



## INTRODUCTION

*I can see that my choices were never truly mine alone—and that that is how it should be, that to assert otherwise is to chase after a sorry sort of freedom.*

—Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*

In an early passage in Toni Morrison's second novel, *Sula* (1973), Nel and Sula, two young black girls, are accosted by four Irish boys. This confrontation follows weeks in which the girls alter their route home in order to avoid the threatening boys. Although the boys once caught Nel and "pushed her from hand to hand," they eventually "grew tired of her helpless face" (54) and let her go. Nel's release only amplifies the boys' power as she becomes a victim awaiting future attack. Nel and Sula must be ever vigilant as they change their routines to avoid a confrontation. For the boys, Nel and Sula are playthings, but for the girls, the threat posed by a chance encounter restructures their lives. All power is held by the white boys; all fear lies with the vulnerable girls.

But one day Sula declares that they should "go on home the shortest way," and the boys, "[s]potting their prey," move in to attack. The boys are twice their number, stronger, faster, and white. They smile as they approach; this will not be a fight, but a rout—that is, until Sula changes everything:

Sula squatted down in the dirt road and put everything down on the ground: her lunch pail, her reader, her mittens, and her slate. Holding the knife in her right hand, she pulled the slate towards her and pressed her left forefinger down hard on its edge. Her aim was determined but inaccurate. She slashed off only the tip of her finger. The four boys stared open-mouthed at the wound and the scrap of flesh, like a button mushroom, curling in the cherry blood that ran into the corners of the slate.

Sula raised her eyes to them. Her voice was quiet. "If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I'll do to you?" (54–55)

The boys flee and the girls regain the shortcut back to Nel's house. Sula's act is astounding not only for its success in warding off the boys but in how it fundamentally alters the terms of a violent confrontation. Rather than allow herself to be assaulted by the boys, Sula takes control of her own violation. She literally sacrifices a piece of her body in order to protect herself and her best friend.

Sula initiates a confrontation with the boys on wholly new terms. She seizes power where there is none; she becomes the victimizer, displacing the boys so effectively that they can only run away. But even as Sula adopts this bold new position and defeats the boys, she remains a victim. This episode leaves her disfigured, her body violated. Her triumph involves a loss of self that represents the cost of her new freedom. Sula exchanges her fingertip for a basic freedom, the ability to move safely in her own neighborhood, though her action also stems from a desire to protect Nel. While Sula is prepared to injure herself, she would certainly not turn that violence upon her beloved companion. Their bond is the most stable entity in the exchange with the boys, more secure and safe than Sula's relationship to her own body.

Although this study is largely concerned with texts written during antebellum slavery, I begin with an episode set in contemporary America in order to emphasize the continuity between historical dynamics and ongoing struggles of black women to confront sources of oppression. Sula's astonishing action is derived from a legacy of seemingly anti-intuitive modes of resistance in which self-violation becomes agency and freedom represents a complex negotiation for power and the protection of loved ones. Since antebellum slavery, African American women have created sites of self-determination under seemingly impossible circumstances. Most famously, former slave woman Harriet Jacobs hid in her grandmother's garret for six years to evade her captors. Though she had the opportunity to flee to the North, Jacobs decided to remain captive in an attic space that measured three feet high, nine feet long, and seven feet wide so that she could remain close to her young children. Jacobs exchanged one freedom for another—the freedom of life in the North for the freedom to act as a mother to her children. And like Sula, this negotiation demands a physical price; Sula loses a fingertip while Jacobs never fully recovers from her years in the garret, noting at the end of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), "[M]y body still suffers from the effects of that long imprisonment, to say nothing of my soul" (148).

These examples pose difficult questions about the nature of freedom and resistance. Is there freedom in the choice to remain in bondage? What does resistance mean when it includes violence directed toward one's body? How may we understand actions that are simultaneously liberating and destructive? These and other concerns direct my study of nineteenth- and twentieth-century female-authored African American texts that describe moments in which women choose to remain in conditions of bondage. I use the term "conditions of bondage" rather than enslavement because, while I begin my investigation with texts that describe antebellum slavery, in the latter half of this book, I examine situations of social and psychological captivity derived from the legacy of slavery. Chapter 3 is primarily concerned with *plaçage*, an arrangement between free women of color and wealthy white men that combined aspects of slavery and marriage. Although the women who participated in these relationships were legally free, their limited social and economic positions made *plaçage* an expedient form of bondage. In Chapter 4, I turn to the psychological bondage produced in the aftermath of slavery as damaging power dynamics and exploitative gender relations become reinscribed by the descendants of former slaves in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975). This novel demonstrates how the memory of enslavement, though necessary for future generations, can be both traumatizing and empowering. By examining multiple dimensions concerning the bondage produced by antebellum slavery, I highlight the limitations of legislated freedom and discuss how contemporary forms of oppression originate from histories of injustice.

