

CHAPTER 1

Speak Sisters, Speak
Oral Empowerment in LOUISA PICQUET,
THE OCTOON; THE NARRATIVE OF SOJOURNER TRUTH; and
INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL



The “I” of oral tradition also seems linked to a concern with a whole African American personality telling his or her own story and controlling the moral perspective of it, the images, the conceptions of value, the selection of events, the dramatic structure and significant conflicts.

—Gayl Jones, *Liberating Voices*

American slave owners institutionalized prohibitions against slaves reading and writing to prevent slaves from challenging their authority, on the premise that without the ability to read or write slaves could not participate in legal or public discourses. This premise disregarded or failed to recognize other forms of literacy, forms that facilitated slave agency, resistance, and freedom. Oral literacy provided a cogent means for slaves and ex-slaves to challenge authority and for empowerment both in slavery and freedom. By 1860 thousands of slave narratives were published.¹ Although many narratives were actually written by ex-slaves, many others were orally dictated to amanuenses and published by the abolitionist press.

In 1845, Frederick Douglass published *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*. His narrative is considered the paradigmatic slave narrative, containing the most famous example we have of a man who attained freedom through reading and writing literacy. In contrast, women’s slave narratives emphasize orality rather than reading and

writing as a means to empowerment. The orality, which slave women demonstrate in their narratives, conveys both their sense of identity and familial relationships and some of the ways they resisted oppression and facilitated their freedom.

I begin this chapter by citing Harryette Mullen's essay "Runaway Tongue: Resistant Orality in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Our Nig*, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and *Beloved*," in which she argues that because Black women were excluded from the nineteenth-century ideals of the Cult of True Womanhood—which included values of modesty, decorum, piety, and purity—they employed orality as a method of resistance to oppression and self-defense. Black women's speech, which white society termed impudent and insolent, was used to resist and expose "the implicit contradictions of the sex-gender system which render her paradoxically both vulnerable and threatening" (Mullen 246). Extending Mullen's argument, I posit that, unlike Frederick Douglass's emphasis on freedom through literacy and manhood, women's slave narratives illustrate freedom through orality, which, according to the ideological constructions of American nineteenth-century society, was most viable for slave women. Moreover, Frances Foster's essay "In Respect to Females . . .': Differences in the Portrayals of Women by Male and Female Narrators" proves that—contrary to the passive victims depicted by male slave narrators—female ex-slave narrators portrayed strong courageous females enmeshed in supportive familial relations. Recognizing Mullen's resistant orality in conjunction with Foster's observation, it is clear that although literate women ex-slave narrators could direct the content and form of their narratives, both literate and nonliterate freedwomen employed verbal communication and Black feminist orality to exert authorial control within a discourse that would normally exclude them.² The oral resistance demonstrated in ex-slave women's narratives constitutes a form of rhetoric, or to use Mullen's term, a rhetoric of "resistant orality" that displays subjectivity, power, and purpose. This rhetoric has a dual function: to control experience and to control the representation of experience.

STRUCTURAL SUBVERSION AND BLACK FEMINIST ORALITY

Although *Louisa Picquet*, *The Octoroon*, and the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* were recorded by amanuenses and are structured differently, the

narrative subjects illustrate how nonliterate freedwomen used orality to regulate the representation of their lives and to express their strength, perseverance, and humanity.³

In 1860, Louisa Picquet traveled throughout the states of Ohio and New York to raise money to purchase her mother's freedom. She agreed to relate her life story in order to publish a slave narrative for fund-raising purposes and as a tool for the abolitionist cause. Picquet was born sometime around 1828 to a mulatto slave woman, Elizabeth Ramsey, and her white slavemaster in South Carolina. She and her mother were soon sold because the baby Louisa looked too much like the mistress' child. Later when Louisa was thirteen she and her mother were sold separately—her mother as a cook to a Mr. Horton of Texas, Louisa as a concubine to a Mr. Williams of New Orleans. At Williams's death Picquet and her children (all four fathered by Williams) were freed, after which she moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, where she married Henry Picquet.

The Octoroon has a question and answer structure that allows the interviewer, Hiram Mattison, a white Methodist minister, to determine the nature of the questions. Mattison's questions reveal his preoccupation with miscegenation and the abuse, both sexual and physical, of slave women. However, Picquet cunningly both answers and evades the questions in a discursive manner that permits her own subjective representation.

Picquet chooses to evade Mattison's intrusive questions regarding physical abuse. For example, Mattison asks:

Q- Did your master ever whip you?

