narratives, and certainly the atmosphere of protest inspired its authors to travel into the past and resurrect issues that moved the American society in these periods.

As a matter of fact, a great deal of neo-slave narratives has been written by female novelists, and consequently, female issues are strongly present in these works. Moreover, the presence of black feminist criticism has contributed to the analysis of neo-slave narratives under a feminist view, as Heglar concludes:

> With the rise of black feminist literary criticism, more recent critical analysis of the neo-slave narrative has developed with a strong feminist component. To a certain extent, this feminist emphasis is justified because female authors have been conspicuously present in writing neo-slave narratives. (HEGLAR, 2001, p.148).

If on one hand eighteenth and nineteenth-century slave autobiographies were predominantly written by male authors, on the other, neo-slave narratives are chiefly produced by black women. These writers, having not experienced slavery, have certainly considered themselves authorized to expose issues related to their race and gender, making use of history and the personal trajectory of their ancestors, as Margaret Walker stated, on her novel *Jubilee*: "I wanted to tell the story that my grandmother had told me, and to set the record straight where Black people are concerned in terms of the Civil War, of slavery, segregation and reconstruction." (ROWELL, 1975, p.10). Needless to say, important neo-slave narrative authors are not included in the "black female" standard. Black male novelists like David Bradley, Ernest Gaines, and Charles R. Johnson have contributed to the establishment and growth of neo-slave narratives as protest literature. What is more, a small number of white writers like M.T. Anderson, for instance, also dared to fictionalize the antebellum slavery.

Nonetheless, it is the neo-slave narrative written by black women which gains more notoriety. Going back to the question of social and cultural ideologies in the mid and late

twentieth century, it is worth observing that feminism was a vital movement in this period, as Stuart Hall puts it in *The Question of Cultural Identity.* Hall refers to feminism as the fifth "de-centering" of the subject, having great impact "both as theoretical critique and as a social movement." The feminist movement included other issues, as Hall points out:

> Each movement appealed to the social identity of its supporters. Thus, feminism appealed to women, sexual politics to gays and lesbians, racial struggles to blacks, anti-war to peaceniks, and so on. This is the historical birth of what came to be known as *identity politics* – one identity per movement. (HALL, 2007, p.610).

Nevertheless, feminism was a movement dominated by middle-class white women. That is, black women did not have so much space to express themselves as white women did. Moreover, the racial movement, quite significant in the sixties and seventies, was essentially led by black men. Therefore, black female writers found themselves in-between the feminist and the Africanist groups, as Valerie Smith remarks in her article "Gender and Afro-Americanist Literary Theory and Criticism":

> Among white feminists, this impulse has taken the form of presuming that one may generalize and theorize about women's experience on the basis of the lives and works of white women from the middle class. Similarly, Afro-Americanists, mostly male, have assumed that one may theorize about the experience of blacks in a racist culture on the basis of the lives of black men alone. (SMITH, 1989, p.56)

In this sense, female issues brought by slave narrators like Harriet Jacobs and Mary Prince had a great significance to black female novelists between 1960s and 1980s. It goes without saying that contemporary writers have presented such questions in a less subtle approach than did antebellum autobiographers, considering the audience and the time. In *Beloved*, for example, Morrison exposes the sexual abuse suffered by the character Ella as a young slave, making use of a more straightforward language to describe the scene:

> Her puberty was spent in a house where she was shared by father and son, whom she called "the lowest yet." It was "the lowest yet" who gave her a disgust for sex and against whom she measured all atrocities. A killing, a kidnap, a rape - whatever, she listened and nodded. Nothing compared to "the lowest yet." (MORRISON, 1998, p.345)

Morrison also exposes the condition of young slave girls as object of desire among white and black men, and the brutalization of slave men stimulated by their masters. The author paints an unsubtle image of slave men's sexuality and how promiscuity is seen as powerful weapon to manipulate the subaltern:

> The five Sweet Home men looked at the new girl and decided to let her be. They were young and so sick with the absence of women they had taken to calves. Yet they let the iron-eyed girl be, so she could choose in spite of the fact that each one would have beaten the others to mush to have her. It took her a year to choose--a long, tough year of thrashing on pallets eaten up with dreams of her. A

> year of yearning, when rape seemed the solitary gift of life. (...) All in their twenties, minus women, fucking cows, dreaming of rape, thrashing on pallets, rubbing their thighs and waiting for the new girl--the one who took Baby Suggs' place after Halle bought her with five years of Sundays. (MORRISON, 1998, p.23)

As discussed in the previous chapter, black female autobiographers like Jacobs wrote mainly to the white female audience. That is, female slave narrators wrote chiefly to members of a distinct cultural, racial and social group of women. It means that the author-reader relation was certainly a great deal complex, considering that, although Jacobs and autobiographers alike treated female matters (like motherhood and sexual harassment), they also brought issues of race, human subjugation, and even attack of the Christian religion. These last three topics were perhaps of less interest or comprehension among white women. In this case, the reader could not identify herself with the author since there was an invisible wall between these two categories: the woman and the property.

Neo-Slave narrative female authors, in contrast, have a diverse audience, and the very fact that these authors are able to share with other black women issues that white feminists and male Africanists have ignored, is quite significant. In this context, the author-reader relation (I mean, the black female writer and the black female audience), reflects the idea of complicity between the woman reader and the woman writer that Patrocinio Schweickart defines as a “dialogic setting”: “the two women are engaged in intimate conversation.” (SCHWEICKART, 1989, p.35)

The scholar Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu, in her *Black Women Writers and The American Neo-Slave Narrative* observes that what novelists like Margaret Walker, Toni Morrison, Octavia Butler and Sherley Anne Williams have in common is the “insistence on placing strong female characters who mother at the center of their imaginative investigations into that past.” (BEAULIEU, 1999, p.137). By highlighting the black slave woman’s strength, neo-slave narrative authors not only rescue the image of antebellum black women, but also depict the contemporary black woman. As Beaulieu puts out, neo-slave narrative female writers are “interested in reclaiming, repositioning, and revaluing the black woman's role in America, both in history and in contemporary society.” (BEAULIEU, 1999, p. 02).

Another important characteristic of neo-slave narratives is their nonlinear structure, in contrast with classic slave narratives. Let us remember Harriet Jacob’s *Incidents*. In fact, Jacobs accounts her development from childhood until her adulthood, every chapter following the order of events. However, we should not forget that her work was written in the nineteenth century, and

the “model” of autobiography, needless to say, differs from the contemporary ones, which are more fragmented and less chronological. For instance, when analyzing *Beloved*, Charles Heglar observes that Morrison’s novel “is nonlinear and defiantly out of chronological order, as her protagonist, Sethe, struggles and fails to forget memories of her slave past and her attempt to adjust to freedom.” (HEGLAR, 2001, p.149).

Differently from writers like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, neo-slave narrative narrators are not concerned with guiding the reader in an orderly narrative. If on one hand, Jacobs, for instance, begins her autobiography with “I was born a slave”, on the other, *Kindred*'s narrator begins her narrative in an unconventional style. In the Prologue, Dana Franklin informs the reader: “I lost an arm on my last trip home. My left arm.” (BUTLER, 2003, p.09). From the very beginning, the reader notices an atmosphere of incompleteness and disorder in the story. In the first chapter, the reader is transported from 1976 to a mysterious place and time before it is clear that it refers to a plantation in the nineteenth century: “The trouble began long before June 9, 1976, when I became aware of it, but June 9 is the day I remember. It was my twenty-sixth birthday. It was also the day I met Rufus- the day he called me for the first time.” (BUTLER, 2003, p.09).

One of the most significant features of neo-slave narratives is the connection between past and present. As we have seen, neo-slave narrative writers bring the scenery of slavery in order to discuss relevant matters in the present. Thus, the past is an essential source for these writers, who do not intend to write “history as it is”. On the contrary, for the post-modern writer, history and truth are not essentially linked and the past is supposed to be reconstructed to gain significance in the present time, as Staurt Hall suggests in “Old and New Identities”: “The past is not waiting for us back there to recoup our identities against. It is always retold, rediscovered, reinvented. We go to our own pasts through history, through memory, through desire, not as a literal fact.” (HALL, 1997, p.58).