All of the texts explored here share an abiding concern with the nature of freedom and the ways in which African American women have sacrificed individual autonomy to achieve other goals. These works demonstrate that bondage, while certainly not desirable in and of itself, can sometimes offer opportunities and protections that would otherwise be impossible. This study does not seek to be a comprehensive investigation of such examples, but rather it aims to examine the reasons behind such radical choices while revealing how varying conditions of oppression have produced an array of resistant responses. Just as freedom cannot be uniformly defined, resistance includes more than an absolute oppositional stance. Amid shifting positions of power and through acts of creative agency, the women in these narratives make often startling choices that are at the same time limiting and liberating. Their stories demand that we consider what is more important than the freedom of the North and explore how the promise of that new life can be construed as frightening and destabilizing. Most importantly, how can we

reevaluate the very nature of freedom to understand the ways in which the choice of bondage expresses another kind of freedom?

Orlando Patterson argues that the concept of “freedom was generated from the experience of slavery” (xiii). Although these opposing ideas are inextricably bound, the choices made by both Jacobs and Sula indicate that we must be wary of applying abstract notions to lived experiences. Sula is not a slave, yet she is hardly free to walk through her own neighborhood. Jacobs is a bondswoman, but she has chosen her captivity. These examples suggest that Patterson’s polarized opposition, while certainly valid conceptually, does not provide an adequate description of individual experiences. Rather, as Wendy Brown observes, freedom is “neither a philosophical absolute nor a tangible entity but a relational and contextual practice that takes shape in opposition to whatever is locally and ideologically conceived as unfreedom” (6). Because it is not a definitive state of being, there is no absolute transformation from slavery to freedom. Many antebellum testimonies by African Americans crossing into the North confirm this ambiguity as they reveal a marked sense of trepidation upon recognizing the new challenges ahead. Though Jacobs describes the day after her escape as “one of the happiest of my life,” she quickly remarks that she “could not feel safe in New York” (182) due to her fear of capture. In his reflections upon the meaning of freedom, former slave Solomon Northup considers the multiple liberties denied to him by institutionalized bondage:

It is a mistaken opinion that prevails in some quarters, that the slave does not understand the term—does not comprehend the idea of freedom . . . They understood the privileges and exemptions that belong to it—that it would bestow upon them the fruits of their own labors, and that it would secure to them the enjoyment of domestic happiness. They do not fail to observe the difference between their own condition and the meanest white man’s, and to realize the injustice of the laws which place it in his power not only to appropriate the profits of their industry, but to subject them to unmerited and unprovoked punishment. (259–60)

Northup’s comments highlight the many ways in which slavery restricted the lives of African Americans. Labor, family, property, and civic justice, among other basic liberties, were denied to slaves. Because freedom refers to the exercise of multiple rights, it is imperative to consider the various freedoms sought by slaves and to understand how the attainment of some required the sacrifice of others.

Recognizing the array of factors that determine individual conditions, Nancy Hirschmann contends that freedom is largely structured through specific social contexts that often function independent of legal statutes; to be equal before the law does not guarantee a parity of rights and opportunities.<sup>1</sup> Beth Kiyoko Jamieson moves discussions of freedom beyond institutional mandates by claiming that it is derived from intensely personal commitments: “Freedom means more than just the absence of physical or legal restriction. It demands recognition of the breadth of individual conscience, the depth of personal desire” (6). The circumstances of Jacobs and Sula highlight how freedom and bondage are not absolute conditions; instead they represent shifting negotiations of power and control that are mediated by personal desires and connections to others. To understand the nature of their choices requires close attention to their specific contexts, which include their social positions as bounded by racial and sexual parameters as well as the personal relationships that inform their identities. All of these matters will be paramount to my discussion of individual texts.