Picquet answers:

A- Oh, very often: sometimes he would be drunk, and real funny, and would not whip me then. He had two or three kinds of drunks. Sometimes he would begin to fight at the front door, and fight ever [sic] thing he come to. At other times he would be real funny. (7)

Clearly, Mattison's question demands a response that describes Picquet's whippings in detail. However, not only does Picquet not describe the whippings, or their number, for that would leave the impression of a passive victim, but she comments on her master's (Mr. Cook's) character and

uses language that strongly suggests how actively she resisted him. By relating Cook's intemperance, Picquet constructs an immoral image of him, which is particularly significant given the concern and activism of temperance advocates during this period. In fact, in the same issue of the *Cincinnati Gazette*, the newspaper in which Picquet's notice announcing the manumission of her mother appears, a chapter of an early version of Frances E. W. Harper's temperance novel *Sowing and Reaping* is published.⁴ The readers of *The Octoroon*, who we can also assume were potentially the audience for the *Gazette* and, therefore, interested in abolition and temperance, would find Cook's inebriation vulgar and disgraceful. Furthermore, Picquet's use of the word "fight," implying two or more persons in active combat, instead of "whip," which Mattison uses, illustrates her rejection of the victimization status Mattison would ascribe to her. Finally, Picquet dismisses Cook's threatening image with her description of him as "real funny." Instead of fear and terror, Cook inspires Picquet's disdain and contempt. After reading this exchange, Picquet's integrity and strength are more brilliantly displayed than either Cook's menace or Mattison's literary intrusion.

As opposed to the question and answer structure found in *The Octoroon*, the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* is written in traditional paragraph form. Truth dictated her narrative to an amanuensis, abolitionist Olive Gilbert, over a three-year period beginning in 1846. The text is narrated in the first person from Gilbert's perspective, with relatively few direct quotations from Truth and many of Gilbert's personal convictions. However, being nonliterate did not confine Truth to the passive position to which biographical subjects are usually relegated. Presented as an afterthought late in the narrative, Truth's rationalization of the veracity of biblical scriptures explains the basis of the narrative structure. Gilbert writes,

I had forgotten to mention, in its proper place, a very important fact, that when she was examining the scriptures, she wished to hear them without comment . . . in that way she was enabled to see what her own mind could make out of the record, and that, she said, was what she wanted, and not what others thought it to mean. She wished to compare the teachings of the Bible with the witness within her and she came to the conclusion, that the spirit of truth spoke in those records, but that the *recorders* of those truths had

intermingled with them ideas and suppositions of their own.
(87–88; emphasis added)

This passage suggests Sojourner Truth's understanding the art of self-representation and the need to distinguish her story from others' subjective representations. She recognized that the recorder of her narrative, Gilbert, could not truly depict every aspect of her identity without inserting foreign ideas and implications. In her essay "Sojourner Truth: A Practical Public Discourse," Drema R. Lipscomb substantiates my argument by identifying Truth's memorization of biblical passages as "crucial to her being able to draw her own interpretations" (232). While one might argue that Gilbert could have simply recorded Truth verbatim, I assert that Sojourner Truth's lack of reading and writing skills made conclusive knowledge of Gilbert's narrative content impossible for her, and thus, she knew better than to assume the accuracy of the *Narrative*. Therefore, the passage indicates that Truth knew the written text must inevitably be structured according to Gilbert's point of view.

This dilemma of authenticating Truth's voice in relation to the structure of her *Narrative* parallels other scholars' concerns in their examinations of Truth's work. In her essay "Finding Sojourner's Truth: Race, Gender and the Institution of Slavery," legal theorist Cheryl I. Harris analyzes Truth's *Narrative* and speeches and suggests Truth's relationships with her transcribers must be viewed within the racial and sexual framework of the historical contexts to understand Truth's authorship. Harris observes, "Racial hierarchy, which positioned white over Black, infused the relationship between writer and author with additional tension. In considering whether the speech ["A'n't I a Woman"] ever was or remains hers, issues of ownership and control and the racial and sexual dimensions of these concepts are evoked. These are issues that are at the center of the institution of property" (12). Olive Gilbert's status as a literate white woman then would designate her as the *Narrative's* author. Yet I contend Truth's authority is substantiated through orality. Regardless of the *Narrative's* point of view, Truth's authority is displayed in the actions and results evoked by her orality. Throughout the *Narrative*, Truth illustrates time and time again the power orality has to not only create positive changes in her and her children's lives, but it also impacts the representations and impressions of her by those she encounters.