For Hall, it is through investigation of history that the individual gets to understand and construct his/her own identity. In this sense, for the neo-slave narrative author, the African slavery is not only a background for her or his novel, but mainly the key point to conceive and discuss the development of their current societies. Thus, to a certain extent, the neo-slave narrative author plays the role of historian, as Margaret Walker stated:

> I believe that the role of the novelist can be, and largely is for me, the role of a historian. More people will read fiction than will they read history. And history is slanted just as fiction may seem to be. People will learn about a time and a place through a historical novel. (ROWELL, 1975, p.10).

As we have discussed, slave narrators were a sort of historians of their present times. As autobiographers, they told their individual experiences within a communal experience. As we have seen in Harriet Jacobs, the author asserts herself (or Linda Brent) as the protagonist of *Incidents*, at the same time she portrays historical events which affected her life and the life of other African-Americans. Jacobs was both witness and victim of the system, what enabled her to document slavery with authority. What is more, slave narrators also used their individual skills to recreate the events of their times. In a way, twentieth and twenty-first-century readers see slavery according to the slave autobiographer's descriptions.

In the case of neo-slave narratives, their authors resort to a time they have not experienced, but are involved with this past somehow. Thus, slavery can be object of interest to authors like Sherley Anne Williams and Toni Morrison since it is part of their ancestors' history. Furthermore, the portrayal of slavery is a means of understanding the present condition of African decedents in the mid-twentieth-century Western societies. In this context, neo-slave narrative writers rescue historical events in order to give them meanings, reconstructing history not as truth but as source of discussion.

Going back to the classic slave narratives, we have seen that eighteenth and nineteenth-century black autobiographers portrayed their "realities" in order to attack the racist system. Likewise, contemporary "slave narrators" portray the "reality" of antebellum plantations in order to attack not only the pre-war system, but also and principally their present-time societies. In *Kindred*, for instance, the narrator witnesses a slave man being captured by "patrols". The narrator learns what a patrol is and makes a reference to the racist and terrorist organization which attacked and killed several African-Americans in the United States for decades in the twentieth century, including the 1970s. In this passage, the author pictures her contemporary society by implying that Emancipation had not changed the scenery of violence and crime against blacks until her present time:

> A name for whites who rode through the night in the antebellum South, breaking in doors and beating and otherwise torturing black people. Patrols. Groups of young whites who ostensibly maintained order among slaves. Patrols. Forerunners of the Klu Klux Klan. (BUTLER, 2003, p.37).

The scenery of violence against African-Americans is also portrayed in *Beloved*. Toni

Morrison makes reference to lynching, a practice repeatedly performed by white separatists (especially the Klan) from the late nineteenth-century to the mid-twentieth-century. Morrison, as well as Butler, exposes the lack of protection for black citizens in a state country, and the invisible slavery that continued for many years after the system legally ended:

> Eighteen seventy-four and white folks were still on the loose. Whole towns wiped clean of Negroes; eighty-seven lynchings in one year alone in Kentucky; four colored schools burned to the ground; grown men whipped like children; children whipped like adults; black women raped by the crew; property taken, necks broken. He smelled skin, skin and hot blood. The skin was one thing, but human blood cooked in a lynch fire was a whole other thing. The stench stank. Stank up off the pages of the *North Star*, out of the mouths of witnesses, etched in crooked handwriting in letters delivered by hand. Detailed in documents and petitions full of whereas and presented to any legal body who'd read it. (MORRISON, 1998, p.244)

To recapitulate, in the first chapter we saw how slave narrators, witnesses and victims of slavery system, had reconstructed the incidents of their lives. In a way, they represented history based on what they knew and saw in their present times. The neo-slave narrative author also represents history; however, subverting the idea of order, truth and stableness in past events. As Linda Hutcheon puts it in *The Politics of Postmodernism*:

> The process of making stories out of chronicles, of constructing plots out of sequences, is what postmodern fiction underlines. This does not in any way deny the existence of the past real, but it focuses attention on the act of imposing order on that past, of encoding strategies of meaning-making through representation. (HUTCHEON, 2002, p.63).

In fact, neo-slave narrative writers do not intend to portray history accurately, but to focus on contemporary issues, as we have already discussed. In these novels, fiction and history are blended, and the authority of their authors should not be denied, since they depict their own history (that is, the history of their ancestors) and issues concerning their current racial and/or cultural communities.

Once again, I would like to take *Kindred* as example. Interestingly, Butler makes reference to contemporary fiction as an attempt to represent history. Here, the author implies that only through experience one is able to describe precisely given facts. In the passage below, the narrator witnesses a slave man being punished, and she contrasts the “real” situation with scenes she had seen in fiction:

> I had seen people beaten on television and in the movies. I had seen the too-red blood substitute streaked across their backs and heard their well-rehearsed screams. But I hadn’t lain nearby and smelled their sweat or heard them pleading and praying, shamed before their families and themselves. I was probably less prepared for the reality than the child crying not far from me. In fact, she and I were very much alike. (BUTLER, 2003, p.36).

It is important to note that the author does not minimize the importance of fictional works that represent slavery. On the contrary, the “well-rehearsed screams” in the movies had provided the narrator a striking picture of the antebellum system. The narrator finds herself divided between the “reality” portrayed in contemporary fictions and the “reality” before her eyes. Here, Butler makers clear that fiction does not provide any “absolute truth” concerning history, but leaves gaps that are supposed be filled by the audience with their imaginations. Exactly what her *Kindred* and other neo-slave narratives do: invite the reader to participate.

Last but not least, the use of black vernacular is another significant characteristic in the neo-slave narrative genre. Going back to the classic slave narratives, the use of both standard and colloquial languages were present in those works. Autobiographers like Harriet Jacobs, as we have seen, reproduced the English spoken by most of slaves, however she used Standard English to compose her narrative. Jacobs showed she was able to manipulate both the marginalized and the so-called superior languages. Neo-slave narrative authors have seen in the English spoken by slaves a way of asserting “Black English”, an important reference to the Black Power movement. Thus, the reproduction of the black vernacular is not only a way of rescuing the slavery memory but also a way of reinforcing black identity through language.

The black vernacular moved from the category of “wrong” to “transgressive” language. It became a code used among black intellectuals in the twentieth century in order to challenge the canonical, that is, the so called “superior” English. Not only literature, but also music and other artistic expressions transformed the so-called “inferior” language into a trend, and nowadays it is often adopted by white artists (hip-hop white singers, for instance). As Henry Louis Gates observes in *The Signifying Monkey*, the black vernacular “has assumed the singular role as the black person’s ultimate sign of difference, a blackness of the tongue. It is in the vernacular that, since slavery, the black person has encoded private yet communal cultural rituals.” (GATES, 1988, p.xix).

The cultural imposition of dominant societies on African slaves was evident in codes like religion and language. At the same time, education was something denied to slaves: it was important for the oppressive society to keep its victims ignorant. In other words, slaves “accepted” the English language without understanding it. Again, slave narrators showed their intellectual abilities to explore the master's tongue as well as reproduce the slave's dialect. For the

neo-slave narrative novelist, the use of both Standard English and the black vernacular reflect the idea that the “marginalized” intentionally masters the canonical language and then subverts it. Thus, the revision of slaves' language is not only a way of attacking the erasing of African dialect by Colonialism but also a way of expressing Black English as a powerful code of black identity.

To conclude, neo-slave narratives are a way of analyzing the effects and legacy of the slavery system, which has persisted in the twentieth and twentieth-first-centuries. In the following chapter, we will see how the novelist Sherley Anne Williams was able to illustrate the system in the light of a contemporary perspective, contributing to the African-American Literature tradition as well as to the rediscovery of issues behind American Slavery.