In my exploration of how and why women choose conditions of bondage, I begin with texts written by antebellum slaves. Because men and women occupied significantly different positions in the slave economy, to examine issues of freedom and resistance requires a gendered analysis. Enslaved men and women worked in different capacities and bore gender-specific burdens. Attentive to these matters, I approach this subject through a feminist perspective, which according to Jamieson “must be grounded in lived experience” (6). Emily West, among other historians, argues that enslaved women were the “victims of gendered oppression” (81). She explains that there was a “triple burden” placed on female slaves as “they had to perform work for their owners . . . they had tasks to complete at home for their own families, and they also had to shoulder the heavy burden of childbearing and much of the responsibility of child rearing” (101–2). Under such overwhelming circumstances that included the constant threat of physical violence, what is meant by freedom? Does it have a different meaning for women than it does for men? Slaves in the antebellum South had no legal rights, had no claim to their labor, their children or their bodies. Moreover, because slave status was determined through the mother, black women were forced to act as mothers to the institution of slavery. Given such conditions, is it even possible to apply the word “freedom” to any actions executed by slaves? Jacobs highlights the instability of this term when she uses the phrase “something akin to freedom” (55) to describe her decision to become impregnated by a man other than her abusive master, a

choice that abets the eventual emancipation of her unborn children. She cannot avoid her eventual rape, but she can select the agent of her initial violation and hence the father of her unborn child. This phrase illustrates how forms of self-determination can exist even while women remain enslaved and foregrounds my discussion of how the decision to remain in bondage can be construed as an oppositional act.

According to Amaryta Sen, freedom is derived from the ability to make choices; he defines it as “the form of individual capabilities to do things that a person has reason to value” (56). This conception is consistent with the founding ideals of the United States as well as with the notion of an ideal citizen, which Martha Nussbaum describes as “a free and dignified human being, a maker of choices” (46). Using this formulation, Jacobs does have freedom because she makes a choice to stay in her grandmother’s garret and opts to have sex with Mr. Sands rather than await assault by her master, Dr. Flint. However, the decision between chosen captivity and forced intercourse cannot compare to the independent life she could have in the North where she would have been largely free from the clutches of Dr. Flint. It is necessary to qualify the freedom represented by the North because Jacobs would have been subject to the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, which required citizens of Northern states to return runaways to their owners. The uncertain promise of the North as well as Jacobs’s severely limited choices illustrate the comparative nature of freedom; as Hirschmann observes, freedom is “a matter of degree . . . freedom is a term of relativity and comparison” (205). It may seem absurd to apply the word “freedom” to Jacobs’s highly restricted conditions since agency devolves upon the selection of two abhorrent options. However, Jacobs does take action, demonstrating that despite her enslavement, she made choices for herself; she did not passively accept the domination of others. That refusal and her astounding creation of options while a bondswoman do not represent freedom as we conventionally understand the term, but they do make her an agent of choice, the key factor in Sen’s formulation. Though both of Jacobs’s options represent different forms of bondage—continued enslavement under Dr. Flint or the captivity of her grandmother’s garret—at the moment of her selection, she is a choosing subject.

To understand Jacobs’s decision, we must appreciate the values that determine her actions. She remains captive despite her deep hatred for Dr. Flint and her revulsion at the brutalities of slave life. Her choice to remain in the South reflects her recognition that the freedom she desires will not be achieved by a lone escape to the North. This observation suggests that there are two ways to understand the meaning of freedom. The first is through Sen’s emphasis on choice, which may include

circumstances of bondage—that is, Jacobs’s freedom to decide to hide in the garret is a choice determined by the exigencies of bondage. The second meaning of freedom reflects the achievement of an ultimate goal that correlates to a more absolutist state of self-determination. For Jacobs, this is the freedom to protect her children and to live with them in a home of her own. To distinguish between these two concepts I will refer to the first as “freedom of choice,” understanding that those choices are most often structured through conditions of oppression, and the second as “the goal of freedom.” This latter designation will receive further elaboration in Chapter 1, in which I explore the multiple visions and objectives of freedom described by slave narrators.