Scholars have long recognized Sojourner Truth's rhetorical abilities demonstrated through her antislavery and women's rights speeches. Lipscomb examines Truth's rhetoric and calls it a "practical public discourse,' a deliberative discourse that sought to inspire human action on the issues of slavery and women's rights" (231). While Truth's rhetoric is admitted and admired in her speeches, her *Narrative* remains unexamined for its rhetorical power. Truth's *Narrative* demonstrates the foundation of the oral discursive strategies she learned as a child from her parents that she later employed in public speaking. Lipscomb fails to identify Truth's connection to African American communities as a possible aspect of her rhetoric. Although she cites Truth's initial religious instruction from her mother as the foundation of her religious interests, Lipscomb does not link the oral traditions Truth learned in these sessions to Truth's rhetoric. Instead, Lipscomb chooses to speculate that Truth only learned her discursive style from other antislavery speakers of her day. This failure to relate Truth's rhetoric to the oral traditions of African American communities limits Lipscomb's analysis because she forcibly fits Truth into the frame of traditional rhetorical analysis without disrupting assumptions or ideas. Truth's negotiation with her orality and Olive Gilbert's position as narrative recorder illustrate a complex model of rhetoric for which traditional rhetorical analysis does not apply.

COMBINING THE ORAL AND THE WRITTEN

Picquet's and Truth's narratives exemplify the both/and concept of Black feminist criticism discussed in the introduction to this book. These narrators demonstrate a speaking subject's ability to theorize concepts and language within a writing environment that could silence nonwriters. Picquet's and Truth's narratives diffuse the primacy of Western logic and writing as the definitive form of intellectual communication. Black feminist theorist Barbara Christian corroborates this observation in her discussion of principles of Black literature. In her essay "The Race for Theory," Christian asserts African Americans "have always been a race for theory—though more in the form of the hieroglyph, a written figure that is both sensual and abstract, both beautiful and communicative" (68). Combining emotive with abstract knowledge, these narrators present a direct opposition to prevailing ideas concerning communication and logic of oral cultures.

Cultural linguist Walter Ong finds distinct polarities in oral and literate cultures. According to Ong, people from oral cultures think and communicate in ways explicitly different from those of literate cultures.⁵ Ong asserts oral cultures have an empathetic and participatory way of knowing rather than the distanced objectivity found in literate cultures. He insists, “For an oral culture learning or knowing means achieving close, empathetic, communal identification with the known, ‘getting with it’. Writing separates the knower from the known and thus sets up conditions for ‘objectivity,’ in the sense of personal disengagement or distancing” (45–46). Louisa Picquet’s oral narrative illustrates the fallacy of Ong’s categorization.

Throughout the narrative she displays both empathy and distanced objectivity according to the occasion. When asked about a specific whipping, Picquet declines to satisfy Mattison’s desire to relate her degradation and shame.

Q- Well, how did he whip you?

A- With the cowhide.

Q- Around the shoulders, or how?

A- That day he did.

Q- How were you dressed—with thin clothes, or how?

A- Oh, very thin; with low-neck’d dress. In the summertime we never wore but two pieces—only the one under, and the blue homespun over. It is the striped cloth they make in Georgia just for the colored people. All the time he was whippin’ me I kept sayin’ I forgot it, and promisin’ I would come another time. (12)

The responses to the first and second questions show Picquet’s reluctance to describe the whipping. However, following Mattison’s repeated “how[s],” Picquet realizes he does not want to know her state of dress, but her state of undress. She employs distanced objectivity by deliberately focusing attention on the number of articles and type of clothing worn by slaves. Moreover, by using the term “we,” she shifts the attention away from herself and concentrates on the slave community in general. Finally, to subvert Mattison and control the representation, Picquet reverts back to the subjective “I”—an empathetic and participatory form—in her response to the whipping. With the agentive “I,” she exemplifies strength

and courage, and counters the beggings and pleadings Mattison apparently expects her to report.

Picquet asserts her agenda throughout the narrative in spite of Mattison's insinuating and often inane inquiries. While recounting the sales and separation of her mother and herself, Mattison asks,

Q- It seems like a dream, don't it?

A- No; it seems fresh in my memory when I think of it—no longer than yesterday. (18)

She goes on to describe how her mother prayed for her while she was on the auction block, and says, "I often thought her prayers followed me, for I never could forget her. Whenever I wanted any thing [sic] real bad after that, my mother was always sure to appear to me in a dream that night, and have plenty to give me, always" (18). Picquet refuses to trivialize and temper the gravity and import of the emotions caused by the forced separation. The reality of the auction block produces the dream of maternal sustenance. She redefines the word "dream"—which Mattison uses to depict something lost and intangible—and imbues it with strength and immediacy that emphasize her connection to her mother rather than the separation. Her emphasis on the maternal bond that remains in spite of the physical severing is a discursive maneuver to promote her self-representational agenda, which is to increase the sales of her narrative in order to raise money to buy her mother's freedom.