4 SHERLEY ANNE WILLIAMS' *DESSA ROSE*

In this chapter I will examine the novel *Dessa Rose*, by Sherley Anne Williams, and its most relevant features as a neo-slave narrative. Published in 1986, the novel portrays the cruel "reality" of slavery, through the perspective of a contemporary female writer. Before analyzing the novel, I would like to briefly introduce the author.

Sherley Anne Williams (1944-1999) was born in Bakersfield, California. Williams graduated from Fresno State College (currently known as California State College) in 1966, receiving her Bachelor in English. In 1972, she obtained her Master's in English. The following year, Williams became the first African-American Literature Professor at the University of California, San Diego. Her first short story, "Tell Martha not to Moan" was published in 1967. Five years later, she released her first book *Give Birth to Brightness*, a literary criticism work which analyzes the black fiction in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In 1975, she released *The Peacock Poem*, a collection of autobiographical poems which focuses on William's condition of single mother as well as the hard work her family did in the fields when she was small (they picked fruit and cotton to support themselves). *Some One Sweet Angel Chile*, her second volume of poetry, was published in 1982. Williams published her last book, *Working Cotton* in 1992 - it tells a child's view of the hard work in the cotton field. She died of cancer in 1999 at 54 years-old.

Dessa Rose is a historical fiction set in the 1840s, in the South of the United States. The novel contains elements of a slave narrative, such as first-person narration, exposure of the system, issues of racism and sexism. The novel is based on two historical events concerning slavery. The first happened in 1829 in Kentucky: a young pregnant slave helped to lead a rebellion on a coffle. The slave was sentenced to death, but her hanging was delayed until after the birth of her baby. The second incident took place in 1830 in North Carolina: a white woman who lived isolated in a farm was reported to give refuge to runaway slaves. Amazed by these two stories, Sherley A. Williams imagined a meeting between these two women to compose her novel.

Williams re-created and blended these incidents in the light of her contemporary perspective, as we are going to see in this chapter. The title character, Dessa Rose, tells her story to a white intellectual before escaping prison, and ends up by hiding in Rufel's place. The white

lady is abandoned by her husband and, in exchange of their labors, permits some fugitive slaves to remain in her farm. As discussed in the previous chapter, the neo-slave narrative author is not concerned in telling "history as it is", or providing the reader with true facts. In *Dessa Rose*, Williams takes the historical incidents and reinvents them, stressing the individuality of the characters and new readings for historical facts.

Each section of the novel represents a different phase in Dessa's trajectory. In the Prologue, Dessa narrates her life with her lover Kaine. In "The Darky", Dessa is in prison, waiting for the end of her gestation to be executed. In this period, she is interviewed by Adam Nehemiah, whose motive is to write a book about slaves' insurrection. The section title represents the view that members of the dominant culture have on Dessa and the slaves in general: "I must constantly remind myself that she is but a darky and a female at that." (WILLIAMS, 1999, p.23). In "The Wench", Dessa meets Rufel after escaping from prison. At first, the relationship between the two women is conflicting due to social and racial barriers. The title represents the view Rufel has of Dessa's : "How dare that darky! …Wench probably don't know her own name and here she is trying to tell *me* something about Mammy…Uppity, insolent slut! Ought to be whipped." (WILLIAMS, 1999, p.121). In "The Negress", Dessa and Rufel become closer despite the resistance they still have on each other. The title suggests Dessa's achievement of freedom and also a less pejorative approach to the black woman: "'That's French', Harker told me then, and dropped down beside me where I was sitting…and he told me more French. 'Negro' meant black man, 'negress' was black woman; 'blank' was white." (WILLIAMS, 1999, p.185).

The novel is a multi-voice narrative, or, taking the term coined by Mikhail Bakhtin, a polyphonic novel. In "The Darky", the reader finds him/herself reading stories told by different narrators. Although this section is essentially narrated in the third person, it is simultaneously narrated by Nehemiah and Dessa. Nehemiah is a white intellectual who interviews "the darky" in prison in order to collect information for his book about the insurrection led by Dessa and other slaves. Interestingly, both Nehemiah and Dessa "steal" the third-person narrator's voice and provide the reader with their perspectives. As Andree-Anne Kekeh observes in "History and the Disruptive Power of Memory", *Dessa Rose* "stands out as a polyphonic text in which each participant in turn is allowed to speak up and assume the responsibility of the making of the story/history." (KEKEH, 1994, p.220).

Although in the fiction it is Nehemiah's discourse which has authority to depict slavery, for *Dessa Rose*'s reader, it is the "darky" who is supposed to supply a more accurate version not only of the insurrection but also of herself. "The Wench" is fully narrated in the third person. Nonetheless, the narrative is blended with Rufel's voice. "The Wench" interplays between Rufel's past and the present time, when she lives in conflict with Dessa. The third part ("The Negress") is fully narrated by Dessa, who finally gains voice and authority tell her own story, in a slave narrative style. Dessa's recovery of her voice suggests the black slave's authority to tell his/her own story, as Kekeh points out:

> The centrality in Dessa Rose's voice in the prologue and the epilogue shows that Williams grants the slave woman narrative authority over the whole tale. Williams consequently dismisses the legitimizing power of official discourses. First imprisoned in Nehemiah's written texts, Dessa Rose manages in the course of the narrative to escape his limiting text and to become, in the first part of the novel, the controlling first-person narrator. At the end of the novel, Dessa Rose has completed her trip. She has journeyed to the West and obtained her freedom and voice. Remembering has helped her to become the author of her own 'herstory'. (KEKEH, 1994, p.225)

Dessa symbolizes the black female resistance in the dominant realm: "I kill white mens cause the same reason Masa kill Kaine. Cause I can." (WILLIAMS, 1999, p.20). Williams gives Dessa a complex personality, what eliminates a simplistic view on the character, that is, a view in which the marginalized is seen as victim or fragile. On the contrary, Dessa is known among slaveholders as "devil woman", the opposite idea of a female Uncle Tom, but yet a female version of Nat Turner:

> The slaves had killed white men in that battle in which they were finally subdued, and in the initial hand-to-hand action that had freed the entire coffle. That fact gnawed Nehemiah. The slaves had killed white men. He had not heard of niggas doing that since Nat Turner's gang almost thirty years before. (WILLIAMS, 1999, p.29).

Like Nat Turner was interviewed by Thomas Gray in prison, Dessa is interviewed by a white writer, who tries to manipulate the story according to his standpoints. I do not intend to discuss whether Thomas Gray manipulated Turner's words or not. However, I would like to stress what the fictional Dessa and the historical figure Nat Turner have in common: both are morally and physically subjugated by the law, condemned for their boldness and are object of interest to white intellectuals.

Dessa's oral narrative is also an important aspect in the character's construction. When interviewed by Nehemiah, member of the dominant race and culture, Dessa manages to conduct the interview according to her personal "plot": "The darky had led him back to the same point as the previous session and he had taken notes on nothing save the names she called in her first burst

of speech." (WILLIAMS, 1999, p.39). It is her memory that masters the conversation, and both the reader and Nehemiah are led by Dessa's story. Although illiterate, Dessa displays power in her narrative, like the oral tradition in the African culture:

> It had been an entrancing recital, better in its way than a paid theatrical, the attack on the master, the darky's attachment to the young buck, the contraception root- all narrated with about much expression as one gave to 'Howdy' with any passing stranger. (WILLIAMS, 1999, p.20-1)

Despite Dessa's disfavored condition, and the so-called inferiority imposed on her image (black, woman, slave, criminal), Williams is successful in creating an impacting image of the character. The prison scenes show the character's strength: "She was thoroughly aroused by this time and seemed, despite the chain that bound her, ready to flee." (WILLIAMS, 1999, p.45). What is more, Dessa shows control over her own narrative, although it is Nehemiah who has the education, the power and the alleged "authority" to write about the insurrection:

> 'The writing what you put on that paper, huh?' He was startled by the question and did not immediately answer. 'You be writing down what I say?' She was on her knees, turned to him now to see what was in the notebook. (WILLIAMS, 1999, p.44)

Dessa can also be read as a symbol of black feminism, an important issue in the 1960s and the 1970s. Before forming a "sisterhood" with Rufel, Dessa exposes the invisible wall created between her and Rufel's race: "White woman was everything I feared and hated, and it hurt me that one of them would want to love with her." (WILLIAMS, 1999, p.169). As discussed before, black women had to find a different arena in the feminist movement since it was basically led by middle-classed white women. Although the two women were victims of a sexist society, they are initially unable to understand each other. One sees the other with prejudiced eyes. Only at the end, Dessa and Rufel conceive "sisterhood" beyond racial barriers, as Nehemiah concludes: "'You-all in this together'-grabbing at us-'womanhood'. He was down on his knees, scrambling amongst them papers. 'All alike. Sluts.'". (WILLIAMS, 1999, p.232).