Just as we may broadly understand freedom through enslavement as suggested by Patterson, we may also understand Jacobs’s decision to hide in her grandmother’s garret by comparing it with the choice made by her Uncle Benjamin. The goal of freedom has a different value for her than it does for Benjamin who, following his escape to the North, never again communicates with his family. By contrast, Jacobs refuses to abandon her children, and while ensconced in the garret, she watches over them and plans an escape for them all. The obvious gender difference between Jacobs and her uncle might imply that men and women approach the goal of freedom in fundamentally different ways. This is a conclusion that has been reified by scholars who emphasize the masculinist rhetoric of Frederick Douglass’s 1845 *Narrative* and herald Jacobs’s text as more attentive to family and community. While these characterizations are valid, they ignore the more nuanced conceptions of freedom that Douglass offered in his later autobiographies.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Linda Brent, Jacobs’s fictive self, and her heroic grandmother, Aunt Marthy, are not the only characters who demonstrate self-sacrificing commitment to family in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

In an unexpected encounter, Linda’s Uncle Philip, while on an errand for his mistress, meets his newly escaped brother Benjamin in New York. After describing his flight and the joys of his new life, which “was worth something now,” Benjamin urges his brother to stay and work with him. Philip, however, refuses, stating that “it would kill their mother if he deserted her in her trouble” (25). Like Jacobs, he too will remain a slave in order to support those he loves and will search other ways to achieve Benjamin’s liberty.<sup>3</sup> Significantly, Philip refuses his brother even though Aunt Marthy is not a slave; conceivably, they might all be free together in the North. However, Philip’s concern is also with their mother’s house, which she pledged in an attempt to buy Benjamin. His decision to return to slave life reflects his dedication not only to his mother but to an entire network based in Aunt Marthy’s home. In

referencing his mother's "trouble," Philip understands that Aunt Marthy's house as well as her reputation is at stake. He cannot abandon her while her future in the community is in jeopardy. As I will demonstrate in further readings, the development of a home space is crucial in understanding the goal of freedom expressed by many slaves, both male and female. In reading this key scene, Stephanie Smith recognizes the limits of Benjamin's escape to the North: "If being accepted as a free-man means denying family ties, then slave and (free) man are clearly not the complete metaphoric opposite," but as such, "[s]lave and freeman are two sides of the same coin of patriarchally determined identity" (150–51). Although Benjamin succeeds in getting "so far out of [the] clutches" (25) of his former master, through his escape he also loses the support and comfort of his family. The home to which Philip returns becomes an impossibility for the now isolated Benjamin. This is not to suggest that Philip is somehow freer in the South; in fact, his degree of individual agency is likely far less than that of his brother. However, the decisions made by the two men demonstrate the variety of choices made by slaves and the different goals of freedom they preserved, none of which were absolute nor ideal.

Although this study focuses on texts written by African American women, I do not aim to make essentialist claims about how men and women conceptualize freedom in different ways. As indicated by the episode involving Philip and Benjamin, men also chose to remain in bondage in order to protect familial relationships. Ex-slave Henry Bibb wrote eloquently about his repeated attempts to rescue his wife and daughter from slavery and at one point in his 1849 narrative states, "I know that I should have broke away had it not been for the sake of my wife and child who was with me" (100). However, as Charles Heglar notes in his study of slave marriage, Bibb "can only escape from the South and slavery by escaping from his family" (36), thus capitulating to the paradigm of the self-made man that dominated much nineteenth-century abolitionist literature. By selecting female-authored texts, I seek to chart a tradition of women who defined the goal of freedom as one involving the preservation and development of family and social bonds. Men are certainly not excluded from this pattern, but attention to the narratives of women places issues of reproduction, sexuality, motherhood, and children at the forefront of discussions of freedom and resistance. These concerns require that we reevaluate the ways in which freedom has been largely tied to individual achievement and physical autonomy. A gendered perspective helps us to recognize the added burdens slave women confronted, burdens that significantly impacted the



nature of their resistance to bondage, and allows us to examine critically the type of choices they made.