Picquet's narrative demonstrates what Elizabeth Tonkin calls "representation of pastness." This phrase describes not just "the past" or lived or recorded history, but rather the construction of the past. Tonkin argues that "one cannot detach the oral representation of pastness from the relationship of teller and audience in which it was occasioned" (2). In their study of the use of historical evidence *After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection*, James Davidson and Mark Lytle illustrate the effect of audience on ex-slave representations of slave experiences. Davidson and Lytle examine two narratives of Susan Hamlin recorded by separate interviewers (one Black, one white) collected in the 1930s by the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The dramatic differences in the narratives demonstrate the affect interviewers can have on the responses of ex-slaves. Similarly, in her essay "Exploring the WPA Narratives: Finding the Voices of Black Women and Men," Melvina Johnson Young identifies

the problematics of race, gender, and class dynamics in the WPA interviews. She asserts, "The dynamics of the relationship between the interviewer and the person who had been enslaved made honest discourse impossible on the basis of the racism, sexism, and/or classism of the interviewer. It would seem, then, that when these factors are eliminated, we get truer impressions of what Black women and men felt their experiences in bondage to have been" (57). Although Young claims that considering the subject positions of the interviewer and narrator and their relationship leads to the "true voices of those who experienced bondage, first hand," I am more concerned with the rhetoric or the language used to subvert the interviewer and control the representation. Considering this relationship, the politics and tensions between the ex-slave and the white amanuensis are factors in Picquet's text that increase the importance of her orality.

As a Black woman, Picquet's racialized body and sexuality are underlying issues that impact the narrative. In his essay "Black Bodies, White Bodies," Sander Gilman traces the use of Black women's bodies, as epitomized in the form of the Hottentot female, in both discourse and artworks in relation to the Victorian ideals of womanhood. Gilman illustrates how the racial ideology of the time positioned Africans and African Americans as deviant sexual beings whose very bodies indicated carnality. Picquet's alternate use of distance and empathy suggests her recognition of her position as teller and Mattison—or even readers of the narrative—as audience. In fact, in his introduction to the Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers edition of the Picquet narrative, Anthony G. Barthelemy acknowledges Picquet's recognition of her relation to Mattison as a re-creation of the slave auction block. Barthelemy observes, "Picquet clearly understands her relationship to Mattison. Once again she is on the block; something is for sale. . . . Mattison examines Picquet with an unrelenting prurient interest. Picquet's strategy here pays off; she deflects the minister's prying questions and maintains some control over the examination" (xli). Picquet contextualizes her interview with Mattison within her slave experience and nineteenth-century race and gender constructs. Consequently, her oral representation of the past is informed by these factors and must be read with this fact in mind.

Ordinarily Louisa Picquet and Sojourner Truth's nonliteracy would have silenced and relegated them to object positions. However, through

orality, Picquet and Truth control the narratives and position themselves as subjects. Thus, these speech acts empower them to overcome oppression and assert their identities through the interviewers' mediation.

ORALITY SUBSTANTIATING FAMILY INTEGRITY

Although Frederick Douglass's equation of literacy equals freedom is widely viewed as the exemplary route slaves adopted toward empowerment, in his 1845 *Narrative* this equation is conflated with violence, which explicitly suggests a masculine application. Contrarily, an examination of women slave narratives illustrates a de-emphasis on literacy and an emphasis on orality as a means to empowerment. This oral power manifests itself in various forms of orality, which convey a sense of identity and familial relationships, and it was used as a method of resistance to injustice.

One form of orality is the practice of history passed on orally found in written and as-told-to narratives. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs (using the pseudonym Linda Brent) relates the history of her grandmother.⁶ She writes,

She was the daughter of a planter in South Carolina, who, at his death, left her mother and his three children free, with money to go to St. Augustine, where they had relatives. It was during the Revolutionary War; and they were captured on their passage, carried back, and sold to different purchasers. Such was the story my grandmother used to tell me. (5)

This account reveals not only the grandmother's history, but also that of the great-grandmother and illustrates Brent's lineage. Therefore, a literate Jacobs is able to express, in writing, a facet of her identity that was passed to her orally and of which there is no written documentation.

As Hazel Carby has demonstrated, Jacobs employs the language and conventions of sentimentalism to confront the ideals of the nineteenth-century Cult of True Womanhood that constructed "true" women as pious, pure, domestic, and submissive. Unfortunately, the tenets of the Cult of True Womanhood excluded African American women.⁷ Carby shows that nineteenth-century race ideology viewed Africans and African Americans as excessively sexual and deviant and that this racial ideology,

marking Black women as overly sexual, precluded recognition of their chastity (27). Nevertheless, Jacobs constructs the slave grandmother as a member of the Cult of True Womanhood.

In the first paragraph of the text, however, Jacobs relates the grandmother's history, which has been passed on orally. In childhood, the grandmother was sold to an innkeeper and later had five children. Jacobs writes, "I have often heard her tell how hard she fared during childhood. But as she grew older she evinced so much intelligence, and was so faithful, that her master and mistress could not help seeing it was for their interest to take care of such a valuable piece of property" (5). Evidently, the grandmother was unprotected in an environment where she encountered a variety of white patrons. Jacobs maintains, "The slave girl is reared in an atmosphere of licentiousness and fear. The lash and the foul talk of her master and his sons are her teachers" (51). That Jacobs is silent concerning the paternity of the grandmother's children—coupled with the reiteration of the corruption of slave girls—points to the grandmother's undisclosed, but salient, experiences regarding sexual harassment and abuse.