Through Dessa and Rufel, Williams challenges the idea of a competitive sisterhood, that is, a sisterhood in which women "are divided by sexist attitudes, racism, class privilege, and a host of other prejudices", as bell hooks puts it in *Feminist Theory*. "Sustained woman bonding", Hooks continue, "can occur only when these divisions are confronted and the necessary steps are taken to eliminate them." (HOOKS, 2000, p.44). In this sense, Rufel and Dessa are made to establish an alliance, not only for mutual interest, but also for starting to see the "other" through a more sympathetic view. When Dessa sees the "mistress" submitting herself to a wealthy white man, she remarks:

> The white woman was subject to the same ravishment as me; this the thought that kept me awake. I hadn't knowed white mens could use white woman like that, just take her by force same as they could with us (…) I didn't know how to be warm with no white woman. But now it was like we had a secret between us." (WILLIAMS, 1999, p.201).

One of the most relevant symbols in Dessa is the portrayal of female sexuality. Influenced by the stereotype of black women's promiscuity, Nehemiah refuses to believe that Kaine's death was due to a musical instrument. According to Dessa, after destroying Kaine's banjo, the master, is attacked by Kaine. In response to the "darky's" audacity, the master kills Dessa's lover: "Was I white, I might woulda fainted when Emmalina told me Masa done gone upside Kaine head, nelly bout kilt him iff'n he wa'n't dead already".(WILLIAMS, 1999, p.17). However, Nehemiah concludes that the only reason for Kaine's fury was due to Dessa's relationship with their master. Nehemiah's conclusion is based on the view that slave concubinage is a natural fact, an association of black womanhood with promiscuity: "It's obvious the buck shared the mistress' suspicion about the master and this wench. Why else would the darky attack a white man, his master?"(WILLIAMS, 1999, p.42).

Without signs of whippings on her back, Dessa carries the marks of slavery in her privates. Like slave autobiographers exposed the physical abuse inflicted by slaveholders, Williams exposes a more bolding image in which the oppressor demonstrates unlimited power over his/her subaltern, like the colonizer over the colonized:

> Though the darky had no scars or marks of punishment except on her rump and the inside of her flanks- places only the most careful buyer was likely to inspect- these bespoke a history of misconduct. But the darky, according to the trial record, had been offered for sale at a bargain price…because she'd attacked her master…How many others on Wilson's ill-fated slave coffle had carried a similar history writ about their privates? (WILLIAMS, 1999, p.21).

As well as female slave narrators like Harriet Jacobs exposed the conflicting relation with slaveholder's wives, Williams depicts the relation of power between mistresses and female slaves. In this sense, Dessa represents the black woman as object of jealousy and abuse from slaveholder's wives:

> …Aunt Lefonia says I too light for Mist's and not light enough for Masa. Mist's ascared Masa gon be likin the high-colored gals same as he did fo they was married so she don't 'low nothing but dark uns up to the House, else ones too old for Masa to be beddin. So I stay in the fields like I been. (WILLIAMS, 1999, p.18)

We can observe that Dessa's "mistress" has an important presence in the story, although she is mentioned only in the first pages of the novel. The mistress leaves in Dessa a negative and traumatic image of white women, and causes the young slave to build a wall of resistance

between her and Rufel. Williams shows the antagonism between white and black women, as a consequence of the recurrent sexual harassment inflicted by white masters.

Adam Nehemiah is another significant character in *Dessa Rose*, representing the view of the "self" (the superior) on the "other" (the marginalized). As discussed in the first chapter, besides the production of slave narratives, a great deal of white intellectuals (pro and anti-slavery) produced literature concerning the bondage system. For being "outsiders", their perspectives were obviously different from those of the "insiders". In this sense, Adam Nehemiah represents the "outsider", that is, the member of the dominant society who attempts to account the case of insurrection led by Dessa and her fellow slaves. Nehemiah is an intellectual influenced by his own cultural and social values, seeing his interviewee with prejudiced eyes.

His relation with Dessa can be defined as a blend of attraction and discrimination. At the same time the writer despises Dessa for her belonging to an "inferior" category, he also feels attracted by the "exotic" beauty of the "darky":

> He scowled, looking at the darky in exasperation…In the cellar, her skin had seemed an ashen black, almost scaly in its leathery pallor. Now, it seemed an ashen black, almost scaly in its leatherly pallor. Now it seemed the color of pekoe tea, a deep lustrous brown that even in the shade glowed with a hint of red. Her voice had lost some of its roughness yet still held a faint echo of that desperate bravado that had fascinated him during their last meeting. (WILLIAMS, 1999, p.37).

The interview between Nehemiah and Dessa can also be seen as a colonization process. Considering that colonization, as Frantz Fanon puts it, "turns to the past of oppressed people and distorts, disfigures and destroys it." (FANON, 1997, p.170), we can observe that Nehemiah uses the same method of the colonizer. He plots to appropriate Dessa's story, steal it and misrepresent it for self-benefit:

> I have at present no clear outline for the book – nor yet what I shall do with the darky's story, but I have settled upon *The Root of Rebellion in the Slave Population and Some Means of Eradicating Them*, as a compelling short title. It smacks a bit of the sensational, perhaps, but it is no more sensational than this story is likely to be. (WILLIAMS, 1999, p.24).

Although Nehemiah tries to establish a relation of power with Dessa, he is deceived by the young slave, who manages to escape, showing smartness over her "superior": "Sly bitch, smile at me, pretend – She won't escape me." (WILLIAMS, 1999, p.71). It is interesting to note that in this case Dessa transgresses not only social but also racial boundaries. That is, Nehemiah's background is not enough to manipulate and subjugate Dessa, an illiterate "darky". Nehemiah's literacy does not give him any broad view on the system he intends to portray, as Nicole N. Aljoe

observes in “Neo-Slave Narratives”:

> …althought the character of Mr. Nehemiah is supposed to be writing an “objective” history of slavery, his perspective is shown to be compromised by his inability to see slaves and Dessa herself as anything other than animals. Williams contrasts this with Dessa’s ability to “read” Nehemiah despite the fact that she is illiterate. Unlike Nehemiah, who is enthralled by Enlightenment positivism, Dessa’s alternative knowledge enables her to narrate the truth of her story to her descendants. (ALJOE, 2006, p. 674)

Even at the end of the novel, Nehemiah is unable to prove that Dessa is a runaway slave, and sees Dessa escaping once again, with the aid of Rufel and an old slave woman. The intellectual does not succeed in oversmarting the three women.