My analysis is influenced by feminist attention to social formation and the need “to interrogate the social construction of the choosing subject, the subject of liberty” (Hirschmann 14). This approach requires consideration of the different circumstances and challenges confronted by slave women. To return to the comparison between Benjamin and Jacobs, it is essential to recognize that unlike her uncle, Jacobs had children. This reality presented her with a set of choices and limitations that her uncle did not have to consider. She actively chose to act as a mother to Ben and Ellen though, significantly, she did not make the choice to begin having children. As a bondswoman, reproduction was forced upon her. Her decision to love and care for her children highlights the instability of freedom and bondage for enslaved women. One might argue that by choosing to love her children, Jacobs restricts her own freedom of choice; she foregoes escape to the North in order to be near them. However, I contend that Jacobs’s action gestures toward the creation of another kind of freedom, one based not in individual autonomy but in meaningful social bonds.

In all of the texts I examine, women seek to change the contexts of their lives. Jacobs makes radical choices to protect her children; Hannah of *The Bondswoman’s Narrative* (2002) begs to become the slave of a woman she deeply admires. These examples provide rich sites of textual analysis, but there is another level in which these narratives operate as explorations of freedom. According to Philip Pettit, an additional aspect of freedom is “discursive control” by which an “agent will be a free person so far as they have the ability to discourse and they have the access to discourse that is provided within such relationships” (70). Discursive control is of particular importance to African American women who have long struggled against racist and sexist stereotypes. Serving as the ideological justification for slavery, archetypal images of the asexual Mammy and the seductive Jezebel continue to influence contemporary conceptions of black womanhood.<sup>4</sup> Farah Jasmine Griffin observes how many African American women writers have responded to such destructive representations: “They are engaged in a project of re-imagining the black female body” in opposition to “white supremacist and patriarchal discourses [that] construct black women’s bodies as abnormal, diseased, and ugly.” Through what Griffin terms “textual healing,” black women writers seize discursive control by exploring “female bodies as sites of healing, pleasure and resistance” (521).

Although Griffin focuses on contemporary novels, works by nineteenth-century African American women writers are also involved in resistant

narrative strategies. Jacobs explains how she initiated an affair with Mr. Sands rather than succumb to Dr. Flint's advances, and though there may have been no bodily pleasure in this action, there was certainly resistance in this decision and in Jacobs's description of such private struggles. Again we must be attuned to the mediated nature of discursive control; Jacobs was hardly free to detail her sexual experiences to her nineteenth-century readers, though she likely would not have wanted to publicly share these intimacies anyway. This is of particular significance to the narrative of former slave Louisa Picquet, which I discuss in Chapter 3. Due to her illiteracy, Picquet required an amanuensis to write her story, and thus she became subject to the narrative control of her interviewer. Picquet's patient and studied answers, which redirect attention from her victimization to her agency, demonstrate the complicated discursive arena involving black womanhood. These examples of how African American women seize narrative control to express their own stories highlight how it is possible to change the nature of prevailing discourses. In this way, black women assert discursive control and consequently claim greater degrees of freedom.

In her discussion of textual healing, Griffin emphasizes the physicality of black female bodies as a site of resistance to damaging stereotypes. However, she notes that "the burden of a historical legacy that deems black women 'over-sexed' makes the reclamation of the erotic black female body difficult" (526). This particular struggle is evident in all of the antebellum texts I consider. While Jacobs certainly depicts her sexual body as a vehicle of resistance against the treacherous designs of Dr. Flint, she presents herself as devoid of sexual desire. Similarly, Hannah of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* and Louisa Picquet elide all discussion of erotic pleasure. This marked silence illustrates the fraught nature of discourses about black female sexuality and suggests that discursive control, as with my general approach to notions of freedom, is also a matter of degree. Audience expectations required Jacobs and Picquet to omit mention of their sexual desires. This is an issue further explored in Chapter 4, where I discuss how *Corregidora's* Ursa withholds herself sexually from Mutt and refuses to articulate her erotic desires to him. In her silence, we may see an inherited legacy of suppressed black female sexual desire that is deeply rooted in dynamics formed from slavery. The freedom for African American women to express their sexuality, like the project of textual healing, "requires constant attention and effort" because, as Griffin observes, "the healing is never permanent" (524). The discursive arena of sexual expression remains a key battleground for black women and indicates that the struggle for freedom, in all its forms, is ongoing.