With this silence, Jacobs can depict a grandmother who exudes virtue throughout the text. Brent's sexual transgressions with her chosen white lover, Mr. Sands, resulting in the birth of her two children, stand in contrast to the grandmother's ostensible virtues. Bruce Mills recognizes the importance of the grandmother's morality in his essay "Lydia Maria Child and the Endings to Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," and suggests, "Because of the narrator/protagonist's 'degraded' past, the grandmother must stand as the primary exemplar of and mediator for redemptive feminine virtue" (259). For the grandmother, the value of purity becomes unquestioned and undiscussed. While Jacobs cannot truthfully represent the grandmother as pure, she endeavors to inscribe the grandmother's purity both through the representation of the past the narrator has learned orally and by means of nineteenth-century sentimental images of domesticity.

The grandmother's commitment to chastity is translated through her reaction to Mrs. Flint's announcement that Linda was pregnant by her master, Dr. Flint. The grandmother laments,

"O Linda! Has it come to this? I had rather see you dead than to see you as you now are. You are a disgrace to your *dead mother*." She tore

from my fingers my mother's *wedding-ring* and her *silver thimble*. "Go away!" she exclaimed, "and never come to my *house*, again." (56–57; emphasis added)

In her outrage, the grandmother invokes the image of Linda's "dead mother," who has previously been characterized as "noble and womanly," and strips Linda of the traditional symbols of domesticity (wedding-ring, silver thimble, and house). Because she must challenge racist assumptions of African American women's promiscuity, it is important for Jacobs to have the audience believe the grandmother would not condone Brent's actions. Even when Brent explains her situation and choice of a sexual relationship with Mr. Sands, the grandmother sympathizes and understands but does not forgive her. Therefore, we have a grandmother who believes in chastity and purity without particularly revealing her own sexual experiences.

The result is a juxtaposition of the oral history passed from the grandmother against the imposed conventions of sentimental discourse—a linking Jacobs uses to delineate Black slave women's dilemma. She portrays characters that simultaneously hold values of chastity and honesty even while circumstances force them to violate these ideals. Because of the degradation of slavery and the exclusion of Black women from the Cult of True Womanhood, Jacobs entreats her readers to consider that "the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others" (56). This is not to say that these qualities are not always valued; simply, they are not always viable.⁸ Clearly Jacobs's concern for her target audiences'—northern white women—attitude toward Black women affects the use of oral traditions in the narrative.

Like Jacobs, Truth's *Narrative* establishes orality's capacity to provide a sense of familial continuity in resistance to the disruption caused by slavery. In the *Narrative*, Truth recounts the experiences of her brother and sisters before they were sold away and the circumstances of their sales. These experiences were passed on to Truth by her parents through oral transmission. In her biography of Truth, Nell Irvin Painter identifies this oral history as a source of pain and terror for Truth (then Isabella Bomefree). Painter asserts, "Seared by frequent, detailed tellings of these losses, Isabella's earliest years lay in the shadow of her parents' chronic depression and her own guilt as a survivor" (12). Truth relates how, through

oral history, her parents perpetuated the memories of her siblings who were sold to slave traders. Truth's interviewer, Olive Gilbert, writes,

Of the two that immediately preceded her in age, a boy of five years, and a girl of three, who were sold when she was an infant, [Truth] heard much; and *she wishes that all . . . could have listened as she did*, while Bomefree and Mau-Mau Bett . . . would sit for hours, recalling and recounting every endearing, as well as harrowing circumstance that taxed memory could supply, from the histories of the dear departed ones. (5; emphasis added)

Although Painter suggests these tales were a traumatic experience for Truth, this passage demonstrates her family's tradition of oral history to resist oppression. The passage illustrates the necessity of tellings and retellings of family experiences to provide continuity and history in African American slave families. While slaves were the legal property of their masters who had the power to dictate much of slave life, this passage points to slave oral empowerment to construct identities and representations. Her parents' orality instilled in Sojourner Truth the knowledge of their experiences, which assisted Truth in defining her identity. Additionally, their oral representations were a foundation of her ability to create a subjective representation that informed readers of the *Narrative*. Cheryl I. Harris notes that "the *Narrative* functioned as a commodity crucial to Truth's survival; it was Truth's major source of income for the greater part of her life after slavery" (18). Thus, the narratives of the legal property of slave owners become not only a source of identity actualization, but Truth's property ownership of the *Narrative* subverts the usual income production of slavery.