Through Nehemiah, Williams contests the notion of truth related to history. The white intellectual includes in his book facts he reinvents according to his own standpoint: “Yet the scene was vivid in his mind as he deciphered the darky’s account from his hastily scratched notes and he reconstructed it in his journal as though he remembered it word for word.” (WILLIAMS, 1999, p.18). For Nehemiah, Dessa’s narration sound like fantastical novel, and his personal version to the story told by Dessa is based on truths established by the dominant society, that is, Dessa’s affair with her master would be only explanation for Kaine’s death:

> These are the facts of the darky’s history as I have thus far uncovered them:
>
> The master smashed the young buck’s banjo. / The young buck attacked the master./ The master killed the young buck./ The darky attacked the master-and was sold to the Wilson slave coffle.
>
> Nehemiah hesitated; the “facts” sounded like some kind of fantastic fiction. He had but the pen of a novelist – And were darkies the subject of romance, he thought sardonically, smiling at his own whimsy. He didn’t for a minute believe that was all there was to the young buck’s attack on his master-a busted banjo! (WILLIAMS, 1999, p.39),

The banjo is a key element in the novel. According to Dessa, her lover’s instrument was the pivot of Kaine’s attack on his master. In fact, Kaine is depicted as a man of artistic skills, what subverts the Enlightenment idea of the black race’s absence of natural talent, as we saw in the first chapter. Kaine is not only a musician but also a gifted gardener. Dessa tells how her mistress refuses to accept the girl’s version, accusing Dessa of being pregnant of her husband:

> This all I got of Kaine. Right here, in my belly. Mist’s slap my face when I tell her that, say, don’t lie; say it must be Terrel, and how she call Masa, Terrel, say it must be his’n. Why else Masa want kill Kaine, best gardener they ever has, what cost a pretty penny? (WILLIAMS, 1999, p.41)

Kaine’s banjo is a strong reference to the African culture, as Dessa tells us Nehemiah and the reader:

> Kaine say first time her hear anybody play a banjo he have to stop, have to listen cause it seem like it talking to him. And the man what play it, he a Af'ca man, he say the music he play be from his home, and his home be his; it don't be belongs to no white folks. Nobody there belongs to white folks, just onliest theyselves and each others.(WILLIAMS, 1999, p.38).

The banjo is not only a reference to African culture, but also an allusion to Jazz, an important artistic movement for African-American culture in the early and mid-twentieth century. "He play the banjo, he play it so sweet till Mist's even have him up to the House to play and she talk about having a gang of niggas to play music for when they be parties and such like at the House." (WILLIAMS, 1999, p.37). Here, the reader is able to reproduce the image of black musicians entertaining a white audience, like Jazz bands and singers did.

Kaine is also an essential character to Dessa's development. The reader is able to notice how Kaine, to a certain extent, helped to "shape" the rebellious Dessa, the view she has of herself and the assertion of her own identity in the dominant realm:

> 'You think white folks pee champagne, huh? They bowels move the same ways ours do; they shit stank just as bad.' She remembered her own startled laugh, even though she didn't know what champagne was, even though she was shocked and a little frightened to hear him talk under a white folk's clothes like that. He wanted, she knew, to shock her, to make her see that white people, except for their skin color, were no different from her, from him-from any people. (WILLIAMS, 1999, p.47).

After Kaine's death, Dessa attacks her master and is sent to Wilson's coffle. The reason for the attack, according to Dessa, is Kaine. He is, indeed, the protagonist, the main subject of her narrative. For Dessa, the attack on her master is just the beginning of her pursuit of freedom. Pregnant and chained, Dessa helps to lead an insurrection, killing five white men. In this sense, both Dessa's master and Wilson, the slave dealer, are essential characters for Dessa's growth. By injuring physically the two white men, Dessa manages to diminish them morally: "She did like to scare Master Wilson half to death when she jumped on his back…Rode him like you would with a mule" (WILLIAMS, 1999, p.143). Here we have an inversion of values: the dominant is dehumanized by his subaltern. Williams draws an interesting picture in which Dessa not only "lowers" but also "effeminates" the slave dealer: "The unnatural, almost superstitious awe in which Wilson seemed to hold the darky had whetted Nehemiah's curiosity; slave dealers were not usually so womanish in their fears." (WILLIAMS, 1999, p.22).

Williams takes the issue of slavery to question the concept of emancipation and the effects of the bondage system in contemporaneity. The author criticizes the false idea of equality between free black and white individuals in a democratic society: "'Now', Kaine says, 'this man

free, born free, but still, any white man what say he a slave be believed cause a nigga can't talk before the laws, not against no white man, not even for his own self." (WILLIAMS, 1999, p.49). Through Kaine's Williams criticizes the false idea of freedom, the racial inequality and the denial of black citizenship by the law. It is interesting to note that Williams brings an issue which is stronger in the 1960s, a time when black leaders like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., for instance, were assassinated. In *Neo-Slave Narrative*, Ashraf Rushdy observes that neo-slave narrative authors of the 1980s like Sherley Williams and Charles Johnson write novels "deeply immersed in the sixties not only because the form in which they are writing (and the debate they are therefore engaging) originated in that decade, but also because both were involved in sixties cultural politics." Moreover, Rushdy continues, they "began writing their neo-slave narratives in the sixties", but "neither could find a publisher willing to take a chance on their novels." (RUSHDY, 1999, p.133).

Dessa Rose also treats the matter of stereotypes in the construction of the black race image: "A loud nigger is a happy nigger." (WILLIAM, 1999, p.29). The insistence on the black race intellectual and biological inferiority was a powerful strategy to justify the African Slavery in Europe and America, as we have discussed. In this sense, Williams brings the issue of stereotypes, a significant topic by the time she wrote the novel, and also a significant issue for the Post-Colonial Studies. As the Hindu-British critic Homi Bhabha argues, the construction of stereotype and its ambivalence is a weapon of the dominant culture to impose its values:

> For it is the force of ambivalence that gives the colonial stereotype its currency. (...) for the stereotype must always be in *excess* of what can be empirically proved or logically construed. Yet the function of ambivalence as one of the most significant discursive and physical strategies of discriminatory power- whether racist or sexist, peripheral or metropolitan- remains to be charted. (BHABHA, 1990, p.293)

As we have seen, Williams shows black slaves' dehumanization not only through physical force but also through labels imposed on them. The black individuality is denied by the moment they are generalized and given pejorative names like "darky" and "nigger", for instance, as Dessa tells us: "It had made me kind of scared to see the way peoples was treated at some of the tavern-inns and Houses where we stayed…And you was always darky or nigger or gal to them, never your name." (WILLIAMS, 1999, p.211). Needless to say, such offensive terms did not cease when slavery ended. On the contrary, they persisted in the following years, including Williams' present time.

In *Loose Canons*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. recalls how African-Americans' individuality

was denied in the sixties and seventies. He tells us an incident in which his father was called "George" by a white man, because, according to his father, that white man "calls all colored people George." Gates also recalls the refusal from older of black men and women to be identified as "black", preferring the pejorative terms. On the other hand, Gates's generation, as he explains, was fighting for the legitimacy of the word "black" as their common, public name: "There was enough in our public name to make a whole generation of Negroes rail against our efforts to legitimize, to naturalize the word 'black'. Once we were black, I thought, we would be free…" (GATES, 1993, p.132)

Prejudice is another relevant topic in *Dessa Rose*. As we have analyzed, characters like Nehemiah sees Dessa and other slaves based on prejudiced values. He even distorts Dessa's narrative based on biases and stereotypes established by his cultural group. Rufel is another relevant character who illustrates the topic. As I have mentioned before, Rufel and Dessa's first meetings are conflicting due to racial and social barriers both women construct. As we know, Williams created Rufel based on the true story of a white woman who gave asylum to fugitive slaves. Interestingly, Williams does not create a romantic image of the character. On the contrary, Rufel is a woman influenced by her cultural values, and despite "protecting" the runaways, she puts herself in a clear hierarchical position. In this passage, Rufel shows the relation of power she needs to construct with Dessa: "Yet this wench was afraid of her. Rufel sat back on her heels, fighting a panicky urge to laugh. Like I was the criminal; her mouth quirked involuntarily. Calmed by the wench's fear, she rose and left the room." (WILLIAMS, 1999, p.140).