In Chapter 1, I examine various conceptions of freedom and resistance as presented in nineteenth-century slave narratives and in historical accounts of slave life. While Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* enshrines a form of freedom familiar to American ideologies of rugged individualism and self-reliance, Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* emphasizes the importance of family ties to individual liberty. In my analysis of these different approaches to freedom, I demonstrate that there was no absolute freedom for African Americans, even among those who escaped to the North or became legally emancipated. We must consequently understand freedom as a socially produced concept that reflects popular ideologies as much as individual desires. For example, the acclaim accorded to Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* has caused a troubling conflation between freedom and flight. This association reflects a significant male bias in discussions of slave resistance; women had far less opportunity to escape to the North and, more importantly, were forced to produce future generations of slaves. Moreover, to conceive of flight as the ultimate objective of slaves ignores alternative conceptions of freedom and the attempts, especially by women, to protect familial relationships and community bonds. Recent historical work examines how child-rearing and the development of strong social networks acted as key sites of empowerment for slaves. While slave narrators like William Wells Brown and Henry Bibb focus on escape, the position assigned to women in the slave economy made flight a more difficult venture. Lacking the mobility and geographic knowledge of male slaves, women were also forced to bear and raise children. Jacobs's decision to remain in bondage and other examples of female slave resistance require us to reconceptualize freedom as based upon what Valerie Smith terms a "self in relation." A commitment to what I term "intra-independence" structures much of Jacobs's narrative and also presents a model of familial relationships not based in hierarchy and subservience. Intra-independence refers to a form of freedom that is grounded in the preservation and care of meaningful social networks. I conclude this chapter by demonstrating that intra-independence, though highlighted in many female-authored texts, is not exclusive to women, as lesser-known slave narratives by men share a fundamental concern for the development of a supportive community and home space. Although Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* has long defined the slave narrative genre and reified a conception of freedom as individual autonomy, other texts provide more complex descriptions of the desires and choices of enslaved men and women.

Chapter 2 focuses on Hannah Crafts's *The Bondswoman's Narrative*, a newly discovered antebellum text that combines aspects of the slave

narrative and the sentimental novel. Because of its unusual combination of literary forms, I read the text as an imaginative memoir that expresses the values and desires of a nineteenth-century African American woman. Hannah, the narrator, is a slave who strongly embraces the cult of true womanhood, an ideology of domestic values directed at middle-class white women. Acting on what Jane Tompkins terms “an ethic of submission,” Hannah rejects an opportunity to flee to the North in order to stay with Mrs. Henry, a white woman she deeply admires. Although Hannah avoids developing close relationships with slaves because of the ever-present threat of separation, she identifies in Mrs. Henry, and especially in her idealized domestic home, all of the values she most cherishes. Hannah’s choice again reorients our conception of freedom; rather than opting for liberty in the North, Hannah seeks to become part of another woman’s home. Bondage to such an environment represents the opportunity to become integrated into prevailing domestic ideology. Hannah’s decision raises troubling issues about her racial identification since she rejects her social peers while uncritically accepting white middle-class values. This tension finally breaks when Hannah is ordered to marry one of the plantation field hands, a population she perceives as hopelessly debased. Breaking with the ethic of submission, Hannah decides to flee, running away not from her master but from her fellow slaves. Her action indicates that the passive values of the cult of true womanhood are inadequate to confront the sexual violence and objectification experienced by enslaved women. Despite the obvious breach between Hannah’s stated values and her bold flight, the novel’s idyllic ending, in which Hannah marries a free black minister and works as a schoolteacher in the North, suggests that a happy domestic home is the ultimate objective for enslaved women.

In Chapter 3, I shift my attention from depictions of slave life to cases involving the voluntary reenslavement of women and nineteenth-century descriptions of *plaçage* relationships. These examples reveal the social and economic pressures that led women to choose conditions of bondage. *Plaçage*, an arrangement between free mixed-race women and wealthy white men that flourished in antebellum New Orleans, combines aspects of marriage and slavery. Although they existed outside legal marriage, *plaçees* were described by social observers and travel writers as models of feminine virtue. They were lauded for their beauty, sophistication, and fidelity even as they operated on the margins of dominant categories of social and racial identities. This chapter is concerned with understanding the social conditions and discursive arena that produced paradoxical images of black female sexuality while silencing the women who were at the center of such fictional constructions.