Moreover, orality becomes a powerful method to claim parental identity and challenge the prohibition of slave women naming masters as the fathers of their children.⁹ Though in Douglass's later autobiographies—*My Bondage and My Freedom* and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*—he is less ambiguous about the identity of his father, in the 1845 *Narrative* he states that "the opinion was also whispered that my master was my father; but of the correctness of the opinion, I know nothing; the means of knowing was withheld from me"—which discounts orality (48). Conversely, Louisa Picquet uses the orality passed from her mother to express her identity definitively, and thus, to subvert the circumscriptions

imposed by slave masters on slave women regarding their children's paternity. Of her parentage, Picquet states, "Mother's master, Mr. Randolph, was my father. So mother *told* me. She was *forbid* to tell who was my father but I looked so much like Madame Randolph's baby that she got dissatisfied, and mother had to be sold" (6; emphasis added). Clearly, for Douglass literacy supersedes orality and some form of written documentation is necessary to establish his parentage. However, for Picquet not only is her mother's word enough to substantiate her claim, but the physical resemblance between Madame Randolph's child and herself is sufficient evidence of her parentage. Therefore, an official document or acknowledgment is unnecessary. Also, this passage displays a tradition of orality in that Picquet's mother was forbidden to divulge her child's parentage; yet, she does tell Picquet, who in turn tells the world.

ORALITY TO FREEDOM

Like Douglass's freedom through literacy, orality was also a viable method to freedom. For Sojourner Truth (whose birth name was Isabella Bomefree) oral resistance can be directly attributed to her freedom.¹⁰ Isabella's master promised to emancipate her for faithful service and hard work one year before the legal statute set by the state of New York. Yet at the appointed time he refused to free her and she decided self-emancipation was in order. When her master accused her of running away, Isabella retorted, "No, I did not run away; I walked away by day-light and all because you had promised me a year of my time" (29). Not only does she express contempt for his deception, the fact that she left "by day-light" illustrates her honesty and integrity vis-à-vis his actions. That this confrontation occurs before a respected physician and his family further empowers Truth. She recognizes the threat to her master's reputation and public image by voicing his dishonesty.¹¹

For deeply spiritual African Americans, extraliterary forms (including prayer and prophecy) provide a significant channel to oppose and counter the hegemonic practices of society. Sojourner Truth's spirituality feeds her orality and provides a powerful discourse, foreign to the literate patriarchal order, with which to suppress secular authority. Following the illegal out-of-state sale of her son, Truth raises the community's ire by traveling throughout New York—from Hurley to New Paltz to Kingston to Poppletown and

back to Kingston—reporting the crime to everyone she encounters. Her insistence for justice brings her before the Ulster county circuit judge, who declares that the “boy be delivered into the hands of the mother” (38). Thus, through orality Truth utilizes the oppressor’s legal system to counter oppression. She exclaims, “Oh my God! I know’d I’d have him again [sic]. I was sure God would help me to get him. Why, I felt so tall within—I felt as if the power of a nation was with me” (31). While Truth expresses the power she felt, this act demonstrates the power of orality. This is an extralegal, extraliterary act because, although it is by the judge’s decree that her son is returned, she relies on God’s decree. Instead of man’s law—the law that sanctioned slavery, the law that separated mothers from their children—she appeals to God’s law—the highest law. Instead of the powerlessness ascribed to nonliterate Black slave women, she experiences power of national proportions. In a world that said, you are nothing without the power of literacy, Sojourner Truth relies on the power of orality sustained and nurtured by spiritual conviction. Rather than exclude her from participation in public discourse and confine her to a subordinate status, Sojourner Truth’s demand for justice—fueled by an absolute certainty of her spiritual relationship with and support from God—manifest in Black feminist orality subverts the very discursive system intended to suppress her.

In her discussion of this event, Cheryl I. Harris identifies Truth’s encounter with the legal system as a contestation of the concepts of “motherhood” and “womanhood” that the court solved through the examination of property rights. Harris maintains,

The contingent character of Isabella/Truth’s claim to motherhood is rooted in her exclusion from “womanhood” which is racially identified. The story offers a textual description of how property as concept, legal metaphor, narrative and positive law proceeded from and reinforced that premise. (22)

Truth’s orality then becomes not just a tool used to obtain her son, but a strategy to confront the dominant culture’s construction of gender. Truth’s speech act parallels her famous question, “A’n’t I a woman?” That her orality results in the court awarding her custody of her son legally certifies her position as “mother,” which in turn problematizes the exclusion of Black women from “womanhood.” If a “true” woman’s most important

vocation was motherhood, then Black mothers possessed the primary quality of “womanhood.”¹²

Louisa Picquet relies on the extraliterary form of prayer for agency, empowerment, and freedom. When Picquet is troubled by her position as Williams’s mistress and fears divine retribution for her sins, Williams entreats her that as long as she maintains her fidelity to him God would not hold her responsible. Picquet declares,

But I knew better than that. I thought it was of no use to be prayin’ and livin’ in sin. I begin then to pray that he might die, so that I might get religion; and then I promise the Lord one night, faithful, in prayer, if he would just take him out of the way, I’d get religion and be true to Him as long as I lived. If Mr. Williams only knew that, and get up out of his grave, he’d beat me half to death. (22)

Soon after this prayer Williams experiences a lingering fatal illness. Picquet then reassesses her position.