Nonetheless, Rufel inevitably constructs with Dessa a feeling of womanhood, a blend of discrimination and respect:

> She would not admire the action- one couldn't, of course, approve any slave's running away or an attack upon a master-still, something in her wanted to applaud the girl's will, the spunk that had made action possible. The wench was nothing but a little old colored gal, yet she had helped to make herself free. (WILLIAMS, 1999, p.147).

Rufel has a complicated relation with the fugitives, especially the women. Although the slave women are useful for Rufel, the white lady sees them under prejudiced eyes. For instance, Rufel is unable to imagine a white man having any interest in a black woman, or even raping one, since Rufel's concept of beauty is the Eurocentric one.

> Rufel didn't believe a word of that. She could see nothing attractive in the rawboned, brown-skinned woman on her lanky, half-witted daughter (…) 'No white man could do that' she'd insisted; unless he

> tied a sack over her head first, she continued maliciously to herself.(WILLIAMS, 1999, p.91)

William brings the issue of interracial relationship by creating the affair between Rufel and the slave Nathan. If on one hand, Rufel refuses to accept that a white man feels attracted by a black woman, on the other, she ends up being interested in a black runaway. Her sudden attraction for Nathan transgresses the view she has on black beauty:

> She turned to the darky aghast, and caught her breath. Never had she seen such blackness. She blinked, expecting to see the bulbous lips and bulging eyes of a burnt-cork minstrel. Instead she looked into a pair of rather shadowy eyes and strongly defined features that were- handsome! She thought shocked, almost outraged. (WILLIAMS, 1999, p.124)

The relationship between Rufel and Nathan disturbs Dessa: “I think it scandalous, white woman chasing all around the country after some red-eyed negro.” (WILLIAMS, 1999, p.218). Here, Dessa expresses a prejudiced perspective on the interracial affair. Moreover, Rufel is, at the beginning, victim of prejudice by the slaves. Having being abandoned by her husband, Rufel is often called as “Miz Ruint”, which sounds like “ruined.” Interestingly, Dessa and her fellow slaves give Rufel an offensive term, just like the white lady refers to them as “darkies”. Here, Williams gives the marginalized authority to deconstruct the image of the “self.”

The presence of black vernacular is another important aspect in *Dessa Rose*. “Rufel”, for instance, is the black version of Ruth Elizabeth. The character is often addressed as Rufel, even by the third-person narrator. The nickname is a result of slaves’ adaptation to the European name: “The darkies never could get her name straight, slurring and garbling the syllables until the name seemed almost unrecognizable.” (WILLIAMS, 1999, p.124).

A very significant moment is when Nehemiah analyses the language spoken by the Sheriff Hughes and Dessa. Despite the Sheriff belonging to the dominant society, he does not master the language, causing in Nehemiah a feeling of scorn:

> True, the fellow spoke English little better than a negro (the darky, Sheriff Hughes told Nehemiah, as being held ‘ex-communion’; the extenuating circumstances that had delayed her hanging he called ‘excrutiating’; Nehemiah himself was ‘Mr. Nemi’, in what seemed a genuine expression of hale-fellow regard)…” (WILLIAMS, 1999, p.26).

If on one hand, Nehemiah sees the Sheriff’s semi-illiteracy with sarcasm, he sees in Dessa’s language a “loquacious, roundabout fashion.” (WILLIAMS, 1999, p.23). It goes without saying that Nehemiah’s view on Dessa’s vernacular does not eliminate his racial and social prejudices. Nonetheless, being Nehemiah a man of letters, “a largely self-taught beyond grammar

school" and "well read in English literature, particularly the modern period", he is "authorized" to differentiate the Sheriff's language from Dessa's. In this sense, it is important for Williams to value the slaves' vernacular as a mark of black identity.

Besides valuing the black vernacular, Williams brings the importance of black music as an assertion of African-American identity. As we saw, Kaine finds in his banjo a means of living his ancestors' culture, bringing the African rhythm to the dominant America. The gospel music is also a cultural expression which has been reconstructed, reinvented by black communities. As pointed out in *The Black Experience in America*,

> In the last decade of the nineteenth-century, black hymnody experienced a stylistic shift. Colorful and allusive texts, reminiscent in many respects to the old black spirituals, were set to melodies composed by white hymnodists." (WALLENFELDT, 2011, p.107).

Bringing the issue to the twentieth-century, I would like to take as example the band Edwin Hawkins Singers, which adapted the Christian hymn *Oh Happy Day* (composed by the British clergyman Phillip Doddridge in the eighteenth-century) to the black rhythm in 1967. The black gospel is an important artistic and religious expression to black identity in the twentieth-century. In *Dessa Rose*, Nehemiah contrasts the slaves' version of Christian songs created by the dominant race, and involuntarily, admits the "darkies'" audacity to transform and improve a cultural reference imposed to them:

> It is, of course, only a quaint piece of doggerel which the darkies cunningly adapt from the scraps of Scripture they are taught. Nevertheless, the tune was quite charming when sung; the words seemed to put new life into an otherwise annoying melody and I was quite please that she had shared it with me. (WILLIAMS, 1999, p.52)

As we have seen, Sherley Williams' *Dessa Rose* revises the past in order to analyze the legacy of slavery in the light of contemporaneity. Although she did not experience slavery, her social and cultural group was directly affected by the system. As Ashraf Rushdy argues, "Williams produces a meditation on the interrelated ways power inhabits the field of cultural production and the terrain of personal life." (RUSHDY, 1999, p.134).

To conclude, I would like to cite Toni Morrison, who says that the reading of Williams' work is "not only necessary, it is imperative". The language, the characters, the dialog with the reader and the re-reading of history characterize *Dessa Rose* as an essential work for the analysis of the neo-slave narrative genre and an important contribution to American Literature.

5 CONCLUSION

This dissertation has examined the role of slave narratives in the denouncement of African slavery and its representation, as well as reinforced the assertion of humanity of the black man and the black woman. It has also examined the role of neo-slave narratives in the revision of the past (that is, the African-American slavery), and the representation and assertion of black identity.

As we saw, African slavery was, in great part, justified by stereotypical images constructed by dominant forces to represent the African culture, as well as the African individual. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were commanded by Eurocentric values and "truths" which successfully maintained black men and women represented as non-human. In this sense, pro-slavery white intellectuals contributed to reinforce such idea, defending the continuity of the system. On the other hand, the growth of anti-slavery groups contributed to form an abolitionist literature. Basically formed by white intellectuals, anti-slavery literature aimed to denounce the system and promote its abolition. Anti-slavery works had a really significant role in the indictment of the system, as well as in the sponsorship of slave narratives. Nonetheless, many of them attempted to depict a "reality" through the perspective of the "outsider".

The portrayal of slavery was marked by the slave narratives, autobiographical works written by freed or fugitive slaves published before 1865. As portrayed in our work, autobiographers like Harriet Jacobs, Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, Mary Prince, Elizabeth Keckley and others used their individual experiences to narrate their lives in slavery. We saw how these writers used different strategies to sensitize the white audience and expose the evils of the system. Besides representing the black race, slave narrators also established authority to portray and, in many cases, diminish some members of the dominant race. Thus, being the direct victims of slavery, slave narrators had authority to depict the system.

In the second chapter, we investigated Harriet Jacobs' autobiography in order to illustrate and support the ideas discussed in the first chapter. Among other characteristics, we saw how Jacobs succeeded in being a provocative narrator, and a great attorney of her own cause. Jacobs presented female issues such as motherhood and sexual abuse, and exposed the cruel conditions that slaves were submitted to. As we observed, Jacobs succeeded in being the author, the narrator and the protagonist of *Incidents*. The writer established herself as the main character by making the "war of her life" (that is, the sexual harassment inflicted by her master) one of the main issues

of her narrative.

Jacobs presented female issues with audacity, marking a differential in female slave autobiographies. Along the analysis of *Incidents*, we could observe that Jacobs invited the reader to visualize the absurdities of the system considering that her audience was predominantly constituted of white women. In this sense, Jacobs used her individual experience as a female slave to accentuate questions of motherhood and sexual harassment to involve the readers. The author not only talks about herself, but also mentions the incidents of other women slaves, who were, according to Jacobs, the greatest victims of the system.