Through my opening reading of William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), I examine how it is possible to produce an image of racialized femininity that responds to the needs and desires of a specific narrative entity—in this case, the novel's male storytellers. I compare this highly romanticized depiction to actual historical conditions of *placées* living in nineteenth-century New Orleans. My purpose in examining such issues of representation stems from my contention that the methods of survival and resistance exercised by free women of color are linked to the discursive violence enacted upon them. The shifting signifiers of race, sexuality, and gendered identity allow for a play of representation that free women of color were able to use to their advantage, an issue I take up in the second half of this chapter.

The story of slave woman Louisa Picquet, as documented by her interview with Rev. H. Mattison in *A Tale of Southern Slave Life or Inside Views of Southern Domestic Life* (1861), is perhaps the best example of this type of deliberate manipulation of racialized and sexualized images. Like Bon's octoroon mistress, Picquet, a woman of mixed-race origin, became the concubine of a white man. She secured her freedom through this relationship and, though illiterate, she later published an account of her life in order to raise money to purchase her enslaved mother. Although Mattison, her interviewer, limits the narrative form by which Picquet is able to express herself, I argue that the former bondswoman takes control of her story by deflecting his invasive questions and redirecting his interest in her sexual experiences to emphasize her agency and resistance to the authority of her masters. Like Bon's octoroon mistress, Picquet is subject to offensive stereotypes concerning black female sexuality. However, she undermines these representations by refusing to validate Mattison's insulting assumptions and creating an alternative narrative to the one produced by her domineering interviewer. Although Picquet surrenders significant control with respect to the representation of her life story, she exerts power over the image produced by Mattison's questions. Her narrative demonstrates the complex discursive battleground that black women confronted in securing their liberty and economic well-being.

In the final chapter of this study, I turn to a contemporary novel, Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*, which examines how the dynamic of sexual dominance between male master and female slave is transposed across generations. In my discussion of this text, I move from forms of institutional and social bondage to those derived from the psyche. Jones treats enslavement both as a historical condition and as an overwhelming attachment to inherited trauma. Instructed by her foremothers to "make generations"—that is, to have children and tell them stories of slavery's abuses—blues singer Ursa Corregidora becomes newly

objectified. The insights of trauma theorists Cathy Caruth and Pierre Janet elucidate how Ursa's embattled relationships with men and her family members reflect the exploitative power dynamics of slavery (qtd. in Van der Kolk 158–82). I chart how the resistance of one generation becomes the trauma of another and the ways in which slavery's legacy perpetuates a form of psychological bondage. By exploring the limitations and dangers of the mother-daughter bond, Jones critiques familial relations that do not allow for individual development and provides a key assessment of the potential dangers of intra-independence. Without her uterus and therefore unable to follow her foremothers' injunction, Ursa searches for forms of female expression and identity different than those of her enslaved ancestors. Many critics have explored how Ursa finds empowerment through her blues singing. I am most concerned, however, with the ways that Jones's text gestures toward the possibilities of establishing supportive heterosexual relationships that can act as critical sources of strength for black women. Despite the conflicted nature of Ursa's relationship to Mutt, I contend that she constructs him as the primary witness of her story through a series of imagined dialogues in which she comes to recognize the ways in which love, hate, pleasure, and violence collide in a type of emotional and psychological bondage. In the climactic and controversial final scene, Ursa reaches beyond words to express the nature of this tension through a key sexual act. *Corregidora* demonstrates that there is no future for Ursa that does not include attachment to her family's painful past, but by sharing that history with others, it is possible to achieve liberating forms of self-expression.

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Paul D reflects on the dangers that love holds for a slave: "A woman, a child, a brother—a big love like that would split you wide open in Alfred, Georgia." After talking to Sethe, he understands that freedom is not simply a physical condition, but it also includes a readiness to experience love: "He knew exactly what she meant: to get to a place where you could love anything you chose—not to need permission for desire—well now, *that* was freedom" (162). The texts examined here are fundamentally concerned with such a notion of freedom as the radical assertion of care and desire, demonstrated through both sexual acts and the preservation of familial relations. The representations of black female experience offered by Harriet Jacobs, Hannah Crafts, Louisa Picquet, Gayl Jones, and Toni Morrison demand that we understand that the goal of freedom involves a deep attachment to others as well as the claiming of one's self. Their resistance to oppression seeks the courage to express personal desire and the freedom to love.