Then, when I saw that he was sufferin’ so, I begin to get sorry, and begin to pray that he might get religion first before he died. I felt sorry to see him die in his sins. I pray for him to have religion, when I did not have it myself. I thought if he got religion and then died, I knew that I could get religion. . . . Then, in about a month or three weeks, he died. I didn’t cry nor nothin’, for I was glad he was dead; for I thought I could have some peace and happiness then. I was left free, and that made me so glad I could hardly believe it myself. (22–23)

Picquet’s confidence in the power of prayer supersedes her fear of Williams’s wrath. She maintains the very faithfulness and fidelity insisted on by Williams, only she is faithful to herself and her beliefs, not to him. Even though she is sympathetic to Williams’s plight, she never regrets praying for his death, and instead prays for his redemption before death. For Picquet freedom for the soul through religious conversion is only possible with physical freedom from slavery. It is significant to note that her desire for freedom is articulated in the context of spirituality.

Picquet’s emphasis on spiritual redemption places the narrative in the tradition of spiritual narratives. In addition to her journey to freedom, Picquet narrates her journey to religious conversion. She describes

the troubling in her spirit she experienced whenever she thought of her mother's enslavement.

It was a great weight on my mind; and I thought if I could get religion I should certainly meet her in heaven, for I knew she was a Christian woman. . . . I made up my mind that I would never hold up my head again on this earth till the Lord converted me. I prayed hard that night. . . . And the moment I believe that the Lord would relieve me, the burden went right off; and I felt as light as if I was right up in the air. (28)

After this conversion Picquet begins to search in earnest for her mother and work to free her. Joycelyn Moody maintains that "the spiritual narrative by definition forswears the temporal to revere the eternal" (104–105). Picquet recognizes her conversion and her adherence to Christianity will ensure reunion with her mother after death. Yet the prospect of eternal reunion does not negate the desire for freedom and meeting her mother in this life. The belief of freedom in eternity inspires the determination for freedom on earth. Consequently, unlike traditional spiritual narratives, in Picquet's narrative the temporal is not dismissed in favor of the eternal. The temporal is made possible because of the eternal. In this instance, Black feminist orality, manifested in prayer and faith, empowers Picquet to achieve freedom for her mother, her children, and herself.

Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents* is the only book-length slave narrative authored by a Black woman. Despite Jacobs's literacy, the power of orality is central to the empowerment of Linda Brent and her children's freedom. For Jacobs orality provides means both to assert Brent's rights as a mother and to free her children. Brent's use of her voice to gain her children's freedom is exceptionally consequential when contextualized within the construction of familial relations in the slave institution. In his book *American Slavery, 1619–1877*, Peter Kolchin observes, "Legally, slave families were nonexistent: no Southern state recognized marriage between slave men and women, and legal authority over slave children rested not with their parents but with their masters (122). In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass acknowledges the legal denial of slave families but asserts, "When they do exist, they are not the outgrowths of slavery, but are antagonistic to that system" (51). Therefore, Linda Brent's use of orality

to secure her children's freedom is particularly significant. Brent risks exposing her hiding place to force her children's father, Mr. Sands, to free them. Using the element of surprise, Brent detains Sands and says, "Stop one moment, and let me *speak* for my children" (126; emphasis added). She goes on to remind Sands of his responsibility toward *her* children. Her assertion not only results in his promise to free her children, but also expresses her rights as a mother to protect and shield them from the injustice of slavery.

Just as Truth's use of orality questions the gender construct of womanhood, Brent's maternal speech act repositions Black slave mothers within the nineteenth-century ideological construction of motherhood. John Ernest contends, "To be a mother in opposition to law and custom was to announce an ideological reconstitution of motherhood" (183). Thus, orality in Jacobs's and Truth's narratives exhibits Black women's interrogation and redefinition of hegemonic ideologies of gender and race.