The examination of the strategies Jacobs used to indict the system and assert African-American's humanity showed how the creation (or recreation) of characters is one of the most relevant aspects in her narrative. The slave community is carefully portrayed by Jacobs. In this sense, we saw the importance of Jacob's father in the autobiographer's development. By depicting her father's individual talent and his convictions of slaves' humanity, Jacobs not only shows where her ideals of freedom come from, but also demystifies the concept of black's intellectual inferiority. We also discussed how Jacobs portrayed her grandmother as a heroic figure. Jacobs re-creates moments in which Aunt Martha is often portrayed in elevated condition in relation to her "superiors", like the money she lends her mistress, the food she offers to poor whites and the "fear" she causes on her former master. Another important character is Benjamin. We saw that Jacobs elevates the black man's image. Besides representing the black resistance, Benjamin also represents the black beauty. Jacobs' interest for Benjamin, and afterwards, for another black man, and the consequent rejection of her white master, mark an important moment in the narrative. At a time when slave women were often punished by white mistresses due to slaveholders' unfaithfulness, Jacobs brilliantly deconstructed the belief that white men were the ideal of a lover for black women.

Jacobs succeeded in reconstructing the image of her former master, portraying him as the antagonist of the narrative. The old physician symbolizes the tyranny and the domination of the white man towards the slave woman, a simultaneous relation of racial and sexual oppression. At the same time, Jacobs stresses Dr. Flint's weaknesses, deconstructing the idea of slaveholders' superiority.

Jacobs was also successful in depicting Mrs. Flint as a remarkable villain. As we

discussed, Jacobs expresses sympathy for white mistresses for their husbands' unfaithfulness. At the same time, she attacks white mistresses by emphasizing the abuse towards slave women, as well as white ladies' false Christianity.

Incidents shows Jacobs' boldness and authority to expose questions of sexuality. As we saw, the author breaks taboos by bringing to the white reader questions that were supposed to be hidden from the white American society. We discussed how Jacobs made clear that freedom and choice were important words in her trajectory. Going back to the question of sexual harassment, Jacobs implies that women should have control over their bodies. If on one hand Jacobs rejects her master, on the other, she plots to become pregnant of Mr. Sands in order to obtain freedom.

Another important aspect discussed in the second chapter is Jacobs' gift as a novelist. Her escape and the concealment for seven years in her grandmother's house, for instance, and her eventual liberty are told in the form of a novel. However, the author ends her narrative with a realistic approach. Despite conquering her freedom, Jacobs regrets her disfavored condition. The examination of Jacobs' work, leads us to conclude it is a narrative that raises questions that certainly inspired subsequent generation of African-American writers.

In the third chapter, we analyzed the genre neo-slave narrative. We saw that, differently from eighteenth and nineteenth-century slave autobiographers, who needed the white audience to believe in their accounts, neo-slave narrative writers are not concerned with the "truth" in their novels. As discussed, works like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, for instance, contain elements of fantasy, social criticism and issues of racism. We also examined the importance of female authors to the genre formation and growth. These writers, by highlighting the black slave woman's strength, not only recover the image of slave women, but also assert the identity of contemporary black woman.

The connection between past and present is another important aspect analyzed in the third chapter. The neo-slave narrative writer does not intend to write "history as it is", since history and truth are not necessarily linked. The past is supposed to be reconstructed to gain significance in the present time. Neo-slave narrative authors resort to a time they have not experienced, however, they are involved with this past somehow. We observed that slavery can be object of interest to these authors for the very fact it is part of their ancestors' history. What is more, the depiction of slavery is a means of understanding the present condition of African decedents in

their present times. In this context, neo-slave narrative writers revise historical events in order to give them meanings, reconstructing history not as absolute truth, but as subject of debate.

We also analyzed the use of black vernacular in these novels. By reproducing the slave's vernacular, neo-slave narrative authors underline the role of Black English to the construction of black identity in their present times. As discussed, the black vernacular became a code used among black intellectuals in the twentieth century in order to challenge language.

Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose* portrays the absurdities of slavery, through the perspective of a contemporary female writer. *Dessa Rose* is a historical fiction that explores elements of slave narratives, such as first-person narration, exposure of the system, issues of racism and sexism. As we saw, Williams re-creates and blends two historical incidents, stressing the individuality of the characters. She also presents new readings for historical facts.

We also examined the polyphonic structure of the novel. Consisting of three primary sections, through which Williams provides differing perspectives on Dessa, the title character. In "The Darky," Adam Nehemiah's expresses his view of the protagonist, as he attempts to re-tell the story of her rebellion on a slave coffle. The presence of Nehemiah is highly significant in the novel. The character symbolizes the colonialist entity, since he attempts the appropriate and misrepresent Dessa's narrative.

In the following section, "The Wench," we could see Dessa's conflict with Rufel, a white mistress. In this section, we could observe how Williams treats the question of representation and the view of the other. In *Dessa Rose*, not only members of the dominant group misread the so-called "inferiors", but also the marginalized deconstruct the image of the "self". Miz "Rufel", or Miz "Ruint" is a clear deconstruction of the traditional, the canonical, the "superior" language.

In the "The Negress", the reader is led by Dessa's narrative. As we discussed, Dessa's viewpoint on her experiences as well as her new perspective on Rufel, mark the growth of the character and the assertion of her voice. In this section, Williams reconstructs the Black woman's voice, which has been traditionally silenced. Besides, Williams establishes an alliance between black and white women, deconstructing the division between these two groups in early feminist movements.

This way, in our point of view, one of the main contributions of our Dissertation was to explore two significant genres that are undoubtedly connected, despite their differences. As we

could observe, slave narratives and neo-slave narratives establish a dialog; in this dialog, both genres defy their present times by discussing issues of ethnicity, human bondage, history, humanity. “Classical” slave narrative authors certainly opened the door to subsequent black writers, not only neo-slave narrative writers, but also intellectuals from other areas who used their narratives to assert black identity. Despite the fact that slave narratives are autobiographical works and neo-slave narratives are historical fictions, the relation between these two genres is undeniable.

We observed, for instance, that Sherley Anne Williams made use of a historical figure to create Dessa. The author not only reinvented history, but also made clear reference to female slave narrators, like Harriet Jacobs. Let us remember that Williams “permitted” Dessa to escape in order to give her voice in the last section of the novel. Although the Prologue is narrated by Dessa, it is in the third and last section that Dessa produces a critical “narrative”.

Thus, if on one hand slave autobiographers inspired neo-slave narrative writers, providing a concrete picture of the system, on the other, neo-slave narrative writers go back to the past in order to analyze their present times and reconstruct their own identities. A movement commonly seen in contemporaneity as different and diverse groups look back to (re)discover their own histories, so many times erased by strong hegemonic powers. In such a universe, Literature, as we have seen, has enormous contribution to bring, mainly if considered under the light and focus of the formulations of contemporary Cultural Studies.

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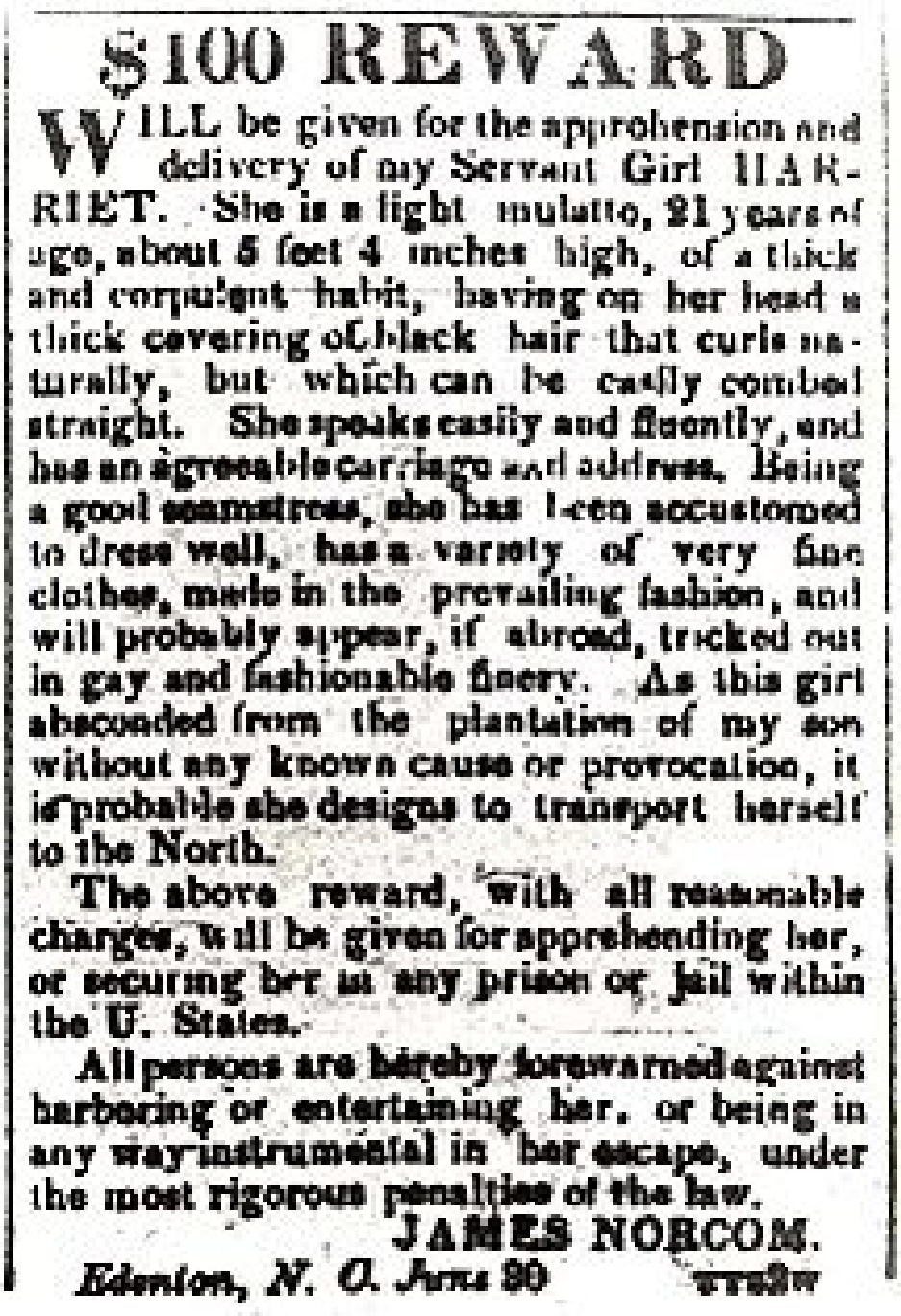
APPENDIX A - Harriet Jacobs' picture

APPENDIX B - Harriet Jacobs' runaway notice



$100 REWARD

WILL be given for the apprehension and delivery of my Servant Girl HARRIET. She is a light mulatto, 21 years of age, about 5 feet 4 inches high, of a thick and corpulent habit, having on her head a thick covering of black hair that curls naturally, but which can be easily combed straight. She speaks easily and fluently, and has an agreeable carriage and address. Being a good seamstress, she has been accustomed to dress well, has a variety of very fine clothes, made in the prevailing fashion, and will probably appear, if abroad, tricked out in gay and fashionable finery. As this girl absconded from the plantation of my son without any known cause or provocation, it is probable she designs to transport herself to the North.

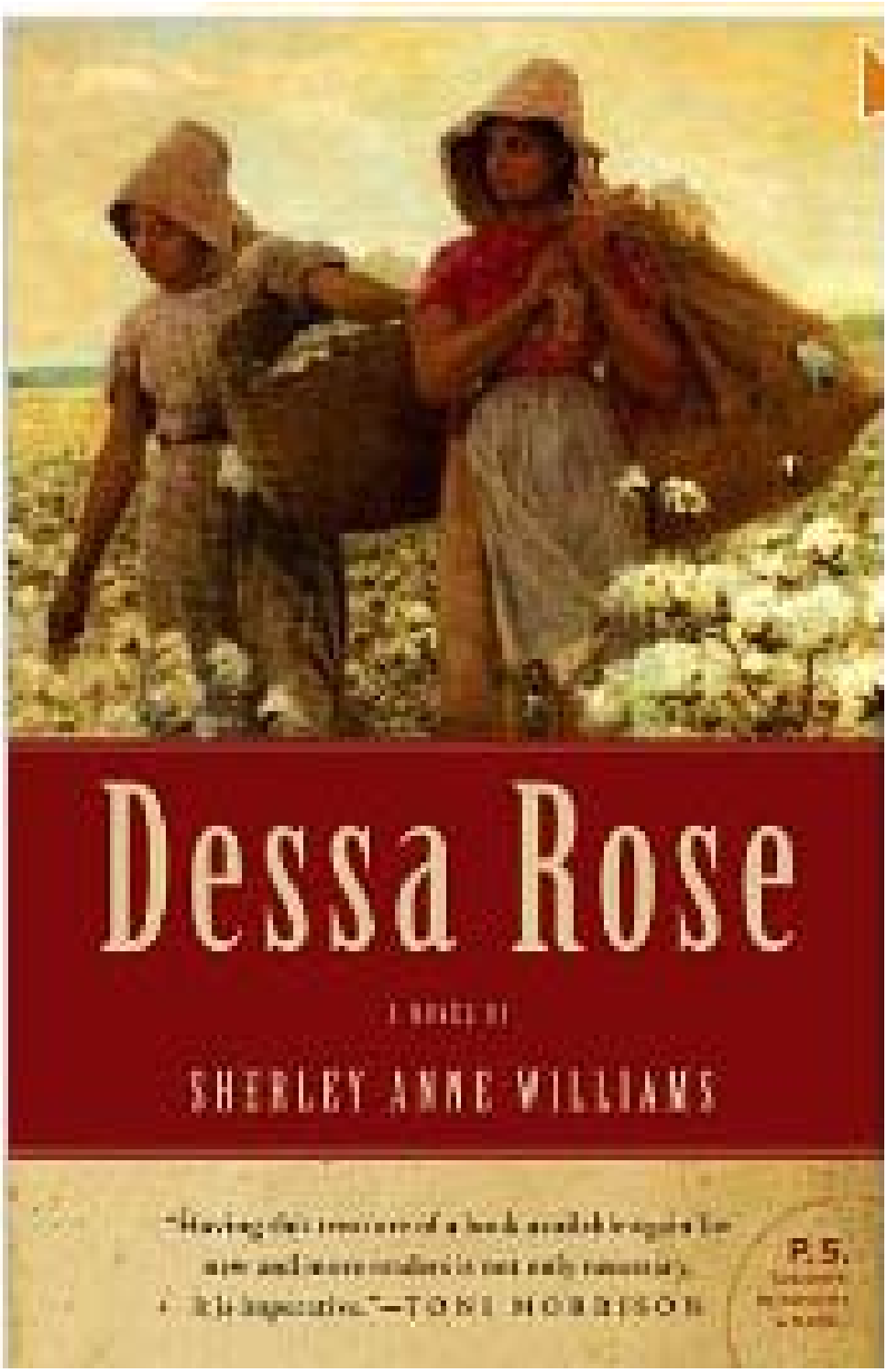
The above reward, with all reasonable charges, will be given for apprehending her, or securing her in any prison or jail within the U. States.

All persons are hereby forewarned against harboring or entertaining her, or being in any way instrumental in her escape, under the most rigorous penalties of the law.

JAMES NORCOM.

Edenton, N. C. June 30 1835w

APPENDIX C - Cover of *Dessa Rose*



APPENDIX D - Sherley Anne Williams' picture