ORALITY TO RESIST SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

In addition to the power to challenge dominant cultural ideologies, orality was valued for multiple reasons, including those of economics, autonomy, and representation. Orality offered slave women the power to resist sexual victimization. Literacy makes Linda Brent susceptible to sexual exploitation, which she counters with orality. Her licentious master, Dr. Flint, chances upon twelve-year-old Brent teaching herself to read. He discretely begins passing her notes detailing his sexual intentions. Brent returns the notes, saying, "I can't read them, sir," and forces Flint to read them to her (31). The verbal denial of literacy subverts Flint and empowers Brent to escape active participation in her victimization. Later, Linda Brent's decision to choose her lover "allows her to appropriate speech rights" (Foreman, "Manifest" 80). In her essay "Manifest in Signs: The Politics of Sex and Representation in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," P. Gabrielle Foreman examines use of the self-construct "Linda Brent" and points to markers both in Jacobs's text and historical data that suggest she was in fact raped by her master. Foreman insists the act of choosing another white man as her lover, and naming him as the father of her children, confuses the children's paternity. This confusion negates the master's excuse to sell her or her children for revealing the father's iden-

tity. While Foreman makes clear that her reading is speculation based on evidence, her reading substantiates orality as a cogent method to reject victimization while simultaneously creating a subjective representation. When we consider the possibilities Foreman's reading occasions, Jacobs's text becomes a written embodiment of orality. The speech acts of choosing her lover and identifying him as the father within a text written under a pseudonym exemplify the fluidity of orality. Not only does oral resistance empower Brent, Jacobs's orality creates a multivalent text that offers "competing stories about versions of herself as her subjectivity is displaced by one or multiple representations."¹³

Louisa Picquet uses oral resistance for personal gain and to circumvent her master's sexual intentions. Picquet uses the money given to her as a bribe for sexual favors by her intoxicated master, Mr. Cook, to purchase material for a dress. When sober, he asks for the money and she tells him that she lost it. Picquet insightfully notes, "I had sense enough to know he would not dare tell any one that he gave me the money, and would hardly dare to whip me for it" (13). Orality empowers her to silence Cook and escape physical abuse. In another instance, Picquet employs speech strategically to avoid being raped by Cook by informing Mrs. Bachelor (the owner of the boardinghouse in which she and Cook reside) of his order to visit his room that night. Mrs. Bachelor's deft maneuvers permit Picquet to elude Cook for a day and a half. However, Cook finally confronts Picquet and orders her to come to his room and not tell Mrs. Bachelor. Picquet admits, "[Y]ou see there he got me. Then I came to the conclusion he could not do any thing [sic] but whip me—he could not kill me for it; an' I made up my mind to take the whippin'. So I didn't go that night" (12). At this point, Picquet realizes that her recourse to orality is exhausted and accepts physical abuse over sexual exploitation. She prioritizes these forms of abuse; thus, the act of accepting a whipping becomes an empowering device to thwart Mr. Cook.

AUTHORITY AND ORALITY

While Douglass's *Narrative* is proclaimed as the exemplary model of slave narratives and his emphasis on literacy as a vehicle to freedom was frequently adopted, these female narratives illustrate that there were various ways "to tell a free story."¹⁴ Yet Tonkin's assertion, "When we consider that

representations of pastness enter continually into different kinds of discourse and are produced in different kinds of society, any discussion leads inevitably to debates on agency, that is to the status of the 'I' who authors statements, and of the subject, a topic of literary and social analysis alike" (4), demands attention to issues of authorization in orally transmitted narratives. Despite Picquet's and Truth's empowerment through oral resistance, my discussion of orality is problematized by virtue of the fact that *The Octoroon* and the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* are ultimately written by the amanuenses, Mattison and Gilbert. In *The Octoroon*, Picquet's voice gets lost or silenced in the second half of the narrative. It is Mattison who directs the reader's attention to the proceeding events in Picquet's life and, although there are some instances related in Picquet's voice, for the most part Mattison's narrative voice is privileged over hers. This dilemma presents itself in other narratives written by amanuenses and causes texts like *The Octoroon* to be excluded from being classified as part of African American women's literary tradition. Consequently, when scholars examine and attempt to situate these texts into a specific literary tradition, the authority and positions of the writer and narrator are confusing and questionable.

Nonetheless, if one carefully examines these texts, there are spaces and tensions, which we might call windows of opportunity, that contain moments of orality or oral resistance in which the nonliterate freedwoman wrests narrative agency from the amanuensis and creates a subjective representation. Furthermore, the oral traditions inherited from African cultures and perpetuated in slave communities are the foundation of resistant orality used as self-defense and self-authorization. The knowledge acquired in both slave communities and the larger society regarding race and gender constructions informs the orality African American slave women used to control experience and representations of experience and, therefore, becomes an identifiable form of rhetoric. In fact, Jacqueline Jones Royster asserts that rhetoric "occurs through the internalization of a complex system of understandings that provide the context within which we decode and encode texts, make meaning, and operate with autonomy, power, and authority" (177). These speech acts point to a tradition that employs diverse methods of orality to overcome oppression and assert one's identity. These women realized "the master's tools [would] never dismantle the master's house" and instead used different means to effect agency.¹⁵